



FRANCE THÉORET

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A Novel Translated by Luise von Flotow

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Cormorant Books

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The past is never dead. It's not even past.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

SEPTEMBER 1956

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

THE MOMENT WE arrive I notice how bare the street is and that there are no trees. We move ten days after the start of the school year. The entire time it takes to unload the truck I see no one. The red brick houses have three floors, and our red brick house has three and a half. The houses rise straight from the sidewalk and have no outdoor stairs or balconies. Ours is the exception; it is set back and has a short staircase and a narrow balcony. This is the city, a space of asphalt and concrete and uniform bricks. It is early afternoon and rue Quesnel is deserted. No one takes an interest in the new arrivals.

My parents have rented a two-storey apartment in a house with a narrow facade. A passageway of packed dirt that is longer than it is wide and darkened by the room above it leads to the backyard. A few more steps and there is a doorway and a cement stairway leading down. A second door opens into the basement. A bare bulb lights up the windowless kitchen. The boxes arrive, one after the other.

My father took possession of his new shop in the morning. He lets my mother take care of the move. We are with her. We help distribute the boxes in the different rooms. As I

work, I note the layout of the new apartment. The basement area is ugly. The dim light from the single bare bulb, the oil stove, and the metal stovepipes suspended from the ceiling and leading to the door are a premonition of discomfort. The room at the front of the house will be the television room. Two narrow windows are located up near the ceiling. Pallid light in short luminous streaks briefly illuminates the darkness. We have a hard sofa bed, stuffed with horsehair, and a television that we set on a low table in the corner opposite the windows. From the kitchen, the room looks empty and dark.

A staircase leads up to the ground floor. The hot September light floods in through the front door. I step into the entrance. A corridor runs along a double room lit by tall windows. The sun lays rectangles of light on the floor. My mother sets up our parents' bedroom in the second of the two rooms. The brightly lit space in front of the windows will remain empty. Two other small dark rooms overlook the backyard. The first one, near the staircase, will be the girls' room. My brothers have to go through our room to get to theirs. No room in this apartment has a door.

The day we move in, the front door that leads to the street is closed off. In order to keep us all safe and sound, my mother condemns the entrance in the red brick facade. We will come and go via the backyard of packed dirt, past the garbage cans. The yard is surrounded by blank walls.

THAT AFTERNOON I walk past the houses on rue Quesnel toward my father's grocery store. On the way to rue Vinet, where the new shop is located, I do not meet a single person. A smell of dusty shelving and rot, of rancid meat, and unclean containers and instruments takes my breath away. The clerk at the refrigerated meat counter is set to sell ground beef and pork sausages. There is almost nothing in the store. The layout of the shelving and the front counter with the cash register probably dates from the early part of the century.

I wonder why they chose such an outdated shop at the corner of Quesnel and Vinet. My parents spent hours talking about their future business. Yesterday, the day before we moved, I learned that we would be living in the Saint-Henri neighbourhood. My parents are seeking fame and fortune, while I see destitution. My first visit to the grocery store makes a big impression. I am confused by my negative reaction. Adults know how you make your fortune. This was their decision. They made it without consulting us. I turn the page on my strong feelings.

THE VICE-PRINCIPAL GREETs my mother politely. My mother is a very pretty woman who dresses well. She has sisters who are nuns, knows the way convents work, and likes the friendliness of people who represent authority. The nun says I have a choice between the general, the commercial, or the special program of study; the special program is like the general one, but more demanding because of Latin. My good grades will

allow me to take Latin and geometry. She suggests I do so. I ask my mother to register me in the special program. She agrees. Everything is decided on the spot, with few words.

This is my first decision, my choice, no ulterior motives or reservations. I intend to work hard. As the year begins I resolve to make greater efforts. I have a few days' work to catch up on already.

I like the feeling in the class. We are a group of twenty teenage girls in the process of becoming young women. Most of the others seem older than me. They are no longer young adolescents. Through them, I become aware of my own break with childhood, my passage toward womanhood. We wear uniforms, white blouses under navy-blue tunics. The tunics end below the knee and have narrow belts made of the same cloth.

THE FAMILY HAS some difficulties adapting to the new apartment. Daily life turns out to be hard. There is only one sink, with a short counter, in the kitchen, and no sink at all in the cramped space allotted for the toilet. We have a single cold-water tap and a large, very heavy, container to heat up water. The kettle on the stove is an object of utmost importance. The kitchen sink serves every purpose, including the most intimate ones. My mother hangs the only mirror that exists in this large apartment over the kitchen counter. My sister and I wash the dishes after the evening meal. My father talks with my mother. He dismisses her doubts about the choice of a grocery store as

a business, and about its location in Saint-Henri. She punctuates her doubts with long sighs that presage angry outbursts and swearing. My father keeps repeating her name, Eva, Eva. He reminds her that they discussed all this, and that she agreed. She hisses a response through clenched teeth: he never consults her. He reminds her that they decided not to establish themselves in a rich neighbourhood. Rich people, he says, live beyond their means, they don't have any money to spend. In the Villeray and Rosemont neighbourhoods, businesses have become too expensive and middle-class people don't spend much on food. You make money on the poor, he says. Trust me, the poor are the ones who have to spend money. They empty their wallets to make our living, a good living.

My mother shrugs, grimaces, gets irritated. She can feel that this new business is going to be a disaster. Eva doesn't believe in talk, and she rejects what she calls her husband's grand speeches. My father goes on and on, repeating himself. He says something, and immediately repeats it. Often he says it a third and fourth time. He listens to himself talk, he likes to hear himself talk. When he starts up again, his voice swells with the pathetic fervour of his words. The tension mounts, hand in hand with the truth. He does not want a discussion with his wife, he wants to convince her, persuade her that he made the right decision, and that he has more foresight than any of the other merchants. He knows how to make money; he wants her to have confidence in him, in fact he demands it. Eva complains: nothing I say ever counts. This is one of

my mother's favourite statements. It is not followed by shouting or swearing. Eva never says her husband's first name, Rémi. She makes fun of the way he repeats hers, Eva, like an incantation.

My mother is disappointed. She expects a failure. I am the oldest. In vain I try to grasp what isn't working between my parents. I make it my duty. I listen to them. Puberty increases my wish to hear them and understand them.

At night I fall into a deep sleep. I dream a lot, always recomposing the same dreams around soaring heights and sudden falls. I am in the grip of strong feelings. In early October, unusual movements wake me up, noises, rapid back-and-forth, up-and-down, down-and-up activities, scratching in the walls. A damp cold suffuses the bedroom; our bedclothes and nightclothes have not been changed since we moved in. Last night before supper my brother Henri told my mother there are rats. She doesn't listen, she didn't listen. My brother knows. He is worried for himself, for all of us. I fall asleep again.

I am sitting on the sofa bed with my sister and my brothers. We are watching television when Henri gets up and points his finger at a rat under the low television table. The rat edges further into the room. It is huge and has a long tail. Henri gets the broom, takes it in his hands, wanting to kill the rat. The fat, black sewer rat tries to turn back to where it came from. My brother hits the animal, he shouts, Out! Out! Together with Jean-Michel he corrals the animal with the

skinny tail toward the kitchen and the door that leads out. The big rodent looks for a way out and refuses to be corralled. My brothers surround it, and push it with their feet and the broom. They injure it. A disgusting smell spreads through the kitchen. They kill the rat at the cement stairs. Henri grabs it by the tail and hurls it at the wall that encloses the backyard.

My brothers are all excited by the battle they have fought and won. We talk about enormous rats milling around in the walls and probably scampering across the basement floors in the night.

There is a bathtub in a damp, smelly cupboard. Washing there sets off an irrational fear. The dim, bare light bulb makes shadows flicker across the walls of the little boxroom. I feel claustrophobic. After the battle with the rat, the door to this cupboard stays shut. We brush our teeth and wash faces and hands at the cold-water tap in the kitchen.

I WALK DOWN rue Vinet in the direction of rue Notre-Dame where I take the streetcar to the stop by parc Sir George-Étienne Cartier. I follow the edge of the park to Esther Blondin School, at its southernmost point. I keep my promise, I work steadily. I am one of the best students, I have good grades. The satisfaction I feel translates into a taste for constant effort. This is a new, light feeling that lets me forget the situation at home.

School suits me, I feel at ease. I have acquired a way of being, a reflective attitude that has become second nature. From first grade, our teachers have been nuns. I notice that

they always prefer the best students. This favouritism has a serious drawback: the teachers' pets come under the influence of the nuns. The head teacher talks to her pets in a low voice, a smile on her lips, whispering things the others can't hear. The girls come so close to the nun they almost touch her. Some years there is only one pet, but often there are two, rarely three. The nuns behave like this in front of the other pupils. The other girls call these pets "chouchous." I have never seen nuns without pets around them. These rituals are part of school life. Some of the pupils have been the "chouchous" of several teachers. They have a mutual agreement.

I cultivate my independence. I stay away from the nuns and their pets. I avoid all communication, even the most banal, with our teacher. The pets form a court around the woman in authority. I keep away from them, I am sure they make up stories. I have nothing to do with the medalists of the class.

I soon have two friends that are very different and hardly talk to each other. I feel quite close to one of them, while the other is the incarnation of a femininity that seems inaccessible, dreamlike. My friend with the short, dark hair wears a blouse with a round collar, a little-girl collar that only she wears. This detail upsets me and I try to forget it. She smiles easily. She is imperturbably calm. She looks at me with big lively eyes, and the collar disappears. Among all my schoolmates, she seems the most distant, the most secret, and the least inclined to make friends. From September we compete for the best grade in French. Rather than compete for the sake

of competing, we have decided to be open about it. Soon, we have a mutual understanding. I read the drafts of her compositions and she reads mine. She doesn't plagiarize my work. I practise intellectual games I did not know before.

We avoid familiarities. We don't want them. We maintain a certain reserve with one another. Sometimes she doesn't speak to me for a several days in a row. She withdraws without explaining why. She seems to have powers of divination. When I begin to feel guilty about her, or when I decide it's time to give up this friendship, she returns. She is always the same, quiet and serene, like no one else. My brown-haired friend is alternately a child and a wise, self-sufficient woman. She loves language. We read our compositions to each other on Friday afternoons. Our exchanges go no further.

A very pretty blond student, tall and elegant, talks to me. I noticed her immediately for the type of beauty that represents the image of femininity for me. She is a woman, she has moved beyond the ages of childhood and adolescence. I admire her beauty. Golden hair, very blue eyes, clear, light skin make her the incarnation of an ideal, a being that imposes distance. She has many qualities that make her ageless, a synthesis of the typical aspects of the eternal feminine. She wears a uniform like mine; this piece of clothing hides her, as it does all of us. One lunchtime, I see her in the company of an older girl who looks like her. Her sister, dressed in fashion from the showcases of the big stores, her hair done in what seems to me the latest expression of chic. They exchange smiles and say goodbye at

the school doors. They are sisters and very close. Whenever I see gaiety, harmoniousness, quick conversation, I imagine the happiest shared feelings. I am sure my girlfriend and her sister are friends. I make this an unshakeable truth. They were born to be beautiful and happy together, for all eternity.

I TELL MY sister Lorraine that I have a new girlfriend, a blonde, who lives on Côte-Saint-Paul. Lorraine says she made two new friends in her first days at the new school. One is the daughter of our father's employee, the other one lives in the house next to hers. All three of them meet at the corner of Quesnel and Vinet and walk to school together. They are in the same class. Our conversation stops there. We sit down to eat. We have to stop talking, and eat in silence. We respect our mother's principles about not talking at the table. Our meals last only a few minutes. Our mother watches us. Don't eat your plate. Chew your food. You don't know how lucky you are. So many children have nothing to eat. Sometimes my brothers start up their racket before the end of the meal. My mother imposes her rule of silence.

We address our parents formally. Our mother trains us the way she was trained. This formality is the indispensable sign of respect for our parents, and adapts us for future social restrictions that will be much more restrictive than the rules within the family. Since the day I was born she has been preparing us to survive the great disasters of the future. We will thank her later on, she tells us as often as necessary.

Mealtimes give her the chance to say she is providing us with a good education, one that our father, a man without principles, and of course, without education, is destroying. She talks all alone since we are subject to her law of silence.

In the mornings, we all move on tiptoes. We are as quiet as possible. My father sleeps in. He is the last to get up. No one says good morning to us. We don't say good morning to each other. We go to bed at night without saying good night. Hello, good morning, good evening, good night, those are mannerisms you read about in school books. Quite often we go to bed at night followed by the sounds of our parents' quarrels and predictions of bad things to come.

I share a bed with my sister. We talk before we fall asleep. If I wake up at night I don't check to see if she is awake. We each have our own night. The noise the rats make in the walls gives rise to strange fears. I huddle in bed in the fetal position, with the covers pulled up over my head.

ONE DAY IN October I am fourteen years old. The day of my birthday my mother says happy birthday. I thank her. My sister and brothers say happy birthday. It is understood that we are too many to each have our own birthday cake. To avoid favouritism, no one has a birthday cake. We are used to this.

Night falls early. It is already dark when our father comes home from the store. One evening he brings home a young cat. This is a first. We now have a pet to share daily life with. The cat will get rid of the rats, he says. I see Henri shudder,

and clench his fists. His eyes grow big, they bulge. He raises his long arms toward the ceiling: the rats are going to kill her. He says it again to make sure he is heard. Jean-Michel strokes the cat, he pours her a bowl of milk.

Henri's warning is ignored. I watch the cat shy away from Jean-Michel's caresses, and stray around her new home. No one pays any attention to Henri's warning.

In the night, there is a racket in the walls. A noisy chase across the kitchen can be heard from the floor above. The cat is fighting for her life. For our safety, my father has blocked the staircase with a wooden panel. This panel imprisons the cat with the rats. Her only hope is to kill the enormous sewer rats.

Henri is the first one up in the morning; he crosses the girls' room, goes down the stairs, and finds the young cat dead. He knew it would happen and is in tears. He moans. My mother gets out of bed, picks up the dead animal, puts it in a sack and throws it in the garbage. The kitchen reeks of rot.

No one mentions the cat again. It appeared in our father's arms, and lived with us for less than a day. Henri, who knew she would die, angrily keeps repeating: the rats, the rats, the rats.

We are cold. The oil stove provides a meagre warmth. It is better not to think about the lack of comfort. I dream a lot, I keep a series of mental images going. I tell myself stories full of soft accords, gentle harmonies, silent calm. The few words addressed to me have a powerful effect. I am what I am;

I realize I like being alone, I like concord, I like sharing. I make up secret loves, enchanted forests with tiny cabins amid fragrant woods. My waking dreams shape my desires. But I grow tired of these long, repetitive visions, and decide to put an end to my internal cinema. I start again, the chimera of my imagination are stronger than my will.

One late afternoon I find two new jackets in the girls' room; they have the same trapezoid cut, but are different colours. The three-quarter length coats are made of rigid nylon and hide the shape of the body. The navy-blue one with the high, knitted white collar is meant for me. My sister gets the beige one with the dark brown collar. I don't know if my sister would like to swap. I accept my mother's choice, her decision. My mother is satisfied as we put the coats on. The skirt of the school uniform is longer. She has no more worries, the sizes are right. She shows us the ugliest rubber boots I have ever worn, boys' brown galoshes, that go halfway up the calf and which we slip on over our flat-heeled shoes. The boots flapping around mid-calf make a noise with every step we make. It is impossible to ignore these boots that make our legs look shorter. We thank our mother.

THE RIGID TENT of a coat overtop the masculine galoshes makes me feel asexual. I learn to walk in the oversized boots. I am conscious of being utterly homely.

From the streetcar, I begin to look in the windows of the stores on rue Notre-Dame. For several days I have an intense

wish to choose a dress for myself. I don't like any of the dresses in the windows of the one big store. Each one has something I find displeasing. This window-shopping occurs at eight o'clock in the morning as the Notre-Dame streetcar takes me to rue Vinet and parc Sir George-Étienne Cartier.

My schoolmates do not make fun of my new winter clothes. That is a relief. I have successfully integrated into this group of students. I have friends who are very different. We don't have much time to spend on our relationships. My dark-haired friend with the round collared blouse rests her folded hands on the edge of her desk. On Fridays, the day for French composition, she turns toward me. We hope to write our compositions in one go and finish before the hour is up so that we can exchange our work. This is our pact. We have agreed to read each other's work before we write the last lines. When we succeed in exchanging our compositions, it makes me newly competitive. The concentration required for composition opens me to reading. I read someone else's inspiration. The composition topic set by our teacher brings forth variations, differences born from the words themselves. This exercise stimulates my imagination. My girlfriend smiles at me, she looks like a little girl and is perfectly behaved, the way we are taught to be, the way the religious and home economics textbooks teach us to be.

AT FOUR O'CLOCK I leave school, cross the park, and hurry to get on the crowded streetcar where I ride home standing. I walk

home from the stop. I rush through my homework, write it up quickly. My brothers fool around, fight, laugh, yell. They expend their energy like boys. The noise they make fills the kitchen. I think, I concentrate on my work. I find the solution to the geometry question. The translation from Latin is harder. I choose the French words, translate literally. I don't have the time to rewrite my text in words that express the spirit of the language.

I collect my notebooks and textbooks, feeling deeply dissatisfied. I could do better. I can't go into the material deeply enough. My intellectual dissatisfaction turns into moral sadness. Some evenings I am overwhelmed by regrets about not having enough time for my work. I feel unable to work steadily. I am tormented by the idea of wanting to do better. It is impossible. I keep judging myself. Invariably, the elementary psychology that consists of listing my faults completes the picture. I am flighty, lazy, superficial and above all unworthy of my good grades. I promise myself I will improve. I always end up in the same rut. We have only one table, the kitchen table I have to clear for supper. The evening belongs to the adults. The children go to bed very early.

THE FIRST SNOW has fallen, and winter is on its way. On Saturday morning we wash our hair and dry it near the stove. We take all morning. We leave streaks of dirt on the kitchen floor. I have the new task of heating up tinned food for lunch. My sister and I wash the dishes. We are free in the afternoon. I feel

lighthearted, and quietly happy. My brothers are playing outside in the damp backyard. I hear their shouts and laughter, and see the outline of one or the other through the narrow kitchen window. I am their babysitter.

I sit down. I put my notebook and Latin text on the kitchen table. I work, I consult the little dictionary, I write. The time spent on the Latin translation soothes me. I am almost certain I haven't left out any of the words. I check and re-check the new expressions, and look for the exact solution. I will get a good grade, and am happy in advance.

My brothers are thirsty and hungry. I pour them milk and feed them cookies. When my mother comes home from the store, where she has been helping my father, nothing has changed. She comments on the disgusting streaks of dirt on the kitchen floor that she doesn't have time to clean. My brothers watch television. Henri has just spotted a rat emerging from the hole below the television. He shouts, and runs for the broom. His rage is visible in how he moves. With one blow he immobilizes the aggressive rat that is looking for an escape. He pushes the big rodent toward the doorway, tries to kill it, at least hurt it with the bristles of his broom. He orders Jean-Michel to open the doors that lead outside. His skill and determination are fierce. He wants to kill the hideous creature that killed the little cat. He says he is avenging her death. The fetid stench of the injured animal makes me nauseous. I help my brothers, encourage them to win their

battle. Once they are out the first door they squash the animal against the concrete rise. Henri grabs it by the tail to toss it into the yard. He is furious. He flings the rat into the farthest corner against one of the blind walls.

The boys laugh about their exploit. We talk about it, go over the battle that just took place, tell the story in all its details. Henri promises to rid us of all the rats. One day our walls will be free of rats.

The ground beef is sizzling in the cast-iron pan on the stove when my father says: you're the oldest. But you don't come and help me at the store. Because you're the oldest, I can't ask the others for anything. A month ago, he asked me to help him. I did not answer. We are about to sit down at the table. I pretend I haven't heard, and keep my eyes on my plate. My parents have been telling me for years: you are the oldest, you have to set an example. They are used to counting on me. This time I am silent and don't react. My mother serves the food. I stare at my plate. Our father is not happy. We eat in silence. Our mother sits down. There are a few seconds of emptiness, breathless, silent. Then our father bursts out: people who don't work don't have the right to eat. He repeats himself in his usual way: people who don't work don't have the right to eat. We have stopped eating. I am in the grip of his angry words. I am no longer hungry. Anxiety ties knots in my throat. It is unthinkable for me to get up. A terrible silence hangs over our heads. Our mother stands up and yells

out an order: Eat! We all pick up our forks, and swallow one bite after the other. My throat is tight, I manage to eat like the others.

I am guilty of refusing to help. A new anxiety takes hold of me, inhabiting my thoughts. I have to make a decision, it is my moral duty. I know my father wants me to help after school. We go to bed around eight o'clock. I won't have any time to do homework; I will be heading for failure.

My mother asks me to heat up tinned food at lunch and serve the younger children. From now on my time is limited. I leave school and hurry to the streetcar, then quickly walk home to our red brick house on rue Quesnel. I carry out my new job and take the same route back to school.

The floor is filthy. My feelings of guilt increase. I suggest to my sister that we do some housework, and wash the floor on Saturday afternoons. She agrees. We will start next Saturday.

No one notices the smell of bleach or the clean floor. Our mother lists the jobs she does besides the hours spent working in the grocery store: wash bedding and clothes, do the banking, keep appointments at the garage. She complains that her husband doesn't use the station wagon. She seems out of breath, at the end of her tether, her eyes sunken into their sockets. She peels countless white potatoes, cooks them in salty water, and places them on our thick, discoloured plastic plates. The boiled potatoes are eaten with mixed vegetables from a tin. She usually fries some ground beef in a knob of white margarine. The food is substantial and unvaried. Now

and then my mother says making meals is a chore. I am too close to her, too attentive to her recurring sadness, the searing glances she flashes each of her children, her tense voice, so close to exasperation, her morbid pessimism that is based on what a real life should be like. I feel guilty. It is my duty to lighten this load that is so hard for her. I am indebted to her; I need to repair whatever it is that makes her unhappy, I need to provide what is lacking.

My mother's voice traverses my ear, deposits in me the idea that life is unhappy, that women are inevitably subject to their husbands' authority, that they give themselves up to be of service to others. I am worried about my mother. I think about the desires she does not express when her staring eyes draw my gaze to her crazed, bitter grin. I no longer understand her. It goes together: I no longer understand myself.

My mother is a personality. Ever since my birth, my happiness has derived from hers. She has a pretty body, in full bloom. Her rounded breasts are particularly attractive. She has wavy hair, but no longer looks after it. Without actually saying so, she is giving up her former aspirations for a better education for her children. I notice a change toward something else. I am sure she is suffering. After the evening meal, I catch her tense gaze, riveted on the kitchen wall. I can't decide if it is profound sadness or anger that shines in her dark eyes. Daily life is a weft of thankless, joyless obligations that only make sense if she can add a few enhancements, tiny luxuries, distinctive little extras. She finds the dark, smelly,

cold apartment repellent. She did not make the decision, the result is the same. She will do the laundry when it becomes necessary or when the good weather arrives. It is early December.

I feel apprehensive about the changes I see in my mother. I feel the onset of a metamorphosis, and thinking about her, I forget about myself. It is winter. I am concealed under my uniform and a navy-blue nylon coat cut in the shape of a trapeze. We have only one mirror, a modest rectangle that hangs over the kitchen sink. I can see my face and nothing else. I am this disembodied face, I cannot tell myself from my mother's body.

My mother no longer cooks. She has given up meals at lunchtime, and has taken on habits that don't satisfy her or the others. I open and heat up tinned food. She has forgotten the ideas she used to have about good food when she would prepare beef with vegetables or an omelette we'd eat with great relish. She used to say things like: you're eating like royalty, and she'd add: not all children eat like royalty.

My mother has two favourite sayings she repeats regularly. The first: too much talk is dangerous. My mother has no trust in words. She thinks words betray those who utter them. Her own words have the power to ruin her life. In this light, there is no value in using a word that is even slightly elaborate. If someone speaks well, they are not to be trusted. If someone speaks too well, they are a liar, a trickster, a sweet talker

dissembling their real intentions. Words are not used to express anything, they are used to mask and entrap.

Her second saying: not every truth should be told. This presents a complex knot, an almost insoluble difficulty. We can try to weigh the arguments for or against saying something, but we cannot be sure. This maxim implies that the heart of language is not so much affected by the fear of making a mistake or being wrong, since the truth is supposedly known, as it is by the utter lack of value of this truth, in effect, by its negation.

I see the sententious aspects of these two sayings that I have never used myself. I have simply analyzed them. There are no boundaries that help us decide what it means to say too much. In the end, this is a subjective generalization. The other saying where the word “truth” is preceded by “every” implies that some truths are good to express. It is just a question of using judgment according to specific adult parameters. The notion of truth would then be related to knowledge reserved for grown-ups, truths that are not revealed.

One Saturday in December, I am alone with her in the kitchen. She has decided to buy me skates for Christmas. We have just put on our coats when she starts moaning, wailing. She throws her coat over a chair, and hurries to the toilet. For a long time she utters stifled moans, long, hoarse wails. She doesn't say a single word. I stand at the closed door, in silent anguish. I lie in wait. She is in pain, and I am paralyzed. Each sound she makes invades me. I stay where

I am, distressed by the mysteries of the body, waiting to help her. My mother seems not to be moving on the other side of the door.

In her hand she holds something wrapped in paper. She says: do you want to see the fetus? I shake my head. This is the first time I hear the word “fetus,” but I gather my mother has just had a miscarriage. She places the wrapped fetus in a glass bowl, takes her coat, and we go out. She walks with her usual step.

The following Monday she does the laundry. The sheets hung on lines in the television room take a few days to dry. The fresh damp smell intensifies the cold. My mother puts off hanging blinds in the windows of the bedrooms. The canvas blinds we have date from before my birth. These stained, yellowed objects in the simplest of shapes have served their purpose. They are on the floor at the back of a closet. No window in the apartment has a curtain.

THE NUN RESPONSIBLE for my class teaches every subject except English. The woman who teaches English is small and plump with white hair, an energetic spinster. Both she and our teacher are energetic women, and good teachers. Just before the holidays, the English teacher opens up a large bag and pulls out a pink crinoline that can stand on a desk on its own. Crinolines are in fashion. The one we have in front of us conjures up an image of a youthful femininity that makes the girls gasp. My

happy feeling of surprise at seeing the pink crinoline is quickly followed by a refusal to own such a thing. The change from joy to rejection is so quick I don't want to win such an object either. It is revolting, undesirable. I don't win it.

I can only guess at what I have escaped. Pink femininity makes me anxious. A year earlier, at my father's insistence, my mother bought me a pair of shoes with Cuban heels, ugly, rigid, black shoes, the exact opposite of the pink crinoline. I have gone into the five-and-dime on rue Notre-Dame to see the beauty products. I dream of owning lipstick, and some rouge, colours on the skin of my face. I like my fleshy, well-drawn lips and inspect them in the kitchen mirror.

Of all the features of my face, I like my lips best. I study their impeccable outline. No makeup at your age, my mother says. I dream on. Femininity is a reverie. It is something I can't escape since I am expecting a change. My imagination takes its inspiration from the girls at school and from the faces of the young women I see in the streetcars and on rue Notre-Dame, on their way to work. It continues to trail after unrealizable fantasies such as owning a makeup kit or a dress from one of the big women's fashion stores.

The holidays increase my reveries. Christmas is a day like any other. I learn to skate on the edge of the municipal ice rink. I go again the next day, I make slow progress.

Our family spends Christmas alone. No relative crosses the threshold of our apartment. No one is invited. We don't

know our neighbours; when we meet on the street we don't see them. They do the same. No such thing as greetings, friendly smiles, signs of recognition.

According to family tradition, we visit our paternal grandparents on the evening of New Year's Day. Our mother intones her usual exhortations and admonishments. We mustn't embarrass her. Sit properly at the table, eat everything we are served, say please and thank you. Good table manners are proof of the good education she is giving us. She insists on this good education, it reassures her, distinguishes her from the other mothers. We get to hear her admonishments several times over, in the same words, which increases our anxiety or our indifference, depending on who we are. She adds: you're the oldest, you have to set an example. This year our mother multiplies her instructions. I don't know what it is that makes her so nervous while the rest of us are calm. She scolds, threatens us with reprimands and punishments until the moment we leave. I feel edgy and unhappy. I wonder what terrible events took place at some earlier festivity. The children behave very well.