The Miracles of Art

My name is Renée. I am fifty-four years old. For twenty-seven years I have been the concierge at number 7, Rue de Grenelle, a fine *hôtel particulier* with a courtyard and private gardens, divided into eight luxury apartments, all of which are inhabited, all of which are immense. I am a widow, I am short, ugly and plump, I have bunions on my feet and, if I am to credit certain early mornings of self-inflicted disgust, the breath of a mammoth. I did not go to university, I have always been poor, discreet and insignificant. I live alone with my cat, a big lazy tom who has no distinguishing features other than the fact that his paws smell bad when he is annoyed. Neither he nor I make any effort to take part in the social doings of our respective species. Because I am rarely friendly – though always polite – I am not liked, but am tolerated nonetheless: I correspond so very well to what social prejudice has collectively construed to be a typical French concierge that I am one of the multiple cogs that make the great universal illusion turn, the illusion according to which life has a meaning that can be easily deciphered. And since it has been written somewhere that concierges are old, ugly and sour, so has it been branded in fiery letters on the pediment of that same imbecilic firmament that the aforementioned concierges have rather large dithering cats who sleep all day on cushions covered with crocheted cases.

Similarly, it has been decreed that concierges watch television interminably while their rather large cats doze, and

that the entrance to the building must smell of pot-au-feu, cabbage soup or a country-style cassoulet. I have the extraordinary good fortune to be the concierge of a very high-class sort of building. It was so humiliating for me to have to cook such loathsome dishes that when Monsieur de Broglie – the State Councillor on the first floor – intervened (an intervention he described to his wife as being 'courteous but firm,' whose only intention was to rid our communal habitat of such plebeian effluvia), it came as an immense relief, one I concealed as best I could beneath an expression of reluctant compliance.

That was twenty-seven years ago. Since then, I have gone every day to the butcher's to buy a slice of ham or some calves' liver, which I slip into my net bag between my packet of noodles and my bunch of carrots. I then obligingly flaunt these pauper's victuals – now much improved by the noteworthy fact that they do not smell – because I am a pauper in a house full of rich people and this display nourishes both the consensual cliché and my cat Leo, who has become rather large by virtue of these meals that should have been mine, and who stuffs himself liberally and noisily with macaroni and butter, and pork from the delicatessen, while I am free – without any olfactory disturbances or anyone suspecting a thing – to indulge my own culinary proclivities.

Far more irksome was the issue of the television. In my late husband's day, I did go along with it, for the constancy of his viewing spared me the chore of watching. From the hallway of the building you could hear the sound of the thing, and that sufficed to perpetuate the charade of social hierarchy, but once Lucien had passed away I had to think hard to find a way to keep up appearances. Alive, he freed me from this iniquitous obligation; dead, he has deprived me of his lack of culture, the indispensable bulwark against other people's suspicions.

I found a solution thanks to a non-buzzer.

A chime linked to an infrared mechanism now alerts me to

the comings and goings in the hallway, which has eliminated the need for anyone to buzz to notify me of their presence if I happen to be out of earshot. For on such occasions I am actually in the back room, where I spend most of my hours of leisure and where, sheltered from the noise and smells that my condition imposes, I can live as I please, without being deprived of the information vital to any sentry: who is coming in, who is going out, with whom and at what time.

Thus, the residents going down the hall would hear the muffled sounds indicating a television was on, and as they tend to lack rather than abound in imagination, they would form a mental image of the concierge sprawled in front of her television set. As for me, cosily installed in my lair, I heard nothing but I knew that someone was going by. So I would go to the adjacent room and peek through the spy-hole located opposite the stairs and, well hidden behind the white net curtains, I could enquire discreetly as to the identity of the passerby.

With the advent of videocassettes and, subsequently, the DVD divinity, things changed radically, much to the enrichment of my happy hours. As it is not terribly common to come across a concierge waxing ecstatic over *Death in Venice* or to hear strains of Mahler wafting from her lodge, I delved into my hard-earned conjugal savings and bought a second television set that I could operate in my hideaway. Thus, the television in the front room, guardian of my clandestine activities, could bleat away and I was no longer forced to listen to inane nonsense fit for the brain of a clam – I was in the back room, perfectly euphoric, my eyes filling with tears, in the miraculous presence of Art.

Profound Thought No. 1

Follow the stars
In the goldfish bowl
An end

Apparently, now and again adults take the time to sit down and contemplate what a disaster their life is. They complain without understanding and, like flies constantly banging against the same old windowpane, they buzz around, suffer, waste away, get depressed then wonder how they got caught up in this spiral that is taking them where they don't want to go. The most intelligent among them turn their malaise into a religion: oh, the despicable vacuousness of bourgeois existence! Cynics of this kind frequently dine at Papa's table: 'What has become of the dreams of our youth?' they ask, with a smug, disillusioned air. 'Those years are long gone, and life's a bitch.' I despise this false lucidity that comes with age. The truth is that they are just like everyone else: nothing more than kids who don't understand what has happened to them, acting big and tough when in fact all they want is to burst into tears.

And yet there's nothing to understand. The problem is that children believe what adults say and, once they're adults themselves, they exact their revenge by deceiving their own children. 'Life has meaning and we grown-ups know what it is' is the universal lie that everyone is supposed to believe. Once you become an adult and you realise that's not true, it's too late. The mystery remains intact, but all your available energy has long ago been wasted on stupid things. All that's left is to anaesthetise yourself by trying to hide the fact that you can't find any meaning in your life, and then, the better to convince yourself, you deceive your own children.

All our family acquaintances have followed the same path:

their youth spent trying to make the most of their intelligence, squeezing their studies like a lemon to make sure they'd secure a spot among the elite, then the rest of their lives wondering with a flabbergasted look on their faces why all that hopefulness has led to such a vain existence. People aim for the stars, and they end up like goldfish in a bowl. I wonder if it wouldn't be simpler just to teach children right from the start that life is absurd. That might deprive you of a few good moments in your childhood but it would save you a considerable amount of time as an adult – not to mention the fact that you'd be spared at least one traumatic experience, i.e. the goldfish bowl.

I am twelve years old, I live at 7, Rue de Grenelle in an apartment for rich people. My parents are rich, my family is rich and my sister and I are, therefore, as good as rich. My father is a member of parliament and before that he was a minister: no doubt he'll end up in the top spot, emptying out the wine cellar of the residence at the Hôtel de Lassay. As for my mother . . . Well, my mother isn't exactly a genius but she is educated. She has a literature PhD. She writes her dinner invitations without mistakes and spends her time bombarding us with literary references ('Colombe, stop trying to act like Madame Guermantes,' or 'Sweetie, you are a regular Sanseverina').

Despite all that, despite all this good fortune and all this wealth, I have known for a very long time that the final destination is the goldfish bowl. How do I know? Well, the fact is I am very intelligent. Exceptionally intelligent, in fact. Even now, if you look at children my age, there's an abyss between us. And since I don't really want to stand out, and since intelligence is very highly rated in my family – an exceptionally gifted child would never have a moment's peace – I try to scale back my performance at school, but even so I always come first. You might think that to pretend to be simply of average intelligence when you are twelve years old like me and have the level of a second-year university student is easy. Well, not at all. It really takes an effort to appear more stupid than you are. But, in a way,

this does keep me from dying of boredom: all the time I don't need to spend learning and understanding I use to imitate the ordinary good pupils – the way they do things, the answers they give, their progress, their concerns and their minor errors. I read everything that Constance Baret writes – she is second in the class – all her maths and French and history and that way I find out what I have to do: for French a string of words that are coherent and spelled correctly; for maths the mechanical reproduction of operations devoid of meaning; and for history a list of events joined by logical connections. But even if you compare me to an adult, I am much brighter than the vast majority. That's the way it is. I'm not particularly proud of this because it's not my doing. But one thing is certain – there's no way I'm going to end up in the goldfish bowl. I've thought this through quite carefully. Even for someone like me who is superbright and gifted in her studies and different from everyone else, in fact superior to the vast majority – even for me life is already all plotted out and so dismal you could cry: no one seems to have thought of the fact that if life is absurd, being a brilliant success has no greater value than being a failure. It's just more comfortable. And even then: I think lucidity gives your success a bitter taste, whereas mediocrity still leaves hope for something.

So I've made up my mind. I am about to leave childhood behind and, in spite of my conviction that life is a farce, I don't think I can hold out to the end. We are, basically, programmed to believe in something that doesn't exist, because we are living creatures; we don't want to suffer. So we spend all our energy persuading ourselves that there are things that are worthwhile and that that is why life has meaning. I may be very intelligent, but I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to struggle against this biological tendency. When I join the adults in the rat race, will I still be able to confront this feeling of absurdity? I don't think so. That is why I've made up my mind: at the end of the school year, on the day I turn thirteen, the sixteenth of June, I will commit suicide.

An Aristocrat

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Manuela, my only friend, comes for tea with me in my lodge. Manuela is a simple woman and twenty years wasted stalking dust in other people's homes has in no way robbed her of her elegance. Besides, stalking dust is a very euphemistic way to put it. But where the rich are concerned, things are rarely called by their true name.

'I empty wastebaskets full of sanitary towels,' she says, with her gentle, slightly hissing accent. 'I wipe up dog vomit, clean the bird cage – you'd never believe the amount of poo such tiny animals can make – and I scrub the toilets. You talk about dust? Big deal!'

You must understand that when she comes down to see me at two in the afternoon, on Tuesdays after the Arthens, and on Thursdays after the de Broglies, Manuela has been polishing the toilets with a cotton bud, and though they may be gilded with gold leaf, they are just as filthy and reeking as any toilets on the planet, because if there is one thing the rich do share with the poor, however unwillingly, it is their nauseating intestines that always manage to find a place to free themselves of that which makes them stink.

So Manuela deserves our praise. Although she's been sacrificed at the altar of a world where the most thankless tasks have been allotted to some women while others merely hold their nose without raising a finger, she nevertheless strives relentlessly to maintain a degree of refinement that

goes far beyond any gold leaf gilding, *a fortiori* of the sanitary variety.

'When you eat a walnut, you must use a tablecloth,' says Manuela, removing from her old shopping bag a little hamper made of light wood where some almond *tuiles* are nestled among curls of carmine tissue paper. I make coffee that we shall not drink, but its wafting aroma delights us both, and in silence we sip a cup of green tea as we nibble on our tuiles.

Just as I am a permanent traitor to my archetype, so is Manuela: to the Portuguese cleaning woman she is a criminal oblivious of her condition. This girl from Faro, born under a fig tree after seven siblings and before six more, forced in childhood to work the fields and scarcely out of it to marry a mason and take the road of exile, mother of four children who are French by birthright but whom society looks upon as thoroughly Portuguese – this girl from Faro, as I was saying, who wears the requisite black support stockings and a kerchief on her head, is an aristocrat. An authentic one, of the kind whose entitlement you cannot contest: it is etched onto her very heart, it mocks titles and people with handles to their names. What is an aristocrat? A woman who is never sullied by vulgarity, although she may be surrounded by it.

On Sundays, the vulgarity of her in-laws, who with their loud laughter muffle the pain of being born weak and without prospects; the vulgarity of an environment as bleakly desolate as the neon lights of the factory where the men go each morning, like sinners returning to hell; then, the vulgarity of her employers who, for all their money, cannot hide their own baseness and who speak to her the way they would a mangy dog covered with oozing bald patches. But you should have witnessed Manuela offering me, as if I were a queen, the fruit of her prowess in *haute patisserie* to fully appreciate the grace that inhabits this woman. Yes, as if I were a queen. When Manuela arrives, my lodge is transformed into a palace, and a picnic

between two pariahs becomes the feast of two monarchs. Like a storyteller transforming life into a shimmering river where trouble and boredom vanish far below the water, Manuela metamorphoses our existence into a warm and joyful epic.

'That little Pallières boy said hello to me on the stairs,' she says suddenly, interrupting the silence.

I snort with disdain.

'He's reading Marx,' I add, with a shrug of my shoulders.

'Marx?' she asks, pronouncing the *x* as if it were a *sh*, a somewhat slurping *sh*, as charming as a clear sky.

'The father of communism,' I reply.

Manuela makes a scornful noise.

'Politics,' she says. 'A toy for little rich kids that they won't let anyone else play with.'

She is thoughtful for a moment, frowning.

'Not his typical reading material,' she says.

The illustrated magazines that the young boys hide under the mattress cannot escape Manuela's shrewd gaze, and the Pallières boy seemed at one point to be consuming them assiduously, however selectively, as exemplified by one particularly dog-eared page with an explicit title: *The Saucy Marchionesses.*

We laugh and converse for a while longer about one thing or another, in the calm space of an old friendship. These are precious moments for me, and I am filled with anguish at the thought that a day will come when Manuela will fulfil her lifelong dream of returning to her country for good, and will leave me here alone and decrepit, with no companion to transform me, twice a week, into a clandestine monarch. I also wonder fearfully what will happen when the only friend I have ever had, the only one who knows everything without ever having to ask, leaves behind her this woman whom no one knows, enshrouding her in oblivion.

Profound Thought No. 2

The cat here on earth
Modern totem
And intermittently decorative

In any case, this is true at our place. If you want to understand my family, all you have to do is look at the cats. Our two cats are fat windbags who eat designer cat food and have no interesting interaction with human beings. They drag themselves from one sofa to the next and leave their fur everywhere, and no one seems to have grasped that they have no affection for any of us. The only purpose of cats is that they constitute mobile decorative objects, a concept which I find intellectually interesting, but unfortunately, our cats have such drooping bellies that this does not apply to them.

My mother, who has read all of Balzac and quotes Flaubert at every dinner, is living proof every day of how education is a raging fraud. All you need to do is watch her with the cats. She's vaguely aware of their decorative potential, and yet she insists on talking to them as if they were people, which she would never do with a lamp or an Etruscan statue. It would seem that children believe for a fairly long time that anything that moves has a soul and is endowed with intention. My mother is no longer a child but she apparently has not managed to conceive that Constitution and Parliament possess no more understanding than the vacuum cleaner. I concede that the difference between the vacuum cleaner and the cats is that a cat can experience pain and pleasure. But does that mean it has a greater ability to *communicate* with humans? Not at all. That should simply incite us to take special precautions with them as we would with very fragile objects. When I hear my mother say

'Constitution is both a very proud and very sensitive little cat,' when in fact said cat is sprawled on the sofa because she's eaten too much, it really makes me want to laugh. But if you think about the hypothesis that a cat's purpose is to act as a modern totem, a sort of emblematic incarnation, protector of the home, reflecting well upon its owners, then everything becomes clear. My mother makes the cats into what she wishes we were, and which we absolutely are not. You won't find anyone less proud and sensitive than the three aforementioned members of the Josse family: Papa, Maman and Colombe. They are utterly spineless and anaesthetised, emptied of all emotion.

In short, in my opinion the cat is a modern totem. Say what you want, do what you will with all those fine speeches on evolution, civilisation and a ton of other '-tion' words, mankind has not progressed very far from its origins: people still believe they're not here by chance, and that there are gods, kindly for the most part, who are watching over their fate.

Red October

By Christmas, 1989, Lucien was very sick. We did not yet know when his death would come, but we were bound by the certainty of its imminence, bound to the dread inside, bound to each other by these invisible ties. When illness enters a home, not only does it take hold of a body; it also weaves a dark web between hearts, a web where hope is trapped. Like a spider's thread drawn ever tighter around our plans, making it impossible to breathe, with each passing day the illness was overwhelming our life. When I came in from running chores outside, it was like entering a dark cellar where I was constantly cold, with a chill that nothing could remedy, so much so towards the end that when I slept alongside Lucien, it seemed as if his body were sucking up all the heat my body might have managed to purloin elsewhere.

His illness was first diagnosed in the spring of 1988; it ate away at him for seventeen months and carried him off just before Christmas, 1990. The elder Madame Meurisse organised a collection from among the inhabitants of the building, and a fine wreath of flowers was delivered to my lodge, bound with a ribbon that bore no text. She alone came to the funeral. She was a cold, stiff, pious woman, but there was something sincere about her austere and rather abrupt manners, and when she died, a year after Lucien, I said to myself that she had been a good woman and that I would miss her, although we had scarcely exchanged two words in fifteen years.

'She made her daughter-in-law miserable right up to the

end. May she rest in peace, she was a saintly woman,' said Manuela – who professes a truly epic hatred for the younger Madame Meurisse – by way of a funeral oration.

Thus with the exception of Cornélia Meurisse, with her little veils and rosaries, Lucien's illness did not strike anyone as being worthy of interest. To rich people it must seem that the ordinary little people – perhaps because their lives are more rarified, deprived of the oxygen of money and savoir-faire – experience human emotions with less intensity and greater indifference. Since we were concierges, it was a given that death, for us, must be a matter of course, whereas for our privileged neighbours it carried all the weight of injustice and drama. The death of a concierge leaves a slight indentation on everyday life, belongs to a biological certainty that has nothing tragic about it and, for the apartment owners who encountered him every day on the stairs or at the door to our lodge, Lucien was a non-entity who was merely returning to a nothingness from which he had never fully emerged, a creature who, because he had lived only half a life, with neither luxury nor artifice, must at the moment of his death have felt no more than half a shudder of revolt. The fact that we might be going through hell like any other human being, or that our hearts might be filling with rage as Lucien's suffering ravaged our lives, or that we might be slowly going to pieces inside, in the torment of fear and horror that death inspires in everyone, did not cross the mind of anyone on these premises.

One morning three weeks before that Christmas, I had just come in from shopping with a bag filled with turnips and lung for the cat, and there was Lucien dressed and ready to go out. He had even knotted his scarf and was standing there waiting for me. After weeks of witnessing my husband's agony as, drained of all strength and enveloped in a terrifying pallor, he would hobble from the bedroom to the kitchen; after weeks of

seeing him wear nothing other than a pair of pyjamas that looked the very uniform of demise, and now to find him with his eyes shining and a mischievous expression on his face, the collar of his winter coat turned right up to his peculiarly pink cheeks: I very nearly collapsed.

'Lucien!' I exclaimed, and I was about to go to hold him up, sit him down, undress him and I don't know what else, everything that the illness had taught to me in the way of unfamiliar gestures, which had become of late the only ones I knew how to make. I was about to put my bag down and embrace him, hold him close to me, carry him, all those things once more, when, breathless and feeling a strange flutter of expansion in my heart, I stopped in my tracks.

'We'll just make it,' said Lucien, 'the next showing is at one.'

In the heat of the cinema, on the verge of tears, happier than I had ever been, I was holding the faint warmth of his hand for the first time in months. I knew that an unexpected surge of energy had roused him from his bed, given him the strength to get dressed and the urge to go out, the desire for us to share a conjugal pleasure one more time – and I knew, too, that this was the sign that there was not much time left, a state of grace before the end. But that did not matter to me, I just wanted to make the most of it, of these moments stolen from the burden of illness, moments with his warm hand in mine and a shudder of pleasure going through both of us because, thank heavens, it was a film we could share and delight in equally.

I think he died right after that. His body held on for three more weeks, but his mind departed at the end of the film, because he knew it was better that way, because he had said farewell to me in the darkened cinema. There were no poignant regrets, because he had found peace this way; he had placed his trust in what we had said to each other without any need for words, while we watched, together, the bright screen where a story was being told.

And I accepted it.

The Hunt for Red October is the film of our last embrace. For anyone who wants to understand the art of storytelling, this film should suffice; one wonders why universities persist in teaching narrative principles on the basis of Propp, Greimas or other such punishing curricula, instead of investing in a projection room. Premise, plot, protagonists, adventures, quest, heroes and other stimulants: all you need is Sean Connery in the uniform of a Russian submarine officer and a few well-placed aircraft carriers.

As I was saying, this morning on France Inter Radio I learned that this contamination of my aspiration to high culture by my penchant for lower forms of culture does not necessarily represent the indelible mark of my lowly origins or of my solitary striving for enlightenment but is, rather, a contemporary characteristic of the dominant intellectual class. How did I come to know this? From the mouth of a sociologist, and I would have loved to have known if he himself would have loved to have known that a concierge in Scholl clogs had just made him into a holy icon. As part of a study on the evolution of the cultural practices of intellectuals who had once been immersed in highbrow culture from dawn to dusk but who were now mainstays of syncretism in whom the boundaries between high and low culture were irreversibly blurred, my sociologist described a classics professor who, once upon a time, would have listened to Bach, read Mauriac, and watched art-house films, but nowadays listened to Handel and MC Solaar, read Flaubert and John Le Carré, went to see Visconti and the latest *Die Hard,* and ate hamburgers at lunch and sashimi in the evening.

How distressing to stumble on a dominant social habitus, just when one was convinced of one's own uniqueness in the matter! Distressing, and perhaps even a bit annoying. The fact

that, in spite of my confinement in a lodge that conforms in every way to what is expected, in spite of an isolation that should have protected me from the imperfections of the masses, in spite of those shameful years in my forties when I was utterly ignorant of the changes in the vast world to which I am confined; the fact that I, Renée, fifty-four years old, concierge and autodidact, am witness to the same changes that are animating the present-day elite – the little Pallières in their exclusive schools who read Marx then go off in gangs to watch *Terminator,* or the little Badoises who study law at Assas and sob into their Kleenex at *Notting Hill* – is a shock from which I can scarcely recover. And it is patently clear, for those who pay attention to chronology, that I am not the one who is aping these youngsters but, rather, in my eclectic practices, I am well ahead of them.

Renée, prophet of the contemporary elite.

'And well, why not,' I thought, removing the cat's slice of calves' liver from my shopping bag, and from beneath that, carefully wrapped in an unmarked sheet of plastic, two little fillets of red mullet which I intend to marinate then cook in lemon juice and coriander.

And this is when it all started.