

from *The Summer of
the Elder Tree*



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—translation by *Harry Mathews* of *L'été du bureau*

Passing things on?

More than once I've been told, "You're lucky, you have a good relationship with your daughters, and that's no accident: you got on well with your mother."

No doubt it's true. Among my childhood paraphernalia there weren't only sorrows but a multitude of tiny items passed along to me, trifles that are shining treasures that never burn out, whatever advanced age one reaches. What are these treasures if not childhood itself, broken into pieces that are glued back together with words, colors, beach pebbles, whatever comes to hand.... On condition that something new is made of them? Assembling small memories – decals and scraps of all kinds, a medley of jingles....

Chocolate bar between two slices of bread – time for your afternoon snack?

Garden, elder tree, sheets shaken out at a window, the house has been sold – the pink horse-chestnut flowers with it?

Velvety skin, cheek smelling of fruit, maternal breath when she comes home, train at night delight.

Intimate scent of scarves, silk and muslin, snatched the length of an absence

Rings, jacquard knitting, how slow your weariness climbing Mont V alérien.

Chopin waltzes, the Moonlight Sonata and the German language never shall I forget it.

Molyneux No. 5, compact snapping shut (powder mist), and your voice in church, so pure, so other and beautiful I'm almost ashamed of it.

Smoke rings, Lucky Strike, blue whorls, black coffee....

My mother, you've disappeared and yet you walk in silence at the edge of my dreams.

Thus the "good relationship" takes shape, and it keeps moving on like a ball passed along from player to player, from mother to daughter. Love and trust – if that sounds old-fashioned, too bad – those made for us an infallible code of transmission. It hasn't always been a smooth ride – sometimes the motor races or stalls – it is, I repeat, a question of improvisation, dependent on humor more than on principles, at least I think it is. Love trust and every shade of laughter: I stick obstinately to a maternal space where you can navigate by sight.

I was lucky: the legacy was weighty but the passers had a light touch – thanks to them I finally published it for all to see. If you believe that not everything can be told in a book, words still find their own way and, left to themselves, decide where to land.

Love and trust kept flowing between me and the two lovely links I had for daughters. It happened effortlessly on my side: the child of the '40s must have remembered the air she'd breathed, the atmosphere of pure love that enveloped her in spite of the folly of adults who had escaped disaster.

It wasn't always perfect. We had our rough moments, malignant episodes of adolescence, we fell somewhat out of touch and "conflicts" abounded, very different at the interval of five years between my very dissimilar daughters. Precocious loves and shudders of anxiety. Insomniac dawns waiting for news. And Léonore's punk years! Sound and fury, tortured sulks, Technicolor hair-dos. The faces our bourgeois neighbors made! And my own face when I had to plead her case at meetings of the parent-teacher association! Today we giggle helplessly when we talk about those things or see the two of them in snapshots of their dissolute youth.

Now when I look at them, one and the other, I'm dazzled by their beauty, their drollness, their independence, and by the thousand and

one unvarnished truths we've uttered without killing each other. I wonder how they managed it; since after all what else have I passed on to them besides life, on a first and second of September? They're the ones I'll have to ask, a long time from now. Who they are – what I can see in them today – is their own doing. The transferal was something they grasped in the awareness of a moment not to be missed if they wanted to remain in contention in the great common place into which I'd released them. They've stayed the distance with no help from me. Am I saying they "managed" with what I passed on to them, the thoroughly tangled skein taken from a trunk in my family attic? That is still my version. Up to them to go on asking.

Judging by the complaints I heard, it can't have always been rosy with a mother around who – much too often for their liking – was waving her handkerchief from a train window or at the porthole of an airplane. They'll have to write their own version of desertion. For my part, I love them. Wherever I may be and without limit.

If that isn't enough (and haven't we heard all too often that "love isn't enough"?), let them find something else and come tell me about it when I am gray and full of sleep....

You ask, what about the father in all this? That is my weak point. It's no use: where I'm concerned, fathers play a thankless part.

Handkerchief at a train window

You're right: I did leave you often. You can't imagine how guilty and torn I felt among my suitcases. It wasn't to get away from you, my lovelies; I would have liked to put you each in a pocket and take you with me, never break up our threesome, and go on babbling with you above the clouds.

I admit that more than once, following where love led me, I tore myself away from you and put you in homes where you say our separation used to make you weep. The memory of those homes still haunts you: I swear that you must have transformed them – they were only inoffensive refuges with kindly families. But you were alone there, far from your divided parents, far from your itinerant mother who left you to the protection of forests and snowbound roads, clinging as she was to the wings of a migrating bird, pursuing her dream of being loved by a man and hearing him tell her so in every hue of the rainbow, and at last believing him.

We remember departures better than returns, don't we? There's more

poetry in the lyricism of abandonment than in daily contentment. And we forget the gayest parts. Later we try to reconstitute the past: that hurts, and we look for help elsewhere.

What do we pass along other than songs that have vanished in the night, scents fluttering in the wake of laughter, blurred images, fragments of a story that even for two beings who have shared them will never be the same? Memories are longings that are rewritten and passed along on the current of words that reinvent them; and so it goes....

An unseasonably summery evening in springtime Vermont; a white house on the campus of Bennington College, a typically American house of painted wood. Nightfall is barely in sight. The babysitter is busy in the kitchen. We're going out to dinner. Harry waits for me at the wheel of our pale metallic-green Buick, the motor running. I'm coming! Just one last kiss for my two hoppingly happy ones, damp and soft after their evening bath. I break away from them and find myself on the porch steps, beyond the screen door that has shut to a squeal of laughter.

Freeze frame: a mother, breeze in her hair, earrings tinkling, her long billowing dress of Indian cotton printed with roses and mallows that glitter with fragile spangles, fragrance of musk or sandalwood. On the other side of the screen, four little hands as still as startled squirrels, my two household elves, the blonde and the brunette, openmouthed, two pairs of eyes raised in wonder: "Maman, you're beautiful!" Did they say it, did I even hear it, astonished to find myself the icon of such an outburst of love? The horn honks; I hustle off. There's a rush of laughing that fades away within the white house.

An indelible snapshot of absolute happiness. I've described it to them in every detail. Neither one has the slightest recollection of it.