

Praise for Constance Debré

‘Challenging yet empowering ... refreshing’ *The New York Times*

‘At once cavernous and concise ... it is sharply observed, cool and unbiased in its assessment of human folly’ *New York Review of Books*

‘A continued, decisive force of writing’ *Irish Times*

‘Shocking for its psychologically blank, bare-knuckle swagger’ *Telegraph*

‘You can’t help but think of her work falling in the tradition of Annie Ernaux, just edgier. Her prose is gorgeously spare and practical’ *Irish Independent*

‘Fascinating ... *Playboy* is a story of bravery and ultimate personal freedom, and the costs that come with it’ *Buzz Magazine*

‘Bold and brash and at the same time quietly controlled ... Debré is brilliantly deadpan’ Chloë Ashby, *Spectator*

‘One of the most compulsive voices I’ve read in years ... there’s undeniable pleasure to be had from the way in which she reacts, her powerful evacuation of feeling, her sense of taking an automatic rifle to her past ... a vision of queer life that has nothing to do with identity or marriage or any of the new homonormative rites’ Olivia Laing, *Observer*

‘In *Playboy*, the French novelist Constance Debré is radical in shucking off not only the trappings of matrimony but also of class’ Mia Levitin, *Financial Times*

‘*Love Me Tender* is, without a trace of coyness, a love letter, both to a child and to a queer woman’s own becoming. As for Constance – both the author and her fictional counterpart – you root for her all the way’ *Guardian*

‘Ferocious emotional honesty ... A bracing read and a timely reminder that attitudes are often far slower to change than legislation’ *Irish Times*

‘A story that’s quietly heartbreaking and fiercely defiant’ *Spectator*

‘Her scalpel-like stylistic approach makes the rebellious content of Debré’s novels resonate all the more’ *Prospect*

‘This is the most addictive book I’ve read since I can remember ... Debré’s observations about how men see women, and how she now sees women in turn, as a lesbian, are brutal and revelatory. Read the earth-shatteringly emotional *Love Me Tender* next, where Debré fights to keep custody of her young son post-divorce, despite her ex-husband’s best efforts’ *AnOther Magazine*

‘Debré’s writing aims to eradicate all origins and backstories, and with them the social roles they enforce, replacing them with an ethos of radical self-fashioning ... Debré’s sprezzatura writing is the literary equivalent of a shrug: a swashbuckling ‘Et alors?’ Alice Blackhurst, *New Left Review*

‘Constance’s voice is extremely strong – sharp, assertive, acerbic, and wholly convincing’ *Buzz Magazine*

‘Intense ... a character striving mightily for authenticity and honesty, questioning and rending the veil of social norms, acknowledging the Absurd, in hopes of finding some more solid, albeit subjective, truth’ Claire Messud, author of *The Burning Girl*

‘A compulsive read, this is for fans of Virginie Despentes, Hervé Guibert and Guillaume Dustan’ *AnOther* magazine best books feature

‘Painfully beautiful’ Christiana Spens, *London Magazine*

‘Debré’s voice is like a diamond drill boring through stone ... that cold sliver of voice, conducting electricity at a high voltage, sending the occasional shower of sparks off the page’ *Bookforum*

‘*Playboy* is an unparalleled document of desire that flies in the face of societal expectations. Debré’s narrator pursues her own with a restless curiosity, all the more intense for its ambivalence, and calm coexistence with the emotional shrapnel left in its wake. This crushing bluntness is at once wounding, unmooring and transcendent; I can’t get it out of my head’ Daisy Lafarge, author of *Paul*

‘*Playboy* is a book that explodes what it means to be a woman in lust with another woman in a heteronormative world. An essential read’ Joelle Taylor, T.S. Eliot Prize winning author of *C+nto*

‘This was my first Debré and will certainly not be my last. *Playboy* has no interest in the comfort of its readers. It is defiant, probing, hot, occasionally cruel, and never, ever sorry’ Saba Sams, author of *Send Nudes*

‘*Playboy* is written in sharp, searing and tender vignettes, peppered with desire, banality and skewering takes on heteronormativity. Debré looks the reader right in the eye and doesn’t blink. It’s a book that makes other books possible’
Jenna Clarke, author of *Disturbance*

‘Constance Debré has the power to make you gasp like no other writer – it’s a thrill to be back with her taught-af prose rendered brilliantly into English by Holly James’s translation. *Playboy* is a razor-sharp exposition of desire and the rocky paths we follow as we try to sate ourselves. As ever, too, Debré dispenses swiftly with bourgeois heterosexual moral codes, exposing the hypocrisies at the heart of French society’
Rebecca May Johnson, author of *Small Fires*

‘Committed to truth-telling, no matter how rough, but also intriguingly suspended in a cloud of unknowing and pain, *Love Me Tender* is a wry, original, agonising book destined to become a classic of its kind’ Maggie Nelson

‘*Love Me Tender* will break your heart and repair it and break it again, but not because it’s trying to. Debré writes matter of factly, fluidly, scabrously, laying bare the hypocrisies of society, of institutions, of families. It is a brutal manifesto of how to live an honest life, direct the way a laser is direct’
Lauren Elkin, author of *Flâneuse*

‘In cruel, brilliant sentences that tighten around the truth like teeth, a fierce character emerges; a new kind of rebel in a queer masterpiece’ Holly Pester, author of *Comic Timing*

‘*Love Me Tender* is a spitting, snarling tour de force of fuck-you feminist defiance. Pulling us straight from the tender moments of a mother meeting her estranged child, right into a whirlwind of lesbian pick-ups, Parisian apartment-hopping and chain smoking, Debré’s novel is a stark reminder of society’s suspicion towards women – particularly mothers – who resist easy definition. Wry, bold and confronting, *Love Me Tender* insists on a woman’s right to define herself, to choose her own life’ Imogen Crimp, author of *A Very Nice Girl*

‘*Love Me Tender* is written with edge and urgency in a voice that is both vulnerable and in full command. I read it in one sitting and was taken over by its narrative energy and shocked by the story it tells’ Colm Tóibín

‘I am obsessed with Debré’s spare account of a, both chosen and necessarily, pared-down life, that smashes the conventions of style as it smashes the conventions of family, without ever losing its tender touch’ Joanna Walsh, author of *Break.up*

‘This book knocked my block off. One of a kind’ Ana Kinsella, author of *Look Here*

‘Written in clear and direct prose. Fearless and honest. Hard and soft. Resolute and tough and, yes, very tender’ Michael Imperioli

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by
Tuskar Rock Press,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.profilebooks.com

First published in the United States by Semiotext(e)

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN 978 1 80081 987 0
eISBN 978 1 80081 988 7



NAME

Constance Debré

**Translated by
Lauren Elkin**



TUSKAR ROCK PRESS

She dips the washcloth in the bowl of warm water, she passes it over his face, she lowers the sheet, she lowers his pajama trousers, she passes the washcloth over my father's inert penis, she raises the sheet above his waist, she asks me for a shirt, I turn to the wardrobe, I lay one on the bed, she takes my father by the shoulders, she tries to remove his pajama top, his arms don't bend, she tries harder, I see she's trying harder, I lean forward, Go on, lean forward, I catch hold of his cold shoulder, I slip my arm behind his cold back, I put my hand in his cold hand, I pull on the arm that is stuck, I think of rigor mortis, I remove his pajama top, I put on the new shirt, I lay my father back against the pillow, she puts away the two pumps, she takes out the tubes, she cleans up the packets of morphine and sedatives, she puts them in a special briefcase with a code, she came to collect the morphine, that's why she's here, It's part of the procedure, she

says, the washcloth the shirt was her idea, We can't leave him like that, she says, she leaves, it's still dark out, I go back to the kitchen, I make some more coffee, it's almost morning, the light is beautiful, I inhale the dry odor of the garden, at eight thirty I take my father's bank card from the chimney, I take the Peugeot, the 206 three-door hatchback diesel with 197,000 kilometers on it bought at Touraine Used Cars a few days ago, I go to the ATM at the Super U, I hesitate, How much, I take out €200.

It is already warm out when I get back, I close the shutters in the bedroom, I look at him, he already looks different, more drawn, more waxy, the undertakers will come when the doctor gives us the death certificate, they really shouldn't wait with this heat, I stay in the house as it gets hotter, I am alone with him, like last night, like all the nights these past few weeks, it's calm, it's new this calm, it's the quiet of the oxygen machine that's no longer going, sometimes I go to his room, I go in, I look at him.

The doctor knocks at the door, I let him in, he goes in the bedroom, he records the death, we go to the living room, he fills out the certificate, he says that he liked my father, that he was a bit challenging as a patient but he liked him a lot, I think he must say that every time, about every dead patient, that he must think people like that, he takes me in his arms, it's awkward, I'm stiff, it doesn't last, he gives me the certificate, Get out, get out do you hear me, he gets out.

My sister arrives with her husband, she's wearing sunglasses like at a celebrity funeral, she's crying, she doesn't dare go in to see him, I go with her, they have lunch, I don't, I want to go swimming, usually I go earlier, the undertakers arrive, they park their truck in front of the house, there's two or three of them I'm not sure, only men, maybe it's a man's job, I give them the certificate, I sign some papers, my sister goes back into my father's bedroom, I hear them talking to her, she's crying hard, she says through her tears that she doesn't want them to take him away, I go in or her husband does I don't remember, we talk to her, she calms down, I tell them to go, to go home, they live nearby, on the other side of the Loire, they left Paris, I tell them I'll look after the undertakers, you guys should get out of here, they go, the undertaker guys take the metal stretcher out of their truck, I wonder if it's refrigerated, they go to the bedroom, I give them some clothes for the coffin, I give them a pair of jeans, another blue shirt, a pair of Clarks, some underpants, some socks, I go outside, into the street in front of the house, they go through the door with my father in the opaque plastic body bag, it's transparent, I see my father's white hair, they slide my father into the back of the truck, they leave, him too, I go back into the house, I'm alone, the house is empty, it's sunny, I go into his bedroom, I look, I move into the living room, I take my pool bag, I go back out, I take the Peugeot, Touraine Used Cars is just down a bit, on the levee, in the industrial zone

by the river, I drive, it's a beautiful day, I cross the Cher,
I make the turn toward Tours Nord, I park in the lot of
the Centre aquatique du Lac, a fifty-meter pool, I swim
every day, I swim.

I was born to do the dirty work, I say dirty but I think beautiful, beautiful work, the most just, the most moral, I insist on that, the most moral, that of destroying, finishing. I say this calmly, simply, just that which has to be done, what we all have to do, not repairing, like they're always telling us, there is nothing to repair, but on the contrary breaking, leaving, taking part in the great business of loss, accelerating it, finishing things. What is your name? My name is Nobody, a name is nothing, like family, like childhood, I don't believe in it, I don't want it.

In the death room, in a drawer, a photograph of a baptism. An official photo of my official life. In front of my mother's chateau in Basque country, my parents, my two grandmothers, my grandfather the prime minister, me in my mother's arms, wearing an oversized dress made of white lace. There was an article in the local newspaper, at Mass

the men of the village sang for me, the president of the republic told my grandfather that Constance is a beautiful name. It's like in a choose-your-own-adventure story, you have to decide to go right or go left, decide which story to tell, which hero to play, sort, decide, get out. All photos are like that, all language as well I imagine. I don't take the photograph, I put it back in this desk which will be sold, or taken home by my sister, or thrown away, I close the drawer, I leave the room.

I have rid myself of nearly everything. Of family, marriage, work, apartments, belongings, people. That's what I've spent the last few years doing, ridding myself. All at once and very calmly, it's been both fast and slow, physical and internal, it's been like digging, like going down into the tunnels, from one underground space to another, like swimming, too, like doing lap after lap. You can't go backward, what existed before is gone, what you were before is gone, it's this impossibility you're after. To make all the questions go away, deprive them of reason, make them obsolete. You can refuse an inheritance, I'm not talking about money, it's been a long time now since I had any, I'm talking about faith, loyalty. Let's do away with origins, I don't hold on to the corpses.

The setting: 1960s Paris, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, full of sons and daughters from good families. On my mother's side there were four sisters, just as on my father's side four brothers, the same madness on each side of the family because families are always mad. She was the youngest, born in a château. When they met she was living in a large apartment on the rue Bonaparte, with the sister closest in age, the one who's going to die of alcohol and pills. Overdose or suicide, hard to tell in these cases. The building belonged to her family, to their family, to my family, in the entrance hall there was a marble bust of an ancestral baron and they had cousins on every floor. Her own father, my grandfather, died when she was fourteen, he was also an MP, a government minister even, but he had been dead for a long time. Her mother, my grandmother, lived in the southwest with her dogs, and came to Paris from time to time to check up on what was happening. There were

arguments, screams, scenes. Everyone in that family was violent. Aristocracy makes you crazy. Not because of the inbreeding, but because of faith. Faith that it is real, being noble. Especially when it no longer is, especially when everybody dies and the châteaux are burning. In that family they raised children like they raised horses, to be beautiful. Being beautiful meant lots of different things. The rest was of no importance.

After the bac, after all those years at boarding school with the nuns, she signed up for classes at the Sorbonne, when she was stopped in the street. They offered to take her picture, she posed for magazines, walked in runway shows, became a model, there was something terrifying in her beauty, for everyone, for her as well.

When she comes to pick me up from school, ten or fifteen years later, that is what I see. Among the other mothers, normal and ridiculous, she is taller, thinner, with her big coats and sunglasses. Even the fat unruly spaniel at the end of his leash only makes her look more royal. She could have gone around walking a pig and everyone would find it perfectly normal, even sublime. Everyone makes way for her when she walks down the street, it's like they feel compelled to bow to her, or to carry the hem of her coat, or to adopt the most sophisticated protocol, like in the empire of China in the first few pages of *René Leys*. I am amazed they even manage to address her directly, they even

sometimes call her *tu*. She calls everyone *tu*. She is very warm. Never a snob. Keep it simple, she says to anyone who never manages it. Proust's Duchesse de Parme. They all fall under her spell. Everyone. I see it. It grabs hold of them. It's physical. They are no longer quite themselves. My friends, my friends' parents, the baker, a bum, it doesn't matter who, she turns them all to jelly.

When I am with her, I watch things happen, it never fails. The way they desire her. A crazy, respectful desire. You don't fuck a queen up against a wall. You may think of nothing else, but you don't touch her. You hope that she will lower herself to your level. That she will lower herself and fuck you. My mother always enjoys it. She parades her sovereign desire throughout the world. To be her child is to be sexual before anything else, because she is. To get hard and to come, to be frustrated and perverse, voyeur and pimp, calm and furious. I am a witness or an accomplice, I watch people fall beneath her gaze, I am the favorite son or daughter, I am the crown prince, *tu quoque mi fili*, "you too, my child?" I delight in it I am enraged by it, I am biding my time.

Now, when I look back, I think she was crazy. I've thought so for a few years now. Since I started dating women. Since I came to understand that all women are stark raving mad.

Staying in a studio, staying at a friend's place, staying at a lover's place, not having a home, not having a domicile, changing, moving, keeping nothing domestic, not being domestic, not sitting down, eating standing up, working in bed, changing places, changing beds, not having a bed, not having a cupboard, not having a bookshelf, throwing out books, not having much clothing, exercising, swimming, running, shaving your head, tattooing your body, seducing, being seduced, leaving, being left, training, improving, starting over, risking, wanting, doing, not crying, being beautiful, being a hero, that's how I'm living now.

Recently I've been staying near Montparnasse. It used to be a hotel. A table a mattress a pot. A coffee maker a knife a fork a cup. Some clothing, black or grey or white, my uniform, you could say, because I'm a soldier.

Everything I own fits in two bags, when they start to overflow I throw something away, that's the rule, the moral rule, the aesthetic rule. My room is between Daguerre and Froidevaux. I'm there but I'm not, I'm often elsewhere, on my bike, in the Métro, in the street, in the cafés, in the pools, in other people's apartments, which people lend me when they go away, or across the street, at the Savoy, forty euros a night, single bed, communal shower, when a girl stays over I would rather leave her my room because I don't sleep. I can be anywhere, it doesn't matter at all.

Walk into the void, that's it, that's what you have to do, get rid of everything, of everything you have, of everything you know, and go toward the unknown. Otherwise you're not alive, you think you are but you're not, you stay home with your knickknacks and spend your life not living. It's nothing less than that, what you have to do. What matters isn't being on the left or on the right, rich or poor, straight or gay, living in a studio or a château, owning or renting, being married or not, none of it matters at all, like it doesn't matter if you're a woman, or Black or white, from a family of government ministers or addicts or an orphan, if you're guilty or innocent, all of that means nothing, being free has nothing to do with all that clutter, with having suffered or not, being free is the void, it is only your relationship to the void.

Today I have a body. It took years. It's not an idea, it's not rhetoric, it's a fact that can be verified by looking in the mirror. My body appeared when I became a writer, when I became a lesbian, when I let go of some things and then lost the rest. Specifically in my muscles and my tendons, in my face and the bones in my skull. It's not my name that interests me but my body. You have to be very focused, very serious, when you live like that.

Still in Paris, still on the Left Bank, a little farther south, between Montparnasse and Saint-Michel. It's the late '70s. I'm playing in the Jardin du Luxembourg or the Jardins de l'Observatoire right nearby. I go to public school on the rue Saint-Jacques. There are Portuguese kids in my class, Spanish kids, French kids, an Arab kid who's the son of the mechanic on the boulevard Saint-Michel, a Black girl called Fatou, a Vietnamese girl who was adopted and who has a French first name, her mother teaches history and geography, I think, otherwise it's full of average white French kids from the neighborhood, the children of shopkeepers mostly, one or two doctors' kids, GPs no doubt. The streets are called Gay-Lussac, Herschel, l'Abbé-de-l'Épée. At this time the fifth is a neighborhood for professors, shopkeepers, and students, neither rich nor poor, normal Paris for the time, middle class, with its ugly cafés, Turkish toilets, the smell of cold tobacco,

lemon-meringue tarts in the bakery windows, its gas stations, its cars that stink of gas, the buildings are mostly blackened, Paris is still dirty. Children from families like my own don't go to the public schools in the fifth, they go to private schools, to Stan, the Franks-Bourgeois, the Cours Désir, sometimes they wear uniforms, navy-blue smock dresses and long flannel shorts, English shoes with straps for girls and laces for the boys. The 1970s is between two eras, there are bourgeois people who still dress like it, my uncles never wear jeans, my cousins are not allowed to wear sneakers except in athletic situations. My parents are nothing like their brothers sisters cousins families, they live differently, they dress differently, they read different books, they think different thoughts. I'm not like my cousins either, or like other girls really. I dress like the boys, the ones from my neighborhood, from my school, more or less. My best friend is called Benjamin. His mother and grandmother run a home-decorations store on the boulevard Saint-Michel called Home Confort, next to a motorcycle store. He's like my brother, we're always together, in class, after school, during the holidays. He comes to Touraine with us, I go to Picardy with him, to Rouvroy-les-Merles where there's only one road, two farms, and the farmer's daughter who got pregnant when she was thirteen. He is calm like me. Calmer I think. I am calm to the point of rage, sometimes. We play marbles, LEGO, G.I. Joe, we make models, when we're a little older we go roller-skating, we go to cafés,

play pinball, other arcade games. I have a BB gun, a Pneuma-Tir, so do my two cousins on my mother's side whom I see on the weekends. On Saturdays we're alone, we can do what we like, their mother who is my mother's cousin works in a shop since she got divorced. They are a kind of gang, we roam the neighborhood in roller stakes with our Pneuma-Tirs, I am the only girl in the group of boys, everyone is used to it.

My parents think it's important for me to go to public school. My mother says we have to be modern, live like everyone else. She says that it was a shock for her to leave boarding school after the bac, to discover the world. As if she had been raised in a cult, like in those stories about Mormon kids. For my father, public school is a given.

They smoke opium at night. They lie down. There is an oil lamp that casts an orange light, Chinese pillows made of lacquered wood on which to rest your head, long pipes, needles with which they prepare the little ball above the lamp, before placing it in the pipe to be smoked. They each do this for the other. I see them sometimes, when I get up, when I can't sleep. I can't sleep because I have asthma or I have asthma because I can't sleep. The pipes are beautiful. They are in the living room, on a piece of black ebony furniture, an Italian writing desk, or was it Portuguese, with hunting scenes inlaid in ivory. During the day I put my nose to the bowl

of a terra cotta pipe, it's cold and smooth, the color of brick, a little darkened by the flame. Heroin doesn't smell like anything—medicine, Néo-Codion, Stilnox, Tranxene, Valium, none of them smell like anything. Alcohol stinks and makes bodies stink. But opium is good, even just to smell it.

We're in the car, we park, she cuts the engine, she turns around and from the back seat she pulls out some strawberries and cream, or was it a pastry, she says that my aunt loves sweet things, she says she won't be long, I wait for my mother in the car, I watch the people, I think, Sainte-Anne is a good place for thinking, like the Santé on the other side of the wall, the crazy people on one side, the guilty on the other. I will spend time at the Santé much later when I am a lawyer, to see the people I'm defending, to prepare their interrogations, their hearings, their requests to be freed which always fail because justice is pointless, I will return to Sainte-Anne to see my father when he comes for detox, which will always fail because that's pointless too. My mother returns, she tells me my aunt is hearing voices, General de Gaulle, Napoleon, Joan of Arc, all the classics. My aunt has always been crazy about politics, we have to save France or the Basque

Country or take revenge on the people who handed her father over to the Germans. Often she talks about her book, she will talk about it for years, she's always in the middle of writing it and it will explain everything.

My crazy aunt has six children. She left them in the Virgin Islands. The British Virgin Islands. Antigua Saint Kitts. Not Guadeloupe Martinique. They speak English, they always speak English in that family. One of them has Down syndrome and is going to die. My uncle is Black. He's a lawyer and speaks Oxford English, but still Black. I can imagine what a scene that must have caused, in their racist family. Now that she's crazy, and everything else has fallen apart, nobody cares, it's no longer the real problem. She's crazy, but hardly more so than the others if you think about it, with their illusions about nobility, family, France, with their alcoholism, which they pretend not to notice. Apart from the voices, of course. Apart from the fact that she sometimes gets herself arrested, obviously. And that she'll end up in Sainte-Anne or elsewhere.

The second sister is mean. Hysterical like the others. She also had a daughter who died. We don't keep count of the dead in my mother's family. We barely notice the insanity, we no longer bother looking for the cause.

The third one is more of an alcoholic than the others, to the point of drinking eau de cologne in the château

bathrooms. She got pregnant when she was sixteen. They worked something out with the boy's family. A good family. They hid the pregnancy. After the baby was born it was sent to a babysitter in Spain, they came to get it later, after a year or two. My cousin was raised all over the place. My aunt couldn't keep it together. She drank too much. They say that my cousin was difficult. It's difficult to be a bastard in this family. Then my aunt died. Maybe that's what helped my cousin survive.

There were four of them, my mother and her sisters. Today, they're all dead. My mother was the youngest. The elder sisters were born in Paris before the war, the younger ones in Basque Country, in U. They grew up in the château. Then in Paris, avenue Paul-Doumer, in a big apartment. There were always loads of servants. They spent all their vacations in Basque Country. My mother had an Irish nanny whom they called Miss and whose name I never knew. When she was eight they sent her to boarding school like her sisters. That's what they did with children. You thrust them into the nanny's arms and then you stuck them in boarding school. I don't know where they ever would have experienced tenderness. Maybe with the nannies. It's also sad when the nannies die. But we don't cry for the servants. We store up our sadnesses, we don't cry, we go crazy.

My cousin A. died when she was two, she drowned in an inflatable pool. My uncle went to answer the phone, he

was only away a minute or two. My aunt and uncle split up not long after.

My cousin S., my crazy aunt's daughter, the one with Down syndrome, died when she was in her twenties. I don't know if people with Down syndrome always die young. I don't know if we still say *people with Down syndrome*.

My uncle E., my mother's cousin, age eighteen, car accident coming home from a family party at a family château.

My aunt M., my mother's cousin, age forty, cancer.

My nephew LJ, twenty-two, overdose.

There are others.

In my mother's family there's a small collection of dead people who died young or violently.

I would like it to be beyond the shadow of a doubt, for it to be completely clear, that when I say I rejoice in the dead, I rejoice at the dead. Respect for the dead is the most disgusting thing there is, even respect in general, there is nothing to respect.

Jeans, black loafers or Clarks, blue Oxford shirts; a tie, always; a blazer; a jacket; sometimes a turtleneck; sometimes a leather jacket, never a coat; his cigarettes; his slimness; his pallor; his gray eyes, my father is always elegant. He doesn't have many clothes, he buys them at the first shop he sees. Elegant without thinking about it, elegant because he doesn't care. Even now, even old, even in his pajamas like last summer at the hospital for his tongue cancer, even in the country in his putrid house in a dirty sweater and his supermarket jeans, with his oxygen tank, his pacemaker, his Subutex and his morphine, even with his poverty, filth, aging, and death, my father is elegant. Elegant in not giving a fuck about anything, clothes, money, himself, and everyone else. Never asking any questions, never saying anything. Elegant in never being there. For the past few months if anyone bothered him about anything he'd say Leave me the fuck alone I'm dying here.

Before he said nothing, he just took a hit or some whiskey without looking anywhere in particular. His decline has lasted thirty years. Or maybe forty, or fifty, it's hard to say. For a long time, it was the fire brigade, melodrama, one crisis after another. For the past decade or so hardly anything has happened, it's all been so slow, like tai chi. He hardly moves from his armchair, looks straight at the TV. To his left, the fireplace, with its mountain of ash, full of burned-out old yogurt pots, ice cream wrappers, medicine, everything he tosses in there. The house is overflowing with broken things and dust, the garden full of weeds and too-heavy branches that always succumb to their weight, as if his indoor space were spreading outside. It is his obsession with abandonment, impotence as will, that's why we can never intervene, it is impossible to repair anything, and so to spend time in this house is to spend time with the dust and the cold, the iced-over radiators, the chipped plates, the missing lightbulbs, the dead sockets, the busted-up tiles. The Montlouis aesthetic is an aesthetic of the garbage dump, with everything frozen somewhere between sinking and resisting, but it isn't clear if the two effects—annihilation and invincibility—will find a synthesis. From time to time, in Paris, those who know him will ask how he is. They are thinking of the charming guy they haven't seen in thirty years. *Charming*, they say. I don't say *charming*, if I said *charming* I too would remain at a distance from him. From the void. From the violence of the void. He doesn't say a word about it. There is

nothing to be said. These kinds of things are solitary. Kindness surrounds us, it's peripheral, it supports us. Extreme kindness, even; politeness; tact. These things dwell on the surface of the life he does not inhabit, one he does not care about. I rarely see my father, I don't speak to him very often, I don't call him. In any case that's exactly what he asks for, that we leave one another alone. When you think about it, it's all right that way. He doesn't tell me anything and I don't tell him anything either. I treat him the way he treats everything, I shrug my shoulders and go on my way.

He is all that remains of my childhood, with his oxygen, his Subutex, and his illness in the falling-down house in Touraine. Luckily that house will not come to me. I will not inherit anything. The two armchairs, the photographs, I relinquish it all to my sister in advance. I don't speak to her anymore. In a few months perhaps, this whole story will be completely over. That's why I'm waiting for him to die. It is happening unbearably slowly.

When they met, he was finishing his law degree and starting a career in journalism. He lived in a studio on the rue Grégoire de Tours, above a greasy Greek joint called Zorba. His father, my grandfather, the one whose name I bear, had been prime minister. He wrote the Constitution. Headed up one ministry after another—defense, finance, justice, foreign affairs, that kind of thing. As a young man my

father had his own bedroom in Matignon. He had three brothers, one older and two younger. He wasn't interested in his family, or in family stories, or in speeches about the family or France. He was nothing like the rest of them. Sometimes a person is born into a family they don't resemble at all. He spent his childhood with his nose in a book so he wouldn't have to see or hear them. He wanted to escape. He wanted to be Kessel, Monfreid, Albert Londres, not Paul Reynaud, not Charles Bovary. His earliest reporting was in Africa, then Asia. Wherever there were wars. Violence and beauty, it's always the same story. Drugs, too.

He's a journalist, he travels, he writes books. He talks. The Opium Wars. Speeches at the House of Commons. Chinese dynasties. The opium dens of Toulon. The Second Empire. Dylan. Rimbaud. Malaparte. Malcolm Lowry. *We'll to the Woods No More*. Norman Mailer. Painters too. A thousand other things. His gentle voice. He joins my games. I build my worlds with him. My LEGO, my forts, my costumes, our stories. We build worlds. My father understands childhood.

Africa and then Asia. Wars. Biafra, Vietnam, Cambodia, Mao's China. He knows each of these countries, their ancient cultures, their histories, he says that *we're* the barbarians. He can talk about it all for hours. He leaves as soon as he can. He is always leaving. My father watches everything with his gray eyes, he talks about the world,

about books, but when it comes to himself, he keeps quiet, he takes off.

What does it do to you to see all of that, dead bodies, children with enormous bellies, bush hospitals, the smell of blood, of ether, of gangrene, to see barefoot fifteen-year-old boys armed to the teeth on a deserted road, what does it do to you, the noise the night the antiaircraft fire in the helicopter. Fear, death. Passport in his pocket. He's off again. French journalist. War reporter. Death brushes past him, blows on his neck, but she's more interested in other people. It could happen but it never does.

With him: kebabs in Barbès, the flea market in Saint-Ouen, army-navy surplus stores. Military clothing. I have forage caps, kepis, fatigues. I am extremely well informed about uniforms, armies, ranks. Present arms, attention, at ease. I'll go to Polytechnique if you want. Or I'll be Lord Jim. I listen to Bach. I don't know where I discovered Bach, my parents' tastes are more modern, but I'm obsessed with Bach.

I enter my mother's world, but my mother's world is not the world, it's her. Everyone does that with her. We watch her, we realize we've never seen anyone like her, we let ourselves be drawn in, we tell ourselves that nothing else exists but her. My mother inhales you, she swallows you up. You're in the belly of the whale. It's beautiful, it's hot, it's

spectacular. You don't want anything different. My father is also like that, with her. He and I are like that, we look at her and try to understand what it is we're seeing. To be swallowed up by her is so good. Sometimes we can't bear it, so my father goes off to do some reporting, he goes to China, he disappears. I have asthma, I suffocate, at night most of all. Like Bacon, like Proust. The illness of geniuses. I spend my childhood with an inhaler in my pocket, a little blue dildo next to my thigh, my own little fix.

My mother at this time: an apartment a quiet life a husband a child a spaniel. And sunglasses boots coats and makeup which signal anything but ordinary life. You can't have a normal life when you have that face, that look. Always made-up. I hardly ever saw my mother without makeup. Very very rarely. Even at the end when she hid her terrible whiskey under her pillow.

Who could ask for a more perfect dealer than a Belgian princess, Fanchon van something or other? She had also been a model. Fanchon wasn't her real name. Aristocrats nickname each other after horses. When I think of the word *bohemian*, I think of Fanchon's apartment, dark and messy, clothes strewn on sofas, pillows, curtains, a theatrical atmosphere. *Malte Laurids Brigge* via Nan Goldin and Cookie Mueller. We stop in for five minutes after school. It's two minutes away, a little ways up the rue Saint-Jacques, across from the Musée de la Mer. They ask me to wait in one

room, my mother goes off with Fanchon, comes back to get me. My sense of what's going on is vague, but I have a sense of it all the same, kids are not that dumb. Usually it's my dad who goes to see Fanchon, he calls, he says Can I come by, he goes, alone. Usually it's my dad who takes care of the drugs, he's been a junkie since he was twenty, that's what interests him in life. That and my mother. Even after her death. For years and years afterward. Drug addicts are strong, they're the opposite of weak, they're unstoppable. A knight's training.

They always fought. Whether or not I was there didn't change anything. He was the one who hit her, but it seemed to me, nevertheless, that she was the one who wanted violence, who *was* violence, she brought it out in him, a violence he hadn't previously known. Without her he was never violent. Never was after her, either. In no other phase of his life, no matter what happened, did I ever see him get angry. I never even saw him irritated. Even with the drinking, through the most difficult times, he never raised his voice. Gentle as a lamb. Gandhi. With her he became something else. He had access to something else. Maybe he was looking for his own violence, maybe he was happy to find it. That was between them. Like a hit of speed. Layered on top of opium, which made them sleep, and dampened everything. Sometimes the next day she'd have bruises on her face, a black eye, a split lip, it was like a hangover. They loved each other that way, since

forever, since before I was born. It exhausted them. Sometimes she said she would leave him but they never left each other, of course they didn't.

I loved my father, I loved my mother, like everyone does. So what? I repeat: So what?

I'm only interested in what interests me. I made that decision five years ago. It's very easy. It's crazy how easy it is. That's its biggest advantage, the power of simplifying things. What interests me is existence itself, not the conditions of existence. For example whether I live in a studio near Montparnasse or in a tiny studio on the place de la Contrescarpe or at a friend's on the rue Chapon, or in a one bedroom on the boulevard de Clichy, or in a studio high in a tower in Arles, or that in the years before that I lived all over the place, or that sometimes I had no money at all, or that it's a little better now, these are things that don't matter at all. I could have a huge apartment, furniture, knickknacks, clothes, cash, none of that would matter. Whether I live here or there, whether the people I speak to are or are not the woman I love, what I'm reading, if I've slept well or badly, what I'm eating, it doesn't matter. Whatever happens I work, I swim, I see the woman I love

or I see no one at all. It's organized. Slightly organized. If something new interests me, I can work it into my system. Ever since I started living this way, loads of interesting events have come to pass. By *events* I mean things that are meaningful with regard to my work or my life, which amounts to the same thing since my work is also existence itself. By *events* I'm thinking for instance of women. They turn up. They like me. If I like them too I go to bed with them. There's no misunderstanding. It's because I live like this that they turn up. So I go on. And when it doesn't work anymore I leave, or sometimes they do. It's the same with apartments. When I'm tired of living where I live, I leave. It's simple. I could easily live without an apartment just as I could easily live without a mistress. Life is a series of entrances and exits. I think that's what I mean by *events*. Entrances and exits. That's always interested me. In order for an entrance or an exit to happen, in order for it to be fluid, you have to stay light at your core. No agenda. No possessions. No opinions either, or not too many of them. To have as light a core as possible. Or even no core at all. My life is very simple now. That it all became possible through homosexuality doesn't have to distract us. No muss no fuss. The system doesn't allow for it.

In my family there are no factory workers, no farmers, no maids, no schoolteachers, no shopkeepers, no low-level civil servants, and also no convicts, whores, fags, murderers, no strangers, no refugees, no immigrants. In my family there are government ministers (under de Gaulle, Pétain, Giscard, Pompidou, Napoleon III, Louis XV, etc.), deputies (under each government), counts, barons, a duchess, two famous painters, a railway-station architect, a winner of the Prix de Rome, some rabbis, pastors, medical-school professors, diplomats, members of the Jockey Club and of the Académie Française. Aristocrats included, the bourgeoisie are ridiculous. They think they're important, they are ridiculous. If the bourgeois could see themselves, if people outside the bourgeoisie only knew. Ridiculous to the point that it should be outlawed. It is the grotesquerie of the bourgeoisie—of all the bourgeoisie since it's an infinitely large sample of the population—

which shapes the particular character of its violence, and makes it unbearable. It took me a while to understand that class violence had gone out of fashion, by which I mean the violence of the lower toward the upper classes. That of the upper toward the lower I know well, I know it intimately, from the inside. I spent my childhood watching people who make the law, how they know nothing about other people, how ugly they were, too. It's a symbol of their inelegance, the absence of self-questioning that plays out on the bodies, the faces, the clothing, the haircuts, everything visible. For instance in Paris on the Line 4 of the Métro you see it very clearly, how beauty and ugliness are distributed according to class, the beautiful people as the line runs south from Porte de Clignancourt to Strasbourg-Saint-Denis, and the empty ones who take over as the line becomes more bourgeois, from the Marais to the sixth, how the bourgeois doesn't really live in his body. I was struck by that when I was a child, the violence and the ugliness of the people who make the law, and later, of those who apply it. For a long time it was my job to decide what justice was, to see the judges doing their work, their work which consisted of putting poor people in prison, because the law is against the poor, because justice is against the poor, that's how it is and it can't be otherwise, because it's not even the judges' fault, that all that plays out on another level, one that is impossible to dismantle, I don't know, all I know is that to see all of that close up disgusted me. In the beginning you think being a