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Translating “Opportunités” by Claudine Jacques

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“Opportunities” by Claudine Jacques is a short story about the choices required of a young man who unexpectedly inherits wealth. The story is included in Jacques’s collection *Caledonia Blues*, published in 2020, portraying a range of dramas from daily life in New Caledonia. Jacques was born in France but has lived in the French territory for more than fifty years, dedicating her life to Oceanian literature since 1994. She is now much-published in New Caledonia as a writer of novels, short stories, plays, and books for children and young adults. In 2020 Jacques won the *Grand Prix culture et littérature* for her entire body of work which comprises over sixty novels and stories. For *Caledonia Blues* she also won the *Prix Arembou 2020*, a literary prize created by the writers association *Écrire en Océanie*, awarded each year to a writer residing in Oceania and writing in French, in particular for the author’s contribution to the cultural development of the country and ability to bear witness to Pacific life today.¹

Jacques’ writing often depicts the beauty of her Pacific territory, yet this collection is no island escape. She chooses to confront her world, holding a mirror to New Caledonian society, its complexity and mixture of races, customs and beliefs, its tensions, inequalities and violence. She is adept at making ordinary people speak in everyday words, but is equally able to imitate the privileged who speak with a sense of entitlement, as we see in “Opportunities”. Readers are carried along by her fluid writing style, her evocative imagery and power of suggestion, all the way to the unpredictable ending.

Many years ago I met Claudine Jacques in New Caledonia. At the time, she was the editor of a journal, *Épisodes*, in which she published my translation of one of her poems. Since then, I have had six translations of her stories published with her encouragement and help along the way. For “Opportunities” I sought and was given her permission to translate the short Drehu passage, though she did not reveal the reasons for leaving her own text untranslated. She had lost the French-Drehu translation she used when writing the story, but willingly obtained a new version for me.

Seeking a reader for my work, I contacted a literary translator, Nat Paterson, through an online forum. He offered to read my draft though he knew little about New Caledonia. He made some suggestions which improved my English expression generally, while there were others I disagreed with or simply dismissed because of his assumption the story was for a European readership, whereas I was translating for readers in Australia or the Pacific. Paterson recommended removing the translated Drehu passage since Jacques had not translated it in the original story. He believed it highlighted the mystery of Kanak culture for the protagonist. Drehu, the language of the people of Lifou, one of the Loyalty Islands, has about 17,000 speakers – more than other Kanak languages (Sorosoro) – and about fifty-nine per cent of them live in Noumea (Dotte et al. 6-7). Noumean readers of the source text may therefore have some understanding of the short Drehu speech, but my Anglophone readers would not. I considered an example in *L’Île des rêves écrasés* by the Tahitian author Chantal Spitz who began her novel with a five-page prologue in Mā’ohi language, which her translator, Jean Anderson, did not translate into English. One researcher of Oceanian writers, Katherine Hammitt, sees Anderson’s retention of these untranslated pages as “resistance to colonial silencing” and notes that there is “an online Tahitian-French dictionary, which allows the motivated reader access to the story told in the prologue” (par. 4 and note [3]). Another researcher, Michelle Keown,

¹ Description of prize by Joël Paul. My translation.

writes that Anderson sought to “respect and reproduce” stylistic elements of the source culture “without making significant allowances for a foreign reader” (“The pragmatics and problematics of translation”, par. 2). For “Opportunities” I myself wanted to know the meaning of the Drehu words because there was a risk that I, and in turn the reader, would misjudge the speaker’s intent, in spite of the author’s defence of the passage in the next line: “This mysterious speech must have been friendly since the women and men came to kiss him”. Given that the Drehu words must remain in the target text to illustrate the “mysterious speech”, the reader is thus led “to understand the linguistic and cultural universe of the source text” (Eco 89), while the offering of an English translation adapts the original to suit the target reader’s universe. When both languages are present, the Drehu speaker is not silenced, and the reader can still experience the mystery.

Another phrase that Paterson challenged was “de facto” for *pacsé*. He believed it would be misunderstood if the story were published in Europe, but I am confident Australian readers will understand it means “not legally married”. His correction of Noumea to Nouméa led me to question my inclusion or omission of accents. In Australia, even on government websites, Noumea is spelt without the accent which prompted me to do the same. Similarly, Napoleon in English needs no accent. But I left Vallée du Tir, Quelès and André accented, as these words have no proper equivalent in English and do not create stumbling blocks. On the option to foreignize, Eco remarks that an untranslatable French phrase should remain untranslated as long as it does not sound like a mistake (90). Hence I have not anglicized *manou*, as its meaning is clear from the preceding lines, or *grand chef*, which Paterson disputed, believing the Kanak² would not use a French term, and recommended “great chief”. I did not agree since “great chief” is not an English title; *grand chef* is clear without translation and is written this way in many academic articles; and the Kanak speak French. One important request Paterson made was for more information about the common destiny, which I added in a footnote.

I am familiar with Claudine Jacques’ style and found this translation straightforward with only a few minor challenges, such as technical terms like *droits de succession*, or unfamiliar names and objects. I was aware that the name Fleural was a play on Jacques Lafleur, a deceased New Caledonian deputy, and read about his influence in society to better understand the effect of his name. Lafleur was known as a strongman with influence in Paris (Coumans). He opposed the Indigenous independence movement, and was from a prominent white New Caledonian family who made their wealth in nickel mining and real estate, activities which at times drew protests from conservationists due to reef damage from building projects and mine effluent (Coumans; Tolmé). Like Jacques Lafleur, the protagonist Alain Fleural finds it easy to make connections because of his family name, and is tempted by unscrupulous developers to invest in the acquisition of waterfront land from a Lifou tribe.

Regarding the *publicitaire reconnu* who made the claim about a Rolex watch, I discovered online that he was an actual advertising tycoon, Jacques Séguéla, and reading about him helped me translate the anecdote. Internet photos and maps were an invaluable resource when describing a grand Noumean villa, a bedroom with a rotunda, a vine with *fleurs aubergine*, the cemetery, Noumean streets, and Peng Beach. Of André Nerval’s adages, one in particular containing the term *ratiocinant* confounded me until I met a French speaker who read it and helped me understand it in context, after which I used the noun phrase “small affairs” rather than a verb. Finally, after many readings I picked up two intentionally contrasting phrases, pages apart: *une foule blanche* and *une foule bariolée*. At first I translated the former with “a

² Since 1984 the use of *Kanak* in French has been invariable whether singular or plural. In English, therefore, the plural is “the Kanak” for one or many, though some translators may write “the Kanak people”.

crowd of white people” but later saw the three-word phrases in French were also ideal in English and changed it to “a white crowd” to highlight “a colourful crowd”.

Very little French Pacific literature has been published in English, yet there is much in common between New Caledonia and Australia, most notably the colonial history but also the ongoing dispute over land ownership, the importance of family and the unimportance of material wealth in the Indigenous cultures of both countries. In “Opportunities” the protagonist simply imitates his wealthy Western elders while observing a Pacific culture that places little value on possessions, but in a final twist is forced to decide whose values he prefers. Readers are left contemplating the consequences of the wrong decision, and asking “What would I do?”.

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Opportunités
Claudine Jacques

Opportunities
Claudine Jacques

Translated by Patricia Worth

Alain Fleural sortit de l'étude Clavet-Quelès un peu hagard et plus riche qu'il ne l'avait jamais été. Le soleil tapait fort et la rue, après la pénombre feutrée des bureaux, lui sembla floue, saturée par un ondoisement chatoyant, genre de grande ondulation bruyante qui venait jusqu'à lui, le rattrapait sous le parking couvert où il demeura un moment à l'abri, aveuglé et grelottant, le souffle haletant comme un jeune chien, les yeux mi-clos...

— Vous héritez, disait le jeune notaire, de votre lointain cousin André Nerval, intestat, ni marié ni pacsé, sans enfants ni famille proche, d'une maison située à la première Vallée du Tir et d'une somme en liquide de...

Charles Clavet examinait le document et suivait du doigt une ligne plus grasse.

— ...cent quinze millions deux cent six mille sept cent cinquante-trois francs cfp une fois les droits de succession, frais et honoraires payés, somme que nous vous domicilierons sur la banque de votre choix.

— Cent quinze millions, avait-il répété, c'est-à-dire, en euros, ça fait combien ?

— Il s'agit d'une somme de neuf cent soixante-cinq mille euros...

Le notaire crut sentir une réticence. Les yeux d'Alain Fleural semblaient s'être agrandis. Il s'empessa d'ajouter.

— Voyez le relevé comptable, vous payez les frais de succession au plus lourd, soit cinquante pour cent de ce que laisse monsieur Nerval, car vous n'êtes pas légataire en ligne directe. Des frais de recherche se sont accumulés également... En outre, vous héritez à la première Vallée du Tir d'une grande maison en pierres de taille, à proximité du centre-ville – mon grand-père qui a fondé cette étude notariale, habite d'ailleurs la même rue

Alain Fleural emerged from the Clavet-Quelès legal practice a little wild-eyed and richer than he had ever been. The sun was beating down, and after the muffled dimness of the offices the street seemed hazy, saturated with a shimmering undulation, like a great roaring wave coming towards him, catching him in the covered car park where he stood a moment in the shade, blinded from the sun and shaking, panting like a young dog, his eyes half-closed.

“You are inheriting,” said the young notary, “from your distant cousin, André Nerval, who died intestate, neither married nor in a de facto partnership, without children or close family, a house situated in the first Vallée du Tir and a cash sum of...”

Charles Clavet looked closely at the document and with his finger followed a line in bold.

“... one hundred and fifteen million, two hundred and six thousand, seven hundred and fifty-three Pacific francs – once the death duties, expenses and fees are paid – a sum we will deposit into a bank of your choice.”

“One hundred and fifteen million,” repeated Alain, “so, in euros, how much is that?”

“It's a sum of nine hundred and sixty-five thousand euros.”

The notary, detecting Alain Fleural's reluctance to speak and eyes that seemed to have grown larger, hastened to add:

“As you can see on the accounting statement, you're paying the heaviest death duties, being fifty per cent of what Mr Nerval left, because you aren't a direct descendant. Search fees have accumulated as well... Furthermore, you're inheriting a large stone house in the first Vallée du Tir, close to the city centre – my grandfather who founded this legal practice lives in the same street as it happens – which represents a very handsome capital valued at eighty million Pacific francs.”

—, ce qui représente un très beau capital évalué à quatre-vingt millions cfp.

— Quatre-vingt millions ?

L'air ahuri, Alain Fleural regardait le papier sans le voir.

— À peu près six cent soixante mille euros, si je saisis bien votre interrogation, précisa Charles Clavet, attentif et courtois.

Fleural sembla s'intéresser enfin au document.

— Ah, oui, très bien.

— Voici l'acte de propriété et le trousseau de clefs. Quant à la banque, pouvez-vous nous laisser un RIB pour le virement ?

— Je n'ai pas de compte à Nouméa, balbutia-t-il.

— Votre homonymie vous ouvrira les portes des banques sans problème.

— Mon homonymie ?

— Fleural est un nom très connu en Calédonie. Jacques Fleural était notre député, homme politique, homme d'affaires... c'est une famille très respectée et très aisée.

— Nous sommes peut-être parents.

— Sans doute, susurra Charles Clavet, en le raccompagnant d'un pas pressé jusqu'à l'ascenseur.

Alain Fleural l'arrêta au milieu du couloir.

— Où sont les toilettes ?

— À droite, la deuxième porte.

— Alain Fleural s'y précipita, referma la porte derrière lui et s'y adossa, blême sous la lumière bleue du néon.

Il eut à ce moment-là l'étrange sensation de ne pas être à sa place, il examina son tee-shirt chiffonné, son pantalon de randonnée à poches multiples, toutes protubérantes, un mouchoir dans l'une, un téléphone dans l'autre, son portefeuille, ses billets d'avion, mais quoi, après trente heures de voyage, une nuit écourtée, il n'avait eu le temps de rien. Son regard dégringola jusqu'aux baskets informes dont une semelle se décollait.

— Putain de merde, grommela-t-il en comparant aussitôt son apparence négligée à celle impeccable, chemise blanche et pantalon

“Eighty million?”

Lost for words, Alain Fleural looked at the paper without reading it.

“About six hundred and sixty thousand euros, if I understand your question,” clarified Charles Clavet, attentive and courteous.

Fleural seemed at last to be interested in the document.

“Ah, yes, very good.”

“Here's the property deed and the keys. And for the bank, could you leave us details of your account for the deposit?”

“I don't have an account in Noumea,” he stammered.

“Your name will open the doors of banks to you, no problems.”

“My name?”

“Fleural is a well known family name in New Caledonia. Jacques Fleural was our Deputy, our representative in parliament, a politician, a businessman... It's an affluent, well respected family.”

“We might be related.”

“No doubt,” whispered Charles Clavet, hurriedly accompanying him back to the lift.

Alain Fleural stopped him mid-corridor.

“Where are the toilets?”

“Second door on the right.”

Alain Fleural dashed in, closed the door behind him and leant on it, pale beneath the blue fluorescent light.

He had a strange feeling of being out of place. He took a close look at his ragged t-shirt, his cargo pants with multiple pockets, all of them bulging, a handkerchief in one, a phone in the other, his wallet, his plane tickets, but what can you expect after thirty hours travelling and a night cut short, he had not had time for anything. His eyes shot down to his shapeless trainers and one of the soles that was coming unstuck.

“Ohhhh shit,” he grumbled, immediately comparing his neglected appearance with the impeccable white shirt and perfectly pleated

au pli parfait, du grand jeune homme mince qui venait de le recevoir avec tant d'amabilité.

Il confronta alors son visage fatigué et bouffi à celui, plus noble, lui sembla-t-il, de Charles Clavet, front haut, barbe soignée, geste mesuré, l'homme avait ce qui lui manquait cruellement, ce petit quelque chose d'aristocratique qui change définitivement la donne. Il l'envia !

— Au revoir monsieur Fleural, je reste à votre disposition, bien entendu, articula Charles Clavet qui l'attendait patiemment sur le palier.

Alain Fleural eut le temps d'apercevoir dans le regard sombre une lumière amusée vite dissimulée sous le sérieux de la charge.

— Merci, merci encore, bafouilla-t-il les bras ballants avant de se jeter dans la cage d'escalier, ignorant maladroitement la main tendue et négligeant l'ascenseur ouvert.

Il sut immédiatement que le mot merci n'était pas ce qu'il aurait dû dire, pas avec cette intonation, mais à qui d'autre dire merci pour ce legs exceptionnel, au défunt dont il ne connaissait pas l'existence un mois plus tôt ?

Il sortit du parking et à grandes enjambées retourna à l'Auberge de jeunesse, il y parvint sans encombres, sans même s'en rendre compte, ramassa aussitôt, dans un petit sac à dos, toutes ses affaires laissées la veille, compta les quelques billets qu'il possédait, évalua combien il lui resterait après s'être acquitté de la nuit, conçut le projet fou de prendre un taxi mais choisit de repartir à pied, un plan publicitaire en main glané sur le présentoir de l'Auberge, cette économie lui permettrait d'acheter de quoi manger en attendant de toucher l'argent de l'héritage. Tant d'argent ! Il n'arrivait pas à s'en faire une idée.

Il longea bientôt les grilles du haut-commissariat, contempla longuement, parce qu'il aimait les arbres depuis sa plus tendre enfance, un baobab pansu qu'il n'avait jamais pu voir qu'en photo, et descendit l'air absent vers l'hôpital. À angle droit, il obliqua en

trousers of the tall, slim young man who had just received him so kindly.

He then contrasted his tired, puffy face with that of Charles Clavet which had seemed nobler with its high forehead, well-groomed beard and measured expressions. This man had what he was cruelly lacking, that little aristocratic something which changes the game altogether. He envied him!

"Goodbye Mr Fleural. Of course, if you need any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me," said Charles Clavet, waiting patiently for him at the top of the stairs.

Alain Fleural had enough time to notice in the dark eyes an amused light, quickly concealed beneath the seriousness of the task at hand.

"Thank you, thank you again," he spluttered, arms dangling, before launching himself down the stairs, awkwardly ignoring the hand held out to him and disregarding the open lift.

He knew right away that the words thank you were not what he ought to have said, not in that tone, but for this exceptional bequest who else could he say it to? To the deceased, whose existence he was unaware of a month earlier?

He left the car park and strode back to the youth hostel, reaching it without a hitch, without even trying. He immediately gathered into a small backpack all his things he had left there the day before, then counted what little cash he possessed, calculated how much would remain after settling his bill for the night, came up with a mad plan to catch a taxi but chose to leave on foot, a city map in hand that he had picked up at the display stand in the hostel. These savings left enough for him to feed himself while waiting to receive the money from the inheritance. So much money! He could not get his head around how much it was.

Soon he was walking alongside the High Commission fence. He gazed a long while at a paunchy baobab; he had loved trees since he was a small boy but had never been able to see one of these except in a photo. His mind miles away, he walked on towards the hospital. At

direction d'un carrefour planté d'une jeune cocoteraie, puis serra encore sur la droite et parvint à la Vallée du Tir.

— Quatre-vingt millions, une maison de quatre-vingt millions se répétait-il... Mazette ! L'excitation le tenaillait, son pas se fit plus rapide. Je la vends au plus vite, j'encaisse et je rentre en France, à moi la belle vie.

Cinq minutes après il franchissait la grille en fer forgé de l'entrée et pénétrait dans le jardin.

Une allée de très vieux Cycas, des dinosaures, songea-t-il, le conduisit jusqu'à la porte d'une imposante bâtisse en pierres de taille. Il fouilla dans sa poche, en sortit le trousseau de trois clefs que lui avait donné Charles Clavet et tourna la plus grande dans la serrure.

La porte s'ouvrit. Ce n'était pas un miracle en soi mais pour Alain Fleural, c'était davantage. C'était le «Sésame, ouvre-toi !» de Fernandel dans *Ali Baba et les quarante voleurs*. C'était la grotte et son trésor, c'était... inespéré !

Dès l'entrée, une intense odeur de moisi le fit éternuer, puis ce fut la poussière qui lui piqua les yeux. Il suivit la lumière oblique de l'entrebâillement et traversa le vestibule puis avança dans ce qui devait être un salon, distingua des fenêtres qu'il s'empressa d'ouvrir. Le premier volet poussé dévoilait un jardin désordonné, une belle friche sous des manguiers couverts de fruits. Le deuxième exhibait une tonnelle ancienne où paressait une somptueuse liane aux fleurs aubergine. Il se retourna pour découvrir, interdit, une vaste pièce meublée à l'ancienne, la surprise l'assit exténué entre les bras du premier fauteuil. Lorsqu'il contempla les tableaux sur les murs, les objets sur les meubles, il eut le sentiment d'entrer par effraction dans le passé d'André Nerval.

— Tout cela est à moi, bon Dieu, tout, tout, tout, s'exclama-t-il dans un fou rire nerveux. Tout, tout, tout, répéta-t-il en chantant à tue-tête. Tout, tout, tout...

the corner he turned off in the direction of a junction planted with a young coconut grove, then, keeping to the right he reached the Vallée du Tir.

“Eighty million, a house worth eighty million,” he muttered to himself. “Wow!” The excitement was building, he picked up his pace. “I’ll sell it as quick as I can, I’ll bank the money and go back to France, the good life for me.”

Five minutes later he passed through the wrought iron gate at the entrance and stepped into the garden.

A pathway lined with old cycads – dinosaurs, he mused – led him to the door of an imposing building of dressed stone. He dug into his pocket, pulled out the bunch of three keys that Charles Clavet had given him and turned the largest one in the lock.

The door opened. It was not a miracle in itself but for Alain Fleural it was something more. It was the “Open Sesame” of Fernandel in the film *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. It was the cave and its treasure, it was... something he had never dreamt of!

No sooner was he inside than an intense musty smell made him sneeze and the dust stung his eyes. He followed the glancing light from the partly open door and passed through the foyer into what must have been a drawing room where he could make out some windows which he was quick to open. He pushed back one of the shutters to reveal an unkempt, abandoned garden beneath fruit-laden mango trees. The second shutter exposed an old gazebo where a luxuriant purple-flowered vine basked lazily. Turning round he discovered, dumbfounded, a huge room furnished with antiques. The surprise was draining and he sat in the first armchair he could find. As he contemplated the paintings on the walls and the objects on the furniture, he felt like a burglar breaking into André Nerval's past.

“All this is mine, good God, all of it, all of it, all of it,” he exclaimed in a fit of nervous laughter. “All, all, all,” he repeated, shouting at the top of his voice. “All, all, all of it.”

La visite lui révéla d'autres bonnes surprises, la maison était splendide, les meubles, les tapis moelleux et les objets rares qui la meublaient, somptueux. Il n'y connaissait rien en style, en époque, ou pas grand-chose mais il avait fait des stages de portier bagagiste dans de grands hôtels parisiens très chics et savait reconnaître le luxe. Son regard se posa sur un petit meuble noir et or, qu'il jugea prétentieux, néanmoins il était bien loin de sa colocation minable en banlieue, bien loin de ses étagères en bois compressé, de son dernier contrat à durée déterminée. À presque trente ans, il héritait d'une maison, d'un jardin ensoleillé et d'argent, d'un avenir murmura-t-il circonspect.

Il gloussa au souvenir d'Emma qui l'avait quitté en le traitant de raté, de minable. Il aurait aimé qu'elle le voie en cet instant. Quand il rentrerait en France, il se vengerait en allant la chercher avec une Mercedes dernier modèle, intérieur en cuir blanc et chromes étincelants, il l'inviterait au resto, un resto chic, hors de prix, ensuite il la déposerait devant son studio et c'est lui qui lui dirait adieu. Des filles comme Emma, il pourrait désormais en trouver en pagaille.

Après avoir dévoré les mangues sabots du jardin, il décida de s'installer dans la plus grande des chambres, sans doute celle d'André car elle jouissait d'une bibliothèque et d'un bureau installé dans une rotonde ensoleillée. Il ouvrit une porte sur une vaste penderie et s'extasia. Les vêtements placés sur des cintres en bois blond étaient rangés par couleur, des vestes bleu-marine, des pantalons gris ou beiges, des chemises bleu ciel ou blanches, toutes à manches longues et une ample collection de cravates en soie, de ceintures et de chaussures en cuir souple, des merveilles, alignées là comme dans un magasin, chaque paire avec son embauchoir en cèdre rouge, il s'assit sur un petit banc de cordonnier qui contenait des boîtes de cirage et essaya presque religieusement une paire de mocassins marron glacé. André Nerval chaussait du 42, lui aussi ! Quelle veine ! Pris d'une inspiration soudaine,

The visit revealed other pleasant surprises: the house was splendid, and the furniture, soft carpets and rare objects that filled it were sumptuous. He knew nothing of style, or of eras, or at least not much, but he had had a few work placements as a baggage porter in grand, elegant Parisian hotels and could recognize luxury. His eye fell on a small black and gold cabinet, which he deemed pretentious. However, he was a long way from his basic rental flat in the suburbs, a long way from his fibreboard shelves, from his last fixed-term contract. At almost thirty years of age he was inheriting a house, a sunny garden and money. A future, he whispered circumspectly.

He chuckled over the memory of Emma who had left him, accusing him of being pathetic, a loser. He wished she could see him right now. When he returned to France he would get his revenge by going to pick her up in the latest model Mercedes with a white leather interior and gleaming chrome, he would invite her to a restaurant, a pricey posh restaurant, and afterwards he would drop her back at her studio flat, and it would be him saying goodbye to her. Girls like Emma, he would now be able to find them in droves.

After gorging on sabot mangoes from the garden, he decided to make the largest bedroom his own; no doubt it had been André's since it had a library and a desk, in a rotunda bathed in sunlight. He opened a door to a huge walk-in wardrobe and fell into raptures. The clothes on blond wood hangers were arranged by colour, dark blue jackets, grey or beige trousers, pale blue or white shirts, all long-sleeved, a large collection of silk ties, and belts and shoes in supple leather, wonderful shoes all in a line as in a shop, each pair with its red cedar shoetree. He sat on a small shoemaker's bench that contained tins of polish, and in an almost religious experience tried on a pair of taupe loafers. André Nerval took a size 42, like him! What luck! In a flash of inspiration he ripped off his t-shirt to try on one of the long-sleeved shirts, then exchanged his cargo pants for some trousers. He studied

il arracha son tee-shirt et essaya une chemise, il en fit de même pour un pantalon, puis il s'observa dans le miroir, la carrure et la taille étaient sensiblement les mêmes mais il était à l'étroit, boudiné à vrai dire, dans le pantalon et la chemise, il tenta de rentrer le ventre, il ne pourrait pas rester ainsi, abdominaux contractés, bien longtemps, Nerval devait être plus mince. Il songea spontanément à Charles Clavet, à son allure. Il perdrait le gras qui lui ceinturerait la taille, il s'en faisait la promesse.

Était-ce le décalage horaire ou cette demi-journée irréelle, la fatigue le projeta sur le lit où il s'endormit, fenêtres ouvertes sur le ciel bleu.

Il entreprit dès le lendemain les diverses démarches administratives indispensables, signa des contrats pour l'eau, le courant et la ligne téléphonique, constata que le nom de Fleural était bien un passe-partout et obtint miraculeusement dans la journée la toute première carte bancaire de sa vie, ce dont, bien entendu, il ne se vanta pas.

Pendant les semaines qui suivirent, il se consacra, avec un enthousiasme proche de l'exaltation au grand ménage de la maison qu'il faisait un peu plus sienne à chaque coup de balai ou de plumeau. Rien ne le rebutait, ni l'encaustique sur les boiseries ni le vinaigre d'alcool sur la robinetterie. Seul le rebutait le petit meuble noir et or. Puis vint la réhabilitation du jardin.

La maison pourrait bientôt être mise en vente.

En attendant il en profitait, la mine gourmande. Une maison, rien que pour lui, du matin jusqu'au soir ! Lorsque, éreinté mais satisfait, il s'installait dans le fauteuil d'André Nerval et feuilletait avec application les livres de la bibliothèque, il le savourait encore. Tout l'intéressait désormais et cet attrait nouveau rendait aisées sa lecture et son initiation. André Nerval avait inséré des marque-pages aux endroits les plus intéressants. «Ne pas corner monstrueusement la page d'un livre mais employer un marque-page» lirait-il plus tard dans un de ses cahiers. Il décida de suivre ces

himself in the mirror; the shoulder span and height were roughly the same but he had squeezed into the trousers and shirt, and in truth was bulging out of them. He tried pulling his stomach in, but could not stay like that with his abdominals contracted for very long. Nerval must have been slimmer. He automatically thought of Charles Clavet's elegance. He promised himself he would lose the fat around his waist.

Was it jet lag or this unreal half day that tired him out? Whatever it was, he threw himself onto the bed where he fell asleep, the windows open onto the blue sky.

The next day he took care of various essential administrative procedures, signed contracts for the water, electricity and phone line, noticed the name of Fleural was quite a door opener and miraculously obtained by the end of the day the very first bank card of his life, which understandably he did not brag about.

During the weeks that followed, he devoted himself with an enthusiasm close to exaltation to the great amount of cleaning needed in the house which he made more and more his own with every sweep of a broom or stroke of a feather duster. Nothing discouraged him, not the furniture polish for the woodwork nor the cleaning vinegar for the taps. The only thing that put him off was the small black and gold cabinet. Next came the renovation of the garden.

The house could soon be put up for sale.

In the meantime he would make the most of it, savouring the experience. A house all to himself, from morning till night! When, exhausted but satisfied, he settled into André Nerval's armchair, he took even more pleasure in its comfort by studiously leafing through some books from the library. Everything interested him now, and this new attraction made his reading and his rite of passage easy. André Nerval had inserted bookmarks in the most significant places. "Do not roughly dog-ear a book's pages but use a bookmark," he would read later in one of Nerval's notebooks. He decided to follow the trail of these page

signets, Petit Poucet cherchant sa route, il apprit ainsi qu'une coupe en cristal des verreries de Daum trônait dans l'entrée, qu'un triptyque de Klimt installé dans le salon de réception pouvait passer pour un original aux yeux des néophytes mais n'était qu'une interprétation fort réussie d'un tableau existant, *Les âges de la vie*, vendu par un faussaire en Malaisie, qu'un secrétaire obtenu à vil prix avait été réalisé par un élève en marqueterie de l'École Boulle, que les magnifiques tapis chinois ne provenaient pas des ventes de Drouot mais d'une saisie des biens d'un certain Donadieu, assureur sans scrupule parti à la cloche de bois après avoir escroqué nombre d'épargnants crédules. Deux pages étaient consacrées au petit meuble en bois noirci qui était enregistré comme un meuble d'entre-deux à profil découpé en marqueterie d'écaille et laiton, au plateau de marbre blanc, qu'André Nerval nommait affectueusement «mon inestimable Napoléon III».

Entrer insidieusement dans la vie secrète de Nerval valait chaque découverte : ses collections de timbres, de papillons, ses ivoires, ses dessins érotiques découverts dans le secrétaire et surtout son herbier, parlaient de lui, racontaient un bout de sa vie. Prudent, il n'essayait pas de le comprendre, c'eût été vain et prématuré, il souhaitait seulement s'en rapprocher, s'en faire un ami, un parent, quelqu'un dont il pourrait parler en société : mon lointain cousin de Nouvelle-Calédonie, dirait-il, mon grand-oncle, pensait-il déjà pour ajouter à cette relation une proximité affectueuse.

La vie, ou bien était-ce André Nerval, le gâtait jour après jour, et lorsqu'il ouvrit les persiennes sur un nouveau matin vaporeux, une douce lumière éclairant le bureau l'invita à passer une main caressante sur la marqueterie. Ce faisant, il manipula fortuitement une tirette, un déclic ouvrit une cache... À peine surpris, il découvrit de petits carnets reliés où courait une écriture fine ainsi qu'une montre Rolex en or dans un petit sac en velours cramoisi. Il referma la cache, mit la montre à son poignet et ne la quitta plus. Après

markers, like Little Thumbling finding his way back home. Thus he learned that a crystal bowl from the Daum glassworks sat proudly in the entrance; that a Klimt triptych hanging in the reception lounge could pass for an original in the eyes of novices but was only a well executed reproduction of the painting *The Ages of Life*, sold by a forger in Malaysia; that a secrétaire, obtained dirt cheap, had been produced by a student of marquetry at the École Boulle in Paris; that the magnificent Chinese rugs did not come from the Drouot auctions but from the repossession of goods and chattels of a certain Donadieu, an unscrupulous insurer who did a runner after swindling a number of naïve investors. Two pages were dedicated to the small blackened wood cabinet, recorded as a console table ornamented on the front with marquetry of tortoiseshell and brass with a white marble top. André Nerval had affectionately called it "my priceless Napoleon III".

Entering insidiously into the secret life of Nerval was worth it with every find: his collections of stamps and butterflies, his ivories, his erotic drawings discovered in the secrétaire, and especially his herbarium, all spoke of him and recounted a little of his life. Fleural was careful not to try to understand him; it would have been vain and premature. He wished only to get closer to him, to make him a friend, a relative, someone he could talk about in company: my distant New Caledonian cousin he would say, my great uncle he was already thinking, to add an affectionate closeness to this relationship.

Life, or was it André Nerval, was spoiling him day after day. When he opened the blinds one hazy new morning, the soft light on the desk invited him to draw his hand gently over the marquetry, whereupon he fortuitously put his hand on a catch, and click, a secret drawer opened... He was hardly surprised to find some small bound notebooks through which ran a fine handwriting, as well as a gold Rolex watch in a small crimson velvet bag. He closed up the hiding place, put the watch on his wrist and did not take it off. After a week it began to

une semaine, elle se remit à fonctionner normalement et ce fut pour Alain Fleural le signe qu'André Nerval l'acceptait comme légataire. Il se souvint qu'il avait grincé des dents et grogné contre les riches et les puissants, lors d'une polémique qui avait exacerbé la France parce qu'un publicitaire reconnu — son nom, mais quel était son nom ? —, avait assuré que le fait de ne pas avoir de Rolex à cinquante ans était un signe d'échec social. Désormais, il pourrait faire illusion et cela lui plaisait assez, malgré tout ce qu'il avait pu en dire. Il changeait, l'argent, l'aisance, la maison, la présence imaginaire de l'oncle le transformaient.

Il ne s'intéressa aux petits carnets noirs que le mois suivant, ils contenaient des listes très longues d'adages, de résolutions, de réflexions, émaillées d'anecdotes. Il sourit dès la première ligne : «On reconnaît un gentleman à ses chaussures de qualité.» Cette approche, somme toute partagée depuis peu, le détermina à engager la lecture.

«Ne pas se mettre en avant, préférer la discrétion et la réserve.»

«Ne jamais contredire qui que ce soit en public.»

«Rester discret sur soi et surtout sur les autres. Ne colporter aucun ragot.»

«Ne pas paraître ni trop brillant (cela énerve) ni trop bête (cela ennuie).»

«Laisser planer le doute sur la fortune et les biens que l'on possède, pour certains ce serait trop et pour d'autres, pas assez.»

«Préférer la marche qui rend svelte ou le taxi qui favorise le contact populaire à l'achat d'une voiture de petit standing.»

«Recevoir à dîner une fois sans compter plutôt que dix fois en ratiocinant.»

«Voyager peu mais utile afin d'évoquer des souvenirs exotiques en société.»

Il eut un moment de tournis. Les règles ainsi listées étaient sans aucun doute le fruit d'une grande expérience, «L'expérience n'est qu'une longue suite d'erreurs, une lumière que l'on a dans le dos», lut-il plus loin, ce qui le rassura sur ses maladroites et l'engagea à persévérer. Il regarda d'un autre œil l'inestimable petit meuble Napoléon III car il lui semblait

work normally again, and for Alain Fleural this was the sign that André Nerval accepted him as an heir. He remembered he had cringed and grumbled against the rich and powerful during a huge controversy that exasperated France because a well known advertising executive — his name, but what was his name? — had made it clear that if you did not own a Rolex by the age of fifty, it was a sign of social failure. From now on, he could almost look the part and he rather liked that, in spite of everything he had said about it. He was changing; the money, the material comforts, the house, the imaginary presence of the uncle were transforming him.

It was not until the following month that he took an interest in the small black notebooks. They contained long lists of adages, resolutions and reflections, peppered with anecdotes. From the first line he was smiling: "A gentleman is recognized by his quality footwear." This approach, which after all he had shared of late, induced him to keep reading.

"Do not put yourself forward, choose instead discretion and reserve."

"Never contradict anyone in public."

"Remain discreet about yourself and especially about others. Do not spread gossip."

"Do not appear to be either too smart (it annoys people) or too stupid (it bores them)."

"Allow doubt to linger over your fortune and possessions, for some it would be too much and for others not enough."

"Choose walking which keeps you slim, or a taxi which stimulates contact with the working class, rather than purchasing an everyday brand of car."

"Host one lavish dinner party for everyone rather than ten small affairs."

"Travel little but strategically so you can recount exotic memories in company."

For a moment his head was spinning. The rules thus listed were without a doubt the fruit of great experience. "Experience is just a long series of mistakes, a light that shines from behind you," he read further on, which reassured him about his blunders and encouraged him to persevere. He looked at the priceless little Napoleon III console table with

désormais qu'André Nerval lui parlait à l'oreille et que chaque mot avait le pouvoir de dicter sa conduite ou de modifier ses goûts.

En toute confiance, il décida de s'y conformer.

Trois mois s'écoulèrent, et parce qu'il avait lu «Les cimetières sont des lieux de vie», Alain Fleural décida de se rendre au cimetière du quatrième kilomètre afin de fleurir la tombe de son regretté grand-oncle. Il choisit une chemise bleue dans la penderie, un pantalon en beau tergal gris et tout lui alla. Il comprit qu'il avait maigri grâce aux travaux réalisés dans la maison et à cette diète qu'il s'était imposée loin des fast-foods. «Être toujours correctement vêtu et rasé de près.» Il se regarda dans le miroir, il était tel que l'oncle aurait aimé qu'il soit. Satisfait, il se peigna à la façon d'André, la raie bien à droite, les cheveux plaqués en arrière et appela un taxi qui le conduirait au cimetière.

Mais avant, il voulait vérifier quelque chose.

— Office notarial Quelès, monsieur, vous m'y attendrez, car ensuite je vous demanderai de me conduire au cimetière du quatrième kilomètre, je vous remercie bien, monsieur, lança-t-il au chauffeur, un métis pâle aux cheveux crépus, en s'asseyant dans la berline verte.

«S'adresser aux petites gens avec beaucoup d'égard et les voussoyer toujours», avait-il lu dans le carnet noir. Lorsqu'ils arrivèrent devant l'étude, le chauffeur sortit et se précipita pour lui ouvrir la porte, les préceptes d'André avaient du bon.

— Alain Fleural, s'annonça-t-il à la jeune femme de la réception avec un sourire convenu. Je désire parler à Charles Clavet. Je n'ai pas de rendez-vous. Pourriez-vous m'annoncer ?

— Veuillez patienter dans le salon, monsieur Fleural, je le préviens.

— Je n'ai que quelques minutes devant moi, insista-t-il avec dans la voix quelque chose de subtilement impérieux.

a fresh eye, for it now seemed to him that André Nerval was speaking in his ear and that every word had the power to dictate his behaviour or to modify his tastes.

With complete confidence, he decided to comply.

Three months passed, and because he had read "Cemeteries are places of life," Alain Fleural decided to go to the Fourth Kilometre cemetery to put some flowers on the grave of his dearly departed great uncle. From the wardrobe he chose a blue shirt and a pair of fine grey Terylene trousers. Everything fitted him. He realized he had slimmed down thanks to the work he had done in the house, as well as the self-imposed diet now that he was far away from fast foods. "Always be appropriately dressed and clean shaven." He looked at himself in the mirror; he was just as the uncle would have liked him to be. Feeling satisfied, he combed his hair in André's style, parted on the right and slicked back, and called a taxi to take him to the cemetery.

But first he wanted to check something.

"The Quelès notary's office, sir, where I'd like you to wait for me because I will then ask you to drive me to the Fourth Kilometre cemetery. Thank you kindly, sir," he said to the driver, a pale mixed-blood man with frizzy hair, as he sat in the green taxi.

"Speak to people of modest means with much regard and always address them formally," he had read in the little black book. When they arrived at the office the driver got out and dashed around to open the door for him. André's precepts had their benefits.

"Alain Fleural," he announced with the right smile to the young receptionist. "I'd like to speak to Charles Clavet. I don't have an appointment. Could you tell him I'm here?"

"Please wait in the lounge, Mr Fleural, I'll let him know."

"I only have a few minutes," he stressed, with something subtly authoritarian in his tone.

— Monsieur Clavet, monsieur Fleural pour vous, disait déjà la secrétaire au téléphone. Elle eut un sourire charmant. Il arrive, monsieur.

Charles Clavet arrivait en effet à grands pas et Fleural, faussement désinvolte, put voir sur sa mine combien il était surpris voire médusé par sa transformation. C'était ce qu'il était venu chercher, rien d'autre que cet étonnement qui faisait de lui un homme nouveau.

— Je ne veux pas vous déranger très longtemps. Je passais devant l'étude. Je tenais à vous saluer, j'ai été très pris par les affaires, ces derniers temps.

— Bien, bien, répondit le jeune notaire, interloqué mais conquis.

— Mais vous êtes occupé, je vous laisse, murmura Fleural sur le ton de la confiance, nous aurons l'occasion de nous revoir, n'est-ce pas ?

— Bien sûr !

La porte de l'ascenseur s'ouvrit au même moment, Alain Fleural s'effaça devant une vieille dame exubérante, toute vêtue de beige et couverte de bijoux. Il la complimenta sur son élégance puis redescendit les deux étages, seul et satisfait.

Il souriait encore dans le taxi qui l'emportait.

Il arriva en plein enterrement. Une foule se pressait sur le chemin qui montait en zigzagant vers la chapelle. Il s'inséra dans le cortège et s'installa jambes croisées sur l'un des derniers bancs pour écouter l'éloge funèbre et de là, observer les participants. C'était une foule blanche, plutôt aisée qui s'était rassemblée sur le parvis. Des groupes s'étaient formés, femmes et jeunes filles assises, hommes debout. Il comprit très vite qu'il n'était pas à sa place, une phrase du carnet disait : «Regarder autour de soi et se conformer aux us et coutumes», aussi se leva-t-il sans attendre et s'approcha des hommes présents.

— Numa Mitchell, dit l'un d'eux, débonnaire, le voyant arriver.

— Alain Fleural, répondit-il en prenant soin d'articuler.

Le nom fit son effet, les hommes se présentèrent à tour de rôle, les poignées de

“Mr Clavet, Mr Fleural is here to see you,” said the secretary, already on the phone. She had a charming smile. “He’s coming, sir.”

Indeed Charles Clavet was coming now, stepping lively, and Fleural, deceptively casual, could see on his face how surprised, in fact, how stupefied he was by the transformation. This is what he had come looking for, simply this astonishment that made a new man of him.

“I don’t want to keep you very long. I was passing your office and wanted to say hello. I’ve been quite caught up with all this business lately.”

“Good, good,” replied the young notary, taken aback but won over.

“But you’re busy, I’ll let you go,” said Fleural, subdued and confident. “We’ll have an opportunity to meet again, won’t we?”

“Of course!”

The lift doors opened and out stepped an exuberant elderly woman, all in beige and covered in jewellery. As Alain Fleural let her pass, he complimented her on her elegance. Then he descended the two floors, alone and satisfied.

He was still smiling as the taxi drove him away.

He arrived in the middle of a funeral. A large number of people were hurrying up the zigzagging road to a family mortuary chapel. He blended into the cortege, and sat legs crossed, on a seat at the back, from where he could listen to the funeral eulogy and observe the participants. It was a white crowd, rather well-off, who had gathered in front of the chapel. Some groups had formed, women and young girls seated, men standing. He quickly realized he was not where he was supposed to be, for an instruction in the notebook said “Look around you and conform to the ways and customs,” so without waiting longer, he rose and went over to the men.

“Numa Mitchell,” said one of them debonairly, seeing him approach.

“Alain Fleural,” he replied, taking care to articulate each word.

The name had its effect, the men introduced themselves by turns, handshakes were

main furent échangées et le cercle s'agrandit aussitôt. On l'acceptait d'emblée. On parla du défunt le juste temps qu'il fallait pour paraître correct, c'était d'ailleurs un brave homme qui possédait toutes les qualités dont celles suffisantes, d'être bien né et d'avoir des immeubles au centre-ville, il y eut une anecdote ou deux qu'Alain Fleural se promit de retenir pour les écrire dans un carnet qui serait son œuvre, puis on évoqua brièvement la politique du moment, le referendum, le destin commun et enfin on parla affaires.

Alain Fleural s'inquiéta, il n'était pas encore assez informé pour participer à ce genre de discussion. Il cherchait l'échappatoire en regardant autour de lui. Heureusement, la vieille dame exubérante croisée chez le notaire arrivait en haletant, la montée était raide. Il s'excusa auprès de ses interlocuteurs et descendit l'allée à sa rencontre, il offrit son aide et la conduisit à une place assise au premier rang. «Rester indifférent aux jeunes femmes, être galant sans excès avec les femmes mariées, choyer et complimenter les femmes âgées sans craindre l'exagération.» La vieille dame, enchantée par tant d'égards, s'appuyait sur son bras comme sur celui d'un ami fidèle, ce comportement ne passa pas inaperçu tant chez les femmes présentes, sensibles à la courtoisie masculine, que chez les hommes qui décelèrent à tort, mais sans rien en dire, l'évidence d'un lien de parenté qui confirmait, s'il en était besoin, qu'Alain Fleural était bien celui qu'il prétendait être.

Pour lui, ce fut une consécration silencieuse.

Un peu plus tard, il s'éloigna discrètement pour se rendre sur la tombe de son lointain parent. Il ne fut pas surpris de découvrir un caveau en granit noir, un prénom et un nom écrits en lettres dorées, une date de naissance, rien de plus, l'essentiel était là. Sous le granit, gisait la dépouille d'un homme volontairement solitaire qui avait préparé lui-même sa dernière demeure. Manquait la dernière date qu'il eût

exchanged and the circle immediately grew in size. He was accepted from the outset. They spoke of the deceased for just the right length of time to appear correct; besides, he had been a decent fellow who possessed all the right qualities including the essentials, coming from a good family and having properties in the city centre. There was an anecdote or two that Alain Fleural determined to remember and write in a notebook which would be his own work, then they briefly raised the politics of the day, the referendum, the common destiny³ and finally they talked business.

Alain Fleural was fretting, he was not yet well enough informed to join this type of discussion. He looked around for an escape route. Fortunately the exuberant elderly woman he had run into at the notary's office was coming up the steep path, out of breath. He excused himself from the conversation and went down to meet her. He offered his help and led her to a seat in the front row. "Remain indifferent to young women, be gallant in moderation with married women, indulge and compliment older women without fear of exaggeration." The lady, charmed by so much respect, leant on his arm as on that of a loyal friend. This behaviour did not go unnoticed either by the women present who were sensitive to male courtesy, or by the men who wrongly detected, but without saying so, evidence of a family connection which confirmed, if proof were needed, that Alain Fleural was the man he was believed to be.

For him, it was a silent recognition.

A little later he discreetly left them and made his way to the grave of his distant relative. He was not surprised to find a vault in black granite, a first name and family name written in gold letters, a date of birth, nothing more, the main details were there. Beneath the granite lay the remains of a man, a loner by choice, who had prepared his final resting place himself. Only missing was the date of

³ The "common destiny" is an agreement between the indigenous Kanak and settler communities of the French-ruled Pacific island of Kanaky New Caledonia. Independence referenda were held in 2018, 2020 and 2021, with the result that New Caledonia remains French though the electorate is deeply divided.

été bien en mal d'ajouter. C'était à lui, Alain Fleural, de la faire graver pour, de la naissance à la mort, donner de l'épaisseur à sa vie.

Il reprit dès lors les habitudes de son oncle, vérifiées dans ses agendas, le matin, de très bonne heure, habillé, coiffé et rasé de près, certains préceptes étant définitivement intégrés, Alain Fleural descendait jusqu'à l'étonnante alimentation chinoise qui faisait l'angle de la rue pour y acheter son journal et son pain frais. La charmante jeune fille, comme il l'appelait, chargée de la caisse du magasin, le regardait de ses yeux bridés avec un peu plus que de l'admiration mais il ne savait quoi faire de cet appel muet, l'ancien Alain Fleural aurait su, sans doute, se serait précipité dans une aventure sans lendemain, le nouveau s'embarquait dans un tas de contradictions et de préjugés, aussi s'intéressait-il à chaque visite davantage à la chatte angora qui paressait sur le comptoir qu'à la petite Asiatique qui finit par lui offrir gentiment un chaton, sans doute pour le séduire. Il lui achetait donc depuis, un paquet de croquettes en plus du pain et du journal. Puis il remontait chez lui d'un pas souple, s'installait dans le jardin, le chaton à ses pieds, dégustait une tasse de café Le Roy, un arabica calédonien rare choisi pour la table du président de la République française, et là, proche de la béatitude, explorait le contenu du journal, «Tout savoir de l'actualité pour s'intégrer» était un enseignement d'André qu'il mettait en œuvre chaque jour. De page en page, il atteignait celle des décès et choisissait tranquillement l'enterrement auquel il assisterait. Pour lui qui n'avait ni amis ni connaissances, se rendre au cimetière était devenu une jolie promenade. L'endroit était gai et fleuri. Il découvrait des noms, familiers ou étonnants car venant de toutes les ethnies du pays, des tombes incroyables, certaines aux décors sobres et austères, d'autres ornées de tissus colorés, d'autres encore de colliers de coquillages, de photographies dans des cadres, de bibelots, il allait ainsi de l'austérité occidentale à la magnificence océanienne et notait scrupuleusement sur son calepin les

death, which André Nerval would have had a hard job adding. It was up to Alain Fleural to have it engraved, to record the extent of his life from birth to death.

He subsequently resumed his uncle's habits, verified from the diaries. Bright and early every morning, dressed, hair combed, clean shaven, certain precepts having been definitively incorporated, Alain Fleural would go down to the remarkable Chinese grocery store on the corner of the street to buy his newspaper and fresh bread. The charming young girl, as he called her, who was in charge of the checkout, would look at him out of her slanting eyes with a little more than admiration, but he did not know what to do about this mute invitation. The old Alain Fleural would probably have known, and would have thrown himself into a one-night stand, but the new Alain was caught in a muddle of contradictions and prejudices, therefore with each visit he showed more interest in the angora cat that lazed on the counter than in the little Asian girl who ended up kindly offering him a kitten, probably to seduce him. So from then on he bought a packet of cat biscuits as well as the bread and newspaper. At an easy pace he would go back up to his house, sit in the garden, the kitten at his feet, savour a cup of Leroy coffee, a rare New Caledonian arabica selected for the table of the president of the French Republic, and there, close to earthly bliss, he would explore the contents of the newspaper: "Stay informed about current affairs so you can fit in," was one of André's teachings that he put into practice every day. He would turn the pages until he reached the death notices and would calmly choose the funeral to attend. For him, a man with neither friends nor acquaintances, a trip to the cemetery had become a pleasant outing. The place was cheerful and flowery. He discovered some names, familiar or surprising because they came from all the ethnicities of the territory, some unbelievable graves, a few with sobre, austere decorations, others adorned with colourful fabrics, still others with shells, photographs in frames or trinkets strung together. And so he went from Western

informations qu'il jugeait utiles et ses propres réflexions. C'est ainsi qu'il assista, de près ou de loin, à une bonne cinquantaine de cérémonies où il se fit naturellement les relations auxquelles il n'aurait jamais pu prétendre autrement.

Ce jour-là, il y avait deux enterrements à quelques heures d'intervalle.

Un temps clément, les fortes chaleurs passées, il décida de passer sa matinée au cimetière.

Pour le premier, il ne s'agissait que d'une veillée, la dépouille royale rejoignait son île de Lifou le lendemain matin, accompagnée de ses sujets. Une foule bariolée avait envahi le parking, les allées et le chemin zigzagant. Il craignit de gêner, seul Européen parmi ces hommes et ces femmes d'une autre culture, population qu'il avait croisée dans les rues, au marché, dans les magasins depuis son arrivée, mais qu'il ne connaissait pas.

Pourtant, il s'aperçut vite que cela n'avait pas grande importance pour eux, en quelques minutes, il faisait partie du groupe, on lui disait bonjour, on lui donnait à boire, on lui proposait une place sur les premiers bancs à côté de la famille du défunt. Autour de lui des nattes posées sur le sol accueillaient les femmes et les enfants, les conversations étaient autant emplies de pleurs que de rires. Un homme d'un certain âge, chevelu, vêtu d'un tee-shirt Kanaky, une pièce de tissu jaune et vert lui ceinturant la taille, lui demanda son nom.

— Alain Fleural, dit-il.

C'est bien que tu sois venu pour aider le Vieux à partir, lui fut-il répondu avec émotion, et l'homme le serra dans ses bras puis il s'adressa en langue à ceux qui se trouvaient là.

Le silence se fit, l'homme se racla la gorge à plusieurs reprises.

— *Enia cile matre amamane koi nyishëti la ketre trejine ka madra Alain Fleural, ka traqa troa hane ce kapa me eashë la hace ka eje the shë, jëne la mecine la AngaJoxu shë.*

austerity to Oceanian magnificence, and in his notebook he scrupulously recorded information he deemed useful, along with his own thoughts. In this way he attended, directly or indirectly, a good fifty or so ceremonies where he quite naturally formed relationships to which he could never have otherwise aspired.

That day there were two funerals, a few hours apart.

The weather being mild, the worst of the heat over, he decided to spend his morning in the cemetery.

The first funeral turned out to be only a memorial service; the royal remains of the *grand chef* would be returning to the island of Lifou the next morning, accompanied by his subjects. A colourful crowd had filled the car park, the pathways and the zigzagging road. He feared he would be disturbing them, the only European among these men and women of another culture, people he had been passing in the streets, at the market and in the shops since his arrival, but with whom he was not acquainted.

However, he quickly noticed that this hardly mattered to them; in a few minutes he had become part of the group, they were saying hello to him, giving him something to drink, suggesting a place in the front rows beside the family of the deceased. Around him women and children were coming to sit on mats laid on the ground, and the conversations were filled with as much laughter as crying. A long-haired man in his later years wearing a Kanaky t-shirt and a piece of yellow and green fabric around his waist as a sash, asked him his name.

“Alain Fleural,” he said.

“It's good that you've come to help the Old Man to depart,” was his emotional reply, and he hugged Alain then spoke in Drehu language to all present.

Silence fell, the man cleared his throat several times.

Enia cile matre amamane koi nyishëti la ketre trejine ka madra Alain Fleural, ka traqa troa hane ce kapa me eashë la hace ka eje the shë, jëne la mecine la AngaJoxu shë.

*Tronyishëti a ce olene kowe la atre celë, ka tru
ihnimine me ka nyipi ewekë ne la qenenoje shë.
Oleti atraqatr koi nyipëti Alain Fleural.⁴*

Ce discours mystérieux devait être amical puisque les femmes et les hommes vinrent l'embrasser à tour de rôle, tête baissée, yeux humides, dans une sorte d'humilité bienveillante. Il remarqua que tous portaient le même coupon de tissu vert et jaune, les femmes en avaient fait des robes, les hommes des ceintures ou des écharpes, des couvre-chefs aussi. L'orateur avait suivi son regard, il interpella un groupe de jeunes, on déroula bientôt un long tissu autour de lui et on l'attacha autour de son buste. Puis, comme on l'avait accueilli, on l'oublia. Ce coupon de tissu était un signe d'appartenance, il suffisait. Ainsi adopté Alain Fleural faisait partie de cette grande famille en deuil qui honorait son défunt. Il resta assis un long moment au milieu d'eux à réfléchir sur le sens de ce qu'il vivait là. Lorsque le convoi se mit en route, il s'en alla par les chemins détournés du cimetière vers la tombe d'André Nerval, le manou vert et jaune plié en quatre sous le bras.

Le doreur avait accompli sa tâche, la date du décès, plus brillante avait été ajoutée. Elle se patinerait avec le temps. Alain Fleural n'en fut content que l'espace d'un éclair, un sentiment de tristesse l'envahit tout aussitôt avec l'impression bizarre d'être inconsolable. Sa mère l'avait abandonné tout petit, il n'avait pas connu son père, il avait navigué de foyers en familles d'accueil, s'était débrouillé tout seul sans sombrer dans la délinquance comme Patrick ou Ali, ses meilleurs potes. Et c'est devant la tombe d'André Nerval qu'il sanglota comme un enfant. Brusquement, l'idée de vendre la maison, de partir, de regagner la métropole pour y reprendre le cours de sa vie lui parut insupportable.

Cette maison, ce pays, il ne les quitterait plus.

*Tronyishëti a ce olene kowe la atre celë, ka tru
ihnimine me ka nyipi ewekë ne la qenenoje shë.
Oleti atraqatr koi nyipëti Alain Fleural.⁵*

This mysterious speech must have been friendly since the women and men came to kiss him one at a time, their heads lowered, eyes moist, in a sort of kindly humility. He noticed they all wore the same green and yellow fabric. The women had made dresses from it, the men sashes or scarves, and headgear too. The speaker had followed Alain's gaze, and called out to a group of youths who were soon unrolling a long piece of fabric around him, tying it over his chest. Then, just as they had welcomed him, they forgot him. This length of cloth was a sign of belonging, it was enough. Thus adopted, Alain Fleural was part of this large grieving family honouring their dead. For a long while he remained seated among them, reflecting on the meaning of what he was experiencing. When the funeral procession set off, he went his own way along the circuitous paths of the cemetery towards the grave of André Nerval, holding under his arm the folded green and yellow *manou*.

The gilder had completed his task and the date of death had been added, shinier than the rest. It would acquire a patina with time. Alain Fleural was satisfied with it for only a brief moment, for all at once he was filled with sadness and a strange sense of being inconsolable. His mother had abandoned him when he was very small, he had not known his father, had drifted through foster family homes, had coped by himself without sinking into delinquency like Patrick or Ali, his best mates. It was at the grave of André Nerval that he sobbed like a child. Suddenly the idea of selling the house, leaving, returning to France to pick up his old life again, seemed unbearable.

This house, this land, he would never leave them.

⁴ Je me tiens là devant vous pour vous présenter notre ami Alain Fleural qui est venu porter avec nous la douleur de la mort de notre Grand chef. Nous devons remercier cette personne bien aimée qui connaît et respecte notre culture. Merci à vous Alain Fleural.

⁵ I stand here before you to introduce our friend, Alain Fleural, who has come to share our sorrow on the death of our grand chef. We must thank this dear man who knows and respects our culture. Thank you Alain Fleural.

«Ici est mon Ithaque», avait-il lu dans les carnets d'André.

Il revint, pas à pas, jusqu'à la chapelle. André Nerval avait raison une fois encore, les enterrements étaient bien plus un lieu de vie qu'un lieu de mort.

Il y avait peu de monde. À peine fut-il arrivé qu'une femme qu'il avait déjà croisée, lui saisit le bras et l'entraîna à part.

— Bonjour, vous êtes le neveu de Jââcques, n'est-ce pas ?

Elle parlait comme on se gargarise, la voix plus grave qu'il n'aurait fallu dans une bouche aussi mince.

Alain Fleural se contenta de sourire.

La dame minauda.

— Ne le dites à personne, mais je l'ai bien connu.

Elle avait accentué le «bien» qui laissait imaginer sans rien en dire.

Il la regarda avec plus d'attention et s'aperçut qu'elle avait rougi. Il lui prit la main et la porta à ses lèvres.

— Je comprends pourquoi, la complimenta-t-il.

La dame, un instant muette, rattrapée sans doute par ses souvenirs, lui serra le bras avec tendresse. Elle voulut reprendre la conversation mais Numa Mitchell approchait.

— Ainsi, vous connaissez ma cousine ? interrogea-t-il, en lui tendant la main.

— Je connais et reconnais la beauté où qu'elle soit, pirouetta-t-il.

— Ah, quel flatteur, reprit la dame, en penchant la tête vers lui, mais je vous aime comme ça. Venez donc dimanche vers dix heures au Domaine, j'organise un brunch.

— Je viendrai avec plaisir.

La dame s'éloigna. Il n'avait ni son nom ni son adresse.

Numa Mitchell le prit à part.

— Je vous ai aperçu tout à l'heure en manou dans les bras du futur grand chef du district de Gaïcha, c'était bien vous, n'est-ce pas ?

Fleural hocha la tête sans mot dire.

— Je n'irai pas par quatre chemins, nous cherchons un médiateur et pourquoi pas un investisseur supplémentaire dans la construction d'un ensemble hôtelier à Lifou,

“Here is my Ithaca,” he had read in André's notebooks.

He made his way, one foot in front of the other, back to the mortuary chapel. André Nerval was right once again, funeral services were much more places of life than death.

Few people remained. Just as he arrived, a woman he had seen earlier grabbed his arm and dragged him aside.

“Hello, you're Jaacques' nephew, aren't you?”

She spoke like she was gargling, her voice uncommonly deep, in a mouth as thin.

Alain Fleural merely smiled.

The woman simpered.

“Don't tell anyone, but I knew him well.”

She stressed *well* which stirred the imagination without needing to say more.

He looked at her, paying much closer attention, and noticed she had blushed. He took her hand and brought it to his lips.

“I understand why,” he said as a compliment.

The lady, silent for a moment, no doubt caught up in her memories, squeezed his arm tenderly. She wanted to continue the conversation but Numa Mitchell was approaching.

“So, you know my cousin?” he asked Alain, offering his hand.

“I know and recognize beauty wherever it is,” he said, evading the question.

“Ah, what a flatterer,” said the woman, inclining her head towards him, “but I like you like that. On Sunday, why don't you come to the Estate around ten o'clock, I'm having a brunch.”

“It will be my pleasure to come.”

The lady walked away. He had neither her name nor her address.

Numa Mitchell took him aside.

“I spotted you earlier in a *manou*, in the arms of the future *grand chef* of the district of Gaïcha. It was you, wasn't it?”

Fleural nodded without saying a word.

“I won't beat about the bush, we're looking for a mediator and, why not, an additional investor in the construction of a hotel complex

sur l'exceptionnelle plage de Peng, quelqu'un qui puisse être proche de la chefferie et nous facilite les transactions, nous rejoindriez-vous ?

«Ne pas sembler intéressé plus qu'il ne faut» lui chuchota André d'outre-tombe.

— Ma foi, il faut y réfléchir, répondit-il, laconique.

— Nous avons une réunion dimanche matin, à mon bureau, rue de Verdun. Je compte sur vous. Ensuite nous irons chez ma cousine. Nous ne pourrons pas y échapper. Je vous ferai essayer ma dernière Jaguar. Un bijou. Tenez, voici ma carte.

Alain Fleural prit la carte, serra la main de Numa Mitchell et se dirigea tranquillement vers la procession qu'une onde de chaleur enveloppait.

on Lifou, on the exceptional Peng Beach, someone who can be close to the chieftainship and facilitate the transactions for us. Would you like to join us?"

"Don't appear interested any more than is necessary," André whispered from beyond the grave.

"Well, I'd have to think about it," he replied tersely.

"We're having a meeting on Sunday morning in my office in Verdun Street. I'll expect to see you there. Afterwards we'll go to my cousin's. We won't be able to get out of it. I'll let you try out my new Jaguar. A real gem. Here's my card."

Alain Fleural took the card, shook Numa Mitchell's hand and headed calmly towards the procession as it moved through a wave of hot air.