

FICTION

STORIES

BY ANNIE ERNAUX

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Photograph by Jet Swan for The New Yorker

The return to school after Easter break fell at the end of April that year. The classrooms were already overheated by the sun, and at half past eleven we sang “*Regina coeli laetare alleluia*” at the top of our lungs, eager to race down the stairs into the fresh air. We could put on our summer dresses and play dodgeball or hopscotch again. Soon it would be the Month of Mary, and we’d recite the decade of the rosary outside, in the leafy grotto, in front of the statue of the Virgin. A small celebration before going upstairs to work.

The start of the term after Easter was often the time that families chose to introduce their little girls to school by sending them to Mademoiselle Goudié’s afternoon kindergarten class. Mothers who worked, or had too many children underfoot to accompany their daughters themselves, would ask an older girl from the neighborhood to do them the favor. Sometimes they asked several girls, but it was better to have just one. Girls laugh and roughhouse when they’re together, and accidents can happen so quickly.

Marie-Paule, the eldest of four children, was five years old. When her mother brought her to me in the kitchen around one o’clock, in spite of the fine weather the girl was wearing a brown raglan coat that reminded me of the one I had worn for several years, bought in a very large size so that it would last. Marie-Paule had straight blond hair, cut in a bob with a clip on one side, and was clutching a miniature schoolbag. I took her by the hand, and we set off for school under the approving gaze of the parents. My father seemed proud that I, too, had become a responsible little girl; when I had first started out, an older student, a mechanic’s daughter, had taken me to school. The top of my head had been level with the bulging briefcase the girl had tucked under her arm. At the end of the day, she would return in the company of another girl her age and they’d talk together in hushed tones,

laughing. The ordeal continued until the last day of school, when prizes were handed out. By the following year, the mechanic had sold his business, so my parents took turns walking me to school.

I was only in fifth grade. Marie-Paule should not have been afraid of me. She stared straight ahead as she walked. Looking down, I saw the part in her hair, darkened by cradle cap. I asked her a lot of questions. All she did was nod or shake her head, yes or no, and continue to stare straight ahead, stiff and tense. “Cat got your tongue?” At school, I quickly handed her over to Mademoiselle Goudié and ran off to play dodgeball.

When I went to pick her up at the end of the day, she was waiting on the bench in the courtyard with the other little girls, her hand on her schoolbag, which was propped upright on her knees. She rushed toward me, holding out her free hand trustingly. I asked her what she had done in class, but she didn’t seem to remember. Drawings. Her mother wanted to know whether she’d listened to me properly. I had no complaints.

She’d arrive during the radio-news hour, just after lunch, with her buttoned-up coat and her schoolbag. My mother would give her an apple, some wafers, or whatever was left over from dessert. She’d say thank you, adding “Madame” with conviction. “She has such nice manners!” my mother said in wonder, because Marie-Paule’s family were not the kind to fuss about such things, and always spent beyond their means, exactly the opposite of us.

On the way, we took Rue de la République, so that I could walk with a friend from my class for the last hundred metres, and Rue Roger-Salengro on the way back. The Month of Mary had begun. The Mother Superior’s reedy voice calmly recited, “Hail, Mary, full of grace,” and the pupils replied, in unison, “Holy Mary, Mother of God.” Sometimes there was laughter from girls who were pinching or tickling each other. The kindergarten class was not entitled to this distraction. At half past one, I left Marie-Paule in the

schoolyard and didn't think of her again until the end of the day.

Rue Roger-Salengro was quiet, almost deserted, lined by warehouse walls and the blind backs of houses whose façades looked onto the parallel street, Rue de la République. There was only a café that had just been shut down because of an "ugly sex scandal," and a dentist's office. Marie-Paule expressed her delight at going home by proceeding at a brisk, purposeful trot. She hardly ever spoke, not even when I teased her a little. She was not entertaining company, and she prevented me from daydreaming, which I was accustomed to doing while walking home from school.

I don't know how or on what day it all started, but I remember the place: in front of the café, whose windows were smeared with a white substance that made it impossible to see inside. I may have used a different voice as I began, the way the teacher did. But, unlike the teacher, I did not warn her that I was going to be telling stories. It was interesting only if Marie-Paule believed everything I said. The abandoned café inspired me to imagine a young girl dying of hunger inside it, locked in by bandits and crying interminably. This was the first time I'd ever spoken my daydreams aloud, and it excited me. Marie-Paule immediately followed along, as if this were all she'd been waiting for. She even asked a few too many questions: why this, why that, on and on.

What I liked most was that I could convince her of anything. All I had to do was show her things in the street, or people we passed along the way, and then start inventing. This method came naturally. I was having a lot of fun, and our walks home were lively. One night, my father told me he had seen us. "You looked like a little schoolteacher!"

After a while, I grew tired of always having the same characters, and I noted that, once again, Marie-Paule was wearing the expression of a stubborn kid who thought only of getting home to her mama. She had a sort of defeated look, even when she laughed. I could never get her to take her coat off—she

would only unbutton it—because, she said, that was how her mother had dressed her to leave the house. It was a hot spring. One day, I invented a woman with black hair and very long nails who lay in wait for us just beyond the café, a child thief. She took children by the hand and led them far away to a distant place, and the parents would never see their daughters again. Marie-Paule was silent. Then I felt her slowing down. Her face turned purple. She started to scream. It was a loud, powerful, endless scream, the likes of which I never would have imagined coming out of such a slip of a girl. She pulled on my arm with all her might, and I had to let her go. She started rolling on the ground on top of her schoolbag. I struggled to pull her up; she twisted away from me to fall back down. I saw at that moment that she had wet her pants. I took her handkerchief from her pocket, wiped her face, had her blow her nose, and kissed her. By the time we arrived at her house, there was no sign of what had happened.

Had I taken Rue de la République home the next day, instead of Rue Salengro, the story would have ended there. But changing our route was out of the question. We walked quietly, each with her own schoolbag, as if the day before had been no different from any other. And yet we could think of nothing but the moment when I would conjure up the black-haired woman, the child thief on the lookout for us behind the white windows of the café. All it took was one sentence from me for the tears to flow, as on the previous day, and the foot stamping to begin.

So it continued on all the other school days. On the way there, we went up Rue de la République, and we couldn't do anything because of the friend I was meeting. Anyway, we were set in our routines. We had to save it for after school, when we could take our time. I never thought about it during the day. I played dodgeball and listened attentively to the lessons in grammar and math. When the bell rang, I hurried to the grotto to get a good spot along the wall of greenery that flared out toward the sky. It was as if we were in a cradle watching the clouds, while the prayer rumbled on. At half past four, I helped Marie-Paule jump down from the bench and we set off hand in hand,

me like an innocent and her like an amnesiac. With her straight hair and her brown coat, she looked like St. Bernadette.

Of course, the child thief was not alone for long. The cruel bear Croconok and the man with the butcher's knife also appeared at the corner of Rue Salengro. To avoid falling into their trap, I suggested to Marie-Paule that she keep her head down, walk on tiptoe, and, most important, not cry. That was the signal for the crying and screaming to begin. She collapsed on the ground and refused to go any farther. I wiped her eyes, kissed her, and then we could calmly move on.

I was not afraid that she would complain to her mother. I felt that it was a secret between her and me. What could she have said? I didn't hit her or pinch her, and watched over her carefully when we crossed the street. She was crying about threats from people who did not exist; as parents say, she was crying for no reason. I believed that, when it came to words, everything was allowed. Sometimes a woman passing by would grow suspicious, convinced that the girl who was sobbing so hard was my younger sister. Marie-Paule would scream even louder, and the woman would walk away, shrugging her shoulders. The only problem was the wet underwear.

One day, Marie-Paule did not appear at news time. Throughout the rosary recital in the grotto, I was plagued with worry. When I got home, my mother told me that Marie-Paule would not be going back to school until October; she was too young and the kindergarten class wasn't right for her. She would be sent to the public school nearby.

May was drawing to a close. I was about to leave for a First Communion retreat. One dusty evening, I walked home alone down Rue Roger-Salengro, dreaming about the days we'd spend in church with boys who would stare and push and jostle us. The café windows had been cleaned, revealing the empty interior. I walked slowly, in a daze. Marie-Paule would never hold my hand again. I had lost her. I wept in despair.

I can still see the grotto at the edge of the garden, Rue Salengro, endless and gray, and two young girls walking, a little one and a big one, because, in my memory, I'm a character to myself. I have related this episode from the year I was ten in order to try to understand why I wanted to write, but in the end it's just another story. ♦

—1984

(Translated, from the French, by Alison L. Strayer.)

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