

Combien de lunes, by Laura El Makki.
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The sky is of a deep blue colour, with voids of near-black velvet, set with winking and shimmering stars seeming to trickle down into wisps of cloud – the day’s survivors, unseen at first – where they are swallowed gently. It is like a tranquil sea, and its foam that melts when it meets the sand. Beauty like this is new to Anna, who has never taken the time to look up, has never noticed what has been, however, present to her always. She looks at the sky: she wants to surrender herself entirely to the vastness, have the choice taken away from her by something bigger than she. A light wind caresses the cool, bare palms of her hands.

‘See anything?’

Mado cranes her neck towards the sky. Anna’s on the brink of telling her the truth, but holds herself back. ‘Apart from the moon, you mean?’ And Mado tells Anna what she has learned at school, that the moon is made of the same matter as the Earth, that in the beginning it was nothing but a ball of magma and that it had cooled down bit by bit, and, next, millions of millions of meteorites had pelted its surface for billions and billions of years, and the craters you could see with the naked eye today were the result of all those impacts; today, there were vast plains covered in grey dust and the fact that the moon’s story was visible, that it was right there, written beneath her eyes, made Mado feel very small; and then it was always the moon that guided people, you saw it a lot a long time ago, it was thanks to the moon that people could count the days, the months – sailors, for example, would count the number of moons that they had seen in the sky and there was only one,

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single thing they wanted to know: how many moons it was going to take them to reach their destination, how many moons, still, before the end of their voyage.

Anna, watching her little sister tenderly, mimics her astonishment and then returns her focus to the sky and their sole luminary. She reflects that neither she nor anybody would be able, any longer, to count anything at all, since all of them are like sailors on an endless ocean, at the mercy of hours that are stretching on and on; and, with a lump in her throat, she wonders whether she ought to tell her little sister what she knows, whether this is what it means to be a protector.

‘Do you think Dad’s all right?’ Anna hasn’t even considered for one second that something could happen to him on the road.

‘Yes, you know him, on his bike,’ she says.

‘When’s he coming back?’

‘Soon.’

‘How do you know?’

‘He hates people dawdling.’

‘Shouldn’t have left with Gautier’s father, then.’

Mado leans against Anna and for a few moments, it’s conceivable it’s just the two of them under the gibbous moon, and the questions fall away, one by one; Anna senses them growing more distant, just like the urgency of making up her mind.

Extracts from *How Many Moons*, the English translation of *Combien de lunes* by Alexandra Cox
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‘Right, come on!’

Anna breaks into a run and tells Mado to catch up her up – she’ll never do it! – and yet she does her utmost to make sure that she will.

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Ethel

Onto the kitchen table, Josselin places a rope, a rifle, and some cartridges. His movements are precise. The small cut on his back isn't causing him pain. He hasn't even wanted Ethel to tend him. He's embarking on some kind of righteous, personal crusade. She'd like to tell him it's insanity, 'you can't be going to do it, surely.' She wonders if there's a word on this earth that will stop him. A light draft is causing clattering in the rails of an open window. Through its glass she stares at the dark. Outside, nothing is jangling.

She recalls the woman's appearance in their life. The month, the day, almost the hour. It was just after her own arrival.

She was trying to force a cowshed door, wanting to find out what was inside, explore her newly acquired domain, but the door wasn't opening and a splinter had got into her finger. Josselin had shown her what to do. 'The wood has expanded here. Got to press hard, slightly downwards, and you pull.' Inside were tools hung on the wall, stacks of cider barrels, and a ladder going up to a crumbling roof truss. She had glanced at her shoes, which were unsuitable for this place. What was required were boots, a warmer cardigan, and trousers that were less swish. She had inspected the far corners of the cowshed while, outside, Josselin argued with a man. They were talking about the Groults' house and an old woman seen back there in the small hours.

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‘But I don’t know, I’m telling you! Just get yourself there.’

Ethel had noticed the man from behind: shaved head, narrow hips; one hand in a pocket, the other occasionally massaging the vertebrae that crenelated his slender neck. She wanted to get a better view of him – Josselin had remained tight-lipped about his acquaintances. At the time, she’d only encountered Suzanne who lived in the house next door: they’d taken a shine to each other and pledged to drink tea together, something they’d done quite soon after. Now, in the cowshed, she had moved a few steps closer and Josselin had said, ‘Ethel, my wife.’ They weren’t married yet, it was the intention, but Ethel never broached the subject.

‘You’re from the city, that right?’ Ethel had nodded. ‘OK if I call you Ethel?’ Ethel had nodded again. ‘Me, I’m Paulin. If you need anything, just ask. I live down there, second house on the left. There’s a well out front, you can’t miss it.’ Ethel had said, ‘All right’, and there had been a silence, time enough for Paulin to mentally undress her, and for her to realise that the edging of her bra was visible beneath her jacket, which she hadn’t buttoned. ‘Ok then, I’m off.’ In the distance, just before going through the gate, and with one hand in the air, he had called out, ‘And welcome!’

Later, Josselin had gone to see whether Paulin was telling the truth – you always had to be wary with him. He had told Ethel the whole story: the building left abandoned for

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years, the children who had done battle at the solicitor's, how things got violent, 'really ugly', and the house that had been just a pretext for obliterating memories – naturally there was no-one to open the windows, do the housework, look after the garden; nobody, in fact, who wanted anything at all to do with the place, though the house had been beautiful in its time, was one of the village's oldest. Nature had ultimately smothered the stonework, and had made its way indoors: immense ferns had sprung up in the living room, nettles had flowered, and bluetits and black-headed warblers had made it their home – foxes as well, and probably cats and bats. Nobody, therefore, could be living there. On site, Josselin hadn't seen anything abnormal. 'Paulin and his half-baked gossip again.' But Paulin had come back the next day and he had repeated the same story.

'I did see her, I'm not a moron.' Josselin wanted to hear no more of it.

And then there had been that day – Ethel couldn't forget it – that day she'd been seen dancing in the river.

The news had spread quickly and the road had filled up with villagers: people were walking fast, waving at those watching at windows to come, because something was happening. Ethel had gone along, and Josselin too. They had got to the road and noticed them all near the watercourse; some were seated on the rocks below, while the children had ventured to the edge, onto the pebbles that snaked through the current and usually got them to the other side.

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She was in the water: her heavy dress was undulating all about her, and she was making big movements with her arms, drawing circles; skimming the surface with her fingers, bringing up droplets and splashing her white face and the ancient stones. She kept repeating the same movement, tracing rounds of water in the air, imitating wind that swells the waves. She was laughing heartily, too. Her hands sometimes came up to encircle her two cheeks and rise to her eyes which she kept shut. As for their own – wide-open – eyes, those remained transfixed.

It had gone on for hours; nobody had really kept count, they were all waiting for her to stop, to wear herself out, but nevertheless they all stayed on, terrified and envious, getting splashed by the cold water. It was as though this dancing woman was purifying them all, one by one, and inviting them to join her, join in the dance. After a while, they had given up hope of understanding, hypnotised by the strange beauty of those futile movements, by that body that the water was trying to sweep away but which was resisting, and all thinking that some force or other was about to carry her off: but no. They had had trouble returning home, leaving her who was sinking into the muddy bottom, whose muscular chest, discernible beneath her dress, could have confronted tempests. Josselin had been the first to leave. Ethel had followed him.

Time had passed and nobody really knew what they had witnessed that day, and what had taken on the appearance of a dream had become a nightmare that they told to

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one another sometimes, to keep it in their collective mind's eye. There had been attempts made to talk to her, but she never spoke. People had explained to her that she couldn't set up home in that house, that it was private property. She had stayed. Missives had been sent to the Groult children in order to notify them, to the prefect's office, and to the police station in the nearest town but none had responded, nobody had mobilised. So the mayor had abandoned the campaign. The woman was doing no harm, after all. The only ones getting worried were the parents, who'd always been letting their offspring play outdoors unsupervised because that's the way things were done around here, and they had put a ban on the children going anywhere near the house: they had to stop at the bottom of the track, never try to talk to that woman if they crossed her path, and, above all, they must never look at her; and when she came down to the village, people would act like she didn't exist.

Yet she did exist: she was residing among them. She had a mute presence, eyes that saw without looking, and a faint smile that never left her, that lent her furrowed and thin face a rare splendour that contrasted sharply with others' vague gazes and regret-scarred cheeks. Occasionally, she'd be seen in the village, passing like a shadow, wearing a black dress whose ample fabric would rise up in concert with her resolute, never hurried steps, which she'd seem to be taking as she counted them in her head, in keeping with a secret cadence, music that she alone could hear.

Like everybody, Ethel had wanted to discover her background but had never dared go up to her, in obedience to a gratuitous fear which suited her fine. So she was a participant –

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she was well aware – in the mistrust that had too lightly arisen, and she had taken to believing, with an unsettling ardour, all the reports: the woman's night-time excursions, the trees she climbed occasionally, the dialogues she kept up with certain animals and then the mark on her neck, like a nick, which inspired everyone to say she was the instrument of the devil.

'We've got no proof against her, leave her be, she never hurts anyone...'

'Because you know her, right?'

Josselin methodically fills his bag.

'Nobody knows her, people have never taken any interest in her – we don't even know what her name is – and you're telling me she should be killed?'

She now has Josselin's face between her hands. A candle is illuminating his eyes and she searches for something in this maimed gaze, behind which a latent and multiple life seems to be growing, withheld from others for the rest of time. Unlike most other people, she has no fear of his scars or of his blind eye; she has always thought that he saw more. Josselin, as ever, puts up his defences. Their two bodies, though, are forming a single unit and Ethel thinks of a citadel; the image urges itself upon her, it's something immense, and she tells herself – she could swear – that they're unassailable. She moves closer to his unseeing eye and places her lips on it. Josselin's hands detach her own from his face, and this gesture performed in the dark sends shock waves crashing all through her.

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Before leaving, he told her not to stay on her own but Ethel doesn't need company, she prefers to wait here. Max might come back.

She senses the emptiness of the rooms, and their pointlessness. She's not touched a thing since she's lived here, not moved one vase, one picture. She doesn't live in this house – she occupies it. Occasionally, she imagines the life that was here, before her. This is where people would eat, that is where they would read or daydream; by that window, people had succumbed to tiredness or dared to hope; against that wall, Josselin, as a child, had perhaps laughed, almost knocked over that porcelain cup or jumped to see himself for an instant in the mirror that was too high up and he'd been admonished for making too much noise: *no playing up, no pudding, go to your room and it's your turn to muck out the cattle pen tomorrow*. Yes, she's heard about childhood here, with its simple joys and transient woes; like her own, except that where she came from there'd been high-rises, terraced balconies, and a disused playground near a studded passage she would pace along often in hopes, each time, of finding, among the rampant grass and graffiti, something useless she just had to take home.

Ethel had grown up in the city, on a housing estate stuck next to tower blocks, where the horizon was obscured by distant scaffolding. You could see the sky a bit. That never moved. At home, mutual fondness went unsaid, and there were lavender bags in the wardrobes and bars of chocolate in the drawer beneath the TV. At school, things happened occasionally but she never talked about them. These days, when she thinks back on them,

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she assesses the gravity of those deeds. The girls trapped in the toilets with boys; gangs that would ambush each other outside the school gates or convene in the big garden alongside, the one with the lake, the mounds and the grottoes, to wreak vengeance. It was there, later, that she smoked her first cigarette. Further along, in a noisy street, and leaning against a porch, she once kissed a boy: she was clumsy, but sure of passing a turning point.

For a long time, people assumed she was older than she was. That flattered her, because to grow up was her only wish. She had a precise idea of how her life was going to be later on. She was going to distance herself from everything that quashes or discourages; she was going to battle against the feeling of being next to worthless. Her mother might speak, but she would ignore her. Deep down, Ethel retained the memory of robust dreams, which had been wrecked by time. Or, maybe she had wrecked them all herself, by contemplating them and not making them come true. Surely she has some of those dreams to hang onto, still; her dreams must be waiting for her somewhere. Sometimes, Ethel would picture them as fish in a cramped bowl that ultimately devour one another.

She paces through the kitchen, the hall, the living room, and the toilet. This is where it happened. The trace of the fire remains on the wall: you can distinguish it in certain places, black beneath the uneven layer of paint.

Josselin never talks about it – it was Paulin who told her the whole story. He said it was her right to know; they were living together, after all.

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Paulin had thrown himself into the telling, insisting over and over on Josselin's beauty, 'he was handsome, you can't imagine'. And the girls that would drop like flies up until that day that spoiled it all, when Josselin had the bad idea to smoke a cigarette. He had nicked it out of his father's packet. He would often do that, and he'd hide in the toilet, the one nobody ever went into. It was the rather dilapidated part of the house, which had been awaiting his parents' renovations for years, a guest room with ensuite bathroom, 'a rich man's dream, we'll admit that'. He'd always be sat there, trying to get out of the daily chores that always awaited him after school: muck out the cattle pen, gather in the hay, fill up the pond, check the tractor's gauges. His father was teaching him everything so that he could take over. The smoke was billowing out under the door when he'd squirted some air freshener, 'stuff that whiffs of the sea, like'. You can imagine what happened next.

In the hospital, they had put him in with the severe burns patients and he had remained immobile for several weeks, putting up with the groans of other people who had maybe risked their lives, done some noble deed to be there.

And later, he had told Paulin the insight he'd arrived at: that his life, the way he'd been living it with his pathetic little hopes, was fucked, and the worst thing of all was that he only had himself to rage against.

Ethel had given Paulin a drink and a few biscuits – he was famished as always – and between two mouthfuls he had gone too far, he had recounted that this drama had broken

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not only Josselin but Josselin and Clotilde who, a long time ago, had been madly in love, and for Ethel, this was tantamount to an announcement that she'd lost. She hadn't known how to process this tale of adolescent turmoil, this passion already experienced before her, the idea, therefore, that she'd arrived after his passion had cooled; nor had she been able to process this name, Clotilde, which she was hearing for the first time. She'd endeavoured not to think about it, Josselin with a different face, Josselin in love with that woman, but Paulin had put it all in her head and this onrush of memories that weren't hers had ended up colonising her and they'd resurface whenever she crossed paths with Clotilde, who lived a few blocks away from her house and was known by everyone, following her marriage to the mayor, as Mrs Letourneur.

Upstairs, Ethel checks the four consecutive bedrooms, the made beds where nobody ever sleeps, where a child could sleep one day if she wanted, if Josselin wanted as well, but they never talk about it. She is sure he'd be good with it, though. In the blind corners, she observes the fireplaces transformed into bookshelves, the yellowed photographs in frames: these people she has never known, this past that is not her past. And the big peaked mirrors that fill out the empty space and tilt this stability somewhat. She walks up to an armchair whose seat seems to bear the outline of a body and a chill runs through her, because she never sits in this armchair and neither does Josselin, who prefers his father's old rocker, downstairs. She moves her hand towards the cushion with folds visible even in the dark and wonders how they can be there, so sculpted, almost warm. She thinks maybe she is not alone and this idea chases away all the other ones. Suddenly, she's imagining the former

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presences. And while the hypotheses are stacking up, almost independently of her will, she advances, paces through the room, puts an ear to the walls, opens a wardrobe. A rancid odour is expelled from it and she can't help herself from reflecting on what she, too, is made of. She pictures to herself a black liquid coursing inside her, in the place of blood. She'd need to purge herself of it, open herself as well, and that way it'd pour out of her mouth, out of her body: it would be a hot vapour, a colourless cloud and she'd know she'd been right, from the very beginning – her condition had a physiological cause.

Ethel parts the net curtain. Her eyes rove around the empty garden: all the shades of black, the motionless roses that can be discerned against the low wall and the silent road which she soon finds hypnotic, and she takes to imagining what can be prowling all around, the noises there must be outside and which she cannot hear.

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Josselin

In single file, they advance up the track they all normally avoid. Branches weave a roof above them and criss-cross, masses of them, at chest height. The tips of them touch them like slender swords and occasionally catch at their clothes, which they unpick nervously.

They forge ahead, elbowing their way through. Occasionally, distant animal cries quicken their heartbeats, but they feel less alone and hope to hear them again.

Josselin walks up front. His one good eye is fixed on a point that isn't there; he is walking and nothing, neither fear nor the night, not even an army of men, could stop him. He walks and could be walking all alone. Cut off from the world, from its shapes, its noises, he mutters swearwords and supplications: her head between my hands, her body beneath mine; turn her over, cast her away; hear her breath stop; cover her head, throw her into the fire and forget it all: not one look, not one word, she'll have nobody to cry out to; just a skin that moans, a shadow that dies, finish it off then go and find the cattle, resume living and be able to count the hours, the days, again.

He pays no attention to the others: either to the apprehensiveness of Paulin, who was so resolutely combative a moment ago and is suddenly so febrile, or to Adalric, at the rear of the procession, keeping watch and stopping from time to time to look back on the

section of track they've just covered and then into the distant darkness, trying to turn the silence inside out, straining to hear the perpetual noises of nature which knows no sleep. Like the others, he never comes to this place.

Josselin stops.

'This it?' says Paulin

' – The farm, shit!'

Paulin crouches down. The undergrowth's barring his view. Then again, if he could see, he wouldn't know what he was looking at, since all is dark, or almost. Josselin is chewing on a twig. There is the sound of his clacking tongue and of his jaw as it closes and opens slowly.

His intensifying gaze dispels the darkness, and teases out a shape from behind the dense leaves and that giant grass that's been thriving, out of the way of human interference, for years. Josselin points at the field in front of them. The wind ruffles the silver ferns and for a few instants, flattens the scene. The corner of a house emerges, finally, and its thickset stone is ablaze in the light of the moon.

The place of ill portent.

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Josselin knows she's going to show herself, that she may appear at any moment; perhaps, dug in amid that ruin, she can see them, too. She's expecting them. He spits on the grass. 'Let's go.'

Their feet seek the ground at first and then set themselves onto some spongy earth with holes and small mounds; overabundant weeds sway and multiply as they progress blindly, tunnelling through an endless wall which, the moment it opens, closes on them again. The moon hangs over them. Josselin glances at it. The light is too bright. That needs to go, he thinks; he's going to do his utmost to crush it. Josselin clutches his weapon tightly. He's full of a rage he can no longer hold in. There's a riot inside him and he thinks instead of doing the usual thing – ignoring its clamour – he might finally listen to it and scream with it. Do what nobody dares to do: put everything, and everybody, back in its place.

The ground, suddenly hard, indicates to him that they're approaching the house. They must be on the old terrace. On the right, an abandoned swing-seat, being lightly pushed by the wind.

The house draws up suddenly in its solid entirety. In the place of the windows, black holes swallow ivy vines that have enlaced the shutters for a millennium. 'What do we do now?' Paulin lets his gaze wander all over. It is arrested by the merest sound. Josselin can hear his fear. He shouldn't have brought him with them. 'You, check the grounds, go and see round the back.' Paulin shakes his head and says, giggling, that he doesn't want to die.

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‘Get a move on!’

‘You go yourself if you want, but I’m not going back there, you’re crazy.’

‘So why are you here?’

Absolute silence descends again.

‘And you two, where are you two going, eh?’

A mouse threads its way between Paulin’s immobile feet, it raises its nose to his laces. For an instant he considers crushing it but it disappears into the grass.

‘We shouldn’t have come here; it reeks of death.’

‘So fuck off then, yeah?’

Staring wide-eyed, Paulin contemplates this desolate site. He raises his face covered with sweat and indecision to the sky and then back to the field, and the darkness. The mist is rising obstinately, one could say it is germinating.

Paulin starts off at the same time as a gust of cold wind that flings tall stems onto the three of them and some drops of water are pearling off Josselin’s fingers, who has always known, deep down, that Paulin was a coward. He motions to Adalric to stay where he is and advances alone, both hands on the gun. Once at the doorstep, he casts a final look behind him, and goes in.

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Gautier

Some embers roll onto the carpet.

It's pretty, this carpet, red and green, with patterns on it that hurt your eyes a bit. For some time now, Gautier has been trying to understand the secrets of their twining designs, the logic that presides over this apparent geometry: is it the diamonds that let you see the squares or the other way around. Mrs Letourneur is making pancakes in the living-room fireplace and she keeps on repeating that she's rushing them, that she could have done them better: she always says that when she cooks something for him. Often, she makes him dishes that she drops off at his door in plastic boxes of all colours and it's always delicious. His father is more the type to stick something frozen in the oven.

His father. He's been gone for hours, three maybe two. Although, Gautier has often pondered that sometimes, hours pass more quickly – they're like minutes –, so it could add up to a lot more, even if it doesn't seem that way. But a minute can be a very long time too, he found that out; he's already had to wait for all the seconds of a single minute to go by, and count them, it was in the woods – talking wasn't allowed because his voice would have frightened off the fish he was trying to catch with his father and they hadn't caught any, they'd stayed sat on a big stone waiting for something to bite and Gautier had thought to himself that time went by slowly, sometimes. He remembers it, it was a weekend after his mother's death. They had gone camping under the stars, an idea his father had so that things got better. In their backpacks, there had been tinned ravioli and marshmallows, and in their heads, for sure, there'd been thoughts going round and round but they'd kept them

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secret: why isn't she here anymore, and what if she had taken that road one minute later, three seconds earlier; what is the last word she'd said, and what was their last word to her? Gautier had asked his father that question, while they were both snuggled into their sleeping bags on the grass because they hadn't managed to peg the tent into the ground. 'Hey Dad, do you remember the last thing you said to mum?' His father hadn't replied, Gautier had waited a bit and, in the end, he had turned his face up to the sky and the stars that he'd never seen in such big numbers. He had promised himself not to fall asleep before he remembered what he had said himself, but it was late, not far off midnight. He hadn't been able to keep his promise.

The carpet is burning in places, little craters are beginning to form and are making the diamonds and squares disappear. Gautier sweeps the embers with his feet and Mrs Letourneur thanks him, her eyes even well up with tears; Gautier doesn't know if it's just the reflection of the flames or if she's moved that he's saved her carpet from destruction, and before he can stop her, she catches him up and hugs him tight. He can feel Mrs Letourneur's heart beating at high speed under her chest and he is surprised by it because she has really big bosoms and he has always thought that bosoms of this size were like a very solid wall that let nothing pass through, not one noise, but you could hear very clearly actually.

And he remembers his mother a bit.

It's nighttime and he can't sleep. He has his head in her neck, his legs tucked up on hers, it's hot there; and the smell of her skin like honey, the funny hole that's formed in her collarbone; he remembers that he would have liked to hide things right there, nobody would have known and nothing could have happened because his mother would have protected them, him and his treasures. And while he's suffocating a bit in Mrs Letourneur's arms, he thinks of the one thing his mother said that he remembers: you have to let the night go by, the night will pass all by itself, and then when it has, the day will come back.

'How are things at home?'

'All right.'

'You know, love, I think about you often and...'

She unclasps her arms and releases Gautier to go and put a pat of butter on the frying pan.

'I know we don't really know each other but I liked your mother a lot and I know it must be difficult for you not to have her there anymore, and I wanted to tell you that...'

She pours a ladle of pancake batter into the frying pan which she tilts with her wrist. She sighs.

'What I'm trying to say is, you're allowed to feel things and talk about them, all right?'

'All right.'

'What about school, you have pals?'

'Yes.'

She unsticks the edges of the pancake with a spatula.

‘And with your father, things ok?’

‘Ok.’

‘Your father... he’s a hell of a guy!’

Gautier wonders what she means by that and doesn’t dare ask the question, because the conversation will continue and he never wanted to talk, he didn’t even know what to reply, he’d never said to himself, ‘things are ok with my father’ because all was going well with his father.

‘Always doing favours, considering other people...’

Two or three times, in actual fact, Arnaud had helped Mrs Letourneur get her shopping out of the boot; he had filled in a mole hole and lent his ladder to repair a shutter. Gautier reflects on other examples while Mrs Letourneur delicately deposits the pancake onto a plate.

‘Someone like that’s a rare gem. Believe me.’

Gautier nods and he doesn’t understand why Mrs Letourneur’s looking at him with those eyes.

‘And it can’t be easy for him, either. Since your mother’s not been here...’

That’s the type of sentence Gautier knows by heart. He has learned to spot them, with time. Sentences that lead nowhere, and the adults believe it does you good to hear them but not at all: it only means repeating the obvious, his mother isn’t here anymore and it’s up to him to write what follows, while that sentence is already finished. His mother is no

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longer here. Full stop. It's not preventing him from sleeping, eating, breathing. Sometimes, it makes him sad but that never lasts for very long. It's difficult to explain, because everybody expects him to be grieving but he isn't, not really.

'You know if he... has anyone? A sweetheart?'

Gautier shakes his head and he knows what she must be thinking.

'Because he's young, your dad...'

If she knew.

'He could start his life over...'

The ravioli nights, the shelves in his bedroom, the train track around the living-room armchairs, the rhymes, ointment on bruises, the stabilisers that have come off his bike because he can ride without them now.

'Have day-to-day support...'

And then the football nights from time to time because otherwise it's bed at 8:30, but with a story, though; the tennis ball-shaped night light he can't be without, the hot-water bottle that warms the sheets, his always folded, clean-smelling laundry; and the always full kitchen cupboards, the lists they make before going shopping so they don't forget anything; the emergency meetings at the kitchen table to consider the tactic to adopt, next day in the playground, when Arthur's gang has promised Gautier they're going to rearrange his face.

Him and his father don't need anyone.

‘I don’t know,’ says Gautier.

At these words, Mrs Letourneur stands open-mouthed for a few moments, about to speak, then she changes her mind, a bit lost, as if she’s finally aware that she’s not going to get the expected answers.

She stands up abruptly and walks up to the tall patio doors, which she slides open. ‘Hear that?’ She puts her head out, then one foot then the next. She looks like an animal coming out of its hole. Gautier casts a glance at the pancakes towering on the plate, all those pancakes, now that’s definitely something for the pikeys. He considers how to go about taking some of them without Mrs Letourneur seeing him, how to wrap them then hide them. At first, he thinks about setting them down somewhere outside – or no, better to keep them on him and, if he ever comes across them – wouldn’t that be great – then he’ll be able to give them some and it would be a way of engaging them in conversation, of telling them he means them well, because they have a good reason for hiding, to escape people who won’t have them in their gardens or homes. They hide because they have no alternative.

‘Pierre! What are you doing here?’

Gautier leans forward a bit and in the night he sees Pierre’s shoes, which are white with a fluorescent yellow wave: he saw them just now by Pierre’s front door with his father,

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Josselin and Adalric, and he had wondered why people left shoes outside at night, what was the point apart from cooling down your feet, which, at this time of year, wasn't the best idea. 'Are you hungry my love?' Pierre shakes his head. Gautier would like to say something intelligent and not just come across as the boy sat next to some pancakes. Pierre knows things nobody knows. One day, he had shown him an ants' nest; Pierre knew a lot about ants, for example he knew the difference between carpenters and pharaohs; Gautier had never seen any pharaoh ants, they didn't live here, same goes for desert ants: those were the ones that walked backwards, their eyes were a bit useless but they always managed to get back home.

'Dad wants me to bring him some things. I'm only passing.'

Mrs Letourner raises a hand to her brow: she looks a bit like a theatre actress, the ones that have big dresses with lots of tiers and always seem to be having a headache.

'Yes, of course! Take his grey jumper. In the bedroom, it's folded. And a scarf!'

Her words come out in a torrent. Shaking her head as if to say, 'no, not that one', she closes her eyes, and all the clothes owned by Mister Mayor parade in front of them.

'And he must be hungry, they all must be hungry down there...'

'But mum...'

'Come on!'

And with a wave, she orders Gautier to get up.

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‘Put your coat on.’

‘Where we going?’

‘Joining the others, on the square, we’re taking pancakes. A crate of apples, some bread, and milk.’

Mrs Letourneur disappears into the kitchen.

‘And we’re emptying the fridge! I’ll be throwing everything away otherwise...’

Pierre has gone upstairs and Gautier takes advantage of being alone to seize several pancakes, which he bundles under his jumper. At first, he has the feeling he’s doing something wrong and then he tells himself it’s no big deal, Mrs Letourneur would understand if she noticed. She was always saying how big-hearted she was.

Gautier is all set. On the doorstep, he discovers the fuchsias all around him and he muses that these flowers look like insects and they’re not really pretty. He bends down to take a look at one of them which isn’t open yet and squeezes its bulb between his fingers to make it pop. Pierre sees him do it and laughs softly. ‘Hey stop that! Leave my flowers alone!’ Mrs Letourneur closes the door to her house and takes Gautier’s hand, suddenly propelling him forward. She has put on perfume. Gautier, right in the slipstream, suppresses a sneeze. Her walking gets faster and faster and she holds his hand very tightly, mumbling things to Pierre who doesn’t answer.

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Gautier looks all around him, the trees, the gutters, the low stone walls that delimit the houses. They must be there, the pikeys. Not far away. Maybe they are watching him, at this very moment. How to convince them, tell them 'don't be scared', tell them what his mother told him. And he considers the pancakes under his jumper which can't be very presentable now.

'The fire, I forgot to put out the fire.'

'Leave it, mum, it'll go out by itself.'

She hands Pierre the plate of pancakes.

'Go ahead, I'll join you.'

'You serious?'

She bends down to Gautier and pinches his cheek.

'You're leaving the kid with me?'

'Now you stay with Pierre, all right?' And Gautier nods as he places his cold palm on the cheek she's just pinched a bit too hard as if, while wanting to be affectionate, she'd been wanting to hurt him as well. Pierre has gone off without waiting for him. Gautier catches him up and, mid-run, discreetly takes a bit of pancake out from under his jumper and swallows it.

'Do *you* know what's happening?' asks Gautier.

'What you talking about?'

'Tonight.'

'I'm no wiser than you are.'

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‘And time, in your opinion?’

‘What do you mean, time?’

‘Does it still exist?’

Pierre laughs a bit.

‘Don’t worry. Time is the only thing that won’t go away.’

The air has cooled. Pierre readjusts the strap of his bag. His eyes are sweeping the surroundings.

‘And the animals that have gone away, it’s weird, isn’t it?’

Pierre takes a chewing gum and puts it in his mouth.

‘My father told me that cows, when you take them to the abattoir before they die, they stop making any noise, you can’t hear them anymore because they know there’s no point in making a fuss. They actually know what’s about to happen to them.’

Pierre speeds up.

‘Do you think that’s what they’re doing now?’

Gautier can hear Pierre breathing. He senses the questions are bothering him a bit, because otherwise he’d answer.

‘Maybe they can sense something we can’t sense, you see?’

‘I’ll tell you one thing. There’s nothing to understand. Things happen, that’s all.’

Things happen. That’s all.

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They walk even faster. The trees pass in procession. Gautier, breathless, takes a look at them all, trying to make out some movement. He hears cracking noises and, behind, the sound of the wind as it sways the branches; faint knocking, some babbling, but everything he does take in he dismisses immediately because Pierre, unshakeable, keeps walking straight ahead. He seems to be hearing nothing. Gautier's vision loses itself in the darkness and soon these trees that he knows so well, down to their names – it's easy, you just need to learn them, his father has always said it was important to know who they are, to look at how they live; Gautier even knows how to calculate their age, it was easier to do on chopped-down trunks – these trees are now no more than trembling splashes and occasionally, when the wind rises, they come up to him, very nearly touching him and picking him up with their big tufty boughs to carry him far away from here. And it's all on a loop in his head.

Things happen.

Nothing to understand.

He muses that his father wouldn't agree, and especially that, when he comes back, he'll have found a solution.