

Madame Verona Comes Down The Hill

Dimitri Verhulst

An extract

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Translator David Colmer

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My dog is old. Sometimes he is in pain and an imploring look comes into his eyes. I am his God. He doesn't know that behind the God that will save him, the one he beseeches, there is another God he cannot see. Is there another behind ours as well? The dog grovels at my feet. At whose feet must we grovel?

Jean Ray

Somewhere, in one of the many story banks that have been set up here and there for us to draw on when the world needs a story, it must be possible to track down the fable that tells us that people, on their arrival in the realm of the dead, must lay claim to a characteristic, one only, that encapsulates their past life. After all, we need to be able to imagine the afterworld as a pleasant place, that's a precondition of these fables, and you would have to be very naive to believe that an eternal sojourn in a single location with all those who have ever and will ever die could remain pleasant for long. According to the fable in question, the wandering souls are grouped according to shared characteristics, from which we can immediately conclude that it must be especially busy in those parts of the hereafter that are filled with people who strove during their life to acquire as much money as possible, possess fire or become a famous guitarist – famous in any discipline at all – or where the resurrected population is made up of all those who made their self-respect subservient to the number of their amorous conquests.

Of course, this fable about the hereafter is actually a fable about life, which is why notorious atheists can also derive pleasure from considering it, as a hypothetical situation. On that icy day in late February, for instance, Madame Verona thought about what she would shortly confess to eternity's fabled gatekeeper as the chief characteristic of the life that had now let go its toeholds and was slipping away from her. It wasn't so much that she was thinking about *what* to tell him – she had no doubts on that score – it was how to put it that was bothering her.

The one characteristic element with which she would summarise her eighty-two years of existence was that dogs had always sought out her company. There must have been something about her character, since her earliest youth, that made dogs feel safe around her. As a child she was often snuffled by passing quadrupeds that immediately begged to be patted and offered to shake hands the way ridiculous people had taught them to. More intelligent breeds that are known for their distrust of children also caught a whiff of whatever it is that makes dogs wag their tails, and even guard dogs that had been trained to foam at the mouth at the sight of a stranger abandoned all xenophobia in her presence. In the summer, when many a holidaymaker dumped the family pet on a convenient roadside, she encountered starving dog after starving dog, and as a girl she would have taken them all home with her if not for the presence there of a mother who could scream entire octaves at the mere thought of a dog. The only thing her mother had ever permitted her was a childish or, more accurately, girlish dedication to Guinea pigs, and even then mother dear would have probably suffered a heart attack if one of the creatures had ever escaped the cage. Let alone that a mother like hers could have understood the young grief of a child digging a hole in the back garden to accommodate the shoe or cigar box that would be lowered into it after the last rites that only children administer to dead animals.

Madame Verona had not seen her parental home since the day her mother herself was lowered into that same merciful earth, after which it was sold to people who showed no interest in the history of their new dwelling. But if she had just once succumbed to a nostalgic impulse to sniff up the atmospheres of her tender years, she could have strolled through the garden knowing it was rooted in a small animal cemetery. It was highly unlikely that anything would be left of the countless cavy cadavers or the birds that had ended up there after leaving a greasy spot on a windowpane, but with a little effort she could have recalled which animal was sleeping the sleep of sleeps under which shrub. More than that, she would have remembered the names of all those little creatures: Mimi, Cuddles, Fluffy, Skittles, Bill, Dolly, or whatever names thirteen-year-old girls give their pets and later feel a mistaken sense of embarrassment about.

Nonetheless, in the case of Madame Verona, we should differentiate between a relatively standard love of animals and the power over dogs she enjoyed throughout her life. Although it is questionable whether “enjoyed” is the right word in this context. After stubbornly bringing yet another pitiful stray home with her (wrong again: she didn’t *bring* them, the dogs simply followed her), she endured her mother’s predictably hysterical outburst and then delivered the animal in question to the shelter, realising that imprisonment there was the price of a full stomach and hoping against hope that *this* dog might be adopted by wiser owners. That last bit is in a manner of speaking because it is common knowledge that there is absolutely no point in buying or adopting a dog in the hope of calling yourself its owner, as it is always the dog that chooses the owner, even if that means long days spent marching and patiently waiting for rain to rust the chain.

It is hard to say when exactly Madame Verona first became aware of her abnormal appeal for dogs, but she was around twenty when she travelled independently for the first time and ascertained that her peculiarity was just as potent in foreign countries. Of course, many people have been tickled by an unsolicited offer of simple canine friendship and felt honoured at an animal like that presenting itself as a confidant, even if it is seldom convenient. She, for instance, once suddenly found herself with a sheepdog as *compagnon de route* on a hiking trip through Portugal. The dog asked nothing of her, he simply followed along behind, days on end, in and over the gentle hills around Coimbra. At night, under the open sky, he stretched out on the hard ground that bent her tent pegs and in the morning he simply resumed *her* path, after first stretching his front legs in a primeval yawn that displayed all of his rotten, yellow stalactites and stalagmites. He made no attempt to demand a share of her meals. And she didn’t give him anything either, hoping that he would go back to wherever he had come from. Puddles were all he needed and, fortunately, there were plenty of them. Finally, a couple of weeks and many miles later, a stone’s throw from Porto airport, knowing she couldn’t take him home with her, she rejected him with a pointing finger and a feigned anger he saw through. Then, for the first time, he let her hear his bark, and the sound cut her to the quick. It was a paltry, worn-out yap, no longer capable of impressing even a sheep. Then he turned, in all his loneliness, hoping that a destination would reveal itself.

When Madame Verona’s thoughts turned to the fable on that cold day in February, another dog was lying at her feet, the kind of farm dog that Renaissance painters cursed because the subtle gradations of colour in its coat revealed the copyist’s limitations as a Creator, and the mass breeding of which must have stopped around the middle of the nineteenth century. A magnificent animal with leadership qualities, gentle through and through, but inclined to boredom. She had vacillated before letting him in, considering her age, but the questions people cannot resist are never asked, they are in eyes, like the melancholy subservient eyes with which he had stared up at her until she said, “Fine, come in, you can live here, but you better realise you’re going to survive me, so don’t get too attached.”

The hour at which the dog would be obliged to seek a new master was approaching, and his legendary intuition was no doubt making him uneasy. But for the time being he didn’t let that show and lay on the cooling feet of Madame Verona, who thought, “This is what I’ll say when I get up there, that I’ve always been popular with dogs.” And it occurred to her that her beloved husband, Monsieur Potier, who had preceded her to the realm of fables, had probably said just the same thing to death’s doorman. He too had always had dogs at his heels. And what could be more logical than Madame Verona and Monsieur Potier being reunited in the terrifying emptiness called The World to Come? Their being accommodated in different sections of the hereafter would make a mockery of beauty.

II.

If we take a topographic map and try to visualise the slopes of the village of Oucwègne, the contours will remind a novice map-reader of a funnel, whereas a seasoned scout will settle for a sieve: a hole in the earth's crust, worn away with immense patience by a river. Because that's what rivers seem to do, they cut the earth into pieces and take billions of years over it. The proximity of a river, a limited knowledge of the Bible and a little poetic license... that was all the old church builders needed to dedicate the chapel in the valley to John the Baptist. But the power of the faith never triumphed over the muscle power required to climb one of the three hills on the way home from Mass. On peak days, determined by dry weather and less slippery roads, the curé raised his chalice of consecrated Beaujolais to a maximum of six elderly women with well-turned calves, during a tinkling of bells that the congregation was obliged to fantasise at the appropriate moments due to a lack of altar boys.

It is difficult to trace the origin of the misconception that people in small, agrarian communities are more religious than their urban fellows, but it is possible that decades of the mass reproduction of Jean François Millet's *Angelus* have played a role that should not be underestimated. In Oucwègne, at least, churchgoers were scarcely to be found unless it was when the bells were pealing or tolling in the tower to spread the tidings of a wedding or funeral through the valley. Six practising faithful, it could have been seven if we weren't discounting someone like Jean-Paul, who dipped his hairy fingers in the holy water every week, but only attended Mass to accompany the quavering voices on his violin and thus assure himself of the thing he so desperately lacked as an interpreter of Bach's partitas: an audience. Of course, we cannot exclude the possibility of someone saying an Our Father now and then in bed, especially the insomniacs – given that the narcotic effects of a Hail Mary are well known to all those who ever knitted their fingers together under the blankets as a pious child only to discover that the end of a decade of the Rosary seldom arrived before dreamland. Still, despite all indications to the contrary, Curé Dubois, a former missionary with an incurable homesickness for the tropics, blamed the secularisation in this unlamented corner of the world on the physical effort church attendance here required, not least of all from the elderly.

The three hills that made up the village were inaccessible during severe winters and each hill formed its own hamlet as long as there was a crunch in the snow: Biènsart, Le Pachis and Chènia. It was on the top of that last hill that Madame Verona lived in a house that could have been lifted from a biscuit tin. And it was this hill that she had come down on that cold day in February, together with her friendly stray, legs wide apart to keep her balance and leaning on her stick, the third leg that was by far the strongest of the three. It was already late afternoon by the time she set out, after her catnap and a sandwich to keep her going. The sky had taken on the colour of an old mop and the birds on the branches were in congress about whether to stay or go, familiar harbingers of persistent snow. And Madame Verona knew that she would never make it back home under her own steam. Not to mention, "on her own two legs", if that didn't sound too cynical for someone who depended on a walking stick. After making it down to the valley she looked up and saw from the chimney that the log she had put on the fire that morning was still burning.

If she ever wanted to make it back home, she had little choice but to wait until someone came by in a car and offered her a ride. Considering the general friendliness of the region that was something that she could definitely count on, but the weather conditions suggested that hardly anyone would be venturing out at this hour. If no one came by – and this was something she had realised while coming down the hill – she would undoubtedly die here in the cold night, because she had no intention of once again rising up against the dictatorship of the body. The last time she had

climbed the hill on foot it had taken her hours and she had felt humiliated by her own bones. Once at the top, she had sworn never again to allow herself to be seduced into rebelling against old age, something that could only lead to snooty airs and, on another level, had already driven countless people into the arms of the pharmaceutical industry. They existed, those who believed that eternal youth was an ingredient in a particular brand of yoghurt, almost made a sacrament of anointing themselves with the most disgusting grease as an antidote to the ailments of the years and lived without traces according to the testimony of their own skin. The trees had their rings; Madame Verona did not begrudge her skin its wrinkles, the signature of all her hours.

“I could die here,” she had said so many years earlier, after seeing the house for the first time with her beloved Monsieur Potier and discussing whether or not to buy it. As if death allowed anyone or anything to impose geographical limitations. They stood together in the living room where they would later put the bed, since it faced east and great lovers like to admire each other by the first, almost tentative light of day. They had opened the window, looked out over the hilltops, the distant farms and the fields where cows patiently grazed their dewlaps fatter to please their butchers. They saw the woods clinging fast to darkness, the clouds drifting in formation to their destinations, and the viaduct that stretched across the valley a little further along to make it easier to join the commotions of two big cities. Below them the river described its path in calligraphic curls, graceful majuscules whose existence people had almost forgotten since the introduction of the keyboard. And while they looked at that landscape, they wondered whether in the long run they would be able to withstand its simple beauty, or whether they would be swept away by the solitude of these surroundings.

There was their house and there was Oucwègne. Full of villagers they didn't know who, according to the stories told by city-dwellers, dared to live hermetic lives. It would be a leap in the dark. “I could die here,” she said, and Monsieur Potier lit a cigarette at the window and rested his gaze on a host of ancient trees whose bark provided a winter home for as yet unfamiliar insects. “I'm sure of it,” he replied, “this is a house you could die in and it's a house you could be unhappy in. We'd be mad not to take it.”

As peculiar as his line of reasoning might seem, it reminds us at least that happy people who are in love are less concerned about their surroundings, or at least that their happiness and love give them the strength to tolerate ugliness. Someone buying a house for life has to realise that sooner or later unhappiness will rear its head as well, in the form of disease, old age, whatever. So yes, the question people need to ask when buying a house is, “Can I be unhappy here too?” And he meant that this landscape could absorb his bouts of melancholy better than any other landscape he knew. They were growing less common, those bouts, perhaps because they were more in keeping with a certain youthfulness he had left behind, but he still preferred to take them into account. A leap in the dark, so that they might tumble into light. “We'll buy it,” and they filled the empty room with the echoing cries of their lovemaking, smoothed the creases out of their clothes and drove to the notary's.

A smile appeared on Madame Verona's face as she thought back on it. A curve in thin lips, a single bracket concluding a long beautiful sentence. A memory of happiness that, in a more wistful key, could also be called happiness.

III.

In winter the heart of Oucwègne lay in the former Catholic cinema, a decrepit building with walls that were still damp from the days when people let out a deep, tubercular sigh at the sight of Greta Garbo and Humphrey Bogart, at least when their deceptive angelic faces had slipped in under the guard of the censorship committee. The silver screen was carted off after it swelled up with an excess of dark-yellow tobacco fumes – a feature which also meant that the last black-and-white films shown here appeared in sepia – and the suffering of the tormented bricks was extended later by Cécile Van De Charlerie using this as the place to cook innumerable cauldrons of mussels in aid of this, that or the other. Garlic mussels, mussels in white wine, all kinds of mussels, served with chips and meatballs in a ladleful of tomato sauce; meals that aroused a suspicion of inviolable happiness and demonstrated why the papists had made the Eucharist the core of every gathering. Our stomachs knew it before we did: it is not by how they live but by how they eat that people come closer to the Lord.

But most of all it was Gordon who breathed new life into the canteen of the old cinema by volunteering to man the bar for a few hours each week. It was true that the disappearance of the last café had not shattered social relations completely; everyone had a set of pétanque balls and shared the bottles they brought from home on the village square under the plane trees. While people cheerfully got drunker and the balls came to rest further and further from the *cochonnet*, they got bites on the lines they had thrown here and there into the river, and later they grilled the fish and ate them with their fingers, spitting the bones out almost irreverently on the ground. But that was in the summer, when it was so hot that pear rust broke out and red spider mite ruined half of the harvest of glasshouse cucumbers, the kind of warmth that people needed to spend the night comfortably outdoors when they were too drunk to attempt the climb home. Madame Verona and Monsieur Potier needed no longer than their first party to realise how difficult it was to climb the hill with beery legs. They stumbled uphill as if on the road to Emmaus, but were contented at feeling immediately accepted by all of the biggest mouths in the village.

In all the happy memories climbing lilies were growing and the cinquefoil was flowering peach. You noticed it from the elation with which they built an imposing tower of dead spruce in March and set fire to it to welcome spring; winter was tough here, lonely above all, and, as long as the embers glowed, those who had come through it drank gin to forget about it as soon as possible. That was why Gordon had opened the canteen of the cinema during the darkest months. It wasn't a lot. A bar, a fridge. And a basic record player with a maximum volume that people easily drowned out when singing along to the songs of Charles Aznavour, him above all. In the corridor to the pisser there was a plaster Jesus whose plausibility was enhanced by his missing fingers: that made Him someone from here, someone like Tosh, a man fathers used as an instructive example when initiating their sons into the workings of the chainsaw. And, together with a few tables and chairs and a train station clock, we have now covered the building's entire inventory. Wait, we've forgotten the most important thing of all, the table-football table.

The canteen was a clubhouse more than a bar: there were no fixed opening hours and no mercantile goals to explain Gordon's flouting of the laws regarding public drunkenness. But if there was one surety in the shadowy existence of this establishment, it was the fact that it was a meeting place where the locals gathered every Sunday morning to boast about the number of pheasants shot and to strew superlatives about harvests and excess stock.

One of the people who accepted drinks there was Robert, an elderly man who felt naked without his trilby and only doffed it at funerals. After pulling up a chair at his regular table he would always

put his box of cigars down in front of him. The cigars were cheap and nasty, inferior tobacco rolled in leaves that gave off more smoke than aroma. The box carried the portrait of a podgy king in nylon stockings, after whom the cigars had also been named, and it was for Robert alone that Rosetta Courthéoux stocked a supply of these unpalatable fumigators; no one else in the whole area who would consider taking as much as a puff of this brand no matter how severe the cigarette shortage. There was something masochistic about Robert putting the cigars down in front of him, especially since he had marked each cigar band with the exact lighting-up time. The phenomenon is familiar from avid smokers suffering from sudden pain in their upper back who prefer to limit consumption instead of quitting entirely, but their motives are undoubtedly different. It was not fear of modern diseases that compelled Robert to schedule his smoking, but stinginess. He rationed himself purely to avoid exceeding his allotted monthly expenditure. You could say that he had put himself on a diet, even if dieticians generally prefer to keep nicotine outside their area of expertise. And so Robert laid his cigars on the table, eavesdropped on conversations and kept a careful eye on the clock. Everyone in Oucwègne was aware of his stinginess, but people saw it as a disease and never called him to account. They included Robert in the rounds they bought, and when logic pointed him out as the next one to buy, no one committed a murder when he missed his turn or suddenly needed to go home.

Robert had reached an age at which it took him a good hour to come down the hill for his pints of beer and there was no question of his returning home unaided. Once he had made it to the canteen his problems were solved, as he knew that someone there would help him back up. It was willpower and stubbornness and thirst that drove him in the end to descend backwards, leaning on the asphalt with his hands, the way a toddler comes down a staircase, exactly like that, and it must have been a terrible realisation that each visit to the canteen could be his last. Because that day was approaching – his legs were already shaking like pendulums, shaking and creaking at the knees – and soon he wouldn't make it downhill. Not even like a toddler. It had always been a more or less inevitable event in his future, he could have prepared himself, but still. His time had run out and a Sunday came when Robert was no longer sitting in the canteen. He was the first person whose tragedy made Madame Verona and Monsieur Potier realise that they too could one day become prisoners of the hill and it surprised them how laconic the other regulars were about their concern.

The last cigar Robert lit, months after his final visit to the canteen, was the cigar from 2:10 P.M. His cigar bands had made it easy for Dr Lunette to be fairly exact in specifying the time of death. At least, the hour. For the date she gave herself a margin of error of plus or minus ten days.

IV.

Although his father had hung himself from a branch at a fairly young age, Monsieur Potier was touchingly ignorant when it came to trees. He couldn't tell a beech from an oak and could just manage to distinguish a spruce and a pine, at least until the Christmas tree industry got involved and started growing all kinds of intermediary varieties, in unrealistic colours as well. Of course, as a child, when autumn prompted the headmaster to set poetic projects, he had put together the occasional herbarium, drawing up separate sections for serrated and lobed leaves in his exercise book and noting the names of the trees under the corresponding leaves after first drying them for days all over the living room under piles of magazines and thick books. The colours of death had surprised and moved him as much as his years allowed, but his arboreal knowledge never outlasted the herbarium itself. Willows, he could recognise. They were often solitary and polled, lonely but stubborn, standing up to the wind for years. The willow was a tree with the determination of a peasant, a will that could only be broken by a lightning bolt. He recognised weeping willows the easiest of all, but that was because a teacher had once told him that this tree owed its name to the way its branches drooped, as if it were staring at the ground in sorrow while the others were grasping at the moon. The story annoyed him, because he had always thought of weeping willows as cheerful and graceful. Nothing like the pollard willow, his favourite – so different in fact that he found it bizarre that trees with such dissimilar characters could belong to the same family.

All this could give the impression that he actually did know something about trees, but he was still never able to tell us what kind of tree his father had hung himself from. That was probably for the best, because otherwise he might not have been able to avoid searching for nonexistent associations and meanings. For the sake of completeness, we should mention his knowledge of palm trees, which he mainly knew from movies and thought of as deformed pineapples.

All those years ago, when the notary unfolded the floor plan of their house and handed them the cadastral specifications, it turned out that they had also become the owners of a neighbouring wood. It hadn't been mentioned in any of the advertisements or documents and they had been happy to be able to live on its edge, but the wood was definitely included in the purchase price and now they were obliged to maintain it. Obligated? Privileged!

Four worthless and clearly reluctant roads connected the hill to the rest of world, and of these four Madame Verona had chosen to come down the most difficult on that February day. The forest road, whose gradient and impassability were such that on the weekends an array of idiots worked their way up it on mountain bikes, the kind of guys who are convinced that grinding the body into the ground was the rent death demanded for a long and limber life. When they finally reached the top they looked pale and immediately began guzzling fortifying soft drinks in disgusting colours, but the effort had undoubtedly given them the courage to sit down for another week at a desk where the pot plants summoned up memories of the nature documentaries that were the consolation of their atavism in the evenings. Nostalgia for the smell of sweat had driven others into the arms of a hiking club, they too parked their cars somewhere below in the village before embarking on the climb in footwear that was designed for long marches in the polar regions. The cameras they lugged up with them betrayed their heroic tendencies and it didn't occur to a hair on their heads that they were being shot from under rain hoods like caricatures of nineteenth-century explorers. The local hunters wisely ignored the existence of this road full of cobblestones that were about to let loose from the saturated soil. After all, their bodies were empires built up over decades, with bellies like basilicas dedicated to the enticement of ladies who knew the value of a red-blooded

man. Even if he alerted any game well in advance by his panting and raucous hawking up of phlegm that was full of the tannins of that last bottle of Pinot Noir.

Calendars had been ripped bare since the last time Madame Verona set foot on the forest road, a place that more than anywhere else linked her with her husband. Childhoods are seldom happy, but here Mr Potter was able to simply forget his quaggy past while rehabilitating diseased trees as firewood, with an axe at first but, after just a year, more realistically with a chainsaw. He had to slave to do it, because the wood was on a slope that was so slippery with mulch that he had to anchor himself to more reliable trunks with a hip belt. Afterwards he had to drag the trees he'd felled uphill, as a centaur made up of an Ardennes draught horse and a much too thin man, then saw them into smaller pieces to split and stack according to precise rules he had picked up from experienced natives. Fire was the primary fruit of these trees and warmth was the harvest. After three years' seasoning the wood gave them the smell that all gods undoubtedly use as perfume and a heat that makes anything produced by electric devices look like a joke. When the toppled giants were already rotten he left them where they were, fungi enveloped the roots and worms did what they had been put on earth to do: demolition. In open places he protected the saplings from the ravenous deer, which he compensated with hiding places made of the branches he'd trimmed away. But even when he wasn't working, Monsieur Potier enjoyed being here, seeing the halos force their way through the foliage, listening to the rustling wind, either alone or with Madame Verona. And when he sledded downhill with her, the winters told him that lovers were children, trying to reach back to seize the time they hadn't spent together. Wanting to have shared their whole lives, because love refused to settle for anything less.

When he found out about his disease, Monsieur Potier resolved to fight one last battle: to stack as much wood as possible, providing his wife with warmth that came from him until she was old. The trees wept resin at his rampant chainsaw. Everything that was diseased, uprooted, blown over or strangled by ivy was split and cut down to size and the garden filled with solid walls of firewood at an industrial tempo. It had seemed like an inexhaustible supply, but that morning in February Madame Verona had laid the last log on the fire. The last piece of firewood that he too had held in his splinter-pierced hands. There had been less and less to hold that he too had held, because if things don't decay, they break, and when she pushed that last log deeper into the fire with a poker, she decided to go down the hill. As a symbol, something meaningless put in the place of something else meaningless, but a thing of beauty.

Soon it will start to snow again and no sled will leave tracks in the whiteness. She looked into the wood a last time and saw how, without him, it had again arranged things just the way it liked them. For years the wars between mosses and barks had been fought openly again, the elms died standing and furious roots churned the earth. Set on revenge, determined to retake the planet, to re-establish its logic-defying chaos, the wood had grown wild. And it was beautiful. Man: they should never have let him crawl up out of the water. Perhaps it was a mercy from her own mind, that it let her think that final thought before dying herself.

v.

I would rather you didn't wait when my time comes.

You can tuck me in, briefly, but nothing more than that.

And if you smile sweetly while tucking me in,

just once I will forgive you your feigned happiness.

Don't sit by my bed to count the seconds

between my putrid breaths. Don't hold the hand

that's laid down like a glove and once

contained my hand and reached for yours.

Don't listen to the grisly pound and rattle

in my chest as cancer reconstructs my bones

and don't look into the broken eyes in my sockets

adjusting to the pitch black

of what will not be night.

Leave me behind in that room. Alone.

Because the two of us belong to life.

Please ignore this banality and go,

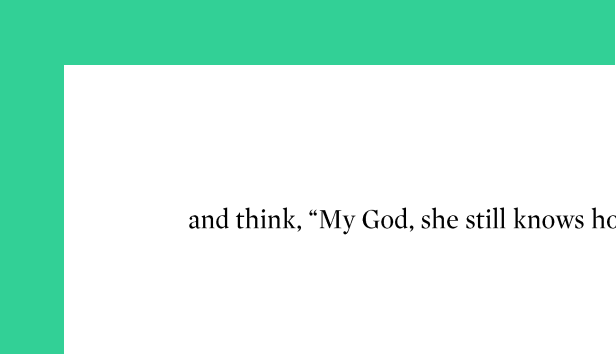
downstairs, into the garden.

Hang your dresses on the line and I will watch

through the window as they salute me in the wind.

Fry something, onions maybe, and brown them well

in butter, so I can smell them here, upstairs,



and think, “My God, she still knows how to cook!”

But if my legs still hold me,

and I hope they will,

I’ll hold tight to the banister

that I actually need to varnish

and say, “I’m already upstairs, sweetheart,

I’ll see you in a bit.”