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Simone de Beauvoir

The Blood of Others

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SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR (1908–86) was a French philosopher, novelist and essayist, and the lifelong companion of Jean-Paul Sartre. De Beauvoir's first book, *L'Invitée*, was published in 1943. In 1945 she published *Le Sang des autres*, a novel dealing with the question of political involvement. De Beauvoir's breakthrough work was the semi-autobiographical *Les Mandarins* (1954), which won the Prix Goncourt. Roman Catholic authorities banned it and de Beauvoir's feminist classic *The Second Sex* (1949), in which de Beauvoir argued that 'one is not born a woman; one becomes one'.

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SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

The Blood of Others

Translated by Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse
With an Introduction by Ali Smith

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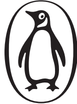

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To Nathalie Sorokine

Each of us is responsible for
everything and to every
human being.
DOSTOYEVSKY

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Introduction

'When I was eighteen, I read a great deal; I would read only as one can read at that age, naively and passionately. To open a novel was truly to enter a world.'

In an essay called 'Literature and Metaphysics' written in 1946, a year after the publication of this novel and in the still-volatile aftermath of the Second World War, Simone de Beauvoir remembered her younger self considering the powers of philosophy and fiction, two activities that seemed on the surface to be oppositional. At this point the already-celebrated young French thinker, one of the formative minds behind the twentieth-century version of Existentialism and the youngest person in history (only the eighth woman, by the time she took the exam at the Sorbonne in 1929) to pass France's tough national philosophy *agrégation*, had also just become one of France's most exciting new novelists.

On the one hand, philosophy 'would carry me beyond the terrestrial appearances into the serenity of a timeless heaven . . . After having thought out the universe through the eyes of Spinoza or Kant, I would wonder: "How can anyone be so frivolous as to write novels?"' But then she'd remember the experience of being so engaged by a novel like Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* or Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* that she'd find herself thinking it 'useless to waste one's time fabricating systems'.

What was it about literature, about the 'frivolous' act of writing novels, that *could* access 'the concrete, temporal world'?[1]

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What does a novel do in the realities of that world? Might it be possible, she'd wondered since her student days, to find a form concretely to *feel ideas*, one which could reconcile temporal world with immutable thought system?

Le Sang des autres / *The Blood of Others* was de Beauvoir's second published novel. She started working on it in 1941, drafting it on what paper she could find in Nazi-Occupied Paris; the Nazis had entered the city on 14 June 1940; the French had signed the armistice eight days later agreeing to collaborate governmentally with the Germans; in the end the Occupation would last until August 1944. De Beauvoir spent the early days in despair. Then one day she bought a bottle of ink and a notebook and decided to trust in an afterwards. Her first novel had been accepted for publication in May 1940, a scant few days before the German invasion of France. *L'Inviteé* / *She Came to Stay* is a story about performance and gender expectation in a radical *ménage à trois*, and in the end about how the objectification of others will lead to deadly solipsism, 'a theme that recurred in every plot line I sketched out . . . the mirage of the Other', the 'existence of Otherness.'[2] Now, in January 1941, literally living the sudden otherness of Occupation, she made notes in her journal towards a new novel. 'Perhaps the following simple construction: two heroes, a man and a woman, with the point of view of each one . . . In the man's character, the theme of *fault* – in the woman's, the illusion of the recognition of consciousnesses through love . . . a novelistic subject about an effort at *moral integrity* (in the sense of total assumption and reconstruction of the world) leading to the failure of facticity . . . Relation of the *social and the metaphysical*.'[3]

She decided on a structure of alternating chapters seen from the separate individual 'consciousnesses' of her two 'heroes.' If one chapter belonged to Jean, a young bourgeois, 'the boss's son', the following chapter would belong to her other hero, Hélène, a young sweet-shop worker; this structure, simple and brilliant,

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puts them straight into formal dialogue with each other even before they know anything much about each other. She completed the novel mid-war, edited it alongside writing what would be her third published novel, *Tous Les Hommes Sont Mortels / All Men Are Mortal,* a book about a man who's been alive for centuries and knows that immortality is pointless, dreary, worse than death. When *The Blood of Others* was published in 1945 it reached an appreciative French public fresh to the complex ambiguities of Liberation. Reviewers declared it the first French Resistance novel.

Via the separate and intertwined lives of its two heroes it conjures and relives historical and political happenings over the decade ending in 1944: the rise and spread of European fascism; class division and the splintering of the political left in France; the long shadow of the Spanish Civil War; then (in detail so vivid it still bristles right now) the first weeks and months of the invasion and Occupation. In it she examines the moral quagmire of collusion, collaboration, complicity, then resistance, and the fallout from and altered moral imperative of each of these.

I wasn't much older than eighteen myself in the early 1980s when I first read, naively and passionately, *The Blood of Others*. Over the four decades between my first reading of it and my next, what I remembered most clearly of it was this: very near the beginning a young woman quite selfishly and shockingly and completely understandably covets, then steals, a beautiful bicycle. Actually, no; she doesn't steal it herself; instead, she persuades someone else to steal it, which unwittingly they do. The beginning of the novel is much darker, much more tragic than this; its opening scene frames the whole narrative: the passing of a night towards a very bleak dawn while people wait for a young woman who's dying to give up the ghost. But even so the spirit of this book is somehow essentially summed up in the image of that young woman bowling through the streets of Paris, first triumphant, then increasingly disillusioned, on a

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stolen bike. What de Beauvoir does with the ambiguities in the image! Round it several ethical questions hover – tiny, even comic at first – about how and why we act, how and why anyone is ever moved to do anything.

By the time in her life when she's writing this novel, de Beauvoir is already the pioneering young philosopher, the too-troubling free-thinker, the black sheep in her family, particularly for her rejection of Roman Catholicism, already the fashionable outlier in conventional Parisienne society for all sorts of taboo-breaking behaviour as well as just for being an unusually vocal intellectual woman. All of this will have helped seminally form another crucially important, carefully casually presented bicycling moment very late in the novel, a moment whose pureness and irony, both, are signalled by reference to Roman Catholic transubstantiation. Here Hélène has just met her friend, a young Jewish woman for whom everything has become immensely perilous. They meet covertly in a church; then, the meeting over, Hélène 'walked back down the church. The organ was silent. Frail in the silence a bell rang, and the officiating priest raised above his head the gold monstrance. Hélène went down the rue Soufflot, took out her bicycle and mounted it. "I am going to see Jean." It had no meaning, it was natural.'

No meaning? What will arise from this short journey from one person to another, one place to another, is a fusion of thought, realization and action, the consequence of which brings about the life, death and afterlife at the core of this novel – if, that is, a bell ringing somewhere, or a bicycle, or a novel, or a simple decision to act, or a person turning towards another person in the world, are ever to mean anything at all to us.

'A novel is a kind of machine that one creates to illuminate the meaning of our being-in-the-world.'[4] As it happens, bicycles meant a great deal to Simone de Beauvoir's being-in-the-world

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in those Occupation years. It's when she first learned how to ride a bicycle, on a stolen bike presented to her by one of her lovers, Nathalie Sorokine, a former student, to whom she dedicated this novel. Sorokine, then aged nineteen, was apparently a seasoned bicycle thief with a roaring trade in repainting and selling them on 'for enormous profit, hinting at all sorts of "connections"' with 'people who were not going to take a German occupation sitting on their hands.' The bicycle became de Beauvoir's 'most treasured possession throughout the war.'[5] In her 1940 diary, between dark thoughts of death, loss and distress, between bouts in the libraries consuming Hegel, Kierkegaard and Heidegger in search of how best to live in the exploded world, she records near misses and collisions on the bike with a kind of unexpected existential euphoria. On it she can cross Paris, even travel beyond it, easily and fast. Later, when there's no other means of transport in the city, she still has wheels.

It's more than just a source of freedom of movement in a curfew time, an Occupied existence: whether she's bowling past truckloads of German soldiers in the street on her way to sit and work at the Dôme (outside on the terrace because single women were no longer allowed to sit inside the restaurant, 'the start of the morality wave that is going to engulf Paris?')[6], or cycling miles across the city or further afield past places now in ruins from the fighting before the armistice, 'I pedalled on, and the sheer physical exertion kept me occupied.'[7] Because of it, the word 'occupied' can continue to mean so much more to her than Occupation.

De Beauvoir later describes this time as the 'moral period' of her literary life.[8] It was certainly one of her most energized and prolific. During and just after the war years she'd edit and publish those three novels; she'd construct a philosophical thesis, 'Pyrrhus and Cinéas' (1944), an analysis of the moral choice

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between action and cynicism (the latter ranging from pacifism to resignation), a choice which she saw as central to the human condition and made all the more urgent by war. She'd write and stage her only play, *Les Bouches Inutiles / The Useless Mouths*, a spirited drama set in medieval France in a town whose people are starving under siege and arguing with each other about how they can save themselves by getting rid of all the members of the community who happen to be children, old, or women. She developed a talk she'd given into a longer philosophical work, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté / The Ethics of Ambiguity*, which she'd publish in *Le Temps Moderne,* the new journal she edited alongside Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Where the other proponents of postwar Existentialism declared Existentialism free of ethics, de Beauvoir disagreed. Even though 'no ethics is implied . . . I have sought, for my part, to extract one from it'[9] and 'not as the formal respect of eternal and supraterrestrial laws, but as the search for a valid foundation of human history such as it unfolds on our earth.'[10] In *The Blood of Others*, existence is nothing compared to *existence with* and *existence for*, and though a couple of decades later she seems to have felt that the novel was a bit of a critical failure, soon after its publication she took to task the prominent literary critic Maurice Blanchot, who had called it a 'thesis novel' full of characters acting like mouthpieces. 'An ethic is not created in a void; it presupposes a metaphysic,' she wrote in reply to this, in an article called 'New Heroes for Old.' 'As soon as a man asks himself How should I act? he is led also to ask Why thus rather than otherwise? In whose name? Who am I? What is this world into which I thrust my decision?'[11]

Of course, she was simultaneously famous / infamous in her lifetime. She's still both. It's proof of her lasting presence, her lasting inquiry. Too feminist for many, not feminist enough for others, she seems often also to have been – as we all are – messily, hurtfully, ambiguously human. Her relationship with the

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bike-stealing Sorokine, for instance, about which she was so publicly guarded that she tended towards outright denial both at the time and much later in her life, caused her some scandal then and continues to rouse it round her name decades after her death; the same with all her bisexual relationships, about which, in her autobiographical writing, the existential truthteller and celebrated dismantler of taboo clearly felt she had to lie. Perhaps there are some truths that can't be contemporaneously tackled, not even if you're de Beauvoir. But as one character puts it in *The Blood of Others,* 'there is not an inch of my path which does not trespass on the path of someone else.' Think of her spirit, looking down from culture's afterlife at cancel culture and shaking her head like it's a meaningless act, a naivety, an act devoid of anything resembling real living, since according to her we ought always to admit the necessity for the kind of dialogue between selves and others that honours the truth of this path-crossing nature implicit in being human. There's no denying that de Beauvoir worked in all her writings, fictional, philosophical, sociological, to unbox human beings from conventions that led, she believed, to reductive individual *and* communal identity, the kind of categorization that would always lead to dangerous social powerplay and power mongering – especially when it came to gender identity.

Margaret Atwood recalls reading de Beauvoir's great mythbuster about the historic and societal objectification of women, *Le Deuxieme Sexe / The Second Sex*, first published in 1949, 'from cover to cover' in Vancouver in the mid 1960s, hiding 'in the washroom so no one would see me doing it . . . Beauvoir grew up hearing that women, in effect, were unworthy of having a say in the public life of the nation. She would have been thirty-six before she could vote, and then only in theory, since the Germans were still in control of France at that time . . . The hardness, the flintiness, the unflinching stare at the uglier sides of existence that we find in Beauvoir are not unconnected to France's

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ordeals. Enduring those two wars, with their privations, dangers, anxieties, political in-fighting, and betrayals: that passage through hell would have taken its toll.'[12]

Realizing that history is *right now* – not just what you're living through but what you're inevitably responsible for, what your action or inaction literally creates – changes everything, de Beauvoir repeatedly suggests. The old ways, the internal worldview or schema of even the great French novelists Gide and Proust, wouldn't do any more for 'the deportee returning from a concentration camp';[13] she turned to writers like Woolf, Kafka, Hemingway and Dos Passos who could make a character individual at the same time as 'purely social phenomena';[14] William Faulkner for his ability to work multiple viewpoints at the same time as retain character individuality, James Joyce for revealing that an internal stream of consciousness can also be 'a means of exteriorization'.[15]

This is one of the reasons *The Blood of Others* is such a notable advance technically on *She Came to Stay* which, for all that it's a taboo-breaking story, is formally still more or less conventional. Before the war, it had been 'our conditioning as young *petit bourgeois* intellectuals that led us to believe ourselves free of all conditioning whatsoever.'[16] The war years had taught de Beauvoir otherwise. In *The Prime of Life* she records hearing a remark made by another woman at the start of the war: '"What difference does the war make? . . . It does not change my attitude to a blade of grass." I found myself both fascinated and embarrassed by such serenity: . . . Not only had the war changed my attitude to everything; it had radically transformed the objects of my attention: the skies over Paris (and Breton villages, women's mouths and children's eyes). After June 1940, I no longer recognized anything – objects, people, seasons, places, even myself. The age I lived in, which for ten years had revolved on a firm axis, now abruptly shifted out of orbit and dragged me

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with it. . . . No blade of grass in any meadow, however I looked at it, would ever again be what it had been.'[17]

It is this decade and this shift of vision that this novel concerns itself with.

Reading it now, eighty years after its publication, with fascism on the rise again not just here and in Europe but internationally, it reads as a gift of resistance in itself.

The Blood of Others opens on a backward glance at life a few hours before certain death. Simultaneously it opens on the urgent question of whether or not to commit an act of resistance which will end the lives of many others and most likely also set in motion reprisal executions of innocent civilians.

'It's easy to pay with the blood of others,' one character says. Another answers, 'Other people's blood is the same as our own.'

Looking back at his own early life, Jean Blomart sees himself saddled with guilt pretty much from privileged birth onwards. He wants to work out how to live in a way that negates the social separation he sees everywhere. Then there's the guilt he feels about having already persuaded a younger man to a political act that brought about his death; then even more guilt – the guilt of just existing at all. 'Even if I kill myself . . . I shall still be responsible for all those acts which my absence will have made possible.'

Hélène is guileless. She is all heedless desire and appetite. More, she's infuriating, sometimes mischievously devious, headstrong, persistent – and true. She feels her individuality fiercely, like we all do. Up against the 'thousands of girls in the world exactly like me . . . I. Only I am myself.' She also feels miserable existential boredom at the thought of her lover Paul, and at her own and everyone else's expectations of her life. 'That was that: she had come to the end of the day; there would be another day tomorrow and it would be the same thing all over again . . . Might as well commit suicide.'

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She wants more. She particularly wants that bicycle she can see in the courtyard outside the shop, the one that doesn't belong to her. When she gets it, she realizes that it's something much more substantial she really wants from life.

Her blunt seriousness stands out against the self-conscious authoritative voicing of existence in Jean's chapters, so much so that the novel subtly questions voice itself – who gets to narrate the self, who gets to narrate the 'other', what it means to be able to claim a self and what it means to be cast as other. This becomes gender analysis too. 'So long as she was silent, he thought he was in the right.'

Against all expectations, especially their own, the novel becomes a love story which routs the conventions of love story, and a war story where defeat is a kind of victory; it confers love on its male protagonist, heroism on its female protagonist. It examines what moral action is, in both love and war. It disabuses both protagonists of their naiveties, shakes them in its extraordinary concluding chapters into vitally present selves they'd never have imagined. It insists: 'each of us is responsible for everything' – and everyone; it does this in imagery that uses blood to unite every human with every other in a series of powerful scenes, including a backstreet abortion scene the pain and shock of which will shake any reader. If Jean's chapters can be said to be the ostensible self-consciousness of the novel, Hélène's are the oxygen of consciousness. Her presence in asserting her freedoms, her desire not to be stopped or stymied in what she chooses, her 'zest for living', are all weighed against any notion of 'no more future'.

In essence, that's what *The Blood of Others* does, acts as threshold for that future – in an assertion of the indivisibility of the personal and the political, since whether we like it or not, accept it or not: 'you are the fate of others.' Throughout, de Beauvoir makes unshowy use of subtle modernist technique to bring

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readers close to the ramification of each fragmented moment. She suggests that a dammed-up spirit will naturally become explosive and she sees this fragmenting as the catalyst for urgent reconstituting. Jean's narrative in particular slips from first person to third person like a punctured self torn between internal and external being – or is it a self coming to understand how to heal a split between the two?

Stylistically de Beauvoir also presents time as a simultaneously split / fused substance, in a slippage between past and present paused before a tough dawn, a future that'll be both end and beginning. Simultaneity is one of the novel's thematic engines, especially the revelation of the simultaneous existence of self as other, other as self. De Beauvoir saw literature's great gift as precisely this simultaneity. Only literature, she said in a 1965 essay called 'What Can Literature Do?', can 'make those hawthorn flowers and the death of a grandmother exist together . . . It alone can succeed in reconciling all the irreconcilable moments of a human experience. Words struggle, therefore, against time and against death, but they also struggle against separation . . . And that is the miracle of literature and what distinguishes it from information. A truth that is *other* becomes mine without ceasing to be an other. I abdicate my 'I' in favour of he who is speaking, and yet I remain myself.'[18]

This 'miracle' of simultaneity becomes one of the most important and revelatory techniques in *The Blood of Others*:

We were there, bathed in the soft dusk of Paris, and we were doing nobody harm. And yet we were also over there in Barcelona and in Madrid; no longer harmless strollers, but dirty swine. As surely as we existed in these joyous streets, we existed under the dark skies filled with the roar of the Stukas; we existed in Berlin and Vienna, in the concentration camps where Jews slept in their shirts on the sodden ground, in the prisons where militant Socialists were rotting . . . In

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Vienna, under the amused glances of the passers-by, the Jews were cleaning the pavements with acids which ate into their fingers. We weren't going to get ourselves killed for that.

Against that last assertion, the novel argues definitively back.

'In *The Blood of Others* I had attempted to show death laying siege in vain to the fullness of life.'[19]

Written up against bloody loss and division, against exclusion and casual and industrialized death, de Beauvoir's novel admits unavoidable moral consequence, unavoidable damage. Then it posits an understanding of an astonishing freedom in the worst, most restricting, least-likely circumstances.

It commits self to other, then acknowledges the worth and the simultaneous cost of this commitment. It spells out the moral worth and the likely cost of the absence of such commitment.

'There's nothing like a good book to take you out of yourself,' as Jean tells Hélène, in a book that takes you out of and at the same time deep into yourself, directly to what keeps us all breathing, the blood in your own and in all our veins.

That's what a novel can do.

Ali Smith

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Notes

All quotes are from Penguin's *The Blood of Others* (1964, 1984) unless referenced below.

1. Simone de Beauvoir, 'Literature and Metaphysics', *Philosophical Writings* (Illinois, 2021), p. 269.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, (Harmondsworth, 1965), pp. 101, 125.
3. Simone de Beauvoir, January 29 1941, *Wartime Diary*, (Illinois, 2021) p. 322.
4. Simone de Beauvoir, 'My Experience as a Writer', *'The Useless Mouths' and other Literary Writings*, (Illinois, 2011), p. 285.
5. Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, (New York, 1990) p. 239.
6. Simone de Beauvoir, July 5 1940, *Wartime Diary*, p. 301.
7. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 460.
8. quoted by Debra Bergoffen, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 79.
9. Simone de Beauvoir, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 3.
10. Simone de Beauvoir, 'What is Existentialism?', *Philosophical Writings*, p. 325.
11. Simone de Beauvoir, 'New Heroes for Old', *'The Useless Mouths',* p. 118
12. Margaret Atwood, Introduction to *Inseparable*, (New York, 2021) pp. x, xii–xiv
13. Simone de Beauvoir, 'New Heroes for Old', p. 115.
14. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 137.
15. Simone de Beauvoir, 'New Heroes for Old', p. 116.
16. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 21.

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17. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 599.
18. Simone de Beauvoir, 'What Can Literature Do?', *'The Useless Mouths'*, pp. 204, 201.
19. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 606.

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I

When he opened the door, their eyes turned towards him.

'What do you want?' he asked.

Laurent was sitting astride a chair in front of the fire 'I must know whether or not you've decided that it's to be done tomorrow morning.'

Tomorrow. He looked about him. The room smelt of soapsuds and cabbage soup: Madeleine was smoking, her elbows on the tablecloth; a book was in front of Denise. They were alive: for them this night would have an end, there would be a dawn.

Laurent looked at him.

'We can't delay,' he said gently 'I must leave at eight o'clock to get there – if I am to go.'

He pronounced his words carefully, as though he were speaking to an invalid.

'Of course.' He knew that he must answer and he could not answer.

'Listen, come and see me when you wake up; just knock – I must think things over.'

'All right, I'll knock at about six o'clock,' said Laurent.

'How is she?' asked Denise.

'For the time being, she's asleep,' he answered and walked towards the door.

'Call out if you want anything,' said Madeleine. 'Laurent is going to lie down, but we'll be here all night.'

'Thanks.' He closed the door.

He must decide. Her eyes are shut, each breath labours between her lips; the sheets rise and fall. They rise too often;

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the effort of living is too obvious, too noisy; she is struggling, her light is failing; at dawn it will be out. Because of me – first Jacques and now Hélène. Because I did not love her and because I loved her; because she came so close to me and because she remained so far apart. Because I exist and she, free, solitary, and eternal, is bound to my existence, unable to avoid the brutal fact of my existence, fettered to the mechanical sequence of her life; and at this last link of the fatal chain her very heart struck by the blind steel, by the hard presence of the metal, by my presence – her death. Because I was there, solid, inevitable, for no apparent reason. I should never have existed. First Jacques, now Hélène.

Outside, the night has fallen, a night without street lamps, without stars, without voices. A patrol went by some time ago: now no one is abroad, the streets are deserted. In front of the big hotels and the ministries, the sentries are on guard. Nothing is happening. But here something is happening: she is dying. 'First Jacques . . .' Again those icy words. But in the slow passing of the night, through other words and scenes from out of the past, the original evil unfolds its story. It has deliberately assumed the shape of a story, as if anything else might have been possible, as if everything had not been predestined since my birth: the utter rottenness hidden in the womb of all human destiny. Entirely posited at my birth, entirely present in the odour and the shadow of the death room, present at every moment and throughout eternity. Today and for all time I am present. I was always present. Before that, there was no time. Since time was, I am, for ever, and even beyond my own death.

He was present, but at first he did not know it. I see him now, leaning against a window in the gallery. But he did not know it, he thought that only the world was present. He was looking at the begrimed skylights through which the smell of ink and dust

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rose in gusts, the smell of other people's work; sunlight flooded the old oak furniture whilst the people below were stifling in the dull light of green-shaded lamps; throughout the afternoon the machines purred monotonously. Sometimes he fled: sometimes he remained motionless for hours, allowing the sense of guilt to enter him through eyes, and ears, and nostrils. At ground level, under the dirty panes, boredom stagnated, and in the long room with light-coloured walls, the sense of guilt eddied out in sickly spirals. He did not know that through the fanlight, when they raised their heads, the workmen could see the solemn, fresh face of a middle-class child.

The blue upholstery velvet was soft to his cheeks; the kitchen, gleaming with copper, exuded a good smell of melted fat and caramel; from the drawing-room came a murmur of silk-smooth voices. But in the scent of summer flowers, in the crackling flames of a cosy winter, tirelessly stalked a sense of guilt. When he went away for the holidays, he left it behind him. With no sense of guilt, stars shot across the sky, apples were crisp to the tooth, cool water bathed his naked feet. But as soon as he returned to the flat, embalmed under white dust sheets, as soon as he shook the napthalene-larded curtains, he found it again, patient and intact. Season succeeded season, the countryside changed, new adventure stories were published in books with gilt edges, but nothing changed the even murmur of the machines.

From the dark ground floor, the odour of guilt insinuated itself into the whole house. 'One day, it will be your house.' On the front of the building there were letters engraved in the stonework: 'Blomart & Sons, Printers.' With unhurried step his father would come upstairs from the workshops and into the big flat; unmoved, he would breathe the thick air that stagnated on the staircase. Nor did Elisabeth and Suzon suspect anything; they hung pictures on the walls of their rooms and

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arranged cushions on their divan beds. But he was sure his mother knew this uneasiness which dulled the brilliance of the sunniest days; for her too, through the shining parquet floor, through the hanging of silk and the deep pile carpets, seeped the sense of guilt.

Perhaps she had also met it somewhere else, in unknown shapes; she carried it with her everywhere, under her fur coats, under the dresses gleaming with sequins which clung to her little rounded body. That was probably why she always seemed to be making excuses for herself: she spoke apologetically to the servants and to the tradespeople, she walked with small hurried steps, all huddled together, as though to reduce even more the amount of space which she required on the earth. He would have liked to ask her about it, but he never quite knew what words to use. One day he tried to talk about the workmen, but she said quickly in a smooth voice, 'Oh no, they don't mind so very much – they're used to it. And then, in life, we all have to do things we dislike.' He had not questioned her further; what she said did not carry much weight, she always gave the impression of speaking in the presence of an exacting and influential witness, who must not be shocked. But when she feverishly cut out a layette for the cook's child, which she could have bought quite easily at the Bon Marché, when she spent her nights repairing the housemaid's clumsy darns, he seemed to understand her. 'It's silly, there's no need for you to do it,' scolded Suzon and Elisabeth. She did not try to justify herself but, from morning to night, she flew all over the place in an endless flight, spending hours pushing the old paralysed governess's bath-chair, talking in deaf and dumb language to her deaf cousin. She liked neither the old governess nor her cousin: it was not for their sakes that she spent herself. It was because of that joyless odour which seeped into the house.

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Sometimes, she took Jean to see her poor – to Christmas trees and tea parties given to well-scrubbed children, who politely gave thanks for the beautiful plush bear or the clean little overall – they did not seem unhappy. The beggars in rags who crouched on the pavements did not worry him either: with their white eyeballs, their stumps, and the metal flutes which they played by blowing through their noses, they took their place as naturally in the street scene as a camel in the desert or pigtailed Chinamen in China. And the stories he was told about these poetic vagabonds and touching little orphans always ended in tears of joy, hand-shakes, clean clothes, and crusty loaves. Poverty only seemed to exist to be relieved, to give rich little boys the pleasure of giving: it did not worry Jean. But he knew there was something else, something that the books with gilt edges did not mention, that Madame Blomart did not mention. Perhaps one was forbidden to speak about it.

I was eight years old when, for the first time, I came face to face with the original evil. I was reading in the gallery; my mother came in with an expression on her face which we often noticed, an expression full of guilt and apology, and she said: 'Louise's baby is dead.'

Once again I see the twisted staircase, the stone corridor with those many doors, all alike; mother told me that behind every door there was a room in which a whole family lived. We went in. Louise took me in her arms, her cheeks were flabby and wet; mother sat on the bed beside her and began to talk to her in a low voice. In the cradle was a white-faced baby with closed eyes. I looked at the red tiles, at the bare walls, at the gas ring, and I began to cry. I was crying, Mother was talking, and the baby remained dead. In vain could I empty my money-box and Mother could sit up for nights together: it would always be just as dead.

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'What's the matter with that child?' asked my father.

'He went with me to see Louise,' my mother answered.

She had already told them the story, but now, with words, she tried to make them feel it: meningitis, the night of agony, and in the morning, the little stiff body. Father listened as he swallowed his soup. I could not eat. Over there, Louise was crying, she was not eating: nothing would ever give the child back to her – no, not ever. Nothing would blot out that unhappiness which fouled the world.

'Come now, drink your soup,' said my father, 'everyone's finished.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Do try a little, darling,' said Mother.

I lifted the spoon to my lips and put it back on the plate with a kind of hiccup:

'I can't!'

'Listen,' said my father, 'it's very sad that Louise's baby is dead, I'm deeply grieved for her, but not all our life are we going to mourn it. Now, just you hurry up!'

I drank. In a trice, the hard voice had loosened the tightness about my throat. I felt the lukewarm liquid slip down my throat and, with each mouthful, something flowed into me which was far more nauseating than the smell of the printing works. But the tightness was relieved. Not all our life . . . *Tonight, until the dawn and perhaps for a few more days – but not all our life – after all it is her sorrow, not ours: it is her death . . . They had laid him on the bench with his torn collar and the blood caked on his face: his blood, not mine. 'I'll never forget it.' Marcel too cried in his heart, 'Never, oh little one, my little pony, my good little boy – never will I forget your laughter and your living eyes.' And his death is deep in our lives, peaceful and strange, and we who live, remember: we live to remember it now that it no longer exists for him who is dead. Not all our life – not even for a few days – not even for a minute. You are alone on that bed,*

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