

Mr Bollène and his wife Louise lived in an ordinary apartment on the third floor of a block of flats without a lift.

Both of them were at the wrong end of seventy in a middle-class area that had seen better times.

For a year, Mrs Bollène's memory had been letting her down more and more. In spite of her efforts to pay heed, lapses and omissions made her confusion more obvious. Names slipped away and she couldn't find the words.

Just yesterday, it had been impossible for her to remember the baker's name. She called him Monsieur Cadet although his name was Rousselle. He made a joke of it.

Following this incident, which took no great explaining, Mr Bollène decided to do the shopping himself. Louise would accompany him. He was afraid that if he left her alone at home she would light the gas and perhaps burn herself.

Mr Bollène, whom age had made anxious, smothered his wife with affection, but he wasn't spared weak legs and a few dizzy spells himself. Nevertheless, he helped Louise to climb up and down the staircase. And he led her by the arm into the street where, a little haltingly, she walked step by little step.

He had to keep an eye on her whenever she was in the shops. Handling fruits and vegetables in order to judge whether a lettuce was fresh or a melon ripe enough, she sometimes shoplifted them, out of pure innocence.

With age, she had slowly become stouter. Her skirts hugged her waist so closely that she had stopped holding them up with anything other than safety pins. The regularity of her appetite astonished Eugène. Afraid of running out of the staples, she sometimes hid a piece of bread or bun in a cupboard so that she could nibble it in secret when she had hunger pangs.

Now and again the social worker for the district paid a visit to the Bollènes. She was kind-hearted and concerned but

such a touchy person that Eugène and Louise were a little afraid of her.

It was the social worker who after Louise had fallen in the street encouraged Mr Bollène to consider getting his wife looked after in a long-stay unit.

That evening Eugène wept a lot. Louise, without understanding what was weighing on her husband, got upset in her turn. The tears welled in her eyes.

Louise cried because he was crying.

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Louise's falls became more common. One night she wanted to get up to relieve herself. She fell in her room and couldn't get up again. Eugène, surprised by his spouse's weight, was unable to lift her up and nearly fell himself. So he called for help.

They took Louise, battered and bruised, to hospital.

Once there, she lost her head completely. The nurse in the receiving ward pressed Eugène to take his wife back with him and also told him how urgent it was to get her a place. The next morning she gave Mr Bollène a form to fill out requesting admission to the long-stay centre at Montibert.

'Your wife doesn't know where she is or what time of year it is. We need her bed for a younger patient,' the nurse told him. 'I hope the centre at Montibert will reply quickly to your request. All the other establishments of this kind are full up. We're coming up to the summer holiday period. The hospitals are clearing out.'

A week later, the nurse told Mr Bollène that his wife would be leaving the department the next day.

'We got the Social Security to accept the costs. You'll still have to meet the boarding costs which are 300 francs a day.'

'But that's out of the question!' exclaimed Bollène. 'My pension isn't enough for that.'

'You can settle that once you get there. Apply to the Social Security.'

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The following day an ambulance transported Louise Bollène to Montibert. It went through the bustling town and then the suburbs. Since it was the beginning of July, the traffic was heavy. Then it drove alongside the river and a railway. Louise was suffering from a vague sense of nausea but for all her discomfort seemed indifferent. She had merely become a little paler. That didn't worry the nursing auxiliary who had been assigned to accompany her during her transport.

The ambulance had crossed the railway through a subterranean passage. Soon it would enter a courtyard surrounded by tall buildings and large plane trees. In their shade, a few old people were seated in wheelchairs. A gardener was watering the lawns. They were decorated with clumps of flowers.

A nurse appeared.

'There's your new patient,' said the auxiliary.

'I do have eyes in my head,' retorted the nurse. 'Another present! Bring her to the Wisteria Wing.'

The Wisteria Wing had been renovated and looked attractive. They took Louise Bollène out of the ambulance and transported her, flat on a stretcher, to the hoist.

Upstairs, a long corridor met Louise Bollène's unseeing gaze. On each side there were spruce rooms, freshly done up and repainted. The furnishings were standard hospital issue but modern, with two large comfortable beds designed for easy access, armchairs with metallic struts, a couple of tables with nickel-plated legs, new lamps and toilet cabinets that looked quite attractive. A rotunda could be seen at the end of the corridor in which a few old ladies were seated. Bright blue blinds were pulled down in front of the windows.

They seated Louise Bollène in a chair in one of the bedrooms. An auxiliary put away her few belongings. Then they undressed her and put her to bed. The nurse had vanished.

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In the night, Louise was wakened by the person next to her in the room who was babbling in her sleep. She became agitated. Someone came. A white shape was standing next to her and rummaging beneath her buttocks and thighs to feel if she was wet.

With daybreak, there were shadows and noises that she thought she recognised. Perhaps they were doing the housework?

At the same time, Eugène was already up in the flat. He had to clean the kitchen, do the dishes, make his bed. The evening before he had told the neighbours he was going to see his wife at Montibert.

He had a quick breakfast and made his way to the platform to catch the bus that went out to the suburbs.

The journey took half-an-hour. The midday wind was blowing and the heat stifling.

When he entered the Wisteria Wing he was staggered by the smell which permeated the place. He entered the corridor and passed the first room, the door of which was ajar. An old man in pyjamas, seated bare-footed in a chair, was holding an elderly woman on his knees. He was moved. He wanted to ask the couple if they knew where his wife was. The two sweethearts looked at him blankly. Both were unable to express so much as a word. The man who was still known as Paul Soubeyrand had forgotten family and first names long ago. But he held to the habit of taking his wife on his knees. She remained an hour or two, immobile like her husband, as oddly indifferent to him as he was to her. It was only a perpetuation or resurgence of an old gesture, not a sign of reciprocal fondness.

Bollène closed the door of their room.

Another ten steps and he discovered Louise, a radiant smile on her face, elsewhere and yet solidly present. Hers was the kind of disquieting presence conveyed by statues, the dead or just immobile old people.

With her seated in the armchair, which, with its gleaming metal and cheerful backing struck him as tacky, he embraced her, taking her hands and raising them to his lips. She seemed to recognise him. But he wasn't sure. He had brought some biscuits and a bottle of mineral water that he placed furtively on the bedside table. He would have liked to sit down himself, but the other chair in the room was occupied by an old lady. She was kept in position by a sheet rolled and knotted behind the back of the chair. She kept clawing the palm of one hand with the nails of her other. Her eyes were red and her eyelids everted and lashless. Eugène Bollène felt repugnance for her.

He turned away and looked at Louise. He leaned towards her and, slightly trembling, stroked her face. He was stricken by the fear of death, by the fear of losing Louise. Even though she didn't respond to his caress, the fact that she was there, even absent, reassured him.

The other old woman stared insistently at Bollène and scratched even more intensely with her fingers, extending the movement to her forearm.

She was jealous and since Eugène Bollène didn't stop stroking his wife's face let out a howl.

At that, he stepped back a little from Louise. The windows opened on roofs. Farther away, the rim of a perimeter wall became apparent. Long poplars reached towards the vast sky.

He sighed. The entire ward seemed to breathe the slow rhythm of chests and hours. The antique clock in the centre of the living room chimed half past three and the sound dwindled in the hot air humming on the tiles.

It occurred to Mr Bollène that he should have kept Louise with him. He should have ... but to take her back now that he had tasted the meagre freedom her departure had granted him seemed impossible.

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He came back every day like this and,

passing in front of the Soubeyrands' room, observed that the wife was still seated immobile on her husband's knees.

One afternoon, he found Louise in bed. He was worried and wanted to talk to the nurse. The ward seemed to be deserted. He called. Cries emerged in response from some of the rooms. An auxiliary came. He asked if his wife was ill.

'No,' replied Mrs Sanchez. 'But we don't have anyone today to get our grandmas out of bed. I'm alone here until ten o'clock this evening.'

'Alone?'

'Alone. Holidays, sick leave, accident leave, further training ... you understand.'

'No,' said Bollène, 'I don't understand.'

'Your wife is heavy,' replied the auxiliary. 'It's impossible for me to lift her from her bed into a chair. We need men. We do have a male nurse, but he's absent. Sore throat. And then he's knackered. It's a tough job. A stretch of sick leave from time to time doesn't do any harm. It allows you to recoup your forces again.'

'Oh yes,' said Bollène, 'tiredness.'

Tiredness was something he felt himself when he got back to the apartment after his visits to the long-stay centre. He found it hard to walk and his legs were heavy and stiff.

He thought that the entire world was affected by this infirmity: it was stealthily creeping over men and women, old and young alike, in this hot and windy summer.

Could it be that fatigue, like dust and sand, would one day drift over decadent and obsolescent civilisations and their cities? The attrition of age, or just utter boredom, would overtake the faithless in their foxholes.

Everyone was sinking in it. Those who had left for the sea would lose their souls there in the swarming beaches.

The auxiliary interrupted Bollène's pessimistic train of thought:

'Your wife is still able to feed herself. That's why her card, which you must have seen at the entrance, is yellow. The red cards are for grandmas who need help

with their meals. Mrs Bollène has a good appetite.'

'Does she enjoy her food?' asked Mr Bollène.

'No,' said the auxiliary. 'She shovels down more or less whatever's on her plate. She's hungry and anything goes: vegetables, meat, sweets. Many other patients have to be drip-fed otherwise they dry up like old plants or newborn children. I've seen that in Algeria,' added Mrs Sanchez. 'It might be true that old age is a desert, but Mrs Bollène visits the oases. She drinks everything we give to her.'

'And her walking?' asked Mr Bollène.

'No, she doesn't walk. She can hardly stand on her legs any more. The physio has given up on her. You have to understand that for him too, she's heavy. He has tried to get her to walk supporting herself on a zimmer, but she wasn't able to. Now, most of the physios are on holiday.'

'Wasn't the administration able to arrange a roster for their holidays?'

'No, everyone wants to go away in July and August. Their holidays have to be at the same time as those of their wives or partners. If admin doesn't give them the dates they ask for, they look for a doctor to sign them off as if they were really ill.'

'Those are dishonest doctors,' murmured Mr Bollène.

'Yes and no. As I said to you, we're all tired out.'

'So I'll have to give up my hope of seeing my wife walk again,' responded Bollène.

'To be honest, there isn't much hope,' said Mrs Sanchez. 'The surroundings and the crowding in here don't help things at all. And perhaps too, the lack of affection ...'

'But I love my wife!' exclaimed Bollène.

'So do we. If you think that you don't have to love old people to work here, you're wrong. We get fond of our oldies. We take them to the toilet, we do their hair, we doll them up, we cuddle them. I don't think it's a matter of looking for

someone to blame. Old age is life for a little while yet, but it's also already death. Somewhere in between, I'd say.'

That evening, when he left, Mr Bollène was close to despair.

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He came back the next day. The auxiliary found him next to Louise and started chatting to him.

'I was thinking about things during the night,' he told her. 'Couldn't I be admitted in order to share a room with my wife? She'd be able to benefit from my presence and I could perhaps help her to walk.'

'You're far too able-bodied and clear-minded to get taken on here.'

'But what about the two Soubeyrands, for example?'

'Both of them are completely gone. That's not your case, Mr Bollène. You actually look very fit for your age.'

He tried to remonstrate with her, drawing attention to his tiredness.

'These bus journeys take it out of me,' he added. 'And my memory isn't what it was. I displace my glasses, lose my keys.'

'Your tiredness? It's the heat!' exclaimed Mrs Sanchez. 'Be patient, wait two or three years. Perhaps then ... But believe me, nothing beats being free.'

'I'm not free! Doing the shopping, cleaning the house, preparing something to eat, the dishes, the bus, the visits to my wife!'

'It's a form of freedom,' replied Mrs Sanchez with her Algerian accent. 'Come on! It's not prison and it's not the factory.'

Bollène shrugged his shoulders. He didn't want to hear any more. He sat down next to his wife and looked at her.

He found her pleasing to the eye, if not beautiful. Her face hadn't aged much at all. It remained full, and her nose still had the fine and lively contours he had admired and loved so much, just like those of her lips. And the gaze fixed on the distance that was now so characteristic of her wasn't lacking in

charm either. He dwelt for a long time on Louise's eyes, on their colour and on the fine, brittle skin around her temples. Not a single crow's foot disrupted the warmth of her newly restored complexion.

The emptiness of mind, the absence of emotion, the loss of time and her recent uprooting or exile gave Louise's face a serenity it had never had before. She shone in a perfect peace, without desires, without interest, without plans, without a past.

He stroked the plump arms.

'Myself or someone else,' he whispered. 'Absent. But she's mine.'

And he halted on this feeling of possession that he had never experienced before with such force. It was true: Louise was his only wealth and she belonged to him.

The woman in the neighbouring bed didn't stop looking at him. She was seated on the bed and her eyes blazed between her wrinkled lids. The thin skin on either side of her hooked and pointed nose was taut over her facial bones. She stirred her long scraggy arms and tried now and again to straddle the metal barriers along both sides of her bed.

Louise was there, close to him. Memories of distant days unravelled in his mind. Days of mutual pleasure. He would need to check the photos to be able to confirm some of the expressions on her face, the colour and grace of some of her poses. Louise had had her hours of elegance. Yes, he remembered: the lustre of a look, a smile, a hand placed on his. And this keen pleasure, this sense of complete happiness they had known together on that July afternoon listening, through their bedroom window, to his father and mother talking in the garden.

He was astonished at the silence that inhabited his reminiscences. Not a sound, except of course for his parents' voices though they were so faded ...

As he sat there lost in recollection, the daily routine superimposed itself on his mind: he had to remember to pay the electricity bill and go to the bank to

withdraw some money.

Without his intending it, his hand had crept under the sheet. It recognised the knee and further on the thighs where the flesh was so soft and warm. The fingers lingered on the belly that had once received him.

Louise stayed motionless, indifferent. He left.

The next day, he noticed that Mrs Soubeyrand was no longer sitting on her husband's knees. She had been put to bed. The tripod of an infusion set stood in her room.

The silence was the same silence as every day, and a clear light flooded the pale yellow walls. The sun, in luminous jets, streamed through the glass.

Soubeyrand was seated in his chair, pyjamas neatly buttoned up, in the same hieratic attitude.

A few days went by. A week lapsed. On Sunday, the bed which Emilie Soubeyrand had been occupying was empty. She was dead. Her husband hadn't noticed anything amiss. The absence had no meaning for him. He was a man but only in appearance. He had, without knowing it, a head full of straight white hair, a moustache and beard carefully trimmed by the auxiliaries and the fresh complexion that Mrs Sanchez admired so much.

He also possessed a chest, an abdomen and limbs whose joints were seizing up like rusty wheels. But he didn't know that either.

Soubeyrand stayed like that until the week began again. Eugène Bollène quickened his pace to walk past his room. From time to time, gusts of hot wind would rattle the blinds drawn down in front of the windows. Mrs Sanchez didn't appear again. Had she left to go on holiday and been replaced in her turn?

Bollène sat beside his wife and his hand travelled her body again. It was all that he had left of her, but it still seemed a lot to him. He halted for a long time on her breasts. Either one amply filled his hand. It comforted him.

The old woman who shared the room slept like a stone and her breathing was irregular. Each breath became more and more spaced apart until the pause was so long it seemed the woman with the bird's face had ceased to live. Then the chest would heave feebly again and this last-moment refusal seemed strange.

The next day, Soubeyrand wasn't alone any more. An old man was sharing his room. Both were seated: Soubeyrand in his armchair, the new man in a tub-chair. He was naked or almost naked. A short shirt fastened at the back covered him down to his belly-button.

The migratory bird who had shared Louise's room for a month had vanished. Most likely dead.

Bollène found himself alone with his wife. He sat, listening to the silence.

All of a sudden, he threw the covers off Louise, spread her legs, lay on her and with some difficulty entered her. He could feel her beneath him living and warm and, in his great despair, that was all he needed.

The new auxiliary, Mrs Abdallah, who had presumably heard an odd noise while taking her coffee in the small room reserved for staff, entered the room. Her surprise didn't leave her indecisive for long.

'How dare you!' she cried. 'You disgusting specimen!'

Old age and its contingencies revolted her.

She showed Eugène Bollène the door even as he was hastily putting his clothes straight.

He didn't turn up again. His body was found 10 days later on the river bank.

### Jacques Chauviré

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