

‘Today’s programme is all about stomach ulcers and with us in the studio we have Professor Chotard from ...’

Monsieur Lavenant clenched his fist in irritation, as if he were crumpling up an invisible sheet of paper.

‘Will you change the station, Thérèse? Or even better, turn the radio off altogether.’

‘There.’

The presenter’s nasal voice was replaced by the roar of the engine. Monsieur Lavenant tugged at the seat belt, which was digging into his left shoulder.

‘In any case, it’s ridiculous to try to listen to the radio in these gorges – you know perfectly well it’s impossible to pick anything up clearly.’

‘It was you who asked me to turn it on, Monsieur.’

‘Hmm, well ... We weren’t in a gorge a minute ago.’

The river Aygues wound its way to the right of the road along the sheer rock. With the non-stop torrential rain of the past few days, its coffee-coloured water carried along dead branches which gathered in the rocky river bends like sets of pick-up sticks. Above the cliffs, birds bounced acrobatically on the taut blue trampoline of the sky. Nature was drying her

sorrowful tears of the previous day. The car swerved.

‘Look out, Thérèse!’

‘That’s what I’m doing, Monsieur. There was a big stone in the middle of the road. It’s because of the storms.’

‘You’re driving too fast.’

‘A minute ago you were criticising me for going too slowly.’

‘A minute ago we were on a straight road. You drive too fast when you shouldn’t, and too slowly when you need to accelerate. Anyway, in a car like this!’

‘It may be old but it serves me well. And you too.’

‘It stinks. It stinks of petrol and wet dog.’

‘I’ve never had a dog.’

‘You must have had one in the car then. I may be gaga but I can still recognise the smell of damp dog!’

Thérèse gave up. Whatever he said, whatever he did, the old boy wouldn’t succeed in spoiling the good mood she had been in since the moment she woke up. She felt serene, happy with the sort of happiness which hits you out of the blue.

‘Why are you smiling?’

‘No reason. The weather’s fine.’

‘The weather’s fine ... Pah! In the desert it’s fine the whole time – d’you think the Bedouin are laughing?’

‘I don’t know, Monsieur. I’ve never been there.’

‘Well, I have, and believe me, there’s no reason to smile. Slow down, Thérèse, we’re coming to the tunnel!’

‘I know, Monsieur. I know the road.’

‘Exactly! That’s why accidents happen. You know, you’re

confident, and then wham! Vigilance, Thérèse, vigilance, at all times. It only needs a second's lack of concentration ... Look there, what did I tell you? English bastard!

Monsieur Lavenant's voice yelling through the open window was quickly swallowed up in the dark shadow of the tunnel, while the camper van which had almost clipped them disappeared in the rear-view mirror. At the exit, the sun striking a layer of rock made them blink. The geological strata formed swirls, folds of ochre, gold or incandescent white trimmed with the green fur of spindly oak trees, all their roots clinging onto the slightest toehold in the ground. The birth of the world could be read there, its bursts of energy, its hesitations, twists and turns, its centuries-long periods of stagnation and thunderous eruptions. Now and then, perfumed clouds of thyme or lavender wafted in, accompanied by the non-stop chirping of the crickets.

'What about ...'

'About?'

'I was going to say something silly, Monsieur.'

'Say it then.'

'What about having a picnic after we've been to the market?'

'That's not silly, that's downright stupid! Have you been drinking, Thérèse? I've heard it all now! Picnic? Do you think you're on holiday or something?'

'I'm sorry, Monsieur.'

'A picnic! And then a little dip in the Aygues, and in the evening maybe a dance, under paper lanterns? You'd be

better off looking where you're going. Here, switch the radio on again, we're out of the gorge. I'd rather listen to the world's bad news than your ramblings.'

'Very well, Monsieur.'

The first cherries were barely ripe, yet the market in Nyons was teeming like high summer. Space was limited and they had been forced to park well beyond the Pont Roman, which had, of course, only exacerbated Monsieur Lavenant's bad mood.

'Just look at that! English, Dutch, Germans, Belgians ... Do I go and do my shopping in their countries? No! You'd think we were still under the Occupation.'

'I could easily have done the shopping on my own; you didn't have to come.'

'That's right, you'd like me to stay shut up in my hole like a rat. I do still have the right to go out, you know.'

'Why don't you wait for me nice and quietly on the café terrace with your newspaper and a cold drink?'

'That's exactly what I had in mind. But don't dawdle like last time. It doesn't take three hours to buy a kilo of tomatoes. Have you got the list?'

'I have. See you later, Monsieur.'

'And don't let anyone rip you off, we're not tourists.'

Seated at a small table in the shade of a blue-and-white-striped awning, he watched Thérèse go off, basket in hand, and melt into the brightly coloured crowd. As soon as she was

out of sight he felt a vague anxiety, a sense of having been abandoned. He shrugged his shoulders and curtly ordered a pastis from the waitress who was bustling among the tables like a frantic insect.

Thérèse allowed herself to be carried along by the wave of passers-by, intoxicated by the infinite variety of colours, scents and sounds, as if at the heart of a giant kaleidoscope. Bodies scantily dressed in the lightest of fabrics rubbed against hers and she experienced the same giddiness as she had at dances in her youth. She desired everything, and everything was there. After the gloomy days counted off like rosary beads in Monsieur Lavenant's joyless house, this was a sort of resurrection and she made the most of it, every pore straining for the tiniest atom of life. She criss-crossed Place du Docteur Bourdongle, enclosed by arcades whose violet shadow suggested stolen kisses, filling her basket with tomatoes, peppers, aubergines, basil, fromage frais, piping-hot bread. She tasted an olive here, a crouton dripping with virgin oil there, a slice of saucisson, a spoonful of honey ...

As she made her way back, having come to the end of her shopping list, she stopped short in front of a stall selling hats, dozens and dozens of hats ...

GREAT DEALS!

FREE! We will clear your attic, cellar or whole house ... 500 F plus paid for German helmets, uniforms, other historical memorabilia, Resistance, militia, US ...

PRIV. INDIVID. SEEKS OLD MILITARY objects, from flintlocks to caplocks, matchlocks, percussion caps, trigger guards, various barrel bands, even in poor condition ...

Monsieur Lavenant pushed his newspaper away and stared mournfully at his empty pastis glass. In theory he wasn't allowed more, but since sucking the ice cube, all he could think of was having another. There was something indecent about feeling so good and everything in him rebelled at the idea of calling the waitress again. Yet he was dying to. He would have to make up his mind before Thérèse came back. He glanced at his watch but as he didn't know how long he'd been there, he was none the wiser. The sight of the crippled hand to which his watch was attached decided it for him. It was scrawny and hooked, like a bird of prey's talon, the hand of an Egyptian mummy, of use to him now only as a paperweight to stop the newspaper from blowing in the breeze.

'The state I'm in already ... Fuck it! I can do what I want.' Immediately, his right arm shot up and the crow in a white blouse and black skirt replaced his empty glass with a new one which he half emptied in order to fool Thérèse, before becoming engrossed once more in the indescribable experience of reading the classifieds.

BULTEX SOFA BED, new, yellow. 1300 F.

WIN BIG ON THE HORSES! 70% success rate for our tip with good odds. WATCH THIS SPACE FOR RELIABLE INFO!

HORSE MANURE TO GIVE AWAY.

TWO THOUSAND-LITRE SEPTIC TANKS.

BRIDAL GOWN, size 38 + veil and tiara. 1000 F.

For a moment he saw it floating before him, a wispy cloud of white muslin. Deep in his wizened heart, something came loose. How long was it since he'd just let go, stretched out on the grass and watched the clouds go by? Years ...

'There now, I wasn't too long, was I?' Thérèse's voice jolted him back to reality.

'What have you got on your head?'

'A hat.'

'A hat!'

'Well, you're wearing one.'

'It's different for me. I can't tolerate the sun. My hat is ... useful.'

'Well, mine is a hat that I like.'

It was a small straw hat with a wide brim which cast a veil of shadow over her shiny, slightly puffy face. Her violet eyes, the only beautiful thing about her, were sparkling with mischief, almost impudence. Monsieur Lavenant tried unsuccessfully to find something to say to make her lower them, but could only snigger and look away.

'At the end of the day, you're the one wearing it. Now, what have you brought for the picnic?'

'The picnic?'

'Yes, the picnic. Have you lost your wits or something?'

‘I thought that ...’

‘You thought that ... You thought ... I’ve changed my mind, that’s all. I’m entitled to do that, aren’t I?’

‘Oh, it doesn’t bother me. Quite the reverse; it’s such lovely weather. We’ve got all we need: melon, tomatoes, cheese and an excellent ham.’

Paying for his drinks, he couldn’t hide the fact that he’d had two pastis and she raised her eyebrows indulgently.

‘Yes, I’ve drunk two pastis; it won’t kill me.’

Monsieur Lavenant decided they should take the Défilé de Trente Pas and look for a place to stop on the way to the Lescou Pass where the air was cooler. The road was very narrow and winding. Thérèse drove carefully, sounding her horn at every bend since it was impossible to see round them. The walls of rock were so close together that it felt like being a bookmark between the pages of an ancient tome exuding a strong smell of mould. It was very impressive but slightly anxiety-provoking. The dense vegetation screened the river below, whose presence was suggested only by a guttural roar, an uninterrupted chant. Neither of them uttered a word until they were out of the gorge, and as one they sighed with relief when the little car came onto the road to the pass. The sun was sounding a fanfare and the clumps of trees were thinning out the higher they climbed. Their stomachs rumbled meaningfully and, quite independently, Thérèse to the left and Monsieur Lavenant to the right, they scoured the horizon for a favourable picnic spot.

‘Take that little one on the right! There, right away!’