## Chapter 1

*Still looking for words*
*That say something*
*Where you look for the people*
*Who no longer say anything*
*And still finding words*
*That can say something*
*Where you find people*
*Who can no longer say anything?*

Erich Fried

Dad is having new experiences. Like not getting through a day without crying for five full minutes, or three blocks of ten minutes, or a whole hour. That's new. His tears stop, start again, stop once more, then come back, etc. All sorts of varieties of sobbing, but not a day without any. It gives life a different structure. There are sudden tears; a single gesture, word or image and there they are. There are tears with no apparent cause, stupidly there. There are tears with an unfamiliar flavour; no halting breaths, none of the usual gurning, not even the sniffling, just tears flowing.

With him, it tends to be in the morning that he feels like crying.

On the eleventh day after I died, Dad went to take my duvet to the cleaners. Walking up the rue du Couédic, his arms laden with my bedding, his nose buried in it. He thinks he's smelling my smell. Actually, it stinks; I'd never had those sheets washed, or that duvet. Days I'd been sleeping in them, months and months. He doesn't find them offensive now. Quite the opposite: there's still something of me in those white depths he's carrying to the cleaners, like someone bearing the holy sacrament. Dad's crying with his nose in folds of cotton. He doesn't look people in the eye, makes detours, going much further than he needs to, turning right on to rue Obscure, walking down it, then back up, on to rue le Bihan, rue Émile-Zola, les Halles, four hundred metres instead of the one hundred it should take. He's making the most of it. He has one more fix of the duvet and finally opens the door to the shop.

Yuna the Wasted Talent is there, feeding coins into an automatic washing machine. Dad can't hang about. Condolences, etc. The manager – more condolences, etc. – relieves him of the duvet. Dad would have liked the exchange to last a little longer: a queue, a phone call from a customer, a delivery, a thunderstorm, just so it went on long enough for him to carry on breathing in the last dregs of my smell. Dad hands it over; he's losing it, losing it.

Back home, he finds the dog chewing my slippers. My smell's on them too. Come on, Dad, you're not going to squabble with Yanka and start sucking on my stinking slippers, are you?

How long will the dog go on recognising my smell? Worth checking in, say, three months: a hundred days, that's perfect, the usual state of grace for newly appointed heads of state. But the state of grace for the newly dead, the period when everything makes you think of them, when just mentioning their name makes you cry, how long's that? A hundred days, a year, three years? We'll have a chance to measure this objectively. How long will Yanka go on bounding over to my slippers to relish the smell of them and the leather? At what point will Mum and Dad stop searching reverently for the tiniest trace of me? How long will they carry on deliberately immersing themselves in things that make them cry? Will I go on presiding over every moment of their lives? Interesting questions. Go on, Dad, admit it, sometimes in between two sobs you wonder about all this too. But it feels obscene to think of the future; now that I'm dead, you've forgotten there even is a future.

And it's chaos in your new world. You're inheriting things, Dad, but these are no gifts. 'Sweet dreams, my love, your Nanie who loves you.' 'Good night, my little weasel.' It's one of the

nicknames my girlfriend gave me, and Dad's slightly embarrassed to come across it in the saved messages on my mobile. But he can't help himself: he delves, delves through everything I left behind. Her telling me she loves me, obviously he was expecting that. Having to work out that I called her 'my Nanie', ordinary enough. The nickname 'little weasel' bothers him. He'll have to do some research into weasels. Why did Marie call me that? Because I nibbled her ears, her lips, her breasts? Google says weasels are nocturnal. Is it because I stayed up till all hours?

Dad doesn't like nicknames. You'll never know why it was 'little weasel' – unless you admit to Marie that you read her texts to me. I'd be surprised if you dare do that any time soon.

Also found this evening, in the depths of the mobile, is this text dated 26 September, a month before I died: 'Star of redemption, good Lion, news: now in Reims, wonderful really seeing the cathedral.' Dad deciphers it feverishly. This message, he's sure, is about the trip to Amsterdam that I went on with Romain just before my death. I'd lied. I'd said we were going to Reims. Mum and Dad would have freaked if I'd told them I was actually heading for hash heaven – an inevitable project for a guy of twenty-one; you must have done the same yourself, Dad, forty years ago, didn't you? After Amsterdam, Romain really did go to Reims. I came back to Brittany to return the car we'd

had so much trouble borrowing. It was from Reims that Romain sent me that text.

Still, that 'Star of redemption' really is enigmatic. It'll be years before you allow yourself to ask Romain about it. For now, you're just inheriting puzzles.

When people asked Dad what his star sign was, he used to snigger. He said he couldn't give a flying fuck what he was – the scales, the crab, the virgin – even less what his ascendant was. He would add that he did know one thing, the name of his descendant: 'Lion', me. Now that I've died, Dad hasn't got anything: no ascendant or descendant.

At 12.45 on 29 October 2003, I had an appointment at the university department for preventive medicine. The problem is, I died on 25 October, four days earlier. When did I make that appointment? That's what Dad wants to know. He's seen that card twice, perhaps even three times, since he started diligently sorting my papers into some understandable order. 'University preventive medicine' – that was all he saw on the small typed card I'd kept: 'University preventive medicine, 29 October, 12.45 with Mrs …', followed by an ellipsis, not giving the name.

When he finds this card, he's in the turmoil of his first proper week of mourning, when the ceremonies are over and the friends have left. Solitude, that's when death really begins. Dad's spent the day sifting through my things, crying between

phone calls, constantly blowing his nose without the excuse of a dust allergy. He resigns himself to throwing away my old school books from Year 11 and Year 12, after meticulously rereading their accumulations of uselessness, just in case, somewhere between an English lesson and a maths lesson, I'd left some note or drawing, something personal that would act as a message to him. He finds nothing, no signs, nothing but the wafflings of a pupil who wasn't really listening to a boring teacher. After hours of frantic searching – and I could actually call it prying, Dad; okay, so I'm dead, but really – he now suddenly notices, right at the bottom of the appointment card that's been bugging him, a detail jotted in pencil, by hand, in tiny writing. A barely visible piece of information, but an essential one: I didn't have an appointment with just any old doctor who happened to be free that particular day for just any old annual check-up; I had a very specific appointment with 'the psychiatrist, Mrs Le Gouellec'. Written like that, discreetly in pencil: 'the psychiatrist, Mrs Le Gouellec'. A handwritten note in someone else's writing, not mine. So I'd definitely asked to see the psychiatrist of my own accord.

That changes everything.

Dad's gripped by a feeling of anguish he's had before. One that niggled him as soon as I died. He thought he'd driven it away, but here it is again, like a thunderbolt. It all comes back up to the surface. For some time now he has been carrying

within him a firm conviction, like a form of madness, and now it erupts once more: the immeasurable power of the subconscious. A manic belief in desire and the soul. I live because I want to. Therefore I die because I … A madness that daren't even finish the sentence.

Dad has already asked himself a thousand times whether I really did die because I was struck down by sheer bad luck: a nasty microbe comes along and there you are, you're dead. Was it actually because I lowered my guard for a moment? One minute when I didn't want to live quite so much, and *bam!* Dad has always believed, or rather speculated with varying degrees of clarity, that it would take only one moment without vigilance for the forces of death to take hold of him. A second's inattention to life, and everything goes up in smoke. Officially, he doesn't really believe in a death wish, but even so, he *does* know a thing or two about it; in all of us – well, in him, at least – there are forces that can destroy the most robust life. So he wonders whether that was what I did for those few days, subconsciously, however much or little I wanted to: left the door open to my own destructive forces.

For as long as he can remember, Dad has felt that every day spent living is like an active decision to live. Hence his vitality, I suppose. Now that I'm dead, he takes every possible opportunity to yell 'Long live life!' He feels he's got to shout it manically: 'Long live life! *Fiat lux!*' Does it help, you mad old

git? Every death then poses the question of what that person did or didn't do for it to happen or not happen. Our own death would be the final – and of course irrefutable – example. Constantly deciding to live, having to make the decision afresh every day, bellowing 'Long live life!' in the devil's face. Until the day when you allow yourself to remain silent, and it's the death of you. Dad's yelling to himself. My appointment with the department of preventive medicine reignites all his delirious thoughts. What was going on inside my head three weeks ago to make me want this appointment, and risk death?

For several days Dad had finally started moving away from this theory, as if his madness no longer had a hold on him. He wept with joy when he saw from the dial in my car that a few hours before I died, I'd filled up with petrol. A tank full of fuel means a life full of plans, doesn't it? Similarly, he felt there was proof of a desire to live in the subscription to the newspaper *Le Monde* that I'd only just taken out (the first issue was delivered to my letter box in Rennes the day after I died). I wanted to read *Le Monde*, to know about the world, so surely I must have had plans for a life? I'd also just subscribed to Rennes Opera House at the student rate. You don't subscribe to a newspaper or an opera company, you don't fill up with fuel when you want to die. The Grim Reaper had culled me, that's all there was to it, and there was nothing Dad or I or anyone else could do about it.

Death existed despite us; Dad was almost prepared to believe that.

And now, crash, bang, wallop, everything's fallen apart, because he's finally read what was on that card from the department for preventive medicine. I really did have an appointment with a psychiatrist – her name was even written on the card; you just had to look properly. You found it, after hours and hours of not knowing how to read. Are you sure you weren't wilfully blind, just a bit?

Next question.

Call the psychiatrist, but to say what? To discuss a hesitation in the will to live, etc. Okay … So, Dad, do you want to talk about my hesitation to live, or yours?

Dad's going round in circles. His age-old demons have come hurtling back, notions of a failing life force. He's going to call the psychiatrist, ask some questions. Obviously, even if she does know something about my relationships with life and death, she won't be able to say anything, especially on that front, so private, strictly confidential. All right then, fine, she'll say nothing, professional code of ethics. But if he doesn't call her, he'll mull it over too much. This is about him too, after all. He decides to call the very next day.

Dad had confided his delirious ideas to Christine and Jean-Jacques the night I died. Doctors both of them, serious people, scientists and everything. And good friends. In tears,

he'd asked them: 'Can't we subconsciously choose to die?' Jean-Jacques saw him coming and was quick to say no, the bug had just struck, unstoppable, the thing was a killer, a terrorist: Lion's dead, the great divide had happened, there was nothing Lion could do about it, and there was nothing you could do about it either. He died, and our own impotence was revealed, that's all there was to it.

Christine, a woman, is shrewder, more in touch with these superstitions. She heard what Dad meant, what he suspected: what if I'd *let* the germ kill me? After all, this germ – fulminant meningitis, to give it its proper name – lives in plenty of carriers who are unaffected by it. Why then did it suddenly, at that moment, on that particular day, find favourable territory in me? How come it proliferated so furiously in me? It can't just be down to chance. Isn't it more likely that my life surrendered to the monster, to giving up and to death?

Dad could hardly speak. That Sunday, right in front of him, Christine had talked about the mystery of the little old man you can leave on Friday with a 'Have a good weekend, see you Monday', to which he calmly replies: 'No you won't, I'll be dead on Monday!' And you come back on Monday and sure enough, the old boy's dead, he's pulled the plug. He's given up. *Lux* stops.

In the last few years, Dad had tried to put a stop to these far-fetched speculations that had been with him for ever. The

day after my death, he finally seemed to accept the evidence. I'd exploded mid-flight because a killer germ had intercepted me, and that was all there was to it. His long-standing obsession didn't stand up. There are some things we can't grasp: death, in a nutshell. Dad was making some progress in warding off his all-consuming madness. The bomb, the great divide, comes and lands on you for no other reason than the fact that it comes and lands on you, and that's what we sometimes need to understand. Death is something we can't control at all.

He thought he'd found proof of this in my paperwork. For the first time in my life I had been keeping a diary. In the weeks to come, I'd made a note of a Radiohead concert to listen to on MCM on 27 October, a meeting at the National Theatre of Bretagne on the 30th, a rock group's live concert at Châteaulin on 18 November and, with no specific date, a certificate I needed to pick up from the university admin office. I had lots to do before I died.

Dad was close to convincing himself that the theories he'd been flirting with for years were pathetic.

But one evening in his second week as an orphaned father, his old madness insidiously fires up again. I'd rarely made so many preparations for the future. And now he sees this as grist for his demented mill. I'd *rarely* made so many plans for the future. *Rarely*. That one word came to him and gave him

permission to launch into his fantastical imaginings once more. All of them regressive. *What if that was just it: the boy had accumulated apparent plans for life in order to battle an obscure, deep-seated death wish. What if he'd been aware of unspoken doubts bubbling up inside him. What if …* That psychiatrist I'd decided to go and see, that little card found in amongst all the mess on my desk in Rennes, surely that was a decision I'd tried to make in order to halt my death wish in its tracks? Maybe I'd tried too late to avoid being tempted? Or maybe I hadn't even really put up a fight? I'd let that germ bomb do its thing inside me so I didn't have to go to the appointment I'd found so hard to make? Dad's old delirious ramblings are back, twirling furiously inside his head.

When, nearly forty years ago, he had his first appointment with a psychiatrist, he immediately went down with jaundice afterwards. A nasty case. I'm sure he was scared to death. But at the end of the day, unlike me he wasn't dead before starting the course of treatment. He went to his first appointment with the psychiatrist. The following week he had that bout of jaundice. 'Your body's responding violently,' the psychiatrist pointed out, while still charging him for the session he missed due to this lavish somatisation. A fanfare entrance into therapy, three times a week for seven years. At one point the psychiatrist said that he'd do well to find some other form of expression than his poor body, or it could kill him. Dad's illnesses are

psychosomatic. His whole life has been dogged by his body's muted responses to the decisions he's made in life. Throat cancer and later thyroiditis; were they his body talking without saying anything? And the pulmonary embolism? Now that psychobabble is part of everyday conversation, people have never missed opportunities to tell him that these were episodes of somatisation. He found something to say in response: *Well then, my recoveries were my body talking too, for fuck's sake. And long live life!* (Refrain.) Therapy gave him the perfect comeback, at least.

Dad was still plagued with doubts, though. Maybe I'd been in therapy for a long time and hadn't said anything about it, particularly to him. Perhaps I was at a difficult point in the process, and he hadn't spotted the signs. Dad, besieged by doubts and feelings of remorse. He should have … The irreversible punctuation of grief, when terrible guilt gets on with its work. That's what they call eternal regret.

Dad spends the night obsessed by the question. It swirls around every which way. So much drivel. What if my death was just my body speaking out, violently? What if I was scared to death, like him, at the thought of giving a voice to my unconscious and my desires? What if I was just like the other men in his family, starting with his father, an emotional mute? Dad broke away from that to some extent, thanks to

psychotherapy. Not always, though. He won't get any sleep tonight.

In the morning he calls the Inter-University Centre for Preventive Medicine. When he gives his name to the switchboard, there isn't a moment's hesitation: 'Perhaps it would be better if, instead of Mrs Le Gouellec, I put you through to the head consultant,' a soft-voiced young woman says before he's even finished explaining why he's calling. On-hold music. In a way he feels relieved, not by the music – which is shitty as usual – but by the switchboard operator's speedy response: his call wasn't completely unexpected. They seem to be aware that this patient, who didn't come to his appointment, has died.

Think carefully, Dad: there's still time to hang up. What can you say? Do you really want to know? And have you asked yourself whether *I* would have wanted you to know? Either way, you won't be able to voice most of the questions you want to ask. There is such a thing as professional secrecy – or let's hope there is.

Dad doesn't want to give up. He feels he has to persist. At least to find out one thing: *was that appointment on 29 October the first my student son had with the psychiatrist?*

Borderline intrusive, Dad. What will you find in your dead boy's life?

After a while, Dr Bernheim picks up the phone (or is it Barnart? Bernin? No, they sound like cardiologists or architects. Dad daren't ask for the name again. Bernheim, he decides – Bernheim sounds more like a psychiatrist). The head consultant, a woman, responds with what Dad was afraid would be the case: they can't tell him anything. He digs his heels in. She sidesteps slightly, letting him infer that it was a first appointment – later consultations are never actually written on that sort of printed card, as the subsequent course of treatment is arranged directly between psychiatrist and patient. You are only given that form when you go for your first visit.

Relief for Dad. So I hadn't yet fallen into the wrong hands with the wrong psychiatrist. I hadn't been in therapy for months, unbeknown to him. At least that was one thing his guilt would be spared.

Turmoil returned through another door. What on earth could I have been doing, going to see a psychiatrist, if not articulating my distress?

Dad weeps silently on the phone. I never mentioned it? Well, so what? Shit, Dad, it was my business, not yours. I wouldn't have told you about it anyway.

The head consultant breaks the silence:

‘In any event, Mr Rostain, I just wanted to say that there’s no connection between that sort of illness and a course of therapy!’

‘Are you sure?’ Dad retorts very quickly; too quickly.

Silence. Then the doctor doesn’t lie:

‘No, I’m not sure of anything. We can’t be sure of anything. Medicine is such an imprecise thing.’

The psychiatrist didn’t mince her words; she didn’t dodge the issue, nor Dad’s fears, nor his questions, nor the mystery itself.

Dad cries for a long time after hanging up. Medicine is such an imprecise thing. So is psychoanalysis.

Chaos. Dad’s listening, fortissimo, to Wagner’s Erda, the mother of the Valkyries who doesn’t understand anything any more. He remembers with cinematographic clarity an epitaph he deciphered the previous day at the foot of a child’s grave in Ploaré: ‘All at once God saw you, loved you and said to you: Come!’ He’s enraged by this incredibly selfish instruction. ‘Come! Leave your life behind for me!’ The Christian God really is a bastard. And so is fate.

So is the subconscious, Dad thinks broodingly, only too aware of the demons haunting him.

With Wotan forsaken, Erda defeated and Tristan dying, Wagner reels out leitmotifs inside an ageing fool's head. It's morning. Dad's crying, as usual.

He used to proclaim 'Long live life' because he'd always believed in it, because – slack-jawed simpleton that he was – he wanted to believe in the beauty of the world. Now he'll carry on proclaiming 'Long live life' regardless, certainly not because he believes in it, but because he just has to. At the morgue, when I was moved there, Dad was possibly even more despairing about my death than my girlfriend Marie, and he found himself taking her by the arm and, in the icy chill of an already wintry sun, making her sing 'Long live the sun! Long live the sun!' exactly as he would have directed one of his singers on stage. She was crying, sobbing, inconsolable; she didn't want to shout, but he wouldn't let go of her. He was crying too, but he wouldn't give up; he shook her, insisting, 'Shout it, sing it with me: Long live the sun!' He turned her to face the blue sky, with her back to the mortuary. He grew even more manic, jumping up and down, singing, 'Long live the sun! Long live the sun! Long live the sun at least!'

In the end, she gave in; it doesn't really matter why. To please this ridiculous old man crazed with grief, dancing and bellowing so close to his son's coffin. 'Long live the sun! Long live the sun! Long live life!' She too proclaimed through her tears, not very loudly, but she did it, 'Long live the sun!' He

persuaded himself he'd grafted a tiny bit of will to live on to this devastated nineteen-year-old widow … who hadn't even been married. He told himself there would always be that, this scrap of energy injected into the soul of a woman who now loved a dead man. Maybe you did succeed, Dad, let's hope you did. But what about you, Dad, be honest: are you still proclaiming 'Long live the sun'? 'Long live life'? Still?

Silence. It's silly really, you never much liked the sun. Mum's the sun-worshipper.

The indescribable pleasures of motherhood and fatherhood – they savoured every drop of those pleasures when I was a baby. How lucky, to live with life.

And now, living with my death. Moments of grief are describable. And the process of dying is appallingly describable. Dad's in the very thick of it.

Good modern stoic that he is, Dad believes – as everyone probably does now – that true happiness is living in the present. Not having hopes and expectations for the future, not clinging to the past; living purely in the present, that is happiness.

Equation: so now that I'm dead, is true happiness for you the pain you're feeling at this precise moment?

Dad can't bear anything that distances him from his distress – work-related concerns, phone calls, things to do, etc. The only thing he really wants is this, the suffering my death has provoked in him. He's going to be locked into this particular present for a while yet. He wants to experience it so thoroughly; purely, if that's possible. Which is why he cultivates it. Withdrawing. Crying as he sits by my grave, with the vast Douarnenez sky all around, the sea in the background, my grave so tiny compared to the ocean, crying, welcoming the pain, almost loving it. The meagre happiness of his present existence is his unhappiness.

He resents anyone who takes him away from it.

Dad's reading my schoolwork compulsively to keep in touch with me. One miserable evening of rummaging he found this Pat Metheny quote very heavily circled in red between two paragraphs about Plato: 'Music is all you need to feel a hug.' Music hugged me, like it hugged you. He laughs. Music? Art? None of that went down very well with Plato. He's still talking to the philosophy student. Further on, he finds a scrawl across the margin: 'Renunciation: what is it we're renouncing?'

I've left you years' worth of books to leaf through, Dad.

A father inheriting from his son, that's an inconceivable sequence of words. Time turned on its head.

‘Renunciation: what is it we’re renouncing?’ He comes back to that. Does my note have some hidden meaning? It’s most likely something a teacher said during a lesson, but what was *I* thinking when I wrote it in my file; what was the renunciation in question? Someone I loved? Life? Stop, Dad! You’re losing the plot. I wasn’t any good at renouncing anything. When choosing what to eat at a restaurant, I had to eliminate things from the menu one by one; I’d be consumed by complete paralysis while the waiter hovered patiently, pencil in hand. Interminable torment. How to decide between a *pâté en croûte* and Burgundy snails? *Renunciation: what is it we’re renouncing?* Careful, Dad: death is making you invest the tiniest details with meaning. You know perfectly well that it’s never going to be the right meaning; it’s just inaccurate fabrication, bitterness, regret, doubt, a distorted rear-view mirror.

Maybe I didn’t renounce anything. Maybe I did. Then what?

Mum won’t stop whispering between her tears, ‘The injustice of it, the injustice!’ In Dad’s case, ‘injustice’ is inappropriate. He’s a non-believer. If there’s injustice, then someone has behaved unjustly: God. Or, worse, someone may have accepted death: me. Dad won’t accept this leitmotif. No, there’s no injustice any more than there is justice: it’s all just chaos. Dad would like to

think that the flutter of blue and gold wings somewhere in the depths of the Pacific islands brought about the tragedy in our home. Thanks to the butterfly, thanks to the incomparable and improbable distance, there's no guilty party, no injustice, nothing but a quiver in the air, and then this seismic event, meningitis, striking me down like a meteorite.

Dad rolls over in bed and strokes Mum's shoulder as she clutches on to the hope of sleep.

Dad doesn't understand how he can be having erotic dreams at a time like this. I've just died, less than a fortnight ago, he cries ten times a day, he's submerged by huge waves of despair every evening. And then, in the night, naked women appear to him, and he makes love to them. He paints one woman's body – oh! When the paintbrush goes over her breast! He takes another standing up. One night, I'm even there and I see everything. One woman is 'the slice of ham' between him and Mum. A family term. We used to make the joke, the three of us, when I was a baby, and even much later, as recently as last month, I think. I loved that particular sandwich, with me as the ham, and them as the loving friendly bread.

A regular morning chaos.

Eight or ten days before I died, Mum came home from having a mammogram worried about a small cyst that had appeared on

her left breast. Checks were done, X-rays sent off. Waiting three weeks for a definitive diagnosis. Dad strung out. Martine G., a gynaecologist friend, reassuring them it's normal to have cysts at her age; you just need to keep an eye on things. Pierre G. even said no one should ever operate on a healthy cyst.

No, not this! For pity's sake! Not cancer for Mum. When his son died, Dad believed, with the fervent hope of someone who has lost all hope, that he had been through the worst possible experience. Wrong. He could live through other terrible things: the death of his beloved wife, loneliness, poverty, war, illness, physical suffering, intellectual decline, and other private catastrophes. Don't go thinking of yourself as a Titus Andronicus, Dad; you haven't seen the worst just because your only son's dead. You can't laugh and whoop yet.

The results arrived this morning. Negative. Mum and Dad barely savour this positive.

Dad needs a new injection of narcissism. A little tenderness, a smile, a feeling of admiration. He'll have to learn to love himself again. At the moment, nothing tastes of anything, nothing has any appeal. So did he need children in order to love himself? He managed to articulate it last night for Mum: the meaning of his life, the meaning in his world, was the order of things, and I had become its origin and its horizon. Now he doesn't know how to order his world any more. What meaning does it have, if any at

all? Dad has lost his framework for perception. He used to tell me learnedly that Kant's space and time were like software programs. Well, he's crashed big time, because I was his program, his GPS – he hadn't really worked that one out.

The meaning of life is a vector, it's just a vector, a direction. Now that there are no more arrows pointing anywhere, his compass is spinning aimlessly.

But of course there's still someone: Martine! Meaning! Long live life! Dad comes back to life. Not for long, though; he's frightened. The childish fear that she'll leave him one day, that she'll die before him. Frightened of cancer, frightened that she doesn't love him any more! The compass goes berserk. Dad's discovering his dependences.

Mum says: 'You know, I'd understand if you wanted to have another child, obviously with another woman … obviously.' He won't.

Louise and Dad are walking along the seafront. Louise is trying to reassure Dad. She's saying that the appointment I'd made to see a psychiatrist the day after I died was a promise of life, a sign that I wanted to live, just like my subscriptions to *Le Monde* and the opera. Thank you, Louise, for helping Dad. She adds that all young people should go and see psychiatrists to talk about the things they can't tell their parents or their

friends. Perhaps that was what I was going to the psychiatrist for, a first mental overhaul after adolescence. Dad would like that.

But his mad theories are still malignantly ingrained. At the moment, he's blinded by another sign: over the last few years – the period leading up to my death, in other words – he directed at least five or six operas about the death of someone close. And once even a show about grieving for a child. Why? Why exactly did he keep revisiting the subject of grief? He now sees it all as anticipation, or even as an evil spell. Torture. There's more: why, in 2001, two years before my meningitis, did he commission another opera – *Sumidagawa*, which Susumu Yoshida is composing right now – that is yet again the story of a child's death? The subconscious lurks everywhere; Dad is surrounded by his own crazy ideas.

Okay, he'll go and see the psychiatrist again.

'If you ask me how I'm doing, what sort of answer can I give you? If I say I'm not doing very well, that would be a cry for help. So I'm not doing badly, I'm not faltering, no, I'm not incapable of working. But I owe you the truth, I can't say I'm doing well; things aren't going well at all. So it's more straightforward *and* worse. I'm not doing badly and I'm not doing well. Some other time I'll try to describe this grieving more thoroughly. Not today.'

Last Monday, when he went back to work, Dad spoke to his team at the theatre with those words.

Dad's eyes won't stop crying. As if these tears that spring up so quickly have taken hold and wreaked havoc on the corners of his eyes. With the net result that his left eye cries independently, even when his heart can't really tell if it, rather than the eye, is crying.

It's now two weeks since I died. Dad has promised himself that tomorrow morning he'll take the rest of my dirty washing to the cleaners, after my sheets and duvet. Not this evening, mind, tomorrow. The hours go by. Compulsive immersion in photos of my life, even though they've been looked at tirelessly every day.

*Shrove Tuesday Album 2003*: the last pictures I took myself. It was this year, six months ago, at the beginning of March, at carnival time. Mum and Dad had dressed up – vaguely oriental, vaguely Venetian; they looked ridiculous, but it made me laugh with pleasure seeing them with their masks and outrageous make-up, unrecognisable. Dressed up like children – people don't do that at their age! The whole of Douarnenez celebrates Shrove Tuesday. I hadn't felt like dressing up this year. Dad now thinks that if he'd pushed me a bit, he would have managed to get me into a costume. He's

right; he only needed to be more persuasive. You didn't dare. Tough. Tough for who, though, for me or for you?

*Douarnenez Album*. The day before I died, 24 October. Dawn, images of a wonderful sunrise captured over the mists on Le Ris beach, opposite the house. Usually, dawn means promise. Today there are no more promises. Which makes it hideous, this particular beautiful dawn which foreshadowed nothing, neither peace nor the next day's disaster. Dad slams the album angrily into the computer's recycle bin.

*25 October 2003 Album*. There was no time to waste. Given the state I was in, the hospital asked to move me straight to the morgue from the intensive care unit where I'd just died. Risk of rapid decomposition. Because my clothes have had it, stained with blood and cut open urgently with scissors on the operating table, it would be better to change me.

'Quick, be quick and get him some other clothes. You'll have to. Specially because the morgue closes in a couple of hours.'

They understand without understanding: I need to be dressed quickly before my body gets too stiff. They do as they're told, without wanting to. It means a heartbreaking trip back home to choose my last clothes as quickly as they can. I haven't been dead an hour and we're on to my dead man's clothes already! Crying, wailing, stunned, and outraged that by agreeing to choose these clothes, they were accepting that I was

dead, Mum and Dad sped off in the car, twenty kilometres of blind, reckless driving. Back at the house, they snatch things on the run: my blue hoody, black trackie bottoms, black trainers, white socks, a pair of boxers (you probably shouldn't go to your grave without boxers). And then, that's it, quick, back to the hospital, that's where Lion is, get back to him quickly, dazed sobs, trip back to Quimper, twenty kilometres still blinded by tears, a danger to other road users, *back to Lion, back to Lion*, as if I was actually there.

How, in that tornado, did Dad think to take his camera? Show me a photo and I'll show you observation, distance, one step removed. Instead of saving the dying little girl, the paparazzi photograph her. Instead of crying, is Dad really thinking about taking photos of my death?

This evening, Dad's sorting through the fifty-three pictures in the album for 25 October: my corpse battered with purple meningococcal patches. Fifty-three pictures of a moment that, for Dad, will go on for ever. These pictures are ugly, really ugly to look at. But they're here, well and truly here. *Thank goodness* they're here, even: Dad would have regretted not taking them. He couldn't say what forces drove him to turning that lens on me, rather than continuing to stroke my face in the hope that the cold would not seep into me. The forces played their part; he's not too keen on those forces, thinks there's

something sick about them, diabolical even. But the pictures are here now, long after my death, and that's precious to him. Dad endlessly touches up these photos, snapped between sobs in the resuscitation room where they'd stopped resuscitating me.

At this precise moment, a million amateur photographers all over the planet are tinkering with their family photos on a computer screen like Dad. A million at least, perhaps two million. Two million cloned photographers, globalised consumers. Let's reframe you. And let's get rid of your red-eye. And let's make you slightly out of focus. And let's bring you into focus again. And let's lose some of the background. Rotate, compare, edit … Usually what these amateur photographers are editing is life, and the image they have of their lives is a beautiful one: a child's laughter, a soothing landscape or a powerful, imposing one, the new car for the next trip, the golden glow of living skin. Dad's manipulating images like everyone else. He's globalised, unoriginal. But it's with my battered corpse that he's tinkering with. He feels very alone.

They used to make a mould of a dead person's hand, and the family would put it on the mantelpiece in the living room. Nowadays, you take pictures that you organise and archive.

I'm hideous. My kind of death is even uglier than death itself. Dad's morbid hobby. The cursor scuttles across the screen, short-cuts on the keyboard, click on different options, Dad duplicates. He drops the contrast to zero, I melt away, my

corpse becomes a ghost when it's still on the operating table. Save. He zooms in on another image, Mum's lovely golden hands clasping one of mine with blue fingernails. Save again. Reframe on to my left profile, save, my right profile, save, a different framing on his own hand stroking my forehead which will soon be ice cold, save, save. Dad's computer processes manically, like him, like a madman. Save what?

With all the copying and altering, the fifty-three photos that this photographer crazed with love and pain took in intensive care have become a hundred and fifty, two hundred and fifty, five hundred cosseted computerised vignettes. The edited pictures are proliferating. Dad's stroking me one pixel at a time.

If you looked objectively at what he's doing, he's tampering with a corpse that's already old and reduced to ash. An amateur horror film.

He doesn't spend all his time like that, at the computer. At night he cries a lot too.