

[This extract is translated from pp128-138 of the P.O.L edition (2011) of *S'autodétruire et les enfants* by Nicolas Bouyssi. It is set in the family's small flat in a huge futuristic apartment block.]

My father comes out from behind the screen. He goes over to my mother and my sister, and strokes Sarah's hair. He coughs. He asks her to let him hold her pet.

Sarah is staring at the TV. A brightly coloured title page announces the start of a cartoon. A gigantic robot appears on the screen. It's got white horns and is surrounded by four skinny Japanese teenagers dressed like cowboys. Excitedly, my sister tells him again that the guinea pig's name is Nestor. She gives it to him. My father scratches the animal's neck automatically. He pushes my sister to tell him about her day. My mother goes back out of the room. Letting her go, my father turns the TV off. He orders my sister to go and find my mother and go to bed.

My father takes her in his arms, kissing her suddenly on the lips. My sister bites back a grimace. He promises her once more that he will take her out for a walk on the fifth floor terrace. He also promises to buy her a female guinea pig so that Nestor has something to do in the evenings, like him and my mother, when they are not arguing. From the kitchen, she hears what he is saying and is concerned by his comment. She begs him not to be so vulgar.

With his nearly empty pill pot in one hand and a can of beer in the other, my father goes over to his bedside table and thinks about taking another tablet. He announces to my mother that he doesn't see anything shocking in the way he talks. He reminds her that their situation, on the other hand, has become more coarse and banal since they moved to the third floor.

My mother is weary of hearing his weak, wispy voice. She pushes the kitchen door to with her foot and turns off the heat under the pressure-cooker before checking that the broccoli and courgettes are done. She mixes the vegetables up with the ham and adds salt. She adds a drizzle of olive oil and calls my sister. It's gone eight thirty. She abandons the idea of bathing her. She goes into the bathroom. My mother empties the tub. The water is already cold anyway. She thinks that what she is going through is too much to cope with.

As she goes, she tidies away the things that are lying about, the boxer shorts and the socks, the ashtray, full of butts of cigars that have barely been smoked, that is perched on the stained-wood shelf above the wash basin. She flings into a large rubbish sack all the vials, ampoules and tissues that have been piling up all day long in the bathroom and the far corner of the hall that is home to the punch ball and the exercise bike.

When she goes back to get Sarah, my father is sitting next to her on the sofa, looking at her two pictures. He has just unfolded them impassively, without commenting on what he can see. In the second drawing, my sister has sketched a proper house. It is made up of a large square with a triangle for a roof. My sister hadn't forgotten to put a chimney on.

There is no smoke coming from the chimney. Every floor – there are three – has got its windows closed. They are rectangular. Each has got six panes. The front door is huge. My sister has coloured it in with a brown felt tip. On each side of the house she has drawn grass and willow trees with a yellow crayon. There are some flowers growing. They are all the same, made up of clumsy circles with no stem and surrounded with oval shapes for petals. On the left hand side of the drawing, my

father spots a round shape coloured in grey. He realises it is the sun because of all the lines shooting out from the round shape.

Below the sun, the bodies of a man and a woman are simply a thin vertical line. Their legs form an acute angle. The man is holding the woman's left hand. Their faces are as round as the sun. Their noses are simply two tiny dots. Their mouths are symbolised by a horizontal half-moon, and my sister had decided to change colour to draw the eyes. The man's are two red dots. The woman's are two blue dots. On the ground, near the man's right foot, an almost abstract shape brings to mind a swan. In the man's right hand, my sister had attempted to draw a vial.

My father folds the two drawings back into quarters and leaves them on the armrest. He informs my mother that he hasn't had time to get dressed or do any housework because he has been trying to think about how to get out of his invalid's routine once and for all. Then he assures her that one day she will understand, and that she will know what he is trying to achieve. One day she will be proud of him, and will thank him.

Without realising it, my father has been reiterating the same thing, at the same time, almost every evening for weeks. All of a sudden, my mother can't stop herself sniggering nervously at his words. She stops laughing and sighs. She tells herself that she is going mad. He is driving her mad by repeating the same old things over and over, evening after evening, when he has been drinking, in the same tone of voice, as if it was the first time he had said anything of the sort. She can hardly bear to listen any longer to that same speech, that same way of drawling his words out, that same pathetic little smattering of unfinished thoughts. My mother opens her mouth, with a determined look on her face. A word shoots out from between her lips. The word is short, full of consonants, less than ten letters long. It is an insult. Sarah is sitting on the sofa by my father. She is paying close attention to the conversation.

My mother turns on her heels and moves away. My father asks her to repeat what she has just said. She retorts sarcastically that it wasn't anything new as far as he is concerned. She alters her tone to speak to my sister. She tells her she should come and eat straight away, and then go into the bathroom to at least clean her teeth and get undressed. My father sits down again on the sofa.

Sarah clutches a flap of my mother's skirt as they go out into the hall. In the kitchen, my mother cleans the mixer and Sarah eats. My mother mutters, 'He doesn't do a bloody thing, what does he think he's moaning about?' Then she regrets having thought such a thing. She is angry with my father for making her think ill of him. She tells herself, as usual, that if he stopped seeing himself as an invalid, he wouldn't want to be pitied anymore. My sister pushes away the meal that my mother has prepared for her. She isn't hungry anymore. My mother doesn't make her eat it. She tells her that she'll just have to go and clean her teeth.

My mother goes back into the bedroom to collect my sister's pyjamas. My father is waiting a few metres away from the Indian wardrobe. He knows full well what she is thinking and what she called him. With a defeated expression, she replies that she isn't thinking anything. She hasn't got time to think or to listen to him. It's far too late. She would just like him to please be quiet and let her get my sister to bed. My father keeps on. He knows that she's thought the worst of him ever since they moved, and that she puts him down in front of my sister whenever she can. My mother is just like everyone else, she sees him as a millstone around her neck, a poor wretch, a handicapped invalid.

He says that eight years is a long time, especially when they have hardly made love for the last nine months. The rot has set in – it started the moment my sister was born. It's about time that my mother realised it. My mother replies that instead of saying annoying and ridiculous things to her – things that always make her think about ending their relationship – he could make himself useful and get dinner ready. At least set the table whilst she's putting my sister to bed. She adds that it worries and depresses her, seeing him in this state so often. Just as she is about to go out of the bedroom, she reminds him that the last time they slept together was less than a month ago.

She pauses by the doorway and eyes him scornfully. With my sister calmly and independently brushing her teeth on her own in the bathroom and the sound of running water partly drowning out their conversation, my mother takes the opportunity to tell him that he was so drunk that they made love without a rubber. If he must know, my father came, profusely, after two minutes, and then fell asleep.

My father acts as if he doesn't understand. He focuses his attention on the word 'rubber'. He grabs the chance to say that he far prefers the word 'condom'. Not knowing what else to add, he goes back behind the screen to sit down. My father doesn't want to talk anymore and turns his computer back on. He puts on one of his sets of headphones. He closes his eyes, opens another beer and listens to his music. He coughs up some phlegm and massages his Adam's apple as if that will soothe his internal churning, then lights a cigar and grinds his teeth.

In the bathroom, Sarah senses that my mother is not in the mood for time-wasting or for putting up with any whining. She allows herself to be undressed and changed without a fuss. When she and my mother go back into the bedroom, my father is dozing. He is flat on his back on the sofa. The headphones are over his ears, his mouth is open and he wakes up with a start when they come in. He stands up and then moves towards them like an automaton, like something that has been pre-programmed and has no concept of how to adapt itself to the situation. His chin is damp. He is smiling cheerfully and he asks her for a kiss.

His damp chin is stubbly. The droplets of beer and saliva clinging to the hairs of his three-day-old beard make him look repulsive. My mother moves so that neither she nor Sarah can see him because, at moments like this, she doesn't know him. She says, 'I don't believe this,' and rubs her eyelids. In less than an hour, she reflects, he has completely lost his dignity. He doesn't seem aware of his behaviour, nor of the impact that this kind of scene has on my sister's memories and upbringing.

My mother just carries on. Instead of arguing, she retreats to the part of the room that Sarah lives in. She shuts the toy trunk. She shuts the Indian wardrobe. She tidies up the toys that are scattered across the floor and slides the shutter across the window, which, like the one in her office, is round just like a porthole.

She does not say that it stinks of cigars. She does not say that my father's presence and perpetual immobility disturbs her. She tries to focus all her thoughts on the things she likes and that give her pleasure in her life. It's not easy. She wishes she could feel some kind of pleasure. She hugs my sister to her, kissing her, then she reads her a short story. She sings an old nursery rhyme, and as she sings she gazes at the trunk and her Indian wardrobe. Sarah falls asleep, her thumb in her mouth. My mother lies her down in her cot with the white bars and tucks her in.

She goes back into the kitchen with the guinea pig cage, and sees my father again. He is sitting opposite the window. He has put the mince and the tomatoes back in the fridge. He is drinking another beer. She asks how he bought it. My father is surprised at the question, and smiles faintly. He bought it on the Internet, as usual. A delivery man he'd never seen before brought it to the landing by the front door at about five o'clock. He tries to describe the delivery man but the words do not come. She'd better realise that he's had a really terrible day, and if she's expecting him to help her get the meal ready, wash up, set the table, she hadn't better count on it. My mother can 'piss off.' He isn't hungry. And anyway, he's going to go back to his corner as soon as Sarah is asleep.

My mother can't get over the way he spoils everything she offers him, the way he is constantly more and more vulgar; she is so exasperated that she can think of all sorts of things she'd like to say to him. But where to start? For one thing, he still hasn't asked her how her day was. And then, he's put the meal she bought him back in the fridge. He hasn't even noticed that Sarah is already in bed. Just like yesterday and the day before, like last week and last month, he didn't bother to say good night to her. My mother starts to raise her hand, desperate to vent her anger somehow. She ends up unclenching her fist and letting it fall in resignation.

Let him do whatever he likes, for god's sake, if only he would bloody well shut up. That's what she is thinking, even though she doesn't say it. My mother is determined: she doesn't want the evening to end up like the others. She wants them to enjoy themselves for a while, to dance serenely together again. She remembers how the two of them used to live together eight years ago. She remembers the way they used to entwine their fingers together in silence. She doesn't understand why such simple, obvious things are, for the time being, impossible between them.

She opens the fridge again. She gets the mince and the tomatoes out again. Since they've both had a hard day, they might as well recoup their strength together. If only they could make the effort to enjoy themselves a bit more, like when my father used to come to see her in her studio flat right at the beginning of their relationship and they would feel like making love straight away. She lights a mimosa-scented candle. She asks him if he remembers. My father runs a hand over his straw-blond hair and finishes drinking his beer. He isn't hungry. He doesn't know why my mother is making a fuss. He doesn't feel like eating stuffed tomatoes at all. My mother grabs one of the tomatoes, puts it on the chopping board and scoops out the flesh.

My father watches her with a perplexed look. He takes an ampoule out of the back pocket of his boxers. Then he breaks it open. He dissolves the contents in the dregs of his beer can. He too feels that they are less and less on the same wavelength. He checks the time and already wants to go back behind his screen. She ought to understand him. His day has been even worse than hers because he hasn't been out. And to put it bluntly, the reason he hasn't damn well done anything is that he never gets a moment's peace. How can he plan anything at all when my mother is incapable of letting him know what time she will be home? How can he get better when he has to put up with constant unpredictability and insecurity?

My father has started to repeat himself all over again. His tongue is furry. He always says this to try to explain away the taste of plaster in his mouth and his bad mood. His thoughts are spinning rapidly round inside his head: they are bashing against the walls of his skull. He's got important things to do. There are plenty of things she doesn't know about. He isn't going to live like a vegetable or a jelly until he dies. My mother starts to scoop the flesh out of another tomato, puckering her lips in

disdain when, to top it all, he uses the word 'vegetable' to refer to himself without seeming conscious of all the sad grotesquerie of the situation.