

Translating Christiane Rochefort's *Les Petits Enfants du Siècle*; or Reviewing Linda Asher's Translation *Children of Heaven* for a 21st Century Update

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Translation *Children of Heaven* for a 21st Century Update**

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Commentary in English: 10,179 words, excluding source text passages, translated passages and glosses.

My translation of the source text: 11,000 words.

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Introduction

In this translation commentary, I would like to consider *Les Petits Enfants du Siècle* (1961), a novel by Christiane Rochefort, of which I have translated 11,000 words into English from the original French. I will examine six individual, *although interrelated*, stylistic features respectively, as defined by Stylistics¹ and Narratology Studies²: **stream of consciousness** (use of commas); **the conversational** (storytelling); **register** (mixes); **time and space** (jumps); **free indirect discourse** (ambiguity) and, briefly, **stream of consciousness revisited** (lack of commas). I will cover two linguistic aspects per chapter alongside the corresponding passages in Linda Asher's 1962 translation, *Children of Heaven*. If and when I believe that the effects are not reproduced in translation, I will offer solutions from my own, in a claim for a 21st century update of *Les Petits Enfants du Siècle*.

Christiane Rochefort – 1917-1998 – was an elusive and unfathomable character; she rarely granted interviews, expressing a “strong distrust of any ‘establishment’ figure, university lecturers included” (1998:3). Consequently, biographical details are lacking. An extremely successful novelist, poet and translator, she was also at the forefront of political protest throughout her career, as a militant for the resurgent French feminist movement; she participated in many of its well-documented actions (*Ibid:3&4*). But she was still not recognised as a public figure.

Overall sales for her nine novels exceed four million, and her work has consistently received coverage across a broad spectrum of the French press, as well as British and American journals. Prizes include the ‘Prix de la nouvelle vague’ and the ‘Prix Médicis’. *Les Petits Enfants du Siècle* (1961) – henceforth *Les Petits Enfants* – the author’s 2nd novel, which has sold in excess of one and a half million copies and holds a regular spot on school syllabuses and university programmes in France, Britain and the US, was short-listed for the prestigious ‘Goncourt’. It won the ‘Prix du roman populaire’ (*Ibid:1&2*). Yet even when she was identified as a writer, it was only ever for one or two of her novels.

Hutton states that such paradoxes extend into the realms of Rochefort’s work, and are “played out in the breaking down of accepted binaries, be they related to gender (female/male), sexuality (gay/straight), language (formal/informal; written/spoken)... and literary categorization (‘popular’/‘high’)” (*Ibid:6*).

¹ The study of style in language (Verdonk, 2002:3)

² The structural theory and analysis of narrative texts (Jahn, 2007:94)

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It is due to these paradoxes that, as with her biographical details, critical back up is modest, because critics are still divided as to whether her work forms part of the mainstream canon of 'high' French literature or is better placed in the category of 'popular fiction'. Coincidentally, her first publications overlapped with the launch of the cheap paperback series Livre de Poche, and the subsequent "partial undermining of fixed boundaries separating so-called high and popular culture... where the classics of French literature jostled with contemporary popular fiction for a place on railway station bookstalls" (Ibid:5).

Fiske claims that the popular can be equated with the offensive, excessive and the scandalous – "poor taste" – (1991:81): Rochefort's novels cover themes which some critics might consider taboo even today, i.e., s-m sex, incest, child sexuality, as well as themes which were deemed taboo at the time, like gay rights and female sexuality; whilst attacking the government's pro-natalist and council housing policies of the day, and the state's manipulation of a consumer society and the rampant materialism of post-war prosperity, *Les Petits Enfants* also presented its readers with a sexually promiscuous young girl.

Due to Rochefort's 'popular-because-scandalous' status, her "anti-establishment approach and willingness to engage with taboo areas", Hutton reasons that she was never going to be welcomed by the academic establishment. Furthermore, not only have women writers been neglected for centuries but they have, according to Rochefort herself, been expected to "write about certain things: house, children, love (1998:7)". By not conforming, she has consistently won the contempt of critics, as well as juries for literary prizes, of which the majority are men.

Considering Hutton's studied 'dominant ideology thesis', however, a popular text would "work to secure the socio-political status quo"; it would be perceived... "to represent women or other oppressed groups in such a manner as to reinforce and naturalize that oppression". And yet Rochefort's works, she argues, "appear to stand in diametric opposition to such an approach". What is more, "the very tenets of the 'dominant ideology thesis' are played out *within* her works"; her heroes "rail against the capitalist system... its regulatory institutions... its complicit foot-soldiers"; in short, they "share a common call for individuals to... be aware of, and resist, the mechanisms of oppression" (Ibid: 5&6), *thus rendering the reader active as opposed to being a readily indoctrinated one*. I cannot agree more when she asserts that *Les Petits Enfants* invites the reader to read the novel's "*disastrous unhappy ending* against the backdrop of the saccharine romances read by the

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narrator's mother" (*Ibid*:6)³ – my italics. Maybe Rochefort's being labelled as a writer of popular fiction is down to her works representing popular themes, however much they undermine the genre⁴.

While it has been suggested that Rochefort may have been too extreme and forward thinking for the French literary establishment, where her works *have* found a niche within the academy are the afore-mentioned school syllabuses and university programmes dealing with French socio-politics from the 1950s to the 1980s, years otherwise known as 'Les trente glorieuses', a time of great social change⁵; *Les Petits Enfants* looks at life amid rapid modernisation, the bulldozing of the old *quartiers* for new soulless tower blocks, as government directives, offering a number of financial incentives, encouraged families to produce as many children as physically possible⁶. While ever these issues still have relevance, her works will be read as such.

Nonetheless, attempting to classify Rochefort as a socio-political writer, or a gay-writer etc, is to fail to "engage with the very *writing* of the texts; narrative, structure, language, reflexivity are shunned in favour of a thematic approach (1998:10)". Like Hutton, I contest that language is the most important aspect of Rochefort's work, which is everything but simple and formulaic, terms one might employ to describe the so-called popular novel. Rather, it is contestatory, ironic; it juxtaposes incongruous registers; it invents neologisms, creates its own hybrid narrative; it destabilizes a language which has been subject to state control for centuries. It is the language of Rochefort's works, I claim, that has the greatest relevance today.

My twenty year fascination with *Les Petits Enfants* concerns the narrative 'voice', an elusive term and aspect of her writing which has a lot to offer in the field of Translation Studies; (de) Lange touches on it when he talks about a translator having to "create a mood, transmit an emotion", which might be attained by "listening very attentively to the music (2006:10)"; while Schwartz calls the translation process "finding a voice" – there is a point in the translation where I suddenly feel very confident and I know what the mood should be, I know what the characters should say and I know what the register of the language should be (*Ibid*:10)". One should, she avers, convey what she

³ The female protagonist, Jo, meets Philippe, falls in love, gets pregnant, and plans to live happily ever after, the *anti-feminist* argument being, thus, that she does not 'fall into the trap', the one of following in her mother's footsteps, but simply sees the error of her ways – indeed, a *feminist* viewpoint might be that Rochefort limits her protagonist to a stereo-typical plot-type after all (Porter Abbot, 2007:43).

⁴ A counter-argument *here*, though, might be that a work's transgression of generic norms simply initiates new norms, inviting subsequent transgressions (Pyrhönen, 2007:112).

⁵ "During that time, France went through a spectacular renewal. A stagnant economy turned into one of the world's most dynamic and successful, as material modernization moved along at a hectic pace and an agricultural-based society became mainly an urban and industrial one" (Ardagh, 1990:13).

⁶ "... by 1935 the birth-rate had fallen to 87 per cent, i.e., seven births to eight deaths. In 1940 Germany was able to put nearly twice as many men of military age into the field as France – and the results were all too evident [...] the population increased from 41 million in 1946 to 54 million in 1982 [...] child allowances were (by 1990) the highest in Europe" (*Ibid*:14/15).

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perceives as the author's intention. I would add to these translators' comments that one endeavours to (re)create a 'distinctive narratorial presence'; and this is my definition of voice.

Schwartz, nevertheless, translates authors who are not necessarily well known in English, and a dilemma she often faces is that critics – editors included, I imagine – are "likely to seize on anything that's a bit odd and assume it's the translator's clumsiness... Who knows, the original might have been extremely weird, exotic, bumpy, but nobody asks that question (*Ibid:15*)".

A potential problem at the other end of the spectrum, as I see it, in spite of Schwartz' comments and Bush affirming that "[translators] want readers to experience and enjoy some of what they feel when reading the original (*Ibid:25*)", translators do have a natural tendency to be explanatory; to clarify, simplify and disambiguate; to "normalize ST hybridity"⁷, if only for the reasons Schwartz cites: no translator wants to be considered clumsy.

Although I agree with the theorists who claim that a good original should be capable of nourishing numerous translations, and that each new translation will always shed new light on the source⁸, I argue that only via something of a strict stylistic adherence to Rochefort's text might a translator capture that of which de Lange, Schwartz and Bush speak; capture the author's intention, even if it means working against one's instincts. "Every translation... requires a different strategy (2006:16)," Schwartz claims.

Indeed, I will now proceed to define how Rochefort's use of language creates Jo's patent narratorial presence, and how one might recreate it in translation.

⁷ At the same time, Klinger notes that an inherent feature of any literary translation is its own hybridity, in that the work embraces features both of the source and the target language/culture (2011:2).

⁸ Baker (2000:4), Hermans (pp. 23–48), Lefevere (1992:141), Scott (2000:92), Venuti (2004:195).

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Chapter 1, Section 1 ‘Stream of consciousness’; use of commas (« sans le style, ça ne tient pas »)

*“They’d caught me. The bulldozers. It was 1962, I think. It was then I invented the expression ‘Electoral deportation’. It was then I started to write Les Petits Enfants – in one go! On the horror. A short, little book riddled with horror, each strange comma placed in horror.”*⁹*

If ever I meet Ros Schwartz again, I will ask whether she has ever read Rochefort's *Les Petits Enfants*, for I am certain she would find it “extremely weird, exotic” and “bumpy”.

The perfect place to begin is with those “strange” commas of which Rochefort speaks, because a paradox exists even here: in that, while she would have her readers believe that she merely ‘threw the pages together’ in some fit of frenzy, thus implying that she paid little attention to punctuation and grammatical accuracy, she also states – as in the quotation further up – that “without the style, it [the book] doesn’t hold up”; “[t]he text,” she says, “is held together by the unvarying and very grammatically studied tone of the little girl” (1998:37). But I believe that the paradox perhaps highlights more the elusiveness of Rochefort as a personality than her work; Boase-Beier would argue that not all stylistic choices can be seen as consciously motivated (2006:51).

The novel is written in retrospective narrative, with Jo primarily as first person narrator¹⁰. She starts out with what is a celebrated line amongst its readers – remembering that the majority of critical material relates to the book's usefulness in studies of Social History:

Je suis née des allocations et d'un jour férié dont la matinée s' étirait, **bienheureuse**,
I am born of the benefits and of a bank holiday of which the morning itself was stretching out, blessed,

au son de <> Je t'aime Tu m'aimes >> joué à la trompette douce (1961:7).
to the sound of “I love you You love me” played to the trumpet sweet¹¹

By the end of the novel, Jo, one calculates, is about 16 years of age¹².

What fascinates me with Jo's opening line is not so much her claiming to be born of benefits, but the commas at either side of the adjective “bienheureuse”/“blessed”, highlighted in **bold**. Of course, the morning becomes the subject of the sentence, but what is interesting is how the adjective

⁹ An asterisk will denote my own translations.

¹⁰ There are, however, instances of first person plural narrative, which I will discuss in chapter 3 on free-indirect-style.

¹¹ Beneath any French narrative I will place my own glosses, which I will italicise along with my own translations.

¹² There are no real clues as to the fictitious time and place of the narrating voice, other than its sense of here and now.

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immediately slows everything right down, for two reasons: a, it momentarily adds a (humorously ironic) religious connotation, as in ‘heaven blessed’; and b, more importantly, the adjective’s enclosure makes it look like a pause for thought, to what would otherwise appear a rather terse introduction. Strict grammarians might contest that the commas are essential to the sentence’s sense and form. I would argue, however, that Rochefort does not necessarily play by their rules; and to talk of grammatical mistakes is erroneous¹³. Hutton believes that her narrative “constitutes a break with the system, establishing the presence of a non-conformist voice”, which is [...] “governed by its own rules” (1998:40) – my italics; I have read the novel enough times to have arrived at the same conclusion. Rochefort employs the commas for *her* reasons alone: for those which I have stated but also to establish who is in charge, the major effect being that Jo grasps the reader’s attention from the outset¹⁴; it is then for him/her to keep up.

1.1 ‘The Children of Heaven’

“I'd say you're best to stick with the Asher translation if you're not reading the French.”¹⁵

Linda Asher, the 1962 translator of *Les Petits Enfants*, is a former fiction editor at the *New Yorker*. She is also the translator of works by writers such as Hugo, Simenon, and Kundera. She has twice received the French-American Foundation and Florence Gould Foundation Translation Prize: in 2000 for her translation of Martin Winckler’s *The Case of Dr. Sachs*; and in 2007 for Milan Kundera’s *The Curtain*. She is one of the jurors for this year’s competition.¹⁶

In reference to Kundera’s *The Art of the Novel*, Publishers Weekly describes Kundera as “A novelist who writes eloquently about the wrenching dislocations of history...”¹⁷, without mentioning the translator Linda Asher – like how she may have gone about her rendition, but this is not my argument here. Comparing Asher’s translation of Simenon’s *Maigret and the Yellow Dog* to an earlier translation by Geoffrey Sainsbury, Foord says: “Linda Asher's translation is much closer to

¹³ I should add here that Renaud, the “non-conforming voice” of Rochefort’s (what is believed to be her) first novel, *Le Repos du Guerrier* (1958), was completely re-punctuated by the publishers (1998:40).

¹⁴ I will even go as far as to quote Norrick here, for reasons which will soon become evident: “Conversationalists who want to gain the floor to tell a story must signal their intention to the other participants. They must enlist the interest of these potential auditors to engage their active listenership (2007:132)”.

¹⁵ Peter Foord commenting on Linda Asher’s 1987 American translation of George Simenon’s *Maigret and the Yellow Dog*, <http://www.trussell.com/maig/momjau.htm> (22/08/2012)

¹⁶ <http://www.frenchamerican.org/translation-prize> (19/08/2012)

¹⁷ <http://findnsave.fresnobee.com/Product/265032/The-Art-of-the-Novel#>

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what Simenon has written, but at times is too clipped, too staccato. However, her translation is the one to read to appreciate Simenon's narrative.”¹⁸

What I find interesting about the above quotations is that two opposing authorial styles appear to have produced two correspondingly opposing results in translation. What I would ascertain from these results – along with my reading of *Children of Heaven* – is that Asher endeavours to recreate, mirror stylistically, the source text, “bumpy” bits and all, and I am sure Foord would agree – inadvertently, he also describes my reaction to Asher’s translation of *Les Petits Enfants*, which I find is a little too clipped and staccato in certain areas, but is, without the French, to be read for a taste of Rochefort’s narrative.

What I should make clear before going on is that I do not intend to *criticise* Asher’s work in terms of ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Each translator has his/her own reasons for translating in a particular way: current trends; dealings with an author, an editor, deadlines... but primarily because, as Boase-Beier states, “[d]ifferent influences on the reading process lead to different interpretations... The words chosen draw the reader into the interactive process of interpretation... which will always be *an* interpretation (2003:10)”. Each interpretation is, thus, equally valid. She also notes the complexities of close reading for translation: how, in the process, a translator hears “echoes of the translation it is about to become (2010:10)”. Herman still reminds the latter that “[l]anguage analysis and language attentiveness may help our reading... but there are few guarantees, few certainties, and no ‘master linguistic code’ that tells a reader how a text must be interpreted. A linguistic orientation can only contribute to interpretation and understanding, not impose them (2007:240/1)”.

Asher translated *Les Petits Enfants* at a time when the likes of Catford and Nida recognised that for the past fifty years there had “[b]een a marked shift of emphasis from the *formal to the dynamic dimension*. A recent summary of opinion on translating by literary artists, *publishers*, educators, and *professional translators* indicates clearly that the present direction is toward *increasing emphasis on dynamic equivalences* (Venuti, 2004:130)” – my italics. Again in Nida’s own words, “[a] translation of dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression... it does not insist that [the receptor] understands the cultural patterns of the source-language context in order to comprehend the message (*Ibid*:129)” ; work, then, which is immediately intelligible to the receptor; *paraphrase*¹⁹.

At this year’s BCLT Summer School (2012), Briony Everroad, an editor at Harvill Secker, Random House, spoke of her relationships with translators being about “dialogue”, and that if a translator is

¹⁸ See 16

¹⁹ “paraphrase” in the sense that a text does not read like a translation.

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able to "justify anything weird", she tends to accept it. I can only imagine the kind of dialogue Asher must have had with her New York editor in the prevailing climate of 1962, especially when trying to promote an unknown author. Schwartz would undoubtedly sympathise.

1.1.1. reclaiming "benefits"

Below is Asher's answer to Jo's opening line in *Les Petits Enfants*, corresponding with the opening chapter of this essay:

I WAS BORN OF THE FAMILY

Subsidies and a holiday morning stretching **comfortably** to the tune of "I love you and you love me" played on a sweet horn (1962:1).

While I appreciate the personification of the morning "stretching comfortably", it should suffice for me to say that I find this opening line somewhat "terse", for the reasons I have previously stated, though I wonder whether Asher's stylistic choices were all her own. Lack of the humorous religious imagery aside, what may be gained in translation, the alliterative 'born', 'benefits' and 'bank holiday', leading up to '*blessed*', is understandably lost to American "Family Subsidies" and – although she does not employ 'public' – "holiday". The more noteworthy loss for me, however, is down to the adverbial rapidity of "comfortably" – in **bold**: a translator's choosing to dispose of the two commas is to equally dispose of the sentence's major impact; it may not look threatening to the rest of the book but, in doing so, the reader, to extend my earlier metaphor about him/her needing to keep up with the narrator, must consequently play catch-up from the outset – indeed, the same could be said of the translator in the actual translation process. My point is that one should acclimatise to Rochefort's stylistic quirks as early as possible, if one ever hopes to capture Jo's, at times darkly witty, voice. Toolan puts it best when he recommends that "[i]t is nearly always rewarding to look at the language of a story's opening – texture and expectations are created there that, in a sense, persist and prevail through the remainder of the narrative (2007:232)". I will elaborate on the significance of Rochefort's commas in the next section – or what Boase-Beier might describe as the text's "second order meanings (2006:37)", or those "elements of the text the reader takes to represent the attitude or state of mind of the reconstructed figure of the author,

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narrator, or character (2010:10)". Prior to that, I have placed my own translation of Jo's opening line below for the reader of this essay to consider:

I was born of benefits and a bank holiday morning stretching out, blessed, to the sound of "I love you You love me" played to a sweet trumpet backing.

1.1.2 a stream of oral consciousness... a stream of conscious orality...

"Narrative is... a mode of representation tailor-made for gauging the felt quality of lived experiences (Herman 2009:137)"

Hutton deems that the uncertainty over the status of Rochefort's work as 'popular' may owe much to the *orality* of her writing, traditionally demeaned in opposition to so-called 'high' cultural forms (1998:12). I would extend this point further, by suggesting that the uncertainty lies in how one interprets the "orality". The "scandalous" aside, I can easily understand how an impatient reader might give up on an ostensibly lazy and gratuitous style – i.e. commas either used 'haphazardly' or nonexistent – but I claim that this is to *misinterpret* the style. For Herman, "a key difference between narrative genres is the extent to which they foreground the factor of consciousness – highlight the impact of events on an experiencing mind – in the story worlds that they evoke (2009:139)". I will allow Rochefort a word on her oral style of narrative in the next section, but what I must emphasise here, to address Herman's point, is that the orality of Rochefort's narrative is the key to the foregrounding of that "factor of consciousness"; the key to the "distinctive narratorial presence".

I do not intend to elaborate too much on the well-covered 'stream of consciousness' technique in literature, a metaphor coined by American philosopher and psychologist William James in a seminal work *The Principles of Psychology* (1890)²⁰ and commonly associated with the novels of Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner. What I will say is that it tends also to be associated with third person narrative – but not exclusively – and represents the free-flowing, random thoughts of a particularized centre of consciousness, or what Herman defines as the "focalizing perceptions of a reflector figure (Ibid:142)". Stream of consciousness writing often lacks 'correct' punctuation and syntax, favouring a looser, and more incomplete style, for the obvious reasons – I will return to this concept in chapter three – without conventional transitions. Nordquist's concise definition is "[a] narrative technique that gives the impression of a mind at work, jumping from one observation, sensation, or reflection

²⁰ Nordquist : <http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/Stream-Of-Consciousness.htm> 10/08/2012

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to the next.”²¹ What I appreciate about this simple definition is that it refers neither to, a, first nor third person narration, and b, neither to interior, nor exterior monologue; I am sure there is an argument for Rochefort’s entire novel being an interior monologue, it is simply not my interpretation. Either way, what Toolan similarly refers to as the “erratic thought processes of a character’s consciousness (1988:128)” cannot be denied. He goes to slightly greater pains of definition: “SOC is a cover label for any verbal rendering of a character’s thoughts in a way which is not overtly governed by framing narratorial verbs of internal communication (*Ibid:128*)”. I will consider what he means by “an extreme rendering of limited point of view”, “distortion(s) of time”, “disruption of chronological sequence”, and “general temporal uncertainty” later, but for now Nordquist’s definition will be sufficient in describing the ‘thinking aloud’, or oral quality of *Les Petits Enfants*’ centre of consciousness.

Mlle Garret’s religious teachings either overwhelm or bore Jo. Below, the latter takes a moment to consider her feelings. It would be useful to take note of the seemingly excessive usage of commas in the passage:

Mlle Garret ne pondait pas un œuf toutes les semaines. En général c’étaient, **sauf l’histoire sainte qui était plus jolie**
Miss Garret no laid not an egg all the weeks. In general it was, save the story saint which was more jolly
que l’histoire non sainte, et, d’abord, sans dates, des explications assommantes et compliquées,
than the story none saint, and, firstly, without dates, of the explications deadly and complicated,
 comme « s’il faut un ouvrier pour construire une maison, il a bien fallu un Dieu pour créer le ciel et la
like, if it needs a worker for construct a house, it has well needed a God for create the heaven and the
 terre. » Je ne voyais vraiment pas pourquoi par exemple, et j’eus une histoire avec Mlle Garret, qui ne comprenait
earth. I no saw truly not why by example, and I had a history with Miss Garret, who no understood
 pas pourquoi je ne comprenais pas, et me dit que je « raisonnais » (17/18).
not why I no understood not and me told that I “was reasoning”.

The highly punctuated passage in **bold** gives a clear impression of a mind at work, “the jumping from one... reflection to the next”. Below, I have **emboldened** the slight tangential shift in the gloss:

In general it was, save the story saint which was more jolly than the story none saint, and, firstly, without dates, of the explications deadly...

²¹ See 19

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What the reader of this essay must, of course, bear in mind here is that the passage is taken out of context, and that it follows a whole stream of stylistic peculiarities, including little punctuation – I had to read it a number of times before recognising the digression. And this is just one of the ways in which Jo keeps the reader alert, and what Jahn means when he states that “narration is the telling of a story in a way that simultaneously respects the needs and *enlists the co-operation of its audience*; focalization is the submission of (potentially limitless) narrative information to a perspective filter (2007:94)” – my italics.

Below is Asher's translation of the above; I have **highlighted** the salient words:

Mademoiselle Garret didn't lay an egg every week. In general, aside from sacred history which was nicer than nonsacred history, **and one thing, there were** no dates, **it was** a bunch of complicated, boring explanations like... (9).

The most striking aspect for me here is that the first impersonal verb – “it was” – has been carried over to the end of the tangential shift, becoming “it was a bunch of”, thus simplifying the structure, in that the reader now has no need to remind his/herself how the sentence had started out. Another impersonal verb has been added – “there were” – while an all important comma has been erased – “and one thing”. To sum it up, the sentence has been ‘explained away’, resulting in the impact of Jo's pause for thought being lost; the “impression of a mind at work”, her particular disposition, her conversational presence.

I intend to keep with the theme of the “conversational” in the next section, but, before that, I have placed my translation of the most significant aspect of the studied passage below, again for the reader's consideration:

Mlle Garret wasn't laying an egg every week. In general it was, save the holy story which was nicer than the non-holy story, and, well, without dates, mind-numbing and complicated explanations like...

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“[s]ome readers will be more compliant than others (Hutton,1988:41)”

To end this chapter, I will keep with the theme of the ‘conversational’, by demonstrating a number of ways in which Rochefort achieves this effect, and again ask whether the corresponding passages in Asher’s translation are replicated. I cannot stress enough this aspect of the novel; as Rochefort has already stated: “[t]he text is held together by the unvarying and very grammatically studied tone of the little girl”.

Norrick claims that “[n]arrators... usually avoid transgressing the boundaries of propriety and intimacy, unless they seek to approach or traverse these boundaries... in order to present special facets of their personalities (2007:139)”. Jo, therefore, very much forms part of the rarer category. But although I agree with Hutton that Jo is selected as Rochefort’s mouthpiece because she stands outside the system as a cynical observer of her environment, I disagree that her readers are tacitly invited to take Jo’s place “irrespective of their age and socio-political situation (1998:41)”. I believe that Rochefort ‘sets up’ the reader a little differently: s/he is elected as a ‘soundboard’; s/he is the designated *peer* for the rebellious narrator, and it is a fascinating role to play. As Short points out, “readers have a tendency to sympathize with the narrator’s world-view. Thus, the narrator’s attitude towards the characters will also affect the reader’s attitude towards the characters (1996: 316)”. But if the reader of this essay has ever been in such an awkward situation as having felt obliged to listen to an outspoken interlocutor – and to agree with him/her, however tacitly, whether it be the case or not – then s/he will understand what Rochefort’s narrative is capable of. Jo pulls no punches: “[n]o-one is spared from the global tirade(1998:41),” Hutton rightly notes. To couple Jo’s candour with her sexual promiscuity – the *ten* year old’s first encounter involves a man of thirty-something – may occasionally involve “reading against the grain (*Ibid*:52)”. The sense of unease is compounded by the dimension of the storyteller’s reliability: “[h]omodiegetic (first person) narrators... can be brilliant, deranged, passionate, or as cold as ice because they are... personally invested in the action (2007:42),” Porter Abbott observes. To further frustrate Jo’s “designated peer”, she allows him/her mere glimpses of other characters’ viewpoints via the odd use of playful – though strictly ambiguous – ‘free indirect discourse’, and a subject I will return to in chapter 3.

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For fear of overstating the novel's sexual content, however, I should point out that I only appear to be doing so because, in between times, very little happens at all – if births and deaths come along at an alarming rate, we have little to indicate what the story is; Jo but describes (and condemns) her harsh surroundings. What 'holds the book up' is how Jo engages her reader. Norrick has noticed that "[t]he tellability of familiar stories hinges not on their content as such but on the dynamics of the narrative event itself (2007:135)", and that narrators construct identity not just through their choice of certain personal experiences to relate, but "the way of presenting these experiences (Ibid:139)".

It would be safe to say that the way in which the story events are told, Rochefort did not, prior to writing, make any decisions about plot, she simply wrote to see where it would lead; indeed, when she began to write *Les Petits Enfants*, she, "très optimiste" – very optimistically – had hoped that Jo would end up a prostitute, implying that marriage was a form of *unpaid* prostitution (1998:54). It would appear, then, that the impression that the novel gives of casual speech reflects Rochefort's write-and-see-where-it-leads approach, though *she* would have argued that her style is more complex than what resembles a transcription of a speaking voice, which she defined as 'parlé-parlé' ['the spoken-spoken'] and which she believed would be unreadable (Ibid: 39). She described her literary technique as 'l'écrit-parlé' ['the written-spoken'] and noted that a strict line must be drawn between it and the former (Ibid: 37). It is this style which characterises *Les Petits Enfants* and, far from being a spontaneous, unworked outpouring, it is actually the result of a lot of work. Some of these stylistic peculiarities are listed below.

1.2.1 the 'conversation'

Back to the very first page, Jo's father exclaims:

Zut dit mon père c'est pas de veine, à quinze jours on loupe la prime (7).

Damn said my father it's not of vein, at fifteen days one misses the bonus.

I have chosen to leave out speech marks here for effect, since there are none in Rochefort's text, although this can be the case in French for direct speech, when a dash is used instead at the beginning of a line. Still, there is nothing conventional about this piece – no dash; no speech marks; furthermore, neither a comma nor exclamation mark follows the exclamation. Funnily enough, however, it is one of the rare occasions that Rochefort employs this no speech marks technique –

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other than the one I will show later in this section – and she has done so on the first page. Again, perhaps due to its timing, Asher appears at odds with it, and so makes a compromise:

Nuts, my father said what lousy luck, we'll miss out on the bonus for two weeks (2).

By *adding* a conventional comma this time, after “Nuts” – in **bold** – I feel that the sentence has unduly lost its pace and sense of spontaneity. For “Zut”, I have chosen “Bugger” because I find “Nuts” to be rather weak; I prefer the plosive impact of “Bugger”, which I believe equals the very French voiced fricative sound of “Zut” – /zy::::t/. I have also used a contraction of ‘of’ as “o”, before “weeks”, to compensate for the omission of Rochefort’s ‘ne’, after “ce”, which is considered to be an ‘incorrect’ construction, and which happens frequently throughout. Below is my own version – the comma omission is **highlighted**:

Bugger said my father no luck, we miss the bonus for a couple o' weeks.

Again, it may appear trivial – Asher’s addition of one little comma to a short line of direct speech – but if one considers Norrik’s point that “[t]he flexibility of the human voice allows conversational storytellers to clearly mark speech by different characters with voice shifts alone (2007:231)”, and that, as already stated, Rochefort is not an adherent of the more ‘literary’ adverb, then such points of punctuation are crucial for attempting to reproduce something similar in translation.

1.2.2 a stream of direct/indirect commentary (a crisis shared)

“[g]enuine conversational storytelling is always interactive (Norrick 2007:127)”

In keeping with Jo’s parents, I will now consider a scene where the reader of the novel should brace his/herself for the author’s inspired manoeuvring of elaborate forms of direct *and* indirect speech – I have both numbered the French lines and **emboldened** them to facilitate reading:

1 : Le vendeur vint reprendre la télé, parce qu'on n'avait pas pu payer les traites. Maman eu beau expliquer que c'est

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The seller came retake the telly, because one no had not been able pay the costs. Mum had beautiful explain that it was
 2 : parce que le bébé était mort, et que ce n'était tout de même pas sa faute s'il n' avait pas vécu, et avec la santé qu' elle avait
 because the baby was dead, and that it was all of same not her fault if it no had not lived, and with the health that she had
 3 : ce n'était pas si drôle, et si en plus elle ne pouvait même pas avoir la télé, le truc fut bel et bien embarqué, et par-dessus
 it was not so funny, and if in plus she no could even not have the telly, the thing was beautiful and well embarked, and by above
 4 : le marché quand papa rentra il se mit à gueuler qu' elle se soit laissé faire, ces salauds là dit- il viennent vous
 the market when dad returned he himself put to mouth that she herself be let do, those bastards there said he come you
 5 : supplier de prendre leur bazar, ils disent qu' ils vous en font cadeau pour ainsi dire et au moindre retard ils rappliquent le
 beg of take their kit, they say that they you of it do present for thus say and at the least retard they turn up it
 6 : récupérer ; s'il avait été là lui le père le truc y serait encore.
 recuperate; if he had been there him the father the thing there would be still.
 7 : « Tiens avec ça que t'est plus malin que les autres, lui dit-elle, y a qu' à voir la vie qu' on a », et là- dessus
 "Hold with that that you're more malign than the others, to him said she, there has that to see the life that one has", and there above
 8 : ils partirent à se reprocher tout depuis le début.
 they parted to themselves reproach all from the start.
 9 : C'était une mauvaise passe. Ils comptaient le moindre sou.
 It was a bad pass, they were counting the least sou.
 10 : Je sais pas comment tu t' arranges disait le père, je sais vraiment pas comment tu t' arrange, et la mère disait
I know not how you yourself arrange said the father, I know truly not how you yourself arrange, and the mother said
 11 : que s'il n'y avait pas le PMU elle s' arrangerait sûrement mieux. Le père disait que le PMU ne coûtait
that if it no there had not the betting office she would herself arrange surely better. The father said that the betting office no cost
 12 : rien l'un dans l'autre avec les gains et les pertes qui s'équilibraient et d'ailleurs il jouait seulement de temps
nothing the one in the other with the gains and the losses which themselves equalled and besides he played solely from time
 13 : en temps et s'il n' avait pas ce petit plaisir alors qu' est-ce qu' il aurait, la vie n'est déjà pas si drôle. Et moi qu' est-
in time and if he no had not this little pleasure then what is it that he would have, the life no is already not so funny. And me what is
 14 : ce que j'ai disait la mère, moi j'ai rien du tout, pas la plus petite distraction dans cette vacherie d'existence
it that I have said the mother, me I have nothing of the all, not the least little distraction in this 'cow barn' of existence
 15 : toujours à travailler du matin au soir pour que Monsieur trouve tout près en rentrant se mettre les pieds sous la
always to work from the morning to the evening so that Mister finds all ready in returning himself put the feet under the
 16 : table, Merde disait le Monsieur c'est bien le moment après avoir fait le con toute la journée à remplir des tubes d'une
table, Shit said the Mister it's well the moment after have done the idiot all the day to fill of the tubes of a
 17 : cochonnerie de moutarde et arriver crevé après une heure et demie de transport si encore il avait une bagnole ça le
piggery of mustard and arrive punctured after an hour and half of transport if still he had a motor that him
 18 : détendrait un peu, ah ! c'est bien le moment de penser à une bagnole, partait la mère, ah ! c'est bien le moment oui ! quand
would distract a little, ah ! it's well the moment of think to a motor, parted the mother, ah ! it's well the moment yes ! when

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19 : on n' arrive même pas à ravoir la télé et Patrick qui n'a pas chaussures avec ses pieds qui n'arrêtent pas de grandir, C'est pas de
one no arrives even not to re-have the telly and Patrick who no has not shoes with his feet which stop not of grow, It's not of

20 : ma faute dit Patrick, Toi tais-toi dit le père ca ne te regarde pas, Mais j'ai mal aux pieds dit Patrick, Tu vas te taire oui ?
my fault said Patrick, You be quiet said the father that no you regards not, But I have pain to the feet said Patrick, You go be quiet yes?

21 : Le soir on ne savait pas quoi foutre sans télé, toutes les occasions étaient bonnes pour des prises de bec. Le père
The evening one no knew not what fuck without telly, all the occasions were good for of the takings of beak. The father

22 : prolongeait l' apéro, la mère l' engueulait, il répondait que pour ce que c'était marrant de rentrer pour entendre que des
prolonged the aperitif, the mother him mouthed, he replied that for that which it was fun of return for hear that of the

23 : récriminations il n'était pas pressé et ça recommençait. Les petits braillaient, on attrapait des baffes perdues (14/15).
recriminations he was not pressed and that recommenced. The little ones bawled, one caught of the slaps lost (6/7).

There are various linguistic elements that I could consider in this passage – scope for an essay alone – all blending to convey the speech and attitudes of Jo's parents from her standpoint. But I will not ponder on its free-indirect-speech dimension, and its merging with indirect speech, given that there is nothing really ambiguous in the passage; nor on how Rochefort 'breaks the rules' regarding direct quotation, in that she again refrains from the use of punctuation, particularly following the initial, stylistically more conventional, riposte on the mother's part (line '7'), immediately following Jo's interventional comment on their financial worries (line '9'):

10 : Je sais pas comment tu t' arranges... (14).

I know not how you yourself arrange... (6).

It is due to the way Jo presents this experience, or Rochefort's stylistic choices, that I do not simply *read* this rather long scene, I *hear* it. More than that, I feel part of it; mentally, I nod with empathy and, in parts, with sympathy. As Norrick notes: "[l]istenership is not a passive state, but an active involvement in the storytelling process (2007:137)".

While a sense of routine misery is conveyed in the repetitive 'disait/dit le père/ma mère...' – 'was saying/said the father/the mother' – what is also interesting to note is that Jo begins this passage

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using ‘papa’ and maman’ – ‘dad’ and ‘mum’ – until the fight; that is, she subtly gravitates from the informal toward the formal. In doing so, she distances herself from them, while not only provoking pity but a sense of intimacy – complicity – in her usage of conversational adverbs, like “d’ailleurs” (‘besides’) and “alors” (‘then’), adverbs lacking their literary modifiers ‘que’ (‘that’) and ‘et’ (‘and’) respectively, or the kind of incomplete elements that “[e]ncourage audience attention and participation”, in that “[t]hey require regularization (Norrick, 2007:137)”. A sense of the spontaneous is also indicated by the use of the abbreviated ‘ça’ – from ‘cela’, meaning ‘it’ in this context. Indeed, although *Les Petits Enfants* avoids ellipses and repetitions, and most phatic communication, examples such as these are frequent.

Below, I have placed Asher’s translation of the above passage, with the corresponding numbered lines²². I have highlighted in **bold** the lines upon which I would like to comment:

- 1 : *The store came to take back the TV because we couldn’t keep up the payments. Mama explained that it was because the baby died,*
- 2 : *that it certainly wasn’t her fault he didn’t live, and with her health the way it was things were already pretty sad and now if she*
- 3 : *couldn’t even have the TV; they took the thing away anyhow, and on top of it all when papa came home he began to holler that she let*
- 4 : *them step on her. Those bastards he said they come around begging you to take their lousy junk, they practically tell you they’re giving*
- 5 : *it to you free and then the least little bit overdue they turn around and take it back; if he had been home we’d still have the*
- 6 : ***damn thing.***
- 7 : ***Oh sure you’re pretty smart, she told him, anyone could see that from the way we live,*** and that started them off again
- 8 : ***blaming each other for everything since the day they met.***
- 9 : ***Things were pretty bad. They were counting every last penny.***
- 10 : ***I don’t know how you do it, papa said,*** I just don’t know how you do it, and mama said she would manage a lot better if there was no
- 11 : ***such thing as horse races. Papa said the parti-mutuel didn’t cost a cent, with the wins and losses it balanced out and besides he only***
- 12 : ***played it once in a while and if he couldn’t have even this one little pleasure then what would he have, life wasn’t such a ball as it was.***
- 13 : ***And what about me, what do I have?*** she said, I don’t have a thing, not a blessed bit of fun anytime in this stinking life working from
- 14 : ***morning till night just so his lordship can find everything just right when he comes home to stick his legs under the table, Shit said his***
- 15 : ***lordship That’s the least after a whole day pushing that mustard crap into tubes like a damn fool and getting home knocked out after***

²² More or less.

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16 : *an hour and a half trip standing up if he at least had a car it would be a little easier Oh this is just the time to talk about a car she*

17 : *said oh a real fine time! When we can't even get the TV back and Patrick needing shoes with those feet of his that never stop*

18 : *growing. It's not my fault Patrick said, You keep out of this papa told him it's none of your business, But my feet hurt Patrick said Are*

19 : *you going to shut your mouth yeas or no? Without the TV at night they didn't know what to do with themselves, they'd pick a fight*

20 : *over anything and everything. Papa would take longer over his drink on the way home, mama would ball him out, he would answer he*

21 : *was in no hurry to get home just for the fun of hearing her complaints, and off they went again. The kids would start screaming, we'd*

22 : *get hit over nothing (6/7).*

In line '**1**' above, the reader will notice that Asher refrained from using Rochefort's comma (before "because"). S/he may also recall Toolan's wise words about the rewards of looking at the language of a story's opening, and so notice that "texture and expectations" *have* indeed prevailed; Rochefort's comma again creates a sense of build-up, as her protagonist pauses momentarily to collect her thoughts, recalling the moment. The comma has also been left out in line '**2**' (after "sad"), as well as the "and" (before "that"); Asher's Jo simply gathers pace too quickly.

As Rochefort's Jo picks *up* the pace in line '**3**', Asher's slows it down by employing a semi-colon (after "TV"), and breaks it up altogether in line '**4**' with the use of a full stop (before "Those").

Equally crucial are lines '**5**' and '**6**

In line '**7**', I can only assume that Asher decided to exclude the speech marks of the mother's direct speech in an attempt to mirror the 'flow' of Rochefort's narrative. But I believe that Rochefort's employment of speech marks here is, a, to mimic the tone of the mother – it certainly has an audible quality; Norrick deems that direct quotations are not always authentic, in that they often have a "symbolic meaning for evaluation (2007:133)" on the narrator's part – b, to allow Jo breathing space to lament the family's financial situation, and c, give more impact to the subsequent, dramatic outpouring, which I feel gets lost without these quotation marks.

I have highlighted "papa said" in line '**10**' because, a, it is preceded by a comma where in Rochefort's text it is not, and b, simply to demonstrate how Asher, by keeping with the informal usage, has not alienated her protagonist – furthermore, unfortunately, the American "papa" and "mama" sound a little too upper-class for an English reader.

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In line '**13'**, Asher adds a question mark to the mother's rhetorical question "what do I have", while in line '**15'**, she opts for a capital T in "That's" (after "lordship"), possibly to offer a little structure, a few pointers for the reader. Strangely, in line '**16'**, she adds "standing up", which does not exist in the ST; I have personally never read that implication in Rochefort's narrative, but either way I would prefer to leave it alone – after all, "[meaning] is as much constituted by connotation, suggestion, implicature and absence as by what is actually and obviously there (Boase-Beier, 2010:9)". She also omits one of Rochefort's commas in the same line (after "earlier") – this passage is, in fact, a fine example of what I mean by Asher's narrative being, at times, "too clipped, too staccato"; it is often similar, I just feel that it could be much *more* similar, given that there must be a high degree of linguistic convergence between the two languages. In lines '**17**' and '**18**', she opts for conventional punctuation, in the use of an exclamation mark and a full stop respectively.

Lastly, in line '**19**', I have highlighted Asher's double use of "they", for Jo's reference to her parents, because she has used this pronoun where Jo's bluster in the ST begins to recede; indeed, rather than maintain a distance, for me, there is now a sense of acquiescence in the latter's tone, in her employment of the French alternative third-person plural "on" – as opposed to 'nous'.

Such a powerful passage. And what must have been a difficult passage with which to convince an editor in 1962. I wonder whether it would be *much* different today.

What I have endeavoured to demonstrate in this first chapter, other than my enthusiasm, is probably best summed up by David Herman, that "[a] fine-grained textual analysis can illuminate how narratives represent the moment-by-moment experiences of fictional minds, as well as the coloration that those experiences acquire from the characters' broader cognitive and emotional stances toward situations and events (2007:247)." Fascinatingly, much of my own fine-grained analysis so far has been to pick up on the use of simple commas, or the narrative's lack of, but I cannot overstate their significance, both in how one might interpret them in the ST and how one might translate them for one's target readership; and how they contribute to the ST's sense of "orality", the conversational: its voice. In the next chapters, I aim to 'rein in' four more stylistic

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aspects all adding to the dynamism of Rochefort's narrative, and again ask how replicable they are in translation. Before that, I have placed below my own translation of the above studied passage, in the hope that the reader will allow his/herself to simply 'go with its flow':

The shop came to take the telly back, because we hadn't been able to make the payments. Mum tried in vain to explain that it was because the baby had died, and that it wasn't her fault all the same if it hadn't lived, and with the health she had it already wasn't funny, and if on top she couldn't even have the telly, the thing was well and truly whipped away, and to top it all off when dad got home he began to bawl that she'd let herself be done, those bastards he said come and beg you to take their stuff, they say that they're offering you a gift so to speak and at the slightest delay they turn up and retrieve it; if he'd been there him the father the thing would still be there.

"Well with that you're more cunning than the rest," she told him, "only got to see the life we lead", and there they started to reproach each other for everything since the beginning.

They were going through a crisis. They were counting every sou.

I dunno how you manage it the father was saying, I really dunno how you manage it, and the mother was saying that without the betting office she'd certainly manage better. The father was saying that the betting office cost nothing the one and the other with the wins and losses which evened themselves out and besides he only played from time to time and if he didn't have that little pleasure then what would he have, life already wasn't so funny. And me what do I have the mum said, me I've nothing at all, not the least little amusement in this cowing existence always working from morning till night so your Lordship finds everything to his satisfaction on his return to put his feet under the table, Bleeding hell the father was saying it's the least having acted the twat all day filling tubes of pigging mustard and getting back knackered after an hour and a half of transport if only he had a motor that would relax him a bit, Oh! it's just the time to be thinking about a motor, oh! it's just the time! when we can't even have the telly back and Patrick who has no more shoes with his feet which won't stop growing, S'not my fault said Patrick, You shut up said the father, But my feet hurt said Patrick, Are you gonna shut it? In the evenings we didn't know what the fucking hell to do without the telly, any occasion was good for a slanging match. The father was lengthening the aperitifs, the mother bawled him out, he replied with how good it was to come home only to hear criticisms he was in no rush and it all started over. The little ones squalled, we copped the misaimed slaps.

Chapter 2, Section 1 ‘Register’ (in the mix)

“[a] language is not a unitary system of signs, but a collection of registers... each with its distinctive forms and appropriate social functions (Adamson, 1989:235)”

In keeping with the concept of the orality of Rochefort’s narrative, I turn to register, or what may be defined as her own hybrid style, which, as Hutton affirms, from “[a] cursory reading... gives “the impression of casual speech, a simple transcription of the speaking voice (1998:37)”. But, as already noted, it is more complex than that, and Rochefort’s écrit-parlé involves the juxtapositioning of, what is deemed by the French elite as, ‘hyper-standard’, ‘standard’ and ‘substandard’ language – the latter being characterized by incorrect grammar, slang and vulgarity. Still, I believe that there is more to it than just Hutton’s claim that it “constitutes a break with the system, establishing the presence of a non-conformist voice”, and that it is “in the light of politicized linguistic protectionism that Rochefort’s own subversive use of the French language must be considered (*Ibid*:40).”

Before elaborating on my point, I will offer a taste of Rochefort’s occasional “substandard” approach. This passage, it should be understood, follows on from Jo’s first ever sexual encounter, and what will be her last with Guido, the thirty-something Italian construction-site worker with whom she becomes hopelessly infatuated. On her return home to the humdrum, she is scolded for not having helped out with the usual chores at dinnertime. Here is how she depicts her feelings:

J’étais enragée. Je les aurais tués. Y compris le sale con*** de l’émission, à qui on demandait combien de kilomètres il y a entre Sparte et Lacédémone et qui restait comme une andouille* à se faire foutre*** de sa poire* par dix millions d’autres cons (47).
*I was enraged. I them would have killed. There comprised the dirty cunt***²³ of the programme to whom one was asking how many of kilometres it there has between Sparta and Lacedaemonia and who remained like a prat* to himself make fuck*** of his mug* by ten million of other cunts.*

²³ *** are Collins-Robert French-English dictionary translations, two out of which have three asterisks beside them, denoting their extreme vulgarity. * denotes impolite.

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No, the gloss does not make for pretty reading, but then nor does the context of the ST. And to shy away from both is, I believe, not only to misinterpret them, but to misinterpret all that which has preceded the passage.

Below is Asher's version:

I was wild. I could have killed them. Including the **dumb sucker** on the show, who they were asking how many miles there **were** between Sparta and Lacedaemonia and who was standing there like a bump on a log making a fool of himself in front of ten million other **idiots** (32).

It should be at least partly evident to the reader of this essay that I feel that the above translation is lacking the same impact. I have **highlighted** "were" in the first line just to point out that Rochefort employs a present tense verb here, thus adding to the sense of immediacy. For the American "dumb sucker", and "idiots", they are not only too weak but neither is repeated; all emphasis is thus lost. For my own version, I suppose that it is difficult to see how such a passage could ever come across as anything other than ugly, given the ugly context and Jo's ugly reaction to it. And yet, an aspect that I have recently found in my own translation subtly reflects what I want to look at next: the said juxtapositioning of high and low standard French, not just in the same paragraphs but often in the same sentence. I can only think that, by adding a little – imagined – free indirect discourse, when translating the above passage, I had succumbed to Jo's occasional dark wit, her ironic voice:

I was enraged. I would have killed them. Including the daft twat²⁴ on the programme, to whom one was asking how many kilometres there are between Sparta and Lacedaemonia and who remained like a tit having the piss taken out of his clock by ten million other twats.

In the **highlighted** text, I hear pompous mimicry, *which* Hutton finds in Jo's shorter register-mixes²⁵.

²⁴ Here is where I would feel the need to draw the line with an editor – and I momentarily contradict myself in this essay – because I honestly could not bring myself to employ the 'c' word – I am not too keen on my alternative, but I would argue its case for a translation always being part a translator's own voice.

²⁵ What I should make clear, however, is that the mixes to which Hutton refers are not always purely linguistic in the technical sense, but occasionally a particular usage of register in what one might deem an inappropriate context.

2.1 ‘high’ on sex

Les Petits Enfants is written in the traditional past historic tense – a literary simple past – which is considered very ‘high standard’. I have highlighted examples of it below:

C'était doux, cela ne finissait pas, j'étais adossée à l' arbre, Guido était à genoux devant moi, j'entendais les oiseaux, je ne savais
It was sweet, it no was finishing not, I was backed to the tree, Guido was to knees before me, I was hearing the birds, I no knew
 pas qu' il existait des choses aussi bonnes, et à la fin il y eut une limite, je fus obligée de gémir, Guido me serra
not that it existed of the things as good, and to the end it there had a limit, I was obliged of moan, Guido me squeezed
 follement, et gémit aussi, mes jambes ne pouvaient plus me porter. Il me coucha sur le sol, ou j'y tombai, je ne sais pas.
madly, and moaned also, my legs no were able more me carry. He me laid upon the soil or I there fell, I no know not.
 Il avait l'air heureux, il parla encore, et il recommença... (44).
He had the air happy, he spoke again, and he recommenced...

While some readers here may find that they are reading “against the grain”²⁶, I am intrigued by the passage’s flurry, its outburst of simple past tense usage; the reader of this essay will admit to the stark narrative contrast between the above passage and the one studied in the last section – and it ought now to place the latter in better context. S/he may also have noticed the “cela” (“it”) in the first line, which, as already mentioned, Rochefort normally contracts to the informal ‘ça’.

What this all indicates to me is that the ‘poetry’ of this passage was evidently Rochefort’s aim: nothing is arbitrary; there is a high level of iconicity of form, in its stream of consciousness and foregrounding of verbs, all echoing what the story is about; all conveying the scene from one new experience and sensation to the next; a scene temporarily lost in time and space, a temporary utopia.

²⁶ Remembering Jo’s age.

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I fundamentally agree with Hutton's stating that, for Rochefort, "sexual experiences can lead to a raising of consciousness, an insight into the workings of oppression", and that Jo's liaison with Guido is "certainly portrayed as having a liberating effect (1998:50)" – hence Jo's subsequent reaction toward the family environment. And although I said in my introduction that Rochefort invites the reader to read the novel's "disastrous unhappy ending against the backdrop of the saccharine romances read by the narrator's mother", there is nothing ironic about the language of this scene. Expressions *arguably* more ironic, to return to register-*mixing*, tend also to involve sex – other than the odd expression, an example of which is given below:

Papa et moi on se regarda (146).

Dad and me one oneself regarded

(as well as lacking punctuation, the incongruity lies in the informal use of "on" – 'we' – instead of the literary 'nous', with the past historic tense; what one would normally hear is 'Papa et moi, on s'est regardé', and see in a literary context 'Papa et moi nous regardâmes'. In my own translation, I have chosen to go with *Dad and me we looked at each other*, while Asher avoids the issue, with "Papa and I looked at each other (108)". Although I have attempted to keep with the spontaneous side of Jo's voice, however, I believe that neither translation truly captures the aspect of linguistic incongruity.)

The other literary tense associated with the past historic is the past anterior, the literary equivalent of the pluperfect but used only alongside the past historic in particular sentence constructions.

Below are examples of Rochefort's narrative that Hutton finds "humorously subversive (1998:153)", because of the given contexts, like Jo's sexual liaison with a young boy:

dès qu' on **fut couché** sous les arbres dans un coin tranquille il **releva** mon pull-over (107).

as soon as we had lain under the trees in a corner tranquil he lifted up my pullover.

(the past anterior and past historic are highlighted respectively)

Or referring to Jo's first sexual encounter with Philippe (her husband-to-be):

Dès qu'il m' **eut prise** je **fus** heureuse (153).

As soon as he me had taken I was happy

What I personally find interesting about these passages, Herman sums up with “[t]he basic idea behind what cognitive linguists call conceptualization or construal is that *one and the same situation or event can be linguistically encoded in different ways – ways that reflect different possibilities for mentally construing the world* (2007: 251)” – my italics; I feel that, in such passages, Rochefort aims to prove that there are many, equally valid, ways of “construing the world.” And perhaps this *is* what Hutton is saying.

Referring to ‘diglossia’ – “the ‘Classical’... or ‘High’, which is... both in form and in function a literary language [...] and the ‘Colloquial’... or ‘Low’, which supplies the medium of ordinary conversation (Short, 1988: 205/206)”, Adamson defines the latter as “[t]he form of the language acquired by children, whereas mastery of the former is chiefly accomplished by means of formal education (*Ibid*, 1988: 205/206)”. This would suggest, then, that Jo is an ‘unrealistic’ character, if one is to accept an *almost ‘time and place’ narration*. Yet ‘realism’ in the ‘real’ world should not be an issue, as, keeping with Hutton’s idea of irony, Fludernick rightly states, “[t]he double levelled ‘intention’ of the discourse in ironic passages... is not purely linguistic phenomenon but can be explained as the result of interpretative work brought to bear on the juxtaposition between the wording of the text and (by implication incompatible) cultural and textual norms of the text as constructed by the reader and the realistic textual world (1993:440)”.

Indeed, Adamson might even argue that such a technique as Rochefort’s is not as original or subversive as Hutton would have it be. Although she recognises that the two halves of the lexicon

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have distinct values, and that they can be used individually to represent “well-defined perspectives or value-systems”, in order “to convey sense of a total apprehension, writers have had to employ *both halves in counterpoint*” – my italics. “The effect of this antiphonal interplay varies from genre to genre, but always it produces the image of a *voice*, whether of author, character, or narrator, speaking to us from within the text (in Short, 1988:209)”.

While I find all the above comments applicable, I am also convinced that Rochefort is simply saying something very positive about sex, and her language is ‘heightened’ in reflexion of it.

Whatever the interpretation, the lines have an impact in the ST, and if, as Bush claims, “[t]he task of the translator is... to try and ensure that the pleasure of reading is reproduced effectively (2006:2)”, then something stylistically similar is required in my target text.

Below is Asher's answer to the last two lines studied of Rochefort's narrative, with the verbs **highlighted**; the penultimate line comes first:

As soon as we **were lying** under the trees in a quiet place he pulled up my sweater (78)

From the moment he **took** me I was happy (114)

I suppose that Asher has allowed her translated lines to read fluently in the Venuti sense of the word – they disguise the fact that they are translations. But if that may be down to the lack of perfect tense usage in American English, then surely the effect could have been all the greater by using pluperfect tenses.

Below are my own translations, respectively, with verbs **highlighted**:

*The moment we **had lain** beneath the trees in a tranquil place he lifted up my pullover.*

*From the moment he **had taken** me I was **undone**.*

In order to produce something similar to Rochefort's above narrative, in the second sentence, I have taken the liberty of compensating a little with an Austen-esque, *double entendre* "undone", which, hopefully, replicates the kind of humour to which Hutton refers, except in a slightly different way. What cannot be denied is that the passages are a far cry from the earlier example of Jo's "substandard" French.

What the reader of *Les Petits Enfants* would also not deny is that, during Jo's sexually active passages, a sense of routine claustrophobia is supplanted by one of emancipation, where time actually moves forward. And this is very important. For Bridgeman, one "[s]hould not neglect how useful spatial information is in keeping track of what is going on. Our association of certain locations with the events that occur in them is particularly strong in our reading of narrative (2007:56)". My interest, though, will be a typical 'stuffy' passage, where time appears to stand still, again fuelling the narrative's conversational dimension, and a passage in which Asher surrenders to the 'explanatory' with the mere addition of a three letter word.

Chapter 2, Section 2 ‘Time and Space’ (jumps... births, deaths and... marriage)

“To read a narrative is to engage with an alternative world that has its own temporal and spatial structures (Bridgeman 2007:52)”

Chapters are of varying lengths in *Les Petits Enfants*, as are sections within the chapters; all appears loosely arranged. If, however, according to Bridgeman, variations in the duration of scenes can be used to show which are most important, and that a scene which is narrated briefly will typically be considered less important than one which takes many pages to narrate, and, furthermore, a scene which is narrated more than once may show a narrator’s obsession (2007:54), then one might conclude that Jo cares very little for her family, and has an unhealthy appetite for sex. I say this because, to my count, 6 births and one stillbirth are covered in the first six pages alone, while Jo’s initial acknowledgement of Guido, following straight through to the sexual liaison, covers a whole nine pages. But of course this is what Herman means when he asserts that for narrative to be classed as such, “[a]n event sequence must... involve some kind of noteworthy disruption of an initial state of equilibrium by an unanticipated and often untoward event or chain of events (2007:10)”. My interest here is with the abundant births and deaths, time which, for Jo, according to Hutton, “passes both painfully slowly and with all the rapidity which characterizes an inexorable process (1998:55)”.

This again brings me back to the *orality* of the narrative.

Bridgeman believes that “[o]ur emotional engagement with a narrative is often linked to temporal parameters (boredom, suspense) or spatial parameters (claustrophobia etc...), often through empathy with the protagonist’s experience of his/her world (2007:63)”, and that – although I would argue that there is a minimum of what she calls “spatio-temporal stability” – “our emotional

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engagement is linked to those temporal parameters", and "[i]f these are not consistently provided or their uncertainty is highlighted in a given narrative, we experience *disorientation* and a degree of unease as an *essential* part of our engagement with the narrative (*Ibid*:64)" – my italics. This "disorientation", I claim, is but another way in which Jo draws the reader into her time and space. She spends much of the former staring out of her cramped bedroom window, when not, due to the sheer number of children, obliged to manage the rest of the family in the cramped apartment of a typically cramped apartment block. Even her pensive moments are desperately repetitive.

Below is a passage in which she momentarily ponders her mother's failings:

Sur leur commode dans leur chambre, il y avait une photo; c'était du temps où ils s' étaient mariés; ils étaient sur un vélo-moteur; elle avait des cheveux longs, et une jupe large étalée; ils riaient. On aurait dit une jeune fille comme celles que je voyais aujourd' hui à la grille, se faire emmener en virée sur les scooters. On n' aurait pas dit nos parents.
On their dressing table in their bedroom, it there had a photo; it was of the time where they themselves were married; they were on a moped; she had of the hair long, and a skirt wide spread; they were laughing. One would have said a young girl like those that I saw today at the gate, themselves make take away in turn on the scooters. One no would have not said our parents.

Elle **avait** la peau sèche, et qu' est-ce qu' elle avait fait à ses cheveux pour en avoir perdu la moitié? Elle regardait droit devant elle, sur rien. Même en me forçant, je ne pouvais pas croire que c'était la même fille, **sur le vélo-moteur**.
She had the skin dry, and what is it that she had done to her hairs for of them have lost the half? She regarded right before her, on nothing. Even in me forcing, I no was able not believe that it was the same girl, on the moped.

Depuis qu' elle n' allait plus à l' usine, elle faisait les escaliers de la Cité, ça rapportait juste assez pour qu' on ne nous enlève pas le salaire unique, ils avaient fait le calcul (30).
Since that she no was going to the factory, she was doing the stairs of the estate, it brought back just enough for that one no us take away not the salary unique, they had made the calculation.

If, as Bridgeman observes, "narration is a method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events reported (2007:53)", then the second paragraph above looks thoroughly ambiguous, an ambiguity achieved, quite simply, by the first word **highlighted** – "avait"; 'had'. Yet it is but a disguised disfluency, fuelling a sense of orality, created not so much by erratically upsetting verb sequences, but by the frugality of language; it 'lacks' time and spatial markers. Jo momentarily brings her narrative back to the time of narration: 'She **had** the skin

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dry', before an immediate return to the time that the photo was taken, with a pluperfect tense: 'and what is it that she **had done** to her hairs'. But just to make sure that the reader does not get lost, she recapitulates, at the end of the paragraph, as one actually might outside the literary world: 'on the moped' – one may recall Norrick's comment about the "flexibility of the human voice", which alone here would suffice to convey a brief time-shift.

I have **highlighted** Asher's translation of the salient paragraph below:

... She could have been some girl like the ones I saw nowadays at the gate, waiting to be picked up for a ride on a scooter. You wouldn't have thought it was our parents.

Her skin was dried out now, and what did she do to her hair, to lose half of it like that? She looked straight ahead, at nothing. As hard as I tried, I just couldn't believe it was the same girl, on the motorbike.

Now that she had quit the factory she did the stairways in the Project (19)...

"The machinations of ambiguity are at the heart of literature," Jean Boase-Beier once told our class²⁷.

And it is *this*, however temporary, ambiguity that draws the reader into Jo's time and space, how s/he, thus, hears her desperate voice.

In the **highlighted** text above, the reader of this essay will notice that Asher has again explained the passage away by the avoiding the potential ambiguity, with "**now**". As a side note, by not using Jo's pluperfect tense in the second part of the sentence – "**what did she do to her hair**" – the reader of the novel is also not naturally conveyed to the mother's 'somewhere between then and now'.

Again, in this, my second chapter, I have endeavoured to demonstrate what can be gained in translation from stylistic analysis – or simple 'reading for pleasure', for that matter. As for my chapter's second section, it would perhaps best be summed up by repeating Boase-Beier: that "[meaning] is as much constituted by connotation, suggestion, implicature and absence as by what is actually and obviously there."

I will briefly return to her idea of the machinations of ambiguity in the last chapter. Before that, I have placed my own translation of the above studied passage below:

²⁷ During a lesson in Stylistics in 2010 at the UEA

On their chest of drawers in their room, there was a photo; it was of the time when they'd gotten married; they were on a moped; she had long hair, and a wide skirt spread out; they were laughing. You would have thought her a young girl like those I'd see today at the gate, getting themselves taken off on scooter jaunts. You wouldn't have thought them our parents.

She had dry skin, and what had she done to her hair to have lost half of it? She was looking right before her, at nothing. As much as I tried, I couldn't believe it was the same girl, **on the moped...**

Chapter 3, Section 1 ‘Free Indirect Discourse’ (those “machinations of ambiguity”)

*“Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end (Woolf, in *The Common Reader* 212, 2004:70)”*

Concisely, ‘Free Indirect Discourse’ – henceforth ‘FID’ – was, as per Gloria G. Jones, first identified and named in 1912 by Saussure's student, Charles Bally, as *style indirect libre* and translated as "free indirect style", a narrative technique which exposes shifts in consciousness, and develops characters in ways that simple direct and indirect discourse cannot (2004:70). One can think of ‘Free Indirect Speech’ – (FIS) the spoken – and ‘Free Indirect Thought’ (FIT) – the thought. Jones also offers an ample example of the technique below:

1, Mary turned, stared, and asked herself, Are these the tulips I saw here yesterday? (direct speech).

2, Mary turned, stared, and asked herself if these were the tulips she had seen the day before (indirect speech).

3, Mary turned and stared. **Were these the tulips she had seen here yesterday? (FID)** (*Ibid*:70).

What the reader of this essay will notice is that the highlighted FID sentence above is grammatically identical to indirect speech; the first person pronoun is replaced by the third person pronoun while the present tense “verb” (are) is replaced by “were”. But it is not the third person (heterodiegetic) narrator who is asking the question; it is the character asking herself. It is a stylish, economical way for a author/narrator to convey another character's words or thoughts, but it can also lead to ambiguity, especially when there is not necessarily a change in register or style – indeed, out of context, the above example already reads ambiguously to me; the narrator could actually be asking the reader.

For the representation of consciousness, FID is also found in first person narrative, “with internal focalization (first person, figural narrative),” Fludernick explains. She claims that it “usually occurs in

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a present tense context and is then formally *indistinguishable* from direct speech (1993:88)" – my Italics. I have placed my own example of Fludernick's description below, from *Les Petits Enfants*. To contextualise the passage, the family's two weeks holiday in the country has come to an end, a holiday covering a whole chapter and throughout which Jo simply records the conversations that arise between her parents and the other holidaymakers in the hotel; she has also spent a whole fortnight without Guido:

La conversation se mit sur le boulot, chacun racontait le sien, on comparait les avantages et les inconvénients; ça s' animait.
The conversation itself put on the job, each recounted it his, one compared the avantages and the inconveniences; it itself animated.

Dommage que ce soit fini on commençait vraiment à s' y mettre, helas! les meilleures choses n'ont qu'un temps.
Damage that it be finished one was starting truly to itself there put, alas! The better things no have but a time.

D'ailleurs dans le fond on aime bien retrouver son petit chez-soi. On est content de partir mais on est content aussi de revenir (76).
Besides in the end one likes well re-find one's little home. One is content to leave but one is content also to come back.

Passages such as those **highlighted** above are plenty in *Les Petits Enfants*, and each of them, interestingly, concerns Jo's ambivalent relationship with her parents. Fludernick states that FID, in serving the needs of summary and condensation, is thus "specifically designed to disregard, mute or warp propositional meaning (1993:435)". What, then, might be ambiguous about the highlighted text above? Well, does the reader attribute the words to Jo's parents, as in an indirect commentary on Jo's part; is this just another example of her deprecating, ironic tone? Or does s/he attribute them directly to Jo? Jo must, after all, be excited about finally getting back to Guido. I have a third theory, however: my interpretation of the above text is that Jo allows for a moment's intimacy between the reader and her parents – who *are* victims of the state and deserve a little sympathy.

It is only my interpretation; "[n]othing is tidy in the study of narrative, (2007:40)," insists Porter Abbott.

Below is Asher's translation of the studied passage:

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The conversation started up about jobs, everyone told what he did, they compared the advantages and disadvantages, things got a little livelier. **Too bad it's over we were really starting to get into the swing, alas the best of things must end. Besides when you come right down to it it's nice to get back to your own little place. You're glad to get away but you're glad to get back too** (55).

Unfortunately, there are no real machinations of ambiguity here for me; nothing draws me into the text. And yet it is clear to see that she used an equal amount of present tense verbs – **bold** and underlined. Nevertheless, I wonder whether the ambiguity created in Rochefort's narrative is partly down to Jo's first verb being in the present subjunctive – "Dommage que ce soit fini" – where there would be no change in past tense narrative – 'C'était (it was) dommage que ce soit fini' – and Asher's use of the English modal verb "must", for which there exists no past tense nor any kind of verb inflection in the present tense, where Rochefort used 'avoir', the verb 'have': "les meilleures choses n'ont qu' un temps".

For me, Asher's present tense verbs read like any of her protagonist's 'odd' interspersions of present tense verbs, and, therefore, like the latter's *own* opinions. Primarily, I base my interpretation on all that has gone before: that is, Asher's Jo not achieving that sense of spontaneous orality from the outset.

Below I have placed my own version:

The conversation turned to jobs, each talking of his own, they were comparing the advantages and the inconveniences; it was getting lively. **Pity it was over we were starting to really get into it, alas! The better things are but for a time. Besides in the end we enjoy returning to our little comfort-zone. We're happy to leave but we're happy to come back too.**

Hopefully, it is equally ambiguous for the reader.

In the last, brief, section, I will have come full circle: when Jo's narration takes an unexpected leap backward, it would appear that she has by now used up her quota of "strange" commas.

Chapter 3, Section 2 **'Stream of consciousness' revisited**

And I return to Rochefort's claiming to have written *Les Petits Enfants* "in one go!" Her "short, little book... each strange comma placed in horror".

At least it *is* a short, little book.

Having already demonstrated that stream of consciousness narration can be either punctuation-less or appear seemingly over-punctuated, I would like to finish by donating Linda Asher the last word. This is in order to reiterate my appreciation both of her translation and what were evidently her aims: to mirror the text stylistically; her translation and her aims certainly *have* my respect. I have said that I did not want to talk in terms of "good" or "bad", but I trust that my reader will allow me the privilege of maintaining that I am in awe of what Asher achieved in an early 1960s climate, as well as repeating that her translation *should* be read, without the French, if one hopes to get a taste of Rochefort's narrative.

But I also hope to have convinced my reader that it is now time that the novel were updated in translation.

It is a short book indeed, and I wonder whether the translated passage below indicates that Asher had finally thrown caution to the wind, or whether her editor had given up, or whether she had ultimately detected that elusive *voice*, whether she suddenly felt very confident and *knew* what the mood should be, what the characters should say and what the register of the language should be.

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Below, in the first paragraph – it is all Asher's translation; my own can be found on page 61 of the attached translation – Jo enthuses – ironically or not, it bears no significance here – about love, about Philippe; the young man with whom she hopes to spend the rest of her life. Each comma virtually bounces off the page – in **bold** – until the second paragraph, where Jo, with equal zeal, digresses in her typical fashion, by abruptly reminding the reader of Lillian, a friend of hers with whom she shared the boys; and she recalls her sexual promiscuity with the fear of what might have been. I have **highlighted** Asher's *one* additional comma, but, as with Rochefort's, the narrative *does* 'lose itself' momentarily:

... Just be **happy**, that's **all**, the one thing a person has to do in life is be **happy**, there's nothing **else**, **nothing**, and to be happy you've got to **love**, you've got to be two people who live for each other without paying any attention to the other **stuff**, who build a nest to hide their happiness in and protect it from attack.

When I told him I was pregnant, and it shouldn't have been any surprise it had to happen with our **methods**, we could never separate and we even put it back in the excitement of the moment there's nothing more dangerous than that poor Liliane had told me that, in fact with all her information it hadn't done her any good she had died and in a rotten way the poor girl, that scared me, but when I told Philippe he picked me up and swung me round in the air like a nut. I really like that better... (117/118).

If only Rochefort's novel had been a little longer. But in terms of its stylistic impact, maybe less *is* more.

Conclusion:

Margaret-Anne Hutton is one of the few academics to have written anything comprehensive on the works of Christiane Rochefort. And as an aficionado of her witty and colloquial style, she advises the reader to remain alert “to the ambiguities of the narrative voice, because the apparent simplicity of the retrospective narrative can be misleading (1998:34)”.

I do concur.

My aims in this essay have been multiple in my endeavour to highlight *some* of the stylistic choices that Rochefort made in order to generate those indispensable “ambiguities”, which go to shape her protagonist’s almost *audible* voice, and so draw her ‘listener’ in.

I have attempted to demonstrate how the crafting of that voice relies upon a ‘stream of consciousness’ technique in many guises. I began at the novel’s beginning and ended at its end. I started out with and finished on those “strange” commas, hopefully persuading my reader that there is nothing strange about them at all. Furthermore, I have striven to convince him/her that Rochefort’s style is anything but formulaic, of which she has been lazily accused; perhaps the French literary hierarchy, of male majority, still feel threatened by the elusive Christiane Rochefort.

Firstly, I introduced the enigmatic writer to the reader, based on what little information there is. I discussed her work and how it has been received in France: not always been favourably. In chapter one, I presented a short sample of *Les Petits Enfants*, insisting that its first line offered enough stylistic distinction for an impression of the rest. I elaborated on this concept and demonstrated how a sense of ‘orality’ is, thus, accomplished and maintained. Equally, I asked whether the translated lines of Linda Asher’s corresponding passages produce the same effects – for each example, I have asked this same question. In chapter two, I considered the novel’s register, revealing a fusion of both

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'high' and 'low' varieties. I considered time and space, time-jumps back and forth amid the more claustrophobic spaces. And again, I demonstrated how the coalescence of these concepts creates the novel's audible quality. In chapter three, before returning to the commas, I considered the ambiguous use of free indirect discourse, how the protagonist offers teasing glimpses of her parents' perspectives, thus keeping the reader fully engaged.

Naturally, then, another aim was to prove that, while Rochefort's work has a place in studies of contemporary France, it should also be read from the viewpoint of recent theoretical developments in Narratology Studies.

Another important aim was to reveal the benefits of stylistic analysis in translation, how, from such readings of the ST, a translator might reach a "full and detailed picture of the inferred author's choices", as Jean-Boase-Beier again told our class. It can only help. In 1988, Toolan wrote of "[I]nguistic descriptions", that they "may not always be able to explain what is in a passage of literary narrative that makes it particularly effective or striking or moving, but such descriptions can help to make us more aware of the kinds of distinct, even unique, verbal texture a text may have, and more aware of how if a story was narrated – worded – otherwise, it would have created a very different effect. *It would, in fact, be a different story* (1988:231)" – my italics; with Rochefort's text, I have gone completely against the grain of my writing in translation; I have translated in a way that I never thought I could, "bumpy" bits and. And I think that the text is better for it; it is more *it* and less *me*, and, what is more, I like the feeling. I have truly found what the author's voice says to me in my translation.

I hope, then, to have proven that it is time for Rochefort's *Les Petits Enfants* to be updated in translation.

My final aim was to promote the novel, and I would like to believe that my reader has become at least intrigued. During my viva, where I had to convince Jean-Boase-Beier, BJ Epstein and Theo

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Hermans that my project was worthwhile, the latter told me that I was, in fact, "obsessed" with Rochefort's novel. I smiled discreetly, and smiled more openly in recollection of the event the following morning, when receiving my copy of *Kinder unserer Zeit*, von Christian Rochefort, in the post, the German translation of *Les Petits Enfants*, translated by Walter Maria Guggenheimer. I was intrigued to see how it had been translated. Theo Hermans was absolutely right.

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My Translation of Certain Chapters and Passages of Christiane
Rochefort's *Les Petits Enfants du Siècle*



Chapter 1

I was born of benefits and a bank holiday morning stretching out, blessed, to the sound of “I love you You love me” played to a sweet trumpet backing. It was the beginning of winter, it felt good in bed, nothing mattered.

In mid-July, my parents introduced themselves at the hospital. My mother was having contractions. She was examined, and told that she wasn’t yet ready. My mother insisted that she was having contractions. She’d need a good couple of weeks, said the nurse; she ought to tighten up her corset.

But could we nevertheless not register the birth now? asked my dad. And what would we register? said the nurse: a girl, a boy, or a calf? We were sent away brusquely.

Bugger said my father no luck, we miss the bonus for a couple o’ weeks. He looked at his wife’s belly with rancour. Nothing could be done.

We went home by metro. There were the dances, but we couldn’t dance.

I was born 2nd August. That was my correct date, since I resulted from All Saints Day. But the impression remained, that I was slow. Furthermore I’d messed up the holidays, retaining my parents in Paris during the shutdown of the factory. I was not doing things right.

I was nevertheless, on the whole, early: Patrick had hardly taken my place in my cot than I was showing myself capable, by holding on, of leaving the room as soon as he started to bawl. In the end I can really say that it’s Patrick who taught me to walk.

When the twins, after having for a long time been misplaced in different hospitals, were finally returned to us – at least we could suppose that it was really them, in any case it was twins – I was already dressing myself and I could hoist onto the table the cutlery, the salt, the bread and the tube of mustard, recognise the towels in the rings.

“And may you grow quickly,” said my mother, “that you may help me a little.”

She was already peaky when I knew her; she had collapsed organs; she was unable to go the factory more than one week in a row, because she worked standing up; after the birth of Chantal she stopped completely, besides we weren’t at an advantage, with the one salary payment, and especially for what she earned, without talking about the complications with the benefits at each Termination of Work, and what she was going to have on her plate at the house with five little children to occupy herself, they calculated that in the end it wasn’t worth the trouble, at least if the baby lived.

At that moment I could already help out quite a bit, go for the bread, push the twins in their double pram, the length of the estate, so that they get some air, and keep an eye on Patrick, who was early him as well, unfortunately. He wasn’t three when he put a kitten in the washing machine; that time all the same dad gave him a good un: the machine wasn’t even finished paying for.

Chantal finally survived, thanks to such extraordinary measures that the mother remained eternally marvelled by them, and would not tire of recounting the tale to the other hags, and how she'd let out a cry on seeing her little girl all bare between blocks of ice, and that the doctor had told her there was no other way of saving her, and he was right. Because of that, she had a sort of preference for Chantal, as much as you could talk of preferences with her; but still she looked after her completely, while the others were for me, including afterwards Catherine, even when she was still a little baby.

I was starting to go to school. In the morning I was giving the boys breakfast, I was taking them to nursery, and I was going to my school. At lunchtime we stayed at the canteen. I liked the canteen, you sit down and plates arrive all full; it's always good what comes on plates which are all full; the other girls in general didn't like the canteen, they found it bad; I wonder what they had at home; when I asked them it was nevertheless the same thing as us, the same brand, coming from the same shops, except the mustard, that dad brought directly from the factory; us we put mustard on everything.

In the evening, I was bringing the boys home and leaving them in the yard, to play with the others. I was going up to get the money and back down for the shopping. Mum was making the dinner, dad was coming home and turning on the telly, mum and me we'd do the washing up, and they went to bed. Me, I stayed in the kitchen, to do my homework.

Now, our flat was good. Before, we were living in the 13th arrondissement, a dirty room with the toilet on the landing. When the area had been demolished, they'd put us here; we were priority; on that estate large families were priority. We'd received the number of rooms to which we had right according to the number of children. The parents had a room the boys another, I was sleeping with the babies in the third; we had a shower room, the washing machine had arrived when the twins were born, and a kitchen-cum-lounge where we ate; it's in the kitchen, where the table was, that I did my homework. That was my time: what a pleasure when they were all docked, and I found myself alone in the night and the silence! In the day I didn't hear the noise, I didn't take notice; but in the evening I heard the silence. The silence began at ten o'clock: the radios quietened down, the squawkings, the voices, clinkings of washing-up; one by one, the windows went out. At half-past ten it was over. Nothing more. The desert. I was alone. Oh! how calm and peaceful it was, the people asleep, the black windows, save one or two behind which someone was staying up like me, alone, enjoying his peace! I was beginning to like my homework little by little. Through the wall, the father's snoring, indicating there was nothing more to fear for a good bit of time; sometimes a noise from the babies: Chantal who was suffocating, lying on her stomach; Catherine having a nightmare; I had only to move them a little and it was over, everything returned to normal, I could come back.

Everybody said that I really loved my brothers and sisters, that I was a real little mum. The hags would see me passing, pushing Catherine, pulling Chantal, gathering the boys, and they'd say to mother that I was a "real little mum". On saying that they'd lean down to me with washed-out faces like they were going to blub, and I'd back off to save myself. The hags were full of illnesses, about which they wouldn't stop talking with the details, especially in the stomach, and all the people that they knew were equally ill.

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Most of them had tumours, and we'd wonder whether it was cancerous or not, when it was cancerous they'd die, and we'd contribute toward the wreath. Mum didn't have a tumour, she had albumin and with her pregnancy it was strictly necessary for her to avoid eating salt, which again complicated everything, because we were cooking twice over.

When the baby died at birth, I believe that I had no real grief. It just seemed funny to us to see her come home with nothing that time. She wasn't getting used to it either, hovering about without knowing what to do, while the work around was accumulating. Then she got back into it little by little, and we all finished by forgetting the poor little baby.

Chantal then was walking and starting to speak, she was pulling on my mum's dress and wouldn't stop repeating; where likka bre, where likka bre? She had been promised. ah! Leave me alone, my mum replied as always, you're tiring me out! Let me wipe your nose. Blow. Chantal had a cold: in winter, she was only a cold, from end to end, with from time to time for a change a bronchitis or a sinusitis. That year the twins had whooping cough.

To keep Chantal quiet, I told her that the Little Brother hadn't been able to come, there weren't enough cabbages, but he'd definitely come next time.

"Lord save us," said my mum, "I have enough on with you lot!"

The shop came to take the telly back, because we hadn't been able to make the payments. Mum tried in vain to explain that it was because the baby had died, and that it wasn't her fault all the same if it hadn't lived, and with the health she had it already wasn't funny, and if on top she couldn't even have the telly, the thing was well and truly whipped away, and to top it all off when dad got home he began to bawl that she'd let herself be done, those bastards he said come and beg you to take their stuff, they say that they're offering you a gift so to speak and at the slightest delay they turn up and retrieve it; if he'd been there him the father the thing would still be there.

"Well with that you're more cunning than the rest," she told him, "only got to see the life we lead", and there they started to reproach each other for everything since the beginning.

They were going through a crisis. They were counting every *sou*.

I dunno how you manage it the father was saying, I really dunno how you manage it, and the mother was saying that without the betting office she'd certainly manage better. The father was saying that the betting office cost nothing the one and the other with the wins and losses which evened themselves out and besides he only played from time to time and if he didn't have that little pleasure then what would he have, life already wasn't so funny. And me what do I have the mum said, me I've nothing at all, not the least little amusement in this cowering existence always working from morning till night so your Lordship finds everything to his satisfaction on his return to put his feet under the table, Bleeding hell the father was saying it's the least having acted the twat all day filling tubes of pigging mustard and getting back knackered after an hour and a half of transport if only he had a motor that would relax him a bit, Oh! it's just the time to be thinking about a motor, oh! it's just the time! when we can't even have the telly back and Patrick who has no more shoes with his feet which won't stop growing, S'not my fault said Patrick, You shut up said the father, But

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my feet hurt said Patrick, Are you gonna shut it? In the evenings we didn't know what the fucking hell to do without the telly, any occasion was good for a slanging match. The father was lengthening the aperitifs, the mother bawled him out, he replied with how good it was to come home only to hear criticisms he was in no rush and it all started over. The little ones squalled, we copped the misaimed slaps.

I'm horrified by scenes. The noise that it makes, the time that it takes. I was boiling inside, waiting for them to tire themselves out, that they bury themselves inside their sheets, and that I remain alone in my kitchen, in peace.

One day, a lady called by at the house, and asked whether the children were going to catechism. It was a Thursday, after lunch, I was dressing the girls to take them out. Mum was ironing; the lady was explaining the advantages that she would have by sending the children to catechism; mum didn't have an opinion; if Patrick went to the cubs, said the lady, he would go out on trips on Thursdays and Sundays. Mum unplugged the iron; she wondered if the twins were big enough as well, for these trips out on Thursdays and Sundays. On the other hand, me she needed. The lady explained that the youth club was not obligatory, that I needed only to attend catechism one hour per week, after class. My mother didn't know, she'd have to ask the father. I was finishing buttoning up Chantal's coat. I said: "Me I'd like to go there to catechism."

My mother looked at me shocked. The lady gave me such a smile that I almost regretted it. She reminded me of a white cheese.

Neither was against it. "Oh! that way it'll be done," said my mother.

On Mondays, coming out of school, I'd take a left instead of right, and returned an hour and a half later at the house, when everything was ready. It was worth it.

The mistress opened the book, and said:

"What is God? God is a pure spirit, infinitely perfect."

Never in all my life had I heard such an extraordinary thing. God is a pure spirit infinitely perfect. Whatever could that be? My mouth stayed open. I'd lost the thread of the rest. I woke up hearing the mistress who was saying, more loudly, eying us more severely:

"What is God?"

"God is a pure spirit infinitely perfect," replied the others calmly. I hadn't been able to reply with them, I didn't understand the phrase, not one word. It was a bad start.

The lesson came to an end. I'd practically not heard it. I stood up like everybody, I walked home, I was preoccupied.

I don't know what happened that night at the house, who bawled and at whom, what we ate, and where the washing up went. I was turning the phrase around every which way, looking for which end to grasp; and I couldn't manage it. White, smooth and closed like an egg, the pure spirit infinitely perfect remained there in my head, I fell asleep with it without having been able to crack it.

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Mlle Garret wasn't laying an egg every week. In general it was, save the holy story which was nicer than the non-holy story, and, well, without dates, mind-numbing and complicated explanations, like "if a worker is needed to build a house, it has been truly necessary for a God to create heaven and earth." I really didn't see why for example, and had an altercation with Mlle Garret, who didn't understand why I didn't understand, and told me that I was being "argumentative". It was a bizarre discussion, it wasn't me being argumentative, but them with their worker. But when people dig their heels in there is nothing can be done. She told me that I hadn't to try and understand, but to learn by heart, that was all one asked of me. But me I can't recite by heart a thing I don't understand, it's like I was trying to swallow a dish cloth. I was bored, Mlle Garret said that I was being a "cynic", and if it hadn't been the walk alone getting home, I would have dropped it, when, one day, Mlle Garret tells us:

"Man is composed of a body and of a soul."

Mystery. Again the thing was activated. I let the others sail away in the detailed explanations, and I contemplated my second egg; it appeared simpler than the first, for the grammar in any case. It was the sense of it which wasn't so. Man is composed of a body and of a soul. And me?

"Josyane? hey, Josyane, are you dreaming?

"Does everyone have a soul?"

"Of course," said Mlle Garret with a light shrug of the shoulders. I would have asked more questions but Mlle Garret didn't like that, she immediately got annoyed. I took away my second egg. I thus had a soul, like everyone, Mlle Garret had been positive. In a sense, although not quite knowing just what it was, it didn't come as a complete surprise.

On the catechism days, Ethel Lefranc, who didn't go, brought Chantal back from the nursery at the same time as her little brother; the boys could look after themselves now, I only had to pick them up along the way.

It was evening. Almost all the windows of the new blocks, at the other side of the avenue, were lit up. The new blocks were more and more inhabited. One block finished, and hup it was filled.

I'd seen them built. Now they were almost full. Long, high, up on the plain, they looked like boats. The wind blew on the hilltop, between the houses. I loved to go through there. It was big, and beautiful; and frightening. Whenever I passed close enough, I'd think they were going to fall on top of me. Everybody looked minuscule, and even the blocks on our estate against those seemed like play cubes. People swarmed around like mini beasts beneath street lights. Voices, radios, coming from the houses, I could see I could hear it all. It felt like I was very far away and my stomach felt a little bit queasy, or perhaps indeed it was my soul. I retrieved the kids. I returned home.

"Go quickly for the milk" said my mother, "I've not had the time Chantal has another fever oh! that one when she won't have something. Take the change on the sideboard. Take out the rubbish at the same time, and you'll get some *râpé*, and the bread, you'll think about bringing the pram in coming back, and check the post at the same time, hurry up, your dad'll be here you ought to be already back."

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If Mlle Garret had been correct she had a soul her as well, I would have made sure to ask her but the mother went into hospital and I dropped the catechism for a time and then the idea had left me. Nicolas was born February, before his due date.

For a moment I had believed that it was over. She was so peaky since the dead baby, and perhaps she'd had everything taken out at the same time, since when she was talking about it having everything taken out. Everybody was growing, even Catherine in spite of her slowness was managing to button herself up on her own, I saw the day coming when they'd be all sorted, where I'd have bugger all to do anymore; and everything was starting again from scratch.

Thanks to Nicolas we'd be able to have the washing machine serviced and that it was a good thing because otherwise the nappies, and I was pissed off with nappies, pissed, pissed, pissed off. We could have the telly back, which served me as well because, when it was there, we had more peace. After that, with a stroke of luck, we could perhaps think about the motor. It was that that they were aiming at now, rather than the fridge, the mother would have liked a fridge but the father was saying that it was definitely his turn to have some well-being, not always his wife's, and with the tiredness for coming from one suburb to another he was beginning to have had a bellyful. The mother was able to go the market every day, besides it was me who went there they didn't look like they'd thought about it. They calculated everything one evening for the motor thing, if there was a way, with the Thirty Three per Cent, of having it, scraping here and there and knocking some off for the telly and adding a bit for the Tax rebate and if the mother could wangle it with a few cleaning jobs within the limits of the one salary family, the assistant had given all the figures; what was cocking everything up it was if we'd have to buy a new bed for Catherine if Nicolas was going in the cot, it's dear a bed. They'd spread papers out on my table, bothering me; fortunately that didn't happen every day.

Finally with uncle George, who was handy, not like dad who couldn't do anything with his ten fingers, we put up a little bed over Chantal's, who'd climb up a storey, where as Catherine, leaving the baby-bed, would settle in on the ground-floor, and what would we do after, the ceiling would never be high enough if we continued. Like that there was only the straw to buy.

Mum wanted Chantal to remain below, in her old bed: "She's so fragile." Times she hurts herself falling. But Catherine was still very little, and stupid as she was she was capable of plunging and smashing her skull in.

Catherine refused to vacate her old bed. She clung to it and when I pulled the bed came too. Her squawking was filling the place. There were three of us going at her. Patrick, that the scent of blood attracted, refereed the battle: "Go on, give 'em some! Don't let 'em do ya!" Dad, long since had enough, gave him a clip, which as usual made him laugh. "What can we do with him, but what can we do with him!" groaned the mother, "my God but what can we do about it I ask myself, what can we do with him what can we do, but what can we do with that kid, but what could we do about it my God!"

Wot wot, Patrick was saying, and energized Catherine was putting the boot in and biting us. The neighbours were banging on the wall, it was ten o'clock.

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The battle concluded with Catherine the victor. Since in any case Nicolas was in an incubator for another three weeks, why fight already. The second half would be played out on his arrival, and perhaps in the meantime he'd die, which would settle everything. We were all exhausted. Only the twins had not participated, they didn't meddle in our affairs; in their bed, they were sleeping, tenderly intertwined.

I reclaimed my kitchen and opened my exercise book. One moment I heard the mother complaining next door: Dear! oh dear! am I tired, dear! oh dear! how tired I can be they'll be the death of me; they'll be the death of me those kids, I'm finished dear! oh dear! my God how tired I can be that's saying nothing my God how tired I can be. The father's snoring was rising into the deep night. The springs creaked, she was getting into bed. Sigh. Silence. Relief. Peace.

*

Chapter 2

Nicolas came out of his incubator, and arrived home with spring.

I'd noticed that time the buds on the trees, the green growth. Thus it was true.

The young chestnut by that point, it wouldn't come back; they'd had it finally. They were passing ropes through it, and pulling on it until it broke. Why didn't they make woodcutters of them, instead of packers, finishers, drillers, spray painters, mustard-makers? Three of the little trees in the court yard – at the start we called the yard "the green space" – wouldn't come back either: they liked to hang from them and bend them to the ground; the game was who could bend the tree the furthest: strong man. Since we'd been there they'd had twelve with that system. One time I'd taken Patrick and I'd shouted at him.

"Leave him be, at those times he's not doing anything stupid," said my mother.

On their chest of drawers in their room, there was a photo; it was of the time when they'd gotten married; they were on a moped; she had long hair, and a wide skirt spread out; they were laughing. You would have thought her a young girl like those I'd see today at the gate, getting themselves taken off on scooter jaunts. You wouldn't have thought them our parents.

She had dry skin, and what had she done to her hair to have lost half of it? She was looking right before her, at nothing. As much as I tried, I couldn't believe it was the same girl, on the moped.

Since she was no longer going to the factory, she was doing the stairs of the blocks, it brought in just enough so that we didn't have the one salary family taken away, they'd done the calculations. Chantal followed her like a lapdog. Catherine would be trailing on her side, generally not far from Patrick, with two or three other brats from the same hatch, busying themselves throwing stones; when they were able to find a cat or a dog it was party-time; but it was rare, in general the animals didn't last long here. One time I'd caught them in the middle of sticking the boot into a poor mutt that was hanging around there the imbecile, and I'd told them one day the dogs would come and eat them feet up, at night, when they'd be all alone in the house without light, and their mothers at the hospital dying; I had trouble convincing them, trying to invent something, they were looking at me in

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that completely stupid way, the way the brats can round here; when I stopped talking for lack of ideas, they calmly got back to it; rage took me and I threw two slaps at Catherine, in preference, because she was my sister, but I'd have preferred to get one to bash the other; as soon a hag came out of the block in a fury and called me a savage, for brutalising children. I told her they were vermin and that she go fuck herself; that made a fuss; the mother said to me: just don't have to get involved with what's got nothin' to do with you, wasn't your dog, was it? As she says at those times he's not doing anything stupid, and in any case we've not got them on our backs.

At that moment, there was only Nicolas at the house, the responsibility of which was mine between class hours.

He was pale and red, and kept his bright eyes, contrary to the others whose were dark, without talking obviously about the twins, who were black like prunes and all frizzy, but those twins they were another mystery.

The mother almost didn't bother with Nicolas; I was big now, she could lean on me. He wasn't any trouble, he didn't make much noise. He'd look at everything with his clear wide-open eyes, as if wondering what kind of shit house he'd fallen into and why. I'd tell myself that he perhaps had a soul. I almost killed Catherine when I caught her cramming as all the little ones do her fingers into Nicolas' sockets. I took her by her meagre mop and doing like in films I very slowly drew my fingers to her bulging eyes. She bawled. Patrick naturally turned up: "You'll go to the Backward Blind School," he said. Catherine threw her fit and I let her wriggle about the floor. In any case nothing changed. But in the end, it's not allowed to be so naughty when you are so ugly.

*

It was once again spring. There was a lilac in the last little gardens that estate hadn't yet scoffed up. When I was coming back from school I'd see it, but I didn't say anything, the other girls would've had my head.

The only moment I was able to walk peaceful, it was the shopping. Because of that, never did I grumble about it; besides no-one was trying to deny me them, the routine was formed, it wasn't thought about anymore. I dragged it out as much as I could to avoid the bickering by lengthening it little by little as the days were getting longer.

The bus stops just in front of the estate, and the people who come back from their work all getting off in a heap, at the time I go to the shops; it's always just about the same faces I see, through habit; I recognise them all. We all recognise each other, but we don't show it; simply we tell ourselves ah, I'm late, or I'm early, or I'm on time, according to the cart which tips its load before the door.

One evening, a man who was getting off the bus looked at me and smiled at me. He crossed the avenue toward the big blocks, and turned to look at me. I was wondering why that man had smiled at me, because really that one I had never seen him. It was bizarre, I thought about it again, and then very few things happened to me that the smallest detail stayed with me. Afterward, I saw that man again, and each time he was looking at me.

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One day, coming back from the shops, I completely cut across him. I had two bottles of wine, one of water, and the milk, plus the bread under the arm.

"It's well heavy for you all that," he tells me as if we knew each other. "You want me to carry it for you?"

"Oh! I've done," I say, "it's there that I live."

"Pity," he said. "Me, I live there," he added indicating the big blocks. "For the moment. I see you often, carrying your bags. You have lots of work?"

"Yes. There, I'm done."

"Never mind," and he gave me back my bag. "See you soon perhaps?"

He crossed the avenue and made a sign to me with his hand.

I met him more often. I was looking at the buses, but he must have arrived earlier, because I was cutting across him on the avenue; perhaps he was waiting for me; we took a few steps together; he took my bag; it happened that we went might go beyond the estate, while talking, that we take the little road which bypasses the houses towards the little gardens.

He was called Guido. He lived alone. He spoke to me like to a person, he recounted his life to me, he wasn't in his country here, in his country he had a house with a vineyard, and like me lots of brothers and sisters, very beautiful sisters who were marrying one by one. We took a few steps, and he left me with his little hand-sign and his smile. He was a very handsome man, brown with beautiful white teeth when he smiled, and bright eyes. He must have easily been thirty.

He felt very alone, he was sad; the blocks got him down, he was telling me that soon the world would be like that, and that the men who had something inside them would have no more than to piss off to the planet Mars. He looked at me and told me that he was going mad; but he smiled, he didn't look mad at all, on the contrary.

"How old are you?" he said to me.

"Eleven." I was lying a little.

"Madonna," he said.

He recounted to me that in the evenings he listened to his gramophone, an old thing but he loved music so much that he preferred that to nothing at all; you must have something that you love in life, if not you'd be like a beast. I told him me if I didn't have Nicolas, I'd be like a beast, and that's how I realised, it's mad what you can discover by talking. I began to speak to him about Nicolas, I told him that I believed he had a soul. He appeared surprised. I explained to him what Mlle Garret had affirmed on the subject, and that I couldn't believe that everybody had one. He nodded his head.

"It's true that it's difficult to believe," he said. "And me, do I have a soul?"

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He's stopped walking so that I look at him; he was smiling, showing his beautiful white teeth. I told him that I believed he had.

"How do you know?"

"I don't know. I just do. I don't know. Firstly, you speak."

He said: "When I build those houses I'm ill; I don't know if I'll be able to continue for a long time. I think: "It's you who does that Guido, you who's born on the hills." Where he comes from there's always sun, but there's no work. But one day, he was saying, there'll not even be the hills anymore. May God want that I be dead that day. I'm not made to stand that, I'm a man me, not a robot.

"You must be right," he told me, "it's for that that what's happening to me is happening to me."

"What's happening to you?"

"How old are you?"

I'd already told him, but he must have forgotten. I told him again.

"Good God," he said.

He began to walk again. He took me by the hand. His hand was big and warm, well-wrapped around my own. Nobody had ever taken my hand, and I felt like crying.

He told me he didn't have a wife, he couldn't approach them; they were as false as the advertising boards, he said, having seen enough.

"Here you quickly lose your soul," he said. "Or if you don't lose it you go mad. That's what happening to me now. With you," he added, smiling at me.

I hadn't spoken about Guido to Nicolas: a young man who was getting off the bus looked at me... it was too stupid to say. So I told him that I'd met an inhabitant of planet Mars. He was almost invisible, the other people couldn't see him, he stayed all alone, he was bored here, he found that it was ugly, but he couldn't return home, he was lost. There was only one thing he liked here, it was music. In the evening he listened to it passing before the houses. Where he lived everybody had a soul, everybody understood each other. Here nobody talked to anybody, people were enclosed in their skin and looked at nothing. He'd smiled at them, made signs to them, they didn't reply; I was the only one. Where he lived there was always sun, and it was full of vineyards and the trees didn't lose their leaves, in spring new ones grew, white ones, which became green the following year, and the trees looked like bouquets of flowers. What I was able to give of it for details on planet Mars, nothing but to be able to speak in one way or the other about Guido. I'd invented that he was called Ciao, because that was how he said goodbye to me. To speak we waited until Chantal snored, even if she was pretending it prevented her from hearing what we said, and in any case, she had a white fear of Nicolas who never missed her and who'd promised to kill her later, when he was big.

School was finished. It was summer. I was meeting Guido every day, after his work; we'd go walking a little further, between the gardens. When I told him that we were going to go on holiday

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he became sombre. He was looking at me, beginning a sentence and not finishing it, then leaving again and we walked without speaking, his hand squeezing mine, crushing it. I had a heavy heart, and me neither I wasn't able to speak. Finally, he asked me if I could go to the shops earlier, the following day, Thursday; he'd arrange it to be free him too; naturally I could. We had a real rendezvous at a real time, in a precise place a little further away from our houses, at the Montreuil road sign.

He had a scooter; a friend had lent it him; he asked me if I wanted to go for a ride with him. If I wanted to! Go on a scooter!

I was delighted. He seemed just as sombre, he was going quickly, and doing lots of tricks, I had to grab him tightly, it was wonderful. We went into the Bois de Boulogne. He took a lane, and stopped.

"We're going to stretch our legs," he said. "Do you want to?"

I jumped from the scooter. He put it against a tree.

"It won't get stolen?"

"We won't go far. Just a few steps. To say something to you."

We took a few steps, on a path. He'd taken my hand.

"So, you're leaving tomorrow?"

"Yes," I replied sadly. It did nothing for me.

"You know..." he said.

"What?" I asked after a while, seeing that nothing was coming.

"Ah!" he said. He turned toward me, and looked at me with a lost expression. He took both my hands and suddenly fell to his knees and pulled me against him, and he began to speak in Italian. What he was saying I don't know, I don't know Italian, but I did know it I heard it, I've never heard anything so beautiful, I understood everything. When he kissed my face, he was burning, his hands were burning on me and from time to time he lifted his eyes up to me and asked me a question, if I wanted to, he only said to me in French: I don't want to do you any harm. I swear to you I swear to you, it's that I love you", and he repeated in Italian that he didn't want to do me any harm, I believed him, I let him go on, I had no desire to prevent him, not at all and less and less, as his hands were approaching me, and when I felt their heat then for an empire I wouldn't have stopped him. It was sweet, and it didn't end, I had my back against the tree, Guido was on his knees before me, I heard the birds, I didn't know that there existed such good things, and in the end there was a limit, I was obliged to moan, Guido squeezed me madly and moaned too, my legs could carry me no longer. He laid me down on the ground, or I fell down, I don't know, he looked happy, he spoke once more, and he started again, he said that he'd never stop, I understood Italian better and better. Me neither I wouldn't have stopped, when he let me go a little I pulled him back, finally I almost hurt from it, I could hardly take it, but what a pity! I would have preferred it to be eternal.

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"You don't have it in for me?" he still asked me when we came back to the scooter, and then the day was going down, I was already well late.

"Oh no!" I cried. I was sincere. He kissed me. I said: "I didn't know that that existed."

"My God," he said, "you were good! I knew it. I was already sure of it."

We started again one last time, but after I really couldn't take it anymore. "Madonna, I'm mad," Guido was saying. We returned home at full speed, and really there he was mad, we almost died twenty times, he was singing at the top of his voice a tune from his home. He dropped me a little before the estate. He said a phrase to me, with "morire", smiling sadly, and did me his Ciao, turning round on the scooter, before turning into his alley.

"So where the bloody hell have you been? The vermicelli when's that gonna cook?"

I was bringing it. We'd bought it with Guido on the way, and carted it around in the saddle bags.

"I went for a walk."

"S not the moment to be going for a walk when I'm waiting for you with the shopping."

In those cases I'm quiet. But today I'd had enough.

"And when is it the moment? I have things to do without stop! I don't stop from morning till night and all the others get away with it! 'Just have to give the shopping to Patrick, him he has the right to hang around as much as he likes!"

Patrick barely turned away from the telly – the only thing capable of making him turn up at the house – and threw me:

"Me, it's not the same, me, I'm a man."

"A man! you don't even know what it is."

It really wasn't the moment to come out with that one, he timed it well, so he did!

"Brat!"

The twins lifted their noses from their geography book (what is a peninsular? a peninsular is a land surrounded by water on three sides) and sniggered, conspicuously.

"Do you want puttin' right?" Patrick says to me, very boss-like.

"Tra la la, tra la la," said the twins.

"You the queers..."

"Tra la la, tra la la,"

"Shut it," said the head of the family, "'can't hear the programme!"

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"You're still gettin' what's comin' to you," said Patrick.

"Tra la la, tra la la," the twins softly sang. Who is it who's going to prize them apart.

"Are you going to be quiet?" said the mother. "Your father's listening to the programme. Josyane, grate some cheese."

"Where is it you got to," said that bug Chantal, sensing a scoop, for that she had intuition.

"With a girlfriend."

"What's she called?"

"Fatima," I replied off the top of my head, besides they didn't know her.

"Nice company," said Patrick, the moralist.

"Piss off microbe."

"Ah! Shit!" said the father. "Can we not have a moment's calm in this God-forsaken day, no?"

"So then, Josyane? didn't I tell you to grate some cheese?"

"Ah! what a pain! Get Chantal at it. She does fuck all! me I'm fed up of playing the maid!"

I was enraged. I would have killed them. Including the daft twat on the programme, to whom one was asking how many kilometres there are between Sparta and Lacedaemon and who remained like a tit having the piss taken out of his clock by ten million other twats.

"Won't get 'em," said the father to his Eldest Son.

"He looks an idiot," the Latter agreed.

Catherine did her mad laugh, like whenever Patrick opened his beak, be it to say the stupidest crap. The mother was having a go at me, because of the *râpé*, between her teeth because of the father and the programme. Finally I told her to piss off. She really wasn't used to me answering back in this way, it was usually reserved for Patrick, that she looked sheepish by it, arm stretched out with a ladle at the end, mouth wide open, while I cut away into my room.

Basically, the secret is to snap at them a bit: what can they do?

I wouldn't eat; besides I wasn't hungry; and then they could shove their lettuce; I had other things to think, me, what, since I'd placed a foot back in this hole I hadn't been able to do, not one little second, so quickly they'd kicked out at me, thrown their crap in my face.

Well, then, they'd won. My treasure was in pieces, I don't know where, drowned in the anger, I couldn't manage to find it again. They're real detergents those blokes, there where they've been the grass doesn't grow anymore, like we'd learned at school about Attila, king of the Huns.

Vainly I repeated to myself: "Guido, Guido. *Tintin*. Ah! the cows!"

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And to think that I could have lived a hundred years without anyone having me suspect that there was something else in life other than their *râpé*, the vermicelli and the social security! Ah the cows.

"Jo?"

"Are you not asleep you?

"Well I'm waiting for you. What they doin' that's gobbin'?"

"They're busy with gruyere."

"What's gruyere?"

"Cheese."

"Don't like that."

"Y' do right. In any case it's not worth being busy for."

"No," Nicolas confirmed. They're all twats. What y' done today? Don't say: you met Ciao. It shows."

"It shows?"

My God, after all yes, perhaps, it showed. Fortunately with them it didn't matter, they've got shit in their eyes.

"What did you do?"

"We went to the forest."

"What did you do in the forest?"

"Euh, we picked flowers."

"Where are they?"

It wasn't always easy with Nicolas. I'd gotten him used to saying everything to him.

"They've gone. They're flowers that fly away when you pick them."

"So why do you pick them?"

"Because they're pretty when they fly away. And after you miss them."

"I want some too," said Nicolas. It was to be expected.

I promised him some. Blessed be Nicolas, the forest had returned, he'd brought it back to me. I thought that I was surely going to be unhappy, and I preferred to be to miss something than to not know that it existed.

Chapter 3²⁸

One day we paid visit to the dam. The men were in ecstasy before the concrete, the quantity that had been required to retain all that water; Charnier asked the gate keepers whether they were sure it was safe. Can't think of anything sadder than a dam, save perhaps for a canal, we visited one of those as well. Every day we looked for something to visit. The women were knitting pullovers for winter, which in all was not going to be long coming. After lunch the men told crap stories. Finally the gamekeeper took in the poor orphan, and revealed to her that she was in reality the true inheritor of the castle, of which the duchess-mother had unduly seized thanks to the babies having been switched round in their cots, but the orphan had a mark on her chest which the gamekeeper finished by discovering, in fact she had misjudged his intentions. The inheritor wedded the son-duke, who because of that was no longer her brother, and they had many little dukes. Eventually we talked about going home. The conversation turned to jobs, each talking of his own, they were comparing the advantages and the inconveniences; it was getting lively. Pity it was over we were starting to really get into it, alas! The better things are but for a time. Besides in the end one enjoys returning to one's little comfort-zone. We're happy to leave but we're happy to come back too.

*

Chapter 4²⁹

The old ones were happy. When you're seven you may as well be eight, frankly. They were going to be able to continue the payments on the car, they wouldn't have let it go for anything in the world, while ever the Mauvins had just bought themselves a newer one, and furthermore they had a mixer and a rug in animal hair.

"And my refrigerator, it's there!" proclaimed Paulette tapping on her stomach at the co-op before the other hags.

Us for the fridge we'd need at least triplets in one go. The mother threw at her rival, who had five weeks advantage over her, a dirty look.

"And I'll go as far as the washing machine!"

"Us the washing machine we have it already," the mother reposted. "For a long time. I find that it's the first thing in the home. For the laundry," she clarified.

"Me my husband he can only stand quality," said Paulette, undefeated. "We prefer to not rush it, but have the right stuff."

She was alluding to our bloody old machine, always on the blink, and which one time pissed through her ceiling.

Cowardly, the mother turned to destiny.

²⁸ I translated this last passage of chapter 3 in the novel, given that I talked about the end of it – free indirect discourse - in the last chapter of my essay.

²⁹ I translated this passage from chapter 4 just to demonstrate the kind of environment that Jo lives in when she is not 'housekeeping'.

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"Me if my last-but-one hadn't died at birth, an' if I'd not had that miscarriage at the beginning which left me peaky for months and besides I've never really gotten over it, we'd have everything today, and maybe we'd even have the Prize."

"Ahh me I've had three still-births!" said Paulette. "And you all see, I'm still here! And I can still serve," she said with her big healthy smile.

A young mother of only three children, who wasn't expecting her fourth until spring, was observing her elders with admiration, dreaming of entering into the livelihood.

"Don't you worry madame Bon," said the grocer lady, that comes little by little, without you even noticing it."

Another expectant one entered who instantly tuned in. I backed up into the crates. Was nowhere else to move in the shop, at that moment in the mornings at the co-op it was a real balloon competition, this estate it isn't a living space it's a rearing farm, and sensitive with it, shouldn't brush by them, with their precious burden, they'd have crushed everybody, and especially that me at that moment I came up to their stomachs, I saw no more than that on the landscape and I was risking at any moment being flattened between two bumps.

Paulette cleared a passage for her own through the others, and exited filled with dignity belly up front with the refrigerator inside, and behind the washing machine which was stamping its feet waiting to be fertilised.

*

Chapter 7³⁰

Philippe. My love. It's little by little that we began to love each other. Or rather in reality we had loved each other from the first instant that we had seen each other, as we realised afterwards, we remembered perfectly both of us, that day, before the letterboxes, him looking dumbfounded, me with the twins. The caretakers. The father. The Martini. And if the lightening had not struck immediately, it was because of the most stupid misunderstanding: on seeing me with new-borns, returning from the hospital, accompanied by a man, Philippe had not supposed for a second that the babies were not mine. I remembered the way in which he had looked at me, and which all the same had appeared bizarre to me; it's that he was thinking: a girl so young, with a man so old, and already twins! it had stupefied him. "And y' were beautiful!" he said. "Y' can't know how beautiful y' were, with a baby in your arms, so small, minuscule like you, what do you expect it appeared logical that a girl of your age would have babies in miniature!" He even saw a young mother in me, happy and radiant, and he'd gone as far as telling himself, What a pity that it's not me, in place of that old man! He'd been jealous of the father! It's unreal. And me who knew nothing of all that! In short he'd gone into his own little world, and from the outset, no how life can be stupid. Result, a complete winter lost, where each time he came across me he'd nod discretely and respectfully Bonjour Madame, and me during that time I'd find him timid that lad I'd tell myself my word he's a nutter that one, he must be an idiot, and I'd continue to marinate sadly without suspecting that happiness was just under my

³⁰ I translated this last chapter to demonstrate the contrast in style of language, between this and most of what has come before it.

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nose. Until he plucked up the courage to ask me, still respectfully, how my charming babies were going on, Caroline and Isabelle, he'd even remembered their names. Caroline and Isabelle were going well they'd bring the Cognac Prize with them and Philippe went better still when he learned that they were my sisters, he couldn't believe it he was asking me if I was really sure and he had me repeat it four times and then, he didn't lose a second to invite me to go to the cinema, and for that very evening, and me I didn't hesitate any more in dropping the gang, besides I wasn't so taken anymore, we all knew each other from every angle it was becoming a routine, and then we'd done winter badly, winter the jaunts they're less fun, you don't have where to go, you can't bloody strip off, it's damp on the floor, you're cold, and I have to say that whenever we managed to hit upon a room to get down in, well, it wasn't the same thing, between four walls, we found it boring. We needed Nature, when all's said and done.

I wonder even if in the end it wasn't Nature which made everything, it's difficult to say, I can't go as far as claiming that I was getting myself screwed by the stars but it is there. It is there, and the proof, that without stars, with an electric bulb, it was losing the greatest part of its charm, it was even taking on an ugly side, we were drinking too much, and me when I drink too much I feel less, and in the morning I feel rough. In short coming back to Philippe we went to the cinema, and he took me by the hand.

Coming back, in front of the door he told me that he loved me.

"I love you," he told me.

On that one he takes off. I'd almost said "What?" because he'd spoken so softly that I wasn't sure I'd heard correctly, but he'd already left. He lived in building F, me in C. For an hour he'd embraced me at my door, he was saying goodbye to me and to say goodbye to me he was embracing me again, he was squeezing me against him suffocating me, I was waiting for him to say to me at any moment "Come on", and instead of that, he was saying to me "I love you" and scampering, leaving me planted on the threshold like a loaf. He really wasn't like the others that one either; in a way he reminded me of Frédéric, at least in his manners.

With the boys, we hardly embraced; only at the cinema, and as well when necking. We didn't like it much. And then Philippe had real beard, he seriously prickled, I had a face all on fire.

We had a date the following Sunday; obviously, I dropped the boys.

That Sunday, he was waiting for me before the gate with a 2 CV. He'd just bought it, second hand and on credit, and, what I understood, just for me, to take me out. That seemed to say that he had the intention of taking me out a certain number of times, if not he wouldn't have gotten himself into so much debt.

Why, with Philippe, nothing but walking beside each other, our fingers intertwined, it was something marvellous? Why him? And he was asking himself Why her? We couldn't get over it either of us, that it might be just us. What was extraordinary, it was that we'd succeeded in finding each other. To think that we were actually living in the same place, when places there are so many of them. America. Even without going so far he could have been in Sarcelles for example, well then it

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was buggered I was never seeing him, I wouldn't have even known of his existence, and he mine. Nothing but the idea of such a catastrophe terrified us retrospectively: that we could have missed each other, continued to live each in our own space like idiots, because it really was like idiots that we'd lived both of us until now no use us hiding from it, and besides we'd always felt it in the depths of ourselves, without knowing that what each of us missed, it was the Other. It's for that that I was often sad, that I cried without reason, that I was going round in circles without knowing what to do with myself, looking at the houses, asking myself why this why that, the world and the whole works, looking for noon at 2pm and daydreaming in the void behind a window, it's for that that it's for that, and it's for that too that I was going with heaps of boys without being particular about any, since in any case it wasn't the right one, nothing but to pass away the time awaiting the only one who existed on the earth for me and who now with extraordinary luck was here, next to me, his fingers intertwined with mine, and the proof that it really is true is that for him, I was the only girl that existed on earth, that he had awaited by acting the prat one way or another on his part and who now was here, his fingers intertwined with mine, oof. In the end life is bizarrely well made when you think about it, everything happens which must happen, there is a logic. From that moment we knew why the sun shone, it was for us, it was for us too that spring began, just like today, when we were taking our first walk together, the first outing of our love.

He stopped and said to me: "Listen, a bird!" The song of the bird ascended into the fresh air, into the luminous sky. It was our bird. Our hawthorn blossom, and there was our violet, our budding May Lilly, still nothing more than a green point barely visible, but we saw it, it was the first; ours. The first in the world. Ours forever. Ah!

We walked, in the still bare forest, we walked hand in hand with beneath our feet the carpet of ancient foliage. We were in no hurry, we had all our time. All our time. The time also was ours since we had eternity before us. Everything belonged to us. It was mad. Every three steps we stopped to look at each other.

"Jo..."

"Philippe..."

Our gazes, our names, that would have sufficed for our happiness, almost sufficed, if we'd been able, if we had had the strength, I would so much have liked that that suffice, that we remain always forever thus, eyes to eyes, like two mirrors face to face, if was so much more beautiful if only, but the body is demanding, we wanted to touch each other, and when we were touching each other we wanted to lay ourselves down, we staggered, drunk on love, we were staggering toward a fatal happiness, we did not have the strength to refuse it in spite of the Perfection of that which we already possessed and that it might have been so sweet to prolong it still. But, impossible, we were no longer able to stand, our legs would carry us no more, the ground welcomed us like a bridal bed, it was time, we could stand it no longer.

"Jo..."

"Philippe..."

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Nothing but our names, they contained All.

From the moment he had taken me I was undone. Since the time also, since he had left me planted on the threshold, on fire. Four days. A woman cannot wait. I was madly happy. It was him, it really was him, such as I had always envisaged it, he was made for me, he had his place marked forever. After he told me:

"Of course I'd have liked to be the first..."

He gave me a little smile a little sad, he was playing mechanically with last year's leaves.

"You are so young... I'd hoped."

First he believes me a mother, then he believes me a virgin, he is marvellous my Philippe. I caressed his cheek, he turned away a little angry.

"I love you."

He tossed the leaves to the wind.

"Too bad! I ought to have come earlier it's my fault."

Now I understood Ethel. In the end she was right. We should keep ourselves for the boy we really love that way there are no histories.

"Philippe..."

"Jo!" He held me passionately. "It doesn't matter" he said, "now I have you, let's forget the past, it's today that life begins. I'm going to erase them," he murmured in a whisper, coming back.

All afternoon we stayed there. We weren't tiring. We wanted to go on. We believed we could no longer and then we wanted more. We'd rolled up into a blanket that he'd taken from the car hastily I suppose. We could see each other. He was beautiful, every muscle in his body was beautiful, I wanted to kiss him all over. Him too. The cold chased us away. The sun was going down, Our sun was deserting us, even love cannot prevent the sun from going down. My skin was ravaged by his kisses by his bites, I kept his trace and that kept me warm.

We staggered again but this time it was with fatigue, we were as if stoned. When one loves one is always stoned, either it's through withdrawal symptoms or through too much. We then noted that we were starving hungry: we'd forgotten to nosh. We couldn't get over it: how we must have loved each other! But then how starving we now were! Love makes you hungry: it stops you from being hungry, it makes you hungry, loves does everything, love is life with the whole menu "What would you like to do in life?" – Love. Love that's what, that's what I should have replied at the Careers Guidance. What did I want to do in life? Love. In the end it's quite simple.

Before getting back into the car he pulled me toward him, and tenderly took my hands in his. "Have I erased 'em?" he said to me.

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I almost asked who. God knows that was far from my thoughts! In my thoughts there was no more but Philippe. Philippe Philippe.

"Philippe..."

"Jo..."

He embraced me.

"So I've erased them?"

"You're joking... firstly they didn't mean that much."

"Jo..."

"And then besides 've no memory."

"But of me, you will have? yeah? you're not going to forget me?"

"You 's' not the same. You it's you."

"Jo..."

"Philippe."

"And then I'll never allow you the time, to forget me! I'm not letting you go anymore. You know," he said to me with infinite tenderness, "that I'm not letting you go anymore? It's for good you know."

"Philippe."

"Jo..."

"Philippe."

"My darling. You're mine?"

"Yes."

"For always?"

"Philippe my love."

"Jo my darling. How happy we're going to be!"

"Happy?"

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"And how happy we're going to be. You're having trouble believing it hey my poor darling? You've not had the best of lives, hey? my poor little love. But it's finished now it's finished I'm here, don't be sad, I'm here you'll see, I'm here now. Nothing will happen to you anymore."

He was twenty-two. He built televisions. He'd just been taken on by a big firm, of the future. He'd earn his life well. They were five children, the eldest girl was married, the youngest worked, typist, the last two would soon be fixed up, the mother was dead. He wouldn't have much burden. He was still living with them but he'd made a housing request and already built up a file. He'd finished his Service, he'd come back last autumn, it's why I hadn't seen him before. He never spoke of it of over there he didn't want to think about it anymore ever. Either about that or the rest, all the tripe he was sick of it, he didn't want to get involved. Not anything of all that. Only to be happy and that's all, the thing we have to do in life is to be happy, there's nothing else, and to be happy we need to love each other, be two people who live for one and other without bothering with the rest, and making themselves a nest where to hide their happiness and preserve it against any attack.

When I told him that I was pregnant, and that mustn't have been a surprise it was inevitable that it happened with our methods we couldn't leave each other alone and we'd even go back at it in the heat of the moment there's nothing more dangerous than poor Liliane had told me enough and besides it hadn't worked for her all her knowhow she'd died and in a vile way, it'd really put the shits up me, but when I said it to Philippe, he raised me from the ground and spun me in the air like a nutter. In a way I like that more.

"Since the day I saw you with a baby in your arms I wanted it," he cried out. "Y' just don't know! I've wanted to give you a baby since that day!"

He told me that each time he'd made love to me he'd thought about it, he was repeating to himself I'm giving her a child, I'm actually giving her a child, and that was sending him mad with joy, with happiness, with pleasure. It was making him explode with it to give me a child. Well, it was done, he hadn't exploded for nothing.

He was waiting for that only he said, so that we marry, for real. And quickly now. It wasn't for the principle of it he couldn't care less he had broader horizons, but he wanted me to be still slim when I came out of the Town Hall, on his arm; all beautiful, in a beautiful dress that he was going to buy me, not white of course that had no importance that childishness, but a beautiful dress, which I had never had. He wanted a beautiful image of that day, to keep in his heart.

We'd buy a cot. He was looking at them already in the shop windows. He didn't want some hideous bed, which supposedly serves for later, stuff the expense, he wanted a real cot, with the muslin thing hanging around it. Blue. No, pink, because he'd prefer a little girl. Actually it's more practical.

In any case for the bonus we'd be in time.

The whole business it was that we find somewhere to live, and at full throttle now; we'd need to activate the request, we could also be looking by own methods, his firm would surely agree a lend

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with him, with allotted times for paying it back, and in any case we had the Credit; there were areas we'd begun to find at present. I pointed out Sarcelles to him.