Oslo! I repeated, as we turned into Upper Street. The way her head now rested on my shoulder told me she was dead.

You said it rhymed with First Snow, she said.

6

Le Pont d'Arc

Month of February. Slight frost at night. 21° C at midday. Cloudless sky above the village of Vogué on the east bank of the Ardèche. The sound of water flowing over, polishing, shifting stones. The river, full of swirls, fast-flowing, metallic-looking in the sunlight, is less than twenty metres wide. It tugs like a dog at the imagination, asking for you to come for a walk. A notoriously capricious river whose level can rise six metres in less than three hours. In it, I'm told, there are pike, but no *sandre*.

I watch the birds upstream as they dive across the silver surface. Earlier this morning I went to pray for Anne in the church under the limestone cliffs. She is the mother of my friend Simon and is dying in her house with a garden in Cambridge. If I could, I would have sent her the sound of the Ardèche with its unwavering yet imprecise promise.

The waters of the Ardèche have made many caves in the plateau of the Bas Vivarais and, from time immemorial, the caves have offered shelter to the intrepid.

On my way here I gave a lift to a man from Lyon who had 'no money but a lot of time on his hands'. I guess he had lost his job. He had been walking through the area since January, sleeping at night wherever he found a cave. Tomorrow, thirty kilometres downstream, I will visit the Chauvet cave which was rediscovered for the first time since the last ice age in 1994. And there I will be looking at the oldest known rock paintings in the world, 15,000 years older than the paintings of Lascaux or Altamira.

During a relatively warm period in the last ice age the climate here was between 3° C and 5° C colder than it is today. The trees were limited to birches, Scots pine and juniper. The fauna included many species who are now extinct: mammoths, megaceros deer, cave lions without manes, aurochs and bears who were three metres tall, as well as reindeer, ibex, bison, rhinoceros and wild horses. The human population of nomadic hunter-gatherers was sparse and lived in groups of about twenty to twenty-five. Paleontologists name this population Cro-Magnon, a term which distances, yet the distance between them and us may be less than we think. Neither agriculture nor metallurgy existed. Music and jewellery did. The average life expectancy was twenty-five.

The need for companionship while alive was the same.

The Cro-Magnon reply, however, to the first and perennial human question of: Where are we? was different from ours. The nomads were acutely aware of being a minority who were overwhelmingly outnumbered by animals. They had been born, not on to a planet, but *into* animal life. They were not animal keepers: animals were the keepers of the world and of the universe around them which never stopped. Beyond every horizon were more animals.

At the same time, they were distinct from animals. They could make fire and therefore had light in the darkness. They could kill at a distance. They fashioned many things with their hands. They made tents for themselves, held up by mammoth bones. They spoke. They could count. They could carry water. They died differently. Their exemption from animals was possible because they were a minority, and, as such, the animals could pardon them for this exemption.

At the beginning of the Ardèche gorges is the Pont d'Arc, a bridge whose almost symmetrical 34-metre-high arch has been carved out by the river itself. On the southern bank stands a tall outcrop of limestone whose weathered silhouette suggests a giant in a cloak striding towards the bridge in order to cross it. Behind him on the rock face are yellow and red stains – ochre and iron oxide – painted by the rain. If the giant were to cross the bridge, he would

almost immediately, given his size, find himself up against the opposite cliffs, near the top of which he would find the Chauvet cave.

Both bridge and giant were there at the time of the Cro-Magnons. The only difference being that 30,000 years ago, when the paintings were being painted, the Ardèche meandered up to the foot of the cliffs, and the natural path which I am climbing would regularly have been crossed by animals coming down, species by species, to drink from the river. The cave was strategically and magically placed.

The Cro-Magnons lived with fear and amazement in a culture of Arrival, facing many mysteries. Their culture lasted for some 20,000 years. We live in a culture of ceaseless Departure and Progress which has so far lasted two or three centuries. Today's culture, instead of facing mysteries, persistently tries to outflank them.

Silence. I turn off the helmet lamp. A darkness. In the darkness the silence becomes encyclopedic, condensing everything that has occurred in the interval between then and now.

On a rock in front of me, a cluster of red squarish dots. The freshness of the red is startling. As present and immediate as a smell, or as the colour of flowers on a June evening when the sun is going down. These dots

were made by applying red oxide pigment to the palm of a hand and then pressing it against the rock. One particular hand has been identified on account of a disjointed little finger, and another imprint of the same hand has been found elsewhere in the cave.

On another rock, similar dots, making an overall shape which is like the side view of a bison. The marks of the hands fill the animal's body.

Darkness.

Before the women, men and children arrived (there is a footprint of a child of about eleven in the cave) and after they left for good, the place was inhabited by bears. Probably also by wolves and other animals, but the bears were the masters with whom the nomads had to share the cave. On wall after wall, the scratches of bear paws. Footprints show where a bear walked with her cub, feeling her way in the dark. In the largest and most central of the cave's chambers, which is fifteen metres high, there are numerous wallows or depressions in the clay on the ground where bears lay asleep during their winter hibernation. One hundred and fifty bear skulls have been found here. One of them had been solemnly placed – probably by a Cro-Magnon – on a kind of rock plinth in the furthest reach of the cave.

Silence.

In the silence, the extent and size of the place begins to count for more and more. The cave is half a kilometre long and sometimes fifty metres wide. Geometrical measurements, however, do not apply because one is inside something like a body.

The standing and overhanging rocks, the enclosing walls, with their concretions, the passages, the hollow spaces which have developed through the geological process of diagenesis, resemble, to a remarkable degree, the organs and spaces within a human or animal body. What they all have in common is that they look like forms created by flowing water.

The colours of the cave too are anatomical. The carbonate rocks are bone- and tripe-coloured, the stalagmites scarlet and very white, the calcite draperies and concretions orange and snotty. Surfaces glisten as if wet with mucus.

A massive stalactite has grown (they grow at the rate of one centimetre per century) to look somewhat like a stomach's intestines, and, at one point in their descent, the tubes suggest the four legs, tail and trunk of a miniature mammoth. The reference could easily be missed and so a Cro-Magnon painter, with four brief lines in red, brought the tiny mammoth nearer.

Many walls that might have lent themselves to being painted on have not been touched. The 400-odd animals depicted here are distributed as unobtrusively as in nature. There are no pictorial displays as in Lascaux or Altamira. There is more emptiness, more secrecy,

perhaps greater complicity with the darkness. Yet, although these paintings are 15,000 years earlier, they are, mostly, as skilful, observant and graceful as any of the later paintings. Art, it would seem, is born like a foal who can walk straight away. The talent to make art accompanies the need for that art; they arrive together.

I crawl into a low cup-shaped annex – four metres in diameter – and there, drawn in red on its irregular curving sides, are three bears – male, female and cub, as in the fairy story to be told many millennia later. I squat there, watching. Three bears and behind them two small ibex. The artist conversed with the rock by the flickering light of his charcoal torch. A protruding bulge allowed the bear's forepaw to swing outwards with its awesome weight as it lolloped forward. A fissure followed precisely the line of an ibex's back. The artist knew these animals absolutely and intimately; his *hands* could visualise them in the dark. What the rock told him was that the animals – like everything else which existed – were inside the rock, and that he, with his red pigment on his finger, could persuade them to come to the rock's surface, to its membrane surface, to brush against it and stain it with their smells.

Today, due to the humidity of the atmosphere, many of the painted surfaces have become as sensitive as a membrane, and could easily be wiped off with a rag. Hence the reverence.

Step outside the cave and re-enter the wind rush of time passing. Re-assume names. Inside the cave everything is present and nameless. Inside the cave there is fear, but the fear is in perfect balance with a sense of protection.

The Cro-Magnons did not live in the cave. They entered it to participate in certain rites, about which little is known. The suggestion that they were, in some way, shamanistic seems convincing. The number of people in the cave at any given time may never have exceeded thirty.

How frequently did they come? Did generations of artists work here? No answers. Perhaps we have to be content with intuiting that they came here to experience, and to carry away with them in memory, special moments of living a perfect balance between danger and survival, fear and a sense of protection? Can one hope for more at any time?

Most of the animals depicted in Chauvet were in life ferocious, yet nowhere in their depiction is there a trace of fear. Respect, yes, a fraternal, intimate respect. And this is why in every animal image here there is a human

presence. A presence revealed by pleasure. Each creature here is at home in man – a strange formulation, yet incontestable.

In the furthest chamber – two lions drawn with charcoal in black. Approximately life size. They stand side by side in profile, the male behind, and the female, touching the length of him and parallel to him, nearer to me.

They are here as a single, incomplete (their forelegs and back paws are missing and, I suspect, were never drawn) yet total presence. The rock face around them, which is naturally lion-coloured, has become lion.

I try to draw the two of them. The lioness is both beside the lion, rubbing herself against him, and inside him. And this ambivalence is the result of the most cunning elision, whereby the two animals share a contour. The low contour of loin, belly and chest belongs to them both – and they share it with an animal grace.

For the rest, their contours are separate. The lines of their tails, backs, necks, foreheads, muzzles are independent, approaching one another, parting, converging and ending at different points, for the lion is much longer than the lioness.

Two standing animals, male and female, joined below by the single line of their bellies, where they are most vulnerable and have less fur.

I'm drawing on absorbent Japanese paper which I chose because I thought the difficulty of drawing with black ink on such paper might take me a little closer to the difficulties of drawing with charcoal (which was burnt and made here in the cave) on rough rock surfaces. In both cases the line is never quite obedient. One has to nudge, cajole.

Two reindeer are stepping in opposite directions – east and west. They do not share a contour, instead they are drawn over each other, so that the upper one's forelegs cross like large ribs the flank of the lower one. And they are inseparable, their two bodies are locked into the same hexagon, the little tail of the upper one rhyming with the antlers of lower one, the long head, with a profile like a flint burin, of the upper one whistling to the metatarsus of the other's hind leg. They are making a single sign, and they are dancing in a circle.

When the drawing was almost complete, the artist abandoned charcoal and painted and rubbed in with his finger a thick black (the colour of your hair after swimming) along the lower one's belly and dewlap. Then he did the same thing with the upper animal, mixing the paint with the whitish sediment on the rock so that it was less violent.

As I draw, I ask myself whether my hand, obeying the

visible rhythm of the reindeer's dance, may not be dancing with the hand that first drew them?

It is still possible here to come upon a crumb of broken charcoal which fell to the floor when a line was being drawn.

What makes Chauvet unique is the fact that it was sealed off. The roof of the original entrance chamber – which was spacious and penetrated by daylight – collapsed some 20,000 years ago. And from then until 1994 the darkness which the artists had addressed, because it was at the far edge of their reach, entered from *behind* to bury and preserve everything they had made.

The stalagmites and stalactites continued to grow. In places films of calcite covered, like cataracts, some details. For the most part, however, the extraordinary freshness of what was traced remains. And this immediacy sabotages any linear sense of time.

I come upon a small overhanging rock which is shaped like the tip of a pancreas and on it are two red paintings, probably of butterflies.

Anne, who is dying in Cambridge, comes to my mind. Her husband, Simon's father, was a professor of

archeology. A long while ago she used to camp, summer after summer, beside Palaeolithic sites.

So, if the dates are right, the paintings you're looking at are from the same time as the sculpted woman of Willendorf?

Yes.

Sculpted from reddish limestone if my memory isn't playing me tricks.

It isn't playing tricks.

The morphine makes you fuzzy. Have they found many flint axes?

I'm not sure. Maybe a dozen.

Making a flint axe symmetrical was already the beginning of art.

I'm trying to say that.

I want Anne at this moment, this very moment, to see from her bed the red butterfly.

Several herds heading west. Among them, near animals, drawn very small, touch gigantic faraway animals.

In the dry season a well-laid fire, once lit, can catch so quickly that those watching it can feel the air being swept away.

Cro-Magnon painting did not respect borders. It flows where it has to, deposits, overlaps, submerges images already there, and it continually changes the scale of what it carries. What kind of imaginative space did the Cro-Magnons live in?

For nomads the notion of past and future is subservient to the experience of *elsewhere*. Something that has gone, or is awaited, is hidden elsewhere in another place.

For both hunters and hunted hiding well is the precondition for survival. Life depends upon finding cover. Everything hides. What has vanished has gone into hiding. An absence – as after the departure of the dead – is felt as a loss but not as an abandonment. The dead are hiding elsewhere.

A male ibex, with curved horns as long as its body, has been drawn with charcoal on whitish rock. How to describe the blackness of its traces? It is a blackness which makes the darkness reassuring, a blackness which is a lining for the immemorial. He is walking up a gentle incline, his steps delicate, his body rounded, his face flat. Each line is as tense as a well thrown rope, and the drawing has a double energy which is perfectly shared: the energy of the animal who has become present, and that of the man whose arm and eye are drawing the animal by torch light.

These rock paintings were made where they were, so that they might exist in the dark. They were *for* the dark.

They were hidden in the dark so that what they embodied would outlast everything visible, and promise, perhaps, survival.

What they painted is like a map, Anne says.
Of what?
The company in the dark.
Who are where?
Here, come from elsewhere . . .

7

Madrid

I am waiting for my friend Juan who will, I think, be late. His statues are never late; they are always already there, enigmatically waiting at the rendezvous. Juan works like a mechanic in a small garage, lying on his back as if underneath a car; he looks at his watch only when he crawls out and gets to his feet. We have agreed to meet in the lounge of the Ritz Hotel, Madrid.

There are tall palms and, leading off this lounge, a bar named after Velásquez. (I doubt whether he drank much.) The walls, the columns, the conservatory ceiling, are painted a whitish-yellow, not what the paint manufacturers call *ivory*, but the true colour of elephant's tusks – much closer to the colour of old teeth. The ceiling of the lounge is as high as three elephants standing on each other's backs.

As soon as one comes off the street and the double glass doors swing shut, one is aware here of the deafness of money, which, like the depth of an ocean, is perceived not as an empty silence, but as a seclusion.

The wide, carpeted staircase and, upstairs, the suites