

## **A FLEETING SORROW**

*By Françoise Sagan.*

*Arcade, \$19.95.*

When it comes to concentrating the mind on the meaning of life, nothing works like a death sentence. Paul Cazavel, the 39-year-old protagonist of this brief novel by the author of "Bonjour Tristesse," is told that he has lung cancer and has six months to live. In Richard Seaver's translation, we follow an interior monologue that delves deeply into the unpleasant nooks and crannies of a prematurely doomed psyche, accompanying Paul through the rest of his day. Upon leaving the doctor, he heads for the offices of his friend Robert, who, between phone calls, briskly tells him to get a second opinion. When Sonia, Paul's mistress, hears the devastating news, she flees to the bathroom for painkillers — for her own migraine. A meeting with his former lover Mathilde — the only woman, Paul realizes, he ever truly loved — sparks momentary hope. But she, alas, has found someone else. At the end of the day, Paul returns home to his wife, Helen, who can barely disguise her glee on learning of her impending widowhood. The novel's unsurprising ending does not diminish Françoise Sagan's message: When a life is filled with such meaningless connections, the tragedy lies not in the death sentence but in the wasted life itself.

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