

A Family

Pascale Kramer

Novel

French



The traditional middle-class family of this story has a painful wound at its core. To his parents and siblings, the lovable, talented Romain is both an enigma and a self-destructive force, whose years of drinking have led him inexorably to a life of ruin. For his family, life goes on, as his sister Lou prepares to give birth. But Romain has disappeared again, and his loved ones must once more confront the gnawing pain of their failure to help him back from the abyss.

“Romain was a gentle, peaceful, tender soul. He never showed any sign of the malaise that drove him, some evenings, to drink himself virtually into a coma.”

Title

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Pascale Kramer was born in Geneva in 1961 and grew up in Lausanne. In 1987 she moved to Paris, where she now runs an advertising agency. She has published fourteen books, including *Les Vivants (The Living)*, which won the Prix Lipp Suisse, and the multi award-winning *L'implacable brutalité du réveil (The Relentless Brutality of Awakening)*. In 2017, she received the Swiss Grand Award for Literature for her body of work. Several of her novels have been translated into English and German.

Photo: David Ignaszewski, Koboy, Flammarion

Translator

Jackie Smith is a literary translator from French and German, and winner of the Austrian Cultural Forum London Translation Prize 2017. A graduate of Cambridge University, she has translated several titles including *Pope Francis* by Marie Duhamel. Her translation of an extract from Hans Platzgumer's *Am Rand (On the Edge)* was published in *Structo* magazine.

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French original (p. 26–29)

Arrivée à la porte de leur appartement, Marie resta accrochée à la rampe, leur donnant des coups de pied en pleurant qu'elle voulait retourner chez elle. Danielle attrapa son visage à deux mains pour qu'elle la regarde et se calme. La petite la fixait de ses yeux assombris, outragés. Les larmes fendaient ses joues brûlantes de sillons écarlates. Danielle resta imperturbable, alors qu'elle n'avait à l'évidence pas la force d'endurer une scène aussi virulente. Olivier s'agaça qu'elle tienne malgré tout à s'en charger. Elle s'était de tout temps octroyé une légitimité plus grande quand il s'agissait de faire obéir ou de consoler. Olivier n'insista pas, les entêtements masochistes de Danielle faisaient partie des très rares choses qui l'agaçaient chez elle. Marie finirait bien de toute façon par céder au sommeil, se dit-il en se retirant dans son bureau. Et de fait, à peine un quart d'heure plus tard, Danielle toqua contre la porte ouverte, comme à chaque fois qu'elle venait l'interrompre, puis elle alla s'asseoir au bord du petit lit d'appoint et le regarda. Olivier rapprocha sa chaise. Cela faisait longtemps qu'il ne lui avait plus vu une expression d'une telle souffrance.

Romain a quitté son travail sans prévenir personne, dit-elle avec un sourire de revanche sur leur confiance à tous ces deux dernières années. C'est la fille de la jardinerie qui fait les marchés qui m'a appris ça tout à l'heure, ils n'ont pas su s'il aurait fallu nous prévenir. J'étais si sonnée que je n'ai même pas pensé lui dire que Lou avait accouché. Elle s'arrêta un instant, détournant son visage vers la fenêtre. La lumière du dehors reflétait son tumulte. Olivier attendit qu'elle poursuive, il n'y avait rien qu'il puisse dire d'apaisant à ce stade. Il se préparait depuis le matin à une nouvelle de ce genre qui signifierait que Romain avait recommencé à boire, ou plutôt à s'anéantir d'alcool comme il l'avait fait avec une constance démente depuis l'adolescence, et une violence envers lui-même qu'ils avaient tous payée de nombreuses années d'inconsolable culpabilité.

Depuis que Romain était sorti de sa seconde cure, plus de deux ans plus tôt, et avait paru vouloir s'accro-

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Excerpt translated by Jackie Smith

When they arrived at the door of their flat, Marie clung on to the banisters, kicking out at them and sobbing that she wanted to go home. Danielle clasped Marie's face in both hands to make her look her in the eye and calm down. The little girl looked back at her, eyes dark and angry. Her tears scored scarlet furrows down her burning cheeks. Danielle remained unruffled, though it was obvious she hadn't the strength to deal with such a harrowing scene. It annoyed Olivier that she was determined nevertheless to take charge of the situation. She had always regarded herself as better qualified in matters of obedience and consolation. Olivier did not protest; Danielle's masochistic stubbornness was one of the very few things that irritated him about her. In any case, Marie was bound to succumb to sleep eventually, he reasoned, as he retired to his office. And sure enough, barely a quarter of an hour later, Danielle tapped on the open door, the way she always did when she needed to disturb him, then went and sat on the edge of the small spare bed and looked at him. Olivier pulled his chair closer. It had been a long time since he had seen an expression of such suffering on her face.

Romain left his job without telling anyone, she said, with a bitter smile at the thought of the confidence they had all placed in him these last two years. The girl from the garden centre, the one who runs a stall at the market, told me earlier. They weren't sure whether they should have let us know. I was so shaken that I didn't even think to tell her Lou has had her baby. She paused, turning her face towards the window. The light outside reflected her inner turmoil. Olivier waited for her to continue; there was nothing reassuring he could say at this point. Since the morning he had been readying himself for a revelation of this kind that would suggest that Romain had started drinking again, or rather destroying himself with alcohol, as he had been doing since his teens with unbelievable regularity and a violence towards himself which had cost every one of them countless years of inconsolable guilt.

Two years or so previously, after Romain had com-

cher un peu sérieusement à la vie, Danielle lui avait loué un petit appartement dans le quartier de la Bastide et tout mis en œuvre pour lui trouver rapidement un travail afin de consolider la volonté puisée Dieu sait où pendant les mois de sevrage. Tout s'était mis en place avec une relative facilité dont ils avaient été conscients qu'il ne fallait pas se réjouir trop vite. Que cela tienne finalement plusieurs mois, puis un, puis deux ans, rendait l'espoir paradoxalement plus ténu, plus insupportable. C'est ce dont Olivier eut l'intuition, pourtant impartageable avec Danielle : que ce serait peut-être un moins grand tourment de ne plus avoir à craindre, jour après jour, de voir s'effondrer l'aptitude à vivre si défaillante de ce fils par ailleurs infiniment aimable et doué.

Il a trente-huit ans, on ne peut pas intervenir davantage qu'on l'a fait, dit-il en lui touchant le genou pour qu'elle lui revienne. Mais c'était une chose dont Danielle ne pouvait pas se suffire ni se consoler, elle était d'une trempe si différente. Tu ne peux pas vivre ni vouloir à sa place, ajouta-t-il encore, en inspirant profondément pour lui faire entendre sa propre douleur devant la défaite, et aussi sa lassitude d'avoir à obtempérer à son volontarisme. Danielle le comprit bien ainsi, mais c'était là que le diable surgissait entre eux. Jamais elle ne se déroberait ni à sa certitude que son fils s'en sortirait, ni à son devoir de l'y aider. Chercher à la dissuader de tout tenter, c'était la blesser au plus profond et essentiel de sa foi. Que son espérance soit un poids pour Romain ne l'effleurait même pas, et Olivier se sentait impuissant et bien malgré lui illégitime à le lui faire entendre.

pleted his second spell in rehab and shown signs of wanting to engage with life in earnest, Danielle had rented him a small flat in the Bastide neighbourhood and gone to great lengths to find him a job straight away in an attempt to consolidate this willpower summoned from God knows where during his months of detox. It had all been relatively easy to set up, though they had known not to rejoice prematurely at this. The fact the job had ended up lasting several months, then one, then two years paradoxically made their hope more tenuous, more unbearable. Olivier had an intuition, not one he was able to share with Danielle, though, that it may well be less of a torment if they no longer had to live in constant dread of the day when the already flimsy life skills of her son, a son in other respects so infinitely gifted and kind, crumbled altogether.

He's thirty-eight; we can't get involved any more than we have done, he said, touching her knee to bring her back to him. But that was not something she was ever going to accept or that gave her any sense of consolation; she was cast from a very different mould. You can't do the living or wanting for him, he added, inhaling deeply to let her hear his own despair in the face of defeat, as well as his weariness at having to go along with her persistent efforts. Danielle understood where he was coming from, but this was something they would never see eye-to-eye on. Never would she abandon either her certainty that her son would make it through, or her duty to help him do so. Any attempt to dissuade her from trying every last thing would amount to an assault on the very essence of her faith. It never even crossed her mind that her sense of hope was a burden on Romain, and Olivier did not feel able to tell her, or that it was his place to do so.