

While Waiting

En attendant

by Marcel Aymé

translated by C. P. Boyko

During the war of 1939–1972, outside a grocer’s on Rue Caulaincourt in Montmartre, there stood a queue of fourteen people who, taking a liking to one another, decided never to part.

“Me,” said an old man, “I have hardly any desire to go back. No fire, only two hundred grams of bread a day, nothing much to go with it, and no one to eat it with. My wife died a month ago. Not so much because of the shortages, but—you won’t believe me when I tell you—because of a fur. If not for the war, which, as she used to say, is no fault of ours, she’d be alive today. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not complaining, but I’ve worked all my life, and what do I have to show for my efforts now? Nothing but aches and exhaustion. For forty years I sold soft furnishings. You might not think so, but it’s a tough job: on your feet all day, always there for the customer, always ready with a smile or an answer to a question. And your supervisor breathing down your neck, watching your every move, and when he gives you a dressing-down, even for no good reason, you’ve got no choice but to hang your head and take it. Either that or hit the street. And you’re earning just enough to scrape by. The salary barely covers your rent, and the commission’s no fortune, either. In 1913, to give you some idea, I was making all in all a hundred and eighty a month. That’s with three girls to raise, mind you, and my wife therefore unable to bring in any extra money. Nor did she have it easy at home: two of the girls not strong, one or the other always ill, and the constant stress of making do with not enough. Then on top of everything comes 1914. Five years as a private, behind the lines to be sure, but five years, or nearly, making nothing. When I returned in 1919, my job had been taken. Finally I found a place at Bourakim and Balandra. In those

years, business was brisk. I made good commission, and the girls started working, too. My wife thought things would only keep getting better. But I was already forty-eight, and I saw a time coming when we'd be glad to've put something by. When she urged me to spend, I urged her to save. My wife was still pretty, no longer young, to be sure, but still pretty, and she'd never had the time or money to be stylish. But that wasn't exactly what she was after now. The truth is that she had certain regrets, or let's call them certain ideas ... In any case, she got it into her head to buy a silver fox fur stole. She told me this without really seeming to mean it. You know, the way you sometimes say, If I was rich, I'd buy myself such-and-such. Deep down, of course, she knew it was ridiculous. The proof is that one day I said to her, 'Your silver fox, you know, we could after all afford it,' and she was the one who said no. Even so, the desire was still there. Well, eight or ten years went by, troubles, concerns: my youngest in a sanatorium, my eldest's husband drinking too much. And my wife, when she mentioned her silver fox, would laugh, but it was an unhappy laugh, and, I can tell you, it gave me pain. One night, coming out of Bourakim, I met my old boss, who asked me if I wouldn't like to come back as a supervisor. Me, a supervisor! I thought I was dreaming. But I was also worried. This was 1934, I was almost sixty-three. At that age, you no longer have that cruelty, that streak of malice you need when you're in charge. But I wasn't about to let the opportunity pass me by. Not only was it a good position, but it would allow me to feel, to tell myself, that I'd made it, that I'd come up in the world. My wife was happy too. You know how women can be. They're at a shop, they say to a friend, 'Oh, I can get you a good deal, my husband is a supervisor at Nadar.' To tell the truth, we were both a bit intoxicated by the idea. Well, one fine evening, I came home with a parcel in my hand—it was the silver fox. A beautiful creature, it was, and I'd selected it carefully. As a salesman, you make connections. I knew a fellow whose cousin was a furrier on the Boulevard de Strasbourg. The fox cost me two thousand, but that was a steal. When I unwrapped it, my wife started crying. I've never seen anyone so happy. She couldn't believe it. She didn't, however, wear it often, her fox, only four or five, maybe six times, at a wedding, a baptism, or dining in the

city with stuffy acquaintances. Sometimes, when we went out on a Sunday, I'd say, 'Marie, my dear, why not put on your fox?' But no, she was too afraid of wearing it out. She kept it in a sturdy box, wrapped in tissue paper and mothballs. Once a week, on Thursday, she took it out to air it at the window, but also a little to show it off to the neighbors, to let them know she had a silver fox. And believe it or not, she got more pleasure that way than if she'd worn it all the time. She was happy, and so was I. But then, in 1937, I, who'd been so strong, all of a sudden wasn't doing so well; old age hit me like a brick. My head was heavy, I was always sleeping, my legs were swollen—I was ruined for work. It was time to hang up the yoke and think about living on the interest from our savings. We had sixty-five thousand francs with which to buy an annuity. But the income wasn't stupendous, I can tell you that. Nevertheless, you learn to live frugally; you take care, that's all. Then came the war, the Germans, the exodus. I got to thinking. I imagined living through five years of war on one side of the Loire, my girls and sons-in-law on the other, and us dying without ever seeing them again. So we picked up and left, me with some clothes in a suitcase, my wife with her fox in a box—and a month later, the return. Things were all right—while the weather was good; but then ... With food scarce and everything expensive, the future looked bleak. Besides which, we needed to help our daughters, since two of them had husbands in prison, and the other was pregnant. But we couldn't anymore. Prices went up and up, but our annuity didn't change. And after that terrible winter, I of course fell ill. The doctor told me, 'You've got to eat better.' All right, but how? 'Don't worry,' my wife said, 'we'll get out of this.' I did feel better in the spring, but then her health started to decline. First she suffered from black moods and weakness in the legs, then problems with her heart and her stomach, and, well, things went from bad to worse. In the end, she had to take to bed. One Thursday morning, before going shopping—it was the end of summer, the air was full of sunshine—I said to her, 'Marie, would you like me to air your fox out at the window?' She turned her poor, frail head on the pillow toward me, her eyes shining like I've never seen, her chin trembling. 'My fox,' she said, 'I sold it.' She got eight hundred francs. —A month ago, when she died, I thought of

buying one, so that she could be buried with it, so that she wouldn't miss it. 'If it's not too expensive,' I thought, 'I can borrow the money.' I asked around. A silver fox fur stole, second-hand, was going for fifteen thousand."

"Me," said a child, "I'm hungry. I'm always hungry."

"Me," said a woman, "I'm better off not going back. My husband's in a work camp in Silesia. He's twenty-eight, I'm twenty-five; the war'll never be over. The days pass, months, years; my life goes on without him—and without even a gap. I keep his photo in my bag, in my bedroom, on the mantel, but it's no use, I'm left to do my own thinking and deciding now. On Sunday, I used to go with him to rugby, to football, to the bicycle races. I'd cheer and shout, 'Come on, let's go!' or, 'Get out of the way!' I'd read *Modern Automotive* every day, and I'd say to him things like, 'You know, the new Magnum is really a work of art.' Now on Sunday I go to the movies or I stay home. When he comes back, I'll never be able to convince myself that I'm interested in sports. I don't suppose I'll even try. I hardly see the people he likes anymore. Before the war, we'd often visit the Bourillots, and they'd visit us. He's an old school friend of my husband's. He has slept with an actress, he knows a senator, he once spent fifteen days in New York. He treated my husband like a nobody, called him 'Dimbulb' and 'Chump'; he'd pinch my thighs in front of him, making his wife laugh. When we returned home, my husband would say, 'Aren't the Bourillots a riot?' And I'd agree, not just to please him, but from the heart! Now, I find even the sound of Bourillot's voice unbearable. The same is true of my in-laws; they're made of cardboard; I space out my visits. As for the little details of life ... I read in bed, go out hatless, get up late, leave my hair down, go to the theater, arrive late to appointments, and in short do all sorts of prohibited things that can't be prohibited anymore. How far I'll have strayed, almost without leaving the apartment! The worst is the pleasure I get from managing myself, from listening to no one but myself. At first I consulted him; I'd wonder, 'What would he say if he were here?' Now less and less. But I tell myself, after all, isn't that the way things go? What's terrible, too, is that I'm never bored. It pains me to think of him over there, I'd do anything to see him return, but the fact remains: I'm never bored for a minute. I have a life of my own, a life

I've built to my own specifications, a life that can never be confused with another's. When he comes back, no doubt, I'll act as if nothing has changed. I'll go with him to rugby, I'll see his parents and the Bourillots, I'll try not to read in bed. But I'll certainly hold it against him, and, despite myself, I'll be thinking all the time of another way, a more genuine way of living. I'm no longer the woman he left; it's as if I've got myself back. What can I do? A couple is not a chemical compound. When the elements are separated, it's not enough to bring them back into proximity to remake what has been unmade. The people who declare war should remember that. Of course the biggest danger is that I'm in earnest—and, knock on wood, I'll stay that way. I will have nothing to forgive myself; I'll be clear-headed. I know a woman, the wife of a prisoner, who took a lover right away. And so she hasn't lost the taste for shaping herself to fit a man; and when her husband returns, they'll pick right up where they left off. I know there are women who marry late, at thirty or older, their lives already formed. But they only have to adapt themselves as best they can. They don't have to hide the fact that rugby bores them silly. Their honesty doesn't seem like a betrayal. No one asks them to say or do things they don't believe in. It's said that love can perform miracles. That's just what frightens me. Because if in the end I start liking bicycle racing and the Bourillots again, I don't know what's left to hope for. I'm so happy being the way I am now. I suppose I should write all this I've been telling you to Maurice—his name's Maurice. But I don't dare to. I know he's awaiting the day he can resume his old life. In his most recent letter, he wrote, 'Do you remember our last Sunday at Velocidrome?' You can imagine what a blow it'd be to him if I told him the truth. But in my life as a single woman, I've got accustomed to hiding nothing. I'm sure that the first time he picks a fight with me, or I pick a fight with him, I'll tell him everything! I'm scared to think of it. I'll have to relearn, while there's still time, how to lie. In short, I'll need friends."

"Me," said an old woman, "I don't believe in God anymore. Last night, I got my hands on two eggs, real eggs. On my way home, I stumbled over a curb and dropped them both. I don't believe in God anymore."

"Me," said the mother of a family, "I'm always a little scared to go

back. I have four waiting for me at home. The eldest is twelve. The fifth died in '41, after the Turnip Winter; tuberculosis carried him off. He'd've needed meat every day and proper, nourishing food. Where was I to get it? My husband a railworker and me doing cleaning jobs when I can find the time—as you can imagine, we can't afford the black market. He basically died of hunger. And the others've taken a bad turn, too. They're thin and pale, the poor things; they've all got runny noses or sore throats; they've hardly got the energy to play. When I come back from shopping, they all four of them crowd round to see what I've got in my basket. 'Look here,' I scold them, 'get out of my hair!' So they back off, without a word. But sometimes I just can't, I don't have the strength. Yesterday my basket was empty, which is to say no food had come in. To see the four of them come creeping up for a peek, it just broke my heart; I burst into tears. On top of everything, there's the cold, and last week, with the gas out for days, there was nothing hot to put in their bellies at all. Their skin's grey and their eyes're dull with cold, and they look at us as if to say, 'What'd we do?' And the chilblains and the cracked skin!—you should see their feet. It isn't easy, even with a voucher, to find boots at a price we can afford. To tell you the truth, at the moment I've got just three pairs to share between the four of them. It only works out because there's always at least one of them sick in bed. I go to city hall to ask for extra vouchers. I know I shouldn't bother, I know what-all good it'll do, but when I see my kids coughing, skinny as rakes, and with nothing to eat, it's more than I can bear: I go and I ask. And, as you can guess, at city hall they send me packing, and not kindly, let me tell you. I'm not well-dressed enough, you see. It's the same everywhere I go. The bureaucrat at his wicket's just a watchdog for the rich and powerful. When he sees the poor, he growls and bares his teeth. Why'd I insist anyway on bringing children into the world? Whatever happens, it's my own fault; if they all four of them starve, who'll even care? Not the government, you can be sure, nor city hall. And the rich care even less. While my little ones die of hunger, those pigs stuff themselves to bursting with eggs at twenty francs apiece, meat and butter with every meal, chickens and hams and pot roasts galore. Nor are they lacking, rest assured, for clothes and

shoes and hats. Oh yes, the rich are eating even more than they did before the war; they force themselves to, lest some of it, God forbid, go to the needy. I'm not making things up. Yesterday at the grocer's I heard two women, all tricked out in furs and jewels, and each carrying a Pekingese, I heard them say that people, for fear of shortages, are eating double what they used to. 'That's how it is at our place,' they said. Don't get me started on the rich. They're all murderers—baby-killers the lot of them. Well, enjoy it while you can, I say; the war can't last forever. When the Germans leave, there'll be a reckoning. Anyone with chubby cheeks and their belly hanging over their belt had better look out. For every one of my kids that they've murdered, I'll take out ten of them. I'll stomp their ruddy faces in, and you can bet I'll take my time; I want them to suffer. They come to us, the pigs, with their guts full and talk of honor and loyalty and all the rest of it! Me, I'll talk about honor again when my children are fed. I say to my husband sometimes, 'Victor,' I tell him, 'show a little initiative up at your station; there're workers who take a package or two off the prisoners; can't you do as much?' When there isn't enough for everyone, when the rich laugh at the laws they've made, it's no time for dithering: it's everybody for themselves, whatever it takes. But no: he's the head of a family and an honest man. He's got honor stuck in his teeth like caramel. And tough luck for us."

"Me," said a girl of twelve, "if you knew what I've been through! When I come home in the evening, down the stairs of Rue Patureau, there's a man there, a big, unshaven, shifty-looking man who watches me with his eyes—I can't describe how. My mother says all men are swine. But this one really scares me. Well, last night, he hid himself in a corner. When I passed by, he jumped on me. He had me sprawled out flat on the paving stones. —And he stole my shoelaces."

"Me," said an old spinster, "I'm tired. Life hardly seems made for me anymore. I'm a seamstress on Rue Hermel, but, as I'm sure I needn't tell you, I'm not doing much sewing these days. It was hard even before the war. I made dresses, coats, suits, and blouses. I had, at one time, as many as five employees. My clientele was bourgeois—this was a long time ago now. Then along came the competition. Big stores, some specializing in suits, some in

dresses, and most of it mass-produced. The garments they turned out, though less durable, were otherwise, I must confess, almost as good as mine, and less expensive, of course. Soon I was doing little more than mending and alterations, and was down to one employee, and she poorly paid, but what could I do? And now I can't get fabric. You'll say, 'What about the black market?' But I'm out of the swim, and I haven't got the capital. When you're old, to get into the black market, you either have to know somebody, or be rich, or a bureaucrat. Before the war, I used to get some bespoke work. That's all done with, or nearly. Now, the women who're able to buy their own fabric at fifteen francs a meter want expensive designs too. They have no confidence in anything costing less than a couple of thousand francs, but if I ask more than three hundred, they laugh in my face. I'm just the old seamstress, now. That's what they call me, when they talk about me: the old seamstress on Rue Hermel who'll do little jobs for next to nothing. Yes, the old seamstress. And even ten years ago, I was dressing shopowners and the wives of commissioners and lawyers. And if I told you that Madame Bourquenoir, the wife of the municipal councillor, used to get her dresses made by me ...! When I think what I've come to: taking in outfits for the neighborhood poor, making schoolboys' breeches out of old coats, hemming, patching, darning. When you've once been a real designer, well, it's hard. If I at least had enough of such work! But no, not even close. If it weren't for the fact that everyone's losing weight, I'd be out of a job altogether. I'm sixty-five years old, I've never been pretty, and if I was ever worth anything it was because I once had a trade, a real one: 'Mademoiselle Duchat, dresses, coats, and suits.' Before the war, the shopkeepers knew me. Despite how little I bought, they always had a smile and a kind word for me: 'Good morning, Mademoiselle Duchat.' Nowadays they only put names to money. The poor aren't recognized anymore. The war will be over one day, perhaps, but me, I'll remain invisible. Women will get their husbands back, men their careers, but no one will come back to my shop. Me, I'm not waiting for anything anymore."

"Me," said a boy, "I hope the world comes to an end, and soon. I've just lost all our bread tickets. My mother doesn't know yet."

“Me,” said a woman of ill repute, “I’m fed up. I am what you think, but it’s not how you think. A lot of people figure my profession’s the best way to put on a little weight. I mean, sure, there’s women who can make a killing in a single afternoon, but that’s not my style. I take what comes my way. My customers are average guys who’ve gotta scrimp and save for some fun. Back in the day, I’d earn my hundred francs a month, give or take. With a bit of thriftiness, me and my chap could make ends meet, and sometimes even sock a little away. Fernando, his idea was to someday buy ourselves a snack bar on the Marne. Keep in mind that before the war, such a thing wasn’t so impossible. And even the war wouldn’t have been so bad, if only the country’d been ready. But the French—what can I say?—the French are hedonists. Well, mistakes were made. And along came the blackout. Still, during the Phony War, we didn’t suffer too much—on the contrary. Men weren’t scarce yet, and they still liked to chase a little skirt. And even after, when the Germans came rolling in, we had a good time. They sent all their servicemen to see Paris. But now they’ve thinned out. Yeah, the era of the tourist is over. And you’ve hardly got time to work nowadays, with it dark out at six already. So you’ve gotta work the cafés. The grub’s not cheap, there’s a lot of women, naturally, and for the customer, well, the atmosphere’s not the same as it is in the street. Which doesn’t help me any, either. Because there’s women who can grab your attention with the depraved look in their eye—or with their bazooms—but me, what I’ve got, and I don’t know if you’ve noticed, is legs that go all the way up to my belt. But what can I do? I can’t sit on the table. There’s women who speak German, too, which gives them an advantage with the soldiers. Fernando, he wanted me to learn, he even sent me to a school in the mornings. But I couldn’t get the hang of it, and let it drop. The fact of the matter is, even with slang I have a hard time, always have. It’s a question of upbringing, too. We never talked slang at my house. My folks wouldn’t allow it. For them, it was always work, work, work. And a lunch break instead of an evening out. Well, they weren’t altogether wrong. Today, even my evenings out are a job of work! We charge a bit more, of course, but with the prices of everything going up, it’s no help. And to feed and shelter a man, let me tell you, it adds up. On top of that,

I'm always needing skivvies and silk stockings; and Fernando needs dressing up, too. He's very dapper; you ought to see him. If only he knew how to occupy himself! I know women whose men keep themselves busy playing the black market. But him, you know, he's too scared, and no good at that sort of thing anyway. When I'm having a bad day, I hold it against him, and sometimes I give him a good kicking-over with my boots; but I'm always sorry after. I tell myself it's just his puny nature, and what can he do about it, the poor bastard? Maybe you know him. It's possible. A skinny little thing in a beige overcoat, one shoulder higher than the other, a stupid, sickle-moon grin on his face? In my line of work, it was fashionable before the war to pair up with a runt, a hunchback, an idiot. Maybe you remember the old song: *I'll take for my pimp the scrawniest wimp*. Well, with attitudes like that, no wonder we lost the war. Because in the end, you know, it all comes down to morale. In any case, at least I've got my little twerp to myself. I can sleep soundly. Nobody's gonna send the likes of him to Germany."

"Me," said an old lady, "I haven't had any soft food to give my cat for more than fifteen days. His name's Kiki."

"Me," said a man, "I'm about at the goddamn end of my goddamn tether, for God's sake. The piddly dribble of wine we're allotted is a goddamn joke! I can't take it anymore. I used to drink six liters a day, not to mention an aperitif before meals and a glass of liqueur brandy with the camembert. And I was as fit as a fiddle: never sick a day in my life and always able and willing to work. Now look at me! I'm fifty-four and good for nothing. I lost my job as a plumber. I tremble all over—just look how my hands shake! And my legs are like lead and my head is a block of wood. How do you explain that? As fit as a fiddle, I tell you. A goddamn fiddle! But now there's no wine. What do you expect? Spare the wine, and spoil the man. God, I feel like my guts are on fire. I can't take it anymore! A liter of wine a week. I ask you! One lousy liter. The criminals. The skunks. My wife gets a liter, too, of course, but you'd better believe she keeps it all to herself; you can bet she doesn't leave me a goddamn drop. The morning of the day before yesterday, we got our allotment. That evening, my wife still had a glassful left at the bottom of her bottle. I couldn't take it anymore; I had to

have it—despite myself, so to speak. Well, we were both out of our minds; she smashed a plate on my head ... As a fiddle. Ah, God, if they only knew the evil they do with their measly allotment. My kid, who's going on thirteen, he doesn't get any at all. But he needs it, too, you know. We've taken good care of him; he's never been deprived. Since he was three years old, he's had his glass of red with every meal. You've got to get them accustomed, you know, little by little. Nor was it doing him a bit of harm. Too much is too much, of course, but enough is just right. A fiddle. By nine he was drinking his liter a day and sometimes one and a half. But how do you expect a kid to thrive on nothing? The worst of it is that he hasn't got my constitution—never has. He's always been sickly: a feeble, nerveless, festering child. The only thing that used to sustain him was his little liter a day. Now all he's got to drink is water. It's disgusting. A fiddle. He, at least, is still young; he still has time to bounce back. But for me, a man in his fifties, to live on a liter a week! To hell with your goddamn liter a week. And to have to wait for it for days on end! I can't take it anymore!"

"Me," said a Jew, "I'm a Jew."

"Me," said a young woman, "I was sixteen when the war began. I remember Paris when I was sixteen. All the people in the streets, the noise, the shops, the countless cars, their horns blasting jazz, and every man was twenty years old. My friends and I, when we'd get out of school, we'd have to thread our way through the crowd, laughing and shouting to be heard. At intersections, cars would line up to see us pass; the traffic cops, all young, would offer us their arms like at a ball, and in parting, if I remember right, they'd offer us roses, jasmine, and forget-me-nots. The walk home to Rue Francoeur was a delight. You'd go slowly through Place Clichy, because of the throng, but also to return all the smiles. There were always at least a thousand boys, and they all had colorful shoes, silk pocket squares, and faces like angels. The way they looked at you!—some blue, their eyes, some black, and their lashes golden in the sun. You didn't hear everything they said, just isolated words: 'love,' 'heart,' 'tomorrow'—and your name. They stepped aside to let you by; they knew that one day you wouldn't pass, but stay. They clustered on corners at sidewalk cafés in order to follow you with

their gaze, and they'd toss to you scarves, and birds, and phrases that made your heart leap into your throat. By the time I reached Pont Caulaincourt I was intoxicated; my head was singing with boys. I remember one day on the bridge in June, a day swarming with sunshine, when even the dead in the cemetery smelled of wildflowers, and the boys strolled about in suits of pure light, and all the world was in bloom and life itself was so sweet that I let out an involuntary cry and my feet came away from the earth. It was my friend Janette who grabbed my legs. I held that against her for a long time ... But the best part of my route was the climb up this street, Rue Caulaincourt. In those days, it used to wind in a spiral all the way around Montmartre Hill. The cars parked along the sidewalks formed a double line of blue that snaked upwards like smoke, and the sky above was tinged with pink. The street was less busy than the bridge, but there were boys in the windows, in the cars, and up in the trees. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I could swear that back then the trees kept their leaves all year round. And down from their branches would rain sighs, and love letters, and snatches of song that'd make your eyes sting with tenderness. When I got home, I'd always find five or six cousins, ostensibly there to see my brother. We'd joke and we'd laugh and sometimes we'd kiss a little. I can admit it now. At night I'd dream that I'd graduated, and that the principal, to reward me, was letting me choose, from among the hundred most beautiful boys in the district, my soulmate. —But that was ages ago; I'm not sixteen anymore. My brother's been killed, my cousins are prisoners of war, my friends have all left town by train. The young men one bumps into nowadays, they don't think of us, don't even notice us. The streets are empty. The traffic cops are old. Rue Caulaincourt hardly even curves anymore. And the trees are bare in winter. Do you think the war will last much longer?"

The fourteenth person said nothing, because she had just, suddenly, among her new friends, died. She was a young woman, her husband a prisoner, three children, misery, anguish, exhaustion. Her new friends brought her to city hall so that the formalities could be duly observed. One of them heard an employee say that there were no coffins available; he protested that she was the wife of a prisoner of war. "What do you want me to do?" said

the employee. "I can't turn myself into a coffin." So they inquired around the neighborhood. Borniol's had none in stock. A confectioner said he could get his hands on one made of fir for fifteen thousand francs, but the orphans were penniless and their mother's new friends were not rich. A carpenter, an honest man, offered to build a good imitation out of plywood. But in the meantime, city hall had received more coffins, and so the young woman was given a decent burial.

Her friends formed part of the cortege; on exiting the cemetery, they sat down together at a café, where they were each served, in exchange for a bread ticket, an artichoke sandwich. They had just started eating when one of the group pointed out that there were thirteen of them at table, and that consequently they should expect more bad things to happen yet.