Art
Characters

Marc
Serge
Yvan

The main room of a flat.

A single set. As stripped down and neutral as possible.

The scenes unfold, successively, at Serge’s, Yvan’s and Marc’s.

Nothing changes, except for the painting on the wall.

‘Art’ received its British Premiere in this translation at Wyndhams Theatre, London, on 15\textsuperscript{th} October 1996. The cast was as follows:

**Marc**  Albert Finney

**Serge**  Tom Courtenay

**Yvan**  Ken Scott.

Directed By  Matthew Warchus

Designed By  Mark Thompson

Lighting By  Hugh Vanstone

Music By  Gary Yershon

Produced By  David Pugh and Sean Connery
Marc, alone

Marc  My friend Serge has brought a painting. It’s a canvas about five foot by four:

White. The background is white and if you screw up your eyes, you can make out some fine white diagonal lines.

Serge is one of my oldest friends.

He’s done very well for himself, he’s a dermatologist and he’s keen on art.

On Monday, I went to see the painting; Serge had actually got hold of it on the Saturday, but he’d been lusting after it for several months.

This white painting with white lines.

At Serge’s

At floor level, a white canvas with fine white diagonal scars. Serge looks at his painting, thrilled. Marc looks at the painting. Serge looks at Marc looking at the painting.

Long Silence: from both of them, a whole range of wordless emotions.

Marc Expensive?

Serge Two hundred thousand.

Marc Two hundred thousand?

Serge Huntingdon would take it off my hands for two hundred and twenty.

Marc Who’s that?

Serge Huntingdon?

Marc Never heard of him.

Serge Huntingdon! The Huntingdon Gallery!

Marc The Huntingdon Gallery would take it off your hands for two hundred and twenty?
Serge
No, not the Gallery. Him. Huntingdon himself. For his own collection.

Marc
Then why didn’t Huntingdon buy it?

Serge
It’s important for them to sell to private clients. That’s how the market circulates.

Marc
Mm Hm. . .

Serge
Well?

Marc
. . .

Serge
You’re not in the right place. Look at it from this angle.

Can you see the lines?

Marc
What’s the name of the . . . ?

Serge
Painter. Antrios.

Marc
Well Known?

Serge
Very. Very!

Pause.

Marc
Serge, you haven’t brought this painting for two hundred thousand francs?

Serge
You don’t understand, that’s what it costs. It’s an Antrios.

Marc
You haven’t brought this painting for two hundred thousand francs?

Serge
I might have known you’d miss the point.

Marc
You paid two hundred thousand francs for this shit?

Serge, as if alone.

Serge
My friend Marc’s and intelligent enough fellow, I’ve always valued our relationship, he has a good job, he’s an aeronautical engineer, but he’s one of those new-style intellectuals, who are not only enemies of modernism, but seem to take some sort of incomprehensible pride in running it down. . . .

In recent years these Nostalgia-merchants have become quite breathtakingly arrogant.
Same pair. Same place. Same painting.

Pause.

Serge  What do you mean, ‘This Shit’?

Marc  Serge, where’s your sense of humour? Why aren’t you laughing? . . . It’s fantastic, you buying this painting.

Marc Laughs. Serge remains stony.

Serge  I don’t care how fantastic you think it is, I don’t mind if you laugh, but I would like to know what you mean by ‘this shit’.

Marc  You’re taking the piss!

Serge  No. I’m not. By whose standards is it shit? If you call something shit, you need to have some criterion to judge it by.

Marc  Who are you talking to? Who do you think you’re talking to? Hello! . . .

Serge  You have no interest whatsoever in contemporary paining, you never have had. This field about which you know absolutely nothing, so how can you assert that any given object, which conforms to laws you don’t understand, is shit?

Marc  Because it is. It’s shit. I’m sorry.

Serge, alone

Serge  He doesn’t like the painting. Fine . . .

But there was no warmth in the way he reacted.

No Attempt.

No warmth when he dismissed it out of hand.

Just that vile, pretentious laugh.

A real know–all laugh.

I hated that laugh.

Marc, alone
Marc It’s a complete mystery to me, Serge buying this painting. It’s unsettled me, it’s filled me with some indefinable unease.

When I left his place, I had to take three capsules of Gelsemium 9X which paula recommended – Gelsemium or Ignatia, she said, Gelsemium or Ignatia, which do you prefer, I mean, how the hell should I know? – because I couldn’t begin to understand how serge, my friend, could have brought that picture.

Two Hundred thousand francs!

He’s comfortably off, but he’s hardly rolling in money.

Comfortable, no more, just comfortable. And he spends two hundred grand on a white painting.

I must go and see Yvan, he’s a friend of our, I have to discuss this with Yvan.

Mind you, Yvan’s a very tolerant bloke, which of course, when it comes to relationships, is the worst thing you can be.

Yvan’s very tolerant because he couldn’t care less.

If Yvan tolerates the fact that Serge has spent two hundred grand on some piece of white shit, it’s because he couldn’t care less Serge.

Obviously.

At Yvans.

On the wall, some daub.

Yvan is on all fours with his back to us. He seems to be looking for something underneath a piece of furniture. As he does so, he turns to introduce himself.

Yvan I’m Yvan.

I’m a bit tense at the moment, because, having spent my life in textiles, I’ve just found a new job as a sales agent for a wholesale stationary business.

People like me. My professional life has always been a failure and I’m getting married in a couple of weeks. She’s a lovely intelligent girl from a good family.
Marc enters.  Yvan has resumed his search and has his back to him.

Marc  What are you doing
Yvan  I’m looking for the top of my pen.

Time passes.

Marc  All right, that’s enough.
Yvan  I had it five minutes ago.
Marc  It doesn’t matter.
Yvan  Yes, it does.

Marc gets down on his knees to help him look. Both of them spend some time looking.  Marc straightens up.

Marc  Stop it.  Buy another one.
Yvan  It’s a felt-tip, they’re special, they’ll write on any surface . . .It’s just infuriating. Objects, I can’t tell you how much they infuriate me. I had it in my hand five minutes ago.

Marc  Are you going to live here?
Yvan  Do you think it’s suitable for a young couple?
Marc  Young couple! Ha, ha . .
Yvan  Try not to laugh like that in front of Catherine.
Marc  How’s the stationary business?
Yvan  All right.  I’m learning.
Marc  You’ve lost weight.
Yvan  A bit.  I’m pissed off about that top.  It’ll dry up.  Sit down.
Marc  If you go on looking for that top, I’m leaving.
Yvan  OK, I’ll stop.  You want something to drink?
Marc  A Perrier, if you have one.

Have you seen Serge lately?
Yvan  No Have you?
Marc  Yesterday.
Yvan  Is he well?
Marc  very.

He’s just bought a painting.
Yvan  Oh yes?
Marc  Mm.
Yvan  Nice?
Marc  White.
Yvan  White?
Marc  White.

Imagine a canvas about five foot by four . . . with a white background . . . Completely white in fact . . . with fine white diagonal stripes . . . you know . . . and maybe another horizontal white line, towards the bottom. . .

Yvan  How can you see them?
Marc  What?
Yvan  These white lines. If the background’s white, how can you see the lines?
Marc  You just do. Because I suppose the lines are slightly grey, or visa versa, or anyway there are degrees of white!

There’s more than one kind of white!
Yvan  Don’t get upset. Why are you getting upset?
Marc  You immediately start quibbling. Why can’t you let me finish?
Yvan  All right. Go on.
Marc  Right. So, you have an idea of what the painting looks like.
Yvan  I think so, yes.
Marc  Now you have to guess how much Serge paid for it.
Yvan    Who’s the painter?
Marc    Antrios. Have you heard of him?
Yvan    No. Is he fashionable?
Marc    I knew you were going to ask me that!
Yvan    Well, it’s logical . . .
Marc    No, it isn’t logical . . .
Yvan    Of course it’s logical, you ask me to guess the price, you know very well the
        price depend on how fashionable the painter might be. . . .
Marc    I’m not asking you to apply a whole set of critical standards, I’m not asking
        you for a professional valuation, I’m asking you what you, Yvan, would give for a
        white painting tarted up with a few off-white stripes.
Yvan    Bugger all.
Marc    Right. And what about Serge? Pick a figure at random.
Yvan    Ten thousand francs.
Marc    Ha!
Yvan    Fifty thousand.
Marc    Ha!
Yvan    A hundred thousand.
Marc    Keep going.
Yvan    A hundred and fifty? Two hundred?! Two hundred?!
Marc    Two hundred. Two hundred grand.
Yvan    No!
Marc    Yes.
Yvan    Two hundred grand?
Marc    Two hundred grand.
Yvan    Has he gone crazy?
Marc: Looks like it.

*Slight pause*

Yvan: All the same . . .

Marc: What do you mean, all the same?

Yvan: If it makes him happy . . . he can afford it . . .

Marc: So that’s what you think, is it?

Yvan: Why? What do you think?

Marc: You don’t understand the seriousness of this, do you?

Yvan: Err . . . No.

Marc: It’s strange how you’re missing the basic point of this story. All you can see it externals. You don’t understand the seriousness of it.

Yvan: What is the seriousness of it?

Marc: Don’t you understand what this means?

Yvan: Would you like a cashew nut?

Marc: Don’t you see that suddenly, in some grotesque way, Serge fancies himself as a ‘collector’.

Yvan: Well . . .

Marc: From now on, our friend Serge is one of the great connoisseurs.

Yvan: Bollocks.

Marc: Well of course it’s bollocks. You can’t buy your way in that cheap. But that’s what he thinks.

Yvan: Oh, I see.

Marc: Doesn’t that upset you?

Yvan: No. Not if it makes him happy.

Marc: If it makes him happy. What’s that supposed to mean?

What sort of philosophy is that, if it makes him happy?
Yvan      As long as it’s not doing any harm to anyone else . . .
Marc      But it is. It’s doing harm to me! I’m disturbed, I’m disturbed, more than
          that, I’m hurt, yes I am, I’m fond of Serge, and to see him let himself be ripped off
          and lose ever ounce of discernment through sheer snobbery . .
Yvan      I don’t know why you’re so surprised. He’s always haunted galleries in the
          most absurd way, he’s always been an exhibition freak.
Marc      He’s always been a freak, but a freak with a sense of humour. You see,
          basically, what really upsets me is that you can’t have a laugh with him anymore.
Yvan      I’m sure you can.
Marc      You can’t
Yvan      Have you tried?
Marc      Of course I’ve tried. I laughed. Heartily. What do you think I did? He
          didn’t crack a smile.
          Mind you, two hundred grand, I suppose it might me hard to see the funny side.
Yvan      Yes.

_They laugh_

I’ll make him laugh.

Marc      I’d be amazed. Any more nuts?
Yvan      He’ll laugh, you just wait.

_At Serge’s_

_Serge is with Yvan. The painting isn’t there._

Yvan      Wonderfully. As far as they are concerned, I’m some berk tottering from one
dodgy job to another and now I’m groping my way into the world of vellum . . . This
thing on my hand, what is it?

_Serge examines it._

Is it serious?
Serge No.

Yvan Oh, good. How are things?

Serge Nothing. Lot of work. Exhausted.

It’s nice to see you. You never phone.

Yvan I don’t like to disturb you.

Serge You’re joking. You just speak to my secretary and I’ll call you back right away.

Yvan I suppose so.

Your place gets more and more monastic . . .

Serge laughs.

Serge Yes!

Seen marc recently?

Yvan Not recently, no.

Have you?

Serge Two or three days ago.

Yvan Is he all right?

Serge Yes. More or less.

Yvan Oh?

Serge No? He’s all right.

Yvan I talked to him on the phone last week, he seemed all right.

Serge Well, he is. He’s all right.

Yvan You seemed to be implying he wasn’t all right.

Serge On the contrary, I said, he was all right.

Yvan More or less, you said.

Serge Yes, more or less. More or less all right.

Long silence. Yvan wanders around the room.
Yvan  You been out? Seen anything?
Serge  No. I can’t afford to go out.
Yvan  Oh?
Serge  (cheerfully) I’m Ruined.
Yvan  Oh?
Serge  You want to see something special? Would you like to?
Yvan  Of course I would. Show me.

*Serge exits and returns with the Antrios, which he turns round and sets down in front of Yvan.

Yvan looks at the painting and, strangely enough, doesn’t manage the hearty laugh he’d predicted.

A long pause, while Yvan studies the painting and Serge studies Yvan.

Oh, yes. Yes, yes.
Serge  Antrios.
Yvan  Yes, yes.
Serge  It’s a seventies Antrios. Worth mentioning. He’s going through a similar phase now, but this one’s from the seventies.
Yvan  Yes, yes.

Expensive?
Serge  In absolute terms, yes. In fact, no.
You like it?
Yvan  Oh, yes, yes, yes.
Serge  Plain.
Yvan  Plain, yes . . .Yes . . . And at the same time . . .
Serge  Magnetic.
Yvan  Mm . . yes . .
Serge  You don’t really get the resonance just at the moment.
Yvan  Well, a bit . . .
Serge  No, you don’t. You have to come back in the middle of the day. That resonance you get from something monochromatic, it doesn’t really happen under artificial light.

Yvan  Mm hm.

Serge  Not that it is actually monochromatic.

Yvan  No!... How much was it?

Serge  Two hundred thousand.

Yvan  Very reasonable.

Serge  Very.

Silence. Suddenly Serge bursts out laughing, immediately followed by Yvan. Both of them roar with laughter.

Crazy, or what?

Yvan  Crazy!

Serge  Two hundred grand!

Hearty laughter. They stop. They look at each other. They start again. Then stop. They’ve calmed down.

Serge  You know Marc’s seen this painting.

Yvan  Oh?

Serge  Devastated.

Yvan  Oh?

Serge  He told me it was shit. A completely inappropriate description.

Yvan  Absolutely

Serge  You can’t call this shit.

Yvan  No.

Serge  You can say, I don’t get it, I can’t grasp it, you can’t say ‘it’s shit’.
Yvan You’ve seen his place.

Serge Nothing to see.

Its like yours, its . . . What I mean is, you couldn’t care less.

Yvan His taste is classical, he likes things classical, what do you expect . . .

Serge He started in with this sardonic laugh . . . Not a trace of charm . . . Not a trace of humour.

Yvan You know Marc is moody, there’s nothing new about that…

Serge He has no sense of humour. With you, I can laugh. With him, I’m like a block of ice.

Yvan It’s true he’s a bit gloomy at the moment.

Serge I don’t blame him for not responding to this painting, he hasn’t the training, there’s a whole apprenticeship you have to go through, which he hasn’t, either because he’s never wanted to or because he has no particular instinct for it, none of that matters, no, what I blame him for is his tone of voice, his complacency, his tactlessness. I blame him for his insensitivity. I don’t blame him for not being interested in modern Art, I couldn’t give a toss about that, I like him for other reasons…

Yvan And he likes you!

Serge No, no, no, no, I felt it the other day, a kind of…a kind of condescension…contempt with a really bitter edge…

Yvan No, surely not!

Serge Oh, yes! Don’t keep trying to smooth things over. Where d’you get this urge to be the great reconciler of the human race? Why don’t you admit that Marc is atrophying? If he hasn’t already atrophied.

Silence.

At Marc’s. On the wall, a figurative painting: a landscape seen through a window.
Yvan  We had a laugh.
Marc  You had a laugh?
Yvan  We had a laugh. Both of us. We had a laugh. I promise you on Catherine’s life, we had a good laugh, both of us, together.
Marc  You told him it was shit and you had a good laugh.
Yvan  No, I didn’t tell him it was shit, we laughed spontaneously.
Marc  You arrived, you looked at the painting and you laughed. And then he laughed.
Yvan  Yes. If you like. We talked a bit, then it was more or less as you described.
Marc  A genuine laugh, was it?
Yvan  Perfectly genuine.
Marc  Well, then, I’ve made a mistake. Good. I’m really pleased to hear it.
Yvan  It was even better than you think. It was Serge who laughed first.
Marc  It was Serge who laughed first…
Yvan  Yes.
Marc  He laughed first and you joined in.
Yvan  Yes.
Marc  But what made him laugh?
Yvan  He laughed because he sensed I was about to laugh. If you like, he laughed to put me at my ease.
Marc  It doesn’t count if he laughed first. If he laughed first, it was to diffuse your laughter. It means it wasn’t a genuine laugh.
Yvan  It was a genuine laugh.
Marc  It may have been a genuine laugh, but it wasn’t for the right reason.
Yvan  What is the right reason? I’m confused.
Marc  He wasn’t laughing because his painting is ridiculous, you and he weren’t
laughing for the same reasons, you were laughing at the painting and he was
laughing to ingratiate himself, to put himself on your wavelength, to show you that
on top of being an aesthete who can spend more on a painting than you earn in a
year, he’s still your same old subversive mate who likes a good laugh.

Yvan  Mm hm…

A brief silence.

You know…

Marc  Yes…

Yvan  This is going to amaze you…

Marc  Go on…

Yvan  I didn’t like the painting…but I didn’t actually hate it.

Marc  Well, of course. You can’t hate what’s invisible, you can’t hate nothing.

Yvan  No, no, it has something…

Marc  What do you mean?

Yvan  It has something. It’s not nothing.

Marc  You’re joking.

Yvan  I’m not as harsh as you. It’s a work of art, there’s a system behind it.

Marc  A system?

Yvan  A system.

Marc  What system?

Yvan  It’s the completion of a journey…

Marc  Ha, ha, ha !

Yvan  It wasn’t painted by accident, it’s a work of art which stakes its claim as part
of a trajectory…

Marc  Ha, ha, ha !
Yvan  All right, laugh.

Marc  You’re parroting out all Serge’s nonsense. From him, it’s heart-breaking, from you it’s just comical!

Yvan  You know, Marc, this complacency, you want to watch our for it. You’re getting bitter, it’s not very attractive.

Marc  Good. The older I get, the more offensive I hope to become.

Yvan  Great.

Marc  A system!

Yvan  You’re impossible to talk to.

Marc  There’s a system behind it!...You look at this piece of shit, but never mind, never mind, there’s a system behind it!...You reckon there’s a system behind this landscape? (He indicates the painting on his wall)…No, uh? Too evocative. Too expensive. Everything’s on the canvas! No scope for a system!...

Yvan  I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.

Marc  Yvan, look, speak for yourself. Describe your feelings to me.

Yvan  I felt a resonance.

Marc  You felt a resonance?...

Yvan  You’re denying that I’m capable of appreciating this painting on my own account.

Marc  Of course I am.

Yvan  Well, why?

Marc  Because I know you. Because apart from your disastrous indulgence, you’re quite sane.

Yvan  I wish I could say the same for you.

Marc  Yvan, look me in the eye.

Yvan  I’m looking at you.
Marc  Were you moved by Serge’s painting?

Yvan  No.

Marc  Answer me this. You’re getting married tomorrow and you and Catherine get this painting as a wedding present. Does it make you happy? ….. Does it make you happy?....

Yvan, Alone.

Yvan  Of course it doesn’t make me happy. It doesn’t make me happy, but, generally speaking, I’m not the sort of person who can say I’m happy, just like that. I’m trying to… I’m trying to think of an occasion when I could have said yes, I’m happy… Are you happy to be getting married, my mother stupidly asked me one day, are you at least happy to be getting married?... Why wouldn’t I be, mother? What do you mean, why wouldn’t I be? You’re either happy or you’re not happy, what’s why wouldn’t I be got to do with it?...

Serge, Alone.

Serge  As far as I’m concerned, it’s not white. When I say as far as I’m concerned, I mean objectively. Objectively speaking, it’s not white. It has a white background, with a whole range of greys… There’s even some red in it. You could say it’s very pale. I wouldn’t like it if it was white. Marc thinks it’s white…. That’s his limit…. Marc thinks it’s white because he’s got hung up on the idea that it’s white. Unlike Yvan. Yvan can see it isn’t white. Marc can think what he likes, what do I care?

Marc, Alone.

Marc  Obviously I should have taken the Ignatia. Why do I have to be so categorical? What possible difference can it make to me, if Serge lets himself be taken in by modern Art? I mean, it is a serious matter. But I could have found some
other way to put it to him. I could have taken a less aggressive tone. Even if it makes me physically ill that my best friend has bought a white painting, all the same I ought to avoid attacking him about it. I ought to be nice to him. From now on, I’m on my best behaviour.

**Serge** Feel like a laugh?

**Marc** Go on.

**Serge** Yvan liked the Antrios.

**Marc** Where is it?...

**Serge** You want another look?

**Marc** Fetch it out.

**Serge** I knew you’d come round to it!...

*He exits and returns with the painting. A moment of contemplation…*

Yvan got the hang of it. Right away.

**Marc** Mm.

**Serge** All right, listen, it’s just a picture, we don’t have to get bogged down with it, life’s too short… By the way, have you read this? *(He picks up De Vita Beata by Seneca and throws it on to the low table just in front of Marc.)*

Read it, it’s a masterpiece.

*Marc picks up the book, opens it and leafs through it.*

Incredibly modern. Read that, you don’t need to read anything else. What with the office, the hospital, Francoise, who’s now decreed that I’m to see the children every weekend – which is something new for Francoise, the notion that children need a father – I don’t have time to read any more, I’m obliged to go straight for the essentials.
Marc  ...As in painting...Where you’ve ingeniously eliminated form and colour.

Those old chestnuts.

Serge  Yes....Although I’m still capable of appreciating more figurative work. Like your Flemish job. Very restful.

Marc  What’s Flemish about it? It’s a view of Carcassonne.

Serge  Yes, but I mean…it’s slightly Flemish in style…the window, the view, the….

In any case, it’s very pretty.

Marc  It’s not worth anything, you know that.

Serge  What difference does that make?....Anyway, in a few years God knows if the Antrios will be worth anything!...

Marc  ...You know, I’ve been thinking. I’ve been thinking and I’ve changed my mind. The other day, driving across Paris, I was thinking about you and I said to myself: isn’t there, deep down, something really poetic about what Serge has done?...Isn’t surrendering to this incoherent urge to buy in fact an authentically poetic impulse?

Serge  You’re very conciliatory today. Unrecognizable. What’s this bland, submissive tone of voice? It doesn’t suit you at all, by the way.

Marc  No, no, I’m trying to explain, I’m apologizing.

Serge  Apologizing? What for?

Marc  I’m too thin-skinned, I’m too highly strung, I over-react...You could say, I lack judgement.

Serge  Read Seneca.

Marc  That’s it. See, for instance, you say ‘read Seneca’ and I could easily have got annoyed. I’m quite capable of being really annoyed by your saying to me, in the course of our conversation, ‘read Seneca’. Which is absurd!

Serge  No. It’s not absurd.
Marc  Really?
Serge  No, because you thought you could identify…
Marc  I didn’t say I was annoyed…
Serge  You said you could easily…
Marc  Yes, yes. I could easily…
Serge  Get annoyed, and I understand that. Because when I said ‘read Seneca’, you thought you could identify a kind of superiority. You tell me you lack judgement and my answer is ‘read Seneca’, well, it’s obnoxious!
Marc  It is, rather.
Serge  Having said that, it’s true you lack judgement, because I didn’t say ‘read Seneca’, I said ‘read Seneca’!
Marc  You’re right. You’re right.
Serge  The fact of the matter is, you’ve quite simply lost your sense of humour.
Marc  Probably.
Serge  You’ve lost your sense of humour, Marc. You really have lost your sense of humour old chap. When I was talking to Yvan the other day, we agreed you’d lost your sense of humour. Where the hell is he? He’s incapable of being on time, it’s infuriating! We’ll miss the beginning!
Marc  ….Yvan thinks I’ve lost my sense of humour?....
Serge  Yvan agrees with me that recently you’ve somewhat lost your sense of humour.
Marc  The last time you saw each other, Yvan said he liked your painting very much and I’d lost my sense of humour…
Serge  Oh, yes, that, yes, the painting, really, very much. And he meant it…What’s that you’re eating?
Marc  Ignatia.
Serge: Oh, you believe in homeopathy now?
Marc: I don’t believe in anything.
Serge: Didn’t you think Yvan had lost a lot of weight?
Marc: So’s she.
Serge: It’s the wedding, eating away at them.
Marc: Yes

*They laugh.*

Serge: How’s Paula?
Marc: All right. *(He indicates the Antrios.)* Where are you going to put it?
Serge: Haven’t decided. There. Or there?....Too ostentatious.
Marc: Are you going to have it framed?

*Serge laughs discreetly.*

Serge: No!....No, no…
Marc: Why not?
Serge: It’s not supposed to be framed.
Marc: Is that right?
Serge: The artist doesn’t want it to be. It mustn’t be interrupted. It’s already in its setting. *(He signals Marc over to examine the edge).* Look….you see…..

Marc: What is it, Elastoplast?
Serge: No, it’s a kind of Kraft paper…Made up by the artist.
Marc: It’s funny the way you say the artist.
Serge: What else am I supposed to say?
Marc: You say the artist when you could say the painter or …. Whatever his name is…Antrios…
Serge: So?....
Marc  But you say the artist, as if he’s a sort of…well, anyway, doesn’t matter. What are we seeing? Let’s try and see something with a bit of substance for once.

Serge  It’s eight o’clock. Everything will have started. I can’t imagine how this man, who has nothing whatsoever to do – am I right? – manages to be late every single time. Where the fuck is he?

Marc  Let’s just have dinner.

Serge  All right. It’s five past eight. We said we’d meet between seven and half-past… What d’you mean, the way I said artist?

Marc  Nothing. I was going to say something stupid.

Serge  Well, go on.

Marc  You say the artist as if….as if he’s some unattainable being. The artist….some sort of god….

Serge laughs.

Serge  Well, for me, he is a god! You don’t think I’d have forked out a fortune for a mere mortal!...

Marc  I see.

Serge  I went to the Pompidou on Monday, you know how many Antrioses they have at the Pompidou?...Three! Three Antrioses!....At the Pompidou!

Marc  Amazing.

Serge  And mine’s as good as any of them! If not better!... Listen, I have a suggestion, let’s give Yvan exactly three more minutes and then bugger off. I’ve found a very good new place. Lyonnaise.

Marc  Why are you so jumpy?

Serge  I’m not jumpy.

Marc  Yes, you are jumpy.
Serge  I am not jumpy, well, I am, I’m jumpy because this slackness is intolerable, this inability to practise any kind of self-discipline.

Marc  The fact is, I’m getting on your nerves and you’re taking it out on poor Yvan.

Serge  What do you mean, poor Yvan, are you taking the piss? You’re not getting on my nerves, why should you be getting on my nerves?

Serge  He is getting on my nerves. It’s true.

He’s getting on my nerves. It’s this ingratiating tone of voice. A little smile behind every word.

It’s as if he’s forcing himself to be pleasant. Don’t be pleasant, whatever you do, don’t be pleasant! Could it be buying the Antrios?....Could buying the Antrios have triggered off this feeling of constraint between us? Buying something….without his backing?....Well, bugger his backing! Bugger your backing, Marc!

Marc  Could it be the Antrios, buying the Antrios? No-  It started some time ago…To be precise, it started on the day we were discussing some work of art and you uttered, quite seriously, the word *deconstruction*.

It wasn’t so much the word deconstruction which upset me, it was the air of solemnity you imbued it with. You said, humourlessly, unapologetically, without a trace of irony, the word *deconstruction*, you, my friend. I wasn’t sure how best to deal with the situation, so I made this throwaway remark, I said I thinki I must be getting intolerant in my old age, and you answered, who do you think you are? What makes you so high and mighty?....

What gives you the right to set yourself apart, Serge answered in the bloodiest possible way. And quite unexpectedly. You’re just Marc, what makes you think you’re so special?
That day, I should have just punched him in the mouth. And when he was lying there on the ground, half-dead, I should have said to him, you’re supposed to be my friend, what sort of a friend are you, Serge, if you don’t think your friends are special?

*At Serge’s.*  *Marc and Serge, as we left them.*

**Marc**  Lyonnaise, did you say? Bit heavy isn’t it? Bit fatty, all those sausages…what do you think?

*The doorbell rings*

**Serge**  Twelve minutes past eight.

*Serge goes to open the door to Yvan.*  *Yvan walks into the room, already talking…*

**Yvan**  So, a crisis, insoluble problem, major crisis, both step-mothers want their names on the wedding invitation. Catherine adores her step-mother, who more or less brought her up, she wants her name on the invitation, she wants it and her step-mother is not anticipating, which is understandable, since the mother is dead, not appearing next to Catherine's father, whereas my step-mother, whom I detest, it's out of the question her name should appear on the invitation, but my father won't have his name on it if hers isn't, unless Catherine's step-mother's is left off, which is completely unacceptable, I suggested none of the parents' names should be on it, after all we're not adolescents, we can announce our wedding and invite people ourselves, so Catherine screamed her head off, arguing that would be a slap in the face for her parents who were paying through the nose for the reception, and particularly for her step-mother, who's gone to so much trouble when she isn't even her daughter and I finally let myself be persuaded, totally against my better judgement, because she wore me down, I finally agreed that my step-mother, whom I detest, who's a complete bitch, will have her name on the invitation, so I telephoned my mother to warn her, mother, I said, I've done everything I can to avoid this, but
we have absolutely no choice, Yvonne’s name has to be on this invitation, she said, if Yvonne's name is on the invitation, take mine off, mother, I said, please, I beg you, don't make things even more difficult, and she said, how dare you suggest my name is left to float around on the card on its own, and if I was some abandoned woman, below Yvonne, who'll be clamped on to your father's surname, like a limpet, I said to her, mother, I have friends waiting for me, I'm going to hang up and we'll discuss all this tomorrow after a good night's sleep, she said, why it is I'm always an afterthought, what are you talking about, mother, you're not always an afterthought, of course I am and when you say don't make things even more difficult, what you mean is, everything's already been decided, everything's been organized without me, everything's been cooked up behind my back, good old Huguette, she'll agree to anything and all this, she said- to put the old tin lid on it- in aid of an event, the importance of which I'm having some trouble grasping, mother, I have friends waiting for me, that's right, there's always something better to do, anything's more important than I am, good-bye and she hung up, Catherine, who was next to me, but who hadn't heard her side of the conversation, said, what did she say, I said, she doesn't want her name on the invitation with Yvonne, which is understandable, I'm not talking about that, what was it she said about the wedding, nothing, you're lying, I'm not Cathy, I promise you, she just doesn't want her name on the invitation with Yvonne, call her back and tell her when your son's getting married, you rise above your vanity, you could say the same thing to your step-mother, that's got nothing to do with it, Catherine shouted, it's me, I'm the one who's insisting her name's on it, it's not her, poor thing, she's tact personified, if she had any idea of the problem this is causing, she'd be down on her knees, begging for her name to be taken off the invitation, now call your mother, so I called her again, by now I'm in shreds, Catherine's listening on the extension, Yvan, my mother says, up to now you've
conducted your affairs in the most chaotic way imaginable and just because, out of the blue, you've decided to embark on matrimony, I find myself obliged to spend all afternoon and evening with your father, a man I haven't seen for seventeen years and to whom I was not expecting to have to reveal my hip-size and my puffy cheeks, not to mention Yvonne who incidentally, I may tell you, according to Felix Perolari, has now taken up bridge- my mother also plays bridge- I can see none of this can be helped, but on the invitation, the one item everyone is going to receive and examine, I insist on making a solo appearance, Catherine, listening on the extension, shakes her head and screws up her face in disgust, mother, I say, why are you so selfish, I'm not selfish, I'm not selfish, Yvan you're not going to start as well, you're not going to be like Mme Romero this morning and tell me I have a heart of stone, that everybody in our family has a heart of stone, that everybody in our family has a heart of stone, that's what Mme Romero said this morning when I refused to raise her wages- she's gone completely mad, by the way- to sixty francs and hour tax-free, she had the gall to say everyone in the family had a heart of stone, when she knows very well about poor Andre's pacemaker, you haven't even bothered to drop him a line, yes, that's right, very funny, everything's a joke to you, it's not me who's the selfish one, Yvan, you've still got a lot to learn about life, off you go, my boy, go on, go on, go and see your precious friends...

Silence.

Serge   Then what?...

Yvan    Then nothing. Nothing’s been resolved. I hung up. Mini-drama with Catherine. Cut short, because I was late.

Marc    Why do you let yourself be buggered around by all these women?

Yvan    Why do I let myself be buggered around, I don’t know! They’re all insane.

Serge   You’ve lost weight.
Yvan    Of course I have. Half a stone. Purely through stress.
Marc    Read Seneca….
Yvan    De Vita Beata, just what I need! What’s he suggest?
Marc    It’s a masterpiece.
Yvan    Oh?
Serge   He hasn’t read it.
Yvan    Oh.
Marc    No, but Serge just told me it was a masterpiece.
Serge   I said it was a masterpiece because it is a masterpiece.
Marc    Quite.
Serge   It is a masterpiece.
Marc    Why are you getting annoyed?
Serge   You seem to be insinuating I use the word masterpiece at the slightest excuse.
Marc    Not at all…
Serge   You said the word in a kind of sarcastic way…
Marc    Not at all!
Serge   Yes, yes, the word masterpiece in a kind of…
Marc    Is he crazy? Not at all!...However, when you used the word, you qualified it
by saying ‘incredible modern’.
Serge   Yes. So?
Marc    You said ‘incredible modern’, as if modern was the highest compliment you
could give. As if, when describing something, you couldn’t think of anything more
admirable, more profoundly admirable, than modern.
Serge   So?
Marc    So nothing. And please note I made no mention of the word
incredibly….Incredibly modern!
Serge  You’re really needling me today.

Marc  No, I’m not…

Yvan  You’re not going to quarrel all evening, that would just about finish me!

Serge  You don’t think it’s extraordinary that a man who wrote nearly two thousand years ago should still be bang up to date?

Marc  No. Of course not. That’s the definition of a classic.

Serge  You’re just playing with words.

Yvan  So, what are we going to do? I suppose the cinema’s up the spout, sorry.

    Shall we eat?

Marc  Serge tells me you’re very taken with his painting.

Yvan  Yes…I am quite…taken with it, yes…… You’re not, I gather.

Marc  No.

    Let’s go and eat. Serge knows a tasty spot. Lyonnaise.

Serge  You think the food’s too fatty.

Marc  I think the food’s a bit on the fatty side, but I don’t mind giving it a whirl.

Serge  No, if you think the food’s too fatty, we’ll find somewhere else.

Marc  No, I don’t mind giving it a whirl.

Serge  We’ll go to the restaurant if you think you’ll like it. If not, we wont. (to

    Yvan) You like Lyonnaise food?

Yvan  I’ll do whatever you like.

Marc  He’ll do whatever you like. Whatever you like, he’ll always do.

Yvan  What’s the matter with you? You’re both behaving very strangely.

Serge  He’s right, you might once in a while have an opinion of your own.

Yvan  Listen, if you think you’re going to use me as a coconut shy, I’m out of here!

    I’ve put up with enough today.

Marc  Where’s your sense of humour, Yvan?
Yvan  What?
Marc  Where’s your sense of humour, old chap?
Yvan  Where’s my sense of humour? I don’t see anything to laugh at. Where’s my sense of humour, are you trying to be funny?
Marc  I think recently you’ve somewhat lost your sense of humour. You want to watch out, believe me!
Yvan  What’s the matter with you?
Marc  Don’t you think recently I’ve also somewhat lost my sense of humour?
Yvan  Oh, I see!
Serge  All right, that’s enough, let’s make a decision. Tell you the truth, I’m not even hungry.
Yvan  You’re both really sinister this evening.
Serge  You want my opinion about your women problems?
Yvan  Go on.
Serge  In my view, the most hysterical of them all is Catherine. By far.
Marc  No question.
Serge  And if you’re already letting yourself be buggered around by her, you’re in for a hideous future.
Yvan  What can I do?
Marc  Cancel it.
Yvan  Cancel the wedding?
Serge  He’s right.
Yvan  But I can’t, are you crazy?
Marc  Why not?
Yvan  Well, because I can’t, that’s all! It’s all arranged. I’ve only been working at the stationery business for a month…
Marc: What’s that got to do with it?

Yvan: It’s her uncle’s stationery business, he had absolutely no need to take on anyone, least of all someone who’s only ever worked in textiles.


Yvan: I’m sorry, Serge, I don’t mean to be rude, but you’re not necessarily the person I’d come to for matrimonial advice. You can’t claim to have been a great success in that field…

Serge: Precisely.

Yvan: I can’t back out of the wedding. I know Catherine is hysterical but she has her good points. There are certain crucial qualities you need when you’re marrying someone like me… (He indicates the Antrios). Where are you going to put it?

Serge: I don’t know yet.

Yvan: Why don’t you put it there?

Serge: Because there, it’d be wiped out by the sunlight.

Yvan: Oh, yes. I thought of you today at the shop, we ran off five hundred posters by this bloke who paints white flowers, totally white, on a white background.

Serge: The Antrios is not white.

Yvan: No, of course not, I was just saying.

Marc: You think this painting is not white, Yvan?

Yvan: Not entirely, no ….

Marc: Ah. Then what colour is it?

Yvan: Various colours… There’s yellow, there’s grey, some slightly ochrish lines.

Marc: And you’re moved by these colours?

Yvan: Yes … I’m moved by these colours.

Marc: You have no substance, Yvan. You’re flabby, you’re an amoeba.

Serge: Why are you attacking Yvan like this?
Marc  Because he’s a little arse-licker, he’s obsequious, dazzled by money, dazzled by what he believes to be culture, and as you know culture is something I absolutely piss on.

_Brief silence._

Serge  …What’s got into you?

Marc  _**(to Yvan)**_ How could you, Yvan?....And in front of me. In front of me, Yvan.

Yvan  What d’you mean, in front of you?...What d’you mean, in front of you? I find these colour touching. Yes. If it’s all the same to you. Stop wanting to control everything.

Marc  How could you say, in front of me, that you find these colours touching?

Yvan  Because it’s the truth.

Marc  The truth? You find these colours touching?

Yvan  Yes. I find these colours touching.

Marc  You find these colours touching, Yvan?!

Serge  He finds these colour touching! He’s perfectly entitled to!

Marc  No, he’s not entitled to.

Serge  What do you mean, he’s not entitled to?

Marc  He’s not entitled to.

Yvan  I’m not entitled to?...

Marc  No.

Serge  Why is he not entitled to? I don’t think you’re very well, perhaps you ought to go and see someone.

Marc  He’s not entitled to say he finds these colours touching, because he doesn’t.

Yvan  I don’t find these colours touching?

Marc  There are no colours. You can’t see them. And you don’t find them touching.
Yvan  Speak for yourself!
Marc  This is really demeaning, Yvan!...
Serge  Who do you think you are, Marc?... Who are you to legislate? You don’t like anything, you despise everyone. You take pride in not being a man of your time…
Marc  What’s that supposed to mean, a man of my time?
Yvan  Right. I’m off.
Serge  Where are you going?
Yvan  I’m off. I don’t see why I have to put up with your tantrums.
Serge  Don’t go! You’re not going to start taking offence, are you?... If you go, you’re giving in to him.

Yvan stands there, hesitating, caught between two possibilities.

A man of his time is a man who lives in his own time.

Marc  Balls. How can a man live in any other time but his own? Answer me that.
Serge  A man of his time is someone of whom it can be said in twenty years’ or in a hundred years’ time, he was representative of his era.
Marc  Hm. To what end?
Serge  What do you mean, to what end?
Marc  What use is it to me if one day somebody says, I was representative of my era?
Serge  Listen, old fruit, we’re not talking about you, if you can imagine such a thing! We don’t give a fuck about you! A man of his time, I’m trying to explain to you, like most people you admire, is someone who makes some contribution to the human race… A man of his time doesn’t assume the history of Art has come to an end with a pseudo-Flemish view of Cavaillon…
Marc  Cacassonne.
Serge  Same thing. A man of his time plays part in the fundamental dynamic of evolution…

Marc  And that’s a good thing, in your view.

Serge  It’s not good or bad, why do you always have to moralize, it’s just the way things are.

Marc  And you, for example, you play your part in the fundamental dynamic of evolution.

Serge  I do.

Marc  What about Yvan? …

Yvan  Surely not. What sort of part can an amoeba play?

Serge  In his way, Yvan is a man of his time.

Marc  How can you tell? Not from that daub hanging over his mantelpiece!

Yvan  That is not a daub!

Serge  It is a daub.

Yvan  It is not!

Serge  What’s the difference? Yvan represents a certain way of life, a way of thinking which is completely modern. And so do you. I’m sorry, but you’re a typical man of your time. And in fact, the harder you try not to be, the more you are.

Marc  Well, that’s all right then. So what’s the problem?

Serge  There’s no problem, except for you, because you take pride in your desire to shut yourself off from humanity. And you’ll never manage it. It’s like you’re in a quicksand, the more you struggle to get out of it, the deeper you sink. Now apologise to Yvan.

Marc  Yvan is a coward.

*At this point, Yvan makes his decision, and exits in a rush.*  Slight Pause.

Serge  Well done.
Marc  It wasn’t a good idea to meet this evening…was it?…I’d better go as well…
Serge  Maybe…
Marc  Right.
Serge  You’re the coward…attacking someone who’s incapable of defending
    himself…as you well know.
Marc  You’re right…you’re right and when you put it like that, it makes me feel
    even worse…the thing is, all of a sudden, I can’t understand, I have no idea what
    Yvan and I have in common…I have no idea what my relationship with him consists
    of.
Serge  Yvan’s always been as he is.
Marc  No. He used to be eccentric, kind of absurd…he was always unstable, but his
    eccentricity was disarming…
Serge  What about me?
Marc  What about you?
Serge  Have you any idea what you and I have in common?...
Marc  That’s a question that could take us down a very long road…
Serge  Lead on.

Short Silence...

Marc  …I’m sorry I upset Yvan.
Serge  Ah! At last you’ve said something approximately human…What makes is
    worse is that the daub he has hanging over his mantelpiece was I’m afraid painted by
    his father.
Marc  Was it? Shit.
Serge  Yes …
Marc  But you said…
Serge    Yes, yes, but I remembered as soon as I’d said it.

Marc    Oh, shit…

Serge    Mm…

*Slight pause... The doorbell rings. Serge goes to answer it. Yvan enters immediately, talking as he arrives, as before.*

Yvan    Yvan returns! The lift was full, I plunged off down the stairs, clattering all the way down thinking, a coward, an amoeba, no substance, I thought I’ll come back with a gun and blow his head off, then he’ll see how flabby and obsequious I am, I got to the ground floor and I said to myself, listen, mate, you haven’t been in therapy for six years to finish up shooting your best friend and you haven’t been in therapy for six years without learning that some deep malaise must lie behind his insane aggression, so I relaunch myself, telling myself as I mount the penitential stair, this is a cry for help. I have to help Marc if it’s the last thing I do… In fact the other day I discussed you both with Finkelzohn…

Serge    You discussed us with Finkelzohn?

Yvan    I discuss everything with Finkelzohn.

Serge    And why exactly were you discussing us?

Marc    I forbid you to discuss me with that arsehole.

Yvan    You’re in no position to forbid me anything.

Serge    Why were you discussing us?

Yvan    I knew your relationship was under strain and I wanted Finkelzohn to explain…

Serge    And what did the bastard say?

Yvan    He said something rather amusing…

Marc    They’re allowed to give their opinions?
Yvan  No, they never give their opinions, but this time he did give his opinion, he even made a gesture and he never makes a gesture, he’s always rigid, I sometimes say to him, for God’s sake, move about a bit!...

Serge  All right, what did he say?

Marc  Who gives a fuck what he said?

Serge  What did he say?

Marc  What possible interest could we have in what he said?

Serge  I want to know what the bastard said, all right? Shit!

Yvan reaches into his jacket pocket

Yvan  You want to know?...

He fetches out a piece of folded paper.

Marc  You took notes?

Yvan  (unfolding it) I wrote it down because it was complicated…Shall I read it to you?

Serge  Go on.

Yvan  …”If I’m who I am because I’m who I am and you’re who you are because you’re who you are, then I’m who I am and you’re who you are. If, on the other hand, I’m who I am because you’re who you are, and if you’re who you are because I’m who I am, then I’m not who I am and you’re not who you are…”

You can see why I had to write it down.

Short silence

Marc  How much do you pay this man?

Yvan  Four hundred francs a session, twice a week.

Marc  Great.

Serge  And in cash. I found something out, they don’t allow you to pay by cheque.

Freud said you have to feel the banknotes as they slip through your fingers.
Marc  What a lucky man you are, to be getting the benefit of this fellow’s experience.

Serge  Absolutely!...We’d really appreciate it if you’d copy that out for us.

Marc  Yes. It’s bound to come in handy.

Yvan carefully refolds the piece of paper.

Yvan  You’re wrong. It’s very profound.

Marc  If it’s because of him you’ve come back to turn the other cheek, you should be grateful to him. He’s turned you into a pudding, but you’re happy, that’s all that counts.

Yvan  (to Serge) And all this because he doesn’t want to believe I like your Antrios.

Serge  I don’t give a fuck what you think of it. Either of you.

Yvan  The more I see it, the more I like it, honestly.

Serge  Let’s stop talking about the painting, shall we; once and for all. I have no interest in discussing it further.

Marc  Why are you so touchy?

Serge  I am not touchy, Marc. You’ve told us what you think. Fine. The subject is closed.

Marc  You’re getting upset.

Serge  I am not getting upset. I’m exhausted.

Marc  See, if you’re touchy about it, it means you’re too caught up in other people’s opinions…

Serge  I’m exhausted, Marc. This is completely pointless….To tell you the truth, I’m quite close to getting bored with the pair of you.

Yvan  Let’s go and eat.

Serge  You go, why don’t you go off together?

Yvan  No! It’s so rare the three of us are together.
Serge    Just as well by the look of it.

Yvan     I don’t understand what’s going on. Can’t we just calm down? There’s no reason to insult each other, especially over a painting.

Serge    You realize all this “calm down” and behaving like the vicar is just adding fuel to the fire! Is this something new?

Yvan     I will not be undermined.

Marc     This is most impressive. Perhaps I should go to Finkelzohm!...

Yvan     You can’t. There are no vacancies. What’s that you’re eating?

Marc     Gelsemium.

Yvan     I’ve given in to the logic of events, marriage, children, death. Stationery. What can go wrong?

Moved by a sudden impulse, Serge picks up the Antrios and takes it back where he found it, in the next room. He returns immediately.

Marc     We’re not worthy to look at it…

Serge    Exactly.

Marc     Or are you afraid, it is stays in my presence, you’ll finish up looking at it through my eyes?...

Serge    No. You know what Paul Valery says? And I’d go quite a bit further.

Marc     I don’t give a fuck what Paul Valery says.

Serge    You’ve gone off Paul Valery?

Marc     Don’t quote Paul Valery at me.

Serge    But you used to love Paul Valery.

Marc     I don’t give a fuck what Paul Valery says.

Serge    But I discovered him through you. You’re the one who put me on to Paul Valery.

Marc     Don’t quote Paul Valery at me, I don’t give a fuck what Paul Valery says.
Serge  What do you give a fuck about?

Marc  I give a fuck about you buying that painting. I give a fuck about you spending two hundred grand on that piece of shit.

Yvan  Don’t start again, Marc!

Serge  I’m going to tell you what I give a fuck about – since everyone is coming clean – I give a fuck about your sniggering and insinuations, your suggestion that I also think this picture is a grotesque joke. You’ve denied that I could feel a genuine attachment to it. You’ve tried to set up some kind of loathsome complicity between us. And that’s what’s made me feel, Marc, to repeat your expression, that we have less and less in common recently, your perpetual display of suspicion.

Marc  It’s true I can’t imagine you genuinely loving that painting.

Yvan  But why?

Marc  Because I love Serge and I can’t love the Serge who’s capable of buying that painting.

Serge  Why do you say, buying, why don’t you say, loving?

Marc  Because I can’t say loving, I can’t believe loving.

Serge  So why would I buy it, if I didn’t love it?

Marc  That’s the nub of the question.

Serge  (To Yvan) See how smug he is! All I’m doing is teasing him, and his answer is this serenely pompous heavy hint!...(to Marc) And it never crossed your mind for a second, however improbable it might seem, that I might really love it and that your vicious, inflexible opinions and your disgusting assumption of complicity might be hurtful to me?

Marc  No.
Serge  When you asked me what I thought of Paula – a girl who once spent an entire dinner party maintaining Elhers Danlos’s syndrome could be cured homeopathically – did I say I found her ugly, repellent and charmless? I could have done.

Marc  Is that what you think of Paula?

Serge  What’s your theory?

Yvan  No, of course he doesn’t think that! You couldn’t possibly think that of Paula!

Marc  Answer me.

Serge  You see the effect you can have!

Marc  Do you think what you just said about Paula?

Serge  Worse, actually.

Yvan  No!

Marc  Worse, Serge? Worse than repellent? Will you explain how someone can be worse than repellent?

Serge  Aha! When it’s something that concerns you personally, I see words can bite a little deeper!...

Marc  Serge, will you explain how someone can be worse than repellent…

Serge  No need to take that frosty tone. Perhaps it’s – let me try and answer you – perhaps it’s the way she waves away cigarette smoke.

Marc  The way she waves away cigarette smoke…

Serge  Yes. The way she waves away cigarette smoke. What appears to you a gesture of no significance, what you think of as a harmless gesture is in fact the opposite, and the way she waves away cigarette smoke sits right at the hear of her repellentness.
Marc You’re speaking to me of Paula, the woman who shares my life, in these intolerable terms, because you disapprove of her method of waving away cigarette smoke?...

Serge That’s right. Her method of waving away cigarette smoke condemns her out of hand.

Marc Serge, before I completely lose control, you’d better explain yourself. This is very serious, what you’re doing.

Serge A normal woman would say, I’m sorry, I find the smoke a bit uncomfortable, would you mind moving your ashtray, but not her, she doesn’t deign to speak, she describes her contempt in the air with this calculated gesture, wearily malicious, this hand movement she imagines is imperceptible, the implication of which is to say, go on, smoke, smoke, it’s pathetic but what’s the point of calling attention to it, which means you can’t tell if it’s you or your cigarette that’s getting up her nose.

Yvan You’re exaggerating!

Serge You notice he doesn’t say I’m wrong, he says I’m exaggerating, but he doesn’t say I’m wrong. Her method of waving away cigarette smoke reveals a cold, condescending and narrow-minded nature. Just what you’re in the process of acquiring yourself. It’s a shame, Marc, it’s a real shame you’ve taken up with such a life-denying woman…

Yvan Paula is not life-denying!…

Marc Take back everything you’ve just said, Serge.

Serge No.

Yvan Yes, you must!

Marc Take back what you’ve just said…

Yvan Take it back, take it back! This is ridiculous!

Marc Serge, for the last time, I demand you take back what you’ve just said.
Serge  In my view, the two of you are an aberration. A pair of fossils.

Marc throws himself at Serge. Yvan rushes forward to get between them.

Marc  *(to Yvan)* Get off!...

Serge  *(To Yvan)* Mind you own business!...

A kind of bizarre struggle ensues, very short, which ends with a blow mistakenly landing on Yvan.

Yvan  Oh, shit!....Oh, shit!...

Serge  Show me, show me…

Yvan is groaning. More than is necessary, it would seem.

Come on, show me!....That’s all right….it’s nothing…Wait a minute…

He goes out and comes back with a compress.

There you are, hold that on it for a while.

Yvan  …You’re complete freaks, both of you. Two normal men gone completely insane!

Serge  Don’t get excited.

Yvan  That really hurt!...If I find out you’ve burst my eardrum!....

Serge  Of course not.

Yvan  How do you know? You’re not ear, nose and throat!...Two old friends, educated people!...

Serge  Go on, calm down.

Yvan  You can’t demolish someone because you don’t like her method of waving away cigarette smoke!...

Serge  Yes, you can.

Yvan  But it doesn’t make any sense!

Serge  What do you know about sense?

Yvan  That’s right, attack me, keep attacking me!...I could be haemorrhaging internally, I’ve just seen a mouse running past!...
Serge It’s a rat.

Yvan A rat?

Serge He comes and goes.

Yvan You have a rat?!

Serge Don’t take the compress away, leave it where it is.

Yvan What’s the matter with you?...What’s happened between you? Something must have happened for you to go this demented.

Serge I’ve bought a work of art which makes Marc uncomfortable.

Yvan You’re starting again!... You’re in a downward spiral, both of you, you can’t stop yourselves…It’s like me and Yvonne. The most pathological relationship you can imagine!

Serge Who’s Yvonne?

Yvan My step-mother!

Serge It’s a long time since you mentioned her.

Brief Silence...

Marc Why didn’t you tell me right away what you thought about Paula?

Serge I didn’t want to upset you.

Marc No, no, no …

Serge What do you mean, no, no, no?...

Marc No. When I asked you what you thought of Paula, what you said was: she’s a perfect match for you.

Serge Yes…

Marc Which sounded quite positive, coming from you.

Serge Sure…

Marc Given the state you were in at the time.

Serge All right, what are you trying to prove?
Marc  But today, your assessment of Paula, or in other words me, is far harsher.
Serge  …I don’t understand.
Marc  Of course you understand.
Serge  I don’t.
Marc  Since I can no longer support you in your frenzied, though recent, craving for
novelty, I’ve become ‘condescending’, ‘narrow-minded’ …. ‘fossilized’…
Yvan  I’m in agony! It’s like a corkscrew drilling though my brain!
Serge  Have a drop of brandy.
Yvan  What do you think?…If something’s shaken loose in my brain, don’t you
    think alcohol’s a bit of a risk?
Serge  Would you like an aspirin?
Yvan  I’m not sure aspirin agrees with me…
Serge  Then what the hell do you want?
Yvan  Don’t worry about me. Carry on with your preposterous conversation, don’t
    pay any attention to me.
Marc  Easier said than done.
Yvan  You might squeeze out a drop of compassion. But no.
Serge  I don’t mind your spending time with Paula. I don’t resent you being with
    Paula.
Marc  You’ve no reason to resent it.
Serge  But you…you resent me…well, I was about to say, for being with the
    Antrios!
Marc  Yes!
Serge  I’m missing something here.
Marc  I didn’t replace you with Paula.
Serge  Are you saying, I replaced you with the Antrios?
Marc  Yes.

Serge  …I replaced you with the Antrios?

Marc  Yes. With the Antrios…and all it implies.

Serge  *(to Yvan)* Do you understand what he’s talking about?

Yvan  I couldn’t care less, you’re both insane.

Marc  In my time, you’d never have bought that picture.

Serge  What’s that supposed to mean, in your time?

Marc  The time you made a distinction between me and other people, when you judged things by my standards.

Serge  Was there such a time?

Marc  That’s just cruel. And petty.

Serge  No, I assure you, I’m staggered.

Marc  And if Yvan hadn’t turned into such a sponge, he’d back me up.

Yvan  Go on, that’s right, I’ve told you, it’s water off a duck’s back.

Marc  *(to Serge)* There was a time you were proud to be my friend…You congratulated yourself on my peculiarity, on my taste for standing apart. You enjoyed exhibiting me untamed to your circle, you, whose life was so normal. I was your alibi. But…eventually, I suppose, that sort of affection dries up…Belatedly, you claim your independence.

Serge  “Belatedly” is nice.

Marc  But I detest your independence. Its violence. You’ve abandoned me. I’ve been betrayed. As far as I’m concerned, you’re a traitor.

*Silence*

Serge  *(to Yvan)* … If I understand correctly, he was my mentor!...

Yvan doesn’t respond. *Marc stares at him contemptuously.* Slight Pause...

… And if I loved you as my mentor…what was the nature of your feelings?
Marc        You can guess.
Serge       Yes, yes, but I want to hear you say it.
Marc        …I enjoyed your admiration. I was flattered. I was always grateful to you
for thinking of me as a man apart. I even thought being a man apart was a somehow
superior condition, until one day you pointed out to me that it wasn’t.
Serge       This is very alarming.
Marc        It’s the truth.
Serge       What a disaster…!
Marc        Yes, what a disaster!
Serge       What a disaster!
Marc        Especially for me…Whereas you’ve found a new family. Your penchant for
idolatry has unearthed new objects of worship. The artist!…Deconstruction!

Short silence.
Yvan        What is deconstruction?...
Marc        You don’t know about deconstruction?…Ask Serge, he’s very much on top of
the subject…(to Serge) To convince me some ridiculous artwork is comprehensible,
you pick a phrase from Builders’ Weekly… Oh, you’re smiling! You see, when you
smile like that, I think there’s still some hope, like an idiot…
Yvan        Why don’t you make up? And let’s spend an enjoyable evening, all this is
ludicrous!
Marc        …It’s my fault. We haven’t seen much of one another recently. I’ve been
away and you started mixing with the great and the good…the Ropses…the Desprez-
Couderts…that dentist, Guy Hallie…he’s the one who…
Serge       No, no, no, no, not at all, he’s from another world, he only likes conceptual
Art…
Marc        It’s all the same thing.
Serge  No, it’s not all the same thing.

Marc  You see, more evidence of how I let you slip away…now when we talk we
can’t even make ourselves understood.

Serge  I had no idea whatsoever – really, it’s come as a complete surprise – the
extent to which I was under your influence and in your control.

Marc  Not in my control, as it turns out…You should never leave your friends
unchaperoned. Your friends need to be chaperoned, otherwise they’ll get away…
Look at poor Yvan, whose chaotic behaviour used to delight us, we’ve allowed him
to become this timid stationer…Practically married…He brought us his originality
and now he’s making every effort to piss it away.

Serge  Us! He brought us! Do you realize what you’re saying? Everything has to
revolve around you! Why can’t you learn to love people for themselves, Marc?

Marc  What does that mean, for themselves?

Serge  For what they are.

Marc  But what are they?! What are they?!… Apart from my faith in them?... I’m
desperate to find a friend who has some kind of prior existence. So far, I’ve had no
luck. I’ve had to mould you…But you see, it never works. There comes a day when
your creature has dinner with the Desprez-Couderts and, to confirm his new status,
goes off and buys a white painting.

Silence

Serge  So here we are at the end of a fifteen-year friendship…

Marc  Yes…

Yvan  Pathetic…

Marc  You see, if we’d only managed to have a normal discussion, that is, if I’d
have been able to put my point of view without losing my temper…

Serge  Well?…
Marc  Nothing…

Serge  Yes. Go on. Why can’t we exchange one single dispassionate word?

Marc  …I don’t believe in the values which dominate contemporary Art. The rule
of novelty. The rule of surprise. Surprise is dead meat, Serge. No sooner conceived
than dead.

Serge  All right. So?

Marc  That’s all. Except that my appeal to you has always been my surprise value.

Serge  What are you talking about?

Marc  A surprise which has lasted quite some time, I’ll admit.

Yvan  Finkelzohn is a genius. I told you he’d understood the whole thing!

Marc  I’d prefer it if you stopped refereeing, Yvan, and stopped imagining you’re
not fully implicated in this conversation.

Yvan  You want to implicate me, I refuse, what’s it to do with me? I’ve already got
a burst eardrum, you work things out for yourselves!

Marc  Perhaps he does have a burst eardrum. I hit him very hard.

*Serge sniggers.*

Serge  Please, stop boasting.

Marc  See, Yvan, what I can’t bear about you at the moment – quite apart from
what I’ve already told you – is your urge to put Serge and me on the same level.
You would like use to be equal. To indulge your cowardice. Talking on an equal
footing, equal the way you thought of us when we were friends. But we never were
equal, Yvan. You have to choose.

Yvan  I have chosen.

Marc  Excellent.

Serge  I don’t need a supporter.

Marc  You’re not going to turn the poor boy down?
Yvan Why do we see each other, if we hate each other? It’s obvious we do hate each other! Or rather, I don’t hate you, but you hate each other! And you hate me! So why do we see each other?...I was looking forward to a relaxing evening after a ridiculously fraught week, meeting my two best friends, going to the cinema, having a laugh, getting away from all these dramas…

Serge Are you aware that you’ve talked about nothing but yourself?

Yvan Well, who are you talking about? Everybody talks about themselves!

Serge You fuck up our evening, you…

Yvan I fuck up your evening?!…

Serge Yes.

Yvan I fuck up your evening?! I?! I fuck up your evening?!

Marc All right, don’t get excited!

Yvan You’re saying it’s me who’s fucked up your evening?!

Serge How many more times are you going to say it?

Yvan Just answer the question, are you saying it’s me who’s fucked up your evening?!…

Marc You arrive three-quarters of an hour late, you don’t apologize, you deluge us with your domestic woes…

Serge And you inertia, your sheer neutral spectator’s inertia has lured Marc and me into the worst excesses.

Yvan You as well! You’re starting as well?

Serge Yes, because on this subject I’m entirely in agreement with him. You create the conditions of conflict.

Marc You’ve been piping up with this finicky, subservient voice of reason ever since you arrived, it’s intolerable.
**Yvan** You know I could burst into tears… I could start crying right now… I’m very close to tears.

**Marc** Cry.

**Serge** Cry.

**Yvan** Cry! You’re telling me to cry!

**Marc** You’ve every reason to cry, you’re marrying a gorgon, you’re losing your two best friends…

**Yvan** That’s it then, is it, it’s all over!

**Marc** You said it yourself, what’s the point of seeing each other, if we hate each other?

**Yvan** What about my wedding?! You’re my witnesses, remember?

**Serge** Find someone else.

**Yvan** I can’t! You’re on the invitation!

**Marc** You can choose someone else at the last minute.

**Yvan** You’re not allowed to!

**Serge** Of course you are!

**Yvan** You’re not!...

**Marc** Don’t panic, we’ll come.

**Serge** But what you ought to do is cancel the wedding.

**Marc** He’s right.

**Yvan** Oh, shit! What have I ever done to you? Shit!

He bursts into tears… Time passes…

It’s brutal what you’re doing! You could have had your fight after the 12th, but no, you’re determined to ruin my wedding, a wedding which is already a catastrophe, which has made me lose half a stone and now you’re completely buggering it up!

The only two people whose presence guaranteed some spark of satisfaction are
determined to destroy one another, just my luck!...(to Marc) You think I like packs of filofax paper or rolls of sellotape, you think any normal man wakes up one day desperate to sell expandable document wallets?...What am I supposed to do? I pissed around for forty years, I made you laugh, oh, yes, wonderful, I made all my friends laugh their heads off playing the fool, but come the evening, who was left solitary as a rat? Who crawled back into his hole every evening all on his own? This buffoon, dying of loneliness, who’d switch on anything that talks and who does he find on the answering machine? His mother. His mother. And his mother.

*A short silence*

Marc Don’t get yourself in such a state.

Yvan Don’t get yourself in such a state! Who got me in this state in the first place? Look at me – I don’t have your refined sensibilities. I’m a lightweight. I have no opinions.

Marc Calm down…

Yvan Don’t tell me to calm down! What possible reason do I have to calm down, are you trying to drive me demented, telling me to calm down? Calm down’s the worst thing you can say to someone who’s lost his calm! I’m not like you, I don’t want to be an authority figure, I don’t want to be a point of reference, I don’t want to be self-sufficient, I just want to be your friend Yvan the joker! Yvan the joker!

*Silence*

Serge Could we try to steer clear of pathos?...

Yvan I’ve finished. Haven’t you got any nibbles? Anything, just to stop from passing out.

Serge I have some olives.

Yvan Hand them over.

*Serge reaches for a little bowl of olives and hands it to him.*
Serge (To Marc) Want some?

Marc nods. Yvan hands him the bowl.... They eat olives...

Yvan Is there somewhere to put the…

Serge Yes.

He fetches a saucer and puts it on the table.  Pause....

Yvan (still eating olives)...To think we’ve reached these extremes…Apocalypse because of a white square…

Serge It is not white.

Yvan A piece of white shit!...

He’s seized by uncontrollable laughter.

That’s what it is, a piece of white shit!...Let’s face it, mate….What you’ve bought is insane!...

Marc Laughs, caught up by Yvan’s extravagance. Serge leaves the room. He returns immediately with the Antrios..

Serge Do you have one of your famous felt-tips?...

Yvan What for?...You’re not going to draw on the painting.

Serge Do you or don’t you?

Yvan Just a minute...(He goes through the pockets of his jacket) Yes … a blue one…

Serge Give it to me.

Yvan hands the felt-tip to Serge. Serge takes the felt-tip, pulls the top off it, examines the tip for a moment, puts the top back on. He looks up at Marc and throws him the felt-tip. Marc catches it.

Slight Pause...

(to Marc) Go on.

Silence.

Go on!
Marc approaches the painting... He looks at Serge... Then he takes the top off the felt-tip.

Yvan You’re not going to do it!...

Marc is looking at Serge.

Serge Come on.

Yvan You’re raving mad, both of you!

Marc leans towards the painting. Under Yvan’s horrified gaze, he draws the felt-tip along one of the diagonal scars. Serge remains impassive. Then, carefully, on this slope, Marc draws a little skier with a woolly hat. When he’s finished, he straightens up and contemplates his work. Serge remains adamantine. Yvan is as if turned to stone. Silence.

Serge Well, I’m starving. Shall we eat?

Marc tries a smile. He puts the top back on and playfully throws the pen to Yvan, who catches it.

At Serge’s.

At the back, hanging on the wall, the Antrios. Standing in front of the canvas, Marc is holding a basin of water, into which Serge is dipping a little piece of cloth. Marc has rolled up his sleeves and Serge is wearing a little builder’s apron which is too short for him. Round about are various cleaning products, bottles of white spirit and stain remover, rags and sponges. Moving very delicately, Serge puts the finishing touches to the cleaning of the painting.

The Antrios is as white as ever. Marc puts down the basin and looks at the painting. Serge turns to Yvan, who’s sitting off to one side. Yvan nods approvingly. Serge steps back and contemplates the picture in his turn.

Silence.

Yvan (as if alone, speaking in a slightly muffled voice)... The day after the wedding, at the Montparnasse cemetery, Catherine put her wedding bouquet and a little bag of sugared almonds on her mother’s grave. I slipped away to cry behind a monument and in the evening, thinking again about this touching tribute, I started silently sobbing in my bed. I absolutely must speak to Finkelzohn about my tendency to cry,
I cry all the time, it’s not normal for someone of my age. It started, or at least clearly revealed itself at Serge’s, the evening of the white painting. After Serge, in an act of pure madness, had demonstrated to Marc that he cared more about him than he did about his painting, we went and had dinner, chez Emile. Over dinner, Serge and Marc took the decision to try to rebuild a relationship destroyed by word and deed. At a certain moment, one of them used the expression “trial period” and I burst into tears.

This expression, “trial period”, applied to our friendship, set off in me an uncontrollable and ridiculous convulsion.

In fact I can no longer bear any kind of rational argument, nothing formative in the world, nothing great or beautiful in the world has ever been born of rational argument.

Pause. Serge dries his hands. He goes to empty the basin of water then puts away all the cleaning products, until there’s no sign left of domestic activity. Once again he looks at his painting. Then he turns and advances towards the audience.

**Serge** When Marc and I succeeded in obliterating the skier, with the aid of Swiss soap with added ox gall, recommended by Paula, I looked at the Antrios and turned to Marc:

‘Did you know ink from felt-tips was washable?’

‘No,’ Marc said…’No…did you?’

‘No,’ I said, very fast, lying. I came within an inch of saying, yes, I did know. But how could I have launched out trial period with such a disappointing admission?...On the other hand, was it right to start with a lie?...A lie! Let’s be reasonable. Why am I so absurdly virtuous? Why does my relationship with Marc have to be so complicated?...

*Gradually, the light begins to narrow down on the Antrios. Marc approaches the painting.*
Marc Under the white clouds, the snow is falling.
You can’t see the white clouds, or the snow.
Or the cold, or the white glow of the earth.
A solitary man glides downhill on his skis.
The snow is falling.
It falls until the man disappears back into the landscape.
My friend Serge, who’s one of my oldest friends, has bought a painting. It’s a canvas about five foot by four. It represents a man who moves across a space and disappears…

END