

The background of the cover is an abstract composition of warm, earthy tones. A large, dark red, textured shape, resembling a piece of fabric or a draped object, dominates the right side and extends towards the center. The overall lighting is soft and directional, creating subtle gradients and shadows that give the abstract forms a sense of depth and volume. The colors range from deep browns and blacks to lighter, warm oranges and yellows.

Platform

Michel Houellebecq

By the author of the international bestseller *Atomised*

Platform

MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ

Translated from the French by Frank Wynne



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Also by Michel Houellebecq

Whatever
Atomised

Plus sa vie est infâme, plus l'homme y tient; elle est alors une protestation, une vengeance de tous les instants.

Honoré de Balzac

(The more contemptible his life, the more a man clings to it; it thus becomes a protest, a retribution for every moment.)

Part One
Thai Tropic

Father died last year. I don't subscribe to the theory by which we only become *truly adult* when our parents die; we never become truly adult.

As I stood before the old man's coffin, unpleasant thoughts came to me. He had made the most of life, the old bastard; he was a clever cunt. 'You had kids, you fucker . . .' I said spiritedly, 'you shoved your fat cock in my mother's cunt.' Well, I was a bit tense, I have to admit; it's not every day you have a death in the family. I'd refused to see the corpse. I'm forty, I've already had plenty of opportunity to see corpses; nowadays, I prefer to avoid them. It was this that had always dissuaded me from getting a pet.

I'm not married, either. I've had the opportunity several times, but I never took it. That said, I really love women. It's always been a bit of a regret, for me, being single. It's particularly awkward on holiday. People are

suspicious of single men on holiday, after they get to a certain age: they assume that they're selfish, and probably a bit pervy; I can't say they're wrong.

After the funeral, I went back to the house where my father lived out his last years. The body had been discovered a week earlier. A little dust had already settled around the furniture and in the corners of the rooms; I noticed a cobweb on the window frame. So time, entropy, all that stuff, was slowly taking the place over. The freezer was empty. The kitchen cupboards mostly contained single-serving Weight Watchers meals-in-a-bag, tins of flavoured protein and energy bars. I wandered through the rooms nibbling a magnesium-enriched biscuit. In the boiler room, I rode the exercise bike for a while. My father was over seventy and in much better physical shape than I was. He did an hour of rigorous exercise every day, lengths of the pool twice a week. At weekends, he played tennis and went cycling with people his age; I'd met some of them at the funeral. 'He coached the lot of us! . . .' a gynaecologist exclaimed. 'He was ten years older than us, and on a two kilometre hill, he'd be a whole minute ahead.' Father, father, I said to myself, how great was your vanity! To the left of my field of vision I could make out a weightlifting bench, barbells. I quickly visualised a moron in shorts – his face wrinkled, but otherwise very like mine – building up his pectorals with hopeless vigour. Father, I said to myself, Father, you have built your house upon sand. I was still pedalling but I was starting to feel breathless, my thighs ached a little, though

I was only on level one. Thinking back to the ceremony, I was aware that I had made an excellent general impression. I'm always clean shaven, my shoulders are narrow and when I developed a bald spot at about the age of thirty, I decided to cut my hair very short. I usually wear a grey suit and sober ties, and I don't look particularly cheerful. With my short hair, my lightweight glasses and my sullen expression, my head bowed a little to listen to a Christian funeral-hymn medley, I felt perfectly at ease with the situation – much more at ease than I would have done at a wedding, for example. Funerals, clearly, were my thing. I stopped pedalling, coughed gently. Night was falling quickly over the surrounding meadows. Near the concrete structure which housed the boiler, you could make out a brownish stain which had been poorly cleaned. It was there that my father had been discovered, his skull shattered, wearing shorts and an 'I love New York' sweatshirt. He had been dead for three days, according to the coroner. There was the possibility, very remote, that what happened was an accident, he could have slipped in a puddle of oil or something. That said, the floor of the room was completely dry; and the skull had been broken in several places, some of the brain had even spilled on to the floor; in all probability, what we were dealing with was murder. Captain Chaumont of the Cherbourg police was supposed to come over to see me that evening.

Back in the living room, I turned on the television, a

32-inch Sony widescreen with surround sound and an integrated DVD player. There was an episode of *Xena: Warrior Princess* on TF1, one of my favourite series: two very muscular women wearing metallic bras and miniskirts made of animal hide were challenging each other with their sabres. 'Your reign has gone on too long, Tagrathâ!' cried the brunette, 'I am Xena, warrior of the Western Plains!' There was a knock at the door; I turned the sound down.

Outside, it was dark. The wind gently shook the branches dripping with rain. A girl of about twenty-five, she looked north-African, was standing in the doorway. 'I'm Aïcha,' she said, 'I cleaned for Monsieur Renault twice a week. I've just come to get my things.'

'Well . . . ' I said, ' . . . well.' I made a vague gesture, something intended to be welcoming. She came in, glanced quickly at the television screen: the two warriors were now wrestling right next to a volcano; I suppose the spectacle had its stimulating side, for certain lesbians. 'I don't want to disturb you,' said Aïcha, 'I'll only be five minutes.'

'You're not disturbing me,' I said, 'in fact, nothing disturbs me.' She nodded her head as though she understood, her eyes lingered on my face; she was probably gauging my physical resemblance to my father, possibly inferring a degree of *moral* resemblance. After studying me for a few moments, she turned and climbed the stairs that lead to the bedrooms. 'Take your time,' I said, my voice barely audible. 'Take all the time you need . . . ' She didn't

answer, didn't pause in her ascent; she had probably not even heard me. I sat down on the sofa again, exhausted by the confrontation. I should have offered to take her coat; that's what you usually do, offer to take someone's coat. I realised that the room was terribly cold – a damp, penetrating cold, the cold of a cellar. I didn't know how to light the boiler, I had no wish to try, now my father was dead. I had intended to leave straight away. I turned over to FR3 just in time to catch the last part of *Questions pour un champion*. At the moment when Nadège from Val-Fourré told Julien Lepers that she was going to risk her title for the third time, Aïcha appeared on the stairs, a small travel bag on her shoulder. I turned off the television and walked quickly towards her. 'I've always admired Julien Lepers.' I told her, 'Even if he doesn't know the actual town or village the contestant is from, he always manages to say something about the département or the region; he always knows a bit about the climate and the local beauty spots. Above all, he understands life: the contestants are human beings to him, he understands their problems and their joys. Nothing of what constitutes human reality for the contestants is entirely strange or intimidating to him. Whoever the contestant is, he manages to get them to talk about their work, their family, their hobbies – everything, in fact, that in their eyes goes to make up a life. The contestants are often members of a brass band or a choral society, they're involved in organising the local fête, or they devote themselves to some charitable cause. Their children are often there in

the studio. You generally get the impression from the programme that these people are happy, and you feel better, happier yourself. Don't you think?

She looked at me unsmilingly; her hair in a chignon, she wore little makeup, her clothes were pretty drab – a serious girl. She hesitated for a moment before saying in a low voice which was a little hoarse with shyness: 'I was very fond of your father.' I couldn't think of anything to say; it struck me as bizarre, but just about possible. The old man must have had stories to tell: he'd travelled in Colombia, Kenya or I don't know where; he'd had the opportunity to watch rhinoceros through binoculars. Every time we met, he limited himself to making ironic comments about the fact that I was a civil servant, about the job security that went with it. 'Got yourself a cushy little number, there . . .' he would say, making no attempt to hide his scorn; families are always a bit difficult. 'I'm studying nursing,' Aïcha went on, 'but since I stopped living with my parents I have to work as a cleaner.' I racked my brains to think of an appropriate response: should I enquire as to how expensive rents were in Cherbourg? I finally opted for a 'I see . . .', into which I tried to introduce a certain worldly wisdom. This seemed to satisfy her and she walked to the door. I pressed my face to the glass to watch her Volkswagen Polo do a U-turn in the muddy track. FR3 was showing some rustic made-for-TV movie set in the nineteenth century, starring Tchéky Karyo as a farm labourer. Between piano lessons, the daughter of the landowner – he was played by Jean-

Pierre Marielle – accorded the handsome peasant certain liberties. Their clinches took place in a stable; I dozed off just as Tchéky Karyo was energetically ripping off her organza knickers. The last thing I remember was a close-up of a small group of pigs.

I was woken by pain and by the cold; I had probably fallen asleep in an awkward position, my cervical vertebrae felt paralysed. I was coughing heavily as I stood up, my breath filling the glacial air of the room with vapour. Bizarrely, the television was showing *Très Pêche*, a fishing programme on TF1; I had obviously woken up, or at least reached a sufficient level of consciousness to work the remote control; I had no memory of doing so. Tonight's programme was devoted to silurids – huge fish with no scales which had become more common in French rivers as a result of global warming; they were particularly fond of the areas around nuclear power plants. The report was intended to shed light on the truth behind a number of myths: it was true that adult silurids could grow to as much as three or four metres; in the Drôme, specimens larger than five metres had been reported; there was nothing particularly improbable about this. However there was no question of the animals ever behaving carnivorously, or attacking bathers. The public suspicion of silurids seemed, to some extent, to have rubbed off on the men who fished for them; the small group of silurid anglers was not well liked by the larger family of anglers. They felt they suffered as a result and wanted to take

advantage of this programme to improve their negative image. It was true they could hardly suggest gastronomy as their motive: the flesh of the silurid was completely inedible. But it was an excellent catch, intelligent and at the same time requiring sportsmanship; it was not unlike pike fishing, and deserved a wider following. I paced around the room a little, unable to get warm; I couldn't bear the idea of sleeping in my father's bed. In the end I went upstairs and brought down pillows and blankets, settled myself as best I could on the sofa. I switched off just after the credits of 'The Silurid Demystified'. The night was opaque, the silence also.

All things come to an end, including the night. I was dragged from my saurian lethargy by the clear, resonant voice of Captain Chaumont. He apologised, he hadn't had time to come by the previous evening. I offered him coffee. While the water was boiling, he set up his laptop on the kitchen table and hooked up a printer. This way he could have me re-read and sign my statement before he left; I made a murmur of approval. The police force was so completely snowed under with administrative work that it did not have enough time to dedicate to its real task: investigation. That at least was what I had concluded from various television documentaries. He agreed, warmly this time. This interview was getting off to a good start, in an atmosphere of mutual trust. 'Windows' started up with a cheerful little sound.

The death of my father occurred in the evening or the night of November 14th. I was working that day; I was