

I



Out in the middle of the field, Théodore is trampling grass in concentric circles. Once he has completed a perfect loop, he halts, then begins all over again. He bows. Lowers his head. He straightens back up. Occasionally a stone interrupts his trajectory and he diverts. The rain does not bother him. He treats it as a neutral variable.

Today Paule must kill him. It is written down in her calendar. She promised Ma as much, on the final day. The old woman was unable to produce a drop of saliva, yet she still managed to get several sentences out: “Théodore must die. You know, the one-eyed. I’d like you to do it.”

It was not a moment to argue. Paule nodded, docile. She thought she would not do it. Once Ma was dead, none of this would matter. Paule would return instead to Louis in the city, where he would console her in her grief, and they would go on about their urban lives. She set the date of execution at random, writing down *Kill Théodore* and then adding, in parentheses, (*One-Eyed*). Then she forgot. Now, on the designated day, it comes back to her.

Paule no longer knows how to kill chickens. She does not even know how to eat them. She has lived without meat in her mouth for twenty years.

The last time she eats meat, she is sixteen. It is her birthday. She has just polished off the steak bought at the neighboring farm and is proudly smoking her

first cigarette out in the field, inhaling too much but not daring to cough. It was Uncle who gave her the pack. Chickens amble happily at her side. The weather is good.

Ma comes out of the farmhouse. The door clangs shut behind her. Ma is bow-legged and furious, perhaps because of the cigarettes. Paule thinks she is going to come and hit her. Ma often lashes out for no reason.

But this time the old woman keeps her distance. Gaze fixed upon her daughter, barely stooping to reach down, she grabs a chicken by its feet as if at random and twists its neck. Paule hears the implacable sound: *tchik*. In that instant she thinks—*It's absurd, killing a chicken after such a good meal, and just before coffee, too*—but then she understands: it is Charles her mother is holding, dead in her hand. Paule loves Charles. They often play together. Paule tells him secrets. He is her animal double.

Ma throws Charles down upon the tree stump that serves as a chopping block and brings the billhook down. Blood spurts. The old woman stares at Paule throughout the decapitation. She stares, feet planted in the earth, then violently shakes the headless body. The blood flows. The grass turns red. The dress is stained. At last, when Charles is completely exsanguinated, Ma tosses the carcass to the ground and returns with a slow step to the farmhouse. Paule remains alone with the corpse. Her cigarette has gone out. Night falls.

At the next meal Paule refuses to eat meat. Ma continues to chew greedily, wordlessly, on offal and chicken blood mixed with garlic. Such meat does

not disgust Paule. In the mouths of others, she finds it logical. It makes up their smell, their very breath.

The highway sighs in the distance. The clouds reel across the sky, the line of the mountains partitions space. Remains of snow stick to the ground. The chair creaks. Paule craves air; she is breathing with her mouth open. On the living room wall, above the shelf displaying a porcelain family of chickens, the old rifle rests on its two hooks. Nothing has changed in the farmhouse these past ten years. Here are the blue bookshelves full of newspapers nobody bothered to throw out. Here is the blood-red couch worn thin by poultry. These are the only spots of color between the stone walls and the stone floor. It makes Paule want to cry, being here again and feeling as if she, too, were part of the furniture. She gets up to drink, in no particular order, the alcohol abandoned in the fridge—red wine, white wine, vodka, Muscat. Alcohol does not go off, it only loses its taste.

Ma occupies the urn. Like a three-and-a-half-liter ashtray made of metal it sits on the kitchen table. It could pass for a simple decorative vase. Difficult to believe that all of Ma is contained in that thing. There should be a stray ring or a dental filling somewhere among the remains. And what if it's a different body that was brought back to the farmhouse? You can't recognize someone by their ashes alone. The thought makes Paule nervous—then she laughs.

The only thing left to do before Paule can leave is fulfill Ma's last request: kill Théodore the One-Eyed. If only it were a matter of a well-placed blow with a

knife and a dying gurgle. But no, it is a whole art—the warm body must be treated, the feathers plucked, the guts removed. And you have to know what to do with the carcass. On a farm, killing is not an end in itself. Death must be useful. Ma's, for instance, brought with it an inheritance—three hundred chickens, fifty hens, and ten thousand euros. The deaths of the animals, in turn, have permitted three generations of the Rojas family to make a living. Paule must kill the chicken and then sell him. There can be no question of keeping the corpse here, of having a burial. She is preoccupied enough with Ma's ashes as it is. If Ma had been better with words (and surely, in the best of cases, it must be difficult to tell your child what exactly you expect of her), perhaps she would have made it clear Paule was to take Théodore's body to the market. Paule reserves a stall for the day after tomorrow. She will sell Théodore for a good price and then she will be free. *It's what you do with a dead chicken*, she keeps telling herself.

Despite the rain, she goes outside without a coat. The viscous drops stick to her skin and pearl upon her nose. Strong noses have this ability to keep the raindrops from rolling down. The chickens are running. There are many of them, they move as a compact mass, vigorous, bobbing their heads rhythmically while their eyes remain fixed. The field stretches all the way to the neighboring vineyard belonging to the Fresse family. The boundary is marked by a barbed wire fence. The Fresses had not shown up for the funeral.

Théodore is dawdling among the chickens. It is easy to make him out: he is thin and quiet and has

one gaping eye. From here it looks as if the others surround him protectively, huddling their plump bodies against him. Now the chickens close in on Paule, thinking she has brought them something to eat. She had forgotten how they smell in the rain. They reek. She sidesteps them, but they are unbothered, running underfoot, a little aggressive, beaks stuck out as if to say, “Quit walking all over the main dish and bring out the dessert already!” Théodore moves slowly in their midst. Paule pushes his companions away.

“It’s okay, you know. It’ll be all right.”

She grabs him forcefully and he does not resist. His feathers are soft—softer than skin, soft like a pillow or a stuffed toy. She wants to press him to her body. She feels for Théodore an affection spiked with jealousy, as if he were a brother who, quiet and docile, had remained at home to watch over their mutual progenitrix. Ma would have been capable of taking this chicken for a son. And, near the end, she would have failed to stomach the thought that he should outlive her.

With Théodore under her arm, Paule goes back inside the farmhouse. If she’s lost the knack, the death may be drawn out and painful. The other chickens better not see. Her hand is shaking.

Théodore is not afraid. When Paule sets him down on the living room floor, he stays close, nipping affectionately at her shoes. He is not acquainted with violence. She would like to beg him to keep still, to be less gentle. In her mind’s eye scenes play themselves out: Ma laughing with Théodore, kissing Théodore—on the beak, perhaps—or telling

Théodore some sentimental story in a low voice, a tender voice that Paule had never known, and Théodore falling asleep, content, surrendering, shutting his one good eye. Perhaps they shared meals. Perhaps Ma ran by Théodore's side out in the field, her arthritic legs attempting to keep pace with the rhythm of his animal ones.

She must have loved him very much.

Paule looks around for help. He cannot die so simply. Some last request must be observed with ceremony. She seizes the condolence book from the hallway and scrawls on a blank page everything that comes to mind about Théodore. She writes how he was an active and gentle chicken, accustomed to devotion and tenderness, a chicken worthy of affection, occasionally a clown. She wants the people who are to consume him to know of his caliber. *Théodore*. His name, uttered by Ma as her final word. The litany in these syllables.

The sentences roll out. Paule writes the chicken.

"You will not be forgotten, Théo."

She grabs him by the wings; they thrash, and it frightens Paule to feel him so fragile between her fingers. Théodore attempts to free himself to no avail. Paule squeezes tighter at the level of his neck. Under the feathers, his heart beats hard and fast. He stabs at the air with his beak, his muscles strain. She increases the pressure. Minuscule bones shatter; the entire body caves. So much for Théodore's cries. A final breath, weightless, dissipates upon the air.

With plugs stuffed into her ears, Paule sets up her stall. The plane trees in the square have been replaced by palms, which began to rot as soon as they were planted. The intention had been to transform the area into a tropical oasis, but the climate had other ideas. The palm trees—dried out, infested with parasites—are the same color as the walls of the houses in the village.

Paule has been relegated to the back end of the market, into a little corner near the church. The customers have to walk past all the other vendors, the twenty or so regulars, before they arrive at her stand. There is no crowd just yet, but already the air is full of premature wailing as the vendors warm up their voices for the day's activity. The smell of meat mingles with the smell of fish. The others eye Paule in her corner: *What's the vegetarian doing here? She ought to have left by now.* It has been ten years since she was last seen at the market.

Benjamin, standing behind his counter, winks at Paule. The old lecher has lost all his hair. He has lost his permit too. Paule suspects him of peddling defrosted fish he obtains from the nearest supermarket whenever the farmers' own supply of pollock, salmon, and shrimp is running dry. Or so Ma had led her to believe over the course of their Sunday phone calls.

Nicolas lays out his cows, inflected into various pieces for grilling, frying, or roasting—chuck,



topside, flank, brisket—all of a beautiful, moving red. They used to be joined at the hip at school, Nicolas and Paule. Copying off each other, spending hours on the phone as soon as they got home, hacking the bark off plane trees together. Nicolas looks to have aged in one fell swoop; fatter now, yet still covered in acne. He does not look her way and does not say hello.

Paule continues setting up, despite everything, despite the obvious hostility, despite the fact that Ma's usual place has been given to a man younger than Paule. This one is well-dressed. His hair is slicked back with gel. He's not from around here—his skin is too clear for that. A Norman, perhaps? His stand is sophisticated. Little spotlights illuminate the chicken carcasses. Bodies extracted from their packaging are stacked to form a pyramid worthy of a gymnastics event.

Paule says to herself, *I killed Théodore.*

Her slaughtered chickens, vacuum packed with Ma's machine, reign alongside several pots of preserves she found in the back of a cupboard. The display is minimalist: five other chickens besides Théodore, and some eggs laid out in a tub upon three wooden boards held up by trestles.

Paule had felt something in killing the one-eyed chicken. A memory from childhood she yearned to revisit. She proceeded to slit several other throats.

But Théodore received special treatment. He has a label, and on that label is his name in big letters, *THÉODORE*, just above his handwritten biography. Paule was careful to write out the whole word, *biography*, so that “bio” would not be confused with the

French shorthand for “organic.” She has even included dates, as regulation stipulates: *14 February 2018 – 20 September 2018*. A fine gravestone made of plastic.

Now Paule contemplates Théodore as if he were a foreign object, a miniscule monument her words had come to adorn. She rereads these words, admiring them as if it were not she who had written them:

*Théodore hailed from open fields. Though unfettered, independent, and mischievous by nature, Théodore suffered from a disability, a blind eye, which he overcame with his nonchalant and classy manner. Théodore enjoyed walking in circles while pecking grass—but never in the same direction as his companions—as well as running in his own fashion, as if he were dancing. He enjoyed a special relationship with his farmer. It was a bond of intense friendship that only death was able to break.*

She places Théodore conspicuously in the center of her stand, using a boiled egg for a pedestal. It is difficult to arrange a meat display. Some stagecraft is required to elicit an untroubled desire to eat. What is dirty or off-putting? What is appetizing? Is it the naked carcass, the bits and pieces, the body whole? The blood? Should the appendices be removed?

Paule continues this silent interrogation of her dead chickens. She smiles weakly and fixes her gaze on the sign opposite, which reads *Frontière/Frontera* and delineates the village border. The shoppers do not come to her stand. They buy their Sunday

dinners from the Norman. Even the villagers themselves. Even Ma's friends. They do not greet Paule. At the funeral, at least, they shook her hand. Did she do something wrong in that moment? She wants to cry out, *I'm not doing this for me, I'm doing it for my mother! Come take Théodore off my hands and that'll be the end of it. I have a man to get back to.*

Instead she hawks, "The chickens of Évelyne Rojas, raised on spring water!" The words come out in a fusillade. The result is immediate: four people materialize in front of her stand. They walk arm-in-arm, their bodies linked. A family of tourists. One of the children is a teenager—more sneering than his brother, with an ugly look in his eye, and pupils so wide he surely must have been out smoking pot. The mother bestows a courteous smile upon Paule. Her teeth are very white.

"You've taken over the farm? Has Évelyne retired?" The polished Parisian accent makes her words disagreeable.

"She's dead."

The announcement has its effect: the mother shrinks back, crosses her arms, and looks to her husband for help but he is busy redoing the younger kid's laces. She will have to go for it alone. The mother's tongue moves in her mouth, knocks against her teeth; the words drown in her saliva. She is sorry, she murmurs, and the accent is gone. In that moment Paule swears the woman is going to ask, *What happened?* or *How did she die?*—but nothing comes out. The woman smiles, wrings her hands, and then exclaims:

"Today we're having chicken!"

Her gaze falls on Théodore. She looks for the sell-by date and reads Théodore's biography. Her eyebrows furrow as she scans the eulogy. Paule wrings her own hands, nervous. This is the first time someone else is reading the biography. She interrupts the woman:

"It's a very good chicken."

The woman has already turned around. She shakes the packaging before the whole family and the flesh within trembles. Paule would like to grab Théodore back. She is afraid he may fall to the ground. She thinks of the urn: it would soon be time to scatter Ma's ashes, and maybe the marketplace could be a good spot.

"Honey, look, it's the chicken's biography!"

The husband bends feebly over the label and raises his head after having read the first two lines. "Do you do this for all your animals?" One of the kids, the teenager, grabs the packaging. He murmurs to his brother, "Look, there's a spelling mistake." His finger presses down on the mistake, squashing Théodore's body. Paule exhales loudly. The mother senses tension. Paule sells Théodore.

After the farmers pack up, they all walk together to the bar, leaving behind the skeletons of their stalls and the unsold wares in their vans. Paule wavers: they have not invited her along, but, if she is to reforge her connections, this would be the place to do it. After these days of mourning, she has the right to a little comfort.

At the bar, a mounted television shows young people dancing idly. The bar owner imitates them as she

pours beer, moving her dry body to the rhythm of the music. The furnishings have not changed in here either: old stone and boars' heads stuck to the wall, as if in homage to the past. The villagers are here, or at least those who have not yet died, positioned just as they were ten years ago, older now, but as if screwed to their barstools, the same words coming out of their mouths and the same drinks placed before them. Frozen like the people of Pompeii. Paule once went to Pompeii by bus on a school trip. Nicolas came along, too. They smoked vervain together.

Paule sits down next to Nicolas at the bar. He does not turn around. *Not a good time for reminiscences*, Paule thinks. Nicolas is absorbed in watching a pool game. A woman plays. The men follow the slit in her skirt with their eyes.

Nicolas has become something of the village stud. It is he who laughs loudest. His laugh, like Louis's, ends in a sequence of little shakes. The first time Paule met Louis, she jumped when she heard that same quivering laughter. Perhaps that was why she kissed him, to stop herself hearing it. Louis would not laugh in this place. He is ill at ease in bars and in the countryside.

Opinions abound as to the outcome of the game.

"The little thing is going to surprise us, I tell you. She isn't giving it her all yet."

"I think the guys will let her play for a while, but once they get bored ..."

"Once they get thirsty, you mean!"

"They'll get thirsty, or else Claude will get here ... either way they'll put her away quick enough."

Paule feels neither time nor silence weighing on

her. She thinks she did well to write that biography. Perhaps Ma would have even been proud.

When Nicolas stands up, Paule sees that he is unsteady. She would like to offer her help, to hold him up, but she does not dare. He greets her with a gesture of his head, sticking his chin out as if to put an end to a long conversation. At the funeral he had squeezed her right hand and asked after her in the usual manner: "How are you?" And she had replied, "Fine."

Perhaps such an exchange is enough. Nicolas is about to leave the bar, and Paule thinks she ought to say something, after all. She calls out, loudly:

"And you, how are you doing?"

Nicolas turns around, as do all the men in the bar. They look at her apprehensively, as if she were a stranger who has just walked in and no one knows what she wants. The noise ebbs. Nicolas braces himself against the door and says simply:

"Fine."

Her pockets are empty by the time she gets back. One chicken is worth three glasses of whisky. Hours have passed. It is dark outside and only the moon illuminates the farm.

Paule heads toward the coop. She leaves the bag containing the unsold chickens at the coop door and proceeds to open it very gently, as if she were entering a room full of sleeping children. All is quiet. The chickens are asleep on their bedding of finely crushed straw, dry, warm, and abundant. Their bodies rise and fall with the rhythm of their breathing.

By the chicks' cage, the air is sweet. The chick Claro has already grown so much: a little yellow ball soon to become a handsome white chicken. Claro was born on the day of Ma's death. It is Paule who named him. She slipped a ring over his foot, as she has seen it done from childhood. The motions must be gentle: you hold a chicken firmly under one arm, to keep the wings from flapping, squeeze the three front toes together, and slip the ring all the way to the toe at the back.

Paule looks at Claro and feels acid clawing up her throat. It forces her to swallow. And imperceptibly her hands curl into fists, her muscles grow tense. She yearns to crush him like an egg.