

The Cat

Georges Simenon was born in Liège, Belgium, in 1903. An intrepid traveller with a profound interest in people, Simenon strove on and off the page to understand, rather than to judge, the human condition in all its shades. His novels include the Inspector Maigret series and a richly varied body of wider work united by its evocative power, its economy of means, and its penetrating psychological insight. He is among the most widely read writers in the global canon. He died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life.

GEORGES SIMENON

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Translated by Ros Schwartz



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The Cat

I

The newspaper had slipped from his hands, first unfolding in his lap and then sliding slowly onto the polished-wood floor. He looked as if he had dozed off, except that every now and again a thin slit was visible between his eyelids.

Was his wife fooled? She sat knitting in her low armchair on the opposite side of the fireplace. She never appeared to be watching him, but he had long known that nothing escaped her, not even the almost imperceptible twitching of a muscle.

Across the street, the metal crusher bucket with steel jaws clattered down from the top of the crane and crashed heavily onto the ground close to the cement mixer with a resounding clang. Each time, the building shook from the impact, and each time the woman gave a start and raised her hand to her chest as if the noise, even though it had become habitual, had struck her in the heart.

They each watched the other. They had no need to look at one another. For years, they'd been covertly eyeing each other like this, constantly introducing new subtleties into this little game.

He smiled. The black marble clock with bronze ornaments showed five to five and he seemed to be counting the minutes, the seconds. In truth, he counted them automatically, he too waiting for the big hand to be vertical. Then, the din of the mixer and the crane came to a sudden stop. The men in oilskins, their faces and hands dripping with rain, would stand still for a

moment before heading for the wooden hut in a corner of the vacant site.

It was November. From four o'clock in the afternoon, they worked under floodlights that would soon be switched off and then all would immediately be dark and silent, and the only light in the cul-de-sac would be the single gas lamp.

Émile Bouin's legs were numbed from the heat. When he half-opened his eyes, he saw the flames leaping up from the logs in the hearth, some yellow, others blue-tinged at the base. The fireplace was of black marble, like the clock, like the four-armed candelabras either side of it.

In the house, apart from Marguerite's fast-moving hands and the gentle clicking of her knitting needles, everything was silent and still, as in a photograph or a painting.

Three minutes to five. Two minutes to. Workers were beginning to plod slowly towards the hut to change their clothes, but the crane was still operating and one last bucket with its load of concrete was being hoisted up to the formwork for the first floor of the building.

One minute to. Five o'clock. The big hand trembled hesitantly on the pale clock face and five strokes rang out at intervals, as if everything had to be slow in this household. Marguerite sighed, listening out for the abrupt silence outside which would last until the following morning.

Émile Bouin was thinking. Smiling absently, he was watching the flames through the slit in his eyelids.

One of the logs, the one on top, was no more than a charred skeleton giving off wisps of smoke. The other two were still glowing red, but crackling sounds signalled that they would soon disintegrate.

Marguerite wondered whether he was going to get up, grab some fresh logs from the basket and put them on the fire. They were both used to the warmth of the hearth, which they

relished until the skin on their faces tingled and they had to move their armchairs back.

His smile broadened. He wasn't smiling at her. Nor at the fire. Simply at an idea that had just occurred to him.

He was in no hurry to translate it into action. They both had time, all the time between the present and the moment when one of them would die. How could they know who would go first? Marguerite undoubtedly also thought about it. They'd been thinking about it for several years, several times a day. It had become their fundamental problem.

He eventually gave a sigh too, and he raised his right hand from the arm of his leather chair and groped for the pocket of his dressing gown. He took out a small notebook, which played an important part in the couple's life. The slim pages had perforation lines, making it easy to tear off three-centimetre strips.

The cover was red. A thin pencil was slipped inside a leather loop. Had Marguerite shuddered? Was she wondering what the message would be this time?

She was accustomed to it, of course, but she could never know what words he was going to write and he deliberately sat there for a long time, pencil in hand, without moving, as if pondering.

He had nothing special to convey to her. He simply wanted to disconcert her, keep her on tenterhooks, just at the point when the racket from the building site ceased, giving her some relief.

Several ideas crossed Émile's mind and he discarded them one after the other. The rhythm of the knitting needles had changed slightly. He'd managed to rattle her, or at any rate to pique her curiosity.

He prolonged the pleasure for another five minutes and the sound of the workers' footsteps heading for the end of the street could be heard.

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Eventually he wrote, in stick letters:

The cat.

Then he sat absolutely still for a while before putting the notebook from which he'd torn a strip of paper back in his pocket.

Finally, he folded it up very small, as children do with a pellet they shoot from an elastic band. He didn't need an elastic band. He had become amazingly adept, almost Machiavellian, at this game.

He rolled the paper between his thumb and index finger. He curled back his thumb and released it rapidly, flicking the message into Marguerite's lap. He never missed his target, as it were, inwardly jubilant each time.

He knew that Marguerite wouldn't bat an eyelid, that she'd pretend not to have seen anything and would carry on knitting, her lips moving as if in prayer as she silently counted the stitches.

On some occasions, she'd wait for him to leave the room, or for him to turn his back as he put more logs on the fire.

At other times, after a few minutes of outward indifference, she would let her right hand drop to her apron and retrieve the message.

Although their actions were always more or less the same, they did introduce variations. Today, for example, she waited until all the noises from the construction site had died down, until silence had invaded the cul-de-sac at the end of which they lived. She put her knitting down on a stool as if she'd finished her work and, her eyes half-closed, she too looked as if she were about to doze off in the warmth of the fire.

Much later, she pretended to notice the folded paper in her apron and picked it up in her fingers covered in fine wrinkles.

She seemed poised to throw it into the fireplace, as if she

were hesitating, but he knew that this was part of the daily rigmarole. He was no longer deceived.

For quite a long time, children play the same game every day at a particular hour, without losing their apparent enthusiasm. They act 'as if'.

The difference is that Émile Bouin was seventy-three years old and Marguerite seventy-one. Another difference is that their game had been going on for four years and they didn't seem to be tiring of it.

In the oppressive silence of the sitting room, the woman finally smoothed out the paper and, without putting on her glasses, read the two words her husband had written:

The cat.

She remained unperturbed, didn't move a muscle. There had been longer, more unexpected, more dramatic notes, some of which were truly puzzling.

This note was the most mundane, the one that Émile Bouin sent the most frequently, when he couldn't think up any other mischief.

She threw the paper into the fire where it went up in a thin flame that fizzled out at once. With both hands on her stomach, she sat absolutely still, so that the only life in the sitting room was that of the hearth.

The clock juddered and chimed once. As if it were a signal, Marguerite stood up, small and slight.

Her woollen dress was a pale pink, the pink of her cheeks, and her checked apron a pastel blue. There were still a few blonde strands in her white hair.

With the years, her features had become sharp. For people who didn't know her, they expressed gentleness, sadness, resignation.

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'Such a worthy woman!'

Émile Bouin did not snigger. Neither of them engaged any longer in such overt expressions of their mood. A shiver, a curling of the lip or a fleeting glimmer in their eyes was sufficient.

She looked about her as if unsure of what she was going to do. He guessed it the way a draughts player predicts which piece their partner is about to move. He wasn't wrong. She went over to the cage, a large cage on a stand, white and blue with gold mouldings.

A parrot with brightly coloured feathers was perched motionless, its eyes staring fixedly, and it took one a while to realize that they were glass eyes and that the parrot was stuffed.

Even so, she gazed at it tenderly as if it were still alive and, reaching out her hand, she poked a finger between the bars.

Her lips moved as they had done earlier when she was counting her stitches. She spoke to the bird. She might almost have been about to feed it.

He had written:

The cat.

She answered him wordlessly:

The parrot.

The classic reply. He accused his wife of having poisoned his cat, *his* cat, which he'd loved even before meeting her.

Whenever he was sitting by the fireside, drowsy from the warmth given off by the logs, he was tempted to reach out a hand to stroke the animal with soft, black-striped fur that used to come and nestle in his lap the moment he sat down.

'A common alley cat,' she claimed.

At least when they were still talking to one another, nearly

always to start a row. The cat might not have been a pedigree breed, but it wasn't an alley cat either. Its long, supple body stretched along the walls and furniture like the body of a tiger.

Its head was smaller and more triangular than domestic cats and it had a fixed, mysterious gaze.

Émile Bouin claimed that it was a wild cat that had ventured into Paris. He'd found it very young, at the far end of a construction site, in the days when he was working for the Paris highways department. A widower, he lived alone. The cat had become his companion. There had still been houses on the other side of the cul-de-sac where now a huge apartment block was being built.

When he'd crossed the street to marry Marguerite, the cat had followed him.

The cat.

The cat that he'd discovered, one morning, in the darkest corner of the cellar. The cat that had been poisoned when it ate the food that Marguerite had made for it.

The creature had never got used to Marguerite. For the four years that it had lived in the house opposite, it would only take its food from Bouin's hands.

Twice or three times a day, at a simple click of the tongue that was the signal, it would follow its master down the street like a trained dog.

He was the only person to have stroked that cat until the day when they both entered a new home filled with strange smells.

'He's a bit nervous but he'll get used to you . . .'

It hadn't got used to Marguerite. Wary, it never went close to her, or to the cage of the parrot, a big macaw with brilliant colours that didn't speak but let out ear-splitting screeches when it was angry.

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Your cat . . .

Your parrot . . .

Marguerite was gentle, almost sweet. One could imagine her young and slender, dressed in pastel tones even then, strolling poetically beside a river wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and holding a parasol.

Indeed, there was a photograph of her looking like that in the dining room. She had remained quite slim. Only her legs had swollen a little. She still had the same dulcet smile in the face of life as she had in the past in front of the photographer.

The cat and the parrot, each as wary as the other, were content to eye one another from a distance, not without a certain respect. When the cat began to purr in its master's lap, the parrot would freeze and watch it with its great round eyes, as if puzzled by the regular, monotonous sound.

Was the cat aware of the power it had over the macaw? Did it not spy on the bird through half-closed eyes with a faint smugness?

It wasn't in a cage. It shared the lovely warmth with its master, who protected it.

A time would come when, tired of dwelling on an insoluble problem, the irritated parrot would grow angry. Its feathers would quiver, its neck would stretch, as if it weren't surrounded by bars, as if it were going to hurl itself at its enemy, and the house would ring with its screeching.

Marguerite would then say:

'It would be best if you left us for a moment . . .'

'Us' meant her and her pet. The cat would quiver too, knowing that it was going to be picked up and carried into the cold dining room, where Bouin would sit in another armchair. Marguerite would open the cage, speaking softly, as if to a lover or a son. She didn't need to put out her hand. She'd go and sit back down in her chair. The macaw looked at the closed door of the

sitting room, listened to reassure itself that it was not in any danger, that the two outsiders, the man and his animal, were no longer there to threaten or mock it.

Then, with a giant leap, it would launch itself at the back of a chair, because it didn't fly. In two or three hops, it reached its mistress and sat on her shoulder.

She'd carry on knitting. The movement of the shiny needles fascinated the bird. When it had had enough, it would rub its huge beak against the woman's cheek, then against the softer skin behind her ear.

Your cat.

Your parrot.

The minutes ticked by, Émile in the dining room, Marguerite in the sitting room, until the marble clock struck the time to start making dinner.

At that point, she was still the one who cooked for both of them.

Initially, Émile had insisted on preparing his cat's food himself. One week, when he had flu and had been confined to bed for three days, she had taken it upon herself to buy lung from the butcher, which she had cut into pieces, cooked and mixed with rice and vegetables.

'Did he eat?'

She'd hesitated.

'Not straight away.'

'Did he eat eventually?'

'Yes.'

He was convinced she was lying. The next day he'd had a temperature of thirty-nine and she'd told him the same thing. The following day, while she was out shopping in Rue Saint-Jacques,

he'd gone downstairs in his dressing gown and had found the previous day's food untouched under the sink.

The cat, who'd followed him, had gazed at him reproachfully. Émile mixed up the food again and held out the bowl to the cat, who didn't make up its mind immediately.

When Marguerite came back, she found the empty bowl. The cat wasn't on the ground floor but in the upstairs bedroom, nestled between its master's legs.

That was where it slept every night.

'It's not healthy,' she'd protested at first.

'He's slept with me for several years and it hasn't made me ill.'

'His snoring keeps me awake.'

'He doesn't snore. He purrs. You get used to it. I'm certainly used to it.'

She was partly right. That cat didn't purr like other cats; it did sound more like a snore, as loud as that of a man who's had too much to drink.

Now, standing by the cage, she gazed at the stuffed parrot, her lips moving as if she were murmuring loving words to it.

Émile, who had his back half-turned from her, did not need to see her.

He knew this act as he knew all of Marguerite's other acts. He smiled vaguely, his gaze still on the burning logs. At length, he stood up to fetch two more and put them on the fire, using a poker to steady them.

No further noise could be heard from outside other than the patter of the rain and the thin jet from the fountain in the marble basin. The street comprised seven houses side by side, all the same, each one with a central front door, two windows on the left, those of the sitting room, and to the right the window of the dining room, behind which was the kitchen. The bedrooms were on the upper floor.

Identical houses had still been there only two years earlier on the opposite side of the road and had even numbers. The enormous iron wrecking ball had knocked them down like cardboard toys and now the entire landscape consisted of a construction site cluttered with cranes, girders, crushers, planks and wheelbarrows.

Three of the street's residents owned cars. If someone went out at night, they could be heard, even with the shutters closed. And looking in from the outside, you could see which rooms people were in.

Few of the tenants drew their curtains and couples or families were on view having their meal, as were a man with receding hair in his armchair reading under a painting in a tarnished gold frame, a child bent over an exercise book chewing on a pencil stub, and a woman peeling vegetables for the next day.

Everything was soft, muted, muffled. In fact, the fountain could only really be heard when people went to bed and switched off their lights.

The Bouins' house, which was still known as the Doises' house, was at the end of the row, against the high wall that sealed off the cul-de-sac. There was a statue at the foot of this wall, a bronze cupid holding a fish. A thin jet of water spurted from the fish's mouth into a marble shell.

Marguerite had sat back down in her chair by the fire. She was no longer knitting. With silver-framed spectacles on her nose, she was scanning the newspaper, which she'd picked up from the floor by her husband's chair.

The black clock hands moved slowly forward, trembling hesitantly every hour and half-hour.

Émile wasn't reading, wasn't looking at anything. His eyes were still shut. Perhaps he was thinking, perhaps dozing, sometimes changing the position of his legs numbed by the heat.

It was only when the clock struck seven that he slowly stood

up and, without a glance at his wife or at the stuffed parrot's cage, made his way over to the door.

The hallway was in darkness. To the left stood the front door with its empty letter-box in the centre, to the right, the stairs up to the first floor. He turned the switch, closed the door behind him and opened the one into the dining room where the air was cold and stale.

Central heating had been installed in the house, but they only put it on when the weather was very cold. Besides, no one ever used the dining room any more. The couple ate in the kitchen where the gas stove was enough to make the room feel warm.

Conscientious and methodical, Bouin switched off the light in the hallway, closed the door behind him, walked into the kitchen, and once the light was on, switched off the one in the dining room.

He had adopted his wife's frugal habits, and he had a further reason to act in this way.

He knew that, as soon as he had stood up, Marguerite had begun to fidget. She didn't want to follow him too closely. She waited a little. When it was her turn to get up, giving a sigh, as she did at each stage of the day, she would have to switch off the lights in the sitting room, turn on the one in the hallway, switch it off again and close each door behind her.

Their respective movements had become rituals that took on a somewhat mysterious character.

Émile Bouin, in the kitchen, fished a key out of his pocket before opening the right-hand dresser, because there were two dressers. The one on the left, which was older and made of Australian pine, had been there since the days of Marguerite's father.

The one on the right, painted white, belonging to Bouin, had been bought on Boulevard Barbès. He took out a veal chop, an onion and three cooked chicory heads left over from lunch, which he'd put in a bowl. He also took out a half-full bottle of

red wine and poured himself a glass before helping himself to *his* butter, *his* oil and *his* vinegar.

Having lit the gas, he put a knob of butter in a pan to melt, sliced the onion and, when it began to turn golden, arranged the chop in the pan.

Marguerite had appeared in the doorway, pretending not to see him, as if unaware that he was there, even ignoring the smell of the onion, which bothered her. She too had a key, which she'd taken from her belt, and she opened her dresser.

The room was not big. The table took up most of it. They had to move around carefully to avoid brushing against each other. They were so used to it that they almost never collided.

They no longer used the tablecloths of the past, making do with the checked oilcloth covering the kitchen table.

Marguerite, too, had her bottle. It wasn't wine but a cordial that had been fashionable at the turn of the century and which her father served her at midday and in the evening when she was still an anaemic young girl.

The outdated label had a design of hard-to-identify leaves and in convoluted lettering the words: 'Cordial des Alpes'.

She filled a tiny liqueur glass from which she took avid sips.

Once the chop was cooked and the chicory reheated, he put it all on a plate and sat down at one end of the table, in front of his bottle, his bread, his salad, his cheese and his butter.

Seemingly indifferent to what he was eating, she spread out her dinner at the other end of the table: a slice of ham, two cold potatoes, which she'd wrapped in tinfoil before putting them in the refrigerator, and two thin slices of bread.

She lagged behind her husband. Sometimes, one of them would sit down to eat when the other had already finished. It didn't matter since they ignored one another.

They ate in silence, as they did everything. Bouin was certain that his wife was thinking:

‘Look at him still eating meat twice a day! And he deliberately browns onions . . .’

It was partially true. He was fond of onions but didn’t necessarily want them every day.

Sometimes, to enrage her, he made himself complicated dishes that took one or two hours to cook. To his mind, it had a purpose. It proved that he hadn’t lost his appetite one bit, that he still loved his food, that he wasn’t deterred by having to cook for himself.

On other mornings, he brought back tripe, the mere sight of which made his wife feel queasy. In the evening, for her part, as if to emphasize her fragility, she would make do with a slice of ham or cold veal, a piece of cheese, or sometimes a couple of potatoes left over from lunch.

That too had a purpose. Several purposes. First of all, to make it clear that he spent more than she did on food. Then, that she refused to use the frying pan after him. When it was essential, she’d wait until he’d cleaned it, even if it meant eating much later.

They chewed slowly, she, mouselike, barely moving her jaws, he, on the other hand, noisily expressing his appetite and his gusto:

‘You see! Your presence doesn’t bother me in the slightest. You thought you were punishing me, defeating me, but I’m very happy and I haven’t lost my appetite.’

Of course, their dialogues were mute, but they knew each other too well not to guess every word, every intention.

‘You are uncouth. You eat like a pig and you stuff yourself with onions like common people. Whereas I have always had the appetite of a bird. That’s what my father used to call me. His little bird. And my first husband, who was a poet and a musician, called me his delicate little dove.’

She laughed. Not externally. Inwardly. Even so, he could tell

that she was laughing. 'It was him, poor thing, who died. He was the delicate one.'

Her gaze barely slid over her second husband, hardened. 'And you who think you're so strong, you'll go before I do as well.'

'I'd have gone a long time ago if I'd allowed myself to be pushed around. Do you remember the vial in the cellar?'

Now it was his turn to laugh inwardly. They may well have been alone in the silent house and have both condemned themselves to silence, but they still engaged in a fierce war of words.

'Hold on a minute. I'm going to put you off your dinner.'

He took the notebook out of his pocket, wrote four words and tore off the strip of paper, which he threw dextrously into his wife's plate.

Showing no surprise, she unfolded the note.

Beware of the butter.

She couldn't help it: she stiffened. She had never become fully accustomed to that particular joke. She knew that the butter wasn't poisoned because she kept it under lock and key in her dresser, even though it went soft, sometimes runny.

All the same, she had no hesitation in eating some more, even though it cost her some effort.

She would take her revenge later. She didn't know how. She had time to think about it. Neither of them had anything at all to do.

'You forget that I am a woman, and that a woman always has the last word, and that a woman lives two or three years longer than a man. Just count the widows. By how many do they outnumber widowers?'

He'd been a widower in the past, but it was as a result of an accident so didn't count. His wife had been run over by a bus, Boulevard Saint-Michel. She hadn't died instantly. She'd hung

on for two years, disabled. He was still working. He hadn't retired. When he came home in the evening, it was to care for her and do the housework.

'She certainly got her revenge, didn't she?'

A void. Silence. Rain was falling in the courtyard.

'I sometimes wonder whether you didn't eventually tire of her and get rid of her. With all the medication she took, it was easy. She wasn't as suspicious or as clever as me. She was a nobody, with coarse red hands, who'd milked cows in her youth.'

Marguerite hadn't known her. The couple had lived in Charenton. It was Émile who'd told her about the red hands, affectionately in fact, in the days when they were still on speaking terms.

'It's funny to see your hands that are so white, such delicate joints, your skin almost transparent. My first wife was a sturdy country girl, with strong, coarse red hands.'

He took a pack of Italian cigars out of his pocket. Shapeless, very dark and very strong, they were nicknamed coffin nails.

He lit one, blew out a cloud of acrid smoke, then used the match as a toothpick.

'Serves you right, old girl. That'll teach you to be so delicate.'

'Wait. You'll get what you deserve.'

He drained his glass of wine, finished the bottle and then, after sitting still for a moment, he rose heavily and went over to the sink where he ran the hot water. While she finished off her meal, taking tiny mouthfuls, he did his washing-up, cleaned the frying pan, with paper first and then with a dishcloth, and carefully wrapped the bone and the fat from the chop in an old newspaper, which he went to throw in the bin under the stairs. Not, of course, without having taken care to lock his dresser.

A chunk of the day had thus been gnawed away and he tackled the last slice by going back to the sitting room where he

fiddled with the television knob. It was time for the news on Channel One. He moved his armchair to face it. The logs in the hearth had almost been consumed, but it was no longer necessary to keep the fire going, because a gentle warmth filled the room.

Now it was her turn to do her washing-up. He heard her coming and going. She joined him but didn't turn her chair to face the television straight away. She wasn't interested in the news.

'It's nothing but dirty politics, accidents and violence,' she used to say.

She picked up her eternal knitting. Then, when a singing festival came on, she shifted her armchair, only a little at first, and then a little more, and more again. She didn't want to appear overkeen on that nonsense. All the same, she did blow her nose during a very sentimental, very sad, love song. Bouin got up to take the bin from under the stairs and put it out in the street. The rain was freezing and the street deserted, with its row of seven houses where there were a few lit windows, the three cars waiting for the next morning and that eyesore of a construction site where walls were beginning to rise up next to gaping holes.

The ornamental fish continued to spout its jet of water into the shell-shaped basin and the bronze cupid was streaming with rain.

He locked the door behind him and drew the bolt. Then, as he did every evening, he lowered the dining-room blind, then that of the sitting room where the television was still on.

It only gave out a silvery glow, but that glow had enabled him to see at a glance that his wife had a thermometer in her mouth.

She'd found it! This was her little revenge, her riposte to the business of the butter. She imagined that she would worry him by having him believe that she was ill.

In the past, she would talk about her weak chest, her

bronchitis and, at the slightest breath of cold air, she would muffle herself in shawls.

‘You can drop dead, old girl.’

He did not only think it. He wrote it on a piece of paper which landed in her lap when she wasn’t expecting it. She read it, removed the thermometer from her mouth, shot her husband a pitying look and then, taking a slip of paper from her pocket, she wrote:

You’re already looking green.

She didn’t throw it but went over and put it on the table. Let him make the effort. She didn’t equip herself with a booklet of tear-off strips. Any old piece of paper, even ripped from a newspaper, would do.

He didn’t dare get up straight away. Even though he was intrigued, he would wait as long as possible.

She found the way to get him to budge. All she had to do was go over to the television and switch it over to Channel Two. He couldn’t bear her imposing a different programme from the one he’d chosen.

Then, as soon as she’d sat down again, he rose, changed channels and snatched the note in passing, as if by chance.

Green! He laughed. He laughed deliberately. He laughed awkwardly, not entirely cheerfully, because it was true that he looked off-colour. He noticed it every morning when he shaved. At first, he blamed the light in the bathroom with its dull tiles. He had gazed at himself in another mirror. He’d grown thin, it was true. As you get older, it’s better to lose rather than gain weight. He’d read in the newspaper that insurance companies make fat people pay a higher premium than thin people.

But he found it hard to grow accustomed to the man he’d become. He was tall and he’d once been broad, well-built, burly.

On the building sites, he used to wear huge boots and, summer and winter alike, a black leather jacket. He ate and drank anything without worrying about his digestion. In more than fifty years, it had never occurred to him to weigh himself. Now, he felt scrawny in his baggy clothes, and every so often he experienced a pain, sometimes in a foot or a knee, sometimes in his chest or the back of his neck.

He was seventy-three, but, apart from this weight loss, he refused to consider himself an old man.

What about her? Did she consider herself an old woman? When he got undressed, she appeared to be scoffing at him, without realizing that she was a lot more of a wreck than he was.

Another one of their games! They would play it later, at around ten o'clock, when they went upstairs to bed. There were three bedrooms. On their wedding night, they had naturally slept in the same one, which had been Marguerite's parents' room and which she had slept in with her first husband.

She had kept their ancient walnut bed, the feather mattress and the huge eiderdown. Bouin had tried to get used to it. After a few days, he'd given up, especially since his wife refused to keep the window open.

He hadn't gone so far as to move into another room but had brought his own bed, which he set up next to his wife's.

The wallpaper had a pattern of little flowers. At first, there were only two enlarged photographs in oval frames, one of Marguerite's father, Sébastien Doise, and one of her mother, who had died of consumption when she was still young.

Later, when they'd stopped speaking to each other, Marguerite had hung the portrait of her first husband, Frédéric Charmois, next to her father. In the photograph, he was a slim, distinguished-looking man with the air of a poet, who sported

a pencil moustache and a goatee beard. He played first violin at the Paris Opera and, during the day, gave lessons to a few pupils.

Less than a week later, Bouin responded to the provocation by putting up the portrait of his first wife above his bed.

And so, each taunted the other, as they appeared to mock one another when they undressed. They could have withdrawn to another room, but they didn't want to change any of their habits of the early years.

Bouin nearly always undressed first, as modestly as possible. All the same, there was a moment when he showed his bare chest, his ribs, which were becoming increasingly prominent, and his hairy legs and thighs with their wasted muscles.

He knew that she spied on him, delighted to see him gradually deteriorating, but, a little later, it was his turn to steal furtive glances at his wife's thin, flat chest, her sagging buttocks and swollen ankles.

'Some beauty, aren't you!'

'What about you? Do you think you're good-looking?'

They still did not speak to each other. They gauged each other in silence. They each cleaned their teeth in turn, because the bathroom was the only room in the house where they were never together. A familiar sound was the scraping of the bolt every time one of them locked themselves in.

Bouin sank heavily into bed and switched off his bedside light. His wife slid more daintily between the sheets and he knew that she would lie with her eyes open for a long time, waiting for sleep.

He dropped off almost immediately. Another slice of the day, the last, had been eaten up. Tomorrow would be another, more or less identical day.

It was good to sleep. Best of all, it was good to have dreams in which he was ageless, in which he wasn't old. Sometimes he saw landscapes as he had seen them in the past, landscapes that

were alive, that had vibrant colours, a pleasant smell. On occasion, he would even run until he was out of breath in search of a stream he could hear babbling.

He never dreamed of Marguerite, rarely of his first wife, and when he did, it was always of her shortly before their marriage.

Did Marguerite dream too? About her first husband? About her father? About the time when she used to wear a broad-brimmed straw hat and stroll along the banks of the Marne under a parasol?

What was it to him? Let her dream about her first husband the musician and about her childhood if she wanted to.

He couldn't care less, could he?