

The Bitter Liquid, Unpublished manuscript, © Jean-Paul Martinon, 2002.

-Come and sit down, says Elizabeth to her mother.

-Take her other arm so that she doesn't fall, says the nurse.

-There. Not too tired?

Marie signals no.

-OK, I'll go now.

The nurse, a stalwart masculine woman in her late forties, takes her diary out and makes an appointment for later in the week. With a wave of the hand, she leaves her patient to Elizabeth's care.

Marie and Elizabeth find themselves alone once more. While her daughter tidies up the bed, Marie surveys the room she's lived in for over twenty years, her familiar surrounding and the few objects she owns. Elizabeth picks up a thin pillow and places it gently between her mother's back and the armchair.

-How do you feel?

-Tired, says Marie.

-Do you want to lie down?

-No, not now, later... I would like to go to the loo.

-It's going to be difficult. You need to rest now. Do you want the pot?

-No, I rather go to the loo.

-Don't be difficult.

Without waiting, Marie grasps the armrests of her chair and, with visible effort, tries to stand up. She holds onto the chair, but her thin and frail arms shake, unable of lifting herself up. Elizabeth catches her by the arms and tries to make her mother stand upright, but the legs are also too weak to support the weight. Marie gives up and falls back in the chair.

-Can't you wait? Says Elizabeth annoyed.

-Where is Elvira? The three of us will manage. Go get her.

Marie finds herself alone again. She tries once more to stand, but once again, falls back in the chair, banging her head against the headrest. She sobs.

Elizabeth returns with Elvira, the maid who has been helping her during these difficult times. She is a short strong-willed Portuguese woman with a stern face and a practical and compassionate approach to the suffering of others.

While her daughter admonishes Marie for being stubborn, they try once more to stand her on her feet. They succeed with much effort. Marie tries to walk, but fails to put a foot forward. Marie looks down at her legs. Elvira tells her that she's too frail to walk to the bathroom; that she needs to wait. But Marie refuses. She looks at Elvira reproachfully and tries again to move her feet. She succeeds in moving them a little. Her stubbornness persuades them that she can perhaps make it. They help her, but Marie is visibly in much pain. They manage a couple of meters at most. They rest. They try again and stop. Marie is breathless, exhausted, in agony. Elvira reaches for a chair, but Elizabeth decides otherwise. She cannot stand the idea of lifting her upright again. She motions Elvira to help her take Marie by the armpits and they drag her slowly to the bed. Marie lands diagonally on the bed. Her position reveals her wrinkled, bruised, skeletal legs. She cries again of frustration and pain. Her breath slows down. She feels abandoned by her body, this body that never gave up, that suddenly refuses to even perform the simplest of task: that of walking a few meters to the bathroom. Elizabeth and Elvira straighten her on the bed and pull the sheets over her frail body. Marie slowly calms down and, with a dismissive hand, asks them to leave her alone.

She closes her eyes. She sees herself a few months earlier, shopping, preparing lunch, alert, alive. She recalls a day earlier that year, when she imagined her death. She made a sign of the cross, praying that a righteous life will prevent the worse, that all will be well, that God will help her leave this world. Her body shivered at the idea that one day she'll only be an immobile corpse. She shrugged and looked out of the window.

-How do you feel? A bit better? Asks Elvira on returning to the room a few moments later.

While Elizabeth tidies up the bedside table, Marie shifts in bed, expressing her discomfort. Elvira adds another pillow behind her back so that she can sit upright in bed.

Elizabeth takes a small bottle and pours some black tincture onto a small spoon. She approaches her mother and asks her to swallow it. Marie swallows and winces at the bitter taste. Both women suggest drinking some water to remove the foul taste in her mouth, but Marie says no and closes her eyes. They sit by her side.

Slowly, the bitter liquid begins to alleviate Marie's pain. She gradually no longer feels the cumbersomeness of her body. Little by little, old memories come back, haunting Marie's inner world. She moves her hand as if wanting to grasp something in front of her and then brings it back to her chest. Marie progressively loses consciousness.

Her daughter looks at her. She tries hard to see beyond this emaciated body; to recall the mother she knew. It's been months now since her mother's colon cancer operation. It's been months now since death has been waiting, since both have been waiting to be freed from this ordeal. She has tried all she could to speed up the process, not to see her mother dead, but to limit the suffering, to shorten this agony that wipes out all previous memories of her. She recognizes that she's lucky somewhat, having a nurse thrice a week and a maid who helps everyday with food, cleaning and running errands. Nursing an elderly cancer patient at home means getting used to the idea of doing a whole set of disturbing chores: replacing drips, catheters, colostomy bags, and applying bandages over bedsores. Her mother is no longer this elegant but quick-tempered old lady, but a body that takes ages to die, a body without any reality, cut-off from everyday life; a body whose only task is to express agony, the signs of a life exhausted. Elizabeth leaves her mother to her sleep.

A while later, Marie slowly wakes up alone in her room. She slowly shifts her body across the bed so that her legs fall off the edge. Sluggish from the effects of the black liquid, she painfully raises her feverish head. Her half-closed eyes struggle to see. She lifts her hand towards the ceiling as if wanting to reach it. She slowly lifts her back as if to reach out further and then freezes in this awkward contracted, uncomfortable pose. Suddenly, as if realizing something, Marie opens wide her eyes. She is remembering something. She is reliving the past.

The door opens onto a dark interior. She silently moves forward and then she sees him. He is there next door, lying on the bed half naked. He's not alone. A little girl is there too. Not any little girl. Her own daughter is there, with him. She recognizes her muffled sobs. She peeks in the gap of the doorframe and then she sees her, kneeling between her husband's legs. She's doing something... something she shouldn't be doing. And then she understands. She freezes at the sight of her little girl and her partially undressed husband. She stands still unable to think or act and then, against all hope, backs away, slowly, so as not to disturb them. And when she is back in the garden, back outside, away from the horror of this scene, she falls on her knees and cries.

The memory fades. Marie cries. Elizabeth runs back to the room and notices her mother's frail body in this awkward position half-raised across the bed, with this hand raised to the ceiling as if pointing to something beyond it. She tries to redress her mother and cover her pale and bloodless body with sheets and blankets. Marie weeps. Elizabeth comforts her and then, mechanically, reaches for the small black bottle, for the liquid that will ease her pain. But Marie signals no; she doesn't want more, not again. Her daughter insists, pulls her upright so that she can swallow again. And so with one arm around her shoulders, Elisabeth pours another spoonful of the reddish-black liquid. Without a word, Marie drinks.

The room is dark. Marie is asleep. Elizabeth and Elvira take advantage of this respite, to busy themselves around her: moving her to one side to apply cream to the bedsores and changing the catheter. Once they are done, they turn her on her back and just before covering her with sheet and blanket, they look down at her,

at this strong-willed woman who now sleeps without hope, perhaps even without tomorrow.

The prognostic isn't great. Elizabeth and Elvira remark that the use of the medication is more recurrent now than ever before. Marie seems to accept the repeated spoonful of black liquid without much protest. The liquid heightens the confusion between memories and reality. It's difficult to tell which of the two sustains her in this life. Elvira says she ought to leave. Elizabeth thanks her once again for all her help. They both leave Marie.

Time passes. Marie slowly tosses around in bed. She occasionally raises a hand as if to call out to someone. Her eyes remain shut. After a while, as if exhausted by the effort, she falls back asleep. Later on that day, noticing the pain on Marie's face, Elizabeth decides to administer again the drug. Marie falls back asleep, unconscious.

A few hours later, she wakes up, looks around the dark room, and, for the first time in a month, sits upright without effort in bed. Her eyes are wide open. She looks alert, as if she has suddenly woken up from a nightmare, as if all that happened before was just a dream. She calls out, a strong voice in the night.

Elizabeth emerges in the room in her dressing gown and switches the lights on. Marie immediately asks:

-Why am I in bed? What's with this tube and this thing on my stomach? What's going on?

-You are ill. Lie down. Please.

Elizabeth reaches out for the small bottle. Marie looks at her with suspicion. As soon as her daughter tries to open the bottle, Marie takes the bottle from her hands and throws it on the floor. Elizabeth looks startled at this unexpected vigour. She fetches the bottle again, opens it, and pours some more liquid onto a spoon.

-Why are you giving me this? Are you trying to poison me? Is that your revenge? Is it because I never spoke out? Is that why you want to kill me?

Confused, Elizabeth takes the spoon to Marie's mouth. Marie obediently opens her mouth, pretends to swallow and once Elizabeth is turned, spits it out onto the floor. Furious, Elizabeth then holds her head and gently forces another spoonful down her throat. With some dark liquid trickling down her neck, Marie swallows the rest in pain.

-What are you talking about? I'm not trying to kill you.

Marie cries, saying:

-I didn't know what to do. Imagine the scandal. What would other people have said?

-What are you talking about?

-You and your father. I saw you together doing dirty things.

-You knew?

-How could I not? I was there. I saw it all.

-I've lived with this secret shame all my life and here you are telling me you knew about it and did nothing to stop it?

-As I said, imagine the scandal. It wasn't an option.

-And we've lived together for the last twenty years, and during all these years, you kept this to yourself?

-You didn't say anything either.

-How could I? How could I admit this humiliation, this embarrassment?

Horrified, Marie doesn't answer. The two women look at each other, startled and confused. The silence of the night becomes uncomfortable. Slowly the medication takes effect. Marie falls back on the bed and gradually loses consciousness. Elizabeth looks at her. The sudden revelation that her own mother knew about the abuse all these years ago leaves her stunned, as if all her life was abruptly taken away from under her. Nothing suddenly makes sense. And why this unexpected burst of energy?

The following day the nurse explains that morphine administered orally as a tincture can occasionally produce unexpected bursts of energy.

-But why was she so lucid? How can she recall a 40-year old event at a time when she barely recognizes me?

-There are things we never forget.

-But why now?

-Maybe because she knows the end is near?

Elizabeth stays silent. She's confused and angry, but also full of pity and sorrow. With the help of Elvira, the three women proceed to wash and prepare Marie for the day ahead. The nurse leaves them.

Marie is asleep. She is visibly elsewhere. She is with her brother. She's just given birth to her daughter. The whitewashed walls absorb the intense heat of this

month of August 1923. Her brother speaks softly, asks how she's feeling and how is the baby. Marie answers with a smile. Her brother asks the whereabouts of her husband. Marie looks confused. She doesn't know. Her brother whispers to her, "Keep an eye on him, will you? Make sure he doesn't do anything stupid, OK?" Marie looks startled and puzzled. What could he mean by that?

Marie cries. She's back in her room. Her worlds collide. She no longer knows where she is or who she is. Elvira and Elizabeth seem to think that she's only this dying and stinking body with tubes and pockets. But she's also this other person, here, now, alive. She's just given birth and she needs to keep an eye on her husband, but why? And then she understands, but it's too late. Her husband is long gone and she's now dying.

-It's too late, Marie tells herself.

And so Marie gives up. Little by little, Elizabeth and Elvira realize that they cannot leave her alone, so they decide to take turn by Marie's side. Eventually, they notice that Marie can no longer swallow the bitter liquid. An intra-venous drip replaces it. She now sleeps most of the time, a body drained of all energy. Without encountering any resistance, Elizabeth and Elvira roll her back and forth, changing the sheets, the tubes and pockets. Marie no longer appears to be suffering. A rictus of confusion seems to have taken hold of her face.

The day is over. The room is now punctuated by Marie's death rattle. Elizabeth holds her arm, feels her pulse, and kisses her gently. The pulse becomes indistinct, appears to stop, then starts again. The dose of narcotic pain reliever is increased. The body struggles to accommodate this new onslaught of medication. The pulse becomes fainter. Moments pass. Her mother's breathing becomes even more cavernous, as if from another world already. Elizabeth takes hold of her mother's wrist again, tries to find the pulse, but cannot find it. It seems to have vanished. And yet, Marie opens her eyes. She looks straight ahead, but without seeing. Elizabeth looks at her mother.

Elvira takes the ribbon that the nurse has provided and immediately ties it around Marie's face to prevent the jaw from falling open. Without pulse, Marie draws a last breath and exhales one last time. Elvira closes her eyes.

Marie is dead. Elvira and Elizabeth place her in the rigid and inhuman position of the dead and call the nurse. They stare at her in disbelief.

It's happened. It's over. Elizabeth feels relief and yet also horrified at a life-long lie. How to react? How to recover? The ordeal of her mother's protracted death has numbed all her senses. So much to think. So little time.

The nurse arrives, takes note of the time of death and asks to be left alone with Marie. She proceeds to replace tubes and pockets with cotton wool and to dress her in the nightgown her daughter has chosen for her. After gently combing her thin white hair, the nurse looks at her patient one last time and switches the lights off. Marie is ready.