

THE REFUGEES

Foreword

I was lucky enough to have Emma Ginet as my French penfriend. My class had chosen the names by lucky dip in our second year at High School, and out she came for me. Not only was she lovely, but she lived - having moved from flat Normandy by the time I went to visit her when I had just turned fourteen - into one of the loveliest and wildest parts of France, the Auvergne. The second time I went, having just completed my French and Italian degree, she persuaded me - a task not very difficult - to stay for a month. I loved our mountain walks, where we gathered wild herbs for her mother's delicious stews of rabbit, chicken and oxtail, and cranberries and strawberries for her crumbly tarts.

It was in the third week during an exceptionally rainy and windy day that she showed me, with her mother's permission, her Aunt Lise's journal which had been discovered amongst her possessions. This so absorbed and fascinated me that I was allowed to translate and adapt it, as long as I agreed to alter key identities.

The ensuing tale - revised and completed many, many years afterwards due to constraints of motherhood and a profession - I humbly submit to the reader as the result.

Penny Hoja

1 The Stranger

It was at the butcher's that news of the Englishman first came to everyone's ears.

"The butcher's wife is pleasant enough but a terrible gossip. I was third, no fourth in the queue, deciding on which chicken for the pot, and Mme Bourret was wrapping up two big shiny kidneys for Mme Robinet - (poor woman - her husband has just gone off to live with a loose, younger type in the next town - and **her** sister went to prison for embezzling the solicitor she worked for - **and** she was rumoured to have been having an affair with him...)..anyway - where was I? Ah yes - Mme Bourret lowered her voice - as the gasbag always does - and this alerted everyone that a fascinating tidbit of news was about to emerge. "Yes," said she in a whisper (though not whispered low enough to escape the ears of every woman in the queue!) "*He came in with an envelope - was it Tuesday? No, Wednesday! And passed it to Monsieur Bourret - (she always refers to her husband formally in the shop) - without one single word! A list...a monthly list of meat to be delivered - and every month until further notice...with a thousand franc note inside in advance and on account! And he did likewise at Monsieur the Fishmonger...and at the grocer's.....*" "Why?" whispered Mme Robinet "Can the poor man not speak French? Has he moved here not able to speak French?" - "The note was in French," said she "So of course he **MUST**. Perhaps he is too ashamed of his accent -" - "Or too proud a man to open his mouth" - "He did look very proud - tall, bearded, and very distinguished like an English aristocrat -" - "Please, Mathilde!" hissed her husband. "*The shop is overflowing. We will put a poster about all this in the window - or on the village notice board!*" - We tittered. She blushed and took the lady's money, as Bourret turned and furiously cut up a loin into chops. His wife made a sour face to his back and we all laughed out loud then."

My younger half-sister Colette had scarcely been back three minutes from her errands before she had told me all this, in different voices, her eyes dancing merrily and her lips barely able to keep pace with her thoughts, as she stooped or stood on tiptoe to put her provisions away. I smiled to myself, said little and sipped at my coffee, sitting in the corner of the settle where we breakfasted.

News of a stranger - and a foreign one at that - had more impact in the village than anything Mitterand did - or did not do - in Paris, Thatcher in London or, naturally, that filmstar in Washington.

Now Colette stopped and stood still, with both hands fondling the floppy chicken as if she could not decide between the cupboard and the fridge, and then went to the back window to look out at the misty slope beyond the garden.

“And it turns out he has taken - not that you would know who I am talking of - old Tesquet’s farmhouse who drank himself to death the year we came. Recluse, he was.....Now, who would have thought it would ever see another soul? Come and see.”

Reluctantly, I got to my feet, wondering how long it would take for me to become fascinated by such trivial village events. Then, afraid of offending my lovely, kindest sister who had taken me in so readily, I made an expression of curiosity and went to her side at the window. She cradled the chicken in her left arm, brushed a lock of hair away from my forehead and pointed a pale, freckly hand into the distance after ducking down to my level to ensure that I could see.

Silhouettes of writhing trees were just visible in the mist.

“Do you see the last pine on the right before the crag? Well, there you take the path veering to the right and you descend to a wall which is falling down and through a large gap you walk straight to a copse...through there, climbing up a path to the left you will come to the cottage through old terraces where he used to grow vines and - when they did no good - grazed goats. We picnic there some nice days...ah, the view!....but no longer now, I suppose, ah well....There is a wide track - hardly a road - winding round the other side from the village starting from just past the church -”

“So that is the house where the Englishman now lives?”

Perhaps a hint of exasperation had crept into my voice for she looked a little deflated to be so interrupted, like a narrator of a funny story deprived of its punch line by a member of the audience.

“Yes, of course. I said so.....”

She brushed the lock of hair away again - behind my ear - saying for the second time that morning that my bruise was almost gone and bent down to kiss my brow. A tear stood in her eye. She looked away to the hills.

“But why would a soul wish to *live* up there? There is nothing...” said she, more to herself than me.

“You mentioned the view. Wouldn’t he see for miles and miles - over the plains to the mountains?”

“Well. Yes. But it would be lonely and in winter so very cold....perhaps he has only come for the summer. Yes, of course. He is a writer of some sort come for solitude....inspiration....”

“And peace and quiet. Maybe a composer. Or an artist? Perhaps he paints.”

“Of course! Mme Bourret will be so disappointed. She seemed to think him a sinister character despite his fine looks. A bad man with a secret to hide...a....a.... -”

“...Fugitive from justice? Or someone hiding from dangerous pursuers?”

Her green eyes grew larger as she entertained this possibility and I felt a little twinge of guilt to

have indulged in this gentle mockery of her inquisitiveness because she was genuinely lovely and interested in people. Then, what I had said about dangerous pursuers made my face prickle with pain and embarrassment, although the irony of it did not occur to her.

“A fugitive! That would explain why he does his errands all in one go and as quickly as he can. He does not wish to be out long enough to be seen by too many busy-bodies like Bourret’s wife. Or draw attention to himself. And he says nothing because he does not wish his voice to be heard. You know, Lise, you might have hit on the truth without intending to.”

I took the chicken from her and put it in the fridge, then poured her some coffee, pausing at the stove to inspect the cassoulet which was barely simmering. It would be ready well before Emma and Martine returned from school and Georges came back from the garage. I caught myself frowning in the mirror; the black eye had turned tawny and the eyebrow was less swollen, making me look less and less like a defeated boxer. My fancy of the long nights came back to mind, this time so much less convincing that I tried again to persuade myself it was, after all, a clever idea. My sister was milky-skinned, tall and gangly; my eyes were blue and hers green; her hair a golden red and mine a light brown. A dye would never work on her but it would darken mine to give me an Irish colouring. Certainly no-one would ever suspect that Colette and I were related. Might the plan really work? I practised again, in thought, in broken French, the nonsensical sentence which kept going around my head. Was there anyone sharp or well-travelled enough in the village to see through such a risky pretence? I was longing to go out into fresh air when the spring finally came.....I gave her the cup of coffee.

“Colette. You have still told nobody?”

“But of course. And the girls are sworn. And Georges never speaks unless it is damned cars.” She put down her cup and embraced me.

“You are safe! And the Englishman will draw every gossip’s attention now.”

Alarmed, I broke away.

“Draw their attention? From me? Who knows I am here?”

“Nobody, I swear! But if you are seen, I will say what we agreed. An old friend from school in Argentan. It is almost the truth, anyway. And you forget, I am still almost a stranger. Four years is hardly long enough here - yet. Mme Bourret has only just stopped marvelling at us, the newcomers. No, the Englishman is a godsend.....Finish your coffee and cake. It is so buttery and firm. My best attempt yet.”

A year* before my escape, Emma’s English pen friend Penny, coming over for the first time, had brought a gift of shortbread and her aunt’s recipe. I crumbled the delicious cake in my mouth with the tepid rest of my coffee and decided I would tell Colette of my crazy plan. Had I not been the best in my class in English? And I had enjoyed drama. Besides, I had so loved Dana’s Eurovision song that I had learnt it off by heart when I was twelve or thirteen and could imitate her brogue perfectly. This would surely work! Who would ever suspect a charade? I would soon be able to walk around the village and in the hills when my face had healed, and would arouse no curiosity or suspicion once accepted as Colette’s pen friend.

* In her journal Lise had written *two* years, but I had first visited in 1984 not 83. P.H.

2 The Plan

“If you think you are confident enough to pull it off, it would be a clever plan,” said Colette doubtfully as she collected in the dirty plates. “Georges?”

Shrugging, he grabbed the wine bottle with his rough, hairy hand and filled our glasses.

“I have told nobody about Lise. Who would I tell? A customer? I mend their car, they pay, they

go..."

Emma and little Martine were arguing quietly about who should sweep up the baguette crumbs - always the first job after dinner. Emma hissed that she had lots of homework and promised to do two sweeps at the weekend. But Martine was being stubborn and sticking to the rules - turn-and-turn-about. I told them to listen. I would do the sweeping.

"It is very important that you tell my new story to anyone who asks."

Martine was cross because she wanted to antagonise Emma whom she resented because she was prettier and cleverer. Martine had unfortunately inherited her mother's golden hair as a shade of ginger and was quite plain and pasty. Emma was dark like her father. My intervention had ruined Martine's plan. She frowned while Emma looked down on her in triumph, and then came back with a stunning reply.

"*She* really only wants to practise her horrible accordion! And Maman, you say we should never lie."

Emma flinched - she was an excellent accordionist - and was about to lose her temper when Georges held up his hands for silence, gesturing to his younger daughter in surprise and admiration at her insight while smiling quizzically at his wife as if to say - *She is right about lies! Answer that one!*

Colette thought this over and sat back down. Taking Martine's freckly hand into her own she said "Of course, you are right my little one. We should never ever lie if it is only to bring benefit to ourselves - or to hurt someone else. But this is quite different. It is to keep your Auntie Lise safe. So God will understand and forgive. If anyone asks, just say *my mother's Irish pen friend*, that is all."

Martine thought over this complication of her simple world and Emma was pleased to be first to make the solemn pledge. Then, looking down on her sister, and speaking in the tones of a second mother, she instructed her to tell anyone - like Mme Bourret - who asked a nosy question that she did not know the answer. Martine was about to react angrily to such condescension when I interrupted.

"Girls. Please do not argue. This is no game. If a certain person finds me, he will.....*hurt* me....quite badly."

Both girls looked suddenly alarmed and I guessed it was just occurring to them that they too might one day fall victim to a violent man. I asked Martine if she was okay. Now tears started in her eyes and she came round to embrace me, sobbing.

"Why would he hurt you? You are so lovely," she managed to say at last.

"You need not worry, Martine. I was unfortunate. Just fetch me the brush..... Emma, go and do your homework. I can sweep up more crumbs than either of you!"

*

That night, I lay in bed writing in my diary, wondering what future I could expect. Could I, by degrees, make myself so familiar to the locals that I would be accepted? My French, I decided, would slowly improve to become nearly as good as theirs. My decision to stay and not return to Ireland would be somehow explained - not that anyone, I was sure, would be so interested in me by then as to want to know. Perhaps a new unforeseeable opportunity would arise for me in another part of France - or even abroad. My English was good, my German fair, and I could turn my hand to many things. A new life! Not yet thirty-five, I would put recent events behind me and begin again. Symbolically, I had wrapped a red elastic band tight around the left hand side of my

journal so that I would not be easily tempted to read of March, February and January; neither should it fall open by accident at those terrible pages.*

It was a few days later when Colette came hurrying in and put her basket on the table, looking fit to burst. I asked her what was wrong but she had already begun to blurt out her news. A lorry. A huge lorry! It could hardly manage the turn past the church.

“It had to have several goes and all the traffic behind was hooting and tooting - like Parisians! In the end the driver had to pull over into Fournaud’s forecourt on the other side and reverse into the gap by the church - and then all the way up the track!”

“Colette. What are you talking about?”

“The Englishman. He has ordered a huge tank - all the way from Issoire. And the digger in the traffic queue had also come from there. It followed the lorry up.”

I looked in the basket. Where was my hair dye? She saw me looking and brought it out of her pocket. I asked her if any questions had been asked in the drogerie. *No*. She had told the shopkeeper that it was for a girlfriend of Emma’s - a surprise.

I took it from her and went to the bathroom. After studying my solemn face - rounder than Colette’s - in the mirror for a long time, I came to a final decision. The substance in the sachet was a magic potion to change my life and my fortune. I squeezed it into a mug and painted it carefully into my hair. Half-an-hour later I was downstairs again and Colette was pleased that it had taken so well, saying I looked even younger and could almost be taken for an older version of her own daughter, my niece Emma.

By one o’ clock the mist had cleared from the hillside and a brilliant early spring sun was shining. Leaving Colette to prepare dinner, I went out into the garden, through the back gate and headed towards the tortured pine, last on the right. The air was so fresh, the new grass and flowers so vibrant that I wept for joy to be outside and free again. Skipping like a girl along the narrow trail, my feet sent up tiny blue and brown butterflies in panicky clouds. Finally, near the top of the hill where the trail veered right, I turned to look down on the sleepy village clasped by the lower hills. To the left stood the church with its comical spire, far too small, stuck on by the ancient villagers as if to say - *that will do, God will understand* - and, to the right side of it, the track Colette had described which quickly disappeared into the trees. Just beyond the village centre, tight-wrapped like the whorls of an opening bud, there was a garage and in my imagination - and it made me laugh aloud - a tiny Georges was wielding his spanner.

Three weeks before, a taxi had brought me from Issoire in darkness and this was my first view of everything. I shouted at the top of my voice but the village was about its invisible business and ignored me.

The path did not bother going to the top of the hill, which was a steep climb through wilderness, but circled around, flat and sensible, before plummeting quite steeply to a plateau where stood the wall Colette had mentioned, now a broken and useless barrier for sheep and goats long gone. I trod carefully, arms outstretched for balance, over the boulders which had spilled out of the wall and was soon heading for the spinney. Sounds of a chainsaw whining, of a motor revving and rumbling came to my ears, with occasional shouts.

*With Colette’s agreement, Emma and I removed that elastic band and read together of the awful violence which Lise had endured.: kicks, punches and worse, culminating in the attack which caused her to flee in mid-March 1985. The causes of her partner’s violence were also mentioned, and I took the liberty of expanding and integrating them into my account further along, for dramatic reasons.

The spinney was not densely packed with trees and soon I was standing half-concealed by a tree trunk at the edge, below walled terraces looking up at a hive of activity. The terraces, seven in all, were mostly intact, and only a few thick stumps of old vine remained to be cut up by the fellow with the chainsaw.

The roof of the building, long and single-storeyed, almost like a Norman farmhouse, was half-covered with plastic sheets. A flat-backed truck stood on the patio and a fat man on a ladder was passing up tiles to his more agile workmate who was laying them and peeling away the plastic as he went along. But this was but a side-show to the main event. The chugging I had heard was coming from the digger busy removing loads of earth from the back garden - which sloped upwards above the house to the right - dumping it into a mini volcano of a heap a few metres further down. A squat man in blue overalls, the driver of the lorry which had so amazed Colette, stood watching and smoking by the tank to which he had attached chains and made ready for the hoist to lift. The silver thread of a stream just above the cottage caught my eye and I wondered what the man digging with a spade was doing higher up. He seemed to be cutting out a new path. All at once I thought I saw the plan! He was preparing to divert the stream into the garden. I kept watch eagerly, expecting to see appear at each moment a tall, thin, bearded man - perhaps smoking a pipe - to stand loftily above these tubby locals, but he never did. No doubt, he was already away painting in a world of his own, oblivious to the tumult around him.

*

“Mme Bourret! I cannot wait to tell you! My pen friend Lise - Lisa - from Ireland has arrived and happened to be walking yesterday afternoon in the hills. The tank is NOT a septic tank!” The butcher’s wife looked shocked.

“No???”

“No.....oh please, M. Bourret, can you cut the next steak a little thicker for my husband - and the other three like the first.....yes, yes, thank you...”

Now Mme Bourret came to a complete standstill and stared at me in disbelief. I had crept out of the house after Colette in order to try out my new identity in the village. My sister noticed her staring and then turned to see me in the doorway.

“Oh Lise - Lisa! You...”

“Yes, Colette, I thought....I would...make a little tour....it is so nice.....”

The butcher’s wife suppressed her amazement, welcomed and called me, after an uncertain pause, Mademoiselle. The little old lady behind Colette was staring at me agape and unashamedly, so I smiled warmly at her, walking past to stand at my sister/pen friend’s shoulder.

“Delightful - delighted!” whispered Mme Bourret. “But has...Mlle.... met with an accident?”

I had rehearsed for this eventuality and had my story easy and ready. I feigned surprise and brushed my eye with my fingertips while Colette began to stutter - and looked ready to faint.

With a smile of self-mockery I slowly described my collision with a post as I had walked along reading a magazine. Mme Bourret looked at me with a mixture of pity and doubt while Colette laughed and shook her head in amazement at my clumsiness - - and cleverness. The butcher turned and thrust the five steaks into his wife’s hands and nodded very politely at me.

“It must have been a fascinating article,” he said with a smile. He was clearly irritated with his wife that she had been so tactless - and nosy - to mention my eye. Glancing at her pointedly he said to me “One can hardly tell now that you injured your beautiful Irish face, Mlle.... Enchanted to meet you.”

He asked Colette if that would be all, and, no, she ordered some ox tongue for stewing. While he went to fetch it from his cold room I saw my chance. In halting French - carefully rehearsed - I told of the scene at the farmhouse.

“The stream is being....diverted?.....*diverted* into the garden...into a tank... and all the dirt taken out will be put on the terraces, I am sure -”

“Mon Dieu!” exclaimed Mme B. “He really is mad! Does he mean to try and grow vines there again? The earth.....”

We made our exit, and arm-in-arm, we threw back our heads and laughed.

“Is he ma-a-a- d?” I said in mimicry of the fat gossip. “The earth.....*bah.....bof!*”

Colette almost dropped the meat she was laughing so much.

“It worked! You were wonderful, Lisa - Lise. O does it matter? Everyone will know of you now and take you as a gossip, too. Shame on the nosy-parker! How does Bourret put up with it? But you will soon be one of us. Safe and sound. Wonderful!”

Over the next few days and the following week, many new events and marvels at the farm meant that my presence and novelty was overshadowed, so I was very grateful to the crazy Englishman. A procession of plasterers, builders, tilers, carpenters and plumbers made their chugging way up the steep track by the church, and a rumour spread that this was all being co-ordinated by an agent in Clermont. A thirsty electrician in Fournaud’s bar said that the Englishman had told him he was a retired soldier, and that he spoke perfect French. Someone else swore blind that he had made a killing on the London Stock Exchange and was wanted by Scotland Yard for insider-dealing. I saw with private amusement conjectures turn to rumours turn to gospel truths. My mocking surmise that he might be a painter had been taken to the boucherie where the “might be” had been chopped away so that half the village “knew” - the half who spurned Bourret’s rival because he was a Communist and sold “suspect” game - “knew” that “him-up-there” was a prominent modern artist. So, instead of the mystery of the Englishman being resolved, the tangle became more and more confusing and complicated as new knots and strings were added.

When, one morning, a tractor driver pulling a trailer of manure stopped at Fournaud’s for a beer and directions, the theory that a new vineyard was being planned “up there” became a certainty. An hour later, Mme Bourret was telling everyone that twenty - yes twenty - trailer loads of dung had been ordered from a farmer in the next valley - at which her husband muttered that she was talking shit as usual - and the news and the joke were soon in our kitchen.

3 The Encounter

It was a Wednesday morning - a beautiful spring morning and the birds awoke me not long after dawn. I experienced a euphoria I had only known in early childhood. Any adult reluctance to get out of bed was quite absent and I literally sprang to the window to stare at the wonderful hills and, to the north, never clearer, the dark cone, the dark ogre, of the Puy de Dome.*

To the right, just risen, the sun shimmered and sparkled like a great unnatural fire in a deep element of dark blue, forcing the line of trees to throw long shadows. That of the last one, the writhing one, resembled a body writhing in pain - or - dared I think it? - in ecstasy. The grass, like the sky, was of an unnatural colour, a green dotted with all the other colours, as if put there, as tiny flowers, by the point of a Master’s brush. My gaze returned to the writhing shadow. In the moments I had been at the window, the right “hand” had moved to grab a boulder as if to throw it. It was almost a comic scene - and I just knew that I was the only person to ever perceive that effect.

My clock said nearly six o' clock. I dressed quickly and was extra quiet in the bathroom, for today, a non-school day, the girls and Colette would be lying in, though Georges would rise as usual at seven. I tiptoed down the stairs and, pausing only to take a shortbread from the tin, and Georges' powerful binoculars from the drawer - he was an occasional star-gazer, (though Colette joked he was far more interested in the bedroom window of their pretty neighbour) - and turning the key very softly, I let myself out. I soon regretted not leaving a note to explain my leaving but was afraid of waking them by going back.

The village gradually came into view as I climbed, glancing behind me. At the top of the path I turned to look properly and saw the distant grey and olive volcanoes of the more rugged south - which had been obscured by haze on my first climb - ranged like a roll of huge waves on a stormy sea. Panting for breath, I reached the writhing pine whose shadow had turned and contracted even more, and rubbed the rough bark.

"I too have suffered," I could not help saying. Laughing a little at the futility of speaking to a tree, a painful memory made a tear start in my eye. Were we not two creatures shaped by experience, one twisted by the wind, and one by cruelty? Yet I could escape - the tree could not! I walked on, singing the soppy Dana song, beneath circling buzzards, and making rabbits start from cover and scurry to their warrens.

I came to a sudden halt and laughed with joy for the gift of the morning - and then cried with regret for the love which gone so wrong, which in spite of everything still flickered within me, and which a stubborn part of me wanted to keep alive. I looked all around. Of course! If Didier could only see all this and could escape from those self-induced, bizarre notions, could gaze at the distances, the plains, the earth, the sky and the mountains, could inhale the pungent scent of the new herbs, then surely his good spirits would be revived! Surely this was the cure for all those who were self-obsessed. But then I envisaged him in a dark room, dazed, out of it, brandy bottle and knife at his side, and cursed him - and myself for even thinking of giving him another chance.

I looked up and, for the first time ever, through the binoculars, I saw the dark, symmetrical markings on the underside of the tawny feathers of those windsailing birds, and gasped. How profligate, how unnecessarily extravagant - and mathematically exact - were the finishing touches of God in His creation, which no deterministic theory in science could explain. To be in the midst of such miracles forced me to my knees and I sent up fervent prayers in gratitude for the beauty of the world. What man could damage, God would heal. The rabbit in the talons of the buzzard would not suffer long and would be transformed. The earth would spin serenely on and the cries of all the suffering would cease, for God would know how to deal with it. As I followed the slow circling of the buzzards, two crows flew up to harass one of them, and he wheeled away in submission, without complaint.

Touching my healing eye socket as a talisman for a new life, I set out on the path veering right, with a renewed determination not to let the past spoil this glorious new morning and what might lie ahead. By now it was almost seven and the world was up and about its business. On the distant road between Issoire and La Bourboule, tiny cars, windows glinting, crept along very slowly as if held in check by an invisible force until they disappeared from my view, obscured by the approach of the ascending trees of the spinney. A sound I had not paid much attention to - a thud with an instant echo such as was only heard on a crystal clear morning - was growing louder. It was coming from the cottage.

* The Auvergne is a land of extinct volcanoes. The Puy de Dome, though not the highest, is the most famous. It last erupted four thousand years ago. - **P.H**

I peered through the trees and saw him. He was wielding a pick, standing a few metres along from the left side of the first terrace. He grappled with the boulder he had loosened and rolled it over the edge, then hurled a black root, spinning, in pursuit of it. He grabbed a spade and from a wheelbarrow he scattered dark soil at his feet and dug it in. He got down on one knee and scooped up some stones and weeds to dump into the barrow. I did a quick calculation; the size of the task along and down the seven terraces would surely take him the whole spring and summer. Now pulling the barrow behind him, he climbed back to the house and began mixing spadefuls from the two great piles of dark dung and light brown soil together, before shovelling the result into the barrow. The cycle - from top to bottom and back again, with time added in to dispose of roots and stones - would take at least half-an-hour.

I had completely forgotten about the binoculars. I put them to my eyes and focused them until I was looking at trays and trays of seedlings on the patio. I recognized small tomato plants, for my father had grown them in the kitchen window much to my step-mother's unspoken irritation. I realized at once that he was not preparing the ground for vines, but for a far more ambitious project!

I whizzed my angle of view downwards and his boots came shockingly into focus. I lifted the binoculars slowly, taking in his green corduroy trousers, his denim shirt, his throat - red with perspiration and exertion - until his face appeared, also quite red. He had no longer a beard, but a black moustache; his eyebrows were black and almost joined. The eyes too were dark and he had a high brow from which his curly hair was receding a little. It was a good, intelligent face, but, to be honest, a little disappointing as the nose was rather fleshy and dominant. When he looked up from the root he was studying, and seemed to stare straight at me, I felt alarm. Had I moved? A glint of light in the lenses could not possibly have alerted him as the sun was behind me and half-hidden by trees anyway. His continual stare made me lower the glasses too quickly and the sudden movement gave me away.

“Qui est là?” he shouted in perfect French. “Vous m’*épiez*?”

There was no point shouting back *no* because I was spying on him. He began to stride down the terraces like a fairy-tale giant and I turned to run. Unfortunately, in the gloom of the wood, I missed the tree root and went sprawling, knocking all the wind and the stuffing out of me. I managed to sit up and began to rub my ankle. The branch of a pine moved aside and he appeared in front of me. He asked if I was hurt and a sudden defiance made me glower back at him. I shook my head. He came close, getting back his breath, and squatted down. His armpits were dark circles of sweat. He stretched out a hand, touched my ankle, and I instantly bent up my knee in recoil.

“Pardon, Mademoiselle. Je suis docteur. Vous permettez?”

I pulled down my skirt hem very tight to cover myself and told him he should speak English. He looked surprised and puzzled.

“You are.....?”

“Irish.....”

“*Irish.*”

“Irish...Canadian...”

I instantly regretted such a rash embellishment, invented on the spot, afraid that my strange accent would not convince the ears of an Englishman. He looked even more puzzled, inclining his head to one side as if to say - *really?* - before asking if I could move my ankle.

“Does it hurt?”

“A little.”

“May I?”

Without thinking, I told him in French that he could examine me, at which he shook his head, as if thoroughly confused. He took my ankle gently but firmly in one hand and turned my foot carefully with the other. His gentleness ran through me like a charge of electricity.

“Rien - nothing is broken - rien n'est.....in French or English?”

“I am here.....to improve my French,” I replied in French.

“Mmm...now I am very confused, young lady,” he said in English. “You are French Canadian or Irish?”

Now, stubbornly, I spoke in French.

“Both.....My father was....French Canadian...but he left....when I was a child. My mother - Irish - moved to.....Calgary, and my French became very, very.....”

“Rusty?”

“Yes.”

“Please explain why you were spying on me.”

“I was not! You terrified me - shouting and....charging down the hill like a bull!”

For reply, he plucked up the binoculars from my chest and grinned. I looked up at the sky and searched for the buzzards which had of course disappeared. He helped me to my feet and put his arm around my back, supporting me for a few paces.

“There were some buzzards, Monsieur.”

“Not in my sky.”

After a few metres, the pain in my ankle became a warm glow and I knew it was not serious. Sensing this too, he let go. He nodded and turned to go back home, before making a parting shot.

“Oh, by the way, tell your friends in the village that the Englishman really is mad.”

His face was at first very serious - and then he went completely cross-eyed and lolled out his tongue. He laughed loud like an imbecile.

“You are mocking yourself of me!” I shouted in English.

“Beg pardon??? What sort of Irish is that?” he retorted, laughing even louder, before walking away, holding up his hand in a flourish of farewell.

*

I was quite tempted to tell Colette that I had spoken to the Englishman, and that he proved to be, after all local speculation, a doctor - (to see her face gape with true astonishment would have been reward enough) - but it did not seem proper to feed the village gossip mill, especially after his accusation that indeed I would so. When I reflected, all morning long, on his brusque and charmless manner, my indignation eventually subsided, for I *had* been spying on him and he was quite within his rights to challenge me - I had been trespassing on his land at an unearthly hour. Whose fault was it that I had fallen? Had he not been attentive, albeit in an unsentimental way? He was too intelligent to be taken in by my ridiculous fictions, and if anyone was to be deemed crazy, it was me. I felt ultimately ashamed to have exposed myself to his gentle ridicule - which, I sensed, he could have made much more mordant - though a part of me resented him for mocking me at all - me, a stranger who said she had strayed onto his land in genuine pursuit of birds.

Were not the English of a certain class, by repute, impeccably polite? Should he not have taken me, suppressing all show of doubt, at my word? Yet, everything considered, I did prefer his forthrightness - although it irritated me to have inadvertently bolstered his sense of superiority,

because he was evidently a proud man.....though not too proud to make a ridiculous face and declare himself insane. Seeing him suddenly go cross-eyed again and talk gibberish, mocking himself in a way that no Frenchman I had met would ever consider doing, made me laugh out long and loud.....But above all, it needled me most that he thought me a nincompoop, some silly, incompetent agent working for the village gossips.

I pressed some coffee and stole another irresistible shortbread biscuit from the barrel. Colette had taken the girls by bus to Issoire to buy clothes and I was quite alone. The sun stood as high as it could reach that spring day and only a few clouds had stolen in from the west. Rain was forecast later. I frowned at the plodding book I had begun reading. On impulse, I put on my old jeans and a tee shirt, and left the house. Emma would not mind if I borrowed her bike.

The track past the church began benignly enough but half-way up its steepness sapped my resolve and I got off to push. As I rounded the final, near impossible bend, I saw him down on one knee, attacking something with a long spike. My gasping for breath must have attracted his attention. He slowly stood up as I dumped the bike at the end of the lowest terrace, trying to straighten, hands on hips.

“Not you again! Why don’t you leave me in peace? Have you nothing better to do than come up here? Aren’t there enough boys down there for you to hang around with on a Wednesday?? Why pester *me*?”

This was said with such rudeness that I would have turned round and left, had I not been so disconcerted by the climb, that it made doubly determined to repay him in similar coin.

“Why are you pretending to be such an ogre? You do not frighten me!”

This took him aback. He threw his spike down and stared. Only then did his comment about boys register properly with me.

“Boys? How old do you take me for, Monsieur?”

He bent forward and took a pair of glasses from his shirt pocket to inspect me closer.

“Nineteen?”

“You.....you let me tell you now that I am turned.....thirty-four years*of age!*”

“Thirty-four?? Never!”

His face softened and he look ready to apologize but before he could do so, I announced - and it even astonished me - that I had come up to apologize to him; that I *had* been spying on him, though not on anyone’s behalf. I too was a newcomer.

“There are so many stories circulating about you that I wanted to see for myself, Monsieur. It was a lovely morning - and I thought I would walk up and take a look at the farmhouse. That was all.”

(Our exchange had been in French, and from then onwards, by tacit agreement, French would always be our language.)

Seeming lost for a reply, he knelt down again with both hands gripping the spike. I climbed closer until I was within a few metres of him.

“They say you are planning to grow grapes in a bad soil - and are laughing at you. But I know you are not.” - and I pointed at the seed trays. “My sister - I mean my pen friend’s sister - is such a gossip. I have told nobody what you are doing. Neither that you are a doctor.... ”

He began to thrust the spike down into the soil, then stopped.

“It is not their business. And if I fail here, I want no-one to know. Pardon me,

Mademoiselle....Madame?... but I need to get on before the rain. I mean to get on as far as that rock.....so I bid you good day...”

I took a deep breath and said that I wished to help him. He wiped his brow with a sleeve and looked at me in a manner which said that I had just confirmed his first suspicions about my mental confusion. This provoked such a stare of defiance from me that he looked away.

“No-one can help me,” he muttered at last. Perhaps I was meant to take this as an expression of despair, but I chose to take it literally.

“But of course I can! I can mix together the two piles and bring it down. It will save hours!”

“But haven’t you got things to do,……*down there*?” he replied, with undisguised contempt for the village.

“I told you. I am a visitor. It begins to bore me, down there. I have been ill and want to build up my strength in the fresh air. I could plant your tomatoes too… and use the hose pipe from the tank to water them in… it is a clever idea.”

The stream which disappeared into the tank at the top was gushing out from the overflow pipe and dancing its merry way on a new course before rejoining its old one to the right farther down by the stone wall.

“I am not as silly as you think.”

“I never said you were silly.”

“But you think I am!”

“I think… you are little crazy… but that’s different.”

“As crazy as you?”

“Maybe even crazier… French Canadian Irish… quite a combination…… And it’s crazy to put the tomatoes in this week… there might still be a frost.”

Not needing to say anything more, he slammed down the spike furiously several times until he was able to prize out fragments and splinters of root. I strode to the top and began mixing and chopping the dung into the new soil, feeling very pleased with myself. Soon, I had made quite a pile and was already feeling thirsty after the climb in the warm sun. The door stood open and I could see into the kitchen. In front of a range stood a pile of firewood taken from the stack below the window outside.

“Would you like me to make you some coffee?”

“There is none. Only tea. In a box on the top. Make some tea if you wish. No kettle. You will have to use the range - be careful, the front rings are very hot.”

The stone sink had only one tap - a gleaming new one of brass to which, I guessed, water was piped directly down from the tank which had been installed slightly above the level of the cottage floor. I wondered about his toilet and bathing arrangements, but was too polite to go and peek. That there was a fridge surprised me. I put a pan of water on a ring of the range and within a few minutes it was bubbling and steaming.

“Would you like it white, like the English?” I shouted.

“No. I like it black, thank you. I hope you do too. I have no milk.”

I put a tea bag in the simmering water and took the pan off the ring.

“What about hot water? For washing. You only have one tap.”

“Water is piped from the tank into a heater unit in the bathroom. Generator runs it. Out back. Don’t worry. It’s all taken care of. I wash and bathe regularly - even when I’m not expecting pretty visitors. So you can come in as close as you want. No need to be shy.”

He was mocking me again, because I was holding the mug of tea at arm’s length for him to take, having knelt down. He smiled and winked.

“I didn’t mean -”

“You can’t help being nosy. You can report to the villagers that I am not living like a savage.”

Before I could retort, a loud howl came from behind me - from a large, long black cat.

“You again! Clear off!”

“No!”

He had picked up a stone to throw but I put out my hand.

“He is lovely! Don’t be cruel.”

Picking him up, I suddenly remembered the rabbits. They would chew all his plants and he needed a deterrent.

“*And* there are pigeons in the wood. Puss will keep them away too.”

Stretching out his paws very stiffly, he meowed very loud, as if in agreement. The Englishman only made a sour expression of resignation and went on digging - but I could see it had dawned on him that my defence of the cat proved me to be not quite so silly after all.

“And what about your clothes?”

“Pardon?”

“You have no washing machine.”

He blew out a long breath of exasperation and shook his head.

“If you must know, young lady, the few things that need washing - shirts, pants and socks - I do in hot water in the kitchen sink.....If you look in the cupboard next to the sink, you will see a microscope....my underwear is in the drawer....have a look - I guarantee you will not see one microbe....”

He looked so serious that I could not help laughing. I sat down on the bench and laughed long and loud, longer and louder than I had for months, hardly able to breathe, until I had the hiccoughs. The cat nuzzled my feet and reminded me he was there. While the Englishman had his back to me, I crept back into the kitchen and came out with a tin of sardines I had spotted. Greedily, the cat gobbled them down and then sat licking his paws.

“Well - now I’ll never get rid of him. You’d better bring some more tins if you mean to come again, but I doubt he’ll chase any rabbits and pigeons now.”

A tiny flash of lightening in the darkening south-western sky turned our heads. We waited for the rumble of thunder and after about twenty seconds it arrived.

“You can do me a favour before you go. Can you fetch the seed potatoes down - there, on the other side of the onions.”

The terrain he had prepared so assiduously proved deep and rich and the cricket stump went in easily. Under his glancing eye, I dropped in a row of potatoes and covered them over.

“Excellent. No need to water them in with the storm breaking. You’d better be off. Now, how shall I pay you?”

“I want no payment!”

“Maybe I could cook you something.....*if* you come again. My name is Adam.”

“And I am Lise - *Lisa!*”

He raised a sarcastic eyebrow and held out his grimy hand which I briefly took, before grabbing the bike and freewheeling away, urged on by the wind in advance of the storm. I had gone a few metres when he shouted something. I dug in the heels of my boots and stopped.

“Lisa - I meant to say how remarkably well your French has come on in just an hour...almost fluent...and I’m surprised you Irish take your tea black like the French.”

I realized my blunder and blushed.

“Slàinte!” he said, holding out his mug. It sounded as if he had said “lawn-chair”.

“What?”

“It’s Irish for cheers - but you probably wouldn’t know that.....in Canada.”

He laughed and began to sing something about a Wild Rover, and his mocking voice pursued me all the way down as far as the first trees where the comic church came into view.

*

I told Colette that I had been riding on the lanes between the villages and she showed no inclination to disbelieve me, even though I am such a poor liar. Besides, she was keen that the girls showed off to me their new shoes and dresses for their approaching Easter visit to their grandparents - Georges' parents in La Bourboule. I had been invited but I knew it was out of a sense of duty, so I declined, not wishing to repeat all my Irish fictions and to reprise the fatiguing role of Lisa with new people, for the secret could not be shared, even with ones so close.

Colette had forgotten to buy rillettes* for our entrée, but when I offered to go, she insisted going to Bourret's herself, for she had something important to tell the butcher's wife about a "certain person" with whom she had been speaking on the bus to Issoire. I was very tired and did not argue. Martine smirked as soon as her mother had hurried out.

"She thinks we did not overhear. Mme Robinet is divorcing her husband."

"Martine!" hissed Emma. "It is not right to speak of adults' personal matters."

"Bah! Did not half the bus hear?"

Emma was in a bad mood because of the pimple on her chin - she had her father's olive-oily skin - and her sister meant to take full advantage. Emma stood examining the blemish rather dispiritedly in the kitchen mirror and Martine, in fair imitation of her mother, advised her not to touch it.

"If you.....*pick* at it....." she said, voice slowly rising, half solicitously, half in warning "If you break it *open*, then you will *spread* it. *Then* what will your chin look like? A mushroom...."

"Oh shut up!" screamed Emma, almost in tears.

"Girls!" I exclaimed.

Martine took cover behind the staircase door, opening it just a fraction, to deliver her parting shot. "Then what would your Romain Salles say at school? He might go out with Amanda Billancourt instead. Perhaps you could wear a plaster and tell him it's a cut."

More screaming as the door slammed shut and Martine clattered, laughing, up the stairs. I went to the window to hide the smile I could not help because of her teasing wit. Emma was an easy target because she was so solemn and self-conscious.

"Take no notice. Every pretty girl gets a pimple now and again. If what's his name does not understand that, then he's not worth it. Soon it will be gone. I thought my eye would never heal."

"I hate Martine!"

"No, no. All sisters fight. Your mother and I did - particularly because we had different mothers - and we were always trying to compete for my poor father's affection. I could be very nasty to my step-mother. But your grandfather told me before he died that I was not the reason she left.....

Families!.....But we love each other dearly now, your maman and I."

"Did your mother.....divorce grandfather? Maman has never spoken of her."

"She died when she had me. Your grandfather married again very quickly. It caused quite a scandal. Then, of course, your maman was born a year after me."

Emma tried to look sensible in spite of her upset.

"And why did....Uncle Didier hurt you, Aunt Lise?"

*a course pâté made from pork

I embraced her and she held on tight and shook with terror and love. I whispered that one day I would tell her.

*

After dinner, I lay on my bed, writing in my diary and thinking of the wonderful day I had had, reviewing the Englishman's wry comments which came to him so easily. I pictured him moving about in the cottage and thought of the potatoes nestling in the dark enriched earth which the pelting rain, falling soon after Colette's return from the shop, had surely soaked. Was he being kind to the cat? What did he really think about my fictions? The urge to explain was very strong in me. He was, at heart, a good man, a doctor, interested in the *welfare* of people - not in gossip at their misfortunes. But he was sad. How old was he? My father had been forty-three at his death from cancer. The Englishman had plenty of those wrinkles around his eyes too. But why had he come? Were there not hillsides enough in England? What had made him sad?

I went to the window. The storm clouds had all passed and the sky, dark blue, was ablaze with a moon and millions of her sisters. It was almost as bright as day. The family had retired and only Georges was left, toddling around in the bathroom. Unable to resist the beauty of the night, I crept down the stairs, put on my warmest coat and went out.

At the top of the hill, the view was spectacular. The lights of farms and of tiny settlements might have been reflections of the stars in a dark sea. The Puy de Dome stood aloof at the edge, a watchtower over the world.

As soon as I was on the edge of the copse, I saw a bright glow on the patio of the cottage. I wished I had brought the binoculars. Peering as hard as I could, I made out the dark shape of the Englishman sitting at a table. I took a deep breath and began to climb the terraces.

"It's me. Lisa. May I come up?"

He did not answer. He was singing softly. There was a wine bottle and a glass on his table. The fire was in a brazier. His face in the soft glow looked rather grey. He stood up and fetched a chair for me. He seemed a little unsteady.

"If I am bothering you...."

"No, no. Come on..."

He patted the chair and asked if I wanted a drink.

"I never drink."

"No? I always do. Then I can sleep. But don't worry - I'm not very drunk. You are safe."

The allusion to safety in the company of a drinker made me feel a little uneasy but I sat down. In front of him there was a notepad and a pencil.

"So, you *are* a writer. Not an artist."

"Being nosy again!... There are lots of questions I could ask of you, but I'm too polite. Quite a mystery, you are, Mademoiselle *Lis-A*."

We sat in silence and looked at the view, watching the few headlights on the main road crossing and then going their separate ways.

"Aren't you married or somehow attached? I can't work out why you want to bother - no sorry, wrong word - bother *with* - a fellow like me. A proper mystery...."

"I told you - I'm a visitor. A free agent. I just like it up here - and I like your project."

"Swap places with me - you must be cold."

"No. The walk has warmed me."

"For instance, I can tell you're not happy; I can tell that you were assaulted recently. Your

eyebrow....”

“No! I walked into a post!”

“Really?”

“I’m too embarrassed to discuss it, Monsieur. Please change the subject. What are you writing about?”

He laughed and sipped his wine.

“You can tell them *down there* that I am a poet.”

“I am too. A little.”

“How can you be a little poet?”

“Now you are mocking me again!”

The howl of the cat broke the tension between us. I held out my hand in invitation and he sprang onto my lap.

“Has he been kind to you, Minou, the gruff Englishman? Has he fed you?”

“Not really. He only had half of my barbecue. Will you tell me your story - when you are ready? I’m on the look-out for ideas - for stories.”

“I would never speak of my past to anyone - *down there*. I have told no-one I have been up here - not even my sister.”

“Ah! So you are visiting your own *sister*? Not your pen friend - or *her* sister? Is she Canadian - or Irish - or both?”

I might have panicked over my newest blunder, but in the near dark, it was not too difficult to dissemble.

“She is....my half-sister. *And* we correspond...My mother married again in Calgary. She married a Frenchman who was.....visiting a relative - a neighbour of hers. It is complicated.”

I had turned my face away from the fire to hide it from his sharp eyes.

“I know there must be a good reason that you are not telling...quite...the truth, because you are not an habitual liar, otherwise you would be a lot better at it. But it is no business of mine. We are strangers.”

He reached across and I stiffened, but he only meant to rub the cat’s ear - which made his eyes skin over and purr even louder. I looked the Englishman defiantly in the eye, unable to find a convincing pretext to avoid his gaze any longer. He smiled.

“Lise - when and if you feel able to- perhaps we can swap our stories. True ones.”

I did not know what to reply and so said nothing. Singing softly, he emptied the bottle into his glass. There was little more of import to say after our bargain had been - tacitly - struck, and after a discussion about what plants might be put in next I took my leave. On my way down I realized why I was drawn to the farm.

I envied him.

4 Stories

Over the next two days, after telling my sister I was going walking again, I went out as soon as I could, stopping only in the cramped village shop to buy baguette and cheese - and of course sardines - and made my breathless way up to the farm. Adam seemed to have forgotten our bargain - maybe due to the wine - and we laboured mainly in silence, making such good progress that by Friday afternoon we had almost reached the end of the first terrace and had planted lettuces and onions as well as more potatoes. When we stopped for tea or sat down for lunch, I was glad to talk to Minou as a distraction from the heavy and embarrassing silence. He seemed

lost in himself, perhaps depressed. Alcohol had so depressed Didier that he could only raise his spirits by drinking more - which made him feel guilty. He was trapped on a spiral staircase, climbing up and down. I wondered if Adam experienced something similar. But no, surely not - for here was freedom, light and air!

On Friday afternoon, upon descending the track - it was much quicker that way and I was a little late - I had the misfortune to meet a woman I recognized as a customer at the grocer's, and she nodded to me as she came out of the church. She looked up the track and seemed to guess from where I had come.

"Is it Mlle Lisa, Madame Ginet's visitor?"

"Yes, Madame...it is such a fine day....and I have been...er..."

"Walking in the hills? Did you meet the Englishman? He is supposed to be cultivating the old terraces."

"No. I have not seen him..."

"But the track leads from there..."

She was close enough to see how grubby my hands were and her widening eyes showed what conclusion she had made. She bid me good evening and scurried off in the direction of the shops, leaving me to wonder how long it would be before her surmise was being shared with the fat lady behind the meat counter.

Colette was preparing vegetables when I came in and I lent a hand with the potatoes. I realized there was no point keeping my secret any longer.

"I have been speaking with the Englishman."

"What?"

"Yes. And helping him a little. He is not planting grapes. He wants to grow all his own vegetables - and maybe sell some at the market."

Instantly, I regretted telling her so much. Had he not wanted his project kept a secret, in case it failed?

"He is a nice man. Honestly" - (for Colette had stared at me dubiously). She began to ask all sorts of questions, but I convinced her that I only knew two or three things.

"His name is Adam; he is forty-odd; and he has a black cat."

I had no qualms about saying so, because it was the truth. I did not tell her that I had agreed to share his table on Saturday night when the family would be in La Bourboule.

Over dinner, Colette had one last try at persuading me to accompany them the next day, but I convinced her that it would be too trying for me to have to pretend to Georges' parents and answer any awkward questions they might put. Georges nodded.

"She does not want the stress, Colette," said he, cutting up baguette.

"But you will be so bored and lonely. And the forecast is so fine, and their garden is so beautiful in spring..."

I assured her that I would be happy to be out in the fresh air - and that there was enough chicken left over to provide for me the next day.

"And on Sunday night - when you come back, I'll do my special crêpes for everyone!"

The girls hoorayed, but the little one - who had been looking at me a little slyly for a while - could not help blurting out her tidbit of gossip. She had seen me walking down the track, having eaten her gôûter* at her friend's house near the church.

* this is a snack, traditionally jam and bread, which French children, after a long afternoon in school, eat in advance of their dinner - which I have seen served even as late as nine o' clock! **P.H.**

“I think Aunt Lise might have a friend up there. That is why she wants to stay at home.”

This was said, of course, in jest and was a wild guess, but it now dawned on Colette - her face said so - that Martine had guessed correctly. Flustered, she reprimanded her daughter so sharply that both were shocked - as well as we other three.

“You apologize, Martine! Now!”

“I - I am really sorry, Aunt Lise...I didn't mean...”

“Not grave, my little one. I was walking and stopped to chat to the Englishman. To polish up my English.”

Colette glanced at Georges - almost in alarm. But he shrugged.

“He came down to the garage and sold his car to the boss. A nice Ford. Very polite and proper man.”

“Georges! You never said!”

“Because it is not important, Colette! You would only tell *that woman*....”

“But how will he get about?”

“He has a bike,” I said. “And a hand-cart. He wants to live as simply as he can.”

Now Emma joined in. Her Geography teacher, M. Bossuet, had told her class that, in future, we would all have to live more simple lives. Martine stuck out her tongue.

“Bossuet is so boring...and his breath smells -”

“No! He is a good teacher -”

“Girls,” said Georges calmly, contemplating the cheese. “Finish your plates. You are both having an early night. We too. I want to be away at seven...*the traffic*....”

I wrote in my diary as the house fell gradually quiet for the night, its final sound being the cistern filling, while I considered with anticipation the wonderful weekend in prospect with my new friend - and Minou - until the weariness and effort of the day overcame me and I sank into a profound and contented sleep.

*

“But what would you do with so many tomatoes?” said I, surveying the rows we had planted out, risking the April weather would remain as kind as it promised to be. He stood up straight and massaged his back.

“Do with them? What a strange question. Make sauces for pasta. And hot chutneys for cheese. If a frost doesn't get them...”

“My father used to cover his with paper cups at night. He never lost any. I could fetch you some from the village.....”

He began to struggle again with a particularly stubborn root as I mixed more soil and dung. After a while, he looked up gasping and asked me to go around the back and get the pork fillets which he forgotten to take out of the chest freezer for our dinner.

We toiled on until around five o' clock, mixing, digging and sowing carrots, peas and cauliflowers. The beans, just germinating like little ears in pots by the warm house wall, would have to wait until safer May to be planted out. He said he would soon sow melons - and courgettes and peppers for ratatouilles. By the foundations, he had dug deep holes for - yes - a grapevine to clamber up the wall, and for a peach he meant to train as an espalier. Around the

back, on the slope, where there were already currants, raspberries and gooseberries, I had already helped him plant an apple, a pear and a plum. I told him I loved strawberries and he gave me a packet of seeds to sow in the gaps where the soil was quite fine. He said he was planning to get chickens and build a coop for them at night for protection against foxes. He joked that he would set nets for rabbits and send the stupid cat down the warren.

In my mind's eye, as we drank tea, I saw a wealth of produce, an endless supply of everything - or almost everything - which he would need to live - and live well - here above the village, looking out on spectacular country and the far volcanoes. As I cradled Minou and stroked his warm fur, these - and other thoughts - made my heart ache.

"Lisa. Would you like to take a bath before me?" he said rather shyly, as he took off his boots and wrinkled and stretched his feet. I decided to tease him. Did I need to, when I had only been planting and mixing?

"Of course not! I thought I would just offer - in case you were too shy to ask. I'm sorry if -"

Telling him that I would shower later at home, I put the cat down, adding that I would like to watch him prepare the special goulash he had promised me.

He cut the meat into cubes and rolled them into salted flour with spoonfuls of mild paprika - he said it gave a better flavour than the fierier variety - before frying them in olive oil with a few slices of onions and red pepper. When they had turned golden, he glugged in half a bottle of red wine with a good squirt of tomato puree - and soon the stew was simmering and thickening on the least fierce hotplate and would be ready to eat - with boiled potatoes - within an hour. He left me with instructions to stir it every so often to prevent sticking.

While he sang in the bath, I sat with Minou with the sun over my left shoulder sinking to the ridge, turning orange and gazeable, and making the soil turn darker and the tiny plants grow longer shadows. I wondered in how many days, if the warm weather continued, the first leaves of the potatoes would appear. I had watered them that afternoon. I imagined all the terraces below me splendid in various shades of green, bathed and nourished by the light and warmth of the wheeling sun, and refreshed by the water of the stream. I imagined the tiny green tomatoes swelling and turning orange - like the sun - before sinking, ridged and red, to balance just above the stony soil. Adam had promised me a fair share of produce - and I laughed to recall his very generous and chivalrous offer - of the loan of his hand-cart!

The goulash was delicious and tender and he persuaded me to have a glass of a soft Bourgogne. He went back inside and remerged, cupping something in his hands.

"I only have the one apple for dessert, I'm afraid. Will you share it with me?"

He cut it into two, and after a hesitation I took my half. It tasted very sharp. The air was cooling, and as the sun finally sank below the brow of the hill, we lit a fire with paper, kindling and logs in the brazier. Lights began to twinkle in the valley and above the eastern horizon. In the far north, the volcano was darkening as the sky around it turned ashen. Something Adam had mentioned earlier came to mind.

"Adam - you said you would make *chutney* with the tomatoes?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

He smirked and shook his head.

"No chutney in Calgary? Surely there is!"

I tried to think of an escape but then sighed and rested my chin in the palm of my hand, realizing this was one blunder too many.

“Alright, alright. I confess. I am French. From Normandy.”

“So why the charade?”

“I am in hiding - from my husband.”

I took a sip of wine, sat back and began to tell my story.

“I married Didier a year ago last May. At first, we were very happy. And we had a wonderful project. We had bought a house on the edge of Argentan very cheaply because it was so badly in need of restoration. Both of us are good at many practical things but not building work. The kitchen was an odd shape and quite small so we decided to steal some of the garden and have a larger one built with a patio to walk out onto. The plans were drawn up, approved and work began last April. The builder had a young assistant whom I had known slightly at school - a shy, pretty boy and very pleasant, but - to be candid - not very intelligent. He greeted me very nicely on the day work began on the footings. Instantly, when I said he had been at my school, Didier wanted to know if he had been my boyfriend. We both laughed - and the boy - name of Raoul - said he had been far too timid to ask me out - which turned out later to be the worst comment he could make. But Didier laughed too and everything seemed fine. Raoul was a very good worker and I became friendly with him - but no more than friendly. It was after the work was all finished in June that Didier’s obsession began. He had always enjoyed his dinner wine and it worried me that he drank a little too much - and on Sundays, Calvados with his cheese. My own father had died of liver cancer due to spirits. However, I kept my worries to myself. In the autumn he began to drink more frequently- more wine and every night Calvados - so that some nights he could not ...oh this is difficult -”

“Could not get an erection?”

“Yes....and it made him angry - but less with himself than with me, for some reason. Then one night he had a dream and woke up shouting that there was an intruder. He said the dream was so vivid.....that Raoul had a key to the new extension and was planning to sneak in and steal from us....but worse....to rape me - *because - had he not said so himself? - he desired me.* But when I laughed he mistook this for scorn and gripped my hand very tight and said he would kill me if I ever betrayed him! I became very angry and went to sleep in another room. Over the next weeks he convinced himself that the dream was an omen. He changed the locks but was still not satisfied. He began to sleep downstairs with a knife because he decided Raoul had built secret passages in the new walls - “

“Classic paranoia due to alcoholism. Was his drinking worse and worse?”

“Yes. It became so bad that he could not go to work and he lost his job. I pleaded with him to see the doctor but he accused me of only wanting him to leave the house so that Raoul could come - and he called me a whore. One day he punched me. I told him I loved him and wanted him to get better - that we should sell the house and move away....but no, he wanted to catch Raoul and kill him. He would cut off his private parts and his ears and his nose and...oh, Adam, it was awful to see a man I loved - and still love - turn into such a monster. I was trapped. I had no family anymore in the town and he would only let me out to go to the local shop for fifteen minutes....Finally, in mid-March, one Saturday, the phone rang and it was a wrong number...but Didier said it was Raoul with a secret message. I was furious and told him to phone Raoul and held the phone out for him - which was a terrible mistake - it proved, he said, that I knew Raoul’s number! He kicked me and hit me in the eye so hard that I was knocked out. I woke to find myself naked and...bleeding...he had raped me but not....himself... - he couldn’t - .. but with a....no, no it is too awful for me to say. In the early evening, while he lay drunk and asleep I

caught the first train south. I had told him once that I had a half-sister somewhere in the Auvergne, but I was sure he would no longer remember me saying. It is a family secret that I am here. If he finds me, I know he will kill me. Now you know all.”

Adam looked at me with no expression - neither of pity nor surprise, and eventually shocked me by asking if Didier had been a good lover before his heavy drinking had started. I went to exclaim *yes* - but the *truth strangled the word. I stammered and blushed.

“Then, of course, he was motivated not so much by jealousy as by self-loathing - over his own incompetence. The excessive drinking was probably the result. I have heard of this many times from colleagues - it is a common trait of wife-beaters. You must have been very, very unhappy, Lise. You say you love him - but that him has disappeared, and you must never go back - or he *will* kill you. Here, have a little more wine.”

I felt utterly miserable.

“Courage! At least you are young enough to begin again. Many women suffer in silence all their lives - in every way - and are incapable of escape - the shame, the pressure of family obligations.....their vows -”

“But I made vows too! I cannot break them, and I cannot divorce him - because he would then find out where I am. I am *up here* but am still trapped inside - for ever.”

I looked at the long valley and began to sob. He patted my hand as if comforting a child.

“You are not alone, Lise. How many people make their partners truly happy? Who can number more goods than bads?”

I thought of silent Georges and chirrupy Colette. “My sister has a happy marriage”

“Maybe. Though perhaps deep down she envies you your freedom!”

“But I am not free. Have you not been listening? And you are too cynical.”

“I have been listening! I know what self-deceit we practise. What disguises we adopt to show others! Your sister might be counting her blessings - and *you* try to persuade yourself that you cannot break away - but it is all self-delusion. I have broken away. I faced the truth. You promised to obey your husband, no doubt - and love him to the exclusion of all others. But has he loved and cherished you?”

“But if he has failed in his vows, does that mean I should fail in mine? I made them before God.”

“Ah, the tyranny of religion. I say God - the real God - the great God of this world and not the god they cram into a church - would applaud if you chose to live the free life He planned for you.....a life.....perhaps, up here.”

I turned in horror and fear to face him. This was what I dreaded and hoped most to hear from him. I got up to leave but he was quickly on his feet too. He apologized - he had not meant to imply the meaning he supposed I had taken from his words.

“It is still quite early. If you leave now, you will not hear my story.”

The brazier glowed suddenly more brightly in a darkness more intense. The moon had been engulfed by cloud rolling in from the north-west, silvering the leading edge to glint like a blade.

“See the red in the cloud? Bad weather on the way. At least the tomatoes will be spared a frost tonight. You’re right - you had better go.”

But the cloud was slow and most of the sky still starry.

“I have time to hear your story.....I think.”

“Then I will tell it to you as succinctly as I can.”

*Colette shyly explained that Didier had suffered a problem “common to all over-eager young men.” **P.H**

He had been a medical student in the mid-sixties in Liverpool. His parents were quite prosperous so he had hardly any grant to live on and was always hard up because they, being convinced right-wingers, had a strange sink-or-swim philosophy. He was expected to live on his wits and some part-time work. .

“We have a military organization in Britain called the Territorial Army. It’s a volunteer army of part-time soldiers. It was recruiting and paying quite a nice allowance, so I joined. After I graduated, I decided to stay in because I enjoyed the comradeship and the idea of national self-defence - not aggression - appealed to me. Even though the Cold War in the seventies had thawed a little - and though I never seriously believed the Soviets would invade - the TA made sense.”

“But you - like us - have nuclear weapons.”

“Yes...but I have never accepted the deterrent case. It assumes infallibility of human judgment under pressure - which is perverse in view of our self-evident tendency to fail. And anyway, if I target missiles at you, then you will target them at me. If I don’t, you won’t bother. The Russians have not got any trained on this hill - have they?? Besides, Britain, like France is an ailing power...an impotent old imperialist who can only feel strong by artificial means. The penile symbolism of the bomb speaks for itself. Anyway, when that woman came to power -”

“Madame Thatcher?”

“- When *that woman* came to power, everything changed for me. Till then, I had no political interests...but she was spoiling for a fight. In 1982 she got it - with Galtieri over the Falklands - the Malvinas. We had a chance to become a modern nation - and never took it. The weekend after the invasion, I was at the football cup semi-final in Birmingham and felt sick to hear the crowd booing Osvaldo Ardiles and Ricky Villa....but, in spite of everything, I decided to volunteer to serve as a medic. It was a mistake. The idiots on the quayside waving flags, in fancy-dress, urging us off to our doom - disgusted me...those settee-warriors, those unspeakable tabloid-reading loud-mouthed morons.... I think it was the moment I realised that I no longer wished to be British...but I was on a ferry, cooped up with some of the most dreadful people imaginable...not *all* by any means....low-brow squaddies who couldn’t wait to shoot an Argie.”

“Were you married?”

“Yes. To Angela. I still am. She didn’t want me to go to the war. I came home a different person. I won’t describe what horrors I saw - which still give me nightmares.”

He paused to reach over and tickle Minou under his chin. He saw then the curiosity in my eyes.

“Alright. Just one. I’ll never forget the filthiest abuse being hurled at me - by our own - for tending to a young Argentinean who had just shot one of *our boys* - he was screaming, trying to push his intestines back in...he died in my arms a few minutes later....Drink?...No?.....Well, I’m having one.....So - not content with beating the Argentineans, that vicious woman wanted to defeat the Enemy Within - trade unionists, the miners and peace campaigners. She declared war on her own people. I tried to avoid the television, radio and newspapers. Finally, last year, I knew I had to leave....especially after she ordered Cruise missiles to trundle round on trailers at night. Utter madness....”

“And...your wife?”

He emptied the rest of the wine into his glass. Immediately I wished I had not asked. Had she perhaps taken a lover in his absence?

“We became estranged, though living in the same house.”

“Any children?”

“A boy. Andrew. Died of leukaemia when he was eight.”

“I’m so very sorry.....and.... she wouldn’t come with you, your wife?”

“No. I’ve written. She knows where I am. Up to her. I’m waiting for a reply. So now you know all. My life here promises a new integrity. I labour on these terraces by day and enjoy - will enjoy - the fruits of those labours by night. I have my wine, my books, my music - and my thoughts and ideas. This view....”

“But no-one to share it all with.”

“Sharing creates responsibilities.....”

Minou meowed as if he wished to have his say.

“You have Minou,” I said, not without bitterness.

“Exactly! I have to trade off the good he might do for the chore and expense of feeding him - and put up with him howling.”

“So loneliness is a price worth paying for total freedom?”

He gestured with his hand at the hills, the plain and at the Puy de Dome around which a few stars, like a crown, were still twinkling.

“Lise.....you must understand me properly. I am not romantic. I was a lonely child and can live happily alone. I am a married man and have not given up.....hope....that Angela will turn up. You loved - and still love - your Didier. Not one of the four of us made our commitments lightly. I set my leaving as a test for Angela and for me to see how much we need each other. Since then....I have met you, quite by chance.....”

I almost told him then and there that I wished to share this life - not *his* life. I felt confused.

There was no way in, unless he invited me....straight out, and not by implication. What might be the price to pay - for both of us? I certainly did not love him - in any way I understood the word.

“Yes, we surrender our freedom and independence for love. If the marriage goes bad - or, as mine, becomes meaningless - do we not have a duty to ourselves, our partners - and even to God who created us with a free will to enjoy our lives - a duty to dissolve the bond, as if it never existed?.....Don’t stare at me like that, Lise! This is not a clever ploy to coax you into my bed! What sort of a man do you take me for? We get on well, we share *some* values, but I am 44 and certainly not handsome enough for you - and not easy-going. We are friends. Sex destroys friendship. It alters the rules. I have given Angie a year to make up her mind. In my absence, she has cause to divorce me for desertion. If she sends me the papers, I will sign. So don’t imagine that you alone have a dilemma, young lady.”

“But what dilemma do you have? You have left it to *her* to decide - like the weather! You just sit here and wait.”

“Don’t be angry. Are you really so insensitive not to understand? Is it not obvious how I feel about you since the first moment when you fell? Why do you think I was so rude to you the second time? Now you had better go.”

Most of the sky had by now filled. The air was chilly and there was dampness in it.

“I leave it up to you whether you come back...”

“Like Angela.”

I dawdled down the track. When I reached the seventh terrace he shouted me.

“Lise! If you do come back.....“

My heart leapt.

“Yes?”

“.....Can you bring more sardines for this infernal beast!”

5 Terrible Bad Luck

First, I reproduce verbatim the entry which Lise made on Saturday night 6th April. **P.H.**

Mon cher Dieu, aidez-moi, dites-moi.....

My dear God, help me, tell me what is the right thing to do! Can I - should I - ever be reconciled to Didier after Argentan? My sudden departure and my absence of almost a month can only have made his suspicions worse that I have betrayed him, before and since. Would he not ask constantly what I did, whom I saw and befriended - and would he ever believe that I saw no-one? And I know I can never return to that house. What would we live on? Would he pull himself together? I try to picture the happy months we shared, but the view of the valley and the volcano and the terraces intrudes. Is this Your message to me? I will go mad! I glimpse a new life but fear to grasp it. To be with Adam would confirm the vile insults which Didier hurled at me, even were we to live as brother and sister. I cannot stay longer in the village. It stifles me. Perhaps I should just pack and leave again, without a word. I am sure I do not love Adam - and he drinks. By accident, by a fall in the woods, I have stumbled on a way to live I would never have dreamt of. But he is too clever for me and he frightens me. Surely I would end up boring him...and he is older...

The rain scratched at the windows like cat claws all through Saturday night and I slept badly. In the morning, as the rain continued, I pulled on my boots three times before finally putting them away. The truth was that I did not really wish to see Adam. The last thing he should think was that I was eager. For me to show up on a soaking wet Sunday morning when only a lunatic would do his garden - what would that tell him? I almost went to church but the prospect of being stared at dissuaded me....

Adam was too self-assured...imagined I admired his levity about sardines when the situation was earnest and delicate.....I would make him wait and doubt himself....I hoped his Angela had thrown his blessed ultimatum on the fire....I would make him wait a week and give me up as a lost cause. Like a coquette teasing her eager boy.....oh, how cheap and vulgar.....

Looking forward to the return of the family, I forgot my troubles and made an orange sauce and plenty of batter to fry crêpes. The depression I was under intensified, however, when they came back at around six. Georges was in a furious temper with the girls. Not only had they bickered at his parents' house, but also in the car on the way home, leading indirectly to an incident with the gendarmerie! As soon as they came in, Georges sent them straight to bed, and glared at Colette when she protested - in a whisper almost - that they had not eaten. He went to say something, looked at me oddly, and slammed the staircase door behind him, leaving us gripped by the echo and then the silence. The batter would sit there all night, unused. Colette sat at the table, head in hands, whispering *what terrible bad luck* over and over.

The girls had been arguing about a car-game they had been playing and who was in the lead, making Georges more and more frustrated. The poor driving conditions had not helped, and a slow camper van was holding him back, with drivers behind him impatient for him to overtake. Finally, with the girls in the back almost coming to blows, he had taken a chance on a hill where overtaking was forbidden. He had not noticed the police car further back.

"Five hundred francs," whimpered Colette again. "Nearly a week's wages."

Of course, it was not really, certainly not entirely, the girls' fault, but Georges had been adamant

it would never have happened if they had not misbehaved.

“Colette, you must tell him it was his own fault.”

She shook her head. “You do not really know him.”

After a decent interval, she wished me a tearful good night and crept to bed. Taps gushed, pipes rumbled....and the house fell terribly silent. I sat unable to stir. The kitchen, left in so abrupt a fashion, seemed to sulk, reminding me of the rooms I had left in Argentan, where my anguish had penetrated the very fabric, the pictures, and the furnishings - even the wallpaper. My imagination had transformed its smart silver stripes into spikes and streaming water. That vision still haunted me. And now these deserted kitchen objects glowered in accusation. I kept reviewing Georges’ parting stare which confirmed my impression of a growing resentment. He was not only angry because of the girls and the fine. I had overstayed my welcome and it was time to go. But where?

Easter Monday was like a day torn out of the calendar. The house remained reserved and meals were taken briskly and in silence. The television stayed switched off. It was wet and I kept mainly to my room.

On Tuesday Georges was up at seven as usual and Colette followed him downstairs, her slippers softly stepping after the tramping of his boots. After he had gone to work I came down for breakfast. The sky was grey but rain was not forecast and I debated whether to *go up there*, but something held me back.

Georges returned from work his old self - better than his old self. I did not know he could be so animated! He kissed the girls and said how sorry he was for being such a bear. Colette beamed like the sun escaping from a dark cloud. Whatever could have brought about the change? The girls promised they would stop arguing and, after they had skipped away from the dinner table to fetch the broom - each clinging to it and virtuously asserting that it was her turn to sweep, not her sister’s - Georges, after a mock clenching of fists to send them shrieking with laughter upstairs, took us into his confidence. He had told his boss Philippe about his misfortune and it turned out that he was on particularly good terms with a gendarme in Issoire - a regular customer and a distant relative - who owed Philippe a favour, after he had towed in his car from distance out of hours.

“Philippe gave him a ring and he has promised to “look into it.” ”

“Look into it?” said Colette. “But the papers will be passed up to a higher authority.”

Georges smirked - an unusual and not a pretty sight - drained his wine and made a quick, yanking gesture with his left hand. Colette looked at first puzzled and then put her hands to her face.

“But, Georges, that is dishonest!”

“Dishonest be damned! Where do the blessed fines go? To the Préfet - for his Christmas party! This has cost me just a bottle of Calvados....I thought you’d be pleased....”

“I am.”

“Don’t breathe a word.”

“I won’t.”

Later I heard hushed tones of pleasure from their bedroom and began to say a prayer of gratitude - but stopped when I realized it was not a little sacrilegious to thank God for a corrupt officer of police.

The fine weather of the previous week was gradually re-establishing itself, and on Wednesday,

after days of confinement and self-absorption, I judged it right to go to the farm, certain that the intimacy - the dangerous intimacy - of our Saturday conversation would have faded. I pulled on my boots and was about to leave when the phone rang. Colette answered. It was Georges - he had forgotten to take his sandwiches from the fridge. Colette was halfway through preparing a casserole and the girls were getting ready to catch a bus into town to see a film, so I offered to take his lunch to him before embarking on my "walk."

When I arrived at the garage a police car was parked on the forecourt and Georges was in conversation with a short, tubby man - his boss - and a very tall, smart gendarme, to whom he had just passed a bottle in a twist of brown paper. I smiled and pretended not to have noticed. "Ah, Lisa!" exclaimed Georges "Thank you. This is my wife's beautiful Irish pen friend." The policeman at first smiled and went to bow - but then paused and gave me a look so penetrating that I froze. His private thoughts about what he would like to do to me were not difficult to read. I handed over the sandwiches to Georges, speaking with the strongest brogue I could manage, and hurriedly made my escape.

Adam tried to disguise it, but he was very pleased to see me, especially when I put five tins of sardines on the table. He pointed at the first terrace and I was delighted to see tiny green ears of potato plant sprouting. He invited me to take a trowel and build up soil over and around them, like mini-volcanoes - to encourage tiny tubers to develop within the darkness. He was battling with a particularly stubborn vine root on the second terrace. I jumped down onto the first and Minou came and sat level with my face, paws together, supervising my work, and clever enough not to get them dirty.

We had sardines for lunch - Adam and I with them spread on baguette with chopped olives and red onion - and Minou from his plate.

"The tomatoes are looking fine, Lise. I thought they might struggle in all that rain."

I looked over to the left. Indeed, they were thriving in that good soil, and their stems looked already more robust. They were signalling that the project would succeed. The warm sunshine was even prizing open blossom on the fruit trees and a few bees were taking an interest. He asked me if I liked honey and I nodded. He said he was going to buy beehives. I knew then, at that very instant, that this was where I belonged. He seemed to sense, without looking at my face, that I was moved.

"Lise....I want you to be my friend. My special friend - very special. I want you to read this."

He took a paper out of his shirt pocket.

"What is it?"

"It's a poem. I wrote it on Sunday. I've dedicated it to you."

I read it slowly - it was in English - and I found it difficult in parts. Gently, he explained. I could not hold back my tears when I had read it.

"There is a room for you at the back if you want it - *whenever* you want it - or if it rains and you need to stay....."

"They will gossip down there..."

"Do you care?"

I looked at the valley and the hills and the volcano.

"No."

He reached out and I took his hand. It was strong. Minou jumped on the table between us and lay purring on the warm slats rolling around, paws outstretched, clawing at nothing. Adam begged me to come back after dinner. He was going to climb the mountain and find the source of the

stream. I promised that I would return. I would tell Colette that I was going for a walk on that lovely evening. Not a lie.

The hill was steep and the path - hardly a path - was difficult to follow. Thousands of herdsmen and wanderers had subdued its grass with their boots over centuries but few had followed recently in their tracks. Adam climbed surely and steadily and then waited kindly for me while I got back my breath. The stream ran roughly parallel with us, at times distancing itself or approaching, seeking easier ways than we safely could. The air was so still that nothing moved, not a branch, not a leaf, not any blade of grass. The sun we had pursued had settled on the brow of another peak and was beginning to set as we reached our summit. We sat on a flat rock, unpacked bread and cheese and surveyed the world. A few tiny white village buildings could be glimpsed in the dusk already settling in that valley. Somewhere a cockerel was crowing and farm dogs were barking in different keys at badgers or foxes - or just at the intruder of the creeping night. A sweet disharmony of bells came up from the valley behind us. I raised my binoculars and the tiny smudges on a far track turned into goats. Laughing, I showed a puzzled Adam where to look. The demi-sun, melting, was infusing long bars of clouds, bruised grey at the edges and stopped for the night, with red gold. The sight was breathtaking. This was where I belonged. I knew then that I would never go back to my old life.

Much farther below us, the stream had been gradually teased out into thin strands emerging from various springs. We tried to count them to the point below where they all fused. We noticed now where the reunited stream hit a rock and divided before being reconciled. I took Adam's hand but instantly regretted it. A familiar noise made us both laugh, and gave me an excuse to let go. It was Minou out mousing. I held out my hand for him to come. Adam threw him a piece of cheese to gobble.

Haze was filling the valleys as we made our way down in the last safe light. At the cottage he asked uneasily if I wanted to stay but I quickly refused.

"Colette would worry. Next week I will tell her of our arrangement. Then maybe I will stay. Sometimes. But I don't love you, Adam. Not like that. Not yet ... anyway."

"I don't want you to love me *like that*. I just enjoy you being here. Enjoy *you*, Lise....please understand...."

"No need to say, Adam. You are my friend."

We embraced. I promised to be early the next day. We had lots of planting to do. The descent by the track was more sensible in the twilight than the copse way. I looked back. He was lighting the brazier.

* * *

The previous paragraph is based on Lise's last proper diary entry. In what way her friendship with the Englishman blossomed in her last few days is impossible to know. She did not confess it to her diary and only briefly mentioned a few more chores which she and Adam got on with, not relevant to this account. Part of me hoped that they did become lovers at some point, but religious Emma disagreed.

"Why does it matter, Penny? Was it not enough that she was for a while so content up there?"

Certain is, that Emma remembers very clearly how happy her auntie was that late evening when she came back for dinner - "*Happier than I ever saw her all that month.*"

I felt very sorry for Emma. Although it was never expressed, she told me she detected, from that

fateful week onwards, a hint of accusation in her mother's face; that she, a girl of nearly sixteen, should have known better than to argue with her younger sister - *over nothing*.

After a long and worrying silence, she had written to me in the autumn of 1985, apologising for the absence of a letter and explaining that she had been very poorly after a death in the family.

“J'en avais honte,” she confessed to me that rainy week in July 1993. (She felt ashamed.)

“It might help if you tell me what went wrong,” I said to her gently. “You were only a child, Emma.”

“It is still very painful. Martine felt sad of course - but I could tell she felt no guilt. Our lecturer says conscience only properly develops in mid-teenage.”

“Have you discussed it with her?”

She shook her head. (The sisters had turned out to have nothing in common and had little contact with each other after Martine's move to Lyons.)

“It was the next week - Monday afternoon - that everything changed. Papa came home looking very worried. He whispered something to Maman and she dropped a plate. She told us to go immediately upstairs. She was not to be argued with. When Aunt Lise came home, voices were raised and we could hear most of what was being said. It was that policeman. He had realised, after beating out his brains for days, where he had seen Lisa before. He had been walking past her for a month - a photo on a poster in his own station: a darker-haired version of woman reported missing. He had contacted Philippe at the garage and said he was convinced that his mechanic's wife's penfriend was Lise Machin, last seen in mid-March in Argentan, sought by her husband Didier. Without consulting Papa, Philippe the garagiste had supplied our address so that the woman he had seen could be interviewed.

I shall never forget Aunt Lise charging up the stairs, in tears. Nothing could be said to persuade her to calm down or to stay. Within half-an-hour she was gone. For ever. The tragedy is that the policeman never came round - if he had, we would have surely confessed that Lisa was indeed Lise...and then we would have told him what danger she was in. But Papa was sure it was better to do nothing because she would be far away by then in a new place. Maman agreed....”

But of course, she was not far away. Colette told Mme Bourret and all the other gossips that her pen friend had returned to Dublin. She begged them to tell any stranger who might show up with a photograph of her that they knew nothing of her, had never seen her; that the man was not to be trusted, an ex-boyfriend - a Parisian - who would not let her be. The following week, Didier did show up and happened to show his photograph to the first woman he bumped into - the woman Lise had spoken to near the church.

It was not clear from the crime scene exactly how the three had met their deaths. Lise had managed to run or stagger down the track before collapsing in the stream. A trail of bloodspots showed she had been stabbed outside the cottage. The Englishman was slumped over the table with his head and throat gashed by a wine bottle. Didier had fallen - or jumped - headlong down the terraces and smashed open his skull on a boulder

“Only God knows what truly happened,” said Emma bitterly, taking the yellowing press cutting back from me. “But God, of course, did nothing to prevent it.”

She recalled that her father had blamed Lise for taking the risk of her disguise. Her mother had blamed the gossips, the Englishman, Philippe and the corrupt policeman. Emma still blamed herself.

*

That week of my visit, when the rain had cleared, I walked up with Emma to the old farm. The building was mostly as I had imagined it, though a little longer, with a storehouse at the end, not mentioned in the diary.

The farm could not be sold and no-one had ever appeared to lay claim to it. Perhaps Angela had gone away or had even died. It was not thought worth pursuing issues of ownership. By order of the Mayor of Issoire, under police pressure, as a result of looting and reports of undesirable elements paying their visits, the windows had been boarded up and the doors padlocked. The terraces were covered in weeds and grass, and in places had collapsed. The stream had long ago decided that it preferred its old course after all. The tank was empty and smelt bad. Around the back, blossom had faded and set tiny fruits on the trees. Rotting apples from the previous autumn were lying around in the grass.

The table and the brazier had gone and amongst the rubbish on the patio I found a rusty tin. I had half expected then to see or hear Minou, but, of course, he had gone too. Somewhere close, his bones had surely dissolved into the chalky soil. In the distance the Puy de Dome was beset by ragged clouds.

On the last pages of her diary, Lise had copied out, in her very neat but strangely juvenile hand, the following verses.

THE RECLUSE

On an ancient incline, writhing olives
Stumble over white rocks sprawled;
In the hut beyond a gnarled man lives
Within a garden, dry stone walled.

Sweet apricots on an espalier
Sweet peaches on the trees behind
For food and other comforts pay
Or trade for little things in kind.

Red-ridged fruits on strangled vines
Dangle on the sun baked earth.
Marrows and gourds in broken lines
Soon reach their full in flesh and girth

These he swaps for bread and cheese
Or he pulps to make delicious soups
And surpluses from olive trees
Go for wine and cantaloupes.

And out of curiosity
There clambered up the day he came
And stayed to keep him company

An old black cat without a name.

He sits following the sketching hand
And paws the pencil by the glass,
Which he lifts while he surveys the land
And thinks...

- which often comes to pass.

The empty bottles form a queue,
Gleam crimson with their captured sun
And dreams replace his headlong view
With lines of verse, his sketch begun -

- Here sit I beyond all mind
Of folk which I look down upon
Steep cruelties of humankind
Cannot touch me through anyone.

There is not a precious thing I own
Could tempt a villain here to climb
This path of lime and scrambling stone
To repay his breath and sweat and time.

Not false regard nor flattery
Which thrive on easy, empty words
Would struggle here to flatter me
For throws of apricots and gourds.

I watch the bursting sun's fire spread
And gild the far serrated rim
Below there scarcely turns a head
To catch this final glimpse of him.

And in the stony light of dusk
I watch the eastern silver moon
Swelling from a shrunken husk
Within the darkened blue lagoon.

What dancing stars in kites and squares
Upon this blackest sky process!
Which those wrapped up in town affairs
See dim through lamps of selfishness.

Until the early moonless hours
Shall waft the constant heat of day.

These stones shall radiate its powers
And keep the chill of night at bay

At moon-set I shall wake perhaps
When all is cool with dewy rain
When the sky rolls up old starry maps
And wheels the sun around again.

And long before his glinting rays
Light up those cloudy eastern cheeks
The birds will sing their lilts and lays
In joyous celebrating beaks.

And when the dawn display is done
And rose has turned to early blue
And from his swathes the naked sun
Has risen in his sky anew

Then satisfied shall I retire
And dream of her whose face does fade
With open hands, her heart on fire;
With love to give and nought to trade.

But she has cast me from her mind
And never shall I see her face
She could not leave that world behind
And swap it for this stony place

* * * * *

She came and climbed the dry stream's course
But only found these sun-bleached lines
Mistral-read amongst the gorse
And posted on the wind-wrenched pines.

