



We're always telling ourselves lies.
For instance, I know I'm not pretty. I don't have blue eyes, the kind in which men gaze at their own reflection, eyes in which they want to drown so that I'll dive in to rescue them. I don't have the figure of a model, I'm more the cuddly sort – well . . . plump. The sort who takes up a seat and a half. A man of medium height won't be able to get his arms all the way round me. I don't move with the grace of a woman to whom men whisper sweet

nothings, punctuated by sighs . . . no, not me. I get brief, forthright comments. The bare bones of desire, nothing to embellish them, no comfortable padding.

I know all that.

All the same, when Jo isn't home I sometimes go up to our bedroom and stand in front of the long mirror in our wardrobe – I must remind Jo to fix it to the wall before it squashes me flat one of these days while I'm in the midst of my *contemplation*.

Then I close my eyes and I undress, gently, the way no one has ever undressed me. I always feel a little cold; I shiver. When I'm entirely naked, I wait a little while before opening my eyes. I enjoy that moment. My mind wanders. I dream. I imagine the beautiful paintings of languid bodies in the art books that used to lie around my parents' house, and later I think of the more graphic bodies you see pictured in magazines.

Then I gently open my eyes, as if lifting the lids in slow motion.

I look at my body, my black eyes, my small breasts, my plump spare tyre, my forest of black hair, I think I look beautiful, and I swear that, in that moment, I really *am* beautiful, very beautiful even.

My beauty makes me profoundly happy. Tremendously strong.

It makes me forget unpleasant things. The haberdashery shop, which is quite boring.

The chit-chat of Danièle and Françoise, the twins who run the Coiff'Esthétique hair salon next door to my shop, and their obsession with playing the lottery. My beauty makes me forget the things that always stay the same. Like an uneventful life. Like this dreary town, no airport, a grey place – there's no escape from it and no one ever comes here, no heart-throb, no white knight on his white horse.

Arras. Population 42,000, 4 hypermarkets, 11 supermarkets, 4 fast-food outlets, a few medieval streets, a plaque in the Rue du Miroir-de-Venise telling passers-by and anyone who may have forgotten that Eugène-François Vidocq,

an early private eye, was born here on 24 July 1775. And then there's my haberdashery shop.

Naked and beautiful in front of the mirror, I feel as if I'd only have to beat my arms in the air and I could fly away, light and graceful. As if my body might join the bodies in the art books lying about my childhood home. And then it would be as beautiful as them. Definitely.

But I never dare try.

The sound of Jo downstairs always takes me by surprise. It tears the silk of my dream. I get dressed again double quick. Shadows cover the clarity of my skin. I know about the wonderful beauty beneath my clothes, but Jo never sees it.

He did once tell me I was beautiful. That was over twenty years ago, when I was little more than twenty. I was wearing a pretty blue dress with a gilt belt, a fake touch of Dior about it; he wanted to sleep with me. He complimented me on my nice clothes.

So you see, we always tell ourselves lies.

Because love would never stand up to the truth.