

The Accident on the A35

What I have just written is false. True. Neither true nor false.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Words*

One

THERE DID NOT APPEAR to be anything remarkable about the accident on the A35. It occurred on a perfectly ordinary stretch of the trunk road that runs between Strasbourg and Saint-Louis. A dark green Mercedes saloon left the southbound carriageway, careered down a slope and collided with a tree on the edge of a copse. The vehicle was not immediately visible from the road, so although it was spotted by a passer-by at around 10:45pm, it was not possible to say with any certainty when the crash had occurred. In any case, when the car was discovered, the sole occupant was dead.

Georges Gorski of the Saint-Louis police was standing on the grass verge of the road. It was November. Drizzle glazed the road surface. There were no tyre marks. The most likely explanation was that the driver had simply fallen asleep at the wheel. Even in cases of cardiac arrest, drivers usually managed to apply the brakes or make some attempt to bring the vehicle under control. Nevertheless, Gorski resolved to keep an open mind. His predecessor, Jules Ribéry, had always urged him to follow his instincts. *You solve cases with this, not this*, he would say, pointing first to his considerable gut and then to his forehead. Gorski was sceptical about such an approach. It encouraged an investigator to disregard evidence that did not support the initial hypothesis. Instead, Gorski believed, each potential piece of evidence should be given due and equal consideration.

Ribéry's methodology had more to do with ensuring that he was comfortably ensconced in one of Saint-Louis' bars by mid-afternoon. Still, Gorski's initial impression of the scene before him suggested that in this case there would not be much call for alternative theories.

The area had been cordoned off by the time he arrived. A photographer was taking pictures of the crumpled vehicle. The flash intermittently illuminated the surrounding trees. An ambulance and a number of police vehicles with flashing lights occupied the southbound lane of the carriageway. A pair of bored *gendarmes* directed the sparse traffic.

Gorski ground out his cigarette on the shingle at the side of the road and made his way down the embankment. If he did so, it was less because he thought his inspection of the scene would offer up any insights into the cause of the accident than because it was expected of him. Those gathered around the vehicle awaited his verdict. The body could not be removed from the car until the investigating officer was satisfied. If the accident had occurred just a few kilometres north, it would have fallen under the jurisdiction of the Mulhouse station, but it had not. Gorski was conscious of the eyes of those gathered on the edge of the copse upon him as he scrambled down the slope. The grass was greasy from the evening's rain and his leather-soled slip-ons were ill suited to such conditions. He had to break into a run to prevent himself losing his balance and collided with a young *gendarme* holding a flashlight. There were suppressed titters.

Gorski took a slow turn around the vehicle. The photographer ceased his activity and stood back to allow him an unencumbered view. The victim had been propelled, head and shoulders, through the windscreen. His arms remained by his sides, suggesting he had made no attempt to shield himself from the impact. His head slumped on the concertinaed bonnet of the car. The man had a full greying beard, but Gorski could ascertain little more about his appearance, as his face, or at least the part that was visible, was entirely smashed in. The drizzle had plastered his

hair to what was left of his forehead. Gorski continued his tour around the Mercedes. The paintwork on the driver's side of the vehicle was deeply scratched, indicating that the car might have travelled down the slope on its side before righting itself. Gorski paused and ran his fingers over the crumpled bodywork, as if expecting it to communicate something to him. It did not. And if he now took his notebook from the inside pocket of his jacket and scribbled a few perfunctory notes, it was only to satisfy those observing him. The Road Accident Investigation Unit would determine the cause of the accident in due course. No flashes of intuition were required from Gorski or anyone else.

The offside door had been forced ajar by the impact. Gorski wrenched it further open and reached inside the overcoat of the victim. He indicated to the sergeant in charge of the scene that he had concluded his inspection and made his way up the slope to his car. Once inside he lit another cigarette and opened the wallet he had retrieved. The dead man's name was Bertrand Barthelme, of 14 Rue des Bois, Saint-Louis.

THE PROPERTY WAS ONE of a handful of grand family homes on the northern outskirts of the town. Saint-Louis is a place of little note, situated at the Dreieckland, the junction of Germany, Switzerland and eastern France. The municipality's twenty thousand inhabitants can be divided into three groups: those who have no aspiration to live somewhere less dreary; those who lack the wherewithal to leave; and those who, for reasons best known to themselves, like it. Despite the modest nature of the town, there are still a few families who have, in one way or another, built up what passes for a fortune in these parts. Their properties never come up for sale. They are passed down through the generations in the way that wedding rings and items of furniture are passed down among the poor.

Gorski pulled up at the kerb and lit a cigarette. The house was shielded from view by a screen of sycamores. It was the sort

of street where an unfamiliar vehicle parked late at night swiftly elicited a call to the police. Gorski could quite legitimately have delegated the disagreeable task of informing the family to a junior officer, but he did not wish it to appear that he was not up to the job. There was a second, more insidious, reason, however; one that Gorski had difficulty admitting even to himself. He was here in person because of the address of the deceased. Would he have had the same misgivings about sending a lower-ranking officer to a home in one of the less salubrious quarters of the town? He would not. The truth was that he believed that the people who lived on Rue des Bois were entitled to the attention of the town's highest officer of the law. They expected it, and were Gorski not to carry out the task in person, it would later be whispered about.

He contemplated postponing the task until morning—it was close to midnight—but the lateness of the hour provided no excuse. Gorski would have had no qualms about disturbing a family in the shabby apartment blocks around Place de la Gare at any hour of his choosing. It was, furthermore, possible that in the interim the Barthelme family might hear the news from another source.

Gorski walked up the drive, his feet crunching on the gravel. He felt, as he always did when approaching such houses, like he was trespassing. If challenged, he would no doubt make some apologetic remark before bringing out the ID card that authorised his intrusion. He recalled the panic that ensued in his childhood home when a visitor called unannounced. His parents would exchange alarmed glances. His mother would cast her eyes around the room and hastily straighten the cushions and antimacassars before opening the door. His father would put on his jacket and stand to attention, as if ashamed to be caught relaxing in his own home. One evening when Gorski was seven or eight years old, two young Mormons who had recently taken up residence in the town called at the apartment above his father's pawnshop. Gorski heard them explain the nature of their visit in broken French. His mother invited them into the little parlour. Albert Gorski stood

behind his chair as if awaiting the appearance of the mayor himself. Gorski was sitting beneath the window, turning the pages of an illustrated book. To his child's eyes, the two Americans were identical; tall and blond, with closely cropped hair and wearing tight-fitting navy blue suits. They stood in the doorway until Mme Gorski directed them to the chairs around the table at which the family took their meals. They did not appear in the least ill at ease. Mme Gorski offered them coffee, which they accepted enthusiastically. While she busied herself in the kitchenette, they introduced themselves to M. Gorski, who merely nodded and resumed his seat. The two men then made some remarks about how pleasant they found Saint-Louis. As Gorski's father made no response, a silence ensued, which lasted until Mme Gorski returned from the kitchen with a tray bearing a pot, the good china cups and a plate of madeleines. She wittered away while serving the visitors, but it was apparent that they understood little of her monologue. The Gorskis did not normally take coffee in the evening. Once these formalities were complete, the young man on the left, after casting his eyes meaningfully around the room, gestured towards the mezuzah fixed to the doorpost.

'I see you are of the Jewish persuasion,' he said, 'but my colleague and I would very much like to share with you the message of our faith.'

It was the first time Gorski had heard his parents referred to in this way. Religion was never mentioned in the Gorski household, far less practised. The little box on the doorpost was merely one of the many knick-knacks arrayed around the room that his mother dusted on a weekly basis. It held no particular significance, or if it did, Gorski was not aware of it. He was not even sure what the phrase 'of the Jewish persuasion' meant, other than signifying that they—the Gorskis—were different. Gorski was affronted that these strangers would talk to his father in this way. He remembered little else of the conversation, only that when the Americans had drunk their coffee and eaten his mother's biscuits, his father had accepted the literature they pressed into his hands

and assured them that he would give it careful consideration. The young men seemed delighted by this response and said that they would be happy to call again. They then thanked Mme Gorski for her hospitality and left. Mme Gorski made a remark to the effect that they seemed like pleasant young men. M. Gorski perused the leaflets the Americans had left for half an hour or so, as if it would have been discourteous to immediately cast them aside. After his father's death, Gorski found them in the wooden box under the window sill in which papers deemed to be of a certain importance were kept.

Gorski was about to ring the bell of the house on Rue des Bois for a second time when a light went on in the vestibule and he heard the rattling of keys in the lock. The door was opened by a stout woman in her early sixties. Her grey hair was tied in a bun at the back of her head. She was wearing a dark blue serge dress, tight around her figure. Around her neck she wore a pair of spectacles on a leather string, and a small cross, which nestled in the cleft of her bosom. She had thick, manly ankles and wore brown brogues. She did not appear to have hurriedly dressed to answer the door. Perhaps her duties did not end until the master of the house had returned. Gorski imagined her sitting in her quarters, slowly turning the cards of a game of patience and letting a cigarette burn out in an ashtray by her elbow. She looked at Gorski with the expression of vague distaste to which he was quite accustomed and which he no longer allowed to offend him.

'Madame,' he began, 'Chief Inspector Georges Gorski of the Saint-Louis police.' He proffered the ID he had been holding in readiness.

'Madame Barthelme has retired for the night,' the woman replied. 'Perhaps you would be so good as to call at a more sociable hour.'

Gorski resisted the urge to apologise for the imposition. 'This is not a social call,' he said.

The woman widened her eyes and shook her head a little,

drawing in her breath as she did so. Then she raised her glasses to her eyes and asked to see Gorski's identification. 'What sort of time is this to be calling on a decent household?'

Gorski already felt a healthy loathing for this self-important busybody. She clearly believed that her status as gatekeeper to the household endowed her with great authority. He reminded himself that she was no more than a servant.

'It's the sort of time,' he said, 'which would suggest that I have called on a matter of some importance. Now, if you would be so good as to—'

The housekeeper stepped back from the door and grudgingly invited him into a cavernous wood-panelled hallway. The oak doors of the rooms on the first floor opened onto a landing, bounded by a carved balustrade. She ascended the stairs, leaning heavily on the banister, and entered a doorway on the left. Gorski waited in the semi-darkness of the hallway. The house was silent. A pale sliver of light emanated from a closed door on the right of the landing. A few moments later the housekeeper reappeared and made her way back down the stairs. She moved with an uneven gait, throwing her right leg out to the side as if troubled by her hip.

Mme Barthelme, she told him, would receive him in her room. Gorski had assumed that the mistress of the house would receive him downstairs. The idea of informing a woman of her husband's death in her bedroom struck him as vaguely indecent. But there was nothing else for it. He followed the housekeeper upstairs. She gestured towards the door and followed him in.

On account of the age of the victim, Gorski had expected to find a more elderly woman propped up on a pile of embroidered pillows. According to his driving licence, Barthelme was fifty-nine years old, but even from the cursory inspection Gorski had made, he had seemed older. His beard was thick and grey, and the cut and fabric of his three-piece suit old-fashioned. Mme Barthelme, by contrast, could not have been much more than forty, perhaps even younger. A mass of light brown hair was piled haphazardly

on her head, as if it had been hastily arranged. Ringlets framed her heart-shaped face. On her shoulders was a light shawl, which she had likely donned for the sake of modesty, but her nightdress hung loosely around her chest and Gorski had to consciously avert his eyes. The room was entirely feminine. There was an ornate dressing table and a chaise longue strewn with clothes. The bedside table was arrayed with little brown bottles of pills. There was an absence of masculine articles or garments. The couple, clearly, kept separate rooms. Mme Barthelme smiled sweetly and apologised for receiving Gorski in bed.

‘I’m afraid I was feeling rather—’ She allowed her sentence to trail off with a vague gesture of her hand, which caused her breasts to shift beneath the linen of her nightdress.

For a moment Gorski forgot the purpose of his visit.

‘Madame Thérèse did not tell me your name,’ she said.

‘Gorski,’ he said, ‘Chief Inspector Gorski.’ He almost added that his forename was Georges.

‘Is there enough crime in Saint-Louis to merit a Chief Inspector?’ she said.

‘Just about.’ Normally, Gorski would have been offended by such a remark, but Mme Barthelme managed to make it sound like flattery.

He was standing midway between the door and the bed. There was a chair by the dressing table, but it was not appropriate to sit to deliver such grave news. The housekeeper loitered by the doorway. There was no reason she should not be present, so it was only to assert his authority that Gorski turned to her and said: ‘If you wouldn’t mind giving us some privacy, Thérèse.’

The housekeeper made no attempt to conceal her affront, but after making a show of straightening the cushions on the chaise longue, she complied.

‘And close the door behind you,’ Gorski added.

He paused for a few moments, adopting the solemn expression he wore for such occasions. ‘I’m afraid I have some bad news, Madame Barthelme.’

‘Please call me Lucette. You make me feel like an old maid,’ she said. The first part of his statement seemed to have made no impression on her.

Gorski nodded. ‘There has been an accident,’ he said. He never saw any sense in dragging things out. ‘Your husband is dead.’

‘Dead?’

They all said that. Gorski did not read anything into people’s reactions on hearing such news. Were he to receive a visit from a policeman at an unsociable hour, it would be clear that he was to receive bad news. But such thoughts did not seem to occur to civilians, and their first response was generally one of disbelief.

‘His car left the A35 and hit a tree. He was killed instantly. It happened an hour or so ago.’

Mme Barthelme emitted a listless sigh.

‘It appears from the initial inspection that the most likely scenario is that he fell asleep at the wheel. Naturally, a full investigation will be carried out.’

Mme Barthelme’s expression barely changed. Her eyes drifted away from Gorski. They were pale blue, almost grey. Her reaction was not unusual. People did not cry out in anguish, faint or fly into a rage. Still, there was something curious in her subdued response. His eyes wandered to the array of bottles by the bedside. Perhaps she had taken a Valium or some other tranquiliser. Gorski allowed a few moments to pass. Then she started slightly, as if she had forgotten he was there.

‘I see,’ she said. She raised her hands to her head and started to tidy the ringlets around her face. She was quite charming.

‘Would you like a glass of water?’ he asked. ‘Or perhaps some brandy?’

She smiled, exactly as she had when he entered the room. Gorski began to wonder if she had understood what he had told her.

‘No, thank you. You’ve been very kind.’

Gorski nodded. ‘Is there anyone else at home, besides the housekeeper?’

‘Just our son, Raymond,’ she said. ‘He’s in his room.’

‘Would you like me to inform him?’

Mme Barthelme looked surprised at this offer. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘that would be very kind.’

Gorski nodded. He had not expected to have to go through the business twice. His mind had already drifted to the beer he planned to drink in Le Pot. He resisted the urge to glance at his watch. He hoped Yves would not have closed up by the time he got there. He bowed his head slightly and explained the need for a formal identification of the body. ‘We’ll send a car in the morning,’ he said.

Mme Barthelme nodded. She directed him to her son’s room. And that was that.

The housekeeper was sitting on an ottoman outside the door. Gorski assumed she had heard every word.

Two

Raymond Barthelme was sitting on a straight-backed chair in the middle of his bedroom reading *The Age of Reason*. The only light in the room came from the anglepoise lamp on the desk by the window. Aside from the bed, there was a worn velvet sofa, but Raymond preferred the wooden chair. If he tried to read somewhere more comfortable, he found his attention drifting from the words on the page. Besides, his friend Stéphane had told him that Sartre himself always sat on a straight-backed chair to read. He had returned to the chapter in which Ivich and Mathieu slash their hands at the Sumatra nightclub. Raymond was enthralled by the idea of a woman who would, for no apparent reason, draw a knife across the palm of her hand. He read for the umpteenth time: *The flesh was laid open from the ball of the thumb to the root of the little finger, and the blood was oozing slowly from the wound.* And her friend's reaction was not to rush to her aid, but instead to take the knife and impale his own hand to the table. What was most striking about the scene, however, was not the bloodletting itself, but the sentence that followed it:

The waiter had seen many such incidents.

Afterwards, when the couple went to the restroom, the attendant simply bandaged their hands and sent them on their way. So what if they had mutilated themselves? Raymond longed to be in a place like the Sumatra, among the sort of people who impaled their hands to the table. Such an establishment could certainly

not be found in a backwater like Saint-Louis, with its respectable cafés where you were served by middle-aged women who asked after your parents, and to whom Raymond always behaved with perfect courtesy. Raymond was not sure what to make of the scene. He had discussed it at length with Yvette and Stéphane in their booth at the Café des Vosges. Stéphane had been matter-of-fact (he had an answer for everything): ‘It’s an *acte gratuit*, old man,’ he had said with a shrug. ‘It’s meaningless. That’s the point.’ Yvette had disagreed: it wasn’t meaningless. It was an act of rebellion against the bourgeois manners represented by the woman in the fur coat at the next table. Raymond had nodded earnestly, not wishing to contradict his friends, but neither interpretation satisfied him. Neither explained the frisson he got from reading the scene, a frisson not dissimilar to that which he experienced when he passed close enough to certain girls in the school corridors to inhale their scent. Perhaps the point was not to reduce the scene to a meaning—to *explain* it—but simply to experience it as a kind of spectacle.

Raymond wore his hair to his shoulders. He had a pronounced Roman nose, inherited from his father, and his mother’s long-lashed grey-blue eyes. His lips were thin and his mouth wide, so that when he smiled (which was not often) he looked quite charming. His skin was smooth, and if he had started shaving it was for form’s sake only. The growth he removed was no more than an embarrassing soft down. His body was slim and lithe. His mother liked to tell him that he looked like a girl. Sometimes in the evening when he visited her room, she would have him sit on the edge of the bed and brush his hair. Raymond did not take exception to his mother’s feminine view of him and even cultivated a certain girlishness in his mannerisms, if only to aggravate his father.

He had recently removed all the posters from the walls of his room and thrown away a good deal of his possessions. He had painted the walls white, so that the room now resembled a well-appointed cell. Against the wall to the right of the door was a

bookcase, culled of its more childish volumes, and now home to a record player with forty or fifty LPs, these carefully selected to create the right impression on anyone entering his room. He was seventeen years old.

For the last fifteen minutes or so, Raymond's mind had not been on his book. An hour ago, he had heard the tyres of a car on the gravel of the drive, before the front door opened and he heard his mother ascend the stairs. Even without the sound of her heels on the floorboards, her steps were easily distinguished from the heavy tread of his father. Since then the house had been silent. Normally by this hour, Raymond would have expected to hear his father returning home and briefly look in on his wife, before retiring to his study to read or look over some papers. Raymond's father always kept the door of his study ajar. This was less as an invitation to drop in than a way of monitoring the movements of the other members of the household. Raymond's room was next to the study and if he needed to use the bathroom or wanted to go downstairs to the kitchen to get a bite to eat, he could not do so without passing his father's door. Raymond often moved around the house in stocking-feet to avoid detection, but he always had the feeling that his father knew exactly where he was and what he was doing. Every night, when the housekeeper retired to her quarters on the second floor, Raymond would hear his father say in a stage whisper: 'Is that you, Madame Thérèse?'

The house was so quiet there was no need to shout.

'Yes, Maître,' she would reply from the landing. 'Do you need anything?'

Maître Barthelme would reply that he did not, and they would wish each other goodnight. The exchange never ceased to irritate Raymond.

The fact that Maître Barthelme had not returned home was unusual in itself. But when Raymond heard the doorbell at 23:47 (he had checked the time on the digital clock his mother had given him for his sixteenth birthday), he knew something out of the ordinary had occurred. People rarely called at the house

at any time of day. The only conceivable visitor at such an hour was a policeman. And the only reason for a policeman to call was to deliver bad news. The arrival of a policeman and his father's failure to return could not, Raymond surmised, be unconnected. At the very least there must have been an accident. But would a mere accident bring a policeman to the house at this hour? Surely a telephone call would have sufficed.

When he heard Mme Thérèse make her way down the stairs and open the front door, Raymond strained to hear the conversation. He was unable to make out more than a murmur of voices. It was at the point when Thérèse climbed the stairs and knocked lightly on the door of his mother's room that Raymond got up from his chair and stood with his ear pressed to his own door. If any confirmation that the caller was a policeman was required, this was it. Thérèse was by nature suspicious and mistrustful and would never have left any other person unsupervised in the hallway. She assumed that all tradesmen were thieves who had to be watched over at all times and constantly claimed that shopkeepers had diddled her. When she returned from her marketing, she routinely weighed out the items she had bought to check that she had not been sold short.

A few inaudible words were spoken in the hallway, before two sets of footsteps ascended the stairs and made their way towards his mother's room. The door must have remained open for a short time, because Raymond was able to catch a few words of the conversation before Thérèse was dismissed and the door was closed. In the intervening minutes, Raymond reflected that he had been wrong to assume a connection between his father's non-return and the policeman's visit. Perhaps there had merely been a burglary in the vicinity and the cop had called to ask if anyone had seen or heard anything unusual. In this case, he would certainly want to speak to Raymond as well. Perhaps the cop would ask him about his own movements, and having no alibi—he had not left his room all evening—he would himself fall under suspicion.

Until this point, Raymond's day had been unremarkable. Around eight o'clock in the morning, he had drunk a cup of tea and eaten some bread and butter at the counter in the kitchen. He could feel the heat of the range at his back. The house was cold in winter—his father being generally ill disposed towards heating—but the kitchen was always oppressively warm. Mme Thérèse was preparing his mother's breakfast tray with her usual put-upon air. His father had already left.

Raymond, as he always did, called on Yvette, who lived on Rue des Trois Rois. They then ran into Stéphane at the corner of Avenue de Bâle and Avenue Général de Gaulle. As the three of them walked to school, Stéphane talked enthusiastically about a book he was reading, but Raymond had paid little attention. Little of note occurred during the day. Mlle Delarue, the French mistress, was absent, as she often was, and her place was filled by the deputy head, who had merely set the class a task and then left the room. Raymond spent the lesson staring out of the window at a pair of wood pigeons strutting stiffly around the schoolyard. At lunchtime, he ate a slice of onion tart with potato salad in the canteen. As he had no class in the final period he had walked home alone. He made himself a pot of tea, took it to his room and listened to some records. As his father dined out on Tuesdays, it was always a relief not to have to sit through the evening meal in his presence. His mother's mood was lighter and she even seemed to acquire a little colour in her cheeks. She would enquire about Raymond's day and he would amuse her with anecdotes about trivial incidents at school, sometimes impersonating his teachers or classmates. When he aped one of his teachers in a particularly cruel fashion she would chastise him, but so half-heartedly that it was clear she did not really disapprove. Even Mme Thérèse went about her business with a less sombre air and, on occasion, if there was some household business to discuss, she would join them at the table during dessert. Once, when Raymond's father returned unexpectedly, she had leapt from her chair as if she had sat on a tack and

busied herself with the dishes on the sideboard. When Maître Barthelme entered, he gave no sign of having registered this breach of protocol, but to Raymond's amusement, Thérèse's cheeks had reddened like a schoolgirl's.

Five minutes passed before Raymond heard the door to his mother's room click open. He listened to the cop's footsteps approach, then pass, the head of the stairs. Raymond stepped back from the door. He grabbed his book from the floor and threw himself on the bed. This would look odd, however, as the straight-backed chair remained in the middle of the floor as if set out for an interrogation. But there was no time to rearrange things and Raymond did not want the cop to hear him scurrying around in the manner of someone concealing evidence. There was a knock on the door. Raymond did not know what to do. It would seem rude to call out *Who is it?* That would imply that admission to his room was somehow dependent on the identity of the person knocking. In any case, the question would be disingenuous: he already knew who was at the door. It was not a dilemma Raymond had ever faced. His mother never entered his room, and Thérèse only did so when he was out at school. His father refused to knock, a source of great annoyance to Raymond, as it meant that he could never fully relax in his own domain; he might at any moment be subject to inspection. He was not even sure why his father called in on him. Their conversations were brief and strained and it was difficult not to conclude that the only purpose of these paternal visits was to keep tabs on him; to remind him of the fact he was not yet old enough to warrant a degree of privacy.

In the end, Raymond got up from the bed, book in hand, and opened the door himself. The man on the landing did not look like a policeman. He was of medium height with greying hair, cut short in almost military fashion. He had a pleasant face, with mild enquiring eyes and thick black eyebrows. He was dressed in a dark brown suit with a slight sheen to the fabric. His tie was loosened and the top button of his shirt unfastened. He did not

have the imposing presence Raymond would have expected of a detective.

‘Good evening, Raymond,’ he said, ‘I am Georges Gorski of the Saint-Louis police.’

He did not offer any identification. Raymond wondered if he should have feigned surprise, but the moment passed. Instead he just nodded.

‘May I?’ The policeman gestured towards the room. Raymond stepped back to allow him in. The room remained almost in darkness. The cop took a few steps inside the room. He looked at the chair in the centre of the floor with a puzzled expression. He glanced around the bare walls. Raymond stood awkwardly by the bed. It was 23:53.

Gorski turned the chair around to face him, but he did not sit down, merely letting his right hand rest on it. With a matter-of-fact air he said: ‘Your father has been killed in a car accident.’

Raymond did not know what to say. His first thought was: *How should I react?* He glanced at the floor to buy time. Then he sat on the bed. That was good. That was what people did in such circumstances: they sat down, as if the shock had drained all the strength from their legs. But Raymond was not shocked. As soon as he had heard the doorbell ring, he had assumed that this was what had occurred. He wondered for a moment if this had been by way of a premonition, but he dismissed the idea. What was significant was not that he had assumed his father was dead, but that—without admitting it to himself—it was what he had wanted. If he felt anything on hearing the news, it was a kind of excitement, a feeling of liberation. He glanced up at the policeman to see if he had read his thoughts. But Gorski was looking at him with disinterest.

‘Your mother thought it best that I break the news to you,’ he said in the same business-like tone.

Raymond nodded slowly. ‘Thank you.’

He felt he should say something further. What sort of person has nothing to say on hearing of the death of their father?

‘A car accident?’ he said.

‘Yes, on the A35. He was killed instantly.’

Gorski then touched his left wrist with his right hand and Raymond understood that he was concerned about the time. He turned towards the door. ‘Perhaps you should look in on your mother.’

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ said Raymond.

The cop nodded, satisfied that his obligations had been fulfilled. ‘If you don’t have any questions, then that’s all for now. There will be a formal identification in the morning. You might want to accompany your mother.’

Gorski left. Raymond followed him to the door of his room and watched him make his way down the stairs. Thérèse was hovering on the landing with her hand over her mouth.

Raymond instinctively retreated. He had the feeling that when he left his room, everything would be different; that he would be required in some way to assume responsibility. He looked at himself in the mirror on the inside of the wardrobe door. He did not look any different. He pushed his hair back from his forehead with his fingertips. He adopted a solemn expression, lowering his eyebrows and tensing his mouth. The effect was quite comic and he stifled a laugh.

He entered his mother’s room without knocking and closed the door behind him. Lucette was sitting up in bed. She did not appear to have been crying. It would have seemed odd to remain standing or to sit on the chaise longue, which was in any case strewn with undergarments, so he sat on the edge of the divan. Lucette held out a hand and Raymond took it. He kept his eyes fixed on the wall above the bed. His mother’s nightdress was loosely fastened and the curve of her breast was clearly visible. He wondered if she had received the policeman in the same state of undress.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked.

She smiled listlessly. With her free hand she gathered her nightdress together. ‘It’s quite a shock.’

‘Yes,’ he said.

Raymond had not expected to find his mother weeping hysterically. He had never discerned any great affection between his parents. Since he had begun to spend time in his friends’ homes he had realised that the stiff formality that characterised his parents’ relationship was not usual. Yvette’s parents laughed and joked with each other. When M. Arnaud arrived home, he kissed his wife on the mouth and she arched her body towards him in a manner that suggested she felt some fondness for him. When Raymond was invited to stay for dinner, the atmosphere around the table was convivial. The various members of the family—Yvette had two younger brothers—chatted to each other as if they were actually interested in the details of each other’s lives. Raymond felt quite warmly towards his mother, but the atmosphere of the Barthelme household was entirely determined by his father. The only topic of conversation which animated Maître Barthelme at mealtimes was that of household expenditure. When Thérèse brought in the dishes, he would interrogate her about the cost of the various items and whether she had recently compared prices in other shops. *There’s no shame in thrift*, was his favourite maxim, and one to which Mme Thérèse was a staunch devotee.

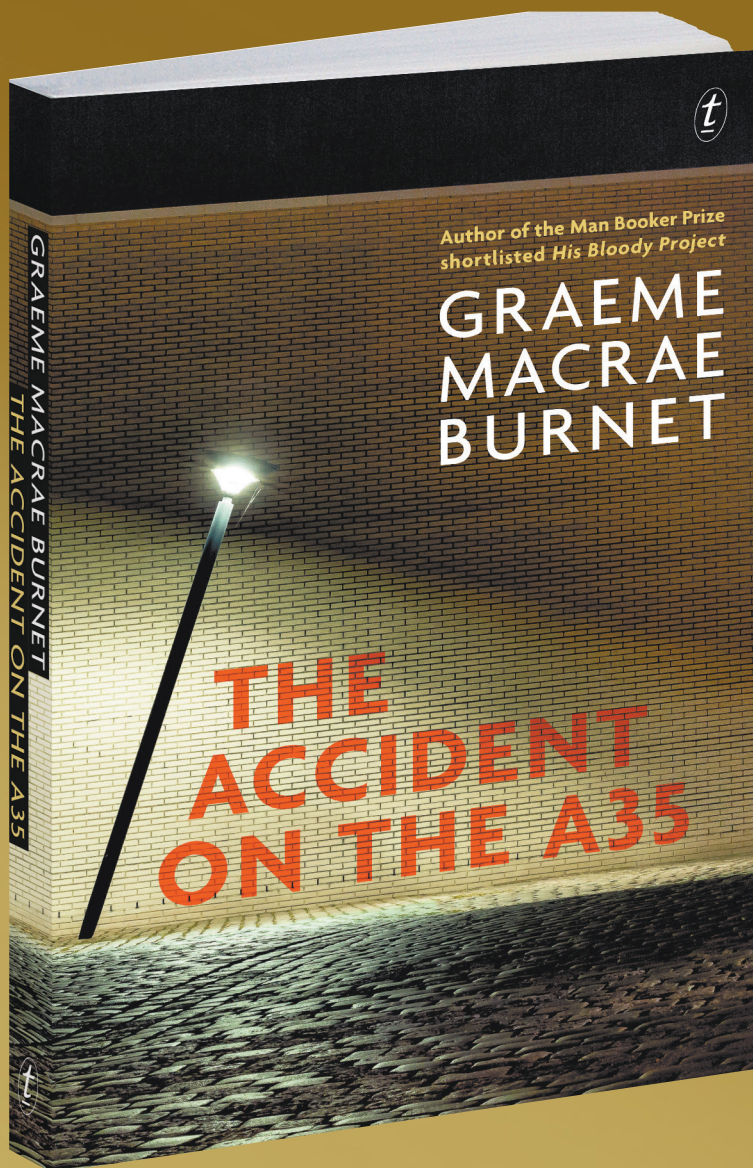
That his father was the root of the frosty atmosphere in the house was borne out by the more cheerful mood at the dinner table when he was not in attendance. Even in his absence, however, when Raymond and his mother shared a light-hearted moment, they would restrain themselves, as if their deeds might be reported to the authorities. Raymond wondered if his mother was now feeling—as he was—a certain lightness; a feeling similar to that which he experienced when the school year ended for summer, or when spring arrived and it became possible to leave the house without a winter coat.

Raymond kept these thoughts to himself. Instead he said: ‘The policeman said that the body would have to be identified.’

It was odd to hear himself refer to his father as ‘the body’.

‘Yes,’ his mother replied. ‘They’re going to send a car in the morning.’

It was a relief to turn to these practical matters. Raymond asked if she would like him to accompany her. She squeezed his hand and said that that would be helpful. They looked at each other for a moment and then, because there was nothing further to say, Raymond got up and left the room.



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