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Submission

Written by Michel Houellebecq

Translated from the French by Lorin Stein

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SUBMISSION

Michel Houellebecq

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY LORIN STEIN



125 YEARS

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I

A noise recalled him to Saint-Sulpice; the choir was leaving; the church was about to close. 'I should have tried to pray,' he thought. 'It would have been better than sitting here in the empty church, dreaming in my chair – but pray? I have no desire to pray. I am haunted by Catholicism, intoxicated by its atmosphere of incense and wax. I hover on its outskirts, moved to tears by its prayers, touched to the very marrow by its psalms and chants. I am thoroughly disgusted with my life, I am sick of myself but so far from changing my ways! And yet . . . and yet . . . if I am troubled in these chapels, as soon as I leave them I become unmoved and dry. In the end,' he told himself, as he rose and followed the last ones out, shepherded by the Swiss guard, 'in the end, my heart is hardened and smoked dry by dissipation. I am good for nothing.'

– J.-K. Huysmans, *En route*

Through all the years of my sad youth Huysmans remained a companion, a faithful friend; never once did I doubt him, never once was I tempted to drop him or take up another subject; then, one afternoon in June 2007, after waiting and putting it off as long as I could, even slightly longer than was allowed, I defended my dissertation, 'Joris-Karl Huysmans: Out of the Tunnel', before the jury of the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne. The next morning (or maybe that evening, I don't remember: I spent the night of my defence alone and very drunk) I realised that part of my life, probably the best part, was behind me.

So it goes, in the remaining Western social democracies, when you finish your studies, but most students don't notice right away because they're hypnotised by the desire for money or, if they're more primitive, the desire for consumer goods (though these cases of acute product-addiction are unusual: the mature, thoughtful majority develop a fascination with that 'tireless Proteus', money itself). Above all

they're hypnotised by the desire to make their mark, to carve out an enviable social position in a world that they believe and indeed hope will be competitive, galvanised as they are by the worship of fleeting icons: athletes, fashion or Web designers, film stars and models.

For various psychological reasons that I have neither the skill nor the desire to analyse, I wasn't that way at all. On 1 April 1866, at the age of eighteen, Joris-Karl Huysmans began his career as a low-ranking civil servant in the French Ministry of the Interior and Ecclesiastical Affairs. In 1874 he published, at his own expense, a first collection of prose poems, *Le drageoir à épices*. It received very little attention, except for one extremely warm review by Théodore de Banville. Such were his quiet beginnings.

His life as a bureaucrat went on, and so did the rest of his life. On 3 September 1893, he received the Légion d'Honneur for public service. In 1898 he retired, having completed – once leaves of absence were taken into account – his mandatory thirty years of employment. In that time he had managed to write books that made me consider him a friend more than a hundred years later. Much, maybe too much, has been written about literature. (I know better than anyone; I'm an expert in the field.) Yet the special thing about literature, the *major art form* of a Western civilisation now ending before our very eyes, is not hard to define. Like literature, music can overwhelm you with sudden emotion, can move you to absolute sorrow or ecstasy; like literature, painting has the power to astonish, and to make you see the world through fresh eyes. But only literature can put you in touch with another human spirit, as a whole, with all its

weaknesses and grandeurs, its limitations, its pettinesses, its obsessions, its beliefs; with whatever it finds moving, interesting, exciting or repugnant. Only literature can give you access to a spirit from beyond the grave – a more direct, more complete, deeper access than you'd have in conversation with a friend. Even in our deepest, most lasting friendships, we never speak as openly as when we face a blank page and address a reader we do not know. The beauty of an author's style, the music of his sentences have their importance in literature, of course; the depth of an author's reflections, the originality of his thought certainly can't be overlooked; but an author is above all a human being, present in his books, and whether he writes very well or very badly hardly matters – as long as he gets the books written and is, indeed, present in them. (It's strange that something so simple, so seemingly universal, should actually be so rare, and that this rarity, so easy to observe, should receive so little attention from philosophers in any discipline: for in principle human beings possess, if not the same quality, at least the same quantity of being; in principle they are all more or less equally *present*; and yet this is not the impression they give, at a distance of several centuries, and all too often, as we turn pages that seem to have been dictated more by the spirit of the age than by an individual, we watch these wavering, ever more ghostly, anonymous beings dissolve before our eyes.) In the same way, to love a book is, above all, to love its author: we want to meet him again, we want to spend our days with him. During the seven years it took me to write my dissertation, I lived with Huysmans, in his more or less permanent presence. Born in the rue Suger, having lived in the rue de Sèvres and the rue

Monsieur, Huysmans died in the rue Saint-Placide and was buried in Montparnasse. He spent almost his entire life within the boundaries of the Sixth Arrondissement of Paris, just as he spent his professional life, thirty years and more of it, in the Ministry of the Interior and Ecclesiastical Affairs. I, too, lived in the Sixth Arrondissement, in a damp, cold, utterly cheerless room – the windows overlooked a tiny courtyard, practically a well. When I got up in the morning, I had to turn on the light. I was poor, and if I'd been given one of those polls that are always trying to 'take the pulse of the under-25s', I would certainly have ticked the box marked 'struggling', And yet the morning after I defended my dissertation (or maybe that same night), my first reaction was that I had lost something priceless, something I'd never get back: my freedom. For several years, the last vestiges of a dying welfare state (scholarships, student discounts, health care, mediocre but cheap meals in the student cafeteria) had allowed me to spend my waking hours the way I chose: in the easy intellectual company of a friend. As André Breton pointed out, Huysmans' sense of humour is uniquely generous. He lets the reader stay one step ahead of him, inviting us to laugh at him, and his overly plaintive, awful or ludicrous descriptions, even before he laughs at himself. No one appreciated that generosity more than I did, as I received my rations of celeriac remoulade and salt cod, each in its little compartment of the metal hospital tray issued by the Bullier student cafeteria (whose unfortunate patrons clearly had nowhere else to go, and had obviously been kicked out of all the acceptable student cafeterias, but who still had their student IDs – you couldn't take away their student IDs), and I thought of Huysmans'

epithets – the *woebegone* cheese, the *grievous* sole – and imagined what he might make of those metal cells, which he'd never known, and I felt a little less unhappy, a little less alone, in the Bullier student cafeteria.

But that was all over now. My entire youth was over. Soon (very soon), I would have to see about entering the workforce. The prospect left me cold.

The academic study of literature leads basically nowhere, as we all know, unless you happen to be an especially gifted student, in which case it prepares you for a career teaching the academic study of literature – it is, in other words, a rather farcical system that exists solely to replicate itself and yet manages to fail more than 95 per cent of the time. Still, it's harmless, and can even have a certain marginal value. A young woman applying for a sales job at Céline or Hermès should naturally attend to her appearance above all; but a degree in literature can constitute a secondary asset, since it guarantees the employer, in the absence of any useful skills, a certain intellectual agility that could lead to professional development – besides which, literature has always carried positive connotations in the world of luxury goods.

For my part, I knew I was one of those 'gifted' few. I'd written a good dissertation and I expected an honourable mention. All the same, I was pleasantly surprised to receive a *special commendation*, and even more surprised when I

saw the committee's report, which was excellent, practically dithyrambic. Suddenly a tenured position as a senior lecturer was within my reach, if I wanted it. Which meant that my boring, predictable life continued to resemble Huysmans' a century and a half before. I had begun my adult life at a university and would probably end it the same way, maybe even at the same one (though in fact this wasn't quite the case: I had taken my degree at the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne and was appointed by Paris III, slightly less prestigious but also in the Fifth Arrondissement, just around the corner).

I'd never felt the slightest vocation for teaching – and my fifteen years as a teacher had only confirmed that initial lack of calling. What little private tutoring I'd done, to raise my standard of living, soon convinced me that the transmission of knowledge was generally impossible, the variance of intelligence extreme, and that nothing could undo or even mitigate this basic inequality. Worse, maybe, I didn't like young people and never had, even when I might have been numbered among them. Being young implied, it seemed to me, a certain enthusiasm for life, or else a certain defiance, accompanied in either case by a vague sense of superiority towards the generation that one had been called on to replace. I'd never had those sorts of feelings. I did have some friends when I was young – or, more precisely, there were other students with whom I could contemplate having coffee or a beer between classes and not feel disgust. Mostly I had mistresses – or rather, as people said then (and maybe still do), I had *girlfriends*, roughly one a year. These relationships followed a fairly regular pattern. They would

start at the beginning of the academic year, with a seminar, an exchange of class notes, or what have you, one of the many social occasions, so common in student life, that disappear when we enter the workforce, plunging most of us into a stupefying and radical solitude. The relationship would take its course as the year went by. Nights were spent at one person's place or the other's (in fact, I'd usually stay at theirs, since the grim, not to say insalubrious, atmosphere at mine hardly lent itself to *romantic interludes*); sexual acts took place (to what I like to think was our mutual satisfaction). When we came back from the summer holiday and the academic year began again, the relationship would end, almost always at the girl's initiative. *Things had changed* over the summer. This was the reason they'd give, usually without further elaboration. A few, clearly less eager to spare me, would explain that they had *met someone*. Yeah, and so? Wasn't I *someone*, too? In hindsight, these factual accounts strike me as insufficient. They had indeed met someone, I fully concede that; but what made them lend so much weight to this encounter – enough to end our relationship and involve them in a new one – was merely the application of a powerful but unspoken model of amorous behaviour, a model all the more powerful because it remained unspoken.

The way things were supposed to work (and I have no reason to think much has changed), young people, after a brief period of sexual vagabondage in their very early teens, were expected to settle down in exclusive, strictly monogamous relationships involving activities (outings, weekends, holidays) that were not only sexual, but social. At the same time, there was nothing final about these relationships.

Instead, they were thought of as apprenticeships – in a sense, as *internships* (a practice that was generally seen in the professional world as a step towards one's first job). Relationships of variable duration (a year being, according to my own observations, an acceptable amount of time) and of variable number (an average of ten to twenty might be considered a reasonable estimate) were supposed to succeed one another until they ended, like an apotheosis, with the last relationship, this one conjugal and final, which would lead, via the begetting of children, to the formation of a family.

The complete idiocy of this model became plain to me only much later – rather recently, in fact – when I happened to see Aurélie and then, a few weeks later, Sandra. (But if it had been Chloé or Violaine, I'm convinced I would have reached the same conclusion.) The moment I walked into the Basque restaurant where Aurélie was meeting me for dinner, I knew I was in for a grim evening. Despite the two bottles of white Irouléguy that I drank almost entirely by myself, I found it harder and harder, and after a while, almost impossible, to keep up a reasonable level of friendly conversation. For reasons I didn't entirely understand, it suddenly seemed tactless, almost unthinkable, to talk about the old days. As for the present, it was clear that Aurélie had never managed to form a long-term relationship, that casual sex filled her with growing disgust, that her personal life was headed for complete and utter disaster. There were various signs that she'd tried to settle down, at least once, and had never recovered from her failure. From the sour and bitter way she talked about her male colleagues (in the end

we'd been reduced to discussing her professional life: she was head of communications for an association of Bordeaux winemakers, so she travelled a lot to promote French wines, mostly in Asia) it was painfully clear that she had been *through the wringer*. Even so, I was surprised when, just as she was about to get out of the taxi, she invited me up 'for a nightcap'. She's really hit rock bottom, I thought. From the moment the lift doors shut, I knew nothing was going to happen. I didn't even want to see her naked, I'd rather have avoided it, and yet it came to pass, and only confirmed what I'd already imagined. Her emotions may have been through the wringer, but her body had been damaged beyond repair. Her buttocks and breasts were no more than sacks of emaciated flesh, shrunken, flabby and pendulous. She could no longer – she could never again – be considered an object of desire.

My meal with Sandra followed a similar pattern, albeit with small variations (seafood restaurant, job with the CEO of a multinational pharmaceutical company), and it ended much the same way, except it seemed to me that Sandra, who was plumper and jollier than Aurélie, hadn't let herself go to the same degree. She was sad, very sad, and I knew her sorrow would overwhelm her in the end; like Aurélie, she was nothing but a bird in an oil slick; but she had retained, if I can put it this way, a superior ability to flap her wings. In one or two years she would give up any last matrimonial ambitions, her imperfectly extinguished sensuality would lead her to seek out the company of young men, she would become what we used to call a *cougar*, and no doubt she'd go on this way for several years, ten at the most, before the sag-

ging of her flesh became prohibitive, and condemned her to a lasting solitude.

In my twenties, when I got hard-ons all the time, sometimes for no good reason, as though in a vacuum, I might have gone for someone like her. It would have been more satisfying, and paid better, than my tutorials. Back then I think I could have *performed*, but now of course it was totally out of the question, since my erections were rarer and less dependable and required bodies that were firm, supple and flawless.

My own sex life, during my early years as a lecturer at Paris III, hadn't evolved in any notable way. Year after year, I kept sleeping with students, and the fact that we were now teacher and student didn't change things much at all. At the beginning, there was scarcely any age difference between us. Only gradually did an element of transgression enter in, and this had more to do with my rising academic status than with my age, real or apparent. In short, I benefitted from that basic inequality between men, whose erotic potential diminishes very slowly as they age, and women, for whom the collapse comes with shocking brutality from year to year, or even from month to month. The one real change, since my student years, was that now I was usually the one who broke it off when the academic year began. It wasn't that I was a Don Juan, or yearned for some kind of untrammelled sexual freedom. Unlike my colleague Steve, who also taught nineteenth-century literature to the first- and second-year students, I didn't spend the first days of

university eagerly checking out the 'new talent'. (With his sweatshirts, his Converse and his vaguely Californian looks, he always reminded me of Thierry Lhermitte in *Les Bronzés*, emerging from his cabana every week to assess the new crop at the resort.) If I broke up with these girls, it was more out of a sense of discouragement, of lassitude: I just didn't feel up to maintaining a relationship, and I didn't want to disappoint them or lead them on. Then over the course of the academic year I'd change my mind, owing to factors that were external and incidental – generally, a short skirt.

Then that stopped, too. I'd left Myriam at the end of September, now it was already mid-April, the academic year was coming to an end, and still I hadn't replaced her. Although I had been made a full professor, and so had reached a sort of end point in my academic career, I didn't think the two facts were connected. By contrast, it was just after things ended with Myriam that I saw Aurélie, and Sandra, and there I did feel a connection – a disturbing, unpleasant, uncomfortable connection. Because as I looked back over the years, I had to admit that my exes and I were much closer than we realised. Our episodic sexual relations, pursued with no hope of any lasting attachment, had left us disillusioned in similar ways. Unlike them, I had no one to talk to about these things, since intimacy isn't something men talk about. They may talk about politics, literature, stocks or sports, depending on the man, but about their love lives they keep silent, even to their dying breath.

Had I fallen prey, in middle age, to a kind of andropause?

It wouldn't have surprised me. To find out for sure I decided to spend my evenings on YouPorn, which over the years had grown into a sort of porn encyclopedia. The results were immediate and extremely reassuring. YouPorn catered to the fantasies of normal men all over the world, and within minutes it became clear that I was an utterly normal man. This was not something I took for granted. After all, I'd devoted years of my life to the study of a man who was often considered a kind of *Decadent*, whose sexuality was therefore not entirely clear. At any rate, the experiment put my mind at rest. Some of the videos were superb (shot by a crew from Los Angeles, complete with a lighting designer, cameramen and cinematographer), some were wretched but 'vintage' (German amateurs), and all were based on the same few crowd-pleasing scenarios. In one of the most common, some man (young? old? both versions existed) had been foolish enough to let his penis curl up for a nap in his pants or boxers. Two young women, of varying race, would alert him to the oversight and, this accomplished, would stop at nothing until they liberated his organ from its temporary abode. They'd coax it out with the sluttiest kind of badinage, all in a spirit of friendship and feminine complicity. The penis would pass from one mouth to the other, tongues crossing paths like restless flocks of swallows in the sombre skies above the Seine-et-Marne when they prepare to leave Europe for their winter migration. The man, destroyed at the moment of his assumption, would utter a few weak words: appallingly weak in the French films ('*Oh putain!*' '*Oh putain je jouis!*': more or less what you'd expect from a nation of regicides), more beautiful and

intense from those true believers the Americans ('Oh my God!' 'Oh Jesus Christ!'), like an injunction not to neglect God's gifts (blow jobs, roast chicken). At any rate I got a hard-on, too, sitting in front of my twenty-seven-inch iMac, and all was well.

Once I was made a professor, my reduced course load meant I could get all my teaching done on Wednesdays. From eight to ten, I had Nineteenth-Century Literature with the second years, while Steve taught the same class to the first years in the lecture hall next door. From eleven to one, I taught an upper-level class on the Decadents and Symbolists. Then, from three to six, I led a seminar where I answered questions from the doctoral students.

I liked to catch the metro a little after seven to give myself the illusion that I was one of the 'early risers' of France, the workers and tradesmen. I was the only one who enjoyed this fantasy, clearly, because when I gave my lecture, at eight, the hall was almost completely empty except for a small knot of chillingly serious Chinese women who rarely spoke to one another, let alone anyone else. The moment they walked in, they turned on their smartphones so they could record my entire lecture. This didn't stop them from taking notes in their large spiral notebooks. They never interrupted, they never

asked any questions, and the two hours were over before I knew it. Coming out of the class I'd see Steve, who would have had a similar showing, only in his case the Chinese students were replaced by veiled North Africans, all just as serious and inscrutable. He'd almost always invite me for a drink – usually mint tea in the Paris Mosque, a few blocks from the university. I didn't like mint tea, or the Paris Mosque, and I didn't much like Steve, but still I went. I think he was grateful for my company, because he wasn't really respected by his colleagues. In fact, it was an open question how he'd been named a senior lecturer when he'd never published in an important journal, or even a minor one, and when all he'd written was a vague dissertation on Rimbaud, a *sham topic* if ever there was one, as Marie-Françoise Tanneur had explained to me. She was another colleague, an authority on Balzac. Millions of dissertations were written on Rimbaud, in every university in France, the francophone countries and beyond. Rimbaud was the world's most beaten-to-death subject, with the possible exception of Flaubert, so all a person had to do was look for two or three old dissertations from provincial universities and basically mix them together. Who could check? No one had the resources or the desire to sift through hundreds of millions of turgid, overwritten pages on the *voyant* by a bunch of colourless drones. The advancement of Steve's career at the university, according to Marie-Françoise, was due entirely to the fact that he was *eating Big Delouze's pussy*. This seemed possible, albeit surprising. With her broad shoulders, her grey crew cut and her courses in 'gender studies', Chantal Delouze, the president of Paris III, had always struck me as a dyed-in-the-wool lesbian, but I could

have been wrong, or maybe she bore a hatred towards men that expressed itself in fantasies of domination. Maybe forcing Steve, with his pretty, vapid little face and his long silken curls, to kneel down between her chunky thighs brought her to new and hitherto unknown heights of ecstasy. True or false, I couldn't get the image out of my head that morning, on the terrace of the tea room of the Paris Mosque, as I watched him suck on his repulsive apple-scented hookah.

As usual, his conversation revolved around academic appointments and promotions. I never heard him willingly talk about anything else. That morning he was nattering on about a new appointment, a twenty-five-year-old lecturer who'd done his dissertation on Léon Bloy and who, according to Steve, had 'nativist connections'. I lit a cigarette, playing for time as I tried to think why Steve would give a fuck. For a moment I thought his inner *man of the left* had been roused, then I reasoned with myself: his inner man of the left was fast asleep, and nothing less than a political shift in the leadership of the French university system could ever rouse him. It must be a sign, he said, especially since they just promoted Amar Rezki, who worked on early-twentieth-century anti-Semitic writers. Plus, he insisted, the Conference of University Presidents had recently joined a boycott against academic exchanges with Israeli scholars, which had begun with a group of English universities . . .

As he turned his attention to his hookah, which had got stopped up, I stole a glance at my watch. It was only ten thirty, I could hardly pretend to be late for my next class. Then a topic of conversation occurred to me: there had been more talk lately about a project, first proposed four or five

years ago, to create a replica of the Sorbonne in Dubai (or was it Bahrain? Qatar? I always got them mixed up). Oxford had a similar plan in the works. Clearly the antiquity of our two universities had caught some petro-monarch's eye. If the project went through, there'd be real financial opportunities for a young lecturer like Steve. Had he considered throwing his hat into the ring with a little anti-Zionist agitation? And did he think there might be anything in it for me?

I shot Steve a probing glance. The kid wasn't very bright, he was easy to rattle, and this had the desired effect. 'As a Bloy scholar,' he stammered, 'you must know a lot about this nativist, anti-Semitic, um . . .' I sighed, exhausted. Bloy wasn't an anti-Semite, and I wasn't a Bloy scholar. Bloy had come up, naturally, in the course of my research on Huysmans, and I'd compared their use of language in my one published work, *Vertigos of Coining* – no doubt the summit of my intellectual achievements. At any rate, it had been well-reviewed in *Poetics* and *Romanticism*, and probably accounted for my being made a professor. In fact, many of the strange words used by Huysmans were not coinages but rare borrowings, specific to certain trades or regional dialects. My thesis was that Huysmans never stopped being a Naturalist, that he took pains to incorporate the real speech of ordinary people into his work, and that, in a sense, he remained the same socialist who had attended Zola's soirees in Medan as a young man. Even as he grew to despise the left, he maintained his old aversion to capitalism, money and anything having to do with bourgeois values. He was the very type of a *Christian Naturalist*, whereas Bloy, desperate for commercial and social success, used his incessant

neologisms to call attention to himself, to set himself up as a persecuted spiritual luminary misunderstood by the common run of men. Having assumed the role of mystico-elitist in the literary world of his day, Bloy never stopped marvelling at his own failure, or at the indifference with which society, quite reasonably, greeted his imprecations. He was, Huysmans wrote, 'an unfortunate man, whose pride is truly diabolical and whose hatred knows no bounds'. From the beginning Bloy struck me as the prototype of the *bad Catholic*, who truly exalts in his faith and zeal only when he's convinced that the people around him are going to hell. And yet when I wrote my dissertation I'd been in touch with various left-wing Catholic-royalist circles who worshipped Bloy and Bernanos, and who were always trying to interest me in some manuscript letter or other, until I realised they had nothing to offer, absolutely nothing – no document that I couldn't easily find for myself in the usual scholarly collections.

'You're definitely on to something . . . Reread Drumont,' I told Steve, just to make him happy, and he gazed at me with the obedient, naive eyes of an opportunistic child. When I reached my classroom – today I planned to discuss Jean Lorrain – there were three guys in their twenties, two of them Arab, one of them black, standing in the doorway. They weren't armed, not that day. They stood there calmly. Nothing about them was overtly menacing. All the same, they were blocking the entrance. I had to say something. I stopped and faced them. They had to be under orders to avoid provocation and to treat the teachers with respect. At least I hoped so.

'I'm a professor here. My class is about to start,' I said in a

firm tone, addressing the group. It was the black guy who answered, with a broad smile: 'No problem, monsieur, we're just here to visit our sisters . . .' and he tilted his head reassuringly towards the classroom. The only sisters he could mean were two North African girls seated together in the back left row, both in black burkas, their eyes protected by mesh. They looked pretty irreproachable to me. 'Well, there you have them,' I said, with bonhomie. Then I insisted: 'Now you can go.' 'No problem, monsieur,' he said, with an even broader smile, then he turned on his heel, followed by the other two, neither of whom had said a word. He took three steps, then turned again. 'Peace be with you, monsieur,' he said with a small bow. 'That went well,' I told myself, closing the classroom door. 'This time.' I don't know just what I'd expected. Supposedly, teachers had been attacked in Mulhouse, Strasbourg, Aix-Marseille and Saint-Denis, but I had never met a colleague who'd been attacked, and I didn't believe the rumours. According to Steve, an agreement had been struck between the young Salafists and the administration. All of a sudden, two years ago, the hoodlums and dealers had all vanished from the neighbourhood. Supposedly that was the proof. Had this agreement included a clause banning Jewish organisations from campus? Again, there was nothing to substantiate the rumour, but the fact was that, as of last autumn, the Jewish Students Union had no representatives on any Paris campus, while the youth division of the Muslim Brotherhood had opened new branches, here and there, across the city.

On my way out of class (what did those two virgins in burkas care about that revolting queen, that self-proclaimed *analist*, Jean Lorrain? did their fathers realise what they were reading in the name of literature?), I bumped into Marie-Françoise, who proposed lunch. Clearly, it was going to be a social day.

I liked the old bag. She was funny, she was an insatiable gossip, and she'd been at the university long enough, and spent enough time on the right committees, to have better information than anyone would ever entrust to the likes of Steve. She led us to a Moroccan restaurant in the rue Monge. Clearly, it would be a halal day, too.

She got going as soon as the waiter brought our food. Big Delouze was on the way out. The National Council of Universities had been in session since June, and it looked as though they'd choose Robert Rediger to replace her.

Glancing down into my lamb-and-artichoke tagine, I raised my eyebrows. 'I know,' she said. 'It's huge. And it's not just talk – I have it on good authority.'

I excused myself, and in the men's room I slipped out my smartphone. You really can find anything on the Internet nowadays. A two-minute search revealed that Robert Rediger was famously pro-Palestinian, and that he'd helped orchestrate the boycott against the Israelis. I washed my hands carefully and went back to the table.

My heart sank: my tagine was already getting cold. 'Won't they wait for the elections?' I asked, after I'd had a bite. This struck me as a sensible question.

'The elections? The *elections*? What have the elections got to do with it?' Not so sensible after all, I guessed.

'Oh, I don't know. It's just, in three weeks we might have a new president . . .'

'Please, that's all settled. It will be just like 2017, the National Front will make it into the run-offs and the left will be voted back in. I don't see why the council should fart around waiting for the elections.'

'But there's the Muslim Brotherhood. They're an unknown quantity. If they got twenty per cent, it would be a symbolic benchmark, and could change the balance of power . . .' I was talking utter bullshit, of course. Ninety-nine per cent of the Muslim Brotherhood would throw their votes to the Socialists. In any case, it wouldn't affect the results at all, but that phrase *the balance of power* always sounds impressive in conversation, as if you'd been reading Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. I was also rather pleased with *symbolic benchmark*. In any case, Marie-Françoise nodded as if I'd just expressed an idea, and she launched into a long disquisition on the possible consequences, for the university leadership, if the Muslim Brotherhood was voted in. Her combinatory

intelligence was fully engaged, but I wasn't really listening any more. I watched the hypotheses flicker across her sharp old features. You have to take an interest in something in life, I told myself. I wondered what could interest me, now that I was finished with love. I could take a course in wine tasting, maybe, or start collecting model aeroplanes.

My afternoon seminar was exhausting. Doctoral students tended to be exhausting. For them it was all just starting to mean something, and for me nothing mattered except which Indian dinner I'd microwave (Chicken Biryani? Chicken Tikka Masala? Chicken Rogan Josh?) while I watched the political talk shows on France 2.

That night the National Front candidate was on. She proclaimed her love of France ('But which France?' asked a centre-left pundit, lamely), and I wondered whether my love life was really and truly over. I couldn't make up my mind. I spent much of the evening trying to decide whether to call Myriam. I had a feeling she wasn't seeing anyone new. I'd run into her a few times at the university and she had given me a look that one might describe as intense, but the truth was she always looked intense, even when she was choosing a conditioner. I couldn't get my hopes up. Maybe I should have gone into politics. If you were a political activist, election season brought moments of intensity, whichever side you were on, and meanwhile here I was, inarguably withering away.

'Happy are those who are satisfied by life, who amuse themselves, who are content.' So begins the article Maupassant published in *Gil Blas* on *À rebours*. In general, literary

history has been hard on Naturalism. Huysmans was celebrated for having thrown off its yoke, and yet Maupassant's article is much deeper and more sensitive than the article by Bloy that appeared at the same time in *Le chat noir*. Even Zola's objections make sense, on rereading: it is true that, psychologically, Jean des Esseintes remains unchanged from the first page to the last; that nothing happens, or can happen, in the book; that it has, in a sense, no plot. It is also true that there was no way for Huysmans to take *À rebours* any further than he did. His masterpiece was a dead end – but isn't that true of any masterpiece? After a book like that, Huysmans had no choice but to part ways with Naturalism. This is all that Zola notices. Maupassant, the greater artist, grasped that it was a masterpiece. I laid out these ideas in a short article for the *Journal of Nineteenth-Century Studies*, which, for the several days it took me to write it, was much more engaging than the electoral campaign, but did nothing to keep me from thinking about Myriam.

She must have made a ravishing little goth as a teenager, not so long ago, and she had grown into a very classy young woman, with her bobbed black hair, her very white skin and her dark eyes. Classy, but quietly sexy. And she more than lived up to her promise of discreet sexuality. For men, love is nothing more than gratitude for the gift of pleasure, and no one had ever given me more pleasure than Myriam. She could contract her pussy at will (sometimes softly, with a slow, irresistible pressure; sometimes in sharp, rebellious little tugs); when she gave me her little arse, she swivelled it around with infinite grace. As for her blow jobs, I'd never encountered anything like them. She approached each one

as if it were her first, and would be her last. Any single one of them would have been enough to justify a man's existence.

I ended up calling her, once I'd spent a few more days wondering whether I should. We agreed to meet that very evening.