

A NOVEL



*THREE
STRONG
WOMEN*

MARIE NDIAYE

Winner of the Prix Goncourt

*THREE
STRONG
WOMEN*

a novel by

MARIE NDIAYE

translated by John Fletcher

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PART

I

 **A**ND THE MAN waiting for her at the entrance to the big concrete house—or who happened to be standing in the doorway—was bathed in a light so suddenly intense that seemed to radiate from his whole body and his pale clothing: yet this short, thickset man before her, who'd just emerged from his enormous house and was glowing bright as a neon tube, no longer possessed, Norah straightaway realized, the stature, arrogance, and youthfulness once so mysteriously his own as to seem everlasting.

He held his hands crossed over his belly and his head tilted sideways; his hair was gray and under his white shirt the belly sagged limply over the waistband of his cream trousers.

There he stood, bathed in cold light, looking as if he might have dropped to the threshold of his pretentious house from the branch of one of the poincianas with which the garden was filled, for—it had occurred to Norah—as she approached the house staring through the railings at the front door, she hadn't seen it open to let her father out: and yet there he stood in the sunset, this glowing, shrunken man who at some point must have been dealt an enormous blow to the head that further reduced the harmonious proportions Norah remembered to those of a fat man, neckless with short, thick legs.

He stood there watching her as she approached; nothing in his rather lost, rather hesitant look indicated that he was expecting her, indeed that he'd asked, even begged, her to come and see him (insofar as a man like that, she thought, was capable of requesting help of any kind).

He was simply there, perhaps indeed having flitted down from the thick branch of a poinciana in whose yellow shade the house stood, to land heavily on the cracked concrete of the doorstep; and it was as if Norah had approached the railings at that instant by pure chance.

This man who could transform every entreaty on his part into an appeal made to him by someone else watched her opening the gate and entering the garden. He had the look of a host who was rather put out but trying to hide the fact; he was shading his eyes despite the fading of the light that had left the doorway in shadows but for his strange, shining, electrifying person.

"Well, well," he said, "it's you." His speech was muffled and weak; despite his mastery of the language he was tentative in French, as if the unease he'd always felt over certain mistakes that were difficult to avoid now caused his voice to tremble.

Norah said nothing.

She gave him a quick hug but did not hold him tight: from the almost imperceptible way the flabby skin on her father's arms shrank under her grasp she remembered how much he detested physical contact.

She thought she noticed a musty smell.

A smell emanating from the lush, wilting vegetation of the poinciana whose branches overhung the flat roof of the house and among whose leaves there perhaps nested the withdrawn and self-assured man ever on the alert—it pained Norah to imagine—for the slightest sound of footsteps approaching the gate at which he would take flight to land clumsily on the doorstep of his vast house with its rough concrete walls; or was it emanating—this smell—from her father's body or his clothes or his old, wrinkled, ashen skin: she

couldn't say what it was, she'd no idea where it might be coming from.

At most she could say that this day he was wearing, and probably always wore now, rumpled, sweat-stained shirt and trousers that were pale and shiny and hideously baggy at the knees, either the effect of his being too heavy a bird, one that fell over each time he landed—or—Norah reflected with rather weary compassion—of his having become after all another slovenly old man, indifferent or blind to lapses of hygiene while still clinging to the forms of conventional elegance, dressing as he'd always done in white and cream and never appearing on the threshold of his unfinished house without tightening the knot of his tie, whatever dusty room he'd emerged from, whatever poinciana, exhausted by flowering, he'd flown down from.

On landing at the airport Norah had taken a taxi, then walked in the heat for a long while because she'd forgotten her father's exact address and only found her way after she recognized the house. She felt sticky, dirty, and spent.

She wore a sleeveless lime-green dress covered with little yellow flowers rather like those strewn over the doorstep under the poinciana, and flat sandals in the same soft green.

And she noticed with a start that her father wore plastic flip-flops, he who had always made a point, it seemed to her, of never appearing in anything other than polished shoes—off-white or beige.

Was it because this untidy man had lost the right to cast a stern or disapproving eye over her, or because, as a confident thirty-eight-year-old, she no longer worried above all else about what people thought of her appearance? Whatever the case, fifteen years earlier—she knew—she would have felt mortified to have arrived tired and sweating before her father, whose own aspect and bearing never betrayed in those days the slightest sign of weakness or susceptibility during a heat wave, whereas now she couldn't care less about showing him an un-made-up, shiny face that she hadn't bothered to powder in the taxi. Telling herself, with rather sour, rancorous cheer, He can think of me what he likes, she recalled the cruel casual insults of this superior male when as teenagers she and her sister came to see him: remarks that always turned on his daughters' lack of elegance or want of lipstick.

She would have liked to say to him now, "You realize, don't you, that you spoke to us as if we were women whose duty it was to make themselves attractive, whereas we were just kids, not to mention your own daughters."

She would have liked to say this to him in a flippant, mildly reproachful way, as if all this had been just a rather crude form of humor on his part, and she'd have liked her father to show a little contrition, and for them to have laughed about it together now.

But seeing him standing there in his plastic flip-flops on the concrete doorstep strewn with rotting flowers perhaps knocked loose as he flew down from the poinciana on his tired, heavy wings, she realized that he no more would have understood or grasped the most insistent allusion to the nasty comments he used to make than he now cared to scrutinize her appearance and formulate a judgment about it.

He had a rather fixed, vacant, distant look.

She wondered then if he actually remembered having written asking her to come.

"Shall we go in?" she said, slipping her bag from one shoulder to the other.

"Masseck!" he shouted, clapping his hands.

The icy, bluish light seemed to shine more intensely from his misshapen body.

A barefoot old man in Bermudas and a torn polo shirt hurried forward.

"Take the bag," Norah's father ordered.

Then, turning to her, he said, "It's Masseck, d'you recognize him?"

"I can carry my bag," she said, immediately regretting her words, which could only have offended the servant, who, despite his age, was used to bearing the most awkward burden and so she passed it to him so impetuously that, being taken unawares, he tottered, before recovering his balance and tossing the bag onto his back, returned into the house with his head stooped over.

"When I last came," she said, "it was Mansour. I don't know Masseck."

"What Mansour?" her father asked with a suddenly wild, almost dismayed look that she had never seen before.

"I don't know his surname, but that Mansour, he lived here for years and years," said Norah, who felt herself slowly gripped by a nauseating, stifling feeling of discomfort.

"It was perhaps Masseck's father, then."

"Oh no," she murmured, "Masseck is far too old to be Mansour's son."

And since her father seemed increasingly bewildered and even close to wondering whether she wasn't deliberately trying to confuse him, she quickly added, "Oh, it really doesn't matter."

"You're mistaken, I've never employed anyone called Mansour," he said with a subtle, condescending smile that was the first manifestation of his former self: however irritating that tiny, scornful smile, it had always warmed Norah's heart; it was as if, to this conceited man, it mattered less to be right than to have the last word.

For she was certain that a diligent, patient, efficient Mansour had been at her father's side for years on end, and that even if she and her sister had come to this house scarcely three or four times since they were children, it was Mansour whom they'd seen here and not the Masseur, whose face she didn't recognize.

Once inside, Norah noticed how empty the house was.

Outside, it was now quite dark.

The big living room was dark too, and silent.

Her father switched a lamp on, the kind that uses forty-watt bulbs and lights poorly. Nevertheless it revealed the middle of the room and its long, glass-topped table.

On the rough-plastered walls Norah recognized the framed photographs of the holiday village her father had owned and run and which had made him rich.

He took much pride in his success, and always allowed a large number of people to live in his house. Norah had always thought that this wasn't so much because he was a generous man but because he was keen to show that he could provide his brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces and sundry other relatives with free board and lodging. As a result, whatever time of day she happened to be there, Norah had never seen the living room empty.

There were always children on the sofas, sprawling belly up like well-fed cats, men drinking tea and watching television, and women moving to-and-fro between the kitchen and the bedrooms.

But that evening the room was empty, harshly exposing the crude materials used in its construction, the shiny floor tiles, the cement rendering on the walls, the narrow window frames.

“Isn’t your wife here?” asked Norah.

He picked up two chairs from the big table, moved them closer to each other, then changed his mind and put them back again.

He switched on the television, and then turned it off before it had time to light up.

He moved about the room without lifting his feet, so that his flip-flops scraped the tiles.

His lips trembled slightly.

“She’s away traveling at the moment,” he mumbled finally.

Oh, Norah thought anxiously, he can’t admit she’s probably left him.

“And Sony? Where’s Sony?”

“Likewise,” he said, exhaling.

“Sony’s off traveling too?”

The thought that her father, who’d had so many wives and children, that this not particularly handsome but brilliant, clever, quick-witted, and ruthless man who’d been born into poverty but made his fortune, and had since then always lived surrounded by a grateful and submissive crowd, that this spoiled individual now found himself alone and perhaps abandoned, fed a hazy old grudge that Norah harbored in spite of herself.

It seemed to her that her father was at last being taught a lesson he should have learned much earlier.

But what sort of lesson?

It made her feel petty and base, thinking that.

For even if her father had always kept an open house to spongers, even if he’d never had any true friends, honest wives (with the exception, Norah thought, of her own mother), loving children, and if now, old, ravaged, and probably much diminished, he wandered alone around his gloomy house—how was that justice served? What kind of satisfaction could there be for Norah, except that of a jealous daughter avenged at last for never having been welcomed into her father’s inner circle?

And feeling petty and cheap she now also felt ashamed of her hot, damp skin and her rumpled dress.

As if to atone for her spiteful thoughts, by confirming he wouldn’t be left alone for too long, she asked, “Will Sony be back soon?”

“He’ll tell you himself,” her father murmured.

“How can he, if he’s away?”

Her father clapped his hands and shouted, “Masseck!”

Small yellow poinciana flowers fluttered down from his neck and shoulders onto the tile floor, and with a swift movement he crushed them under the toe of one of his flip-flops.

It gave Norah the intimation of his doing likewise to the flowers, rather similar, covering her dress.

Masseck came in pushing a cart laden with food, plates, and cutlery, and proceeded to lay out the table.

“Sit down,” her father said, “and let’s eat.”

“I’m going to wash my hands first.”

She found herself adopting the tone of peremptory volubility that she never used with anyone but her father, the tone intended to forestall his attempt to have Masseck, and before Masseck Mansour, do what she insisted on doing herself, insisted out of an awareness that he

so hated seeing his guests perform the slightest labor in his house, thereby casting doubt on the competence of his servants, that he was quite capable of saying to her, "Masseck wash your hands for you," without for a moment imagining that she would fail to obey him as those around him, young and old, had always done.

But her father had hardly heard her.

He'd taken a seat and was staring vacantly at what Masseck was doing.

She found that his skin was now blackish, less dark than before, and dull looking.

He yawned, his mouth wide open, not making a sound, just like a dog.

She now felt certain that the sweet fetid smell that she'd noticed at the threshold came both from the poinciana and from her father's body; in fact his whole person seemed steeped in the slow putrefaction of the yellowy-orange flowers, this man who, she remembered, had worn none but the chicest of perfumes, this haughty and insecure man who'd never wished to give off an odor that was his own!

Poor soul, who'd have thought he'd wind up a plump old bird, clumsy flying and strong smelling?

She walked toward the kitchen along a concrete corridor lit imperfectly by a bulb covered in fly specks.

The kitchen was the least commodious room in this badly proportioned house, as Nora remembered, having added it to the inexhaustible list of the grievances against her father, though knowing full well that she would mention none of them, neither the serious ones nor the less serious, and that, face-to-face with this unfathomable man, she could never summon up the courage—which she possessed in abundance when far away from him—to express her disapproval; and as a result she was not at all pleased with herself but, rather, very disappointed, and all the angrier for bowing and daring to say nothing.

Her father couldn't have cared less about making his servants work in a tight, uncomfortable space, where neither he nor his visitors ever set foot.

Any such consideration would have been incomprehensible to him. Indeed, he would put down to the sentimentality that characterized her sex, the world she inhabited, and a culture he didn't share.

"We don't live in the same country, societies are very different," he would more or less say, in a pedantic, condescending manner, and perhaps summon Masseck to ask him in front of her whether the kitchen suited him—to which Masseck would say yes—and her father, not even looking at her, since that would give the subject an importance it didn't merit, would, with an air of triumph, simply consider the matter closed.

There's no point, no sense in having a father you literally can't communicate with, whose feelings for you have always been in question, she thought, yet again, but this time calmly, not shaking with rage, impotence, and despondency as so often in the past when circumstances had brought up the fundamental differences of perception, outlook, and education between her and this cold, passionless man who'd spent only a few years in France, where she, a vulnerable person of strong feeling, had lived all her life.

And yet here she was, in her father's house. When he'd called her, she had come.

If she'd possessed less of this capacity for emotion which he so heartily despised (lumping together, with his own daughter, the entire limp-wristed, feminized Western world), she would have found any excuse to avoid making such a journey ... "And you would do me

great honor and give me the distinct pleasure if you were able—if you felt strong enough—leave your family for a time, even for quite a while, and come here, to your father, because I've important things to say to you ...”

Oh, how she already regretted having weakened, how she longed to return home now and get on with her life.

At the tiny sink in the kitchen a slim young girl in a T-shirt and threadbare skirt was washing some cooking pots.

The table was covered with dishes about to be served, Norah realized, to her father and herself.

She noticed roast chicken, couscous, saffron rice, a dark meat in a peanut sauce, and other dishes she could just make out under their steamy glass covers. The profusion was staggering. It was beginning to make her feel queasy.

She slipped between the table and the sink and waited until the girl, who was laboriously rinsing out a large stew pot, had finished.

The sink was so narrow that the pot kept hitting the edges or the tap and, since there was no draining board, the girl had to crouch to set the vessel down on the floor, where she spread out a dish towel on which to dry it, a sight that once again exasperated Norah, who quickly washed her hands, all the while smiling and nodding to the girl.

And when she'd asked her name and the girl, after a brief silence—as if, Norah thought, to give her answer a dignified setting—had replied, “Khady Demba,” her calm assurance, firm voice, and limpid gaze both surprised and soothed Norah, calming her jumpy weariness and feelings of irritation and resentment.

At the end of the corridor her father's voice rang out, calling her impatiently.

She made haste to rejoin him and found him in a state of some annoyance, anxious to tuck into the prawn and fruit tabbouleh Masseck had served in the two plates set opposite each other.

She'd hardly sat down when he started eating greedily, with his face almost in his plate and this voraciousness, entirely devoid of polite pretense or small talk, was so much at odds with the old-fashioned manners of this rather affected man that Norah nearly asked him if he'd been depriving himself of food, thinking that he was quite capable—if his financial difficulties were such as she supposed them to be—of trying to impress her by loading the dinner with all the provisions of the three preceding days.

Masseck brought out one dish after another, at such a pace that she couldn't keep up.

She was relieved to see that her father was paying no attention to what she ate.

He only raised his head to scrutinize gluttonously and suspiciously what Masseck had just put on the table, and when at one point he looked furtively at Norah's plate, it was with such childlike apprehension that she realized he was simply making sure Masseck had not served her more generously than him.

That really upset her.

Her father—normally so loquacious, so full of fine words—remained silent. The only sounds to be heard in the desolate house were the clatter of plates, the slip-slap of Masseck's feet on the tiles, and perhaps the rustle of the poinciana's upper branches brushing against the tin roof. She wondered vaguely whether the lone tree was calling out in the night for her father to come.

He went on eating, moving from the grilled lamb to the chicken in sauce, hardly pausing for breath between mouthfuls, joylessly stuffing himself.

For dessert, Masseck put a mango cut in pieces before him.

He pushed one piece into his mouth, then another. Norah saw him chewing with difficulty and trying to swallow. In vain.

He spat out the mango pulp onto his plate.

Tears were pouring down his cheeks.

Norah felt her own cheeks burning.

She got up, heard herself mumbling something, she couldn't tell what, went over and stood behind him, and then didn't know what to do with her hands, never before having found herself in a position either to comfort her father or to show him anything other than a stifled, forced respect tinged with resentment.

She turned around, looking for Masseck, but after clearing the table he'd left the room.

Her father was still weeping silently, expressionless.

She sat down next to him and leaned forward to bring her head as close as possible to his tear-streaked face.

She could smell, under the odor of the food and the spicy sauces, the sickly sweet scent of the rotting flowers of the big tree, and since her father kept his head lowered, she could see how grubby the shirt collar was around his neck.

She remembered a piece of news that two or three years earlier her brother Sony had passed on but that her father hadn't seen fit to divulge to her or her sister. She'd resented this, but before long she'd forgotten both the news and her bitterness at not having been told. The two things now went through her mind simultaneously and as a result her tone was rather acerbic even though she'd tried to make her voice sound comforting.

"Tell me, where are your children?" she asked.

She remembered that he'd fathered twins but couldn't recall what gender they were.

He looked at her, distraught.

"My children?"

"The last ones you had. Or so I understand. Has your wife taken them with her?"

"The little girls? Oh, they're here, yes," he murmured, and turned his head. It was as if he were disappointed, as if he'd hoped that she would talk about something he didn't know whose implications he hadn't grasped, something that, in a strange, magical way, would save him.

She couldn't contain a slight shiver of vengeful spite.

So Sony was the only son of this man who didn't care much for girls, or have much time for them.

Overwhelmed, weighed down by useless, crucifying females who weren't even pretty, she thought Norah calmly, thinking of herself and her sister; they'd always had, for their father, the irremediable defect of being too much like him, that is, quite unlike their mother, and attesting to the pointlessness of his marriage to a Frenchwoman, because what good had it done him? No almost-white children, no well-built sons ...

And it had been a failure.

Upset, overwhelmed by a feeling of ironic compassion, she laid her hand lightly on his shoulder.

“I’d like to meet them,” she said, adding at once, so as not to give him time to ask what she meant, “your two daughters, the little girls.”

Her father shook her hand off his fat shoulder in an involuntary gesture signifying that nothing could justify such familiarity on her part.

He rose heavily and wiped his face on his sleeve.

He pushed open an ugly glazed door at the other end of the room, and switched on the solitary bulb that lit another long, gray concrete corridor, off which, she recalled, doors opened onto small square rooms like monastic cells that once were inhabited by her father and numerous kin.

From the way their footsteps and her father’s loud irregular breathing echoed in the silence, she was sure that the rooms were now empty.

They seemed to have been walking already for several long minutes when the corridor swung first to the left, then to the right, getting almost dark, and so stuffy that Norah nearly turned back.

Her father stopped in front of a closed door.

He grasped the handle and stood still for a moment with his ear against the panel. Norah couldn’t tell if he was trying to listen to something inside or was summoning up the will to open the door. But the attitude of this man, at once scarcely recognizable and illusory as ever—oh, what incorrigible naïveté to think, even not having seen him for years, that time might have altered him and brought them closer together—worried and annoyed her now more than it ever had in the past, when she could never be sure whether, in his brazen recklessness and arrogant flippancy, and utter lack of humor, he wasn’t going to hurl some unforgettable cruel remark at her.

With a quick movement, as if to catch someone in flagrante, he opened the door.

With an air of fear and repugnance, he stood aside and let Norah in.

The tiny room was lit by a lamp with a pink shade. It stood on a small table placed between two beds, on the narrower of which sat the girl whom Norah had seen in the kitchen and who had told her she was called Khady Demba. The lobe of her right ear, Norah noticed, was slit in two.

Sitting cross-legged on the mattress, she was sewing a small green dress.

Looking up briefly, she smiled at Norah.

Two little girls were asleep on the other bed, lying face-to-face under a white sheet.

With a start Norah realized that the faces of the two children were the most beautiful she had ever seen.

Awakened perhaps by the stuffiness of the corridor flooding into the air-conditioned room, or by an imperceptible change in the quiet atmosphere surrounding them, the two little girls opened their eyes at the same time.

They looked at their father gravely and without warmth or feeling. They showed no fear in seeing him, but no pleasure either. As for him, Norah noted with surprise, he seemed to meet them under their gaze. His shaven head, his face, his neck in its grubby collar, all were suddenly dripping with sweat and reeking of that acrid odor of flowers crushed underfoot.

This man, who’d managed to maintain around himself a climate of dull fear and who never let anyone intimidate him, now seemed terrified.

What could such small girls be making him afraid of? Norah wondered. They—th

miraculous offspring of his old age—were so marvelously pretty as to make him forget that they belonged to the lesser sex, and perhaps even forget the plainness of his first two daughters, Norah and her sister.

She went toward the bed and knelt down. Looking into the two small identical faces, round, dark, and delicate like the heads of seals resting on the sand, she smiled.

At that moment the first bars of “And here’s to you, Mrs. Robinson ...” rang out in the room.

Everyone jumped—even Norah, though it was the ringtone of her cell phone. She reached for the phone in the pocket of her dress. She was about to turn it off when she noticed that the call was coming from her own home. Awkwardly, she put the phone to her ear. The silence of the room seemed to have changed. Calm, ponderous, and lethargic just a moment ago, it had suddenly become alert and vaguely hostile, as if the chance of overhearing something clear and definitive might help them to decide between keeping her at a distance and welcoming her into their midst.

“It’s me, Mummy!” Lucie’s voice rang out.

“Hello, darling! You don’t have to shout, I can hear you quite clearly,” Norah said, reddening the face. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes! At the moment we’re making crepes with Grete. Then we’re off to the movies. We’re having a lovely time.”

“Splendid,” said Norah softly. “Lots of love! Speak to you soon.”

She snapped the phone shut and slipped it into her pocket.

The two little girls pretended to be asleep. Their eyelids flickered and their lips were pressed together.

Disappointed, Norah stroked their cheeks, then got up and nodded to Khady before leaving the room with her father, who closed the door carefully behind him.

She thought, plaintively, of what seemed yet another failure on this man’s part to establish a straightforward loving relationship with his children. A man who provoked such a pitiless gaze did not deserve the beautiful little girls born to him in his old age, and nothing, no one could change a man like that except by tearing out his heart.

But as she followed him back down the gloomy corridor, her cell phone knocking gently now against her thigh, she admitted grimly that her irritation with her father was amplified by the outsize excitement in Lucie’s voice, and that the barbs she couldn’t or wouldn’t dare utter to Jakob, the man she’d been living with for a year, would be planted there, in his father’s back, as he walked innocently before her, bowed and overweight, along the obscure passage.

For in her mind’s eye she could see her beloved Paris apartment, the intimate, discreet emblem of her perseverance, of her modest success, into which, having lived there for a few years alone with Lucie, she’d introduced Jakob and his daughter, Grete, and with them, at a stroke, confusion and disorder, whereas the motivation behind the purchase of the three-room apartment in Montmartre (financed by a thirty-year loan) had precisely been her spiritual longing to put an end to the lifelong confusion of which her now elderly, threadbare father, his wings folded under his shirt, looming huge and incongruous in the gloomy corridor, had been the agonizing incarnation.

Oh, she’d quickly sensed in Lucie’s tone—panting, urgent, and shrill—that the apartment

was at that very moment the scene of another demonstration of fatherly ardor, a detestable display informed by Jakob's ostentatious refusal to lay down any limits or exercise the slightest authority over two seven-year-old girls, and by his habit of undertaking, with extravagant commentary, great energy, and much gusto, culinary preparations he usually lacked the ability, will, or patience to see through, so that pancake or cake batter was never set to cook, because in the meantime he'd suddenly suggested going out or doing something else, in the same panting, urgent, shrill tone that the girls adopted, and that got them so overexcited that they often ended up exhausted, fretful, and in tears, a situation made worse. Norah thought, by a vague feeling that, for all the screaming and laughter, the day had been pointless, awkward, and weird.

Yes, she'd been quick to sense all that in Lucie's voice. She was already worried about not being there. Or rather, the disquiet that she'd started to feel as the day of her departure approached and that she'd firmly suppressed, she now gave free rein to. Not that there was anything that could objectively be considered dangerous in leaving the girls in Jakob's care, but she was concerned that the discipline, thrift, and high moral values that, it seemed to her, she'd established in her little apartment and that were meant to affirm and adorn her own life and form the basis of Lucie's upbringing were being demolished in her absence with colorful and methodical jubilation by a man. As for bringing the man into her home, nothing had obliged her to do that: only love, and hope.

Now she was unable to recognize that love any longer; it lay smothered by disappointment. She had lost all hope of an ordered, sober, harmonious family life.

She had opened her door and evil—smiling, gentle, and stubborn—had entered.

After years of mistrust, having left Lucie's father and bought the apartment, after years of austere constructing an honorable existence, she had opened her door to its destruction.

Shame on her; she couldn't tell anyone about it. There seemed to be nothing expressible or understandable about the mistake she'd made: a mistake, a crime against her own efforts.

Neither her mother nor her sister nor her few friends could conceive how Jakob and his daughter, Grete—both of them gentle and considerate, well brought up and likable—were working subtly to undermine the delicate balance that had finally been achieved in the lives of Norah and Lucie, before Norah—as if blinded in the end by an excess of mistrust—had obligingly opened her door to the charming incarnation of evil.

How lonely she felt!

How trapped, how stupid!

Shame on her.

But what words could she find sufficiently precise to comprehend the anger and disquiet that she'd felt two or three days before, during one of those family arguments that epitomized for her Jakob's nasty underhandedness and her own feeble-mindedness, she who had so aspired to simplicity and straightforwardness, she who had been so afraid of twisting things, thinking while she and Lucie lived alone together that she'd run a mile at the slightest hint of it, determined never to expose her child to eccentric or perverse behavior?

But she had been ignorant of the fact that evil can have a kindly face, that it could be accompanied by a delightful little girl, and that it could be prodigal in love—though, in fact, Jakob's vague, impersonal, and inexhaustible love cost him nothing; she knew that now.

As on every other morning, Norah had gotten up first, made Grete and Lucie's breakfast

and gotten them ready for school. Jakob, who normally only woke up after the three of them had left the house, emerged from the bedroom that morning just as Norah was finishing her hair in the bathroom.

The girls were putting on their shoes, and what should he do but start teasing them, undoing one girl's laces and stealing the other's shoe, running and hiding it under the sofa with howls of laughter like a mocking child, oblivious of the time and the distress of the girls. Grete, who, amused at first, ran around the apartment in pursuit, begging him to stop his tricks, came to the verge of tears but trying to smile because it was all supposed to be comical and in good fun. Norah had to intervene and order him, like a dog, in that faux-gentle tone, pulsing with suppressed anger, that she used only with Jakob, to bring the shoe back at once, which he did with such good grace that Norah, and the girls too, suddenly looked like petty, sad women whom an impish teaser had only tried to cheer up.

Norah knew that she had to hurry now or be late for the first appointment of the day, so she refused tartly when Jakob offered to go with them. But the girls had encouraged him and backed him up, so Norah, weary and demoralized all of a sudden, gave in. Standing silently in the hallway with their coats, shoes, and scarves on, they had to wait for him to get dressed and join them. He had a way of being gay and lighthearted that seemed forced, almost threatening, to Norah. Their eyes had met as she glanced anxiously at her watch. All she saw in Jakob's look was cruel spite, bordering on hardness, under his stubbornly effervescent manner.

It made her head spin, wondering what kind of man she'd allowed into her home.

He'd then taken her in his arms and embraced her more tenderly than anyone had ever done. Feeling miserable, she chided herself: Who can enjoy a taste of tenderness and then willingly give it up?

They had then trudged through the muddy slush on the pavement and clambered into Norah's little car. It was cold and uncomfortable.

Jakob had gotten into the back with the girls (as was his annoying habit, Norah thought: an adult, wasn't his place in the front, next to her?), and while she let the engine warm up she'd heard him whisper to the girls that they needn't fasten their seat belts.

"Oh, why needn't we?" Lucie had asked in astonishment.

"Because we're not going far," he'd said in his silly, excited voice.

Norah had gripped the steering wheel, and her hands had begun to tremble.

She'd ordered the girls to fasten their seat belts at once, the fury she felt against Jakob hardening her tone. Her anger had seemed aimed at them, the unfairness of which Grete and Lucie had expressed to Jakob with a pained look.

"We're really not going far," he'd said. "Anyway, I'm not going to fasten my seat belt."

Norah pulled out.

She, who made a point of never being late, was certainly late now.

She was on the brink of tears.

She was a lost, pathetic creature.

After some hesitation, Grete and Lucie had given up fastening their seat belts and Norah said nothing, furious with Jakob for seeking always to cast her in the role of a killjoy or villain, but also disgusted with herself for being, she felt, a coward, unworthy.

She'd felt like heaving the car against a bus, just to show him that fastening seat belts

wasn't pointless, but he knew that, didn't he?

That wasn't the issue. What was *she* doing? What did she want from this man who was hanging on her back with his adorable child in tow? What did she want from this man with the soft, pale eyes, who'd sunk his painless little claws in her flanks so that no matter what she did she couldn't shake him off?

That's what she could not, dare not, explain to her mother or her sister or her few remaining friends: the sheer ordinariness of such incidents, the narrowness of her concern, the emptiness of such a life beneath the appearance of fullness that—such was the terrible power of enchantment wielded by Jakob and his daughter—so easily deceived mother, sister, and friends.

Norah's father stopped in front of one of the cells that lined the corridor.

He opened the door carefully and immediately stood back.

"You'll be sleeping here," he said.

Gesturing toward the far end of the corridor, he added—as if Norah had shown a slight hesitation about this particular assignment—"There're no longer any beds in the other rooms."

Norah switched on the ceiling light.

The walls were covered with posters of basketball players.

"Sony's room?" she mumbled.

Her father nodded.

He was breathing more audibly, with his mouth wide open, his back against the wall.

"What are the girls called?" asked Norah.

He shrugged, pretending to think.

She laughed, slightly shocked.

"Don't you remember?" she asked.

"Their mother chose their names, rather strange names, I can never remember them," he replied, laughing too, but mirthlessly.

To her great surprise she sensed in him an air of desperation.

"What do they do during the day, when their mother isn't there?"

"They stay in their room," he said abruptly.

"All day?"

"They have all they need. They don't lack for anything. That girl takes good care of them.

Norah then wanted to ask why he'd summoned her.

But though she knew her father well enough to be aware that it couldn't have been for the simple pleasure of seeing her after so long and that he must be after something from her in particular, he seemed at that moment so old and vulnerable that she refrained from asking the question. When he's ready, he'll let me know, she said to herself, but she couldn't help telling him, "I can only stay a few days."

She thought of Jakob and the two overexcited girls, and her stomach tightened.

"Ah no," he said, agitated all of a sudden, "you must stay a lot longer, it's absolutely essential! Well, see you tomorrow."

Slipping into the corridor, he trotted away, his flip-flops clacking on the concrete, his hips wiggling under the thin fabric of his trousers.

With him went the bittersweet smell of rotting flowers, of flowers in full bloom crushed

under an indifferent foot or bitterly trampled, and when she removed her dress to go to sleep she took particular care to spread it out on Sony's bed so that the yellow flowers embroidered on the green cotton cloth remained fresh and distinct to the eye and bore no resemblance to the poinciana's wilting flowers and the guilty, sad smell left in her father's wake.

She found her backpack at the foot of the bed.

She sat in her nightgown on her brother's bed. It was covered with a sheet bearing the insignias of American basketball teams. She cast a pained look at the small chest of drawers covered with dusty knickknacks, the child's desk with its low top, the basketballs piled up in a corner, most of them burst or deflated.

She recognized every object, every poster, every piece of furniture.

Her brother Sony was thirty-five and Norah hadn't seen him for many years, but they had always been close.

His room hadn't changed at all since his adolescence.

How was it possible to live like that?

She shivered in spite of the heat.

Outside the small square window everything was pitch black and totally silent.

No sound came from within the house nor from outside it, except perhaps—she couldn't be sure—from time to time that of the poinciana's branches rubbing against the corrugated-iron roof.

She picked up her cell phone and phoned home.

No reply.

Then she remembered that Lucie had mentioned going to the movies, which annoyed her because it was Monday and the girls had to be up early the next day for school, and she had to struggle against a sense of impending catastrophe, of terrifying disorder, that swept over her every time she wasn't there to see, simply see, what was going on, even if she could never always do much about it.

She considered such worries as failings on her part, not weaknesses.

Because it would be too arrogant to think that she alone knew how to organize Lucie and Grete's life properly, that she alone, through the power of her reason, of her anxious concern, could prevent disaster from crossing the threshold and entering her life.

Had she not already opened her door to evil in a kindly, smiling form?

The only way to mitigate the effects of this great blunder was to be constantly, anxiously, on the alert.

But when her father called she'd simply left.

Sitting on Sony's bed, she now regretted it.

What was her father—this selfish old man—to her, compared with her daughter?

What did her father's existence matter now, when her own hung by a thread?

Although she knew that, if Jakob was sitting in a movie theater at that moment, it was pointless, she still dialed his cell phone.

She left an exaggeratedly cheery message.

She could see his affable face, the calm, clear, sensible look in his eyes, the slight droop of his lips, and the general pleasantness of his finely wrought features. She was still able to acknowledge that such amiability had inspired her with confidence, to the extent that she had

not dwelled on the puzzling aspects of the life of this man who'd come from Hamburg with his daughter, on the slightly differing versions he'd given of his reasons for coming to France, on the vagueness of his explanations for his less than assiduous attendance at law school, on the fact that Grete never saw, and never spoke about, her mother, who, he claimed, had stayed in Germany.

She knew now that Jakob would never become a lawyer, or anything else, for that matter, that he would never contribute meaningfully to the expenses of the household even if he did receive from time to time—from his parents, he said—a few hundred euros, which he spent immediately and ostentatiously on expensive meals and on clothes the children didn't need, and she knew too—finally admitting it to herself—that she had quite simply set up in her home a man and a little girl whom she had to feed and care for, whom she could not throw out, and who had her boxed in.

That was the way it was.

She dreamed sometimes that she would return home one evening to find Lucie all by herself, relaxed and happy as she used to be in the past, unaffected by the hollow excitement Jakob provoked, and that Lucie would tell her calmly that the others had left for good.

That was the way it was. Norah knew that she would never have the strength to throw them out.

Where would they go, how would they manage?

Only a miracle, she sometimes thought, could rid her of them, could free her and Lucie from life with this amiable but subtly evil pair.

Yes, that was the way it was, she was trapped.

She got up, took a toiletries bag out of her backpack, and went into the corridor.

So deep was the silence that she seemed to hear it vibrating.

She opened a door that she remembered concluding was the bathroom.

But it was her father's room. It was empty, and the double bed had not been slept in. Something about the stillness of the air and of everything else made her think that the room was no longer used.

She followed the corridor to the living room and groped her way through it.

The front door was not locked.

Hugging her toiletries bag to her chest and feeling her nightgown rubbing against the back of her knees, she went outside. With her bare feet on the warm cement she felt herself trampling on the invisible flowers that had fallen from the poinciana. She dared at last to look up at the tree, in the vain hope of seeing nothing there, of not discerning in the crisscross of branches the pale shape, the cold luminescence of her father's hunched body. She thought she could hear, coming from the shadows, loud, painful breathing, desolate panting and even stifled sobs and little groans of distress.

Overcome with emotion, she wanted to call out to him.

But what word could she use to address him?

She'd never been comfortable saying "Daddy," and couldn't imagine using his first name, which she barely knew.

Her urge to call out to him remained stuck in her throat.

For a long while she watched him rocking very slightly above her head. She couldn't see his face, but she recognized, gripping the biggest branch, his old plastic flip-flops.

The body of her father, this broken man, shone palely.

What a bad omen!

She wanted to run away from this funereal house as quickly as possible, but she felt that having agreed to return to it and having managed to locate the tree her father was perched in, she was now too deeply committed to be able to abandon him and go back home.

She returned to Sony's room, having given up on the idea of trying to find the bathroom, so fearful was she now of opening a door on a scene or situation that would cause her to feel more guilty.

Sitting on Sony's bed again, she toyed with her cell phone, deep in thought.

Should she try again to call home, at the risk of waking the children if they'd gotten back from the movies?

Or go to sleep with the guilty feeling of having done nothing to avert a potential catastrophe?

She'd have liked to hear Lucie's voice again.

A hideous thought went through her mind, so fleeting that she forgot the exact form it took, but long enough for her to feel the full horror of it: Might she never hear her daughter's voice again?

And what if, in hastening to her father's side, she'd unwittingly chosen between two camps, two possible ways of life, the one inevitably excluding the other, and between two forms of commitment fiercely jealous of each other?

Without further ado she dialed the number of the apartment, and then, since no one picked up, the number of Jakob's cell phone, also in vain.

Having slept little and badly, she got up at dawn, slipped on her green dress and sandals, and went in search of the bathroom, which was, in fact, next door to Sony's room.

She went back to the little girls' room.

She gently opened the door.

The young woman was still asleep. The two little girls were awake and sitting up in bed. Their perfectly identical pairs of eyes were wide open, gazing sternly at Norah.

She smiled at them, murmuring from a distance the tender things she habitually said to Lucie.

The little girls frowned.

One of them spat at her. The thin spittle dribbled onto the sheet.

The other began to imitate her, puffing out her cheeks.

Norah shut the door, not offended, but unsettled.

She wondered if she should be doing something for these little waifs, and in what capacity—as a half sister, a kind of mother, an adult morally responsible for every child one came across?

She once again felt her heart bursting with impotent rage at that thoughtless man who after so many failures couldn't wait to marry again and produce more children who meant nothing to him, a man whose capacity for love and for showing consideration to others was so small, seemingly used up in his youth in his relationship with his old mother, long dead, whom Norah had never known.

It's true he'd shown some affection toward Sony, his only son.

But what need had he for a new family, this unfeeling man, incomplete, detached?

He was already eating when she reentered the living room. He was sitting at the table as of the previous evening, dressed in the same pale shabby clothes, his face bent over his plate stuffing himself with porridge, so that she had to wait until he'd finished and had hurled himself backward, as if after enormous physical exertion, panting and sighing. Only then could she ask, looking him straight in the eye, "Now, what's this all about?"

That morning her father had a look that was even more evasive than usual.

Was it because he knew that she'd seen him in the poinciana?

But how could that embarrass him, this cynical man who had never batted an eyelid over much more degrading situations?

"Masseck!" he shouted hoarsely.

He then asked Norah, "What'll you have? Tea? Coffee?"

She tapped on the table lightly with her fist, thinking, with a vacant, worried air, that it was time for Lucie and Grete to get up and go to school, and that Jakob would perhaps have forgotten to set his alarm clock, which would mean that the whole day would bear the mark of failure and neglect. But wasn't she herself much too virtuous, punctual, and scrupulous? Wasn't she in reality that tiresome woman whom she reproached Jakob for painting her as?

"Coffee?" asked Masseck, offering her a full cup.

"Will you please tell me why I've come?" she said calmly, looking her father in the eye.

Masseck scurried away.

Her father then started breathing so violently and with such difficulty that Norah leaped from her chair and went up to him.

She stood there, awkwardly, and would have put her question to him again if she'd been able.

"You must go and see Sony," he murmured painfully.

"Where's Sony?"

"In Reubeuss."

"What on earth's Reubeuss?"

No answer.

He breathed less painfully, slumped in his chair, his belly sticking out, surrounded by the syrupy odor of poinciana flowers in full bloom.

Then she was deeply moved to see tears running down his gray cheeks.

"It's the prison," he said.

She took a step, almost a leap, backward.

"What've you done with Sony?" she cried out. "You were supposed to be looking after him!"

"He was the one who committed the offense, not me," he whispered, almost inaudibly.

"What offense? What's he done? Oh God, you were supposed to be taking care of him and bringing him up properly!"

She stepped back and sank onto her chair.

She gulped down the coffee, which was acrid, lukewarm, and tasteless.

Her hands trembled so much that she dropped the cup onto the glass-topped table.

"That's another broken cup!" her father said. "I spend all my time buying crockery in the

house.”

“What did Sony do?”

He got up, shaking his head, his old wizened face ravaged by the impossibility of talking.

“Masseck will drive you to Reubeuss,” he croaked.

He walked backward toward the door to the corridor, slowly, as if trying to escape without her noticing.

His toenails were long and yellow.

“So,” she asked calmly, “is that why there’s no one here anymore? Is that why everyone has left?”

Her father’s back met the door; he groped behind him, opened it, and scurried away down the corridor.

Once, in a meadow in Normandy, she’d seen an old abandoned donkey whose hooves had grown so much he could hardly walk.

Her father was quite capable of trotting along when it suited him!

Her immense feeling of resentment lit up her mind and sharpened her thoughts.

No one, nothing, could ever excuse their father for his failure to keep Sony on the straight and narrow.

Because when, thirty years earlier, wishing to abandon their mother and France and his dead-end office job, he’d suddenly left, taking Sony, then age five, with him—abducting Sony, in truth, because he knew the mother would never agree to let him take her little boy—when he’d thereby plunged Norah, her sister, and their mother in a despair the mother would never really get over, when he’d promised in a letter left on the kitchen table to take better care of the child than of himself, his business affairs, and his personal ambitions, their mother, in her grief, had clung to that promise, convincing herself that Sony would have a brilliant career and great opportunities that she, a simple hairdresser, couldn’t perhaps have managed to give him.

Norah couldn’t recall without gasping for breath the day she came home from school to find her father’s letter.

She was eight, her sister nine, and from the bedroom the three children shared Sony’s things were gone: his clothes in the chest of drawers, his bag of Legos, his teddy bear.

Her first thought was to hide the letter and, by some miracle, the reality of Sony and the father’s departure, so that her mother wouldn’t notice.

Then, grasping how powerless she was, she’d wandered around the small, dark apartment, dizzy with worry and pain, staggered by the realization of what had happened, of the huge suffering already inflicted and certain to go on being inflicted, and of the fact that nothing could undo the terrible thing that had occurred.

She’d then taken the metro to the salon where her mother worked.

Even now, thirty years later, she couldn’t summon the strength to recall precisely the moment when she told her mother what had happened and what suffering still lay in wait.

It was all she could do to remember, little by little, her mother’s wild stare as she sat on Sony’s bed, frantically smoothing the pale blue chenille coverlet and repeating shrilly, monotonously, “He’s too young to live without me. Five years old, that’s much too small!”

Their father had phoned the day after his arrival. He was triumphant, full of gusto, and their mother had made an effort to be conciliatory, to sound almost calm, fearing above all

that this man who hated open conflict would break off all relations if he thought she was making a big fuss.

He'd let Sony talk on the phone but had grabbed the receiver back when the child, hearing his mother's voice, had started to cry.

Time had passed, and the bitter, heartrending, unacceptable situation had become diluted in the routine of everyday life, had melted in the normality of an existence only disrupted at regular intervals by the arrival of a clumsy, stilted letter from Sony, which Norah and her sister had to answer in a similarly formal way so that—their mother calculated—it would appear to their father that there was no risk in allowing greater contact.

How accommodating and sadly devious this gentle, benumbed woman had shown herself to be in her distress! She'd gone on buying clothes for Sony, folding them carefully, and putting them away in the little boy's chest of drawers.

"For when he gets back," she'd say.

But from the outset Norah and her sister had been fully aware that Sony would never come back, knowing as they did their father's lack of feeling, his indifference to the feelings of others, and his penchant for imposing his iron will on those around him.

Once he'd decided that Sony was his by right he would ignore everything that could restrain his desire to have his only son at his side.

He considered of little importance the unhappiness that Sony felt about his exile, just as he viewed the suffering of his wife as unavoidable and purely temporary. For he was like that: implacable and terrifying.

Throughout the time their mother still expected Sony to return, Norah and her sister knew that she hadn't gotten the full measure of her husband's intransigence. He would stubbornly refuse, for instance, to send the boy back to France for the holidays.

For he was like that: an implacable, terrifying man.

The years passed and the painful subservience of their mother was rewarded only by an invitation to Norah and her sister to visit their brother.

"Why won't you let Sony come and see us?" their mother shouted into the phone, her face contorted in grief.

"Because I know that you wouldn't let him go again," their father, calm and self-assured, probably answered, slightly annoyed perhaps because he loathed weeping and shouting.

"Of course I would, I swear to you!"

But he knew she was lying, and she knew it too. Choking and gasping, she couldn't go on.

That their father would never want to be burdened with his two daughters, that he'd do nothing to keep them, was so blindingly obvious that their mother let them go to see him, sending Norah and her sister as emissaries and witnesses to her immense affliction, to her somewhat disembodied love for a boy whose photograph his father from time to time sent her, a badly taken picture, always blurred, which invariably showed Sony smiling broadly, in excellent health, amazingly handsome, and expensively dressed.

Their father had acquired a holiday village while it was still under construction. He'd given it a complete, luxurious makeover, and it was now making him a wealthy man.

Meanwhile, in Paris, in a symmetrical but contrary manner, as if she felt she had to atone for her misfortune by letting things slide, their mother was experiencing money troubles. She kept getting into debt and having to negotiate endlessly with credit card companies.

Their father sent a little money at irregular intervals, different amounts each time, doubtless because he wished to convey the impression that he was doing all he could.

He was like that, implacable and terrifying.

He was incapable of compassion and remorse, and because as a child he'd been tormented by hunger on a daily basis, he was determined now to gorge himself and apply his quick intelligence to no aim but ensuring his comfort and establishing his power. He had no need to tell himself, "I deserve all this," because he never doubted for a second that his privileges and the wealth amassed so quickly were his by right.

Meanwhile their conscientious, desperate, insecure mother was getting into a mess with her accounts. Eventually, that meant she had to move. In the rue des Pyrénées they took a two-bedroom apartment that looked onto an inner courtyard. Sony's drawer was stocked with fewer and fewer new clothes.

So when the two girls, aged twelve and thirteen, arrived for the first time in their father's enormous house, stricken with emotion and exhausted by the heat, they brought with them the decorous, austere, repressed sadness in which they lived, a sentiment betrayed by their short, simple haircuts, their denim dresses bought too big so as to last longer, and their graceless missionary sandals. It all aroused an overwhelming feeling of disgust in their father, made only worse by the fact that they were neither of them very pretty, as well as suffering from acne and being overweight. As they grew older they shed the extra pounds, but they would always, in a way, look fat to their father, because he was like that: a man deeply shocked and repelled by ugliness.

That's why, Norah thought, he'd loved Sony as much as he could love anyone.

Their younger brother appeared on the threshold of the house. He hadn't dropped from the poinciana, then still a small and delicate shrub, but had just dismounted from a pony on which he'd been slowly trotting around the garden.

Dressed in a cream-colored riding outfit and wearing real riding boots, he stood with one foot forward, his riding hat tucked under his arm.

No smell of rotting flowers clung to his lithe, elegant frame. The nine-year-old boy's narrow chest was not lit from within by any unusual glow.

He was simply there, smiling, happy, and magnificent, stretching his arms out to his sisters as dazzling and carefree as they were dull and serious.

And Sony treated them with extreme unpretentious kindness throughout their stay, during which, though scared and reproachful, they tasted a life of luxury beyond their wildest imaginings.

He greeted every remark they made, every question they asked, with a gentle smile and a few noncommittal words, making a joke of it, so they failed to notice that they never got a straight response to anything.

He remained silent whenever they mentioned their mother.

He gazed into space and his lower lip quivered slightly.

But it didn't last; he quickly became once again the happy, calm, unpretentious, smooth-skinned, almost too gentle boy whom their father would gaze at proudly, obviously comparing him with his two lumpish anxious-looking daughters and telling himself—Norah supposed—that he'd done right in not leaving Sony behind, in removing him from his mother's baleful influence, which had transformed two amiable little girls into a pair of tubbs.

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