(and I knew that they wouldn't, that it wasn't possible, that they would never go so far; but the thought did occur to me).

Confounded by a creature beyond their ken, my parents tried relentlessly to set me back on the right path. They would get annoyed, and say to me *That kid's got a screw loose, he's not right in the head.* Most of the time they would say *pussy* when speaking to me, and *pussy* was just about the worst insult they could imagine – that was obvious from the tone they used – the one best for conveying disgust, better than *dickhead* or *loser*. In a world where masculine values are held up as supreme, even my mother would say about herself *I've got balls, nobody messes with me.*

My father thought football might toughen me up so he suggested that I play, as he had in his youth, as had my cousins and my brothers. I resisted: even at that young age I wanted dancing lessons; my sister took those. I dreamed of being onstage, in tights, with sequins, and a huge crowd cheering for me as I bowed, gratified, dripping with sweat – and yet knowing the shame that such a dream represented, I never admitted to it. Another boy in the village, Maxime, who took dance lessons because his parents, for reasons no one could understand, insisted on it, was constantly being made fun of. *The Dancing Queen* is what he was called.

My father begged me *Come on, it doesn't cost anything and you'll be with your cousin, with your mates from the village. Give it a go. At least try, for me.*

On one occasion I agreed to go, more out of fear of the consequences I'd suffer if I didn't than as part of an effort to please him.

I went, and then I came home – earlier than the others, because after practice we were supposed to go into the locker room to change. I had learned, to my horror and terror (and yet it's something I should have thought of, something everyone knew) that the showers were public. I went home and announced to my father that I couldn't continue *I've had enough; I can't stand football, it's just not my thing.* He went on trying to convince me for a while, but finally gave up.

I was with him, we were on the way to the café, when he bumped into the president of the football league, whom we all called *Coach Cigar*. *Coach Cigar* asked, with the kind of surprised look people sometimes put on, one eyebrow cocked *How come your kid stopped coming to practice?* I watched my father lower his eyes and mumble a lie *Well he hasn't been feeling so great* with, at that moment, the inarticulable feeling that runs through a child who is confronted in public with his parents' shame, as if in a flash the world has lost all its foundations, all its meaning. He understood that *Coach Cigar* didn't believe him, so he tried to cover his tracks *And well, you know, Eddy's a little bit weird, I mean, not weird, but a little bit strange, he's happy*

just sitting around watching TV. In the end he came out and admitted it, looking wretched and not wanting to meet the other man's gaze *I guess it turns out he's just not that into football.*

Outside my house, in the northern village of barely a thousand people where I grew up, I think it's fair to say that as a young boy I was reasonably well liked. Moreover, there were also many things that people associate with a country childhood that I enjoyed: the long walks in the woods, the shelters that we built there, the fires in the fireplace, the warm milk fresh from the farm, the games of hide-and-seek in the cornfields, the peaceful silence of the small streets, the old lady who gave us sweets, the apple trees, the plum trees, the pear trees in every garden, the explosion of autumnal colours, the leaves that blanketed the pavement, until our feet were lost, stuck in those mountains of leaves; the chestnuts that fell with them in the autumn, and the fights we'd organise. Chestnuts hurt a lot, and I would return home covered in bruises but I made no complaint – quite the contrary. My mother would say *I hope you gave as good as you got, or better, that's how you know who beat who.*

It wasn't unusual for me to hear someone say *That Bellegueule kid is a little weird* or to get smirked at when I talked to people. But finally, being the odd boy in the village, the effeminate one, I elicited a kind of amused

fascination that set me apart, protected me somewhat, like Jordan, my Martinican neighbour, the only black person for miles around, to whom people would say *It's true I don't like blacks, there's so many around these days, always causing trouble wherever they go, wars in their own countries or coming here and burning cars, but not you Jordan, you're all right, you're different, you're all right with us.*

The women of the village would congratulate my mother, *Your son Eddy is so well brought up, not like all the others, you see it straight away.* And my mother would be proud and congratulate me in turn.

surprise *Why does he talk like a girl, why would he want to act like a girl when he's a boy? Your son is a strange one, Brigitte* (my mother) *the way he's behaving.* Their surprise made my throat tighten and tied my stomach in knots. People would ask me the same kind of question *Why do you talk that way?* I'd still pretend not to understand, I wouldn't speak – then came the desire to scream, but I couldn't, the cry stuck like a kind of foreign body, burning in my throat.

The lives of girls, mothers and grandmothers

Between the hallway at school, my parents, and the people in the village, I was trapped. My only reprieve was in the classroom. I liked school. Not the school itself, not school life: the two boys were there. But I liked the teachers. They never talked about *pussies* or *dirty faggots.* They explained that differences should be accepted, they voiced the discourse of the French educational system, that we were all equal. People were not to be judged by the colour of their skin, their religion, or their sexual orientation (that way of putting it, *sexual orientation*, would always make the group of boys at the back of the classroom snicker, we called them *the boys at the back*).

My marks weren't very good. The bedrooms at home had no lights and no desks so schoolwork had to be done in the main room, where my father would be watching television or where my mother would be cleaning

a fish at the same table and mumbling *You shouldn't be doing your homework at this time of day*. In any case, I didn't like doing homework, I never mastered what they call *the basics* because of my frequent absences, because of the language my family spoke at home, which was therefore my language, marked by frequent errors and the use of the Picardy dialect that we sometimes spoke better than standard French.

Still I grew attached to my teachers, and I knew that to please them I had to get good marks, or at least show them I was trying despite my difficulties. There was something suspicious about the way I would obey them: being an obedient student at school was considered girlish.

But only in the early years, after which the girls began to hate school too and to make trouble for the teachers. It was just a matter of time. Their elimination from the system simply took a bit longer.

When my sister was in school at first she wanted to follow a training programme to become a midwife, but then she let us know that she was going to become a Spanish teacher *so I can make lots of money*. For us, teachers seemed solidly middle class and my father would get angry whenever the teachers' union went on strike *They make money hand over fist so what have they got to gripe about*.

She was sent to one of those regular meetings with a careers advisor and she explained that she wanted to become a Spanish teacher in a collège *But these days, young*

lady, careers in education are hard to come by, everyone wants to be a teacher so there are fewer and fewer spots, and the government allocates less and less money to education. You should pursue something where you have a better chance, something less risky, like a career in retail, and in any case, when I look at your record your marks aren't stellar, I have to say, they are barely average, you'd be lucky to succeed at the baccalaureate exams.

She came home one night annoyed after one of these sessions, put out by the careers advisor's attempts to modify her plans *I don't know why he has to be such a ballbuster that man, I just want to be a Spanish teacher.* My father *Don't let some black man tell you what to do* (the careers advisor was Martinican).

My sister resisted for a while. The advisor called her in several times to talk to her. When she was in her final year at the collège, she was supposed to do an internship somewhere and the advisor recommended the village bakery. A few weeks after the internship ended she explained to my mother (who was disappointed: *We would've liked to see her get a better job*) that she no longer wanted to be a teacher, but rather a sales assistant. She was sure of her choice, the careers advisor had been right. An apprenticeship would guarantee her a paycheque, which she wanted so she could afford all the things she'd been deprived of throughout childhood because our parents had no money.

*

home, watching television, when they are out of work. He stayed home waiting to die, fixed, motionless in his bed. Rumour had it, I don't know if it was true, but they said he died in his own excrement. *He died in his own piss and shit*, but he wouldn't even get out of bed, he didn't go to the bathroom any more, he just covered up the puddles of piss and piles of shit with sheets of newspaper, a last little gesture to hygiene before dying. *They said his socks were stuck to his flesh, he hadn't taken them off for months, and with all the piss and the pus the socks just little by little began to get absorbed into his skin, glued on until they became like part of his body.* And then, silence. The process of the body's decomposition. The women of the village: *The worms were eating him*, and the stench that spread through the streets. A crowd gathered (it was the same day that my cousin had identified, albeit unwittingly, the presence of death – because *it smells like something died* was an expression we were always using to describe foul smells) in front of the house emitting the smell of the rotting body. Even though it was nearly impossible to breathe, the women used Kleenex to cover their noses so they could keep watching, so they could stay, so they wouldn't miss their chance to witness such an event, so they could escape for a few minutes from a daily routine that held no surprises, or even the expectation or hope of a surprise. Given his fragile constitution, my cousin threw up a lot in the course of the afternoon.

We told that story often, we thought it was funny.

A good education

My parents were making sure I had a good education, *not like the troublemakers and the Arabs from the projects*. Here was a source of pride for my mother: *My children are brought up right, I teach them how to behave, not like the scum out there* or – and I have no idea where she got her information from, maybe from things her father, who had fought in the war in Algeria, had said to her – *My children are brought up right, not like the Algerians, the Algerians are the worst, you know, if you look close you can see they're more dangerous than the Moroccans or the other Arabs.*

Having been constantly told by my mother that I was better than Arabs or than our impoverished neighbours, it was only after I left collège that I realised I was less privileged than I had imagined. I knew, even before then, that there were other worlds where people had it much better than in mine. Like the bourgeoisie that my father railed against, or the village shopkeeper, or the parents

of my friend Amélie. It was even something I thought about fairly often. But since I had never actually been faced with the existence of these other worlds, since I had never been plunged into them, my knowledge was of the order of intuition or fantasy.

This is something I will discover much later, particularly in my conversations with my former teachers – teachers at the collège who were powerless, beaten down by the ways that parents in the village raised their children, and who would talk about my situation in the staffroom *Really the Bellegueule kid has a lot of potential, but if he keeps on the way he's going, not doing his homework and missing class so often, there's no way he'll get ahead.*

I belonged to the world of children who turn on the television as soon as they wake up, play football all day long in the quieter streets, in the middle of the road, in the pastures that lie behind their houses or at the foot of their apartment blocks, who watch more TV in the afternoon and evening for hours on end, between six and eight hours a day. I belonged to the world of children who spend hours in the streets, evenings and nights, *just hanging out*. My father – always awkward when it came to questions of schoolwork – would warn me that I could do what I wanted but that I'd have to face the consequences *Go out when you want, come home when you want, but if you fall asleep in school the next day it's your own damn fault. If you play at being grown up you get what's coming to you,*

whereas the children of the teachers, of the doctor, of the grocer were made to stay home and do their homework. He might ask me several times in the course of a single week if I'd finished my homework. He didn't care what I answered, just like my mother when she asked me how my day at school had gone. It wasn't really him asking the question; asking it was part of a role he was playing, and sometimes the role got the better of him, against his will, as if he were accepting, or rather interiorising, the fact that it was preferable, or that it was more legitimate, for a child to do his homework well.

Going out always involved the bus stop, the centre of a boy's life. We spent our evenings there, sheltered from the wind and the rain. I think that it has always been that way: teenage boys gathering there every night, to drink and to talk. My brother and my father both put in their time, and when I've returned to the village I've seen boys there who were only eight years old when I left. They had taken up the place that had been mine a few years earlier; nothing ever changes.

We would talk on endlessly through the night: about what was going on in the village, as if it were a world unto itself, isolated from all knowledge from outside, from elsewhere, about pranks, the mailboxes we would kick over just for the fun of it, Jeanine, the old lady who lived across from the bus stop, and who would call the police when

we made too much noise and we'd hurl insults at her *you old whore, you crazy old bitch*, before we ran away. We would buy cases of beer and drink until we were sick, videoing ourselves on our mobile phones.

I remember from a very early age, thirteen or fourteen, having to deal with people passing out, falling into alcohol-induced comas. Calling the paramedics, propping up one of my *mates* on his side so he wouldn't drown in his own vomit. When it happened to me, the morning after the night of drinking (we would say *Let's get plastered this Saturday again*), I would wake up in a tent we had made a point of pitching in one of the pastures around the village, with my clothes stiff with dried puke, in a dirty sleeping bag that reeked, almost indescribably, of the food that my irritated stomach had thrown up, my belly aching and my skull pounding, as if my heart and lungs had switched places with my brain for a day. My *mates* would laugh and tell me that I'd nearly died, that I could have drowned in my vomit, could have swallowed my tongue.

I tried hard to hang out with boys as much as possible for my parents' sake. The truth was I found spending time with them boring. And often enough when I told my mother I was heading off to play with them, I was actually going to meet Amélie. One of my favourite games was to do her make-up, using lipstick and all sorts of

different powders. I hardly dare imagine the terror that would have gripped my parents if they had known. I felt a need to reassure them, to act in such a way that they'd stop asking me questions I wished would simply go away.

Fights were a frequent feature of these evenings. At the bus stop, cheap whisky and pastis joined the litres of beer. The festivities lasted through the night right up until the break of day, hours of free time, of waiting for the time to pass or really for it to arrive. It was also built from red bricks, the bus stop, and tagged *Fuck the dam pigs, Kill the fuckin fagots.*

Fights were par for the course; girls fought as well as guys – but mainly the guys, and not just under the influence of alcohol (almost every day in the playground: children grouped around two adversaries – sometimes more than two – screaming the name of the one they wanted to win at the top of their lungs).

Such a fight broke out one day between me and Amélie. It was about something childish. Her parents were better off than mine, although not really *bourgeois*: her mother worked at the hospital and her father was a technician for the power company. That day, to hurt my feelings, Amélie – knowing this would work – had called my parents slackers. I remember this fight with the precision of events in our lives we create out of memories that might have been banal or insignificant. But then months,

on, as one says, as far as the eye could see, with animals crossing them to get from one grove of trees to another.

These evenings when I got home later than usual, my father's mates would already be there. They'd be drinking glass after glass of pastis, each time saying *Come on, just one more for the road* and my mother would retort *A couple more one mores and we'll be lucky to get you out the door on all fours.* The room was inevitably clouded with smoke from the cigarettes and the wood-burning stove, thick enough to dim the light. My mother: *Now that's a good smoke.* The television. My father and his pals, Titi and Dédé, watched the same show every night. Always the same running commentary about the women on the show in order to mutually reaffirm their virility *Damn she's hot, that babe, I'd like to have a go at her, I'd jump her bones*, and my annoyed mother *That's all these jerks can think about.* One time, when I got home from school, they had a different channel on. It was a rare occurrence given their loyalty to their favourite programme, *Wheel of Fortune*. They'd say, when it was time for the programme to start *Our show, quick it's time for 'Wheel', don't wanna miss the beginning*, interrupting whatever they'd been doing, or talking about, and rushing to their seats, breathless. They'd been waiting for this moment all day; in a way, the whole day only made sense as a prelude to this moment of watching *Wheel* in the evening, glass in hand.

There was a gay man on the other channel who was part of a reality TV show. He was quite extroverted, wore

bright colours, had effeminate manners, and a crazy hairdo as far as anyone like my parents was concerned. The very idea that a man would get a professional hair cut was frowned upon. Men got their hair cut by their wives with an electric razor; they didn't go to a salon. This fellow really made them laugh – that laughter again – each time he'd speak *Man, I bet that guy visits the fudge-packing factory. Watch out, don't drop the soap! What, no way, he'd be the one bending over more likely.* This was the kind of humour that easily veered towards disgust *Those fucking faggots should all be shot, or someone should stick a hot poker up their arse.*

It was at that moment, while they were talking about the gay man on the television, that I got home from school. His name was Steevy. My father turned around and called out to me *Hey Steevy, how's it goin'? How was school?* Titi and Dédé guffawed, they were laughing hysterically: it brought tears to their eyes, they were doubled over, as if possessed, gasping for breath *Steevy, oh my God it's true, now that you say it, your kid acts kinda the same way when he talks.* Once again, crying was not an option. I smiled and hurried to my room.

My other father

Here is an anecdote my mother told me. It was during one of the village dances – outlandishly named dances that would take place in the village hall a couple of times a year, like 'Tartiflette and Eighties Night', or 'Cassoulet and Johnny Lookalikes Night'. There was a gay man, a brave guy, who had made the choice to live his life openly. He would go to these dances with other men he had met, probably at some of the cruising spots found in the area, deserted car parks or seedy petrol stations. All the boys from the village would also turn up, gangs of mates who came to drink, have fun, sing, and try to pick up the very small number of girls who weren't already taken, who didn't already have children. What with the alcohol and group dynamics, the boys started bothering the gay man, bumping into him with their shoulders, giving him hostile looks, *So what's your story, you're a fag, right, you like sucking dick, stop looking at me like that or I'll punch your face in.* My father came over, having heard everything. He

was really angry, his jaw clenched, and he said, *Leave him the fuck alone, you shitheads, you think you're funny calling him names, so he's a fag, why the fuck should you care? What's it got to do with you?* He told them to go home *Enough of your bullshit. He came this close to beating them up himself* my mother concluded.

My mother told me another story from my father's life when, around the age of twenty, he had decided to quit the factory, to give up everything and head for the south of France. *He told his boss to go fuck himself, and it wasn't an easy thing to do, you know people around here never go anywhere. They go straight from collège to the factory and they spend their whole life in the village or they move a couple of towns over but never too far. But your dad really up and left.*

So my father left. It must have been something he had often dreamed of doing. He imagined that down there the sun would make factory life more bearable, that the women there would be prettier. He left. He tried to find work in Toulon. My mother: *He tried finding work as a barman but I imagine he spent more time at the bar drinking than actually asking for work. I don't know if he maybe traded odd jobs for things, or what really went on, cause your dad isn't exactly talkative, but I know he lived with an old lady. An old lady with lots of money. A Mormon if I remember right.*

During his trip he had become friends with a young troublemaker (my mother said: *a pick-pocketer*; she was