Foreword

When the French police informed us about Oliver I was not shocked. I had half-expected him to do this – but not in such a strange way. I was close to his wife but he was hard to get to know, and, to be honest, to like. He was often moody, reserved and silent. Paul, my husband, an extrovert, found him hard going. When his son got in touch – he had gone to work as a surveyor in New Zealand – and asked if we could go over to put his affairs in order, we could hardly refuse.

As we were standing in his front garden, M. Bonneval from the next farm arrived with a laptop. He kept saying *la rose*, pointing at the machine and then the withered shrub in the flowerbed. Our French isn't great. In the kitchen he entered a password and pointed to a file on the desktop. The Rose. It was Oliver's laptop.

I have to confess, that having spoken to Oliver's doctor in Nogent, I adapted what he told us and took the liberty of adding the postscript. Unfortunately Chambrelan had no record of Adèle's address or phone number. But I'm not sure it matters.

Lorraine Day

THE ROSE

Is it possible to preserve a lost loved-one, in defiance of death and time? To what lengths are the bereaved prepared to go? Blade-marks on ancient bones have led archaeologists to speculate about the de-fleshing of corpses and, by extension, to theorise that the grieving relatives took some comfort - as well as nourishment - in consuming the body of the dear-departed - although to what extent (brain? skin? marrow? *guts??)* - shall remain a mystery, for, as far as I am aware, no contemporary stone age / hunter-gatherer tribes have maintained such practices. The literal incorporation of the dead within the living - if these cannibalistic rituals really did take place (though how the waste products were viewed shall also remain a mystery) - must have been their way of combating mortality. As the mother liberated new life from her womb, so was she absorbed at her death by her offspring, and thence re-absorbed into the body of the tribe. A cycle of life in which death was only one point was thus conceived.

The consumption of the dead, though repugnant to us, may have been not only a virtuous, but even a compulsory ritual of reverence and love, a consoling guarantee to the old and moribund of survival within the muscle and bone of their descendants. Perhaps in the faeces were identified the least worthy or the damned unpleasant aspects of the person. Our ancestors had doubtless seen in the spawning rivers how decaying salmon enriched the waters for their hatchlings, and how leaves in the forest fell to moulder down into the soil in which new seedlings thrived. Incorporation was their way of imitating those natural processes. American Indians achieved their de-fleshing by proxy, placing their dead on biers to be consumed and flown away - and thence into a far wider cycle of life - by the great birds they so venerated.

The embalming and bandaging of the dead and their imprisonment within dark pyramids might have been viewed by those tribes as bizarre and even cruel. Behind glass now in museums, their eternity is one of being gawped at and yawned over by school parties - a fate which would have surely first baffled then utterly appalled the embalmers and bandagers.

We prefer to burn or bury our dead out of sight and - *be honest* - gradually out of mind, behind a screen of dead grass, below slabs whose solemn, loving dedications are soon corrupted by time, by weather and by lichen, depending on the resilience of the stone.

As many of us do, I enjoy visiting graveyards to wonder at the longevity of some and the tragic fleetingness of others. Look, this woman outlived her husband by forty years and her son died in infancy! Now she lies on top of them, all three neglected by the impatient present, in a quiet queue for immortality. The British increasingly prefer to cremate whereas the Americans and the Continentals still prefer to bury. I have seen how, in Austria and Italy, gravestones are adorned with the photographs of the incumbents, and lanterns in which candles slowly burn, as if God alone cannot be entrusted with the immortalisation of the person. Some Swedes choose to be deep-freeze dried and shaken to pieces to make a fine compost. Some people wish to be buried in flimsy coffins under a sapling. The Madagascans open up the caves of the dead every seven years and turn the bones of the loved ones or take them out into the air to keep them company for a while, amongst dancing and feasting. Then they put them back.
Some keep their loved ones trapped like genies in vases (though I wonder if others are loath, out of superstition, to have them on the mantle, or in the bedroom) and others bring cuddly toys and flowers at regular intervals to the graveside, and at Easter and Christmas, they buy wreathes. Many keep the bedrooms of lost ones as shrines. Some compose and send in bad verses to the local newspaper on the anniversary of their demise.

All are vain attempts to halt or slow the march of time away from that terrible moment when life stops. The person whom we daily touched, loved, spoke to, argued with, made up with, walked out with and rode with, is now gone for ever. We need to be near them but they are now just a sprinkle of ashes or stinking flesh. The bewilderment and agony this causes has to be experienced to be properly understood. Their proximity due to our mental and photographic images, to their possessions, their handwriting, perhaps their recorded voices - seems so immediate that we expect them to walk through the door at any moment; yet their self is less real now and more remote than the farthest star we can see on a clear night.

Nothing can prepare you for the pain. Nothing can alleviate it but the Thief of life itself - Time. This is my story, of how I coped. And what I did with my beloved wife.

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What a heavy burden of responsibility and enormous power a secret confers on its possessor. And as death approaches, what a dilemma. To reveal it at the final moment - as an act of cruelty - in order to paralyse the survivor with its venom - is to sting like a dying scorpion. To reveal it as act of kindness, to relieve the survivor in the long term of their grief may be well-intentioned, but misguided.

“I betrayed you! Think of that every day and suffer! I shall not tell you how or when or who with. Your fate is to ask a thousand questions to which my dead mouth offers no answers!”

OR

“I betrayed you. Think less of me. Transfer your affections to a worthier one.
I do not deserve your grieving. Farewell.”

What an arsenal the moribund have at their final disposal! And in their feverish state of confusion and anxiety are they in proper control of it?

But spare a thought for the *secret*.

Should the secret itself, as a victim - like the wife of the deceased in *suttee* - be trapped within the urn or the coffin for ever? I cannot help but think of the truth as a bird, with a right to be free, regardless of where it flies and what harm it does.
"This is the truth. And the truth should be told. I cannot take a guilty secret to the grave. I betrayed you. There, my conscience is eased. Far better to face reality than to be part of a fiction. It is painful. Endure it. Conquer it. Be stronger. If you can still love me *then*, it will be a love tempered and strengthened by suffering; a spiritual love beyond the prison of the weak flesh, all of which of mine is vanishing."

This then was her legacy to me. She needed to tell me of a brief affair. She confessed, she cried and I forgave. It burnt into my heart and mind like a brand and when she died the grief was a double-headed Gorgon; for not only she, but my fixed idea of her was dead. Did I ever wish she had never told me? At first, yes, of course. Then, as I reflected on those heart-felt words of hers, and on the importance of knowing the truth, no.

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It was an early April morning. The sun was climbing and swelling. The forecast was good. She had listened to it with grim resignation and we shared, I am sure, the same thought; that the chilly overnight temperatures to come would probably not concern her. I reached out to turn of the bedside radio as a piece I knew would irritate her was announced - something by Messiaen, I think. When she had woken at seven our conversation had drifted into where I might scatter her ashes.
"If you bury me I will haunt you! You choose," she had eventually whispered with a smile. "Take me on a mystery tour - somewhere new….Surprise me."
She had not lost her dark sense of humour. We chuckled until the hollowness of the jest silenced us. As I clicked off the radio, she reached out for my hand and gripped it with all her failing strength.
"If I think you will go to pieces, Oliver, and close the garden gates on the world, I will die in agony. Please promise me you won't do that. I want you to imagine I will see and love the world still through your eyes. For all you know, I might. It's the one hope and consolation I cling to. I love you and want to be with you. If you can still love me - after what I said yesterday - please promise."
I had so often imagined with dread the approach of these final scenes; the nurse whispering in my ear that her coma was imminent; the departure of my weeping son; the world outside the window ignorantly going about its business. She had spoken with a quiet vehemence. I felt blackmailed. I knew my life without her would be an empty structure and yet she was begging me to promise to carry on within it regardless, and even to enjoy it. How could I go, without her, *anywhere* we loved? Or anywhere new without her to share in its delights? Marie was my life. All my pleasures were related to and dependent on her. I looked into her lovely face where only a pale weariness betrayed the vile creature consuming her slender body. I screwed up my eyes in tears and inclined my face to her breast to feel the warmth of

life still within. She rallied.
“You must promise me not to be lonely. Promise me you will find someone to love and someone to love you. Somewhere within you I might flourish. If you are sad and depressed I will wither too. I can’t bear the thought! Please promise.”
How many times had we had discussions like this since her diagnosis? Today she had found new, unanswerable arguments. I kissed her lips which were still mouthing the same plea.
“I promise.” I said.
She sighed and closed those wonderful dark blue eyes. I whispered her name but she could not hear. The nurse came from nowhere and nodded sadly. She was in a coma. I sat with her for hours until her final breath, and when there was no more point in remaining I had to be helped out. My beloved was dead and through the window in the hospital car park someone was angrily sounding a car horn.

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In the months before her death I had occasionally caught myself imagining, as some kind of morbid rehearsal for the event, that she had already died. Whenever this happened, I stopped the process immediately, fearing that this might inoculate me against the grief to come. I assured myself that this act of imagining must be a natural event for those on the threshold of loss.
I need not have worried because there began a period of pain so intense that I will not - cannot - discuss it. The God of Perversity ensured that the rest of April was as kind and lovely as any April I could remember. The thought of the simple, elegant flowers and the enthusiasm of the birds disgusted me and I could not bear the thought of venturing out. Then I recalled my promise to her and, having steeled myself, I found myself walking mechanically along the canal where we used to stroll out from late January onwards, playing our game of spring-spotting. A water vole plopped into the water and I went to point it out and make a comment to her. Within ten minutes I was back home. I took out the brandy and paracetomol and stared at the bottles for hours before finally putting them away.
My son and friends came around, stayed a while and I put on a front. As the weeks passed the pain eased slightly, but not the emptiness. I was able to stop myself usually from thinking about her confession. I had a guilty secret too and I used it to hurl at hers like a demolition ball. Her encounter had happened many years previously, she had said, in a moment of weakness, with a man I did not know, on a union training course. It infuriated me that he had the only record now, however imperfect, of the event; infuriated me that he possessed *my* secret - as he had possessed my wife - and that he had absolutely no idea of the agony I suffered in the dead of night, as he slept soundly. I wished him as dead as she was. Years ago I had read an article in a colleague’s science magazine about the colonies of bacteria which live within and upon us, and which we pass on in part to those with whom we come into contact. I realised with sudden revulsion and despair that his had passed from his body to mine by way of hers. I scrubbed my teeth and I showered, but of course all in vain. How could I purge that contamination from my innards, from my heart and ultimately from my mind?
For solace, I thought of myself as a temporary vessel into which hot oil had been poured and which would soon be as empty again as the space whence it had emerged. And in the cemetery the silent graves assured me that suffering is as temporary as joy. Within twenty or thirty years my life would be over. Who then might wonder whether

it had been a happy one? Certainly not me. I had firmly turned away from bringing about my premature end, but not because I had any lingering fear of death. The consolations of life now seemed so meagre, so piecemeal in comparison with its underlying futility and with the agonies of bereavement, hurt and doubt. From that seed of doubt there grew up a rank plant - a conviction almost - that she had told a white lie on her death bed; that her adulterous partner had been an acquaintance, a friend even. So almost without planning to, I distanced myself by degrees from our circle - who felt inhibited anyway, I suspected, to be with one half only of the entity they knew as Marie and Ollie - often reduced, reflecting how inseparable we were - to Mollie. This broke a promise, I was aware, of not cutting myself off from people. I whispered to her again, as I lay in our lonely bed, that I *would* make new friends. But not for a while yet.
I also meant to keep my promise to her about her ashes, but not for a while yet either. I could not decide where - and when - I would be able to release them. The garden we had laid out together after our early retirement together bloomed spectacularly that summer and I was tempted to bury them there. But then I thought of the heedless people who would move in after my death and disturb her. But I was unable to go into the garden in August, when it was at its most spectacular with the second flush of our roses, the rubdeckia and the cannas. It was then that a voice told me that I had no choice but to leave my home town - with Marie - and begin a brand new chapter in what was left of my threadbare life, in completely new territory.

In a dream I saw her again crying and pleading with me. “Promise me!” she kept saying. The next day I put the house in the hands of a letting agency and within a week tenants had been found. I considered where I could move to - somewhere I had been without Marie, or somewhere entirely new. My mind roamed over the map of Britain but could not settle. The thought that I shared and trod the same ground as that man revolted me. I even imagined him masturbating on his sordid memories and felt nauseated. I texted my son, packed a few clothes, a few necessary items, my laptop, my CDs and - with my precious ashes - drove away one gloomy September morning and left England for good.

Thirty years ago, before we had ever met, I had been an English assistant in a small town called La Rose, not many kilometres from Le Mans. In all those years I had scarcely thought about it, let alone felt any urge to undertake a sentimental return journey.

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<u>LA ROSE</u>
I was surprised to see how little La Rose had changed. Here were no ghostly shadows of Marie. I could walk around without the cruelty of objects she had touched or sights she had seen. My relief felt like betrayal but was better than the agony of nostalgia. The tall, old factory in La Rose which made cigarette papers and books of matches was still silent and derelict. Down the right hand side of it ran the drive I had forgotten about until that moment, the drive which led to the small Calvados distillery. I ventured down there a few paces, expecting it to be likewise shut up for good, and turned back when a figure emerged from the doorway, hammer in hand, to stare at me menacingly.
I retreated onto the small square which was still geometrically dotted with plane trees,

pollarded, and with trunks wrapped in brown and cream paper-bark, as smooth to the touch as to the eye. There was one space - a stump like a missing tooth - where one had evidently decayed. There was still the Bar-PMU (the equivalent of the bookmaker's), the butcher's and three doors away the boulangerie-pâtisserie. The rest were dour private houses of three storeys with dark windows, some already shuttered or half-shuttered as the light diminished. They put me in mind, with their jaundiced lace curtains, of suspicious, indignant, old women, huddling together to share some local scandal.

At the opening of the square was a narrow street, rather like the gullet of the torso, and on the left corner I could see figures busy in the papeterie, the one other shop on the square. I looked around the wrought-iron benches, which had also been positioned by a pedantic mathematician, and admired the neat cut-outs of lawn, between which a maze of clay and gravel paths ran. No-one used to sit on those benches and no-one did now. I crossed the road, stepped around the puddles and stood in the middle of the park. I turned to look at Les Trois Cloches, the one and only building, in flat, scarlet Normandy brick and creamy mortar, of some merit in the town. Outside it I had parked, just along from the squat chapel - formidably ugly - whose three bells gave the hotel its name. Here I intended to stay until I could decide where to settle. Financially I was secure. As well as my rental income I had my lecturer's pension, half of Marie's, our savings and the monthly return from them. I could rent or buy here and be comfortable. The price of property this far from the Channel had not gone through the roof.

I did not expect to find the same people in charge of these shops after thirty years and was amazed that the proprietress of the hotel, Mme Forrestier - minus her husband, as it would turn out, and sadly depleted of the lustre of her auburn hair and the complexion for which she was admired or envied - was still behind the counter, now in a tasselled green shawl against the autumnal draughts. It had rained all the way to Portsmouth and for most of my journey from Caen, through Falaise - where William the Bastard's castle juts up still on its strange inland cliff - and had only stopped in the early afternoon, just after Argentan. But the wind which had driven it persisted. As I entered the lobby and admitted a gust of it, she looked up crossly and shrank into herself. The glazed double doors in that green matt paint which Normans unaccountably love, still did not fit well together and I had to have several goes at closing them. I turned. There she was. It was if no time had passed since my last call. I asked her if she had a room and she looked almost contemptuous to hear such an absurd question. Of course she did. It was Tuesday, and in the whole of La Rose there was probably nobody who did not belong there.

"You are English, M'sieur?"

"I am."

"But your French is very good. For one night?"

"No, Madame Forrestier, for maybe quite a while. Until I find a property."

She straightened up and stared.

"You know my name, M'sieur?"

"Yes. I came to dinner here once - in 1972. June. The staff of the school were saying farewell. I was the English assistant."

Still she stared, this time trying to fix on the occasion. She was, I estimated, in her mid-sixties and still, in spite of the efforts of time, a keen-eyed, attractive woman, even more so now in this state of high alertness, and her round face etched with fine, whiskery lines put me in mind of the face of a curious cat. Then she sighed and looked dejected.

“There were very, very many such celebrations back then, M’sieur. *Then* there was more style, more *joie de vivre* then today, when money is so *tight* and life is more….complicated…..whoever thought it would be so, back then?”
I glanced to my left into the large dining room which was in virtual darkness, and saw again the many tables, candle-lit and glass-laden, around which all those past colleagues of mine were raising their champagne flutes and wishing me Bon Voyage and Bonne Chance; and in the corner next to me sat Adèle, the dark-haired beauty I adored but would never see again. What was her surname? And at that moment there was as yet no inkling in my head of the other girl I would meet just over a year later and fall so helplessly in love with. And where, all those faded years ago, now finally sealed, had she been on that very evening? I pictured us both, bizarrely, as two diaphanous creatures floating in a suspension of time, awaiting the moment of our release and our first encounter…..that foggy morning in October…..Or was it November?
“M’sieur? Did you hear? I must have your passport. The gendarmerie here is very attentive. Very *efficacious.*” she added with evident disapproval.
I handed it over and she studied it very closely. I thought of the bored official at the port who had nodded me through as I waved it under her nose.
“Monsieur W? Wr? Comment ça se dit?”
“Wright.”
“C’est bizarre!”
She looked at my photo and then closely at me. Her thoughts were obvious. My dark hair had, like hers, greyed. The gleam in my eyes had gone out and the freshness and firmness of my cheeks had sagged. Until Marie’s diagnosis I had maintained my youthful looks. Madame placed the relevant page on her photocopier, took a copy and handed it back.
“No more moustache?” she asked sadly.
“No. It went grey like the rest of me. I shaved it off.”
“I am sorry, but I cannot recall M’sieur.”
“No matter. I would be amazed if Madame could. And *Monsieur* Forrestier…Is he…?”
“Ah *him!”* she exclaimed. She made a noise between a sniff and a snort. She turned to the walnut board on which only one ring of fourteen or fifteen was keyless. Her hand went from one to another before making a choice. She put it on the counter and asked if I would like to reserve a table for dinner. I would indeed. I booked for eight. Out of habit, her finger made a slight movement towards the large brass push-bell which still occupied one corner of the marble counter and stopped itself. I remembered I had rung it once back then for some reason. I wondered when it had dinged its last ding to summon help. And since my last unsteady walk to the top with Adèle on the eve of my departure, how many eager feet had negotiated the steep stone staircase which wound around to my left and out of sight? Our climb I could remember, but, alas, nothing else. As I rounded the final flight now with my case, it struck me not for the first time in my life, how poignant it was that buildings outlast all who frequent them - and their actions, good and bad - and that even their proud owners are no more than visitors.

It was past five, and in the dullness more and more lights were coming on all around the square. The baker was doing a lively trade and the counter stools in the Bar-PMU were all occupied - save one on the very end nearest to the door. Within two minutes I was seated on it, ordering a pastis, a drink which I had not sampled in all those years.

The other men predictably stared at me and my clothes as I entered and then returned to their aperitifs and conversation. One untidy, unshaven man was staring up glumly at the end of a horse race shown on a small television set perched high in the corner. He was drunk. The barman was about forty and he kept looking at me with more than the normal curiosity due to a stranger. Finally he put down his tea towel and placed his palms on the counter opposite to me. In accented but decent English he enquired,
"You are Mr Wright? You remember me? I am Laurent Frelon, your old pupil."
He held out a palm to me. I was astonished. I took it. He brought me another pastis on his account and told the others in rapid French that I had been his teacher. This was met with a chorus of hoots, cheers and comments I could not quite make out, though I got the gist.
"But no! He was a *very* good boy," I lied. Did I have the vaguest recollection of a very earnest, enthusiastic pupil with his hand up? In a sea of indifference? But a boy without a face or a name. Had he been Laurent? I decided there and then that he *had*.
He pointed expectantly at the photograph on the wall behind him. The smiling couple were his mother and father, now retired, he said. Did I remember them? I looked and shook my head.
"It is thirty years, Laurent. One forgets so many things. And besides, in those days I rarely came here."
"No matter."
He began to talk of the school and of the staff he liked and disliked. There were few names I remembered; Monsieur Salles, the huge sport teacher, le "rugbyman", who had picked me up one Saturday night and carried me above his head after the French had trounced "les rosbifs" at the Parc des Princes. And of course there was Monsieur Ferlin, the ice-cold Directeur who rarely emerged from his office. Laurent eventually mentioned Mademoiselle Chabert, the pretty music teacher. Chabert of course! Adèle *Chabert*! I felt strangely elated - like a researcher who had unearthed a precious fact.
"All the boys loved her," he added with a wink. "And the girls were jealous."
He turned to serve another client and got involved in a discussion. I did not have the chance to ask him the obvious question. I thought with some alarm of Marie. I ought really to remove her from the boot of the car. I looked around to make sure it was still there. It was a collector's item, an old Morris Minor. What if it were stolen? In my imagination I heard her laugh. What a mystery tour that might be! I stood and turned to leave, but Laurent called me back.
"Mr Wright, I mean - I mean*t* - to ask. Why do you come back? To La Rose?"
The pastis had loosened my tongue a little.
"To look up old friends, Laurent. Like you."
But thoughts of Marie deleted any further enquiry about Adèle.

The heavy curtains in the restaurant had been drawn to. It was a shock almost to see again the old floor tiles in red, gold, and black which I had completely forgotten. There was only one diner besides me, a heavy man in shirt-sleeves and braces who was reading Le Figaro when I entered. He gave me a curt nod and went back to his paper. Mme Forrestier turned out to be the chef de cuisine and the waitress. The house pâté of duck was delicious, and she poached the cod I ordered for my main in a delicate wine sauce with tiny carrots and shallots, to mouth-watering perfection. I decided, on her recommendation to drink the dry cider which the small cidrerie in the neighbouring town of La Ferté produced for a small circle of favoured hoteliers.
"The proprietor is the second cousin of my *husband*," she had explained, hissing the final word like a nasty goose. My fellow-guest departed, and as soon as his footsteps

were fading on the stairs, she came in with a slice of her special apple tart which had not been on the menu. And from behind her back she conjured a bottle of what she called, with a wink, Calvados "of the farmer".
"M'sieu has heard of Calva?"
I smiled. I mentioned my tour of the distillery next to the cigarette-paper factory. *Didier,* I suddenly declared with confidence, had been the name of the manager. I told her how he had casually tossed me a bottle of it, and that I had juggled with it and only just managed to catch it. Otherwise I might never have tried it. Did Didier still run the place?
"Didier has retired. His nephew carries on. But the cidrerie here has closed. It was first taken over by Pommier and after scarcely two years it was all at once shut down and all the apples and vessels were transferred to *Nogent* - bah! It was a terrible scandal!"
"So, is there no large employer now in La Rose?"
She put down the empty plates and sat down opposite.
"SIREX," she murmured with an enigmatic smile. "That *fat* man, in the braces - he works there - just for the time being. He does the computers. A *Parisian*." she whispered with another hiss.
"SIREX? Is that the big modern factory near the wood I can see from my window?"
"*Exactly*!"
She was determined to keep me guessing. In the end I weakened.
"So what does SIREX make?"
"You will never guess!"
SIREX. Coffins? Hand-cuffs? Fireworks? Gobstoppers? What was the French for gobstoppers? I shrugged.
"Kitchen rolls….and….toilet paper! SIREX, M'sieur, wipes half the bottoms in France! In *Nogent* they say we are not only the *arse* of Normandy, but now have the factory to match! But, of course, in *Nogent* they make contraceptives."
"I never knew that."
"So *we* say, in La Rose, the *Nogentais* do not need them, as they are too busy making money to make love."
From her pinafore she produced two small glasses and poured us a measure of Calva - "le trou Normand", the Norman *hole* - and I cautiously tasted it. I had tried bootleg Calva before, but this was round and nutty and smooth, with a definite aftertaste of apple. She beamed to see me enjoy it and poured me another.
"It is a little secret which we older ones keep. The mayor also partakes so our supplier is safe. But it is best not to speak of it. The chief of the gendarmerie does not drink and is an enthusiastic kill-joy. His father died with his liver."
"But why does Madame risk her secret with me, a complete stranger?"
"But no! Monsieur is not a *complete* stranger! And besides," she added, looking from my right to my left eye, "He has a roguish little glint in his eyes. He can be trusted. And if he cannot - too bad!- No more Calva for *him*!"
She sat back in her chair and turned serious.
"The people in Nogent are right of course. About La Rose. So why have you come back to this no-hope place?"
So I began to tell her some of my secrets. And when I had finished she looked very sad and quite moved.
"And was your Marie a French woman perhaps?"
"She had a French great-grandmother. Descended from the Huguenots."
I reached for my wallet and showed her a picture of her in her prime.

“Ah, but she is beautiful! And she *looks* so French - with her dark hair and eyes! She could be from here!”
“She was also Irish. Her eyes were a very dark blue. It’s hard to tell on the photo.”
“And she died of cancer?”
“Yes. In her intestines. Then in her bones and her lungs. Finally everywhere.”
She shook her head and whispered something about her sister. We sat silently and the tick of the clock grew louder. Then, without any warning she began to laugh. She turned very red and apologised for this *sacrilege.* She had thought all at once about her husband, she added, and had not been able to stop herself.
“You have taken so much care for your wife, but I…….” her voice trailed off and she laughed again.
“I remember Monsieur Forrestier only very vaguely,” I said. (In truth, I could not picture him at all.) “Madame eclipsed him!” I dared, abetted by the Calvados, to add.
“But you flatter me!”
“But no, Madame. Not at all! Is he…..Did he……What….*happened.*..to Monsieur Forrestier?”
“Fool! He left one afternoon with our cook - a woman many years younger - to start a restaurant in Nogent. I had a booking for fifty people that same evening! He demanded a divorce and, of course, his share of Les Cloches. I refused. But, alas, she was too much for him! A large lady with muscles and her……*appetites*! And as he was *trying* one night to make love to her, he just *died*! His heart gave up! So he got nothing and she got even less. I never think of him, that is why I laughed. *You* cannot decide what to do with your dear beloved‘s ashes, while I - ah, ah, ah - would have thrown his in a *ditch*! *Im - bé - cile*!”
I shared her amusement, till she stopped and thought over again what I had been saying.
“And now you wish to recommence here - well away from home. But why *here*? There are many, many prettier places. I too would sell up, if I could, and move away, if I could find a buyer. But *who* would buy this?”
She was studying me with a hint of curiosity. The teak case-clock in the corner chimed the first quarter after ten and it lent me the cover I needed to pretend I had not heard her half-proposal.
“My faith! Is it so late?” she demanded of its dial.
“Madame. Have you perhaps heard of a lady called Adèle, who *was* Chabert, the music teacher once - or maybe still - at the C.E.S. ? She had dark hair like my wife‘s. She was very pretty and would have surely been known in the town. She would have caught the eye of anyone with good taste - such as your good self.”
She stoppered the bottle and stood up.
“Teachers do not come here any more, M’sieur. Would your wife have liked La Rose? I think not!”
“It is quiet and it suits me. It holds no bad memories. I think Marie will like it too.”

The next morning she brought me croissants which were soft and fragrant. The coffee was mellow and together they made a delicious breakfast. The Parisian had already gone, judging by the crumbs and large coffee stain on the cloth of the next table. I sensed her disgust as she tidied up. She had that knack of communicating exactly what she thought without the need of a word. And I sensed she was dying to tell me something but was unsure of how to begin. Finally she came over. She had remembered something. A notice in the papeterie was advertising a house for rent, and it would be ideal for me.

“I would of course be sad to see you depart. One needs reliable clients these days.”
I assured her that I would do nothing in a hurry.
“It belonged - or rather belongs - to a Monsieur Tesquet. He is very old and very stubborn. Despite many falls he has refused all entreaties of his daughter to leave. Finally he fell, concussed himself and broke his hip - and is now in private care. The notice was still in the window on Saturday. It is a very nice property.”
After breakfast I walked to the shop and copied the number onto my phone. I dialled it and spoke to a very pleasant lady who confirmed that the house was still not let. She gave me directions and I set off in the direction of La Ferté.
The road quickly narrowed into a lane and from the old buildings occasionally on my right, house martins darted back and forth, to my surprise and delight, across my windscreen. On my left was a dense wood and, shockingly, a wild boar emerged, stared at me, then trotted into a gap in the hedge. I slowed to a crawl. At intervals there were chickens on the road and verges, some peering into the ditches before retreating. They appeared to belong to no-one, for the buildings had been replaced by pasture and occasional groups of dun cattle. Then a farmhouse came into view, a traditional building, low and very long, with a thatched roof. The courtyard, filthy with mud and cowpats, was framed by outbuildings where the cows were milked, chickens housed, cheese made and, no doubt, Calvados distilled. Most of the shutters - in Normandy green - were closed, but in the centre the top half of the split door was open, allowing the eye a peek into the dim kitchen. I drove on slowly. As the crossroads approached there came into view a smaller farm building, obviously renovated and gentrified - perhaps as a weekend retreat for wealthy *Parisians*. I crossed the junction and plunged into the virtual darkness of forest on both sides. I wondered if I had misunderstood the directions, for I seemed to be heading away from all possibility of settlement. But she *had* said, I felt certain, to drive on through the trees for three kilometres. And as the dark trees fell away right and left, starting with a very narrow column of silver, gradually to envelope me, there spread out a huge sky. And I felt great relief.
There on the left, behind a rose-hip hedge and a white gate, was the square bungalow - with the pyramid roof - in the square plot. Exactly as she had described it. And the gate bore the name-plate LA BRODERIE. The front garden was, as I had been warned, quite untidy. The lawn would need a scythe taking to it and the tall flowers in the borders were being jostled and bullied by weeds and grasses. At the back were four apple trees and a large enough plot to keep me in vegetables the whole year. Perhaps I could grow those huge, ridged tomatoes which, if properly ripened, had a superlative flavour. And could I distil my own apple wine into something resembling Calvados? My spirits rose and flourished with the plants I could envisage. I walked further in, and behind the hedge, between the garden and a spinney, ran a stream. Was it a trick of the light and the water or had I had just caught the gleam of a passing fish!? Were there fresh-water crayfish in there too? And eels? In the spinney I could see the cream caps of mushrooms and I made a note to buy a pocket guide. Around the spinney was more pasture and more cattle and, beyond, more woodland girding the horizon. I turned and on the boundary spotted a tree I did not recognise. The leaves were long and in clusters, and from the boughs were hanging green pods. Some had fallen to earth with the apples. I picked one up - it was the size of a small peach - split it open with my thumbs, and revealed - to my utter amazement - a soft walnut. It was sweet and delicious A thrill, a reflex of sheer elation ran through me. But I had no-one to share it with. The thought of Marie pierced me and I threw the pod away. I sat down with my back to the tree and wept.

A strange voice called softly. Surprised and embarrassed, I opened my eyes and looked around. But there was no-one. I got up. And it was only then, in the absence of thinking, that it struck me. I was entirely secluded and in the middle of a vast silence, which not even the faraway cattle seemed inclined to break. This was what I was seeking. Somewhere here Marie could eventually be free. And I might even learn to be content. I asked out loud if this might be the right place, but only the wind in the wood whispered an answer.

I phoned Tesquet's daughter and discussed the monthly rent. I did a quick conversion and was shocked to find the amount fell *well* within my budget. I asked again to check that there had been no mistake. I accepted immediately - with the proviso that should the property become available to buy, I would have first refusal. I would meet any reasonable asking price.
"But willingly, M'sieur! Such an arrangement would be entirely convenient. My father will assuredly never return there. He is no longer physically or *temperamentally,* of a disposition so as to permit it. But of course *we* must inherit the property before it can be sold. If you get my meaning."
(We?)
"Yes, naturally." I replied. "Are you his *only* child?" I ventured.
"No. I have a brother. But he is rather…ingenuous…rather like a boy. He will not dispute any arrangement I make. Shall I ask the notary to draw up an agreement between us? A *comprehensive* one, to meet the eventuality which M'sieur refers to?"

*

Did I dare to approach the school? The incident which had decided me <u>*never*</u> to become a teacher had left its mark, though it was, of course, no longer *physically* painful. I had been within ten days of leaving the school and returning home. I was, in my early twenties, younger than any of my colleagues, fresh-faced - *baby*-faced even. More than once in the autumn I had been mistaken for a pupil. These things, and my rather slight build, had made it very difficult for me to assert any authority. Even with the younger forms, even with half-classes, I had not been a success. So much so that in that in the November I had, in great dejection, told my supervisor I wished to return home. She decided then to use me differently, with groups of no more than six in conversation around a table in the library. This worked. The building I had been growing to loathe and dread, ceased overnight to hold any terrors for me. But there was one fifteen-year-old boy - (boy?? He was a *brute)* - with whom even the most seasoned staff, even the biggest male teachers, such as Salles, had trouble with. Brought up on a farm where the dog ate on the kitchen table, he was ferociously ugly, ferociously stupid and ferociously xenophobic. Naturally, he developed a particular hatred of me, even though I had never taught him. Upon hearing I was about to leave (he was leaving himself) he had decided to give me a special present, a generous good-hiding, as I left the building one sunny June afternoon and "persuaded" some other pupils to swear that I had kicked him first. I was so badly beaten and shaken up that I had not returned. Ever since, I have had difficulty focusing my eyes, especially when tired.
It had therefore been a sense of shame and of solidarity that had swollen the teacher numbers at my farewell dinner. Ironically too, it had been the Brute who had led indirectly to me meeting Marie just over a year later. Let me explain. In my first two years of study at university I had coasted. Having no clear idea of what to do with a

French degree - other than teach - I had no reason to be super-ambitious. There was a great shortage of teachers and even a third-class or an ordinary degree would get me on a PGCE course. I saw my third year in a French school as just a tiller to set me on track for that destination.
I returned transformed. There was no power on earth which could drag me through a school foyer again. I abandoned my flat-mates and rented a bed-sit. I swapped drinking for studying and the pub for the library. Whenever I felt the urge to go out, the sight of my bent nose in the mirror, courtesy of the Brute, quenched it. In the end I knew my Rabelais, my Baudelaire, my Gide, my Proust and many other authors on my reading list as intimately as buddies, and had read all the relevant "crits". An unintended consequence of this new me had been my rupture with Adèle. I kept putting off replying to her letters - or wrote just a hasty, sketchy effort - and in the end her letters dried up.
I got my First and was accepted as a research student. I decided to delve into the work, life and background of an obscure seventeenth century poet whose writing, I felt, had been undeservedly neglected. Through my efforts his quaint metaphysical verses were placed on the undergraduate reading list. In that single-minded final year I had virtually run out of the Modern Languages building after tutorials and the occasional lecture, and knew none of the new students by sight or name. It was a relief in my post-graduate year - that extra year I had earned - to relax and take time to renew friendships I had neglected, and make new ones. I began to spend more time in the coffee-bar. One morning I joined the end of a queue which was so long that it turned a corner. As I came around that corner I saw her. A beautiful girl, about to be served at the hatch. She was slim, about five foot six tall with a mass of dark brown hair cut straight across in a sharp line, thick, above her collar.

Adèle??

She turned. Her face was rounder, less oval than Adèle's, and her eyes were *dark* blue and she had the most distinct eyebrows and a delicate nose and mouth. She saw me stare, smiled and looked away. Instead of joining a group of friends as I thought she was bound to, she looked around for a place to sit. The bar was crowded and noisy and she headed for a place in a corner. To my astonishment no-one seemed to notice her and I felt like shouting out "are you all blind?" Next to her there was a chair free and I left the queue immediately to sit there. I asked her if she minded and in a lovely Irish brogue she said she did not. I wondered why I had never seen her before and in the end I asked her if she was new. It was a pathetic chat-up line and her grin as much as said so.
"I mean, you're on your own as well, and……..well…..you're……."
I was going to say absolutely gorgeous.
"No, I'm not new. This is my third year. I'm doing German."
Her *third* year? This explained why I did not recognise her. In her fresher year I had been in France, and in her second, my fourth, I had become an academic recluse. But in her third she *ought* to be abroad like every other modern linguist, either in a school or a university.
"I had to come home from Berlin," she said without me asking. "My father died suddenly. I'm going back next autumn. So everyone I know *well* is abroad. So here I sit all on my own. Until you show up."
"Oh, I'm sorry," I spluttered. "If you'd rather have your own company, I'll just .."
"No, no. Please."

I looked up and saw the poster on the notice board advertising a concert by the Liverpool Philharmonic. It was that very evening. I told her I was no good at chat-up lines and asked her simply if she wanted to go. She nodded.
As we sat listening to the Schubert her hand took mine, realised what it had done and withdrew itself. I turned to her and whispered that I loved her, and always would.

I wonder. Had I not met her that day in the coffee-bar would our paths have crossed perhaps years later? Would we have then glanced at each other and immediately gone on our way? In 1973 *she* had been alone and *I* had seen her resemblance to someone else. These were the motives that had made us pause and consider. Those circumstances which had changed us from strangers into lovers were special and unique. In another life we might have become no more than acquainted. What makes me write this and terrifies me is the realisation that her face is fading and she is becoming a stranger with every passing day. We are becoming as old friends, estranged for years, who meet and then, once they have raked over the past, have nothing new to talk about.

How can I preserve her?

*

Within a week I moved into La Borderie and began to replace some of the old man's furniture. A tour of the cellar revealed quite a nice stock of cider and many, many unlabelled bottles with corks roughly driven in, leaving about a centimetre above the neck. In the corner - next to an old dressing table with a swivel mirror - dusty and hanging with cobwebs was a contraption of glass spheres, spirals and a brass pan, very dull, as if the absence of light had ruined it. Immediately I realised what the bottles contained, removed a cork with my teeth and sipped at it. Firewater! The spirit of the apple - with a mellow aftertaste. It was the distilled essence of forgotten autumns - when Marie was alive! I decided I would drink one glass after dinner each night.

I almost returned to England for Christmas but in the end stayed put. I have now only the haziest recollection of my first Christmas Day alone, due in part to Tesquet's Calva. In late January the old gentleman passed away and in March I acquired the house. In all those months I remained relatively content, was not often very lonely and, with my stories to write, certainly never bored. As well as keeping my diary, I began a series of short stories about my childhood and a historical novel about my postgraduate poet - (recently abandoned) - which kept me absorbed. Looking back now, in the new spring, I cannot believe that I, a lonesome widower, could have filled those late autumn and winter days so easily with writing, with walks in the forests and along the narrow lanes which led into the scattered villages and hamlets where I eventually ceased to be stared at. People I passed mostly ignored me or just nodded. A few were prepared to exchange a few words. I drove into the outskirts of la Rose only to visit the Leclerc supermarket, or to withdraw cash. Without ever intending it, I began to be a talking point in the locality - the Englishman who lived with his dead wife. How did they know my secret? Then I remembered I had told it to Mme Forrestier at Les Cloches. I went cold to wonder how much I had told her that evening under the influence of her particular brand of the spirit.

This would have probably remained the diary as which it began, had it not been for my dream. That particular night I had not slept very easily - owls were calling from the spinney and from the woods behind - and in that state of half-sleep I dreamt of Marie in the coffee-bar again. But this time when she turned around it *was* Adèle smiling at me. I sat up in bed as if electrocuted, feeling shame and dismay. The whole of the next day I kept trying to dismiss the images and explain away the dream. She *was* quite similar to Marie and she *had* meant a lot to me, a lonely, rather unhappy student in a foreign land. But Marie was in no way a substitute for her. We all have types of people in mind who attract us, do we not? It was natural that Marie would captivate me, being the perfect casting from that particular mould of womanhood. What was the *probability* of my meeting another one as beguiling, as fulfilling and as wonderful as her? I recalled reading idly, in the months before her death, the dating pages in the local newspaper - not out of *disloyalty* you must understand - but to test whether there was anyone with whom there was the remotest chance of compatibility. Those not in my age range, in their twenties and thirties, sounded shallow and mostly marooned in limbo with a child or children, had, nonetheless a Good Sense Of Humour and were "bubbly." Those in their fifties were divorced and occasionally widowed. Having ceased to bubble, they liked dancing, evenings in and evenings out, walking (the dog - yuk!) dining out, concerts and pubs, and wanted a genuine friendship or companionship, *possibly* a relationship. I imagined the awkwardness, the silences broken by small-talk, the growing awareness of unbridgeable disparity and the welcome farewell with its "genuine" promises about getting in touch. I rated the chances of my finding a suitable new mate about as high as a growing number of astronomers rate the chances of there being another earth-like planet anywhere. Very low, even zero.
But I had promised my ailing wife that I would look. Did that sentence me to spend my life trawling through all those oceans of lonely, drowning people? Life can be extremely cruel to us. Many of those shouting for attention in the cold were, doubtless, lonely for obvious reasons. How many of those, or others currently attached or semi-detached, were secretly wondering - not even aware themselves that they ever did - whether someone like me was wondering about someone like them? Perhaps I could cast my nets wider than my home town. There were lonely-heart websites. To write a profile for myself would be easy enough. *fifty-something, 5ft 10, slim, academic, keen walker, music lover, amateur writer*. But what could I write about my intended? To render Marie down to a few words seemed absurd and even sacrilegious and I abandoned the project in disgust without beginning it. I am not, to be candid, a people-person. We might stand anywhere for an hour, watching the world go by, and find it difficult not to be persuaded that on the whole we are amongst the unloveliest of species, in particular, dare I add, the genera of the British isles, where squatness, tubbiness and pastiness are indigenous. Perhaps my new companion would turn up abroad.

I had not thought of Adèle for some time and had ceased making any casual, half-hearted enquiries after her. She might be hundreds of miles away, might have become a person who would disappoint - even disgust - me, and, even if she had not, she would be a woman who, for a host of reasons, would not have the slightest inclination to renew our acquaintance. We had not had a full sexual relationship (to go into physical detail would be sordid) but it still bothered and intrigued me that I had no recollection of our final night together at Les Cloches. If I had ever thought of her during my married years, I had become ever more persuaded that my attachment to

her been had been more infatuation, more of a clinging-on and less than genuine affection because of her qualities. In those early months at the school I had felt so intensely miserable and I gravitated to her because she was also young, maybe two years older than me. She was also experiencing discipline problems due to her youth and due also to the nature of her subject which many of the brutes - as the brutes of today too, no doubt - found pointless. We had often sat together, lamenting the iniquities of a school system more harnessed to training than devoted to knowledge and appreciation of art. There remained few vivid memories of us together for me to cherish and it occurred to me years later that I did really know her well at all. I grew certain that she had become disenchanted, that her charms had attracted a wealthy prince, a man without a soul, to rescue her from the tower of an unhappy career, and that she had swapped those ardent principles for bangles, baubles and beads.

During the milder periods of the winter I had been busy digging the borders of the front garden, reburying the many bulbs I unearthed. At the back I had turned over most of the soil and turf where I intended to grow my vegetables. In the corner was a thick tangle of old brambles which I had considered leaving to provide me with a supply of blackberries in the late summer. I had not made blackberry wine for twenty years. But there were so many to be gathered in the lanes that I decided one March day, not long after that disturbing dream, to shake some petrol over the whole lot to set fire to it, and to use the space for some other crop. The branches were so sapless and dry that they went up in an impressive blaze, leaving a pile of glowing white ashes behind. When they had cooled I began to dig out the roots. My spade hit a rock jarring my elbow and shoulder quite badly. I cursed, bent down and swept away some of the ashes with my gloved hand. It was not a rock - but the corner of a slab, and after a few minutes I had revealed what I thought was the inspection cover of an underground pipe, perhaps the water supply to the house. But how could it be? The spinney, not the road, was just over the fence. The slab was of dark stone, rather like slate, and was about a yard square. It had something engraved on it, but the ash made it impossible to read. I fetched water and, sluicing it away, I straightway read the simple inscription MARIE. I fell on my back and thought I heard that strange voice cry out again. I listened and heard the yelps of the jackdaws in the trees and the distant lowing of Monsieur Bonneval‘s cattle. Nothing more. When I had regained my balance and composure, my first thought was to phone Monsieur Tesquet’s daughter. Had her father ever owned a dog?
“Why yes! Many over the years. Why ever do you ask, Mr Wright?”
“Was one called *Marie*, by any chance?”
She went silent, and I imagined that she was trying to remember. Then she gasped.
“Madame? Are you alright?”
“*Marie?* You have astonished me, Monsieur!”
I told her about my discovery under the blackberry bush. She replied that blackberries had grown there for decades - at least since her childhood. There had never been a dog in the family called Marie. Her father had never owned a bitch. She paused and hesitated before finally telling me what was on her mind.
“You astonished me, Monsieur, because this was the name he kept repeating in his last days - when his mind was completely gone. *Marie*! We thought it was an old friend!”
I stood over the grave and wondered if it really was a dog below. A yard square. Quite a big dog. How long had it been there? The chiselling looked quite sharp but slate was a hard stone to wear. I made a mental note to ask Tesquet’s daughter when the house

had been built. I thought of Marie's injunction to me not to bury her ashes. Shivering, I went in. I looked at my wife's urn in the corner of the fireplace. And for no clear reason I thought of the apricot rose she had so lovingly chosen for the back garden not two years before. I kept concentrating on other matters as I lay trying to go to sleep that night, but the underlying image of Marie's rose would not fade. I saw her holding a half-bloom in her palm between her fingers. The bud had been a dark orange, and the open flower a much softer, more subtle colour, flecked and edged with cream, in tight quadrants, with a patina which recalled the softness of her young skin. In my image she was smiling with the certainty that she had found her favourite. But her eyes were pale blue, like Adèle's, not dark blue. I woke with a jolt. I got up and went into the kitchen to make a drink. Was this what Marie wanted, for me to grow the rose I had so neglectfully left behind? I felt an impulse to get dressed and jump in the car to go home to get it, but Marie's smile turned into the laughter which had always greeted my crazier schemes. Instead, I turned on my laptop and looked for the nursery online where we had bought it - Allbrighton's in the West Midlands. I clicked through the photos in the catalogue until I had it. It was called Crown Princess. I paid with my card and went back to bed. The image disappeared and I slept soundly.

When I woke I was immediately troubled by a voice which had been silent for weeks. *Had* Marie slept with a friend of ours? I asked her out loud but there was only silence. Almost a year had elapsed since her death. I worried that this nagging doubt about the truth, reawoken, would ruin the new peace of mind I was so unexpectedly finding. I required certainty. Unable to get an answer from Marie, in the end I thought of Lorraine.

Dear Lorraine,

I hope you and Paul are well. I am settling in well in Normandy and have found a lovely property. You must come out and visit some time.

Lorraine, let me come to the main reason for writing this letter. One of the totally unexpected consequences of losing Marie - and I have no idea whether this is peculiar to me - has been a growing doubt as to how well I knew her and whether the version of Marie I have is the genuine one.

Perhaps it astounds you to read that, in view of how close we always were, but as she recedes into the past she is becoming a stranger to me. No doubt a counsellor would describe this as a common aspect of the process of - and I hate this term - "moving on."

I do not wish to move on. But I did swear to her on her death-bed that I would not, in her words, close the gates on the world. (I am truly sorry if I gave you and Paul any offence by rejecting your overtures of friendship last summer, but I had no wish to be a burden or an embarrassment to you, or to other friends.)

Lorraine, I am loitering at a crossroads. Time, like a policeman, moves us on, whatever we intend.

You were Marie's closest friend and, no doubt, confidante. I hesitate - and it frightens me - to ask you this, but I must. If there were things - secrets - she told you about her

personal life, her thoughts, her marriage, which she did not wish me to know, then I beg you to tell me now. As her husband I feel I have a right to inherit them. Perhaps there are matters of which you would gladly unburden yourself. In her absence I ***absolve*** *you of that responsibility, of any vow you made to her.*

If the version I cherish of our life together is the true one, then I shall have my peace of mind restored.

If that version is a fake, then I shall be initially devastated, but in the long term, stronger and wiser for the truth, I will be better able to open a new chapter in my life. And move on.

If I had borrowed a precious book from you, naturally you would want it returned.

Think of what you know about me, which ***I*** *do not know, as* ***my*** *book.*

As I sealed the envelope I thought of those savages consuming the flesh of the dead. In my hunger for the truth I wanted to consume every aspect of Marie. After I had posted the letter, an inner voice asked if I had the right to consume the whole body. And I realised what a weight I had loaded onto the shoulders of her rather forthright friend. Within ten days I had her reply. I left it on the table for hours before mustering the nerve to open it. I took down a bottle of "Norman hole" - into which I would afterwards disappear, if it was the answer I feared. I poured myself a glass, took a sip and tore the envelope open. The first paragraph turned my blood to ice water.

Dear Oliver. (Not Ollie)

Your letter has placed me in a very difficult position. Did that not occur to you? It must have done, unless your mind is in so much turmoil that you cannot think properly. You say, you cannot move on, in fact have no wish to. To be honest, Oliver, I always found you rather on the melodramatic, over-sentimental side. There! Now Marie is no longer with us I can confess at least that! If I carried on and told you that Marie was a whore who slept with all and sundry, would you move on then and open that new chapter?? Do you not see? If I tell you all was hunky-dory in your marriage you will have your blessed peace of mind, <u>*but*</u> *(and this is where it gets awkward for me) you will remain in limbo, some sort of recluse worshipping at her shrine.*

I filled my glass and drank. I hardly dared to read the second sheet of paper.

Marie told me a lot of things about her marriage, Oliver. It worried her that you were so reliant on her, and rather possessive, and that you neglected your son, because he was not so academic. It annoyed her you sulked if you did not get your own way, and she did not like some of your university friends, particularly that arrogant fatso who could not see the point of teaching foreign languages to the riff-raff. There were lots of things which pissed her off, as there are for all of us in close relationships.

But at no time did she ever give me to understand that she had betrayed you, and she never revealed any private detail about what went on between you between the sheets. She loved you Oliver. She was a good wife. And it really hurts me to think that you

should doubt it.

Get a grip for God's sake! What would she think if she knew you were in this state? See a counsellor! When you have shaken yourself out of it, let us know, and we will come over, raise a glass to Marie and empty your wine cellar.

I cried for joy. But the more I read the letter the less convinced I was by it. I thought suddenly of Tony, a mutual friend of ours. Paul had seen Tony's wife Carolyn, quite by chance in a pub one night with her tai-chi instructor. He had casually mentioned it to Lorraine and she had mentioned it to us. We debated one night over dinner whether to mention it to Tony. We decided it was better not to. After Carolyn left her husband for the tai-chi man, Lorraine confided that she had known for years about her wish to end the marriage once the children had left home. I urged her to tell Tony this, as he had surely the right to know, but she had refused, saying there was no point in "rubbing more salt into his would." Lorraine's letter had begun with a tang of salt, only to end sweetly. Was it a clever poultice designed to bring false relief to me for my own good?

*

A parcel arrived. The delivery man looked me up and down, probably inspecting for himself the eccentric Englishman - *un original* - who lived all alone in the middle of nowhere with his dead wife's ashes. I took out a knife and cut into the heavy-duty paper of the parcel and was rewarded with a fist full of mud and a nasty scratch on my thumb. I ripped off the paper in anger, thinking it was someone's bad idea of a practical joke and saw, to my delight, in a leaking plastic bag, a sturdy rose stock with three thick stems. A few red eyes hinted at the genie within. I went into the front garden and considered where to put it. I dug a hole a yard square and a yard deep and was about to place the rose at its centre when it occurred to me what I must do. I laid slabs in the bottom and at the sides, leaving a small gap in the corners for drainage. I put in leaf-mould from the spinney and a bucket of well rotted manure from Monsieur Bonneval's dung-heap, and back-filled the hole with the best soil. I fetched Marie's urn. I stood irresolute for a while and then thought of my promise. She would be buried but liberated at the same time! I emptied her ashes in, washing out the vessel to ensure no residue of her remained, and broke the urn. The pieces I added to the earth to ensure good drainage and pushed the roots of the rose carefully into the mixture until the joint with the stem was just below the level of the ground. With the heels of my hands I firmed everything down and scattered more soil to bring the levels even. Some of the wood was dead or inconsequential. I trimmed the rose into a perfect shape and stood back to admire it. I spread the manure I had left over as a mulch. Now Marie would be free, able to transfer her latent beauty into the wonderful blooms still mysteriously slumbering within the roots and stems. Surely she would approve!

That night I could not sleep. Drunk, I was in a state of near elation and kept picturing the essential goodness of my wife enriching and being converted into the substance and elegance of the plant, just as minerals invade the tissues and bones of the trapped creature and transform it into a fossil, preserved for ever. Only this would *not* be a dead-end fossil but a *continuous* transformation, a process renewing itself every spring and summer, pausing autumn and winter only to recuperate. At four o' clock I gave up sleep and went out to stare at the precious rose. I am not a conventionally

religious man. I do not believe in the survival of the individual in some spiritual form beyond the death of the body. God could be relied on neither for a good life, nor for a good death. The state of the narrow human world, particularly in respect of those on whom wealth and fortune were bestowed, filled me with dismay. If God did exist, he was not a Christian. I had opened the urn to allow Marie's matter to reconnect with the *wider* world, to experience - no, wrong word - to have contact again with wind, rain and sun; to become perfume, colour, substance and form. I felt excited and certain that this was the fate, the afterlife she would have chosen. I went back to bed and slept soundly, untroubled by owls and by guilt, by grief and by grievance.

I inspected the rose almost hourly over the next few days for signs of response to the good earth and warmer air. On the anniversary of her death I sat there for the entire day in the drizzle, thinking of all the wonderful things we had done together. Through my eyes now she might see a world of new hope in the daffodils and bursting leaves, and through my ears she might hear the songs of the reviving finches and tits.
One morning, after a particularly mild night, I saw to my delight, emerging from the crown below the soil, a new stem, thorns and skin as pink as rosé wine. I knew that my Crown Princess was thriving and I took it as a sign that it was becoming the instrument through which Marie was undergoing once more - as she had at her human birth - ***release*** - this time as pure beauty, into the world of light!

But the grave-slab bothered me more and more, spooked me even. It bore no dates and no dedication. Marie was of course a very common name but the shock of the coincidence did not lessen, and I saw some mysterious significance in it. But the contrast between its dead finality and my wife's flourishing rose could not be more explicit. A glorious May saw a multitude of buds form on sturdy stems, and in June the first bloom filled me with an indescribable joy. As soon as it faded, I carefully gathered all the petals and whiskery anthers in the palm of my hand and buried them beneath the crown. On windy days I gathered all the petals I could see which had been blown from the flower and buried them too. That might appear obsessive but it just seemed the obvious, natural thing to do. To prevent mildew, black spot, aphids, etc, I bought all the sprays and powders I could find. But the plant seemed to possess a healthy resilience and I could not help but equate it to Marie's own determination which had helped her battle so bravely against that foul disease, which, for my comfort, I imagined had been burnt away in the process of cremation. My rose was blessed with a remarkable and innocent beauty- a beauty beyond the talons of human cruelty - undimmed, undiminished and undaunted except by rain, by frost and by wind, and naturally, except by its only treacherous friend. Time.

One evening, under the influence of more than my usual rations of Tesquet's apple brandy, I took up pen and paper and did something I had not attempted for years. I wrote a sonnet.

MY DARLING ROSE
Time, disguised as breeze, makes weep my rose;
Time, turncoat air wherein, since bud, she thrives.
In guise of mould, sly seconds swift dispose
Of petals, till not form, nor scent survives.
Within my mind it sways, its colours dye
My memory, brave challenger of time;

The fading sketches of my days defy
That heedless thing which turns my rose to slime.
Within the very earth, which mystery blends,
In simple earth, transformed, which beauty is,
My queen, deposed, her humbled state transcends,
And lends again her regal qualities.

So where is death? Though love succumbs to fire,
What passions might dull ashes soon inspire.

The sight of the grave in my back garden made my conviction grow that inhumation was as futile as it was stupid. Why *imprison* the matter of the deceased when it could be released by transformation? I had read that all our atoms enclosed by burial eventually escape anyway, which made the ritual even more pointless. And the idea of building a *pyramid* to shut away the dead in darkness for ever seemed even more of a monstrous absurdity. So the grave in the back garden preyed on my mind until it began to infuriate me, and I was tempted more than once to lift the slate with my spade and dispose of it somehow. Of course, if it was a woman or girl or child down there, then the remains would have to be exhumed and reburied with priestly supervision. An animal could remain where it was. Was I superstitious? The very thought of interfering with the stone or the earth beneath made me shudder as I drank my second tot of Calva late that night. An owl called very close and I jumped, spilling my glass. I heard Marie laugh. She would have found that funny.

*

I have not added to this account for a while. I escape into here again, through my rabbit-hole, through my looking glass. And here, at a distance, I can write down what stings me, as if it were fiction, and somehow escape for a while its venom.

I have been quite busy in the garden and have planted out lots of less hardy vegetables. I had quite a number of spare seedlings and there was only one area spare - the corner where the grave was. I had covered it with grass cuttings from the front lawn. I bent down one morning and swept them away to reveal the name again. That was when I resolved to do something about it. That same day, in the late afternoon, I picked up a *panier* from my table and walked the short distance in the warm sunshine to the farm. Monsieur Bonneval was in his yard, hanging up chickens by their talons on hooks to drain them of their blood. I hailed him and he looked up. We were on nodding terms only and when he saw me he looked quite taken aback that I had called him over. He came to the gate. I apologized and handed him the wicker basket. It contained old walnuts from my tree and some unexpected early raspberries from the canes I had planted that March. I looked beyond him to the chickens which still jerked now and then and said “Chicken fried with walnuts and pears - *sweet* pears - are delicious.” (My chat-up lines do not improve.)
“Avec *poires*?” The tone of his voice clearly wondered if I was raving mad or drunk. His suspicious eyes narrowed and he could only softly mouth the word *pears* again to himself to check that he had understood.
I said I had a question which probably he alone could answer. He looked puzzled and rather worried. Had he any idea, I asked, when my bungalow had been built? He let out the breath he had been holding, wiped his hands on his blue overalls and raised his

eyebrows. He leant on the gate and looked at the roof, just visible above the hedgerow, as if to confirm which bungalow I meant.
"It was already there when I was a small boy," he said. "As far back as I remember."
I found it hard to imagine this great, bearded man in his fetching brown corduroy cap as a small boy. He told me that "old Tesquet" had bought it sometime in the 60s.
"I watched them move in….and I used to……*play* with his daughter in the meadows," he added with a rude wink. "But the *boy* was…*toc*.." And he rolled his cow-eyes around, one clockwise, one anti-clockwise, which struck me as remarkably clever.
"Between the wars it was a still farmhouse - not much more than a smallholding - the portion of land was not big enough to be profitable and it got deserted - as so many are. (Then in come the *Parisians,* the Belgians or the English - and now even the *Boch* - to buy all the unworkable land up. Bah!)"
"So the *old* farmhouse was demolished?"
"Yes, before I was born. My father bought most of the land belonging to it at the back - the spinney and the pasture. But who from, I could not say. Why are you so curious?"
I told him about the grave and he whistled. I asked him if he knew who Marie might be.
"Oh, but there are so many Maries! The *church,* you see ……There is no date on the grave? If it is slate it could be very old. And if it was under all the brambles, who knows - maybe a hundred years since, or more."
"Do people in these parts bury their animals on their land? A sheepdog, perhaps?"
"*Sheep!* Here? No! But we don't bury people in the garden either! We have cemeteries. The English too?"
"So you have no idea who - or what - Marie might be. Might your parents know?"
"Father is already dead twenty years and Mother has lost her *boule*."
Boule was our equivalent of marbles. I asked him who else might know. He scanned the far horizon and found no-one to recommend.
"Madame Bonneval, perhaps?" I suggested
He motioned with his head to my right. She was from Les Haies, he said, a village some ten kilometres away. Disappointed, I thanked him and went to go. The chickens were now only occasionally dripping blood from their headless throats. He called me back. He had a question for me.
"Monsieur, is it true what they say about you?"
"Say what?"
"That you keep Madame, your wife, in the cellar - in her coffin?"
I threw back my head and roared with laughter until he joined in. He slapped me amicably on the shoulder.
"I *told* my stupid wife not to believe such nonsense!" he shouted, turning his head towards the house, so that she might hear. When I had recovered I decided to tell him the story of my rose, and confessed that I had helped myself to some of his dung. When I had finished I was amazed and moved to see tears welling in his bottom lids.
"It is, Monsieur Wright, such a beautiful story. I must tell it to my wife. She will cry."
"Call me Ollie." I gave him a return slap on his shoulder and he pronounced Ollie perfectly with a broad grin.
"I am Bernard. I will tell everyone about your beautiful rose."

Enquiries about Marie at more distant farmsteads drew shrugs and at the gentrified residence just before the crossroads the door was closed in my face. I thought of the

land registry and went into La Rose to the town hall, another rather unattractive building on the main square. I was redirected to Nogent, the main town of the department. I was told that all such records were kept there for public scrutiny. I had no desire to drive some sixteen miles into a town to which I had formerly taken an instant dislike. Apart from its very tall limestone castle, whose dilapidated walls and arrow-slits, I remembered, had been overrun by a host of yelping jackdaws, it was a gloomy collection of buildings hewn from a much darker quarry. So I settled down in front of my laptop to fill in the form I had found on the council website. Everything was going fine until I came to the box which demanded the "purpose of the enquiry." I could hardly type in "who is the Marie buried on my land?" so I came up with "historical research." The programme had no patience with this airy-fairy notion and kept throwing it back at me with a red asterisk and a red sentence requiring a "valid" reason. I phoned the help-line and I was told politely that I had to enter a valid reason (as well as pay twenty-five Euros). I asked the lady what a valid reason might be and was told with impeccable logic that only *I* could know what reason had led me to make the enquiry in the first place. French bureaucrats are just as helpful as English ones, and, I suppose, the entire world over. I tried "in search of relative" and "pursuit of debt" and eventually the screen froze. I imagined some little person in the office frustrating my every effort with glee, and in disgust I logged off.
Once annoyed, it takes a long while for the hormone responsible for anger in me to dilute, and I tried to hurry things along back to mellowness with a few more measures of Calva that evening than I normally would drink. It was late June and an absolutely perfect evening. I sat on the terrace watching the red sun dissolve into the haze and the woods. I had eaten *en plein air* and had already consumed a bottle of excellent *Bourgueil*, having written a clever, sarcastic letter to the town hall in Nogent. I re-read it and on impulse screwed it up. I laughed at my own pomposity. I began to stare at the grave which was a curious orange in the late sunlight. The name Marie seemed to glow. I thought then of what Bernard had said regarding the unprofitability of the old farm. The Calva fuelled my imagination. Perhaps the husband had been so hard up that he could not *afford* to have his poor wife buried in the cemetery. I imagined him, head sorrowfully bent, begging the stonemason to chisel no more than her name for the smallest fee he could charge. Had the inconsolable farmer even reported her death? Or had he murdered her, in a jealous rage and planted the brambles to hide her? Perhaps he had been as loath as me to distance himself from his beloved. Or perhaps there was a more sinister explanation even than foul-play! I saw her on her deathbed, imploring him to scatter her ashes as she had always wished, in order to be at liberty to roam the earth in the winds or in the waters - or on, or *in*, the footpads of nocturnal creatures! And then as she lay near to her final breath his gentle face had broken into a terrible leer. This was the moment he had been waiting for all these years, he exclaimed. Yes, he had known about her secret meetings with the young labourers from the nearby farm. Now revenge would be his! In a dreadful whisper he told her that her final wish would not be granted. It would be her fate to lie in a stone-clad tomb, in the cold and dark, for all eternity!

A shrill cry from the darkening spinney seemed to confirm this. It shattered my reverie. What nonsense! Marie was a favourite *pig* or a golden retriever, I heard *my* Marie say with a chuckle. In my state of inebriety I decided there was only one course of action to take. This was *my* land and this slab had no place there *any more.* I told myself what a perfect corner to grow asparagus it was. I turned on the terrace light and fetched a spade. After a series of failed attempts I managed to get the spit just

underneath one corner of the damned thing. I needed a log to create some leverage. I stumbled around in the spinney with a torch until I found a decent branch. I dragged it back through the gate and wedged it under the shaft. I thought of the word fulcrum - idiotic word - from my physics lessons and laughed. It fascinated me that words can suddenly drain of content and leave their absurd form behind to be mocked. I placed one foot carefully on the handle and pushed. A tiny movement! I fetched a chair to hold onto for balance and stood with all my weight on the spade handle. I had expected the shaft to snap in the middle - its *fulcrum*! - and send me sprawling into a giggling heap, but first to my delight, then to my horror, the grave stone rose. Was it another coincidence that at that very instant the tall ash on the edge of the wood filled like a sail with a billow of wind - when none had blown! - and bent backwards with a sigh? I overbalanced and fell next to the grave and saw it snap shut like the dark mouth of a wide crocodile. I had banged my head on something and in the thrum of giddiness I swear I heard that strange voice again I had heard in the autumn, when sitting in despair against the apple tree. A thought shot through my dazed head. Had I freed her? If I had been sober, I would have given up the whole crazy enterprise then, particularly as the western sky was turning from pale blue to a ghoulish white as the menace of night poured in from the east.

I stood up and regained my balance. I needed to apply extra brainpower to the task and forget fulcrums. I fetched the rope from the boot of my car and made a large noose. I placed the chair above the shaft of the spade, facing away from the grave, sat on it and put my feet on the handle to raise the slate high enough to lasso two corners of it. I twisted my back round and just managed to slip the loop underneath. Triumphant, I ran the end of the rope around the trunk and over a low branch of my walnut and heaved. The slab rose and rose until almost vertical. In the artificial light gilded black ants were swarming out in all directions. I tried to grab the edge and tip it backwards but the lasso slipped off and it crashed back down. It was at this point of utter dejection that the final solution appeared to me. I went into the shed and found Tesquet's sledge hammer. I began to smash up the slate - avoiding the inscription - until it was in several pieces. One by one I tossed them aside. Ignoring my misgiving, I took the spade and began to clear away the topsoil and the ants nest until I revealed - to my utter horror - what looked like a thick yellow wrist and forearm. I leapt back and my heart froze. But as I stared, I realised it was not a bone. It was a shallow root from my walnut tree. The sky was turning dusky blue and from the spinney bats were racing out to circle my roof in pursuit of drowsy insects. I shivered. Should I continue? The dreadful shriek of the jay made up my mind. I quickly scraped the earth back into the hole and went in.

I woke up in the armchair with severe heartburn. In the low light of the table lamp I saw that the bottle of Calva was lying in my lap. The escaped spirit smelt acrid. A tapping made me look into the window. A woman was staring in. Was it Adèle? I shouted, got up and tripped. I looked. The face had gone. For many minutes I could not move, as waves of terror seized me, ran up and down my spine and into my neck. Gradually the blood returned to my limbs and I got to my feet. The window was utterly dark. I went out into the warm night and dared to ask "Qui est là? *Adèle*?" The light from the hallway crept out a few yards before being swallowed by the pitch of the night. There were stars, billions of them. But no moon. In the east there was not yet even a glimmer of the day to come. In spite of the mild air I shuddered again. I hotched along the side wall to the back and peeked around the corner into utter darkness.

What had I done? Why could I not have let sleeping dogs lie? The unintended jest

almost made me laugh. The wind stirred the spinney into a conspiracy of whispers and louder voices.
“Anyone there?” I asked again. My query sounded ridiculous, an intrusion into a world that had not the slightest wish to acknowledge me. A world beyond towns and villages, a dark world of owls, bats and badgers. I retreated to the front and locked up. And closed all the curtains.

When I woke I thought immediately of Adèle. The face at the window had been pale and oval-shaped. The eyes had been large like hers. Had she somehow heard I had returned and come to see for herself? *At two o’ clock in the morning??* I could not decide if the front door had been open when I stepped out. If it was open, perhaps a passing neighbour had come to check up on me. I had only ever seen Madame Bonneval from a good distance, a figure toiling in the dark interior of the farm kitchen. Farmers were up and about at all unearthly hours. Yes; decidedly, it had been her. She must have left as soon as she had seen me. But when I called at the farm with more walnuts and was rewarded with eggs, the theory collapsed. She had a mass of frizzy ginger hair and a robust chin and nose. I described my visitor to her and lied that I had seen her out walking. She shook her head and replied there was no-one of that description locally. In the end I persuaded myself that in that half-waking, drunken state - and as a direct result of my grotesque venture - I had simply had a bad dream.

I dug the pulverized slate into the soil, imagining that would be an end to it. But it was not. The patch of dark earth it had concealed for decades - centuries? - clashed with the indigenous red-oxide soil, and it looked as if it contained pitch. Would it flicker with flame like ignited rocks I had seen burning on the Dorset coast? In the end I decided not to experiment with a match. It felt like sacrilege. But neither did I wish to plant vegetables there. In the end I plucked up the courage to sever the large root which ran across it and pushed the whole spit of the spade into the pit to remove the soil. I dared to try another spit and struck something. I turned the spade. White fragments. Were they pieces of chalk or pieces of bone? I quickly thrust down the rose I had rushed off to buy from a local garden centre and firmed in the roots with my foot. I took more red soil from a border and scattered it over the whole area. But no matter how often I did this - and in the end I gave up - whenever it rained the blackness returned. But the rose flourished, an intense, velvety crimson, with loose whorls, leggy and tall, a complete contrast to my Marie’s compact apricot. I did nothing to it, ignored it, neither fed nor watered it, and left it to fend entirely for itself against pests. It unsettled me that by August it had overtaken my precious rose in vigour, bloom and - dared I think it? - in beauty. Was I even jealous? Was I going out of my mind?

*

Then one morning I received a call from the daughter of Mr Tesquet. She had come by more information about Marie but from a completely unexpected source.
“My Aunt Colette is in a nursing home and we always visit on her birthday. Usually she is silent, saying mostly only yes or no, and we wonder if she recognises me. Normally there is so little to say but I mentioned in passing my father - her brother - babbling about a woman called Marie. M’sieur, believe me, I was totally shocked! It was if Aunt Colette had been in a deep sleep and was suddenly awake. “Marie?” she exclaimed. “Has she returned?”

“Has who returned?” said I. And she told me the strangest story. A family secret, M’sieur, but I will tell you because now it can hurt no-one. Before his marriage to my dear mother, it turns out that father had been engaged to be married to a Marie, but the aunt could not remember her last name. My grandfather Tesquet opposed the engagement because she came from gipsies and had a certain reputation. But she was passionate and so beautiful that my father would not give her up. Then when the Germans invaded she decided - with her brother - but against father’s wishes - to join the resistance - and they became estranged. One night in 1942 or 3 she simply disappeared. It was a mystery. The Boch had not captured or killed her - they always posted the dead faces of their victims in the towns and villages as a warning. In the end after the war when she still had not come back my father met and married my mother. But, M’sieur, I can tell you that they were never happy. And now I know why. He still loved her! His Marie. It is so sad….”
I let her have a little cry and then asked her very gently if there could be any link between his Marie and the grave in my garden.
“Definitely not, Monsieur Wright. He only bought the land in 1962 and before that we lived in La Rose.”
I told her what I had done with the crimson rose and she said I had done the right thing.
“If there is a person down there then what good would it do to disturb her? Let her lie in peace. No-one is grieving for his Marie. Am I not right to say so?”

Yes. No-one was grieving for *his* Marie.

I debated whether to pull up the rose and call in the police. In the end I went out with my gardening gloves and seized it by the stem. But, after a few tentative efforts, no matter how hard I yanked, it would not come up….as if it was being grabbed from below. I stood back in horror at the thought. I took the spade but hesitated. I could not bring myself to do it. I went in home and poured myself a drink. I would leave well alone.

I began to worry that living alone was turning me gradually into an eccentric. We need the contact - friction even - of others in order to smooth away the excesses of our behaviour. I shaved less often and as I passed a shop on my way into Leclerc I was shocked to realise that the shabby individual with the unkempt hair in the window was me. The question of sharing experiences with someone *close* kept posing itself, and although I was not *desperate* for company - and though I was able to go out walking in the woods and by water, without feeling so poignantly the absence of Marie at my side - I felt guilty that I had made no effort to fulfil my promise to her about seeking companionship.
It was the sight of the school bus passing in the lane that September which made up my mind to contact the C.E.S about Adèle, and settle the matter of her whereabouts once and for all. I asked Paul Bonneval, the gangly son of Bernard, about his music teacher and he mentioned a thin, balding man called Chancellier. I left a message for him at the school, lying to the secretary that I was a parent. When he called back I apologised and told him the real reason for my call, to enquire about Adèle Chabert . He had, he told me, been teaching there eight years. His predecessor had been a middle-aged woman, fleshy, with red hair, called Martine Grünberg. I had put together - with more help from Laurent in the PMU Bar - a good list of names, old teachers who might be able to tell me what had happened to Adèle. But not one of

them rang any bells with Chancellier. I phoned the school office and confidently announced that I had been the assistant for English all those years ago and was making a nostalgic journey to look up old colleagues…in *particular*, I added, to the chill, ominous silence at the other end, a Mlle *Chabert*, the teacher of music, of whom I had *especially* fond memories……. I was told not to *leave* (French people do not hang up) and I found myself talking next to a dry-sounding gentleman who told me he was the deputy principal of studies. I explained the whole situation again and waited. He eventually apologised and explained that it was the invariable policy of the school to give out no information about members of the staff, present or past.
"But I am only here for a few days. Then I return to England."
"Monsieur, please try to understand. I would love to help but I cannot. In a neighbouring school a jealous husband posed as a parent, wishing to know if a such-and-such a teacher worked there. He was told that indeed he did. The caller then came in, dragged the poor man out of a history lesson and beat him mercilessly in front of his terrified pupils."
He told me I would need to write in for an appointment with the director, with documentary evidence in support of my claim, and wished me good day. I was stumped. I did not even have Adèle's married name. She could be anywhere, in Paris, in Marseilles or abroad. Even in *her* grave.

I felt very tired and ill at ease. I put it down to the drizzly weather which had taken over from a glorious summer and to my lack of progress in my new quest. One afternoon I decided to give one last *brilliant* idea a try. I drove to the school and foolishly sat outside in my Morris with my binoculars trained on the staff car park, waiting for the close of school. I would note the number-plates of the greying teachers as they emerged from the building and follow any promising candidate home. I might even recognise a long, lost colleague. Children came out first in dribs and drabs and then in waves. I began to be noticed in my English antique and several came close to have a good look. I would need to get out as my view was blocked, if I was going to stick to my plan. But the very idea of mingling with children made me shudder almost as much as my ghosts, and I sat unable to move. Some were beginning to say quite unpleasant things - in French and English - about my motives for being there, and it dawned on me just how suspicious I looked. My rapid departure through a jeering throng must have seemed conclusive proof.

The very next day the gendarmerie pulled up on my drive. I already felt very queasy after a sleepless night and their arrival made me feel decidedly dreadful, which I also looked. They inspected my car and checked their notebook, before knocking. An empty bottle on the kitchen table made it look as if I had breakfasted on booze. I picked it up and stood there dithering with it as they came in. One officer kindly offered to take it off me - and made sure he sniffed it before putting it by the sink.
"Monsieur Wiggt? Riggt?"
"Wright. English is a very quaint language. Please take a seat…OK, look, I think I know why you have come. But let me assure you, my reason for being at the C.E.S yesterday is entirely innocent. I am *not* a paedophile - in fact the *very* opposite - a paedo*phobe*. I *loathe* children."
They stared at me and then at each other. Both had genial expressions and one almost smiled.
"Then why, M'sieur, why were you parked outside the gates? With binoculars?"
I told them I had had a couple and was not thinking straight. I said I had needed to

steel myself to go to the school where I had once worked and where I had experienced a very unpleasant incident. I explained about the boy, about my year as an assistant, and finally about Adèle.
"So M'sieur was at the wheel after drinking….." he glanced at my empty bottle and added "….Calva of the *farmer*? "
I explained quickly that, even so, I had been under the limit.
"Oh? And what is the limit in France, M'sieur?"
I shook my feverish head. I had forgotten, I stammered.
"50mg of alcohol per 100ml of blood. Nearly half the UK limit. Did you know that?"
"No. I'm sorry."
He tutted. One glass of *that* stuff would put me over, he assured me.
"And you had a *couple*??"
"Two very small shots. Nothing really."
The other one, the slightly more thickset one who reminded me of le rugbyman had not said much. He came over and asked to look into my eyes. Was he trying to ascertain whether or not I was a liar? He peered at me and sat back down. He looked quite concerned.
"Monsieur has very yellow whites of the eye. You are ill. Where have you bought this Calva?"
"I did *not* buy it! Let me show you."
Slowly I took them down to the cellar and showed them. The circles where the missing bottles had stood told their own tale. One whistled while the other began counting.
"Over fifty bottles? In how long?"
"In just under a year. Is that a problem?"
"Do you drink other kinds of alcohol?"
"I enjoy a bottle of wine - *with* a meal."
They said nothing and we walked back up the cellar steps. Before they left, they told me to stay away from the school and *under no circumstances,* to consider selling, buying or making spirits. Luckily, they were so astonished at my consumption that they failed to spot the dusty still and the buckets of apple wine I had fermenting. The friendlier, quieter one of the two turned on his heels and came back to the doorway where I was standing.
"I believe what you said, M'sieur, about the reason for your visit to the school, but please understand that men who like children are particularly unwelcome in this region. Last year a girl in Les Tilleuls was raped by a stranger who was never caught. If you wish to find a lost sweetheart, try an advert in the local paper. And I would see a doctor, Monsieur. "
He smiled kindly. They left.

The idea of the advert grew on me so much, after initial scepticism, that in the end I submitted the following to Le Journal de la Sarthe, the newspaper which served Le Mans and district.

Oliver Wright cherche Adèle, née Chabert, ex prof de musique au C.E.S La Rose, 1972.

I added my mobile number and left it at that. Like an angler I waited patiently for a bite. Many days passed, then weeks and I had almost given up I, when a female phoned to say that Adèle had married a southerner and moved to the Midi in the

eighties. She could not recall her new surname and had lost touch with her. She thought she might be in Perpignan. I went online and submitted the same advert to the Independant in that town, but nothing came of it.

An unpleasant incident at the Leclerc supermarket persuaded me to have nothing more to do with La Rose. There was a Monoprix near Les Haies where I would take my custom henceforth. I admit I must have looked rather shifty and unkempt. I was still sleeping badly and far from my best. As I was walking along the wine aisle I thought I recognised one of those pupils who had come to my window outside the school, and, seeing quite a hostile expression on her face, I automatically smiled. She was a pretty, olive-skinned girl. She tugged at her mother's coat and whispered to her. She stiffened and gave me a withering look.
"So this is the man who has nothing better to do than sit and watch schoolgirls leave their classes!" she announced loudly.
Other shoppers turned to look and one said to his wife that I was the Englishman who had buried his wife in the garden. Someone else laughed and I heard the word "vagabond". I looked at them all and went to speak. Something hit me on the shoulder and I fled, leaving my trolley in mid-aisle and with more insults overtaking me.

It was Bernard who persuaded me to go to the doctor. I looked so yellow - he thought I had a crisis of the liver. I smiled. The French are famous for their fixation with that organ, believing it to be the source of all wellbeing, malaise and disease. I told him I had cut back my Calva to one small glass a night. He looked surprised.
"Calva? You buy Calva?"
I told him of my discovery and he went rather pale.
"*Tesquet*'s Calva? Sacred blue! He was prosecuted many years ago. It made a friend of his very ill. He spent weeks in hospital with a poisoning of the liver. I cannot believe he began to make it again! No wonder he went mad! The old ***cunt*** !"

The doctor took one look at me and ordered me to stop drinking immediately.
"Nothing. Not even weak cider. You have cirrhosis, I fear. Are you sick in the morning? Do you have soft stools? Have you a fever?"
The answer to most of these and other questions was "yes." He asked me what I drank and when I told him he clapped his hand to his mouth and looked appalled.
"Have you had any hallucinations? Heard voices? Become obsessed with matters which were never of any importance to you before? Get confused?"
I did not answer but felt very hot. I would probably have turned red if I had not been so yellow.
"This illicit stuff is responsible for so many deaths in Normandy. The alcohol limit is not controlled, there are traces of more *poisonous* kinds of alcohol in there and many, many other impurities that are eliminated in the *proper* distilleries."
The blood tests suggested that my liver function was so impaired that I might need a transplant. I would never be able to touch booze again.

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I was lonely and bored. Bernard and his wife had unexpectedly been to see me in the small recovery hospital just outside La Rose, but of course no-one else. For the rest of the world I was of no importance. To my doctor's surprise, my liver function had improved. I felt so much better that I would be able to leave within a few days. My

jaundice had faded and my nausea had all but disappeared. I could not wait to get home. It was late October and I had my rose to tend. The weather had been particularly damp and misty. I would no doubt have a lot of pruning to do.

The crimson rose was still blooming, even in the fog. But Marie's apricot was a very sorry specimen. The damp had induced mildew on the leaves and there was black-spot as well. They would have to be burnt and the stems rigorously pruned. A passing stranger saw me at work and said it would be better to dig up the specimen and start again. She told me the sap would take the disease to the roots. I pretended I had not heard her and when I looked up she was gone. Had she been the nosy woman at my window that June night? I looked down the road at her retreating back. And thought I recognised Adèle. I went in pursuit but my weakness caused me soon to give up. I tried to call after her as she rounded the far bend but the noise of the rookery she was passing must have drowned any peep I could make.
I trimmed the rose almost to the ground and took all the prunings, leaves and deadheads into home. In the fireplace I placed them all on newspaper and lit the corners. The pan underneath began to catch the ashes but in helpless misery I watched all the white smoke curling away up the chimney to oblivion. After the ashes had cooled, I swept every iota into the pan and took it outside to pour its precious contents into the soil around the stubs. A malicious wind sprang up and blew the lot into the air. I shouted in fury and tried to pursue the dust in vain. It was on the ground, on leaves - just a thin film - and what was *not* there was whirling away, like the smoke, to places beyond my reach. I sat down and wept, praying that the rose would survive. I strove to console myself in the end with the thought that I could dig it up in the spring, if it died, burn it and use the sterile ashes at the roots of a new specimen. I thought of the doctor mouthing "obsession?" I struggled inside and sat down. Unaccountably, I thought of my son and that *voice*, now edged with malice, whispered that he, David, was not my son at all. That *he* had been the vile fruit of Marie's liaison with her union colleague. This would explain, a similar voice added, why I had never felt much affection for him - a sixth sense had been telling me he was nothing whatsoever to do with me. He did not look like me and had none of my personality. How did I feel now, it argued, to have lavished so much time and money on another man's son, a faceless man I loathed?
"Stop it!" I yelled. "I freed you from your trap! Why are you punishing me like this?"
"*Im - bé - cile,"* it whispered. " *Grand con. Calculez!"*
Calculate? Calculate what? An English voice said simply - *When* did she give up? Only then did it dawn on me that she had indeed given up her union work a few weeks prior to giving birth. It was as if an icy talon had seized my heart. I groaned. I thumped my head. Here was another flail, another barbed question to which no balm of an answer could be applied. The certainty that I had stumbled onto an horrendous truth made my skin go very hot. I saw myself in hell. I sobbed. Who could contradict it? I opened the cabinet to find my mobile - God knows who I intended to phone! - and saw a corked-up bottle of Calva which I entirely forgotten about. It was nearly half full. I took it out and the golden liquid gleamed in the lamplight. I saw my face distorted and narrowed in the bottle glass. And someone else behind me! I turned but the thin figure had already vanished. An hallucination? I had not touched a drop for weeks. How could it be? I twisted the bottle again and saw the standard lamp - my vision! - twist too. Fool!
I heard the word "calculate" again. "Calculate what?" I said out loud. "What *else*? What ***else***?" In the bottle I saw the word "blessings" form. I shook it and the bubbling

contents washed it away. I put the bottle down, closed my eyes and stared into my darkness. I had to snap out of this. I was pretty well again. I was just imagining things. Of course David was my son! Next spring I would feel much better. Something or someone would turn up. Perhaps even Adèle. I would invite David and his partner over. *And* Lorraine and Paul. I thought of Christmas alone without a friend, without the comfort of a drink, of hours of silence and of endless views of drab fields and naked woods. What was there to live for? My wife was gone, my health was gone, my rose was dead. I lived in a bleak, flat wilderness. The son I did not love was not my son. Should I move away and begin afresh? But Marie was in that soil. And even the thought of the effort of moving exhausted me. I gave a sad laugh.
"I'm sorry Marie. I've buggered everything up. Like you did. We didn't deserve this. Why do things go so wrong?" I uncorked the bottle and took a swig. It burnt my throat then my stomach. A glow of relief crept through my whole being and neutralised my despair. I took another drink - a smaller one - and a certainty that sorrow did not matter overwhelmed me. Were not joy and sorrow, like success and failure, both impostors? Another few sips and I would be able to sleep and awaken refreshed and optimistic. Did not doctors always exaggerate? Had not mine expressed surprise at my rapid improvement? I wandered into the cellar in case I would need to drink just a little from another bottle in order to sleep. From the fermented-out, forgotten apple wine I dredged up a glassful. It tasted a little musty but was heady and very dry. Some I could bottle as strong cider. The other bucketful I might distil. When I was fully recovered a mere thimbleful per night, as a digestive, could do no harm. From the bottle I had brought downstairs I poured the remaining spirit into the glass to mix a cider cocktail. The flavour was delicious, even with all its *impurities*. *Life* was full of impurities. Boring, pompous man! Boring, boring, boring…….

I shivered and woke. In the dark corner, a woman sat opposite me in a long dress, legs apart, untangling her dark hair.
"Adèle?"
She shook her locks and smiled. My eyes were tired. I gave up the effort to focus them and she became two-headed. Was it a youthful Marie? Of course not. It was that bloody woman in the lane!
"Who are you? What are you doing in my cellar?"
"Dans *votre* cave?" she countered with a pout. "Im-bé-cile!!"
The word shocked me. Here was my nagging *voice* made flesh. .
"Êtes-vous *Marie*?" I managed to croak.
For answer she produced a crimson rose from nowhere and put it into her cleavage. As she grinned I caught just a glimpse of skull.
"***You*** are…….an ***hallucination*** "I exclaimed in English.
"Comment? Comprends pas!" railed the apparition.
"Oh, you *do* understand! You are just a crazy part of me. You don't frighten me. This is all bullshit! Just the booze."
To my horror she leant forward, showing me her ribs, with a new bottle of Calva and filled my glass. My head span. I looked and saw the bottle now in my own hand. I coughed violently into my left palm and saw a dark stain. "Qu'est-ce que tu veux?" I cried. "Dis-moi ça! Pourquoi tu te moques de moi, hein?"
What did she want? Why was she laughing at me? I put the bottle down, lifted the glass and drank.
"Marie has told me all her secrets, poor fool. Poor cuckolded fool!"
The apparition had turned suddenly into Lorraine!

“Liar! She told me the truth! You just want to cause me pain, pretending you’re the *whore* I freed! What did *you* do, to end up under the brambles? Why were you not buried in consecrated ground? Did the Germans kill you? Or Tesquet for deceiving him? Answer me that!”
The faces opposite became two of my own – a double vision - one vertical, one diagonal, jaundiced and blood-smeared, and I watched myselves pour more spirit.
“Go on! Drink, and I’ll tell you.” I answered myself. “Without it you’ll never know!”
I screwed up my eyes and re-opened them. I laughed and saw my reflection laugh. I was looking at my own face in the swivel mirror of the old dressing table. I managed to get up. I took three paces forward and span the mirror round to the wooden side. But the mirror side came back round and I saw the whore behind me in the chair I had vacated. I turned and it was empty.
“See! You’re not there! This is Tesquet’s fault! Old cunt!”
Then I found myself in the dark spinney. I heard faint cries of passion. In a moonlit clearing I saw a woman with her back against a tree, legs spread wide apart, and a man, naked below the waist, gripping her, lifting her onto himself with bulging, sinewy arms. Was she *my* Marie? I staggered groaning out of the spinney and fell flat on my face. When I looked again it was bright morning. I heard the harsh rasp of digging and sat up to watch. A man and woman were lifting a large black dog, a limp dead dog, into the pit. The woman turned. It was Madame Forrestier, pointing down and hissing “fool, *imbecile*.” I went to look in and fell.

When I woke again it was dark. I was in the cellar, so cold I could not move.

*

And now I am warm. The light is real again. Here in my room, on a very functional chair, sits a large man with a beard, looking stupid, as he is still holding in his great paw the bouquet which his wife has made him bring. He greets me and smiles. He asks how I am and I tell him I am not sure.
“They had no way of telling,” he says after a while. “How many days and nights you lay there in that cellar. It was lucky I came and checked. Francine happened to mention she had seen no lights on in the bungalow for a while. I thought you might have gone away, until she pointed out your car was there.”
I smile and wonder how many times he has told this story to his open-mouthed friends. I try to think. I have no clear recollection of conscious thought, or pain; and no recollection of being rescued. I only remember the nightmare - and the rest that preceded it - much later. Now I remember his name.
“Is this another part of the convalescence home, Bernard?”
He sniffs and does not know for a moment what to say.
“You have been in the ICU, Ollie. You have been gravely ill. This is Nogent. You were just lying there, covered in booze and surrounded by glass.”
“I must have smelt pretty bad.”
He smiles briefly. “No, not *good*. To be honest, I thought you were dead. You were so cold and such a strange colour. Like the chicken skin when I pluck out all the feathers.”
I thank him, of course, for saving my life and manage, I think, to sound sincere. He blushes and looks self-conscious. He mutters - as I have heard many French people do, when thanked for a kindness - that it is “normal”. Had I been told, he wonders after a long silence, how long I would be in? I shake my head. He understands and

lowers his gaze. How fragile and ill-looking - how *yellow* - that hand looks, my hand, the hand he has just taken into his great hairy rustic mitt, which is by contrast ridiculously pink, and in the rudest of health.
"If you come again, Bernard, can you do me a favour? My laptop. It's in the kitchen. I need to finish something."
After his departure a doctor comes in and asks if there are people in Britain who should be contacted.
"No. There is no-one."
"No *family*?"
"No-one close. Just cousins I haven't spoken to for years."
"You also have an infection of the blood and of the kidneys. We are trying with different antibiotics. Try to rest. The drip is of morphine. It will ease the pain if you press the plastic button on the back of your hand."
I press and press and am drowsing when I feel a warm hand stroking mine. Bernard?? I look. It is Adèle. It really is. Her eyes are gleaming through her tears. For a while I am left speechless and in the end I tell her, truthfully, how little she has changed.
"You've come at last," I whisper. "How I've missed you."
Madame Forrestier telephoned her, she tells me. Her voice is still as soft and melodic - as if for ever on the verge of singing - and so gentle and kind. She wonders, with an easing of her smile, why I had stopped writing. I tell her how hard I had had to work back then.
"I kept meaning to come back over and look for you. Then I met Marie, my wife. Ex-wife. She died. I'm really sorry. Really I am."
I manage to put out my hand to stroke her satiny cheek. She holds it close with her hand and inclines her head downwards, raising her shoulder to trap them both, never taking her dark blue eyes from mine. I ask her to tell me about her life. Had she been happy? She tells me about her businessman husband, a man with energy but no soul. Once her teenaged children had departed, so had she. In search of a true soul-mate. I rally. I tell her that when I am better we can start afresh together. I tell her about my garden, my vegetables, my walnut tree, about the stream with its tiny brown trout, and about the spinney with its delicious mushrooms - ceps and morels - about all the birds and the bats that live in there. About all the quiet walks in lanes and fields and by water. She knows, she says. She has been to see for herself. She adores the apricot rose in my garden. I decide not to tell her its secret. But she reads my thoughts and she smiles mysteriously. She knows it and approves. She looks more serious and asks who the *Marie* might be, under the slate in the back. I wonder out loud ***why*** Bernard has put it back. It must be ***him*** who did it. She tells me not to get upset.

Before she goes there is one thing I need to ask her. What had really happened on our last night in the hotel? She wonders how I can possibly have forgotten. I reply that I remember only walking up the staircase with her to my room. The rest is a blank. She giggles and wonders how many glasses of champagne I had drunk. It had not been her at all. *Madame Forrestier* had insisted on accompanying me upstairs. She had partially undressed me and thrown a cover on me. And in an instant I remember! I had been a virgin when I met Marie! I cannot hold back the tears. She is pleased too and sheds a grateful tear, saying she is sorry, and then whispers that I look very tired. Despite all efforts not to, I begin to weep.
"I'm sorry, Adèle. I've made a big mistake. If I'd come to France to find you back then, who knows….*She* betrayed me. And now I've poisoned myself by accident. I never meant to. I'll get better though. It was a stupid accident like that brute beating

me up. I know why I came back here. To find you. I never stopped loving you. I'm going to get better, I promise."
I see us sitting down together at the rustic table with apples, bread and cheese.
I see us at the back door looking out together as the fading light spawns tiny bats to wheel and dip for insects. I feel her warm and pensive silence. I have no desire to intrude into her thoughts. When we lie together we will meet fleetingly but then go our own private ways to sleep. I tell her all this as she strokes my brow and says she will come back when I have slept a little.

When I wake the first thing I notice is the empty chair where she sat. The top part is bathed in the strong light of the setting sun. A nurse enters and for an instant I call her Adèle. She also has dark hair and a kind smile. She takes my blood pressure.
"Did you see my visitor? The lady?" I whisper.
"A *visitor*? It is half-past four, M'sieur Oliver. No visitors until seven. I saw no-one. Did she have a special dispensation?"
I tell her I have no idea. A while later my meal arrives. I am not hungry. I barely touch it. As the hour of seven comes and goes the footsteps of relatives pass in the corridor. I keep hoping that every new approach of clicking heels will be hers.

But her eyes had been dark, not light blue.

Bernard has come again to visit. And his wife too! Except that she looks a little too much like the tangle-haired woman in the cellar I had imagined in my stupor. This time, though, she has grapes to give me, not Calvados. She has little to say but her husband tells me he has a confession. He had found my mobile on the lounge floor. His son had texted in English all my contacts, "Ollie very ill". Am I angry? No, I tell him. I ask Bernard to come close. I need an even bigger favour than the laptop he has brought.
"My rose. Will you look after her for me? Until I get out?"
He begins inexplicably to weep, gets up and leaves.
"Ollie," says Francine Bonneval. "If you cannot come out, what do you want to happen to you?"
I wonder what she means.
"You know. If you do *not* get better."
Now I understand. I am at Marie's bedside all at once, asking her the same question.
"Shall I tell you my dearest wish, Francine? I want my ashes to be buried with Marie's under the apricot rose. Will you promise me?"
She promises and holds my hand tight.
"Not the red one at the back. That can see to itself. *My* Marie's rose, the *apricot* one."

Bernard has come back when I open my eyes again. He beams. He has a surprise. I look up, and at the long window are all our friends, waving and blowing kisses. The very solemn doctor - the main man - is standing amongst them and explaining something. Bernard joins them and then they all move away without a second glance.

When they have left what a wonderful surprise it is to see David turn up. I tell him I am sorry for not being a better father. We had been a bit like chalk and cheese, but now I can see in his eyes how alike we are. I just know he is my son. He tells me simply that his mother is on her way to see me.

I press my green plastic button, bringer of relief, and I can begin to think again.

It is so easy, I realise, to see one's own life as *the* story, the heroic epic whose theme and plot is the achievement of happiness in the sharp teeth of adversity. But the people around me - near and far - are not "in" my life, are not merely co-stars or bit-players in *my* drama. No. To any objective observer of the stage, we all drift on, meet uneasily, and go our separate ways with little resolved. There is no guarantee of success or joy and the majority of the players leave little mark, and, judging by their private faces, are disappointed. But is not the *obligation* almost, to pursue happiness, in itself as illusory as the great goal? This conclusion ought to be depressing but it brings me now, as I lie here beyond the pursuing, a curious kind of solace. It dawns on me that I have no right to consume or possess anyone, neither in life nor death. The essences of the dead belong not to them, certainly not to me and not to some vague God of Everything. Where they are blown or dissipated, where they find their next temporary dwelling, lies within the impenetrable mystery of pure Chance. And to imagine, near death, the soul looking out from the window of just one atom, as it undertakes its eternal journey through space and time, fills me finally with true bliss. I am very tired now, too tired to type much more. Tomorrow I shall try

Monsieur Oliver Wright is dead the 14 decembre, with a crisis in the liver, of the kidney and of the blood. A Madame Adèle N. has come to see him but one day too late, I regret.

Chambrelain Philippe, Docteur

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