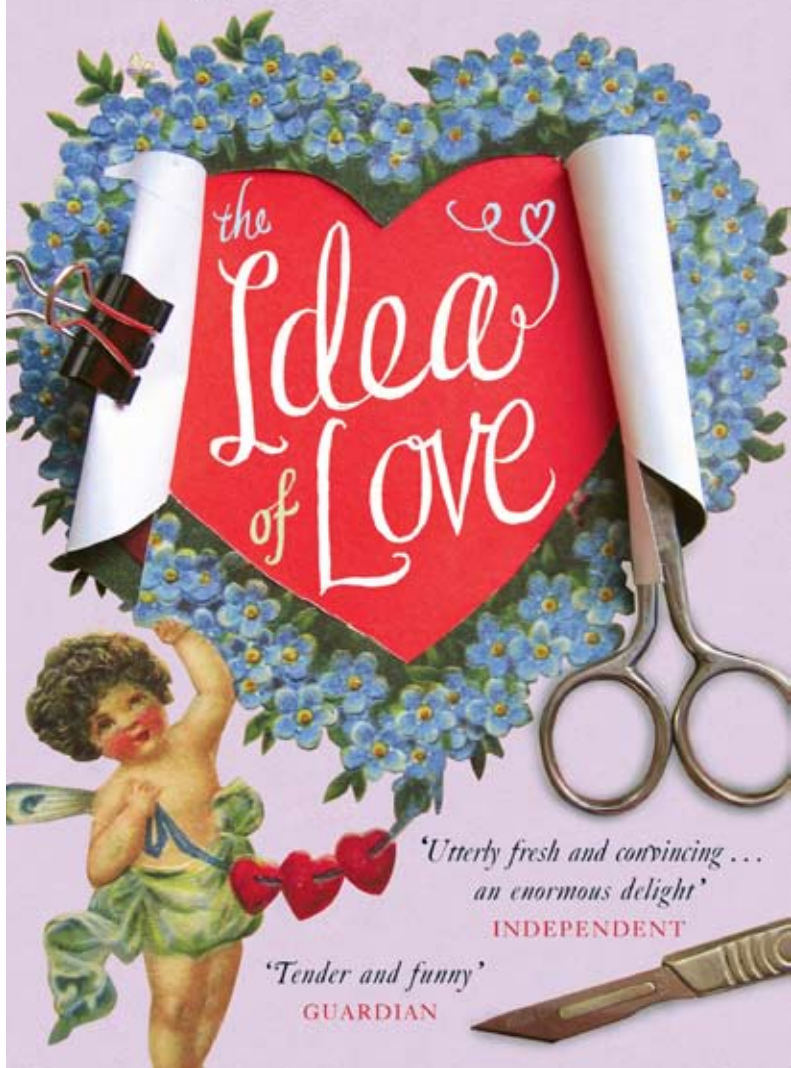


LOUISE DEAN



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by  
Louise Dean

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# I

Now that he loves Rachel he can see that losing his family was only a formality; they were never his. He'd attached himself to them believing that being sufficiently foreign, sufficiently quaint, almost rural and almost Catholic they were implicitly better or at the very least – different.

In truth he'd rarely been at home. He was more of a tourist when it came to family life. That thought brought to mind a slogan daubed on a wall in Soweto on one of his first business trips to South Africa just the year before apartheid crumbled: *Soweto is no zoo for tourist pigs*. How pricked he'd felt on his tour bus then. Family life is no zoo either. At thirty-eight years old he saw that he'd been ten years staring at the one cage, the chimps, failing to make any deductions while they aped his forlorn stare, mimicked his gestures, mirrored his pose.

An Englishman with a French wife, they lived in one of the small market towns that is on the crossroads of rip-you-off-Riviera and rob-you-blind-Provence. It was an uneventful and lonely place for ten months of the year. To the casual eye it was a romantic place; gorge and ravine, Saracen tower and stony river bed but as one grew more accustomed to the place, one's eyes were drawn to the signs of the struggle between man and nature; here and there in the middle of a vineyard or a field the stray abandoned one-room dwelling; broken down, exposed, done with.

They'd come to live there seeking a rural counterpart to his place of work; Richard's company's head office was situated in the Californian-style suburbs of Antibes with its anodyne office blocks and roundabouts giving on to roundabouts. He'd worked, when he met her, for ten years in the dismal man-made 'town' of Croydon for the French pharmaceutical group Europharm, latterly as their youthful Sales Director. He'd drunk in a pub underneath an underpass and lived in a flat overlooking a flyover.

A year after Valérie moved in with him he was relocated to head office in Antibes – it seemed too good to be true as she was by then sick and tired of England – and so they decided to quit, for good they said, town life. She stayed behind packing his things, disposing of much of his past he found out later, while he went ahead for a month-long immersion course in business French. They meant to be happy.

When they moved out to the South of France, she was pregnant, and they gathered to them what she had for family in France, her quick-minded mother and her regretful father – and they made a home for themselves in the Var region of Provence. He was promoted to regional positions and oversaw in the new markets of Eastern Europe sales of psycho-pharmaceuticals, those mind-bending drugs as he dubbed them, principally anti-depressants but also anti-psychotics, with the highest profit margin of any product known to man, more profitable even than oil. In these developing consumer markets, his client, the psychiatrist, was clamouring to prescribe chemicals to people struggling – as Richard saw it – with the transition from the old rural community-based life to the new lonesome urban standard.

Richard knew from his work, from the pockets of madness and gluts of sadness emerging throughout the urban sprawl, that his family would be better off in the countryside amongst a community, even if he had to create it with his own hands, even if he had to spend money to make it, even if he had to fake it . . .

And then, of a sudden, it was over. He'd failed. And he and his neighbour's wife, Rachel, both of them learnt in different ways, that whilst good may spring from love, love rarely springs from good intentions alone.

When his wife, Valérie, left him for Jeff, his friend and neighbour, he was incensed, and in his burning and breaking he made himself a refugee from his former life. He lost his entire wherewithal within a month of her leaving – the family, the house, the job – and he lost his grip on reason. The locals round there said that a forest fire was a necessary evil for it was the fire that released the seeds from the cones of the pine tree.

He'd thought of himself as a romantic and indeed he had been insomuch as the romantic clings to the idea of love rather than daring to love. (Though they don't mind being loved, if you insist . . .) But he didn't know what love was until he lost everything.

He found himself, one day in September, at the centre of an illusion, seeing suddenly that his family was not his family after all, that his son was not the happy child he thought him, and that his best friend was not a friend at all. In fact, his wife didn't know him, his family were in his pay, his son was disturbed, and his friend was despicable; a womanizer who barely liked women, a coward and a dodger.

And Richard hated him because they were alike, and he too coveted his neighbour's wife.

One Friday evening at the end of August, just after supper, he picked up the phone to hear Rachel's voice.

'Richard.'

'Yes?'

'Richard.'

'I'm listening.'

'Richard.'

'Rachel, is something wrong?'

He'd raised his eyebrows at his wife, pointing at the phone. Valérie was leaning against the kitchen counter holding an empty glass at her lips. He mouthed the name of the caller at her: *Rachel*.

Her look did not match his. She looked afraid and also excited. She didn't move. She waited. And so did he. He waited but he already knew.

'Jeff's having an affair with Valérie.'

But it was all over long before then.

They'd lived next door to each other for four years or so, but it was really in the past year, drinking together, that they'd become friends, he and his neighbour, Jeff, the American. Jeff was taller than him and dopey looking.

Richard was slightly out of step with everyone else around there, despite the compensations he made to local life, such as going hunting on the odd weekend during the season, because he was working for the man, he was a corporate animal, unlike the locals and the foreign 'lifestylers' moving into the area, such as Jeff and his wife, Rachel. Most of his conscious life was elsewhere.

After a good many appéros, dinners and impromptu into-the-early-hours drinking sessions he told Jeff something about his other life.

It was a departure. He normally stuck to the programme. The anecdotal salesman, much travelled, Richard had a book of life arranged in chapters to which he referred normally, only over business lunches and dinners: *Saint Petersburg Nightlife*; *Meeting Mick Jagger*; *An Embarrassing Bowel Accident in a Ski Lift*. He was no longer sure if these things had really occurred but the telling and retelling took a consistent enough form, his audience was rarely the same, and from each tale he emerged unscathed. He told Jeff some of his stories, because Jeff set up the game that way.

The thing was, he suspected now, that was what really finished it all; telling Jeff about his other life. Until then he'd kept his two worlds apart so that the one couldn't say anything about the other. The old adage about shit and the doorstep was worth observing.

He'd been running high on bravura then, with his promotion to Sales Director for Europharm Africa. He had a seat on the global executive board. It seemed then that his life had something like cinematic proportions. He was travelling constantly; and in the poor places to which he went, he was like a celebrity he was so luxuriously equipped and protected, with his business-class travel, his five-star hotels, his Amex card, his drivers . . . He walked to the front of any queue in those days.

He woke after their heavier drinking sessions, the same way, face forward, saliva oozing on to the pillow and over his cheek, and in his thorax, between the ribcage and skin, a pain. He assumed it was the booze. When he recalled their conversation later in the sober light of day, on the motorway generally, he had a curdling feeling in his chest, which he later knew to be the tickle of a tiny treason. He told himself he was allergic to wine and swapped to beer.

Jeff had a good turn in self-deprecation. Jeff was American and washed-up, or rather that was his gambit, with the implicit addendum that he had found 'the meaning of life'. The women left them to it, to the barbecue, the fire, the roast, to the opening of the bottle; their manly play. Over these activities, in chat, would emerge the recollection of some bizarre thing a woman had done or said in bed, and the ring-pull would sound the end of one story and the

beginning of another, and the sound of the latch on the kitchen door would close the subject.

In fact it was Rachel who was his friend, he could see that now. (*You can walk away from the past the same way you can step out of the sea*, she said to him in a hotel room in L'Argens, when their marriages were over, when they knew they loved each other, *and you can look back and see it, see its drift and tendency but not be of it any more.*)

Rachel was English like him; he could speak to her. They laughed. They insulted each other with affection. After more than ten years of making himself French, he found speaking English with an English woman something like discovering a secret den. Convention dictated that he spent his time with her husband and that she spent time with his wife, but he had perhaps taken some of the candour Rachel inspired in him over to that relationship.

Their mutual confidences mounted in the springtime, as he and Jeff spent more and more time together. Their friendship showed itself in the hand on the shoulder as they parted ways. Fishing trips, camping trips, holidays in Sardinia were mooted. Jeff showed him his poetry and his cartoons, he took him through the vineyards, had him taste the first wine he made. Richard had got to like the man's affable quiet joy. Now he knew something of its source.

Jeff had sat on Sunday afternoons in Richard's kitchen, his head bobbing under the hanging lamp, eating salty snacks, *cornichons*, *saucisson*, then, long and angular but slow as an old horse, going to the fridge for the both of them, for another beer, for more of the same. The guy had eaten him out of house and home.

He never knew whether Jeff's anecdotes were based on any truth, they were entertainment, they seemed improbable enough, combining famous people with outlandish drugs in high-rolling places, fantasies most likely, campfire tales that got more spooky, more twitchy later on in the evening. He would finish with the flourish of making off with the stash, the booze, the money, and the girl, perhaps, if Rachel and Valérie were absent. He could tell a story, he kept a smile on his face and didn't mind admitting mistakes. He seemed to say: *I am a fool aren't I?* But he didn't mean it. He'd

shared with Richard the story of Jeff, but given him nothing in the way of the real man. It was like losing your house in a card game.

He'd even told Richard how he screwed his business partner's wife. She was an opera singer, she made such a noise, the major domo (as he described the servant) came running and tried to break into the bedroom by shouldering in the door.

Sometimes people tell stories for a reason, as a warning, as a way of spilling the beans, as a way of trying to part company with the bad, but the story is always bigger than the storyteller.

### 3

Richard had indulged in scores of one-night stands since joining the pharmaceutical business. He might have been losing his hair but with professional women of a certain age panicking all over Europe he was more than sorted for sex. He had a number of sexual encounters in Eastern Europe, some meaningful email correspondence, some of it quite revelatory and touching, but he was careful to curtail it after two or three exchanges.

As a matter of taste he preferred not to lie to Valérie, and due to his travelling he didn't need to. He left this other life behind him when he took to the motorway. He considered these sexual escapades a normal part of modern life, that opportunity separated those who cheated from those who did not, and the latter dressed up their bad luck with moralizing. The rest took what they could.

But that wasn't the whole story.

Just the night before, he'd sat drinking with Rachel in their neighbours' kitchen, at one in the morning, with Valérie gone home and Jeff retired to bed, talking about sex, sex with strangers. Without going into detail, he'd alluded to his own enquiries.

'Don't tell me it's about intimacy or I'll smack you in the face,' she said.

'No, no. No I'm like you, Rachel. It's my way of finding God.'

'Are you laughing at me?'

'No,' laughing, 'it's just that you think the road to God is through here . . .' he'd put a fingertip on her forehead, the first time he had ever touched her, and she reached for a cigarette to make a certain movement out of her flurry of reaction, and he had thought to himself – God, I'm good at this – and gone on – 'it's not though, Rachel . . .'

She'd interrupted him. 'So you think you'll find God through a woman's vagina?'

‘Possibly. Definitely not a man’s vagina anyway. No seriously, I would never rule it out. I think of sex as a spiritual exercise.’ He was joking.

But there was something else. He craved intimacy.

He’d felt close to her through talking about that. It didn’t matter, being drunk, whether it was true, all things might be true in drink, no one knew and few remembered afterwards. It was the only way to try on new clothes without looking foolish. He shook out the match, closing one eye, feeling the sulphur’s snap. ‘Maybe.’

She looked downcast, she hid her eyes and he didn’t ask her why, he let it go because he didn’t want to get mixed up with her that way, his neighbour’s wife, he didn’t want to start thinking about what she was thinking.

‘Do you know, Rachel, before we acquired language – which, if say all of human life was the equivalent to a calendar year, would be very recently, at something like five minutes to midnight on December the thirty-first – communication was touch, and between lovers, of course, copulation.’

‘Copulation! You fool!’

‘Intercourse, not chit-chat. Think about it. Nowadays sex is so two a penny. Sixty years ago, sex meant so much more and words too by the way. An airmail letter, a telegram, a newspaper page – you had to be economical – words had real value, the cost of the secretary typing, printing, the paper, the postage and so on, well a word might cost as much as a ha’penny. And sex a life. People were more sparing. Now we’re virtually verbose. There has to be a relationship between cheap words and free love.’

She mused glumly on the subject, like a nodding dog and he got up and went home, not kissing her goodbye, taking care not to touch her at all.

He went back grumpily over the paddock to his house, considering whether he had had too much or not enough to drink, replaying the conversation. He’d talked too much. Verbose, indeed. Sex. Words. What was it about? Approaching the house he imagined his wife’s cold chaste posture in her pyjamas in their bed. Sex was a poor correspondence when it was loveless.

He knew there was supposed to be a relationship between talk, sex and love, something triangular, but he was still back in prehistoric times, wanting touch. He'd be happy with a handshake in his home, he thought. Sometimes when he was away, if lonely he went for a massage, nothing sexual, a simple back rub, just to feel another person touch his skin.

The bedroom door was shut. He thought he might go and sleep in Max's room, on the rug, so as not to have to face her staunch disinclination.

It was pretty much part of his job, pleasuring psychiatrists, most of whom were female and who had a lot of doubts to be quelled. He could help them to see the worthiness of what they did together. Between them they purveyed treatments that didn't treat so much as muffle common suffering in all its forms from grief and paranoia, to loneliness and despair as well as the ordinary longing for love.

His predecessor as Sales Director for Europharm Africa told him over lunch that going to Africa with big bucks looking for mental illness was the craziest damn thing if he thought about it and the thing was not to think about it.

With his knife and fork, the retiring salesman folded his last triangle of pizza into a mouth-sized piece and told Richard what he'd seen for himself out in West Africa, which was, he said, a totally different kettle of fish to East Africa; church halls packed with people claiming to be possessed, a sort of retro-engineering of the miracle of healing, thousands afflicted by faith rather than cured by it. The play-acting was vaudeville.

He could recall, back in the seventies, a psychosis spree in the Gambia, then Liberia then the Côte D'Ivoire and Nigeria – their health ministers made out it was something contagious for a while, just to let their brothers have a bite at the apple too.

'Hey, we aren't shrinks anyway,' he said, showing the clean palms of his hands, 'we're just salesmen. But you can't help, when you work in Africa, getting into bed with the government, you've still got totalitarianism out there. It's not really a market economy you're dealing with. So you have to see things differently, Richard. There's not a nice way of putting what I'm driving at here.'

'I know what you're saying.'

The girl put down before them a double-scoop ice cream in a cornet for his colleague and a cup of coffee for Richard.

The table hesitated on the cobbles before Richard settled it with his forearms and, stirring in two sugars, bent into his shadow. All of this adjustment, unspoken, and the sun on their shoulders, in the town that was once Italian, that knew a thing or two about pizza and ice cream, and him thinking as an aside how women were the new men, how aggressive they were in bed.

The woman he'd been with the night before in Lyon had asked him to give her anal sex, only she didn't put it that nicely. He hadn't felt like it. It was the first time in his life he'd left a woman's hotel bedroom without having had sex. He'd had to say, look I can't do this, the first time he'd ever done so, and he'd seen then how strange it was to be there together at all, to have the cold light of day in the middle of the night.

But if West Africa was overemotional, 'spiritual' as they called it, then East Africa was much more sensible, his colleague went on. Things were a little different. It was there, on his recommendation, the company were investing their money in relationships with one or two of the better governments, sponsoring clinics and hospital programmes, training the drug-dispensing doctors, making the psychiatry module look swish.

The job was to secure a monopoly for Europharm, to be seen to sponsor development under the auspices of the World Health Organization. But that wasn't any sure thing. Governments came and went, let alone ministers. Sometimes he'd go one week, see one guy, and the next week he'd go back and the guy would be gone. Richard would be able to break even for a couple of years on the basis of 'investment', but he'd soon have to make a profit and a brand loyalty won at grass roots would be better in the long run as governments came and went.

This was what he had to tell him. This was the nub of it. His advice was to get out and about to the local hospitals, to win the medical fraternity over. The doctors would be there for longer than the politicians. Europharm should be seen to take an interest in the mental suffering of the people.

'Lay down roots for the company there. You know, be sincere.'

Richard found, not for the first time, that he couldn't pick up the coffee cup, he was shaking. In the last year these peculiar crises came upon him in all sorts of situations, even humble lunches like these. It felt as if he was about to fail, suddenly and explosively. His chest was tight like he was having a heart attack. The scene shifted as if it no longer included him; he was central, then he was not. None of this was real. He felt himself flush, he was going to say or

do something that would embarrass himself. He thought he might pass out. The more he observed himself feeling this, the more distant he became from himself, the worse it got. It was as if only by shouting out, by screaming some kind of obscenity, by giving head to this sudden flush of heat and madness, he could expurgate himself and yet he sat tight, holding on to the table, holding on to the seat, not daring to move. These crises were coming upon him now in the least important of occasions, whereas when he was a young man he had suffered them only when he was really and truly about to risk himself. Nowadays it was as if he was risking himself every other day. He hadn't found a way of stopping it. Drinking made it worse.

Watching his waistline, his predecessor said he was, but Fenocchio's in the Old Town was still the best ice cream in the world. It had been his haven. Worth the twenty-minute journey for lunch. He was having liquorice. Hell, we all have our vices. He didn't smoke. Or drink coffee.

He looked at the ice cream before licking it, biting it, trimming it, and he looked at it again after he'd done that, judging the work done and that to come and taking his time.

'My time's my own now. I like golf. I never thought I would. You get all these young guys who want to ask you this and that, how to make markets. Hey, look, I took anti-depressants to the Eastern bloc in eighty-nine, but I've made it plain, I'm gone. It's a long lunch every day and an easy life from now on. Though I doubt I'll get ice cream like this in Perpignan.'

'I see.'

With his coffee cold before him, and his hands clasped beneath the table, Richard asked for the bill with a nod at the waitress.

Richard would get a briefing from the World Health Organization, the old boy said. Before, guys like him, the old school, had to fly by the seat of their pants, now they had to be seen to be regulated by anonymous interests. He raised his eyebrows to show what he thought of that.

'Well, Africa will have the privilege of skipping the asylum and all that jazz. So much the better for them, my friend. Of course it's

tempting to see yourself as a missionary. Bringing progress to Africa and all that. Well, if you must. Look concerned, you know, though. Not everyone in Africa can be got to with bakshish, don't think that about them. Oh no.'

The waitress stood sideways waiting for the transaction to complete, the terminal in one loose hand, passing her free hand through her glistening curls, looking past the stall of wooden roses, through the gap in the buildings, to the promenade, towards the sea, towards Africa.

The retiring salesman rolled the now miniature cone in his handsome fingers. 'You'll like the Head of Mental Health at the WHO,' he said, donning mirrored sunglasses. 'She's a woman.'

His return home was a forty-minute transfiguration; the scenery shifting to the rugged Wild West of the Var, its ascendancy signalled by mount Roquebrune, which loomed like a grumpy Ayers Rock. It was here that Richard turned off the A8, relinquishing the daytime brasseries in favour of a dusk of dirty tabacs where old men idled, letting their dying cigarettes fall to the floor.

He drove out of Nice, thinking how when he got in he would be able to tell Valérie that he'd now be bringing home one hundred and ten thousand euros per annum.

He thought of the girl she was, Valérie, when they met. She was his opposite; mercurial, mysterious, indolent. He was pale, equitable and useful. She was a girl with a savage haircut and dark matte skin, some swagger, almost a boy with long lashes, who sat in his flat in Croydon placidly listening to her Indochine records and smoking cigarettes out of the window. She was the sexiest girl he'd ever met. She went bra-lass, her nipples prominent, her back arched, her body sinuous and childish, her face petulant and sensual. Not so very short, she had a way then, of reducing herself, of looking up to him. She didn't mind being wrong, she liked to nestle into him; she needed him. She hated her bar job, so he told her to give it up and she did. She waited in for him instead. 'Today I 'ave done nothing but play with myself,' she would say, sighing and smiling.

Men and women stared at her when they went out and about into pubs and restaurants together. His friends fancied her, their girlfriends didn't like her. She would smile at the men and blank the women. It was comical. 'I've nothing to say to them.' She'd shrug. She had a thick accent and spoke little English. She'd followed a boyfriend to England and dropped him for Richard. He'd wooed her with gifts and trips and treats. He made her entertain his friends with tongue twisters. 'I no pheasant pluck I pleasant fuck his mate.'

She was so French. She wore things English women didn't wear, like matching bras and knickers, she was frank about her periods, not remotely embarrassed about body hair and she got on top of him in bed and screwed up her eyes and concentrated very hard. She took being a woman more seriously than anyone he'd ever met, and the effect was to make her alluringly girlish. He thought he'd always want to have sex with her.

She didn't mind being driven here or there, she didn't mind doing whatever he was doing, she didn't mind having sex day and night. She didn't mind staying in all day, doing 'nussing' as she said. She had a doll, the miniature of herself, with hacked dark hair, 'Marguerite'. She wanted a baby, she said. He wanted to take care of her, and he wanted to be taken care of too, though he did not know that then.

They married in France. Their child was born in France in 1996. Maxence. A French name. All things French. He helped her with the baby, though that was not how she recalled it later, but he remembered many nights sitting up with the infant or walking around with him, singing 'Row, row, row your boat' or 'The Grand Old Duke of York'. The birth of the child was also the end of the romance.

She named him 'Maxence'. He'd hoped for 'Edward'. They'd taken to speaking French between them since moving there. He'd once made her smell Marmite, and her expression then reminded him of how she looked at him if he spoke English to her.

She bemoaned their son from the day he was born. Nothing was on schedule according to her books, he didn't sleep well, he had colic, he had colds, he wouldn't eat vegetables and all of this she took as some sort of personal indictment. *Relax*, he told her, *enjoy him*. Well, there won't be another one, was her rejoinder.

As a toddler, he wouldn't leave her alone, she couldn't take a pee without him, he was so noisy and violent she claimed, he broke things, he hit her, he hurt animals, he wouldn't settle to read or play nicely, he wouldn't go to her parents. She proposed she get a local woman to look after him during the day. The woman had other children at her house, it would 'socialize' him she said.

Richard had so wanted his wife to be at home with their children. No more children, she told him, winking as she popped her pill, waggling her finger in an ironically come-hither sort of way. She'd have Max ready every morning for the woman to collect. She gave the woman an extra three euros a day to prepare his lunch.

'What will you do with yourself?' he'd asked her.

'There is so much to do,' she'd said, 'and it will be so much better for Max because when he is here I will be able to give him my attention. He is a very difficult child.'

Her parents, Guy and Simone, had come to live next to them just after Max was born. They'd bought for them a small bungalow and they paid the mortgage. He'd hoped her mother, who was a warm bosomy woman, would have Max when Valérie needed her to, but it emerged soon after they moved in that Simone was suffering from ME and needed prolonged periods of rest and little disruption. She tried to help, here and there, and was crestfallen she couldn't do more, but she was frail, she fell over and if she fell, well – she put her hands in the air – what would become of Guy? (He could not survive without her.)

In those early days, the family drank together more or less every evening when he got home – there was nothing else to do – and those were pleasant evenings, her mother standing, tongue out, hastily unpeeling the cellophane from a salty snack selection as they sauntered over the burnt grass paddock to them and her father bent as ever to the ground, stroking and murmuring to his dog and putting its long hairs into the nuts and pretzels. They chatted through the good or bad luck of others. Richard liked to speak French. When he spoke French he was someone else – someone cleverer, possibly.

Guy's father had been a Corsican passer-by on his way to or from the war, and Guy had a string of stepfathers until he lost his temper with one of them when he was thirteen. His mother gave him a coin and sent him away. The rest was freefall: pimping in Paris in the fifties; running prostitutes; driving for the Marseillaise mafia; he may or may not have been in the French Foreign Legion; he got Simone pregnant to the disgust of her family, then wandered off

again, though he sent money, and years later he came back to be a full-time father to his daughter, to which honour Valérie seemed unmoved. She was ten then. She avoided him physically. She never sat close to him. They never embraced. ‘She doesn’t greet me,’ he would moan in a stage whisper, to Richard.

His style of wooing his daughter was stealthy and practical. A trug of fresh vegetables picked and presented beautifully left on the outdoor table in the morning. (Left there to rot, as Valérie preferred the convenience of frozen food.) The trimming and pruning of her shrubs and trees, which went unremarked until Simone mentioned it three or four times. And he gave Simone money, from his pension, to buy gifts for his daughter and grandson and told her not to tell them the money was from him and for her own reasons she complied and cordially passed on to him the affectionate hugs of his daughter and grandson for the new gloves, the new video game . . . He remained hang-headed in the background, still chewing his fingernails, still sorry for having gone away from them.

‘The truth is, I followed my dick,’ he said to Richard one evening when they were drinking. ‘That’s not a problem for me now of course,’ he shrugged, pointing between his legs to the ground. ‘Before I was like a human being attached to a monster.’

On each of his birthdays, since they’d lived next door, Richard saw him grimly smoking outside on the terrace, waiting for Valérie to come, but she ‘forgot’ his birthdays or she went away visiting friends, if she could arrange it.

Richard was fond of Guy who in a way had, as he intimated, run to ground. He was tied to the land, and nature, would rarely venture beyond their plots and the neighbouring forest and he knew its larder. He tended to them with his herbs, his infamous cure-all soups, his applications of cabbage leaves to swellings, thyme in the bath, and notwithstanding his arthritic hands he managed to sew lavender bags. He jested that he was a lunatic, and indeed he was very occupied with the comings and goings of the moon, the fixity of the sun and the happenstance of rain. He located all manner of mushrooms, even truffles, and made a wild-leaf salad with fresh grated garlic that would send a cold packing.

Simone was the least loved of five children, the unwanted daughter in an agricultural family, the last child, mistreated by her mother, loved though, she maintained, by her father, whose photograph took pride of place above their television, and she developed mystical powers and illnesses to secure a smidgen of attention and developed a large chest and a pregnancy as soon as she could. She allowed Guy to come back not only to the warmth of her unconditional tolerance but also to raise her up, *la dolorosa*, to tell of her life from behind her hand, askance, and to sing of it too, the self-saucing sentiment bubbling up as she hit the top notes. She sang like Piaf, all trembling indignation. She ran a number of sideshow businesses which occasionally cross-pollinated profit-wise, the two principal ones being fortune telling and selling the cannabis that she had Guy grow.

He liked to assist them financially and they were not greedy; a new washing machine here, a twenty-litre box of Coop red there. They were ostentatiously helpful in return, especially Valérie's mother, who was always thinking aloud how she could help more but ceded agreeably to his protestations that she did too much. She listened to him, she praised his French, and deplored oh-so-covertly, for his ears only, the state of his marriage and the negligence of her daughter. Her hands went up with her eyebrows at this point, resignation was her suit. Impassioned of an evening, the old boy threatened the spectral rogue, whoever dared to threaten Richard or the family, with a taste of his shotgun. They kept the paths weed-free.

They gave Max birthday and Christmas presents and five euros here and there and received his visits without much warmth. Typically Max would stare into space and say nothing, waiting for the opportunity to leave, and his grandparents seemed to feel much the same way. 'Well, Max, your mother will be wondering where you are.' And Max would look at them with an aloofness and they'd raise their eyebrows in unison as he left.

'He's not right in the head,' said Guy. 'He doesn't communicate.'  
'He's a boy,' Simone would respond archly, taking the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone

The low hum of chatter, as the early evenings descended, was Richard's idea of the good life, and what he kept in mind driving home. Of course it was possible they were all alcohol-dependant, he admitted to himself amiably. So what? The good life, rosé, same thing. He was looking forward to telling them about his promotion and he knew Simone would rush for a bottle of champagne and pant and sweat, all fingers and thumbs, as she opened it and they would clink glasses together. After a few glasses of champagne, Valérie would unwind and smile and laugh and be generous and he'd put the boy to bed so as not to disturb her happy state.

They were able to laugh together, the family, and the laughter was like a nightlight, a modestly useless accessory in the daytime, which could become so very important in the dark.