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**Quod
Serpens...**

...quod serpens in muliere suffocavit.

Anecdote from Ancient Greece :

In the middle of Winter, a man found a frozen serpent. He picked it up and put it under his shirt to warm it back to life. The serpent did wake up and bit the man on the chest.

As he lay dying, the man complained about the unfairness of his fate, but a passer-by said to him : “Why be so surprised ? After all, you *knew* it was a serpent.”

Chapter One

Beaumont used to be an island. No longer. A few stretches of sand, held together by the seam of a slate-coloured road, are now linking it to Lerrywick. Salt pans, now abandoned, have grown on its northern and western edges. Beaumont, however, still retains the atmosphere of an island. One feels as if every part of the town belongs to a perfectly homogeneous whole. It's a very small place, and one can either be part of *village life* or, as in a big city, one can just dream and remain detached, remote, unattainable.

On Church Square, the chime of the ancient clock makes you feel like the reader of a 19th century novel. When crossing the square, fat old women wobble on with all the elegance of a ladybird that hasn't managed to fold its wings properly. In the church itself, with its chancel tilted to the left (like Christ's head on the cross, or so they say) there breathes a sacred and shiny

monster, delirious with wooden Rococo sculptures : an organ so old that Johan-Sebastian Bach himself could have played on it, had he known that such a place as Beaumington actually existed.

Lining Church Square, and tightly wedged between more conventional buildings, is an unsteady-looking structure, tall and skinny, like a mirage. There used to be a film and camera shop on the ground floor. I was born on the second story of this house, which smelled of town gas and chemicals. We didn't stay there very long. After a year or so, we moved on to Star Cottage.

Snugly fitted at the bottom of a garden, Star Cottage, to this day, blinks its narrow windows between flights of tall plants and flowers. The sandy courtyard launches its yellow paths in three directions : one towards the iron gate of the garden, another towards the chicken coop and its orgy of morning

glory, and the third towards the tree-covered darkness of a park.

Next to the kitchen door was an old washing trough where rainwater had accumulated, the inner walls of which were covered with the soft velvet of underwater moss. More than one small toy, placed precariously on the lip of the washing trough, had fallen by accident and finished its career in a watery grave where, three feet below, I could see it and its predecessors, inaccessible and forlorn, turning, month after month, into miniature examples of archaeological wrecks. My mother refused to fish them out for me. I was forbidden to play near the washing trough. She probably thought that the contemplation of these toys, which were slowly acquiring a pale-green tinge, would be a healthy reminder of my duty.

Among these symbols of my disobedience was a ruddy-cheeked rubber doll, fallen on its side, and on whose face and limbs faint wrinkles of

sunlight used to shimmer, silent and cool as in a distant world. I would gaze at my little artificial person with a mixture of sadness and sadism, unable to comprehend why I could find beauty in the loss of something I loved.

I enjoyed the dampness of the stone, creeping up through capillarity and attracting thirsty insects like bees and butterflies. It would make *me* thirsty as well. I would lean over till the tip of my nose touched the surface of this green and translucent water whose fragrance of grass and wet sand attracted me so much, but I would not drink it. Instead, heading for the kitchen, I'd ask for a glass of water.

The garden was a world by itself. Enormous black caterpillars, snugly fitting in luxurious fur coats hurried majestically from one stock-flower to the next. Brown and white bumble bees would dive vigorously in snapdragon flowers and come out backwards like puffy old gentlemen expelled from a first-class compartment by a railway

guard. They would then solemnly turn round and, having recovered their dignity, fly heavily towards another snapdragon flower.

The chicken coop, where Hampshire and Sussex hens cooed peacefully, looked like a giant aviary, shaded by creepers clinging to its wire. There were only five hens in all. During summer afternoons, they would doze off in dust bowls of their own making, and with their half-closed eyelids, seemed to be experiencing the pinnacle of happiness. They were never killed. We were far too poor for that. In those days, chicken meat was a luxury. I must have been a good ten years' old before I ate chicken. Our hens' *raison d'être* was strictly to give us eggs.

They had acquired, in the process, a level of importance well above the station of ordinary volatile. They had names. We talked to them. Hoping for leftovers, they would run towards the wire as soon as they heard us. Fish bones, vegetable peels, bruised lettuce

leaves, cold noodles and boiled-ham rind gave them a varied diet, supplemented from time to time with worms or crushed snails. One of the hens would capture the unfortunate gastropod and, chased by all the others, start sprinting around the aviary. They would catch up with her, steal her prey from her and start running in the other direction, which always made me burst with laughter. The winner would eventually gulp her prize catch with great spasms of her neck. The others would stop, both impressed and resigned, their heads craned to one side. Then everything calmed down again.

To reward us for this royal diet, they would give us eggs of impressive sizes, eggs of sensuously tanned flesh tones dotted with freckles. My grandmother would come down and collect them every afternoon around five o'clock. I was allowed to go with her and bring back one egg. Sometimes, it was so freshly laid that it imparted to my

awkward palms a warmth and smell of feathers and cut straw.

To avoid chicken droppings, you had to watch out where you trod. In spite of their unavoidably faecal nature and in spite of the horror that all sorts of excreta triggered in me (and still does), I could not help admiring the beauty of these little yellow, black and white circumvolutions designed by Nature. I always managed to bring back my egg without breaking it, but I was less successful when it came to avoiding droppings, which gave my mother the opportunity to launch into one more of her interminable lectures.

My grandmother is the one who truly brought me up during my early childhood. She and my mother belonged to a by-gone world : a mixture of semi-illiteracy and strong religious principles which could turn people either way. In my grandmother's case, towards love, understanding and tolerance ; in my mother's case, towards stiffness, narrow-mindedness

and an inexhaustible need constantly to criticise everything and everybody.

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It was truly *a dark and stormy night* : nine pm. and a concert of howling gales. My mother howled in tune with the elements, and had been doing so for hours. Everything had gone wrong, they said. My right arm was folded above my head and I couldn't come out of her womb. We lived in such an isolated community that most women chose to give birth at home. The midwife had panicked and asked my grandmother to go and fetch the doctor ; then, arguing that she had another birth to deal with, she hurriedly left the scene. In the dim, yellowish light of 40-watt bulb and while the tempest raged and made the whole village shake, the doctor pulled, cut, mopped and finally managed to drag out of my mother a shapeless blue-skinned animal dripping with blood : a tiny girl that my father

baptised with shaky hands. The doctor cut the umbilical cord, and almost throwing me at the foot of the bed, started to suture my mother who, by then, had fainted ; but my grandmother did not see things that way. She knew that, in circumstances such as these, the child must come first, not the mother.

“Doctor, you take care of the child.” she pronounced in a clear, dry, authoritative voice.

“The child is dead. I’m dealing with the mother.”

My grandmother’s tone of voice went up one octave.

“I said : take care of the child.”

Tired and irritable, the doctor turned round and looked her in the eyes. “The child is so blue that she is either already dead or severely brain-damaged and her mother is bleeding. If I look after the child, you’ll have this woman’s death on your conscience. Do I make myself clear ?”

“I said : take care of the child.”

“No.”

The doctor wanted to turn to my mother again but before he could do so, he had received, on both cheeks, a loud pair of slaps. Shaking with rage, my grandmother, now hard as steel, shrieked, her arm stretched towards me: “The child. ”

Subjugated by such instinctive authority, the doctor placed his stethoscope on my chest. “Well, I’ll be” he muttered, “she’s alive !”

Devastated, my father had witnessed the scene without saying a word. His first wife had died while giving birth, and his first mother-in-law, a tall, hysterical, bigoted woman, well thought of by the *respectable* folks of Beaumington, had publicly accused him of murder during the funeral ceremony. The doctor lifted me by the feet and performed a slapping resuscitation. My father, hatless, went out into the storm and only came back at daybreak.

In the end, I survived and so did my mother, but I had really messed her up, tearing the walls of the vagina and the rectum so that, until she was taken to hospital for an operation, her “solid waste”, as they quaintly put it, would come out through one overlapping, gaping hole. I am familiar with these lovely details because of the way she never tired of describing them to the *ladies* who, a few years later, would come to have afternoon tea with her. “If men only knew what we go through for them !” she would always end up saying, supported by a chorus of approving mumbles with mouths full of soggy biscuits while my father was rotting away in a Prisoner of War Camp.

Whether this difficult birth had traumatised her or whether it was simply the woman’s nature, she thoroughly hated me. She did it in rather clever ways, calling me with affectionate pet names in front of others, for example, but never hugging or kissing me. As for her general view of education, it consisted in finding fault

with all I did and all I said, non-stop, for every waking moment I ever spent with her. For comfort and affection, I had to turn to my grandmother, but by the time I was five, she had left us to go and work as maid/secretary to her son who was a vicar in a small parish, hundreds of miles away. Without a father as an alternative, I felt completely betrayed but never bore a grudge against my grandmother. I was simply petrified at the idea of having to spend all my time with my mother.

I must be fair : she never hit me, but she indulged in what contemporary thinking would describe as *mental cruelty*. She was a woman of principles. She said (to other people) that she loved me but she only said so because mothers are supposed to love their children. She would have starved, so that I could eat. She would have thrown herself in front of a lorry in order to save my life – that is what mothers do – but she was as cold as an iceberg and never missed an opportunity to show that she was always right and I, (along

with 99.9% of the planet's population) always wrong.

I have often wondered how she saw the world. Because of her own, fundamentalist, religious upbringing, you expected her to be rather uptight when it came to sexual matters – and she was – but this rigidity of views also extended to people who “pack themselves in trains like sardines to go on holiday”, people who sunbathed : “absolutely disgusting, all this flesh on the beach.” people who went skiing, mountain climbing, horse riding : “serves them right if they fall” ; girls who “go dancing” : “serves them right if they become pregnant”, and so on, ad infinitum.

Even people who ate at, let us say, six o'clock in the evening or eight o'clock instead of what she considered the “right” time of seven, were, to say the least, highly suspicious and even somewhat unbalanced ; certainly never to be trusted or befriended. As I grew up, I came to realise that the very word

“people” was always pronounced with deep contempt. She was obviously, herself, so much better than “people” and, of course, so much better than me.

As I grew older, I started visiting the houses of young girls of my own age, and they started to come to our house. My mother was always charming towards them, but as soon as they had turned their backs, I would be subjected to a detailed description of all the things that were wrong with them.

To reach the village from Star Cottage, we crossed the garden, went through the iron gate and turned left. I distinctly remember doing so at the age of two, on the shoulders of my uncle Emile who had come to visit us. My mother always says that I was far too young to recall his visit. She is right in a way : I do not remember the actual visit but what sticks in my mind is the unusual sensation of being lifted ever so high, and of feeling the powerful muscles of his neck between my legs. I

was desperately squeezing the front of an enormous bald head, out of which came a voice whose vibrations penetrated my whole body.

Turning left after the garden gate led us to the house of Mrs. Vaucher who, I learned later, owned Star Cottage and was renting it out to us. *Renting* is a big word since we did not have any money. She just wanted the place to look lived in, the outside neat and clean, the garden spruce. We paid her a visit one day. The interior of the house was dark and exuded a complex mixture of smells that were quite new to me but were dominated by that of camphor oil, an odour which I came to associate with old ladies, along with that of heavy satin dresses, moth balls, hyacinth and a faint whiff of urine.

A matriarch sitting in an armchair, her shoulders covered with black shawls, her bushy white hair curling over a small, wrinkled face, an arthritic finger pointing at me, and a squeaky voice is how I remember the personage.

My grandmother and my mother used to say that Mrs. Vaucher was wealthy. I had no idea what it meant. While we were there, I could detect in their voices an involuntary tone of respect, as if they had walked into a church but still wished to finish a conversation they had started outside.

From the beginning, it gave me a rather disquieting vision of wealth, symbolised by old age, dimly lit houses and almost whispering voices, which implied that rich people were quite extraordinary creatures whose mysterious life-styles increased their sense of isolation. They were, at any rate, completely outside what most of us considered a “normal” life.

Mrs. Vaucher’s house was built within a street corner. It wasn’t a crossroads but a simple right angle framing the house on two sides ; an angle made by the same street, which happened to turn sharply. The other side was made partly of a row of disparate terraced houses in front of

which little children often played hopscotch or mumbled nonsense rhymes while throwing balls against a wall. The rest of the street skirted the front garden of a nunnery, an estate linked, in the back, to Star Cottage itself. This right angle which, in my memory, remains perpetually warm and sunny, represents for me one of the most peaceful and sleepy places in the world.

I go back there in my dreams, and my heart beating wildly, I open the garden gate of the nunnery. Since it is a dream, why bother with the fact that all these nuns are dead by now. Why bother about logic ? I push the garden gate. It squeaks plaintively. I follow a warm, sandy path bathed in the scents of blooming flower-beds and herbs, mostly sage, thyme and rosemary. I walk slowly towards the large, forbidding, 18th century façade of the house, an appearance cheered somewhat by the shine of beautifully varnished woodwork. The door opens and the nuns come out, indistinct

features, forgotten names... I fall on my knees in the sand. They come closer. I can feel, around me, the coolness of their shadows and the rugged smell of their habits. Reassuring fingers land gently on my forehead, and I start sobbing uncontrollably. Like the prodigal child, I am at home again and I am forgiven. Forgiven for what ? Forgiven for life itself, I guess, forgiven for growing up.

If, coming out of Star Cottage, you turned right, you ended up by the sea. From my earliest childhood, I have been able to lose myself in the contemplation of the sea whose powerful breakers would, along the coastline, self-destruct on jagged rocks and make the shore tremble under my feet while the sou'wester winds meowed amongst salty, dry bushes, and long clouds streaked across the skies at unbelievable speeds. It was, with hindsight, like a prehistoric world. There was no pollution. I find it both depressing and exhilarating to relive in my mind the purity of the wind and the

transparency of an ocean teeming with life. I go back to beaches where the worst sort of litter consisted in polished pieces of wood or the occasional shard of glass made smooth by countless tides.

I was three and half years' old. I could walk quite well. My grandmother had taken me to the beach on foot. I waded in a pool of seawater left by the latest high tide on a gigantic, concave rock formation. The pond was warm and full of seaweed, shrimps and tiny crabs. This miniature world felt like a tropical paradise. Suddenly I noticed that the water surrounding my right foot was turning red, and that small puffs, shaped like fern, would come out of my ankle, then rhythmically followed by another, dissolve in the pool. Hardly any pain. I didn't know what had happened to me and could not describe it. I called my grandmother and, raising my leg, showed her the cut. She rushed towards me.

With both of us now sitting on the warmth of sun-dry granite, she took out a handkerchief and attempted to make it into a firm bandage. She lifted me in her arms and, frail little woman that she was, started back to the village in vigorous strides. Soon, she was out of breath, and slowed down. Red-faced, shaky and dripping with perspiration, she put me down gently on the pavement while throwing glances of desperation at the silent holiday homes and deserted streets.

“You are too heavy, Quentina. I can’t... Try to walk... Lean on my hand... Try not to put too much weight on your foot.”

I obeyed. I had not said anything. In fact, I felt strangely calm. I was overwhelmed by a sort of unexpected well-being. The noise of our steps began to fade. I was walking on air. The trees around us became all blurred and... I woke up at the doctor’s. My grandmother had carried me for more than a mile.

The cliffs I loved are still there, of course ; but instead of being enhanced at the top, by sprawling, old-fashioned villas, with their stone walls and maritime pines, they are now soiled by hundreds of small Summer chalets where townspeople seek peace and quiet with the desperation of the damned.

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Finally, from Star Cottage, you could go into the park. It encompassed both Star Cottage and the nunnery. Only years and years later did I realise that the nunnery was a former *big house* and that Star Cottage had been a tied cottage. The whole thing had belonged to this famous Mrs. Vaucher who, possibly in an attempt at bribing the Heavens and save her soul, had turned the house over to a religious order and had, for herself, retired to a small, ordinary habitation. The sisters did have a gardener, but he lived in town, in a place of his own.

The park started with an enormous mulberry tree whose fruit possessed an unequalled degree of sweetness. Then, on the windowless side of the cottage, lay some guttering ending in a barrel, from which the gardener, Mr. Clavering – always known to us all as “Good Old Clavering” – came to fill his watering cans. When I studied physics at school and we were taught the principle known as Pascal’s barrel, that very barrel, surmounted by that very length of guttering, sprang to my mind and stayed there.

Next to the barrel were two or three fig trees. The memory of their figs still makes my mouth water but you had to be ever so careful when you picked them for they attracted wasps by the dozen.

Beyond the fig trees were three alleyways. If you turned left, you ended up behind our house. The gardener was often to be found there, either feeding the rabbits in their hutches, splitting logs into kindling for the nuns’ fire,

turning over piles of compost or maintaining gardening tools. Associated with him and his activities, lingered a strong, earthy mixture of wholesome smells: wood-shavings around the workbench, the sandy and metallic odour of spades and forks, the warm, furry exhalations of the rabbits and even the solid olfactory presence of Clavering himself, complete with ancient corduroy trousers and tobacco pouch.

I remember him killing a hedgehog with a fork. I felt neither horror nor pity. Mr. Clavering was tall and slim. He had white hair and a white moustache. He was very gentle with me. Everything he did was good. He talked to himself a lot and, in the process, swore like a trooper. I did the same. Once, but only once, a swear word passed my lips at home. My mother was in hysterics for days but I had time to catch the shadow of a repressed smile on my grandmother's face.

Clavering was also the one who stunned the rabbits with a cricket bat, skinned them and drew them. All this was as it should be and I remained completely indifferent to the fate of these animals ; as indifferent as our cat who would position himself in front of the hutches whenever he heard Clavering sharpen the special knife he used for skinning. As the victim was then carried to its place of execution, the cat would follow, meowing away, its head only a couple of inches from that of the upside-down rabbit. The two animals could have looked into each other's eyes.

If you went any further behind the house, you crossed a no man's land of fragrant thyme, rosemary, thistles and pine needles, and you ended up in a miniature desert of sand dunes dotted with enormous bushes of Spanish broom and yuccas. I wasn't allowed to go too far in that direction because you then trespassed onto the grounds of an independent girls' boarding school. I disobeyed from time to time, risking

scratches from unfriendly vegetation, yet fascinated by the presence of enormous, yawning pine cones.

One day I arrived during what must have been a morning or afternoon break. With my heavy, curly, blonde hair spreading all over my shoulders, my neat, blue boiler suit and my innocent, pale blue eyes, I was simply adorable, though I say it myself. The girls landed around me with wing-like flappings of their skirts. Kneeling on the sand, towering over me or crouching in front of me, they laughed, cooed and marvelled at the little girl who had strayed into their territory, and they did so with the candid immodesty that a burgeoning maternal instinct gives adolescent females. Then a bell rang and they scattered as quickly as they had appeared, leaving me desolate and lonely among scented bushes. It rather scared me and I never went back.

The alleyway in the middle plunged into a kingdom of darkness. You found yourself squeezed between two tall

prickwood hedges behind which grew taller trees whose branches met above you and created a sinister tunnel of greenery. I very rarely ventured under that foliage and then only after harnessing my tin drum. I then walked slowly (I would have been ashamed to run) between the stark shadows of the prickwood path. To ward off evil spirits I played my drum as hard as I could..

This self-imposed trial did not, as in legends, provide its own rewards. When, at the end of a sharp turn, the alleyway disintegrated and let the sunlight through, I did not end up in some sort of paradise. Instead I would be facing a tall and dry jungle where enormous winged grasshoppers buzzed heavily, and where cacti, rose trees and laurel strove to survive. It was a forgotten garden, a wild, abandoned, impenetrable world. To make matters worse, rumour had it that it was full of snakes. I would then turn around, and still drumming away, head back towards the house.

The right-hand path was that of comfort, civilisation and affection. The alleyway was wide, flat and beautifully kept by Good Old Clavering, the sand raked with as much loving care as that of a Japanese garden. Beyond the mulberry tree, it went up steeply, veered to the right and, like a wave weakened by a beach, spread out in front of the nunnery.

I used to spend hours in the company of these excellent women. They had a dispensary where I was not admitted. At any rate, the wafting smells of ether and other medicines that came out of it, would have been enough to put me off. One whiff, and my skin shivered. I envisaged bandages, scissors, cotton balls, pus, blood and cries of pain.

By contrast, I rushed towards the kitchens where something delicious was usually waiting for me. Had it not been during the war, the nuns would probably have given me sweets and pastries, but since my mother and

grandmother often skipped meals so that I could have something to eat, and since I, myself, would occasionally have to make do with a runny, sugarless pudding or a soft-boiled egg to last me the entire day, the sisters would discretely push a fillet of Dover sole my way or some mashed potatoes. Generous people regularly gave them these things which they, in turn, shared with their little tot who, like a cat in a spinster's house, was queen of the realm without even knowing it.

At my tender age, I had to go for a sleep after lunch. My very first erotic impressions took place during such siestas. The general atmosphere of these lazy, dozy afternoons was punctuated by the buzz of the odd fly caught between the windowpanes and the curtains. Beams of light would paint the shapes of passing cars against the walls and ceiling, the room itself becoming a giant camera obscura, and the tiny gap in the curtains acting as a lens. It often made me feel strangely

free and a great deal more grown-up than I was. Silence was erotic.

The only voices I was used to in the house were those of my mother and grandmother talking to me or each other, and neither of them were loud women but, I suppose, there was an almost constant murmur of voices around me. Silence, real silence during afternoon naps, gave me delightful sensations : freedom, yes, but also, inexplicably, a powerful desire to be naked.

They would put me to bed in my underwear. I would, at first, enjoy the coolness of the rough linen sheets against my arms and legs. I would then create a gap between my knickers and my vest, and delight in the same coolness on my stomach. Finally, and unable to resist any longer, I would bring the knickers down to my ankles and roll the vest up to my chin. Rocking gently left and right, I revelled in this refreshing nakedness. One day, I fell asleep like this and was woken up by

shrieks of indignation from my mother who, for some reason, had come to wake me up. My grandmother, behind her, was making soothing noises, arguing that I must simply have felt too hot. Mother went on and on, accusing me of all sorts of things I had never heard of, and using words I did not understand. She scared me enough so that I did not do it again, at least not for any length of time : a few seconds of stolen pleasure, and all would be back in order.

My father had reappeared on the scene on the 6th June 1945, one year, exactly, after "D"-Day. It was a sweltering afternoon. My mother and I had taken the bus to the nearest town where he was due to arrive. Along with dozens of other wives and children, we waited patiently on the pavement, opposite the railway station. We were not allowed in the station itself. It was crowded enough, we were told ; nor were we kept in order by our usual policemen, but by American MPs (not Members of Parliament, as I was

informed later : just Military Police). Their impeccable, beautifully ironed, light brown uniforms created quite a contrast with the crumpled, heavy, sweaty, dark, greenish or brownish things we had come to associate with soldiers. Compared to our emaciated lot, most of these Americans looked somewhat overweight – though in truth they were not – and quite menacing in a cool, gum-chewing sort of way. They looked sleepy and bored but did not miss a thing.

When finally out of the station, some of the returning soldiers would let their bags slide from their shoulders onto the pavement, and would lean against the yellow and red scaffolding which had been erected to replace the old fence. Through this brightly coloured metal frame, shone the steel-grey flanks and domes of an armoured train.

Soldiers looked around, hoping to catch sight of a familiar face. The war, for them, was finally over, well and truly over, and now, instead of the immense

feeling of joy they should have experienced, they could not avoid a melancholy mood.

Voices around me echoed in my head as in an indoor swimming pool. Women, dashing towards soldiers and bursting into tears after crushing them in their arms, seemed like superficial and silly actresses. The men staggered as they collided with such emotional welcomes and tried to look natural while attempting to remove the straps of their Army bags. Their lips smiled but their eyes remained dead, the moment they had so looked forward to, having lost its magic : shattered as it became reality.

Suddenly, a shape, a shadow blocked the light in front of me. My mother was crying on someone's shoulder. I then heard the man say, almost in a whisper : "Must say hello to Quentina, I don't want her to feel left out." The shape crouched. Our eyes were now at the same level. His arms drew me gently towards him, and I felt a light but prickly kiss on my cheek. He

did not say anything. Nor did I. I was afraid of him, and am now aware that he was afraid of me. He was a stranger and remained so until his death, some thirty years later.

Chapter Two

In 1947 I was eight years' old. By then, my parents and I lived on the outskirts of a village, in what had been a farmhouse. Only that farmhouse was cut in half : a wall had been erected from the front of the building to the road. Connecting doors between the halves were bricked up. Had this been the result of an ancient domestic feud ? We never knew. When my father bought the house, it had its own deeds. We were semi-detached ! The other side belonged to a family of market gardeners who were friendly, quiet and no trouble.

With its roof of dark slates and its granite walls, the farm could have looked cold and forbidding but it was not. Cheerful window frames, a white gravel driveway and a garden lined with roses, gladioli and hollyhocks saw to that. As soon as clouds dispersed, the granite would soak up the sun's

warmth. Later, it would send it back to the courtyard, making it feel comfortable and cosy.

I could indulge my love of silence in those days. We had just moved from Beaumington, a very small town indeed, almost a village where there was nevertheless a murmur of cars and other activities that one did not experience at the farm.

All was peaceful there. No planes ever flew overhead either. The noises of Nature were discreet and only served to underline the quality of the stillness that surrounded us. The rasping song of a cockerel, the hoot of an owl at night or the distant barking of a dog did not shatter the peace but gave it a rounder, dreamier dimension.

Not counting bathrooms, our house had only three rooms downstairs and four upstairs but they were huge. The lounge, with its impressive stone hearth, would not have been out of place in a small castle. We rarely went there, ending most of our evenings in

the dining room where my father had set up the radio and turntable. That's also where I used to do my homework.

This "homework" was set by my mother, my aunt (when she visited, which was often) and an older cousin. The three of them coached me through Elementary School and it was not until I turned eleven that I was well enough to walk to school. Before that, I looked like a perfectly normal child, but suffered from a rare viral infection of the tendons, which meant that I couldn't walk for more than five minutes. After that, my knees started to hurt horribly and I collapsed, as helpless as an overturned tortoise.

The farm had some outbuildings : former stables where my parents raised goats and rabbits. Further on, there was also what, in grander days, must have been a tied cottage. By 1947 it was a neat little house with its own garden. Part of my parents' modest income was the rent from that house. There lived a family, going by the unusual name of

Shallots and, among them, Monique who was one year older than me, almost to the day.

Monique and I were inseparable. Throughout 1947 we were just good friends, playing marbles, making miniature gardens whose irrigation generated more mud than we bargained for, followed by a stern parental telling-off for turning up so filthy. In bad weather we were constantly at each other's houses, playing cards, Monopoly or other games, helping with the cooking by peeling potatoes or dealing in various ways with the vegetables such as green beans and peas ; or again, drawing or reading side by side at the dining-room table, inhaling the tantalising smells of the next meal, made, of course, with vegetables from our own gardens and, more often than not, meat from our own animals, be it chicken, rabbit or kid ; simple meals indeed, with never a first course and never a dessert, but with the

incomparable freshness and quality of home produce.

Things started to change between Monique and me in 1948. Most of our games, whether indoors or outdoors, were at ground level and girls always wore skirts in those days. Monique's legs and knickers were almost continuously within my field of vision as were my legs and knickers within her own. When you are not sexually mature, these things mean absolutely nothing. I have not the slightest recollection of looking at Monique before 1948, in any way other than as a playmate. I wasn't in the least conscious of the fact that there could have been another dimension to our games. By 1948, however, I had become conscious of her legs and knickers. I wanted to see what she was like behind the white gusset that was often stretched flat against her as she crouched in front of me, or sinking slightly in the middle when, more relaxed, she would sit on the floor.

My parents were strict Catholics, which means that they were sex-maniacs in reverse. Never did I see them cuddle and kiss, let alone do anything else. The genital area was always referred to as *dirty*, and the books I was encouraged to read always insisted on the need to be *pure*. Apparently, there were things connected with the genitals which were so horrible and evil that they would make Jesus suffer. They were a thorn in his crown of thorns, a lash of the Roman's whip, a nail in his hand on the cross...

Mary was not left out. These things would make her cry. Now, I ask you, who would have the heart to make Mary cry ? Only a monster, that's who. *Impure thoughts*, whatever they were, meant that you had committed a venial sin. Even more mysterious were *impure actions* ; so mysterious and so *impure* that no one was allowed to mention them by name. These were mortal sins. It seemed that Jesus and Mary were made to suffer far less from thieves,

embezzlers, burglars, murderers, bullies and genocidal maniacs (like Hitler and Stalin) than from little girls committing *impure actions*.

1948 was also the time when I would experience strange moments of elation, some sudden warmth over my whole body and tingling sensations between my legs, followed by a light wetting of the gusset. I knew about periods and I also knew that this gentle wetness was not in that category. Nor was it urine. It remained a mystery for a long time, but soon became a normal thing and I stopped worrying about it.

Every Sunday morning we used to go to mass, of course. On one such Sunday, as we were leaving church, my mother started shaking me by the shoulders. Apparently, a drop of liquid was slowly running down my leg. “For goodness’ sake, Quentina, what are you thinking about ?” she hissed.

She was far from satisfied with the answer : “Nothing”, even if it happened to be the truth. I wish I could have

explained to her that I had no control over these seepages and that I didn't have to have any particular kind of thought to trigger them... but how do you even begin to talk about *these things* when they are so clearly taboo and when their very mention would have been greeted by shouts of indignation ? So, I just said "nothing" and she did not believe me.

"You'll have to go to confession for impure thoughts," she added.

I had never been close to my mother. I could not do anything right. Each encounter resulted in criticism of some sort. She simply could not talk to me without criticising something. That's the way she saw "educating a child". Nothing met with her approval : absolutely nothing. Years later, when we had television, I could hear her mutter as she watched panel games : "She should pull her hair back. He should never wear a bowtie with that suit. Oh, what horrible lips ! Look at his

eyes, he could be a pig” and on, and on, and on...

Like most children, I thought all mothers were the same, and I accepted life as it was without asking questions. I simply tried to stay out of her way, and I kept my mouth shut in front of her because, naturally, everything I said was just as wrong as everything I did. She would say to neighbours and shopkeepers (in front of me) that I was a sulky, sullen, uncommunicative, awkward child. I would often attempt not to fit that description, but even paying her a compliment never worked : she thought that the whole world was so wrong that trying to cheer her up was something of an insult. “Honestly, Quentina, how can you say I look well, this morning, when your father has left a ring of milk on the table ?”

Spending, as I did, so much time at Monique’s house, I started to draw comparisons between my mother and Monique’s. Mrs. Shallotts was no saint. She was a busy housewife with a short

fuse. She did not smile much but she clearly loved Monique in ways that I found strange at first, then clearly puzzling. She would indeed tell her daughter off sometimes but she would also talk to her about this and that, crack jokes, have a laugh, play games, give her a cuddle and a kiss and (most upsetting of all) tell her how much she loved her. I did not *want* to think that my mother could have been like that. I did not *want* to admit that mine was not a good mother.

I wish I could say that, as a 9-year old girl, I cried on my pillow at night, thinking that Fate had dealt me an unfair hand by giving me a bad mother, but things did not happen that way. Slowly but surely, a dead weight settled, instead, over my heart: the certainty that if your own mother could not love you, then no one else could... or ever would.

Fortunately, I was spared the horror of realising that, in some respects, I had become like my mother and could not

love anyone either (until, that is, some momentous events in later life).

By the time she shook me like a doll outside the church, I had come simply to hate her. Hating her was so much easier than pretending to love her. Hating the only thing she truly loved - her religion - was also a great relief.

Impure thoughts ? What could they possibly be ? Then, as we were walking back to the car, I caught sight of a small group of girls, roughly my own age, sitting on a low wall by the bus stop. One of them, restless and vivacious, leant sideways to touch the shoulder of the girl who was next but one to her, and as she did so, her knees flew apart and I was able, quite by accident, to see right up her skirt and catch a glimpse of her tiny, bright, white underwear. It was a revelation. It made me think of Monique's legs and knickers and I could feel, with great alarm, that another drop of liquid was running down my thigh. I sat down

quickly in the back of the car and pulled my overcoat tight around my legs. From then on, the mere thought of Monique resulted in my gusset becoming anything from slightly damp to soaked.

The next time I saw Monique was in her own garden. At the bottom was a bell-shaped shelter made of a wire frame on which all sorts of creepers and evergreen plants had climbed. It created a lovely, fresh, private world for children. The vegetation was so thick that if it suddenly rained, it could keep us dry for several minutes. Unfortunately, long after it had stopped raining, heavy drops would fall from time to time, making us shriek and giggle, especially if they inserted themselves down our necks.

The “bell” had little benches, on which we sat, and also a low, round table in the middle, where we could spread our toys and games. It also had a lovely smell, all of its own : a smell of fresh water, packed earth and...

Monique, who left a trail of warm ironing whiffs from clean, crisp skirts and tops, but also shampoo, discrete cologne and the soft fragrance of her own body.

If I wanted to be cruelly objective, I would say that Monique was plain. She was certainly not the sort of child who makes people exclaim : “Oh, what a pretty little girl !” but she had regular features, a slim body with, as I was starting to appreciate more and more every day, lovely long legs. Her hair was deep brown, cut just short of shoulder length and looking somewhat unruly. Her large, brown eyes revealed a depth of thought beyond her age, a depth which often intimidated me. Her lips were full and sensual, though I had probably never heard the word *sensual* in those days.

She liked to wear white tops and simple Summer skirts in pale, almost fading colours, along with white socks and sandals. Her only concessions to harsh weather were a pair of shoes and

a black raincoat but she kept wearing her light Summer skirts under the coat.

As soon as we sat down, I lost myself in the contemplation of her knickers while being conscious of an almost painful swelling in mine.

“What’s the matter ?” she asked.

“Nothing” and, this time, I *was* lying.

“What shall we play, Quentina ?”

“How about *Queen and Lady in Waiting* ?” I replied without hesitation.

Queen and Lady in Waiting was a game of our own invention. We would flip a coin and one of us was a queen. The other one was a lady in waiting and had to do as she was told. I hasten to say that neither of us had ever asked the other one to do anything disgusting or painful such as eating worms, something which, we knew, local boys had done for a dare. It usually involved bowing to the monarch, singing a song, reciting a poem or serving a fictitious meal with great ceremony.

Monique won the first round and I was the perfect servant, pretending to

give her a seven-course meal with great wines, accompanied by music. My imitation of a harpsichord was not at all bad. I immersed myself in the game and, for a while, thought of nothing else.

When it was my turn to be queen. I became very serious. I knew what I wanted and felt that I had reached an important moment in my life. This may sound too solemn for a child ; yet, that is exactly how I felt.

“Will you do as I tell you ?” I asked, shaking with suspense and, almost, fear.

“Of course. Why do you ask ?”

“I just want to be sure.”

“What’s the matter with you ?”

“I want to be sure, that’s all.”

“Yes, you *can* be sure.”

“Promise ?”

“Promise” she laughed, but she was a little uneasy by now. Her smile disappeared and she looked anxious. I took a deep breath and pronounced, as

casually as I could : “I’d like you to take your knickers off.”

I was pleased that she did not scream, get angry or run back to her mother. She simply closed her legs that, so far, she had kept slightly apart, and pushed her skirt down between her thighs. Then she simply said : “No.”

A long, painful silence followed. I knew that, whatever the outcome of my reckless gamble, we would never play *Queen and Lady in Waiting* again. Would we ever play again at all ? What next ? Damned for a little, damned for the lot. I swallowed hard, inhaled deeply and took the plunge : “If you had been the Queen and you had asked me, I would have done it.”

“Go on, then.”

My heart beating wildly, I tucked my skirt up in its belt, stood up, pulled my knickers down to my ankles and sat down again, knees wide apart. There seemed to be no reaction on Monique’s face. She looked at me, but her expression was perfectly bland. Then,

slowly, but without hesitation, she took off her own knickers and half opened her legs. I gasped : in front of me was a vision of loveliness. Did I look like that too ? We were too young to have any pubic hair. A thin, pink, vertical line peaked between two areas of white skin, both as plump as well-fed sparrows. The very top of the thighs also held its own fascination with its paler than pale area looking so soft and inviting.

A bit more relaxed now, she opened her legs as wide as she could and, like the petals of a tulip bud, the pink line opened slightly. I was enthralled. She then bent over and tried to look at herself as if it was a novelty. Just checking, so to speak, or perhaps she felt as we do, later on in life, when we take some newcomers through the house : we see it with their eyes and it looks different ! She raised her head again, smiled and pronounced quite firmly : “This is nice.”

I don't know how long we remained like this, but common sense told us that to be found out would not be a good thing. The Shallotts may not have been such fanatical Catholics as my own parents, but we knew instinctively that there would be trouble.

Later, I asked Monique to explain to me in great detail just how she had felt that very first time, and she said that the combination of going over the shock of my request, looking at me, being stared at then feeling fresh air play on her, was an unforgettable experience. She had loved it. I too had almost fainted with pleasure at being stared at. It was a totally new sensation. When she mentioned fresh air, I also knew what she meant. The vulva is so constantly protected, even by the skimpiest of swimsuits, that the fluttering, on it of even the slightest breeze, carries you, every time it happens, to a different world, a world of such cool, clean intensity that I, for one, never wanted it to disappear.

No wonder so many people are hooked on naturist camps. On that very first occasion, I could feel the blood surging almost painfully through my chest. To this day, on scorching summer afternoons, I often place a fan at the foot of my bed, then masturbate under the exhilarating, cool, immodest and searching caresses of the fan.

Monique and I decided that the “bell” was too dangerous. We never even discussed whether we would do the same thing again. It had immediately become obvious that we would, but it must be somewhere else. Behind the hamlet was a cluster of thick woods. It was not too far and I could just about reach it without being in pain. We found a spot from which we could see without being seen. If anyone came along the path, there would be plenty of time to readjust our clothes. It was all deceptively easy. All we had to do was sit at the foot of a tree or on a tree stump, take our knickers off and bring our skirts up. In fact, most of the time,

it wasn't even necessary to do anything with the skirt at all.

Thinking back on this time in my life, I am sure that Monique and I must have done other things as well. We must have continued to do our homework together, play cards, draw, help her mother with the vegetables, but I simply cannot remember. From the moment we started looking at each other, everything else becomes vague and unimportant in my memory.

Bad weather was the enemy. When we could not go out to *our* woods for days on end, we both became sulky and irritable. We started playing Monopoly on the floor so that we could at least look at each other's legs. We took a rare and dangerous pleasure in noticing if the other one's gusset got wet, but it also increased our frustration. When the weather improved and we went back to our favourite spot, we could not wait to take our knickers off. We would utter moans of relief as we did so. It had become a need, a drug.

One day, in my bedroom, I felt an itch on my clitoris. I did not know the word *clitoris* then, and had never wondered what the various aspects of my *private parts* were called. If, according to my parents, these *private parts* were so incredibly *private* and *dirty*, I could not imagine that anyone would have been allowed to study them scientifically, then bother to give them names. When I became aware that it was so, I still had the ingrained reaction that these scientists and doctors must have been doing something extremely *naughty*.

I started scratching through my skirt and, much to my surprise, discovered that this created a pleasant sensation. I kept going. The pleasant sensation became overwhelming and I soon gasped for air and couldn't go on. It was not, by far, the strongest orgasm I've ever experienced but it remains, in my mind, as a fresh, unique, delightfully unexpected, enchanted moment : a few key seconds in my life.

It did not take me long, after that, to figure out what the wetting I experienced was meant to lead to ; or that I did not have to rub myself through two layers of clothing to make this wonderful thing happen. My bare hands could do the job perfectly well at night in the privacy of my own bed.

As soon as possible, I showed Monique how it *worked*. She was fascinated. Within seconds she had found the right spot. Watching her was such an extraordinarily new experience that I thought I would come just by looking at her without having to touch myself. When she reached the end, her wide-open legs jerking even wider with the last few spasms, I was in a trance, with pins and needles all over my hands, feet and chest.

It may seem hard to believe but we went on watching each other for an entire year before it occurred to us that we could actually do it **to** each other. We had no guidance. On the one hand, we had been acting in ways which were

wildly beyond those of our age group ; on the other hand, we remained incredibly innocent and naïve. What we liked, we liked, and we did not think about anything else.

It came in time, of course. One day, Monique said to me : “Girls are supposed to have breasts. I don’t. Neither do you. Feel how flat I am.”

I put one hand under her dress and went up all the way to her nipples. It was true : she was as flat as a boy but I enjoyed stroking the warmth of her body. I enjoyed the softness of her skin. As I moved my hand on her chest, I could feel Monique living and breathing under my palm. It was a delightful sensation, but evidently, not nearly as delightful for me as it was for her. She gasped : “Don’t stop, don’t stop.”

I went on, of course, and this time, did not confine myself to her chest. My hand slid between her legs. She gasped again. Instinctively, I started to perform what I had watched her do so many times before. She came with a long wail

that went on for several seconds, her whole body shaking uncontrollably. Afterwards I placed my fingers under my nose and found that I simply loved the smell.

From then on, every time I played with her, I would smell my fingers, firstly a few seconds after I had started touching her and then again after she had come, the two smells being quite different. The first one was rather strong and peppery : a mixture of freshly crushed geranium leaves, moss and sun-soaked pine needles which invariably made my heart beat faster. The second smell reminded me of sea-weed and wide open beaches ; both pure magic, both totally addictive.

She then did it to me, and I found out why she had enjoyed it so much. Needless to say that no one had ever stroked my chest or my thighs, or touched my vulva and clitoris. She too liked my scent.

We developed a secret code. Whenever we were in company and

unable to communicate verbally, we would press two fingers against our lips, with the tips close to the nostrils, as if hesitating and wondering what to do next. It meant : I'd like to play with you.

Despite all this, we had never kissed. The reason being, I think, that we had almost never been to the cinema. Monique did not have a bicycle. I could not walk (or cycle, obviously) and we were at the mercy of Roger's generosity. Roger was the son of our semi-detached neighbours. He had a car, and would occasionally, extend an invitation to drive to town with him. My father also had a car, but the idea of taking us to the cinema would have never crossed his mind. With hindsight, he would probably have taken us if we had asked... but I normally avoided asking my parents for anything ; so much so, that the idea of approaching my Father never crossed *my* mind. With further hindsight, and even if he had agreed, my mother would certainly have objected anyway. It had been hard

enough to talk her into accepting Roger as a *babysitter* for us girls. Monique had proved a good barrister. Without her clever plea, I would not have had a chance.

When we did go to the cinema, it was usually to see full-length cartoons such as *Snowwhite and the seven Dwarfs* or *Bambi*. One day we went to see a film called *Happy Birthday*, a sentimental story about a wealthy young man whose girlfriend was not “suitable”, meaning that she did not have enough money. In the end, it turned out that she had money after all. What a relief! But what struck us in this otherwise beautifully shot little film, was the amount of kissing going on.

Back in the woods, we tried it for ourselves. I enjoyed the touch of her lips on mine. They felt so warm and soft but, above all, so big! I reflected that if a tiny pimple inside our mouths can feel enormous, then someone else’s lips would feel gigantic at first. This unusual sensation had almost

disappeared with the second kiss and had completely gone by the third. I knew then what to expect.

What I did not expect was the feel of Monique's tongue suddenly darting in my mouth and touching my own tongue. How did she know about that? Was it pure instinct or something she had read about? I never asked: just responded in kind.

Of all the things we had done, kissing was the one that brought us closest together. I could not get enough of it, and neither, apparently, could Monique. Whereas before, we would "*play*", sometimes very briefly – hastily even – then, satisfied and light-hearted, go back to our respective houses, it seemed that, from the moment we discovered kissing, we could not bear being apart, occasionally taking incredible risks to stay together, join our lips and insert our fingers in each other's panties. What saved us, I suppose, was our parents' unshakeable conviction that children so young could

not possibly know anything about anything.

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One day, my parents went to town ; both of them at the same time. It had never happened before. Monique and I devised our strategy. In the past, it hadn't been possible to see each other completely naked. We decided that it would be our chance. We would do so in my parents' bedroom because it was the nearest to the upstairs bathroom. One of us would strip and leave her clothes in the bathroom. If Monique's parents came around, or if mine came back unexpectedly, the one who was still dressed would ward them off by saying that the other one was on the loo. The naked one would dash to the bathroom, get dressed and flush the toilet. It must be said that in these villages and in those days, people did not lock their doors. Neighbours wandered in and out with total

familiarity, yelling “Anybody in ?” To lock the front door would have aroused suspicion.

Monique disrobed first. An added advantage of my parents’ bedroom, and one which had not occurred to me at first, was the presence of two, huge, full-length mirrors set in their wardrobe. To see Monique’s slender figure appear at the doorway took my breath away. Her body was so delicate, so beautiful, and she moved so gracefully that I had tears in my eyes. To see her reflection in the mirror at the same time was almost more than I could take.

She sat in front of the mirror and let herself go backwards so that she stretched across the bed.

In front of so much beauty, and in an almost mystical reaction, I fell on my knees between her half-open legs, my head only a few inches away from her labia. Before I knew it, I had moved forward and was licking her. Meanwhile, I stroked the inside of her

thighs, went up to her chest and back to her thighs, slowly, regularly.

My heart was beating more wildly than it ever had before. The mixture of sensations in which I was swimming was quite incredible. If I leant to the left or to the right, I could feel the warm, soft inside of her thighs brushing against my cheek. I could smell her and taste her and both the smell and the taste were like mediaeval love philtres. Above all, I could feel, with my lips and my tongue, the soft elasticity of the inner lips and the light resistance of the clitoris.

That young, perfect body moaning and trembling under my lips, offering to all my senses the very best of itself, represented a cocktail of feelings which I can only describe as ultimate. It is often assumed that the ultimate human ritual is intercourse. Monique and I already had doubts about that. Even at our tender ages of ten and eleven, we knew what intercourse involved and what its consequences could be, and we

were quite determined never to let a boy talk us into it. All around us, pets and farm animals gave public performances free of charge. The idea that our own parents could indulge in intercourse seemed both comical and improbable. I, by contrast, was not doing anything gross or comical. I was a priestess worshipping at the shrine of her goddess. I was performing the ultimate human ritual. When Monique came, she yelled. She literally yelled, then sounded as if she was crying and finally calmed down, still breathing deeply, but still shaken, now and then, not unlike a building affected, after an earthquake, by some recurring slight tremors.

When it was my turn to be licked, I took a long time to come because I just could not believe what was happening. “She’s kissing me and licking me *there*!” It seemed so improbable ! To start with, I did not feel anything. Then a wet, warm sensation spread between my legs and seemed to creep over my whole body. I had never experienced anything so delicate and, at the same time, so

strong, and it frightened me. I almost passed out at the end. I do not remember yelling but she said I did.

When it was all over we looked as if we had just discovered a new world, which, of course, we had. We gazed at each other, drifting, sinking into the infinity of what we could see in each other's eyes.

... and why had my parents been both away that day ? Quite simply to sell the house. We were moving.

Monique and I were numbed.

... but move we did. Children are so dependent on their parents, so helpless, that they suffer, but they also accept. We accepted. We had no choice. We hardly talked about it, and the separation took place without drama, without tears.

We did not write to each other. It wasn't *done*, and our parents would have found it, not so much suspicious as ridiculous. They did not kill my ability to love simply by condemning love, they also laughed at it : a much

more effective and destructive tactic. And what could I have said ? Could I have received a letter without my parents asking me what was in it ? Children were denied the most elementary form of privacy, and it certainly included the right to deal with their own post. We had no telephone. The separation was as complete and irrevocable as an amputation.

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My legs got stronger and better, and I was soon well enough to go to school. It was an all-girl establishment, but on our way and on the buses, we had to endure the crude and coarse guffaws of male companions who always talked about “fucking”. I found them repulsive. I became very shy. I was grateful to be in an all-girl environment, sometimes feeling desperately attracted to one of them, or driven to distraction by beautiful legs unconsciously displayed under a desk, but I did not have

another girlfriend until I was sixteen, and even then, we went no further than kissing. I did not have what people call a *proper* lover (i.e. a male) until I was twenty-five.

I saw Monique one last time when I was thirteen and she, obviously, fourteen. Her parents had popped in for a cup of coffee, for old times' sake.

Monique and I immediately took ourselves off. By then we lived on the edge of a small town, and new houses were being built so fast that we had to walk on rough, unpaved roads. Unfortunately, a young cousin of hers came out running behind us and we could not get rid of him. The little horror must have been seven or eight years' old but he sensed that Monique and I wanted to be alone. He was determined to spoil our meeting.

In the end, defeated, we walked back, letting the sides of our arms brush against each other from time to time, but not daring to hold hands. Monique and the stupid brat got in her parents'

car. She was crying and they were telling her off. I could not hear what they were saying. The car sped away.

A sexual paralysis took hold of me then. Those very few boys whom I found acceptable were already dating, and the girls they dated seemed so much more attractive than I was ! These young couples all looked so fresh, so cheerful, so “nice”, so well-balanced, when I, by contrast, felt so insecure, so frayed at the edges !... Boys who did not have girlfriends were usually noisy, vain, superficial – very unhappy, as I now realise – but about as desirable as mentally retarded chimpanzees.

As for dating girls, I had learned quickly that it simply wasn't allowed. The amount of hatred I could see painted on the faces of those who mentioned the word *lesbian* was truly terrifying. Much, much later in life, I discovered that there were indeed men who found the idea of female homosexuality extremely erotic and exciting, but back then, all I could see

was the hatred. It made me feel like a girl in an Arab country, wondering if she was not going to be stoned to death for defying religious taboos and hysteria. That so much of this hatred seemed to come from men is something I did not understand and still don't. They acted as if a lesbian was depriving them of something. Apparently, the poor girl should have flung herself in their arms, and stopped "wasting" her sex life with other females. These violent, mini-brained hunks were evidently quite incapable of understanding that, as in the Middle-Ages, most women would gladly have chosen chastity over a relationship with them. The boys' problem, of course, was precisely that, steeped in selfishness as they were, they never tried to understand anything at all... One cannot help feeling sorry at times for profoundly cretinous people.

Some twenty years later, my mother said to me : "By the way, Quentina, do you remember Monique Shallotts ?"

“Of course, I do.”

“I heard she’s a nun now. Works for the down-and-outs in a big town somewhere. Can you imagine ? Whatever possessed her to do something like that ? There’s something wrong with that girl.”

I most sincerely hope that the God she serves has smiled upon her, and that this wonderful woman may have found another lover, another nun with whom she can satisfy her obvious yearning for making love.

Chapter Three

By the time I turned twenty-five I still had not had any lover other than Monique. A few kisses from classmates and university friends at the end of birthday parties, but no sex at all. On my twenty-fifth birthday my mother said to me : “At your age, women who are not married are either promiscuous or dykes”. I was quite stung by this remark. I should not have been, but I was. Even when we do not like our parents, even when we are “old”, we can do with their approval. We can also do without their condemnation, especially when this condemnation is relentless. Yet, we fall for it every time, always hoping that, just for once, they will approve of something we have done, or said, or not done, or not said.... For the whole of our lives, we feel linked to them by some invisible but very strong umbilical cord we can never discard. Does their death come as a relief ?

When my father died the level of indifference I experienced was staggering. “Wait” said my friends and family “it will hit you in a few weeks, in a few months, in a year’s time, perhaps”. That was seven years ago. It never did *hit* me. I never thought it would. I am – or was – an emotional cripple. I can sympathise with people’s sufferings but I can never be sad at their death. I never miss anybody. I shall not miss my mother either since, unless she dies within the next few days, I will be *gone* before she is. Will she miss me ? She will make a good show of it, I am sure, but will she miss me in her heart ? I really don’t think so. She is an emotional cripple too. She is the one I got it from. She coached me well, and despite all my efforts to free myself, to rebel, to deny her influence, she did a marvellous job and shaped me, in so many ways, in her own image.

By the time she made the remark about my being promiscuous or a dyke, I was leading what could be construed as a successful existence. Like wealth,

success is an extremely relative notion. A man on unemployment benefit in Europe would be wealthy in India. I had a stable job in a law firm, an income which allowed me to rent a nice flat, run a small car, go out to shows and restaurants pretty much when I felt like it, and go on holiday once or twice a year.

A lot of wealthy people would consider this sort of *success* as being pitiful, but with a decent income at the end of the month and a job I enjoyed doing, I thought that I was as happy as any human being can expect to be. I knew, in my heart, that I had very little to complain about, and that life was treating me well. I missed sex, of course, but I had good friends, male and female, who were just friends, and with whom I would spend long evenings putting the world to rights, going out to the theatre, concerts and the like. At home, I read a lot and watched a lot of television. With the help of a vivid imagination, a proven finger technique, a bottle of baby oil and a state of the art

vibrator, I managed to remain emotionally sane.

Parental pressure was not the only pressure. The *natural* order of things said that I should be attracted to men, that I should be married and have children. I could imagine trying to make love to a man, I could imagine being married, but I drew the line at having children. There again, my childhood may have had something to do with this. Since my own mother had not loved me, why should I be expected to love a child of my own? I saw no point in it. To feel such revulsion towards my mother and yet to be so like her was precisely what I hated most about myself : I hated both the revulsion, which made me feel guilty, and the likeness, which made me feel like throwing up.

I sometimes fantasised about becoming amnesic and starting my life all over again without any prejudice or influence from the past. I also fantasised about being *reborn* in a

different family ; about being abandoned as a child, sent to an orphanage and rescued by *nice*, loving, middle-class people in a warm house, full of books and classical music. I fantasised about being taught perfectly conventional, reassuring and nauseating activities such as flower arranging, macramé and scrapbooking.

I can see now that the *pressure* I felt to *conform* and get married was more imaginary than real. I could easily have continued leading my little life the way I intended. No one would have cared very much and it would have been better for me.

Yet, after the “dyke” remark, I sensed that I was drifting slowly but surely towards necessary changes in my life. Perhaps I was bored, not unlike those inhabitants of Byzantium who let in the Barbarians because they (the Byzantines) were so bored with their own lives... but they were slaughtered and enslaved to the last. Served them right. Served *me* right.

So, I tried having boyfriends, though why we should call “boys” men in their twenties and thirties is totally beyond me. Women often resent being called “girls” but men never seem to resent being called “boys”. Who can say for certain who is right and who is wrong? I remember a phrase from my Sunday School days : “If you don’t remain like one of these” said Christ pointing at a little boy, “you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven”. Perhaps men know something we don’t. Perhaps we should be delighted to be called “girls”. You can say “gentlemen friends” of course, but it’s quite a mouthful and it evokes the idea of much older men ; so “boyfriends” it is, and like it.

First past the pole was Oliver. The good news : he was a considerate and capable lover, but as he was my very first man, I didn’t appreciate how good he was until much later. The bad news? He was only nineteen. In keeping with the tradition of calling men “boys”, I now had a toy-boy ; hardly an ideal set up for a good marriage. I was a little bit

in the position of a woman who wants a four-door car, goes to a dealer, sees a two-door car and buys it, knowing all along that it really was not what she was looking for.

Of course, he and I didn't know our respective ages when we met. He often told me, after he learned how "old" I was, that I didn't look my age, and he certainly appeared more mature than most men do at nineteen. Oliver was tall and very elegant. He dressed well and expensively, had a good job, was an excellent conversationalist and possessed a reasonable cultural background. Our lovemaking was thorough and satisfying but always on the cold side. I did not love him. He did not love me. We acted out the accepted and acceptable rituals of the sexual liberation of the sixties. Our relationship helped us live our lives, no more.

Just as wealth and success can mean so many different things to different people, so does sex, of course.

I have never heard a man say that sex was not important to him but I have heard many women say so. Such remarks make me feel uncomfortable. Are they lying ? Are they making fun of me ? Are they deluding themselves or are they sincere ? I can never completely believe or disbelieve these statements. All I can say is that I have met many women who *seem* happy going through life without a partner of either sex. After all, I was one myself from the age of eleven to that of twenty-five : a jolly long time. But I never pretended I did not miss someone to make love to. The ones who puzzle me most are those who clearly have had a sex life, and who, later on, seem happy without it. It makes me wonder if these women do not suffer from some sort of Alzheimer's disease specifically affecting sexual memories and protecting them from feeling frightfully lonely. They seem to blot out all recollections of what are, for me, the most essential, the most remarkable,

transcendental and certainly memorable moments of our lives.

I see sex as a window on life, a Sun, a light shining on the Earth. Without sex, I view the world through a grey filter, not unlike these insect screens that Americans often have outside their front doors. Sex removes the screen, and life looks bright again. Otherwise, the screen comes down, darkens my life and spoils everything. If I enjoy a satisfying relationship, I can then - and *only then* - fully enjoy the other things that life has to offer, such as good food and wine, good friends, hobbies, music, holidays... It has been so ever since my parents moved house in 1950. From the moment Monique and I were separated, and until I met Oliver, the world appeared under a permanent eclipse of the Sun.

Oliver and I settled into a sort of routine. I would spend a week-end at his flat. He would spend the next week-end at mine. Routine can destroy a relationship, it can make it stale.

Unfortunately, or fortunately (hard to tell) it can also reinforce it, give each participant a sense of permanence and security. It nurtures confidence. It creates a powerful bond between two people. Even though he did not love me, Oliver felt comfortable with me, he enjoyed the stability of our situation. What we had, however, was not enough to satisfy him, and eventually he wanted to marry me. I let all this drag on for a while, then turned him down and left him. I would have been quite prepared to go on as we were for years and years, perhaps forever. But I was not prepared to buy a house, struggle with a mortgage, have children (which he wanted) and possibly lose my job in the process, not to mention my sanity. We had, by then, been “together” for two years.

The separation was sexually frustrating. However, without real love, it was not too painful. Less than six months later, the young fool had wedded an eighteen-year old girl. He was clearly afflicted with *marriageitis*

and loved the idea of marriage more than he loved anyone in particular. I hope he had time to regret his decision, but I also hope it did not wreck his life for I did not hate him... far from it.

Some people, male or female, seem to be able to find a new partner at the drop of a hat. One day you see them with "X", the next they appear with "Y" or "Z". It takes me much longer. I have never thought of myself as particularly attractive. I am all right, I suppose. Not ugly, not beautiful, just average. But there was, obviously, a much deeper problem : that of a cold heart. I could not help that. Even when I tried to be nice to men, they looked scared. Could they read on my face that I had never loved anyone ? If that particular aspect of my personality did not bother them, I usually managed to scare them in other ways : I have a PhD. I enjoy literature, photography, astronomy, gastronomy, classical music, mediaeval architecture, history, prehistory, archaeology, philosophy... and I like to talk about these things. They do not. In their eyes,

if you cannot chat about fishing, football, cricket or pop groups ; if you haven't bothered to go to the cinema and see the latest Hollywood evisceration and special effects super-film, then you are "boring" and that's that .

It took me two more years to find Julian (or for Julian to find me). I was twenty-nine and my mother was taut as a drum whenever the subject of marriage came up between us, either when I was visiting her or when she telephoned. Boyfriend number two then, Julian, made me realise how good Oliver had been in bed. Julian was naïve, inexperienced and needed coaching in the area of personal hygiene. He liked to indulge in quick and rough mutual masturbation, but lost his erection whenever he tried to come inside me.

"Say, Quentina : would I have to marry you if you became pregnant ?" he asked almost every time, even though he knew perfectly well that I was on the

pill. What seemed to him like a fate worse than death had obvious psychological repercussions that kept him from ever performing properly. I can do without intercourse, which I have always considered as only *one* possibility if my partner is talented in other ways but Julian was not. I was spared the necessity of getting rid of him when he was offered, and eagerly accepted, a job in Singapore.

Number three, (I was thirty by then) was Leonard, a cheerful Dutch fellow, a bit on the hefty side and heading for clear overweight status by the time he would turn forty. Leonard was as uncomplicated as one can possibly imagine. All he ever wanted was to ejaculate inside me, preferably within a couple of minutes, or even less. Not unpleasant but rather too basic for my taste.

When, one year later, I met Francis, I was like a ripe fruit ready to be plucked. Only I was not so much ripe as tired. Later on, as I acquired a taste

for American sitcoms, from the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* to *Rhoda*, I repeatedly came across the cliché of the nice, wholesome American girl going out with a series of “jerks”. The dialogues were witty, the actors wonderful, but the situation itself was always tinged with sadness, which is the mark of all good comedies.

Francis was not a jerk and I wanted to marry him. So, one night, as he was on top of me and I judged that he wouldn't last more than fifteen seconds before an orgasm, I proposed and he accepted. A bit unfair perhaps but I had set myself a target (as they say nowadays) and had reached that target.

There was one other consideration besides the psychological pressure from society in general and my parents in particular, and it was that, unlike the time when I had met Monique, I was, by then, fully conscious of my inability to love, and I accepted it. I did not moan about it, did not feel sorry for myself, did not try to trigger sympathy in

others. It was the way it was, just as some people are cross-eyed or afflicted with hairy legs. You must count your blessings and learn to live with your drawbacks. I reasoned that if, at the age of thirty-one I had never loved any one, then I never would. Also, of course, and somewhat more painful to accept, was the fact that I had never *been* loved (a notion I usually managed to push to the back of my mind). No one had ever developed a great passion for me, not even an infatuation. No one had ever said : “Quentina, I love you”... A pleasant friendship, sustained by a (hopefully) equally pleasant sex life was the most I could hope for in married life.

As it turned out, it did not work out that way. Do human projects ever develop as planned ? The friendship was real and lasting. The sex was almost a complete failure... and yet, within ten months, I was duly married. My parents were happy, or pretended to be. Why should any woman ruin her life to please parents she does not love in

the first place, is one of those deep, deep mysteries of our wretched lives. I wonder if it happens a lot but I suspect it does.

I'm still married to Francis. I do not love him. He does not love me but we like each other. We talk about politics, world issues, public morality and we agree on most things most of the time. We do not talk about sex. It irritates Francis. He knows that he is very, *very* bad at it and would rather avoid the subject altogether. He has also, by now, almost convinced himself that his way of making love (if you can call it that) is the right way, the proper way, the only way, and that people who kiss deeply, lick each other's bodies, perform oral sex, shave their pubic hair or take photographs of each other are, to the very last, hopelessly perverted.

So, what did I do for entertainment all those years ? In an odd sort of way, I remained faithful to my *new life* in the sense that, until fairly recently, I had not gone to bed with anyone else. I may

have rebelled in my heart but, in practice, I simply do not possess the necessary stamina that it takes to become a good rebel. I learned, by contrast, how to become a good cook and a good flower gardener. I sharpened my interest in photography, transformed a box room into a dark room, spent hours playing with the computer, collected stamps and, as I used to during my days as a single “girl”, watched a lot – and I mean *a lot* – of television.

Chapter Four

It must be nice to be headhunted. It almost happened to me. Ten years after I married Francis, the Law firm where I worked changed hands but the new management turned out to be rotten to the core and very cliquish. Partners dropped out, the secretarial floor haemorrhaged, junior executives like myself started looking around. A colleague of mine, called Tammy, did just that, found a firm she liked, enthused about it, met me a few times for drinks, mentioned my name to her boss, and six months later I was in a new post with a slightly better salary and infinitely better working conditions ; *almost* headhunted, therefore, not quite.

William Eksworth, the head of the firm, was a rotund, voluble little man, always ready to reminisce and keep you listening to his stories for ages while his tiny office filled with the smoke from a pipe stuck between a bushy, grey and

white beard and an equally bushy, grey and white moustache.

“Here is the person you’ll be working for.” He puffed, letting me – gasping for air – out of his office on my first day with him. He placed a hand on my shoulder, which is something I intensely dislike, then made me turn ninety degrees to the left.

Through my smoke-filled, tearful eyes, I saw, coming towards me, the most enchanting woman on whom I had ever set eyes. At first, I could just make out the outline of her body as she appeared in front of a frosted-glass double door brilliantly lit from the outside, but already the elegance of her walk was working its magic on me. I then saw her at close range and, as a possible throwback to the days when my mother could not find anything nice to say about me or anyone else, my first reaction was to latch on to the one thing I did not particularly care for in her. She had dark brown, almost black, bushy hair, far too much of it for my

taste. It made her head look too small for the rest of her body.

The rest of that body was a delight. Vivian, as she was called, was taller than me, slim, with very small but, it seemed, very firm breasts, a wonderfully flat tummy and long, streamlined legs. She was dressed discreetly and impeccably in a straight, sleeveless brown dress with green and red flowers on it. Her voice, when she greeted me, had a soft, deep, yet crystal-clear enunciation.

She shook my hand neither too harshly nor too casually. I lost my soul in the contemplation of her large brown eyes, lit by a spark of humour. I instantly fantasised about her lips brushing against my own... I undressed her in my mind and tried to visualise what sort of knickers she was wearing, how much pubic hair she had, how the skin of her body would feel to the touch, what her genitals looked like, their smell, their taste... I must have seemed to her like the village idiot and,

when answering her greeting, appear incoherent. She gave me a brilliant smile, said she looked forward to working with me and wished me good luck.

I caught a dreamy look on William's face as he watched her walk away from us. He too lusted after her, but a pinch of intuition told me that he did not stand a chance. "What do you think?" he asked – a rather odd question in the circumstances, when he should have asked Vivian what she thought of me – but we were both fascinated. We were both miles away from a law office. William and I, at that moment, shared the same planet, the same wavelength. We were both talking about the same thing.

"Was she ever a ballet dancer?" I heard myself say while figuratively slapping my own wrists for asking such a stupid question; but obviously, for William, it was far from a stupid question.

“She does look as if she has been a dancer, doesn’t she ?... She would be too tall for ballet, though, even if she were very good at it. Tall dancers end up in nude shows.” Evidently, the idea of Vivian dancing, naked, on a stage appealed to him, just as it, suddenly, appealed to me. He heaved a deep, dreamy sigh : “Well, back to work, now. See you on Monday, Quentina.” I walked slowly towards the bright glass-panelled double door through which Vivian had appeared – and she was, indeed, an apparition – wondering if William’s vivid imagination was now undressing me and transporting me, naked, on a stage. I did not think so, somehow.

This first contact with Vivian reminded me of a conversation I had heard at an office party to which Francis and I had been invited some time previously. Two men were talking next to us.

“When you are introduced to an attractive woman,” said the first one,

“do you look first at her face, her breasts or her legs ?”

“I look at her crotch,” the other one replied. “I’m a gusset man myself.”

They roared with laughter but Francis was not amused. “Absolutely disgusting.” He hissed. I remember blushing, which no one noticed, not even Francis. I remember blushing because I thought it was funny, and also because it occurred to me that, in many people’s eyes I too would be seen as absolutely disgusting.

So, that’s what *lust at first sight* is all about, I thought later, as I crossed the beautifully landscaped car park. That’s what it is. I shall no longer laugh at people who believe in “love at first sight”. It does exist. It just happened to me. But is it love ? Is it not just some sort of infatuation ? Must be, must be.

I was angry, nervous, stressed. I was also relieved to have left my old firm, and elated to have joined Tammy’s and William’s and Vivian’s.

It couldn't be love, it couldn't, it couldn't. "Besides" I muttered "I've never loved anyone in my life, so why now, why should I start now, when I am almost forty-five ? Why here, why so suddenly and out of the blue ? I'm not going to start now, am I ? No : the reality is more down to earth. *I am a gusset woman myself*. That's what it is. I may be absolutely disgusting but I am me, Quentina. That's all I'll ever be. For the higher, more emotional, more ethereal stuff, I don't qualify. So, forget it."

I lay awake most of the night. I was reminded of a character I had enjoyed immensely as a teenager : that of Giovanni Guareschi's Don Camillo. He was often torn between the voice of the Devil and that of Christ. Only, in my case, it was the voice of Passion against the voice of Reason.

Passion said : "I'm going mad". Reason would reply: "Indeed you are, but not the way you think. You should be grateful to have found a better job.

You should not jeopardise this stroke of luck by falling in love with your immediate superior. By the look of it, she's a happily married woman. Why torture yourself ?”

Then, there was a third voice, which was neither Passion nor Reason. The voice of Fate, I suppose, and it said : “All your life, you have complained that you didn't know what love was, that you had never fallen in love. Now it seems that you have... even if you are not sure. You should be pleased. It hurts but it also uplifts your whole existence.” To which I would retort : “I know it hurts but there's very little uplift. I want to make love to that person and I fantasise that she wants to make love to me but there is very little chance of that, is there ? So, where's the uplift ? All I can foresee is frustration and misery.”

At the thought of having even a faint chance of being desired in return, I always felt, as time went by, as if the

ground opened under my feet and I was about to faint.

Mornings sobered me up. At night, I often believed that it would be impossible for me to work with Vivian as a *normal* colleague. The haunting presence of Passion seemed more active when I was not with her. Disgusting ? Depraved ? Yes, a thousand “yes”. Francis was right and I was wrong. My head, during the night, would swim with desire and with shame. I would clutch my pillow and imagine that I was holding on to her. I would touch myself, smell my fingers and pretend that it was her smell.

Nights may have been torture but days, thank goodness, would go by smoothly. I never fantasised about seeing her naked when I was with her, in the same room, sometimes sitting in front of her and able to contemplate her magnificent legs disappearing under her skirt. When we were working together, I never lost control, never became dreamy with love or desire. She

was more real in my heated imagination than in life itself.

Our law firm building was, unusually for such establishments, set in the middle of a beautiful park. It was a former big house ; a very, very small big house, definitely not a *pile*. It was not sprawling. It was not built in that dreadful grey stone which looks like desiccated bones. It had style, it had life and its stone was warm, ochre, cheerful or dreamy according to the time of day, or the weather or the seasons.

Childhood summers are always hot and dry, they say. Going to work for Ushant, Adams & Adams remains, in my mind, a glorious experience with never any rain or dirty snow or soggy grass or mud. I liked to arrive early. I was often the first one there.

At six o'clock, I would wake up and take a long look at the view from my bedroom window : gardens, rolling hills, the roofs of a few substantial, prosperous houses peeking here and there out of the greenery and, on the

right-hand side, the darker, more businesslike roofs of a carpenter's workshop. On the rare occasions when I had been home during the day, you could hear the meows of power saws and the more robust groans of lathes sculpting tenons and mortises but these noises were muffled and did not intrude on our lives.

I drove to work. The approaches to Ushant, Adams & Adams were magnificent, as befits those of a former big house : a long driveway among century-old trees. There was a huge car park, also surrounded by trees. Some of these had been left in the car park itself. They provided a welcome shade in the Summer... for a short while at any rate. If you left your car in the shade in the morning, you would find it in the sun in the afternoon. Guessing where the shade would be by the time I left work became a niggling intellectual stimulus, and I soon got the hang of it.

In my memory, every time I got out of the car, the air was crisp, the sky

pale blue and the vegetation fragrant. Intervals between tree trunks would carve out huge beams of light in the thin morning mist.

I would enter the outer office with my own key, hang my coat and my handbag and head for the percolator that the janitor had cleaned, refilled and started. A wonderful smell of coffee permeated the room. I would open a window and let the fragrance of pine needles and freshly cut lawn blend with that of coffee. I would turn on the radio, not very loud, and listen to Classic-FM while savouring my first cup of the day. I never had breakfast but looked forward to the first-class doughnuts that Ushant, Adams & Adams distributed generously every day at coffee-break time, around 10:30. Once we had croissants instead.

Why do I remember these insignificant details ? I suppose it's because, in some obscure way, going to work was like going home : it meant being with Vivian. I liked my work, I

loved the setting of the place, I was also in love.

Occasionally, I would have the pleasure of meeting the janitor. He was an older man, very tall, very thin and very funny. I should have said the morning-janitor because he worked only part time. His name was Al. He was an educated man with interesting things to say.

“Why do you do such a menial job ?” I asked when I got to know him fairly well.

“Retired. Small pension. Besides, I like it here, among all these women. Don’t get me wrong. I’m way past it. I just like women, that’s all : they smell nicer than men, anyway.”

Al had been in show business. He had toured provincial theatres, met a lot of celebrities and appeared on television in the late fifties. I had no reason to doubt his word, especially after he treated me to part of his routine with an invisible dog. Not only was I in stitches, but I could

immediately detect the professional stage presence and the impressive leg work. He'd been a dancer before he became a comedian, and it showed.

“...here, among all these women...”
Yes, I liked that too. I am no man hater and I do resent being conveniently labelled. I also have a tendency to be contrary. Those who think of me as a feminist get a lecture on how much I hate the feminist movement. Those who think I am a traditionalist get a feminist lecture. The truth is that I like *some* men very much indeed but I do not like men in general ; just as I dislike *some* women very much indeed but, generally speaking, feel more comfortable in the company of women... and there, at Ushant, Adams & Adams, women were in the overwhelming majority. Al was right : that firm was a woman's world.

A woman's world... My introduction to a woman's world had been as a schoolgirl but, oddly enough, my first keen memories and acute sensations of being in a woman's world

had taken place in a building where there were no women at all. At school, I was surrounded by girls and women all day long, but I soon stopped thinking about it. When I did think about it, it was mostly to relish the fact that we did *not* have boys around. The rest of the time, I was far too busy with lessons, homework and other activities to dwell on the subject for any length of time. Reality can be the best vaccine against fantasies and, just as I fantasised about Vivian when I was not with her, my girlish fantasies about other pupils always took place after hours.

My own school did not offer Music as a subject. Well, it did, but I wanted to learn how to play the piano and there was no one to teach me. I had to have private lessons. And so, late afternoons, twice a week, I would go to another school. Teachers and pupils had left the premises by then and I never met a single one of them.

Hory Grammar School for Girls, as it was called, had a lot in common with

the working environment of Ushant, Adams & Adams. It too had been set up in a small big house called - would you believe ? - Hory Castle. The house was enclosed in a park. *Temporary*, demountable classrooms that had lasted for decades were pleasantly dotted among the greenery.

The music room was the furthest away from the house and the most isolated. This was done, so as not to disturb other lessons. You could make as much noise as you wished and, in June, for instance, when a combination of warm sunshine and frequent showers made the trees, hedges and unkempt flowerbeds steam like a jungle, you could easily pretend that you were completely isolated from the rest of the world.

The first time I entered the music room was on a sunny September day. The light shone generously through rather dusty window panes, making the place feel warm and cosy but what struck me above all was the smell : it

reminded me of Monique's scent, only stronger and, at the same time, more stale : a wonderfully erotic smell, a female smell. It had nothing to do with sweat, as in a gymnasium, nothing to do with periods or urine. It was much more subtle. Could it have been pheromone ? After all, why not ? They say evolution has deprived human beings of the ability to detect pheromones but I have my doubts about that.

I clearly don't understand what happened, back then, but I loved that subtle fragrance... nor could I understand why my own school, which was also a single-sex school, did not smell like that. I wondered if it was not simply because it was all fake marble, tiled floors and concrete slabs whereas Hory Grammar was mostly made of wood... and wood has a memory. Cement does not.

From then on, I made a point of getting there early, very early, much ahead of the tutor, especially on sunny

days when the combination of sunlight and warmth seemed to bring this wonderful fragrance out of the wood from desks, benches, floors and even the blackboard. As a student of music I had a natural gift but lacked discipline. To the tedious finger exercises that I was assigned, I much preferred, before the tutor arrived, and as soon as he had left, to let my hands wander on the keyboard in a lazy but inventive way, improvising slow melodies which sounded somewhat Chinese or Japanese. I was probably deluding myself, and what I thought of as wonderful sounds were more likely to be the pianistic equivalent of singing under the shower...

Arriving to work at Ushant, Adams & Adams was not unlike going to these piano lessons of a distant past. I even found a little of the same smell. Every day, I would forget about that smell and every morning I was pleasantly reminded of it as I entered the back room of our office. Vivian would walk in, energetic yet soft and feminine,

always cheerful, always interested in people and genuinely concerned about their happiness and well-being. The old Sioux (or is it Cherokee?) in the film *Little Big Man* keeps saying to his adoptive son : “When I see you, my heart soars like a hawk.” That’s just the way I felt when Vivian walked into the office every morning.

I had seen so little of her ! She always wore what I thought were tights but were, in fact, stockings. I’d never had a chance to look up her skirt. I kept wondering about her pubic hair. Monique had imprinted in me a certain ideal of female beauty – or perhaps I should say sexual beauty, because it applies to men as well as women – and that sort of beauty definitely did not include pubic hair. I found it repulsive, on myself and on others. When it started, I had my own downy growth in absolute horror. As soon as I was in a flat of my own, and safe from any accidental discovery by my parents, I endeavoured to shave religiously every morning after my shower. It makes me

feel so clean, so fresh and, in a totally illogical way, so light-footed throughout the day's activities. I asked Francis if he would shave his pubic hair for me. He just laughed. What if he had to go to the doctor's ? he said.

I can't imagine a doctor being particularly shocked by anything, let alone something as harmless as this. Francis' final argument was that it was something women did, not men. So there. It reminded me of the days, probably in the late Forties and early Fifties, when some men were saying that using underarm deodorant was a "woman thing". Even as a child, I used to find this remark extremely stupid and offensive. It clearly implied either :

a) that women smelt stronger than men, which, in my experience, is not the case, or :

b) that, if you were lucky enough to be a man, it was quite all right to inconvenience other people with your wafting sweat.

I judged Francis' attitude towards pubic hair to be at about that same level of ineptitude and insensitivity, but oddly enough, I accepted it for a while. The pressure to conform to whatever taboos society places on us is enormous and not easily shifted. Being different attracts a very special and very nasty form of bullying. From school playgrounds to Army barracks, factory floors and Police Stations, all the way to – I shouldn't be surprised – old people's homes, individual differences seem, for a depressingly large number of people, the excuse they have always been waiting for, in order to open the floodgates of their basest instincts. We live in a society in which about 40% of men and 10% of women make you feel ashamed of being a member of the same species.

Then, one day, as I was waiting my turn at the hairdresser's and leafing through a glossy magazine, I came across an article on nudist camps and nudist beaches. There were black and white photos of naked people

sunbathing, playing volley-ball or enjoying a barbecue (ouch !). All the figures were small enough, on the picture, so as to look fairly innocuous and not “offend”, as they say, but not so small as to prevent you from observing that many of these sun-worshippers had shaved their pubic hair. What made me laugh, then made me sad, as I thought of Francis, was that there were *more* shaved men than women in these pictures. A “woman thing” indeed ! How much nicer the world would be if we were more relaxed about ourselves, more ready to please others and less ready to jump to (the wrong) conclusions ! My respect and affection for Francis went down yet another notch on that hairdresser day.

Still, I had not seen much of Vivian’s body at all. She took a week’s holiday on a Caribbean island at some point.

“Don’t forget to bring back some photos.” I said before she left, hoping to see her in a bikini.

I was to learn, later on, that Vivian loved swimming but hated sunbathing. She also hated having pictures taken of herself.

“Why is that ? You are not a Muslim, are you ?” I asked jokingly.

We were, by then, in a steakhouse, she and I, and it was more than one year after I had joined the firm of Ushant, Adams & Adams. Vivian laughed : “Not Muslim, not anything else. I am not a joiner of clubs, religions or movements of any kind. The truth is, I’m ugly and that’s why I can’t stand looking at pictures of myself”.

My jaw must have dropped. “What do you mean, ugly ?” And, before I could think of any implication, added : “But you are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

She laughed again, not taking my remark seriously. “I had a lover once” she said softly “and I thought **he** was the most beautiful man I’d ever seen. He didn’t like to hear me say that. He thought he was ugly. *You’ll see*, he said

to me a few times, *one day you'll realise just how ugly I am and you'll go right off me. You'll wonder what you ever saw in me in the first place. You'll see...* I didn't believe him, of course. Then we went to a Christmas party together where a lot of people took a lot of pictures. When I looked at them, my heart sank : he *was* ugly. From that moment, all sorts of little things started to irritate me about him, from the way he combed his hair (what was left of it) to the way he told jokes or kept tidying up my place when he came over. I became indifferent toward him. I hated myself for it but I couldn't help it... I just couldn't help it... I never want someone else to feel that way about me..."

"Not much chance of that." I muttered, but she was lost in her memories.

There fell a heavy silence that I was careful not to break. Vivian had stopped eating and was absentmindedly pushing her food around her plate. I thought for a moment that she was

going to cry but she did not. In fact, she smiled. It was one of those smiles the Japanese are good at, the sort of smile we put on quickly to keep us from bursting into tears, or when we think that we have no right to burden another person with our own problems. It gave me the *all clear* to start talking again.

“What happened to him ?”

“I don’t know, but I realised afterwards that no man had ever loved me as deeply and sincerely as he had.”

Inside, I was yelling : “No, Vivian, no one has ever loved you as much as I do.”

*

A few weeks before, she had asked me if I would go swimming with her after work. I had taken a deep breath and feigned enthusiasm. I love swimming in the sea but hate swimming pools. On the other hand, I

was dying to see Vivian as nearly naked as I probably ever would.

We went to the sports centre on a Wednesday lunch-time, the only time, she said, when there were no schools about : no yelling, no yobbish behaviour.

Even without school children, the place was incredibly noisy. They should bestow a Nobel Peace Prize on the first architect who will design a quiet pool. Swimming pools create an unreal, echoing, surrealistic noise, the sort of noise, strangely enough, which almost puts me to sleep, as if by some kind of defence mechanism.

My only experience of such places had been at school and had put me off forever. I could not avoid it every single time, but I went swimming as rarely as was humanly possible. I kept having stomach cramps and irregular periods at the most opportune moments. All this to say that I had, in fact, never set foot inside a public swimming pool before.

It was as bad as I had anticipated. The changing cubicles were wet, the mosaic floor slippery, there were too many people about. Every noise, every shout was amplified as in a torture chamber and the smell of chlorine burned my throat, but at least, I had a chance to find out more about Vivian's figure : it was lovely and she was perfect but the ordeal of being in such a place meant that these observations remained purely on an abstract level. She wore a pale green, one-piece swimsuit, which added to the general coolness and anti-sexual atmosphere of the place. Beautiful as Vivian was, I do not think that she attracted much attention from male swimmers either.

*

A few days after going to the public swimming pool with Vivian, I met Emilio. I had left the office at lunchtime. I often went back to my car when the weather was nice. I would

open a window, push the front passenger seat all the way and tilted its back, then use it to relax and close my eyes for twenty minutes or so. I usually did not pull the seat back to its proper position until I had a passenger, which was a rare occurrence. I then learned that the other solicitors in the firm and all the secretaries had christened my vehicle the *sin car*. It was the sort of good-humoured banter that, in a small way, contributed to making Ushant, Adams & Adams such a nice place in which to work.

Lying down in the car would give my back a rest from the sitting upright position it endured eight hours a day in the office. It also rested my ears from the constant hum of computers, printers, photocopiers and the like, as well as the inevitable chatter of office life, punctuated by the trills of telephones to which I much preferred the trills of birds. My car smelt good in the heat. No one had ever smoked in it and I really enjoyed its fragrance of seat material, warm metal and cable glue :

not to everyone's taste, I know. More conventionally, I also basked in the fragrance wafting from pine needles. It reminded me of the erotic experiences of my childhood. Occasionally, one of those needles would fall on the roof or on the bonnet with a tiny clicking sound.

On that particular day, as I was going along the flower beds on my way to the car park, I noticed an unusual creature making his way towards the main building : a man who could have been in his forties (hard to tell). He was short and fat yet moved quickly and with great determination, and also with the sort of suppleness one does not normally associate with people of his girth. His arms were unnaturally long which gave him the gait of an orang-utan. His enormous head, with no less enormous bulging eyes, was completely bald. His round, babyish face was made very businesslike, almost cruel, by the sort of beard known as a *borgia*. I recoiled in horror, not least because I hate beards. An

orang-utan ? Yes, but also a giant spider, his long arms swimming in front of him like the antennae of a tarantula. His visage, in spite of its ugliness, brimmed with intelligence but also with cold, sarcastic humour. Here is a man, I thought, who enjoys hurting and frightening people.

“Is Vivian in her office ?” he asked abruptly without saying *hello* or bothering to introduce himself. He did not shout but it felt like it. Before I could say anything, he added : “She took my set of house keys. I’m locked out.” He did not wait for an answer and ploughed on towards the entrance hall.

He must have thought that I was a mental case because, in all likelihood, I looked like a rabbit caught in the proverbial set of headlights. All I could hear in my mind, again and again, was “My God, that’s Emilio ! That’s Vivian’s husband ! How is this possible ? How could she, how could she ?”

That day, instead of going to my car, I walked back and forth along the

small river that crosses the property, and where local fishermen were (for a fee) allowed to set up their paraphernalia. There weren't any on that day. I only managed to make my shoes muddy.

When I got back to work, I was greeted by a particularly cheerful Vivian. She was almost laughing as she said : "You must have passed Emilio on the way to your car."

"Ye...yes. He told me about the keys..."

"What did you think of him ?" She asked with a repressed, cheeky smile on her face.

"I... didn't have time to think." I lied.

She knew I was lying. She turned round in order to go back to her desk and added, almost as if talking to herself : "He's an unusual man..."

That night I tossed and turned, muttering "Why, oh why ?" I soon had to admit that someone else could have asked the same question concerning Francis and me.

Chapter Five

I want to mention Francis again. I feel that I have not been fair to him. It is said that marriage counsellors (we never went to see one) ask you to make a list of what you do like about your partner. Basically, even if you are at each other's throats and are itching for a divorce, there are still nice things you can say about each other. This sort of psychiatrist's game irresistibly reminds me of : "At least he made the trains run on time" when talking about Mussolini.

Francis and I have never fought, never engaged in shouting bouts. We have confined ourselves to the occasional sharp remarks followed by periods of sulking, lasting no more than a few hours.

His qualities ? First and foremost : loyalty. Francis often reminds me of a dog : not as derogatory a remark as it may seem. I keep in mind a short poem I came across when I was a teenager. I burst out laughing, at the time,

because I thought it was deliciously irreverent, almost sacrilegious. My mother came out of the kitchen to see what made me laugh and, naturally, she was not amused. It was a dedication on the first page of a booklet of poems. Here it is :

*This is to Plimp, my dog,
loving without question
and forgiving without an
afterthought.*

*God created the dog in his image
while the Devil created man
and inserted Hell in his heart.*

Uncomfortably close to Manicheism, wouldn't you say ? Francis loves me, as would a dog. If he had a tail, he would wag it every time I come back from work. He also follows me from room to room, which can be particularly annoying. He does not love me properly, though. He needs me, which is quite a different thing

altogether. He misses me terribly when I am not with him. He would go round the bend if anything happened to me, if he learnt, for instance, that I had been in a car accident and that I had ended up in hospital, and he will indeed go round the bend when I finally commit suicide. But loving as would a dog is not the same as loving as should a human being. This is not a criticism in any way since I do not love him myself. I do not make myself to be better than he is...

After all, what is love ? Philosophers and poets have been asking that very question for thousands of years. At Sunday school, priests who knew nothing of carnal love (or who certainly should not have) kept giving us their version of it, always pushed back into second place after devotion towards God, of course.

Because Francis and I like each other, because we are comfortable with each other, because we talk to each other, it is not surprising that I often

ask myself if we do not love each other after all. In a way, we do, of course. It is the love of brothers and sisters, and that is not something to be despised, surely... but, without passion, is it real love ?

Outsiders think we love each other. We like shopping together, we enjoy going on holiday together. We are seen together in restaurants and theatres and at local events. As we walk, he often takes my hand in his. I suppose it makes us look all lovey-dovey. It is quite nice, in fact. Better than being shouted at or called a silly cow. We all know that the line is very thin indeed between joy and sadness or between laughter and tears. How thin is it between real love and the pretence of love ?

“You two are always together...” I’ve heard it said. Or : “It’s nice, nowadays, to see a couple who still do everything together, after all these years...”

We are the picture of a perfect couple. People envy us. True, we do like

each other but... we have separate bedrooms. We are only like two good friends sharing a house. I too would be extremely distressed if he were to end up in hospital because of an accident or a serious disease. I too would be lost without him and yet, I do not love him and he does not love me. Of that I am certain. More certain now than I was a few years ago.

I have reached the conclusion that what we see as love (perhaps I should write Love, with a capital L) around us, on television, in films, or in novels is simply a figment of our imagination : wishful thinking, a convenient concept for artistic minds. At the limit, I would accept that love with a big L might be a reality for a few, a very, very few couples at some point in their lives but that “people like us”, as Francis keeps saying, *normal* people, in other words, are not affected by passionate love. And you can almost hear him sigh : “Thank God for that !”

My parents would have agreed wholeheartedly. For them, a marriage based on friendship was preferable to a marriage that gave too much importance to passion and all that it implies in terms of carnal intimacy and bodily fluids.

So, there we are. From Francis, I get loving friendship without passion whereas from Oliver I'd had passion without love. I did not know it at the time. Do we ever really know what is happening to us ? Oliver's passion was not a grand passion, the sort of passion that ruins men, breaks up marriages and could be the stuff of a Greek tragedy, but with hindsight, it was passionate sex ; passionate and also patient, considerate, delicate, subtle, uninhibited and inventive, the sort of sex you think of with nostalgia for the rest of your life ; the sort of sex which you almost regret having ever enjoyed.

Oliver liked slow, mutual masturbation, elevated to the level of art. He liked to gaze at my naked body.

He would then tell me how beautiful I was. He liked to kiss that body, always taking his time, never rough, never domineering. He adored oral sex. Oliver was a top-notch lover, the genuine article.

Why, then, could I not *train* Francis in the same way ? After all, even if life, as a whole, is often seen as being short, married life, year in, year out, offers – or so one would think – the opportunity to change, to improve, to learn...

I was Doctor Higgins. Francis was Elisa Doolittle, but I failed miserably. Either I was full of illusions, or else I did not know how to fire the imagination and enthusiasm of my lazy, indifferent and awkward partner.

Francis is not impotent, far from it. He gets erections easily and frequently. He enjoys ejaculating, as would any other man. Did I just say “as would any other man ?” On second thoughts, he probably does not enjoy it as much as other men do, certainly not as much as Oliver did, otherwise he would pay

more attention to the different ways of getting there. Yes, I definitely think that the word *enjoy* is the key word here.

“*How do I love you ? Let me count the ways...*” I can paraphrase this wonderful quotation and say : *how does he not love me ? Let me count the ways...* I want to go over his infuriating inadequacies.

-- He does not like kissing. He never does if he can help it. An affectionate peck on the mouth, lips firmly closed, is as far as he will go. Whenever I have tried using my tongue, he has turned his face away. Have I got bad breath ? Do I taste bad ? Silly questions, really. Oliver used to be very good at it and never complained. Try as I might, I have never elicited a satisfactory answer from Francis in that respect.

-- He does not like caresses on his chest and on his thighs. He says it tickles. No point in adding that he is not exactly good at caressing me, since he cannot see the point. At the beginning of our relationship, when I

was trying so hard to instil some sexual sophistication in him, I caught him several times looking around the room, as if he were following the moves of a fly while (just to be nice to me) absentmindedly fingering my clitoris. He asked me once in similar circumstances : “Did you remember to stop at the building-society on your way home ?” He was not interested in what he was doing, in what I felt, on how to improve or vary his technique. He had not the faintest idea that he could have been accomplishing an erotic action. In fact, I doubt very much if the word *erotic* has any meaning for him at all.

Once again, how can I not reflect on the way Oliver took our games seriously, how anxious he was that I should enjoy myself, how he managed to introduce in his moves and his attitude that subtle blend of invention, beauty and affection (ideally love) that is the essence of eroticism ? I think that, when it comes to caresses, the most depressing, most deflating moment I spent with Francis was on

the day he told me off for stroking my own nipples while his hand was reluctantly moving between my legs. He said it was “irritating and ridiculous”. Dear Francis ! He can really turn a woman on.

-- He does not like to give oral sex. He tried once, for only a few seconds then turned his face away, looking sad and disgusted and shaking his head as if to say “I can’t do this.” I knew without the slightest doubt that I was as clean as a whistle, which is not always the case with him and, without any pubic hair I am also as smooth and fresh as any woman can be... but there’s worse :

-- He doesn’t like to *receive* oral sex. Is that possible ? Is there another man like him in the whole, wide world ? Why have I been *that* lucky ? The first time I tried, I recoiled in horror : he wasn’t clean. “But I had a bath yesterday !” he whined. I wondered for a few seconds if I’d heard right. I literally had to teach him how to soap himself thoroughly *before* sinking in the bath or before

rinsing himself under the shower. Even so, he only now does it in a desultory fashion. As in anything else connected with sex, his heart is not in it. When I did eventually manage to give him proper oral sex, the ungrateful beast, having come fairly quickly, muttered that it was not as nice as “the real thing”.

I did it once more after that ; only once. We were on a cruise and I felt excited, elated and sexy. When we got back to our cabin, one evening, I pushed him under the shower, dried him myself and knelt in front of him with the enthusiasm of an oversexed teenager. With my mouth full of sperm and, with what, I hoped, was an enticing smile on my face, I got up and tried to kiss him. He backed away and snapped that I was being utterly revolting. I spat the sperm on his chest. He looked at it and yelled as if it had been some kind of giant, deadly spider, and rushed back to the shower with

such genuine shivers of disgust that, on that day, and for reasons which I cannot quite explain, he frightened me.

So what does he like ? He likes the missionary position. In, out, in, out, shake it all about, and the whole messy business is over in a few seconds. Now, that, in his book, is *real* sex. Don't ask him to vary positions.

"We are not acrobats" he said when I suggested that he should take me doggy style for a change. I could have explained that I was not exactly asking him to do anything exotic but what was the point of starting an argument ?

One of the profound mysteries of my insignificant little life is that we did get married. In anything but sex he always took a great deal of interest in me. If I travelled anywhere, he wanted me to telephone and tell him that I was safe and sound. He was quite distressed, once, when I said that I wanted to take a short holiday by myself and spend a few days with old university friends of mine. As I drove away, I could see tears

in his eyes. If I am ill, I cannot find anyone who is more concerned, attentive, gentle, helpful and patient. If I have problems with other people, be it at work or in any other circumstance, he is on my side, fighting in my corner, full of good advice. At home, he is messy but not lazy and will happily vacuum, do the dishes, cut the lawn or do whatever has to be done in a house.

No one had ever treated me like that. From my parents I'd had a mixture of demands, criticism and indifference. Oliver was a superb lover but I doubt if he even knew what I did for a living. No one before Francis had ever been genuinely interested in me as a person. No one had wanted to see photos of me when I was a little girl or a teenager. No one had ever wanted to know what happens, every day, at the office and no one had ever listened with such supportive enthusiasm to what I had to say. Francis was, at the time I got married, the only person who had ever

made me feel that I was not completely on my own in this wretched world.

He first made me realise this on what should normally have been our second or third date, I don't quite remember which. We had arranged to meet at his place when, a few hours before, he telephoned, saying that he had forgotten a wedding he was supposed to attend. Would I mind ? I did not. I really did not, nor did I believe a word of his story. I invited a girlfriend over and settled down for a quiet evening of TV watching. We had a nice chat, hardly paying attention to the telly. The phone rang : it was Francis, apologising once again for letting me down. In the background I could hear music, the clinking of plates and cutlery and a feeble, drunken rendition of *For he's a jolly good Fellow*. I dreamily placed back the receiver.

“Nice guy” I said to my girlfriend.

“Really nice ?”

“He tells the truth.”

“Wow ! Don't lose him.”

I didn't. Was I right or wrong ? Did he keep me sane by chasing away my loneliness while driving me up the wall with his sexual inadequacies ? Did he both save and destroy my life ? The only way to know would be for me to be a famous person with biographers, psychoanalysts and the like and then come back to Earth fifty years from now in order to reflect on the analysis. As it is, no one will care either way. Because of its violent nature, my death will make the front page of the local paper and within two days everyone around here will have forgotten I ever existed. Francis will not forget, of course. I do hope he remarries or, at least, finds an uncomplicated, undemanding, preferably uneducated nice young woman who just wants a good old-fashioned screw now and then and is happy with it. Life will go on, as they say, as indifferent to my fate as Mother Nature is to mankind in general. I will make no impact, leave no message...

If only, if only I could have found someone as nice as Francis and as sexy

as Oliver ! Do some lucky women have it all ? Does marital happiness actually exist, somewhere, sometimes, hidden in anything from an African hut to a penthouse apartment in Palm Beach ?

If only Francis had had a sense of *investment* ! Investment ? Yes : but not monetary investment. I'm talking about emotional, sentimental and above all sexual investment. I tried to explain what I meant but he did not or, rather, would not understand.

In the Middle Ages, it was widely believed, especially among monks and the clergy, that for each moment of pleasure there is a moment of pain. Being cheerful little souls, they insisted that the pain should be at least ten times more acute than the pleasure. Inflicting upon yourself as much pain as you could possibly muster was, therefore, rather a good move. There was a price to pay for everything, a very high price. The idea is still with us nowadays. Louis-Ferdinand Céline used to say : "All we do, good or bad, has a

price. Good is more expensive, of course.”

Aside from such eighteenth century-style quips, I do think that if we make the effort of paying the price *before* we commit ourselves to good or bad, that price remains small and the rewards great. It is not as painful to save for a holiday and wait, as it is to borrow with the credit card, then repay the bank, with interest for what seems like ever and ever. Sometimes, as with Archimedes’ lever, the investment is so very small and the reward so incredible! What stops people like Francis is that, satisfying as the reward may be, it is not automatic.

Francis sees sex as a pleasurable experience. Nothing wrong with that : we all do. Where Francis and others like him go off the rails is when they assume that making an effort in order to experience pleasure is a contradiction in itself. According to them, pleasure should just *happen*. No need for investment. If this was the

case in other walks of life, we should be able to experience the delights of sunbathing on a Caribbean beach without taking the trouble of trekking to Heathrow, waiting in queues, putting up with a crowded plane, possibly plagued by inconsiderate children, and watching yet another dreary movie. We would expect to eat the most delicious food without taking the trouble of either cooking it or paying for it and so on, and so forth.

The Japanese are more adept than people from other nations at investing in life itself, or so the saying goes. They cherish the beauty of apparently humble objects : a polished floor, a comb... In fact, it's no more than an artistic and subtle extension of the Western saying : "If something is worth doing, it's worth doing well." I would conclude that if love is worth making, it is worth making well. I also know that a little effort to start with, will bloom into truly magical rewards.

“Tell me what turns you on.” I would whisper to Oliver. “Tell me your most intimate yearnings, your fantasies, tell me what you’ve never told anyone before”. And when he did, I would say : “Me too”, and I was not lying because if you have learned to take pleasure in giving pleasure, if you delight in the other person, the other person will delight in you and, like two mirrors reflecting each other’s images, you will reflect each other’s dreams and fantasies ad infinitum, experiencing such sensations and emotions as you never knew existed. The magic word is *yes*. Every time you say *yes*, he or she loves you more, loves you better. Every time you say *no*, you go down one more notch towards darkness and indifference... indifference and despair.

There was a time when I used to broach the subject with Francis but I never got anywhere. He would immediately look uncomfortable, start fidgeting, imply that I was a pervert, which made me laugh ; imply also that I was immature and in urgent need of

growing up, which made me sad and resentful. Do we ever grow up or do we just pretend ?

Francis is so blind to his problem that he said to me on two or three occasions : “You only want to make love on your own terms”. Considering that for years and years, I have been making love (sort of) on his terms and that he does not even want to know what other terms there are, the unfairness of his remark left me numb and speechless. I could have started a heated argument, neatly packaged, impeccably logical, but I did not. Each time, utterly discouraged, I withdrew, giving him I suppose, the impression that I agreed with him, thus making things even worse for myself in the long run.

If Francis had become physically incapable of having sex, I would not have resented it. You cannot blame someone for falling ill or ending up in a wheelchair. I might have been tempted to have affairs and then again I might not. If I had felt, on his part, an intense

desire to please me manually and orally, if he had taken a sort of abstract pleasure in watching me masturbate in a variety of ways, including with sex toys, I might not have been tempted to meet anyone else. What infuriates me is that there is nothing wrong with Francis' plumbing. The paralysis is in his brain.

Once, a long time ago, Francis borrowed a pornographic video from a colleague at the office. I did not realise, at the time, that it was "for a laugh". So many, in Britain, cannot approach sexual matters without giggling ! They have never quite evolved beyond the *Carry on* mentality and see people making love as an opportunity for a good session of *oink-oink, nudge-nudge* behaviour.

Like most pornographic films, this one had some pretty stupid-looking actors (stupid as in a deep stupor) and grotty-looking, heavy-breasted actresses with vulgar make-up, prancing about in high heels – even in

bed – and sporting utterly ridiculous red and black underwear of a type that may have been fashionable in the Naughty Nineties (1890s, that is) but is now inseparable from the cheapest, coldest and dreariest forms of street prostitution, in other words : *common as muck*.

However, there were also some glorious, even beautiful moments with smiling, good-looking men who did not look as if they were just making a few bucks before going back to an anti-nuclear protest. There were slim, nice-looking women with shaven pussies and small breasts, who were clearly enjoying themselves. Such scenes were fresh, natural and decidedly erotic. There was a lot of enthusiastic, imaginative oral sex. I kept hoping that it would show Francis that *my terms* were not exactly unusual and that, in fact, they were most people's terms, most people's idea of what good sex was all about. I should

have known... no : I *knew* that I had no hope of changing the leopard's spots.

I debated for several minutes with myself as to whether or not I should make any remarks but reached the point when I could no longer resist and pronounced, very matter-of-factly : "You never do that...". No reaction. I tried again a little later on : "You never do that either". Francis was clearly annoyed and, in the end, simply muttered : "Not for people like us", and switched off the tape. We were back to the drawing board, only he did not want any drawings on it...

Francis lives his life as if he were immortal, as if there would always be time to enjoy himself later. Can he not remember what his father looked like at the end of his life... shuffling along painfully on stiff legs, puffing, leaning on furniture with bloated fingers ? Can he not see what's in store for him in a not so distant future ?

I, on the other hand, live as if I were to die tomorrow, a bitterly ironic remark

considering that I am actually going to die if not tomorrow, at least very soon... On the other hand, I could say that there is no tomorrow for me. What happened to me lately can never happen again... correction : *must* never happen again. Is there a morrow for Francis ? The fool ! All he can look forward to is an expanding waistline, increasing stiffness of the joints and a steadily declining physical appeal to the opposite sex. If he had any sense, he too would commit suicide...

When does a person stop wanting to make love ? My fear used to be that it would happen to me too soon. My other fear was that it would never happen but that I would be too wrinkled and too ugly for anyone to put up with me. All this is now rather irrelevant... Francis, of course, is already an old man. What a sorry, bloody waste ! He could have saved my life...

When my grandmother died, I inherited what modest possessions she had. While sifting through all her

paraphernalia, I found a watch which had belonged to my great-grandmother, and a beautiful watch it was too : the back was decorated with silver, gold and chryselephantine birds. My first reaction was relief that it had not been lost. "I'll keep it preciously" I thought, but what will happen to it after me ? To Francis, it is only a pretty piece of jewellery. I can easily imagine this beautiful watch ending up, somewhere, on the *Antiques RoadShow* with an old lady who would coo : "I bought it at a house clearance for only a few Pounds. I have no idea how much it is worth". Well, lady, I can tell you how much it's worth : nothing. Beautiful as it is, it remains a thing, an object and it will never be a part of you. *Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas.*

In the end (and I do mean the *end*), human relationships and human warmth are far more important than an expensive antique watch or a luxury car. Loving sexual relationships are the most important of all, for they are part of you, a part that only Death can take

away. Through failing to understand that simple truth, Francis ruined his life, but he does not know it. He also ruined mine and **I** know it.

Chapter Six

William had told me, as he had told everyone else, that if one of us had ideas on how to improve the efficiency and customer appeal of the firm, we should definitely put it all down on paper and give it to him. It was not, he hastened to say, a matter of *stealing* anyone's ideas : it was a simple matter of pooling our resources and making sure the firm prospered. If it prospered, we prospered. Simple as that.

I had been with the firm for something like eighteen months when I made a list of my absolutely brilliant ideas. New kid on the block, I did not want to appear pretentious but, on the other hand, I reflected that if I waited too long, I would lose the benefit of the outsider's fresh look at things. As they say in American managerial courses : "If you don't know that something is impossible, you just go ahead and do it". The more you become an expert, the less likely you are to be daring.

William was usually a warm, enthusiastic, bubbly sort of fellow who made you feel good about your work but, if you were a woman, also made you feel a bit uneasy. He had, to put it simply, a crush on all of us. He was a sort of ageing *Cherubino*, a randy little man and, when you saw his wife, you began to understand the source of his frustration. Roberta was a very tall woman, towering above William. This, in itself, was neither here nor there, but she was also on the portly side with a wobbling stomach, a deep, authoritarian voice and a gait like that of a strutting centurion. Otherwise, she was also quite companionable and fun to be with ; going out to a restaurant, for instance. Her raw sense of humour would soon win us over. At work, women sympathised with William but never to the extent of actually having sex with him. When comparing notes at the office, none of us had ever given him as much as a kiss on the cheek. He was, however, such a nice and genuine person that the thought of accusing

him of anything like sexual harassment had never crossed our minds.

William had walked out of his office and I had followed, anxious to know his reactions to my ideas. He had what I thought was my memo in his hand. He stopped at the glass-panelled double-door and stared sadly and silently at the tall pine trees in the park.

“Well”, I said, “Did you read it ?”

“Not now, Quentina”, he replied without looking at me. “Not now.”

I had never seen him so solemn and so distant. I could have thought : “Have I done something wrong ?” but I knew, down deep, that it had nothing to do with me. It was something serious, only I did not have a clue what it could be.

It came the next morning. William called a meeting. He puffed on his pipe a few times and announced : “Ushant, Adams & Adams are reorganising... rationalising...”

“Oh, my God !” I heard someone whisper in the back.

William went on : “They are closing this branch. We have one week to sort out our files and cases, and turn them over to the Trant office. Redundancy payments will be on the basis of one week’s salary for every year spent with us. You’ll get all the paperwork first thing tomorrow morning.” He turned and left the room.

There was a wail and a loud sob in the back of the room. A young woman I barely knew, but who seemed quite nice, had just got over a divorce, had sorted herself out, found a secretarial job with Ushant, Adams & Adams at about the time I joined and... bought a house. No significant redundancy payment for her and no way of coping with her mortgage unless she found a job within less than a month. With two young children to raise, she had, so far, been a tower of strength and a mine of resourcefulness, but this was the last straw, the coup de grâce. I saw madness invading her eyes as she, no doubt, visualised house repossession, social security B & Bs in the company

of thugs and drug addicts, or even cardboard boxes in pedestrian precincts while her children would be taken into care.

I happened to know that there really was a Mr. Ushant and that he really did live on Grosvenor Square and drove a Rolls-Royce. Vivian and I looked at each other and drifted together out of the room. We both had husbands in full-time jobs. We felt selfishly lucky, almost ashamed. Vivian had been with the firm for four years, so she got four weeks' pay. Wow !

Can you be a solicitor and also out of work ? Yes. Can you do temporary work, i.e. be a sort of legal *locum* ? Oddly enough, yes. My specialisation, as a solicitor, is probate and, by spreading the word here and there, some work was pushed my way ; work that I could do at home. I did not dislike it but hated the uncertainty of it all. It made me understand a little better what it was like to be a self-employed person who depends

entirely on his or her work, all the while dreading illnesses and feeling reluctant to go on holiday, unable to make plans for the future or buy something such as a car on monthly payments, just in case business should slow down and you can no longer honour your financial commitments.

Chapter Seven

Around Christmas time, Francis is like a child. He grows all excited. He even decorates the house and buys a Christmas tree, just for the two of us. It makes the house look gaudy and cheap. The cat starts eating tinsel and is sick all over the place... I don't mind a good meal, good wines, some overindulgence and a box of horribly expensive soft-centred chocolates but, more than anything else, I want to shut myself away from the world, nestle indoors in a warm, comfortable house without decoration – in other words a house that actually looks like a house – then collapse on the couch and watch the inevitable 007 film.

I ought to count my blessings, I suppose. When we were first married, Francis always wanted to go and spend Christmas with his family. If that didn't work, he invited them over. Now, at least (and at last), we have peace and quiet, along with privacy.

Rotten weather and heavy traffic are a lethal combination. It is bad enough when you have to travel, but far, far worse when there is no life-and-death reason for you to do so... Yet, one still does. We would arrive in his hometown exhausted, having fought our way through what seemed like hundreds of roundabouts. We were greeted by falsely cheerful parents, sisters, brothers-in-law, cousins... For some reason, I always found their houses cold and damp, even in overheated living rooms. There was never a place to sit. Children and dogs would dart about your legs. Christmas decorations were even worse than the ones Francis had put up at our house. The food (if you could call it that) consisted in huge piles of sausage rolls, thin, floppy sandwiches, pineapple cubes on sticks and slices of sponge cake. The music was loud, the conversation dreary, invariably starting with : “How are you, Quentina, everything all right ?” to which I would inevitably reply : “Fine, and yourself ?”

“Roads all right ?”

“Not too bad.”

“Nice to be off work for a few days isn’t it ?”

“Yes, very nice.”

“Help yourself, there’s plenty of food.”

“Thank you.”

Aware, by now, that I was not going to talk about cars, football, children or the weather, my uneasy, momentary companion would look around for another victim : “And how are you, Teresa, all right ?”

The worst was yet to come. The very next day, we would be invited by someone else, such as another sister. We would get there, only to find exactly the same crowd, often wearing exactly the same clothes, drifting in and out of similarly cold, damp or overheated rooms, urging us to partake of a feast of carbohydrates so dry that, just by looking at it, your tongue would start sticking to your palate. As in a déjà vu nightmare, the same voice would yell,

above a similar number of decibels :
“Hello, Quentina ! All right ?”

Francis seemed to enjoy himself. I could often hear him say : “You must come over to our place one year for Christmas.” “Yes”, I kept thinking “let’s all get bored somewhere else for a change.”

When they did come over, I tried to limit their numbers and treat them to a proper meal but they would ask for ketchup with the smoked salmon, pull faces at the turkey stuffing because it was not Paxo, turn up their noses at a 15-year old Bordeaux, fetch a glass of Coke from the fridge in the middle of the meal, refuse the salad because it had vinaigrette on it and hardly touch the dessert because it was too “rich”. They would agree, however, that the meat was “very tasty”.

“Do they think I’m stuck up ?” I asked Francis at the beginning of our marriage.

“No, not at all, they like you.”

I was extremely sceptical but, as time went by, it became obvious that they really did like me. I could never understand why. They were, and are, a depressing but honest and good-natured bunch. I can easily imagine their sex lives being on the same exalted level as Francis'.

These so-called parties sometimes made me wonder what I did talk about when I was not with my husband's family. I did not seem to have any problem with other people. Nor did I confine myself to the heights of classical music, literature, philosophy or archeology, but knowing that we could have if we wanted to, had the effect of putting me at ease. Words, then, seem to flow naturally, even if topics were often mundane.

Having thus managed to win the Christmas battle and persuade Francis that I really, definitely, honestly did not want to go anywhere or invite anybody, I was watching the James Bond film after a rather good Christmas dinner,

when the telephone rang. It was Vivian. My heart leapt in my throat. I looked at Francis and felt absurdly guilty, as guilty as if Vivian had been a man and we'd had an affair. Francis did not notice.

Vivian, it seemed, had found a firm of solicitors, twenty miles or so down the road, who needed a couple of temps for six months. It was even hinted that if they liked us, they would ask us to stay... Vivian was applying for it. Was I interested? I had nothing to lose. I said yes. Besides, the idea of seeing Vivian again and working with her made me feel wonderful. We would share a car, she said, and save on transportation costs. Even better.

We both went for interviews and got the jobs. I turned my free-lancing files over to the new firm. There followed a period of my life that could well have been the most peaceful and the most genteel I have ever known. Francis remained nervous because it was a temporary position and what

would I do afterwards ? I could only think of my renewed working relationship with Vivian.

The drives to work were delightful. I liked it better when she drove because, as we talked, I could look at her, elegantly dressed as always, her Roman profile staring ahead. I would get lost in the contemplation of her androgynous chest, breathing in and out regularly. I imagined her legs, especially when she used the clutch or the brakes. I tried to visualise the tiniest pulses and contractions of her thighs as she did so ; yet, it was admiration rather than sexual need. I was in awe of her. I saw her as a living masterpiece, and considered myself lucky for being so close to so much beauty.

I often felt as if I was her sister or, rather, as if we ought to have been sisters. The fact that I found her so attractive did not seem to be incompatible. After all, my feelings for her were just a jumble of impossible

dreams : dreams of sisterhood, dreams of lesbian love, what did it matter ? It was all in my imagination and would always stay there. So, why worry about it ?

I enjoyed waiting for her in the morning. I would wake up very early (I always do), take my time over my shower, prepare a light breakfast (no doughnut at 10 a.m. where we were) and choose my clothes for the day's work. I developed a taste for wearing very expensive men's shirts and long, black trousers, known as stretch pants, kept tight along the legs, with a loop that goes under the shoes. I bought the tiniest, sexiest white knickers I could find while despairing of the fact that Vivian would never see me wearing them. I switched from women's perfumes to men's eau de parfum, such as Eternity for Men or Monsieur Rochas and Vivian did notice and seemed to like it.

As I lingered in the bathroom I wondered every morning if I was really

pretty. Monique had probably seen me as being attractive, though I doubt if the concept of physical attraction had much meaning when we were children. Any young lady who isn't fat is attractive and the ultimate criterion of grown-up female beauty is often no more than the ability to remain childlike.

We think of old age as being the main destroyer of physical beauty. To my mind, the years between the ages of twelve and twenty are the most unfair to girls. From being, almost to the last, quite charming, they undergo a selection as ruthless as anything Darwin could have thought of. In the end, only one in five perhaps, can truly be described as attractive ; only one in ten actually beautiful. Oddly enough, what lets them down is rarely the body but the face. Meeting the "real world" (whatever that means) makes them appear harsh, frightened, suspicious or cruel, which, of course, is what they have become. Oliver had found me

attractive. He'd told me often enough, and I think he meant it.

I would look at myself, naked in front of the full-length mirror of my bedroom, trying to imagine how Vivian saw me. She did not undress me in her mind, I knew that instinctively. Nevertheless, as with painting or sculpture, nudity remains the essential you. Under long, straight, blond hair, I have big, pale-blue eyes and a round face with pronounced cheekbones. My breasts are small and, thank God, firm, but their nipples are brown. I would have liked them to be pink, like Monique's... My stomach is flat, my pubic hair non-existent, since it is daily and carefully shaven ; my legs are long and elegant. I am all right. I should have men panting in droves behind me, but I never did. It must be my personality.

I would utter a deep sigh. Francis, popping in to let me know that he was off to work, or to ask what I wanted him to buy at the supermarket on his way

home, would mutter something about my being narcissistic. It brought me back to earth with a start and I would get dressed.

I am sure that there must have been mornings when the weather was foul, overcast and depressing but, in my memory, the mornings when Vivian and I drove to work remain fresh, bathed in a golden hue diffused through a light mist as we progressed dreamily through a landscape of rolling hills, hedges and apple trees with the odd suicidal pheasant dashing in front of us, barely managing to avoid the car. The returns home, late afternoons, are less precise in my mind, tinged, as they were by the prospect of leaving Vivian and dulled by the tiredness of a whole day's work.

Vivian and I, going home to our respective husbands... Not much in it for me. What about Vivian ? She never talked about her private life and rarely mentioned Emilio. I, on the other hand, never hinted that my greatest dream,

my most unrealistic fantasy was that we should both chuck our partners, go out into the sunset together and spend the rest of our lives as best friends and lovers.

Hard as I tried, I could not imagine Vivian and Emilio making love... They say that we cannot imagine our own parents making love : a sad reflection on our generation, really. I hope there are, nowadays, families in which children accept as the most natural thing in the world that their parents do make love. As for Emilio... I often wondered what it must be like to be with him. I visualised his giant half-spider, half-orang-utan frame approaching my naked body, the roughness of his Borgia beard on my mouth, on my breasts, on my thighs since I must assume that, unlike Francis, Emilio doesn't just fuck : he also makes love.

As I pictured all this in my mind, I shivered with horror. I would have made a very bad call-girl. Far too

choosy... and yet, which of the two situations is worse : that of an ugly man who makes love well or that of a reasonably good-looking one whose attitude towards sex is repressive and sick ? Vivian did not find Emilio ugly. She found him “interesting”, and there were mornings when she appeared so content, so glowing that she had obviously been fully satisfied during the night. On such mornings, I felt like howling with anger, frustration and sadness.

What is it like to *be* Vivian, I fantasised. What is it like to inhabit such a tall, slender, elegant body, to have such a patrician profile... and to live with Emilio ? Would it not be fascinating, as in these Frankenstein-inspired films, to be able to switch bodies ? For a few weeks, she could be me and I could be her. I was almost afraid to imagine what I would find. There is a widely accepted idea that no one is actually happy and that even fabulously rich and successful people consider themselves failures.

Beautiful women think they are ugly... Why did I have the feeling that Vivian's dark secret was, in spite of appearances, her relationship with her husband ?

Another one of my harmless (I hope) fantasies was to imagine that my body had been "bugged" and that Vivian could put on a pair of earphones and listen to everything I did and everything I said when I was not with her. Why she should have bothered to do so is the one question I could not answer. With my luck, she would probably catch me as I sat on the loo, making disgusting noises... I suppose that, in a way, such fantasies are only an extension of the universal need for an all-seeing, all-knowing God or, on a more modest scale, for guardian angels. It is an extension of the need for reassurance, the need to break the hard shell of loneliness and actually reach out towards another entity, be it human or divine, which tells us that we are not alone. But we are alone. We live alone,

we suffer alone and, sure as Hell, we'll die alone.

Shortly after we started work at the new firm, Vivian placed her hands on my hips while I was standing (and blocking her way) in front of a filing cabinet. I jumped and uttered a little yelp then apologised for overreacting.

“No need to apologise” she laughed. “I just didn't know you were so ticklish.”

In a split second, I had a clear idea of what I wanted to reply, felt basically too shy to say it, but decided to take the plunge after all, though I blushed as I whispered : “I'm only ticklish when I'm not aroused.”

“And when you are ?” mused Vivian.

“Then, what would normally tickle me drives me absolutely wild.”

“Well, well, well, what do you know...”

And we got back to work. I was pleased at the thought of this first physical contact with Vivian and even

more pleased that, at last, I'd had the courage to talk about something sexual with her. Yes, I am ticklish or perhaps I should only say "sensitive". However, when I am aroused, light fingers brushing over my waist, my neck or the sole of my feet send me into a veritable second state made of irrepressible moans, uncontrolled writhing and, above all, a delightful numbness of the mind. Sexual pleasure stops me thinking, and that is really wonderful. I lose all sense of time and space, all sense of what is or is not acceptable behaviour, all sense of modesty. I am only a body reaching frantically for the nearest that anyone can get to some erotic Nirvana. The soul alone can never reach these heights but the body can become a soul, floating for a while in the unbearable world of Perfection. Oh, Francis, why could you never understand any of this ? I would have so loved to love you if you had given sex the importance it deserves ! I would have amazed you, stunned you, given you a life worth writing poetry about.

“Something wrong ?” asked Vivian gently, as she touched my shoulder ; the second time she had touched me within a few minutes. That is when I realised that tears were rolling down my cheeks and falling steadily on a customer’s tax return.

Chapter Eight

Emilio's fortunes were going up and up and turning into just that : a veritable fortune. Hard work, sheer luck and inheritance meant that he had turned into a successful yuppy, even if he was no longer young.

In your forties, do you become a middle-aged yuppy, a midyuppy ? He was posted in Spain, which suited him to a T as he was, way back, a Spaniard himself. I seem to remember Vivian saying that his parents came to England when he was only six. He had soon been fluent in the languages of both countries.

Everyone in the office went : "Ahhhh, poor Vivian, all by herself..." From then on, she was often invited out and enjoyed it thoroughly. She joined a choir, took singing lessons and seemed as happy as a lark. I saw the temporary separation of their couple as a chance to meet Vivian in a different environment, different, that is, from

those of the office and the car. I asked her if she liked Indian food. She did. I suggested we went to a restaurant that I knew and liked, and she agreed.

I do not think that a teen-age boy who has led a sheltered life and knows little of girls can be more nervous on his first date than I was on that day. I bought a new dress for the occasion : very pale green, fairly short, yet with long sleeves. I went to the hairdresser's, had my nails manicured, I soaked in a bubble bath twice as long as usual, chose the most expensive of my perfumes and, by early evening, needed to go for a pee every five minutes. Once, I forgot to wipe myself with toilet paper before putting my knickers back on. I swore, got undressed, washed again and put on a fresh pair of knickers.

You are really stupid, I kept telling myself. You don't think she's going to make love to you, do you ? Nothing is going to happen, absolutely nothing.

The reasonable side of me was right. Nothing happened.... well, not

quite nothing : we talked. She told me how happy she was without Emilio around.

“Don’t you like him ?” I asked cautiously.

“I used to. I also used to think that I loved him. He swept me off my feet, as they say. He’s so clever !... and so macho ! He is intimately convinced that women are inferior to men. To him, it’s not only an opinion, it’s a certainty, something that’s not even worth discussing. It’s like stating the obvious.”

“So, you are not really happy ?” My heart was beating wildly.

“Compared to most, I’m not unhappy. He is a vigorous, insatiable lover and, as far as I know, absolutely faithful. He is still one of the most interesting persons I’ve ever met and now he’s successful...” Her voice trailed. Every compliment she paid him was like a steel mesh, brushing against my heart. “But,” she went on, “ever since he’s left, I feel so free ! I can breathe

again. I can be myself. I dread the day when I'll have to join him in Spain. There will come a time when I won't be able to justify my staying here on my own. He'll sell our house, anyway. Where would I go, then ?”

“You could buy a place of your own.”

“It's not that simple... He wants me to stop working altogether. Says he earns enough for the two of us now. He can't understand why I should stick to what is, after all, a temporary position. I can't tell him to his face that I don't care about the job. What I do care about, of course, is the fact that I am away from him and his nagging way of minimising my work and rubbishing the idea that I should want to work. I am finally away from his constant organising of all the things that he thinks I should do. I don't know how he can accept the fact that I graduated from Law School and that I have a good job when he doesn't even think that I am capable of filling in a check properly

or taking my car for a service after so many miles...”

Wrecked by an incredible mixture of emotions, I let her talk and talk and talk. I was dying to tell her about Francis and... perhaps go even further and broach the subject of my attraction for her. After a while she stopped abruptly, smiled sheepishly and apologised for talking too much. And it's true that, coming from anyone else, I would normally have been bored stiff but I desired her so much that I was drinking her every word.

“Don't apologise”, I said. “We all have problems. Francis and I...”

I too, talked but not as long as she had. I went for the essential : no love, no kisses, no caresses, no games, no acting out fantasies... – would Francis even know what sexual fantasies are ? – no oral sex...

Then I took a deep breath and talked about Monique. The restaurant was fairly dark and Vivian may not have been able to notice how I blushed

and how the tips of my fingers trembled. I was experiencing a delightful mixture of emotions.

On the one hand, there was a tremendous feeling of liberation. I had often wanted to talk to Francis about Monique but always backed out at the last moment, nor had I mentioned her to Oliver. He and I had had such an active and healthy sex life that there had been no need for complications.

On the other hand, everything I said about Monique, I projected onto Vivian, imagining each stage of my childhood relationship being repeated as an adult, with an adult. I knew that History never repeats itself, that each lover is different and that you can never quite recreate with one what you enjoyed with another. I knew it instinctively and also because books on marriage, practical psychiatry and sexual education keep saying so. Yet, I could not help imagining Vivian re-enacting every gesture, every reaction of Monique's as I told the story.

Towards the end, I could feel such wetness in my gusset that I feared it would show through my dress when I got up. It was impossible for Vivian not to notice the state I was in. We then remained silent for a long time. Finally, Vivian called the waitress. We had agreed to go Dutch. Vivian looked totally unperturbed. As usual, she was cool, almost cold, elegant and definitely composed.

“We must do this sort of thing again, some time” she said as we put on our coats.

My heart missed a beat. I had made some progress after all. I suggested a steak house I liked.

“Very well”, Vivian agreed, “Today is Wednesday. We could make it a Wednesday thing if you like”.

“That would be nice. It would cut the week in half.”

I could barely talk. I walked to the door unsteadily, as if I had been a little drunk.

“Are you all right ?” asked Vivian.

“I’m fine. Just need some fresh air, I guess .”

“Pick you up tomorrow, as usual, then ?”

“Yes, and next Wednesday at the steak house ?”

“Sure.”

As I drove home, I was totally exhausted. I kept playing our restaurant conversations in my mind like a recording. She was unhappy with her husband : good. She had not shown any disapproval while I told her the story of Monique : excellent. She had wanted to meet again and talk some more : fabulous !

I hated the fact that Francis was somewhere in the house. I would have liked to strip naked, run up and down the stairs, do a pirouette in every room, collapse on an armchair in the living-room and masturbate gloriously... but Francis *was* in the house, even if he was only upstairs, snoring. Why on earth was I afraid of him ? He had never been macho towards me the way Emilio

had towards Vivian. He had never shouted at me and most certainly never threatened me... so, why was I afraid of him ? Why should a married woman not feel free to run naked in her own bloody house if she wanted to ? Why should she not masturbate in the living-room if she felt like it ? Is this or is this not a free country ?

I did collapse on a living-room chair but didn't take any clothes off : I fell asleep and woke up cold, stiff and thirsty at three o'clock in the morning.

*

Waiting for the following Wednesday was sheer torture. I kept telling myself not to expect too much. Quite likely, Vivian missed Emilio more than she was willing to admit. She was just killing time and was probably amused at my little confessions of schoolgirl naughtiness. However, she also enjoyed talking about herself and her marital problems. Who does not ?

The beautiful marble statue, the “cold fish” as she had been described at work, was human after all.

Wednesday came. Everything always comes in the end : weekends, holidays, retirement, death... everything... even a Wednesday with Vivian. We met at the cheap and cheerful steak house I had suggested. Not so cheap, in fact, but definitely cheerful and serving delicious steaks with excellent trimmings.

We had decided to share a taxi so that we could have wine with our meals. I can have an Indian meal with or without wine, it does not bother me but I find it hard to contemplate a good steak without a nice, oaky red. We chose a rather decent bottle of Rioja. I had, in the past, tried some of their much more expensive wines. They felt like flue-brushes going down your throat. Their wine buyer ought to be sacked or, at the very least, sent on a course.

I was not going to let such considerations spoil my evening. Vivian was much warmer, this time, much more... intimate. She even said, at some point : “It’s nice to have a friend like you, someone to whom you can say anything at all.” That was the evening when she told me that she thought she was ugly after I had expressed my unreserved admiration for the way she looked. That was the evening when she told me about her lover’s photographs and how, from one day to the next, she had found him ugly. I could not help thinking : “You should take a few photos of Emilio, then. That would surely open your eyes.” but this was no time to be catty, no time to blow my chances. That was the evening when she kissed me.

We took a taxi and went to my place first. Vivian asked the driver to wait a minute. My house is up a short footpath, away from the road. As soon as we found ourselves hidden from the taxi by a few tall bushes, Vivian turned towards me and kissed me. It was a

long, soft, yet passionate kiss and our tongues touched and played like a couple of dolphins brushing against each other on the surface of the sea. When we stopped, I hid my face against her neck. I desperately wanted to kiss her back but was shaking so much that I could not. I heard myself whisper : “My God, I think I’m falling in love.” Vivian pushed me away gently and walked briskly back to the taxi.

I got home in a haze, in a dream. Once inside I collapsed on the living-room couch and burst into tears. More than that : I sobbed, I howled like a baby. I’m surprised Francis did not wake up. Perhaps he did but decided not to interfere. Just as well. Had he suddenly appeared in the living room, I would have hit him, I would have scratched his eyes out, screamed my hatred of him, struck him over the head with a vase...

I could not stop, I could not stop... I wailed and wailed, my body shaken with giant tremors, my throat made raw

by the same little cough we experience when throwing up. So many things were happening at once ! I had been kissed. I had received a proper kiss, the first one since Oliver and I had parted company. So many long years without a kiss ! Oh God, was that possible ? Did I really deserve such a crossing of the desert ? The first kiss in... more than ten years. Would anyone believe it ? Could I believe it myself ? How could I have been so incredibly stupid ? Not so long ago, some deranged nuns used to let others wall them inside a cell for the rest of their lives. I had been silly enough to let myself be walled in by a pervert. For the sake of some abstract principles, for lack of courage, lack of conviction, I had been faithful to a weird partner who had ruined so much of my life.

But there was more, much more : I was in love. I knew, then, without a shadow of a doubt that I was in love. I felt as if I had come out of a chrysalis and expanded into a magnificent butterfly. I had never loved my parents.

I had liked Monique and Oliver. I had even liked Francis... Now, I loved. I was nearly forty-five years old, and I loved for the first time. I was obsessed, body and soul with another human being. Is this what most people feel as teenagers, then as young adults, then again and again... or just once, having found the perfect companion and thinking of no one else ? My chest hurt as if it had been about to explode. My eyes were burning. My whole body ached. I was short of breath. I yelled with happiness and I yelled with despair.

The next day, at the office, I must have looked like Death warmed up. During our morning drive Vivian and I did not mention the previous night. We confined ourselves to chit chat about the weather, Wimbledon and the Tour de France which we both liked and watched. On the way back, and as I left the car, Vivian took my hand and whispered : "The story of Monique fired my imagination. I'll be yours if you

want. Will you come over later on, after dinner perhaps ?”

I nodded and gave a sheepish smile. I was too emotionally exhausted to say more, too numbed to react. Emilio away, Vivian and I alone in her house... and we had already kissed... A few hours later I would be naked, in the arms the only person I had truly loved. What a tortuous path I had followed before getting there ! I felt as if I had won a great victory over the snares of life. I also felt like a winning general who cannot rejoice as he surveys field after field of burned, dislocated and eviscerated bodies... or like someone who has overcome a great challenge : walking coast to coast through the United States, for instance. When one gets to Portland or Seattle or Santa Barbara, one is empty of all emotions, good or bad, sad or cheerful. The tempest in the brain has stopped. The silence that follows is deafening.

I did not tell Francis that I was going out. He could work it out for

himself from the way I washed and dressed after dinner. He did not ask where I was going or for how long. In a sleeveless, straight, dark-red dress with brown swirls on it, I arrived at Vivian's at nine o'clock, which was the time we had both agreed on, but I had to drag myself to her place because while I was taking a shower and changing, I had felt a headache coming on and, within minutes, it had developed into a blinding migraine. Could the gods be so cruel and unfair? I dosed myself up with a strong mixture of paracetamol and codeine and just about managed to drive through gingerly.

By the time I rang her bell, the pain had gone down a little, but each beat of my heart still sent painful thumps around my head, and I felt rather wobbly. She opened the door, shut it behind me as soon as I was in the hall, and took me gently in her arms. She had put on a dress very similar to mine, only mauve instead of red. "You won't believe this" she

whispered “I’ve just started my periods. I’m flooding.”

In spite of the fire in my head, I could not help shaking with silent and excruciatingly painful laughter. “And I have a migraine !”. She laughed as well.

“You want to go home ?”

“No, I want to be with you... if you want to be with me, that is.”

“I want to be with you. Let’s go to bed : we’ll just have a cuddle.”

We went up slowly to a rather small bedroom with a rather small bed in it. I must have looked a bit surprised.

“That’s my bedroom” she said. “What used to be our bedroom is now Emilio’s. I prefer this one.”

“So, you two don’t have sex any more ?”

“We do. I am a good wife in every respect, and I mean every respect. Like a Marineland beluga, I perform when required but, afterwards, I want to come back here. It’s my room. I like it.”

We were standing in the middle of the carpet, holding hands. I didn't feel like making love at all. I also knew by past experience that it was not just a matter of fighting the pain but also of fighting the painkiller. I had found out a long time ago that even if a migraine went away, there was not much point in touching myself : I could hardly feel anything. Painkiller also meant pleasure killer. Yet, I was overwhelmed by curiosity, a curiosity full of tenderness and love. I took her in my arms and whispered : "Let's take our clothes off."

"I shall have to keep my panties on," she answered.

I just nodded. She had said "panties", not "knickers". I knew she had never lived in the States and she was not the sort of woman who indulged in silly affectations of language. I had always liked the word "knickers". The *ck* in the middle of the word evoked, in my mind, the *ck* of *wicked*. Delightfully wicked knickers

were the exciting white lid draped over the forbidden fruit. “Panties”, on the other hand, sounded too round and soft for my liking. It lacked a certain erotic dimension. But from the moment Vivian used the word “panties”, it became a magic word, more sedate, more grown-up, more poetic, more feminine and evocative than “knickers”. Schoolgirls wear knickers. Beautiful women like Vivian wear panties. It was, I knew, a purely personal slant. It could have been the exact opposite for someone else.

...and beautiful she was. She took my breath away. She was so tall, so slim, supple and elegant ! The first thing I noticed was the smallness and firmness of her breasts. She had the breasts of a teenager, and not just of any teenager but of an incredibly beautiful teenager. She also had pink nipples, something I had always wished I had myself. Her waist was narrow, her stomach hard and flat, her legs incredible. Her skin was pure white. Vivian hated sunbathing. She had a

Victorian approach to sunlight : wide brimmed hats and long sleeves. The result was staggering. Attempting to tan such a lovely skin would have been criminal.

When we had undressed, we looked at each other appreciatively. Vivian seemed to have a silly smile on her face.

“So, you shave as well ?” she said.

My heart leapt in my chest : “Do you ?” She lowered the front of her panties to show me. She was as smooth as I was. I took her in my arms and melted at the touch of her silky, burning hot skin. I was not sexually aroused : I was just so happy that, in spite of the throbbing pain in my head, I thought I was in heaven.

We got into bed and cuddled. It had been so long since I had felt a naked body against mine ! I bathed in its warm and soft embrace. After a while, I instinctively started to stroke Vivian’s body, very gently, very slowly. She did the same and it was lovely but

not sexy. The painkiller was at work, full blast. I could feel Vivian's hand sliding between my legs and searching for my clitoris but I was dry and made of wood. At some point, Vivian started to moan with sheer frustration. She grabbed my hand and introduced it down her panties.

"It's all right, she said. I've got a Tampax. Just stay at the top."

"I don't mind if you don't mind."

Sliding my fingers down her stomach without meeting any hair was an exquisite moment. When I touched her, she shivered with pleasure then settled on her back, legs wide open. She was fully concentrating on what I was doing. Eyes closed, she had forgotten the rest of the world and was breathing softly and deeply. I played with her for a long time then started to quicken my circular motion. It was, in fact, much more of an oval motion, a compromise between a circle and an up-and-down movement. She stiffened and wailed. It lasted several seconds. How many, I

could not really tell – I was not counting – but it was the longest female orgasm I had ever known. I had only Monique and myself as references, of course. I wished I could have come like that. I kept my fingers on her, very gently, not wanting to hurt her but not wanting to stop this magnificent climax either. She finally pulled my hand away, shifted and turned on her side towards me.

“Oh, what a clever girl you are !” she sighed. “What a clever, clever girl !”

That was the last remark I expected : “I didn’t do anything special.”

“Oh but you did. Emilio never has the patience to wait till I finish.”

“I thought you said he was a good lover.”

“I said he was a very active lover. Not the same thing. How would you like, for instance, to be woken up at five o’clock in the morning and find him straddling you and brushing his penis against your lips ?”

I would not have liked it at all, but then, thinking of Francis, I could not

help reflecting that, in his case, it would have been a great improvement over his usual behaviour, and I am not at all sure I would have told him off.

Quite out of the blue, a weird thought took hold of me then : am I, as the saying goes, committing adultery ? Or is a man an essential ingredient for adultery actually to take place ? A funny, if totally academic question.

“Can you tell him not to do that ?” I asked.

“You don’t tell Emilio anything. He is a domineering man. He likes to control people. I’m not happy with him, Quentina. He doesn’t treat me very nicely. Sometimes I’m scared of him.”

“Does he hit you ?”

She shook her head “no”. I looked at the watch I had left on the bedside table. Vivian and I had been together for almost three hours, which I found hard to believe. I would dearly have liked to close my eyes and drift to sleep, especially as my migraine was ebbing away but traces of social conventions

clung to me. I did not want to reappear at our place at five or six o'clock in the morning. Francis must be sound asleep by now, and to him, it would probably make no difference, as he would not hear me come back anyway, but I still got out of the bed and started putting my clothes back on. Vivian got up as well but just slung a bathrobe on. She led me to the front door and, before opening it, gave me a deep kiss : the first and only one of the evening. Then, before I realised what she was doing, she had fallen on her knees, had pulled my skirt up and was kissing my knickers. She stood up again, looked me deep in the eyes, and mouthed, rather than said : "Thank you."

She then opened the door and I plunged into a dark, cold, drizzle.

Chapter Nine

Thus started the happiest chapter of my life. After our first intimate encounter, Vivian and I did not make love for almost a fortnight as my periods started just as hers ended. It left two weeks, every month, during which we could barely keep our hands and mouths off each other. We met every third day at this stage. Still Francis did not ask where I used to go. Also, I got into the habit of staying at Vivian's longer and longer, eventually falling asleep and coming home whenever I woke up which could be at any time from one to five in the morning. I usually managed to sneak out without waking Vivian up and we would meet again in the morning, wondering if the delights of the previous night had been anything more than a wonderful dream.

The second time I went to her place, I was in top shape, eager to make love, heart thumping in my chest,

gusset soaking wet in anticipation. I was dressed much more casually in a white V-neck top and pale blue trousers. When Vivian opened the door, she seemed as cool and casual as if I had been no more than a good friend popping in for a cup of tea. She even kissed me on the cheek. First, I thought that something had happened and that she had changed her mind. Then, I assumed that it always took her a few minutes to warm up but I was wrong on both counts. When I asked her about it, she said that, in spite of the impression she may have given, she too had been a nervous wreck waiting for the sight of my car at the bottom of her garden, and that she too was extremely wet.

“Want to feel ?” she said, lifting up the hem of her classic little black dress. I introduced my hand in her panties and let my fingers slide down her well-lubricated labia. She closed her eyes, uttered a light moan and seemed about to faint. Then I did what I had been dying to do since that steak-house evening : I kissed her and kissed her

and kissed her... I got it out of my system. I was whining like a dog who has been away from his master for too long and cannot believe his luck when he sees him again.

What happened next is like a golden haze of memories. We were soon naked and on her bed, naked and free... free as I had never been before, free to love, free to be ourselves, to laugh, to talk, to hug each other, slide against each other, melt into one another, to kiss, to climax, to express our wishes and seek delightful sensations without restraint or modesty of any kind : just free.

I remember my wonder at the beauty of her labia and clitoris. As an extension to her delicate, white skin, they were of a most beautifully pale, pink hue even if, as the labia swelled, their edges became a shade redder. I gazed at them in sheer wonderment, stroking them gently, separating them like the petals of a rosebud, licking their dew and starting all over again.

The smoothness of the surrounding skin, totally free of pubic hair, turned it into such a natural masterpiece that I was inclined to worship it as some sort of god. As I inserted two fingers in her shiny, slippery vagina, I even recall whispering : *Introibo ad altare Dei, ad Deum qui lætificat juventutem meam.*

We delighted in oral sex, something else of which I had also been starved. We decided (although the verb “decide” is somewhat too strong, here) to take turns in stating our preferences for a particular evening. In the car, on our way back from work, she would say something like : “Tonight, I would like you to undress me slowly then kiss and lick my body as I stand naked before you.” I would answer something rather dull like “OK” but then would almost invariably ask : “Are you wet ?”

“Yes, very. And you ?”

“Swimming in it.”

I found that “planning” made waiting to be together almost painful but also incredibly exciting. Before I left

the car, she would ask : “What are you going to do tonight ?”

“I’ll undress you slowly then kiss and lick your body as you stand before me.”

“See you then.”

I would rush to the house in a state of great turmoil, hardly able to eat anything, and dying to go back to her place. Our first meeting had been at nine. We now met at seven.

Later, as our exhausted and happy bodies finally drifted apart, we would be amazed at the way time had flown. I did not bother to dress up any more and would arrive in jeans and T-shirt. I almost invariably find her naked under a dressing gown, except on the days when she asked me to undress her. Then, she would wear something like a little black dress and those suspender-free stockings that stopped only an inch or so from her panties. Those nights, she also wore a bra, something for which her tiny, firm breasts had absolutely no need.

When it was my turn to choose, I would often ask her to dress like a young girl before I got there. I was trying to recreate Monique as much as I could : white socks, light Summer dress with pale, almost fading colours, white top, white knickers. She was then to treat me to a gentle and slow striptease while I remained fully dressed in front of her.

As a variation on a beloved theme, I would “direct” her undressing as a film director might instruct an actor. I would say things like : “Sit on the floor against the wall. No, don’t let your skirt fall on your lap : bring it back to your knees so that I can actually look up your skirt. Now, take your panties off, but pull them halfway down your thighs. Now bring them down to your ankles, pull up your skirt and open your knees as wide as you can..” I liked these scenes to take place in her living-room rather than her bedroom for reasons I could not explain at first... then later, yes, I did think of an explanation : I had never made love to Monique in her own

bedroom. Perhaps I was never in it. I certainly could not remember it at all. The idea of asking Vivian to disrobe outdoors crossed my mind many times but I never dared mention it. The area where we lived was not as sparsely populated as had been that of my parents' semi-detached farm. I did the next best thing : I took photos. She had often mentioned that she did not like people to take pictures of her, and I knew that she was afraid of looking ugly, but I was not, of course, talking about snapshots. I was planning a much more emotive and exciting pastime...

The amount of nudity and subtle eroticism based on the female form that one can find in women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Vogue* or *Marie-Claire* shows that a lot of women, consciously or unconsciously, do respond to the titillation brought on by female beauty. Men's magazines are not so subtle but some of the pictures can appeal to women as well. Most, however, do not : they are designed to

cater to the readers of the gutter press. Why should it be assumed that only beer-swilling football yobs like to look at explicit female nudes ?

Normally, if the girl is shown completely naked in those publications, she displays enormous breasts or wears outrageous make-up or pouts like a morose, spoiled brat who finds everything “boring”. She frequently offers a combination of all three. If she is not completely naked, she will be sporting the inevitable and utterly ridiculous high-heel shoes, black stockings with suspenders, leopard-skin underwear and anything that can possibly make her look vulgar.

Fortunately, there are, sometimes, a few photographs which, in the minds of the editors, are designed, I suppose, to cater for “minority tastes”. Anyone with a trace of common sense would assume that “minority tastes” would refer to those readers who prefer their women to look repulsive and gross. Not a bit of it. “Minority tastes” seem to be aimed at

readers who enjoy the young, fresh-looking models with innocent looks or smiling faces, small breasts and completely shaven pubic hair... readers who wish that women would look like angels. If clothes are involved, “minority tastes” means white knickers and socks, tennis shoes perhaps, and white tops...

This “girl next door” look is definitely not a favourite with editors and publishers of men’s magazines. They go for the 1880’s saloon look. Their usual pictures must, by necessity, appeal to a lot of men, or these magazines would not sell so well, but they do not appeal to women. The “girl next door” look, on the other hand, does appeal to, at least, *some* women and also, of course, to men who genuinely like women, the true connoisseurs, those who appreciate them as a gourmet appreciates a great wine. This definitely excludes all those who roar : “Whoaa ! Look at those tits !”

Having bought half a dozen men's magazines under the bemused glare of my West Indian newsagent, I looked for the sort of photograph that appealed to me and, I hoped, would appeal to Vivian as well. In the first couple of magazines, I found none whatsoever and was beginning to get discouraged. Down they went in the bin, complete with all their adverts for "dirty" telephone calls. One of them advertised a guaranteed "thirty-second-jerk-off." How refined can you get !

My luck improved slightly with the next magazine : I found one picture I liked. It showed two girls dressed as American cheerleaders. They were sitting on a flight of stairs, apparently chatting amiably and, of course, you could look right up their very short skirts. One of the girls had ordinary, white knickers on – a bit too small for performing as a cheerleader in real life, but one must accept a little poetic licence – and the other one wore nothing underneath and was completely smooth-shaven. Their legs

were only half-open. The end-result was one of clean, imaginative eroticism. The photographer, I thought, was a genuine artist and I would have liked to meet such a person.

Three down, two to go. The fourth magazine was another disappointment : it had virtually no pictures, save for a few corpse-like shots of “readers’ wives” spreading their fat thighs on underexposed backgrounds. The rest of the magazine was taken by “genuine” stories. Most of these stories centred on finding a friend or a married partner in bed with someone else and joining in. They did not sound very “genuine” to me but I had led such a sheltered existence that I was inclined to give these letters the benefit of the doubt. Innocent till proven guilty, or something like that.

Magazine number five made it all worthwhile. I found no less than nine splendid shots of lovely young women. It proved, if need be, that explicit, even very explicit pictures need not be

vulgar. As in literature or in cinema, as indeed in anything else that is creative, where there is talent there is beauty, whatever the subject matter. The last magazine gave me three pictures.

I cut them all out with a pair of scissors and inserted them in clear plastic pockets of the type that can be inserted in a 4-ring binder, then took them to Vivian's. I had told her beforehand that I would.

We talked a great deal : it was one of the nicest fringe benefits of our relationship. We had, of course, mentioned homosexuality. Vivian was positive that I was her first female partner. She had been attracted to me because she knew me well, because we had worked and commuted to work together and, as she had mentioned before, because she had been moved by the story of my relationship with Monique, but she had never (and she insisted on the word "never") felt like making love to any other woman, and now couldn't think of a single one who

might attract her in the least. I, by contrast, did not know who or what I was. In the end, I came to the conclusion that what I wanted more than anything else was sex *and* human warmth and that any male or female, who could give me both, would therefore attract me, give me pleasure and persuade me to reciprocate. If there had been a third sex to the human race, I would probably have felt equally well disposed towards it.

In some of our conversations, we had mentioned nudes. Like most of us, Vivian had had a quick glimpse at men's magazines and found their pictures repulsive. Not because they were pictures of naked women but simply because they were repulsive pictures, full stop. When I showed her my little collection, she was fascinated. I had guessed correctly. We mused on what it must feel like to be photographed for a magazine, with all the paraphernalia of professional photographers : spotlights, background, shades, umbrellas, not to mention

being under the gaze of the photographer himself or herself and knowing that we would be seen by thousands of “readers”. Some of them would undoubtedly masturbate while looking at us. Heady thoughts...

I made it quite clear that I really, really would not mind if she refused to go along, then added : “I know you said you didn’t like pictures of yourself but I’d like to take erotic pictures of you.”

She just smiled, then confessed : “I must admit that I’d like that very much. The idea really turns me on, but who would develop them ?”

“I would.”

She looked at me, astonished. “You have a darkroom ?”

“I most certainly do. Did you say Emilio was amazed that little old you could do anything at all ? Well, I can develop and print pictures. So there !” She laughed : “Touché ! Well, it’s all set, then. Will you allow me to take some of you as well ?”

“Of course.”

“I can’t wait. I really can’t wait.”

“Tomorrow, then ?”

“Tomorrow. Fine.”

The next day I packed my Pentax and, in it, a brand new 36-exposure film. As I drove to Vivian’s, I felt my mouth go dry with apprehension. I had often fantasised about taking such pictures and being photographed myself. I wished Francis had wanted to take some of me : I would have loved it. I would have been so gloriously immodest !... but that, too, in his tiny little mind, was a perversion.

Suddenly I found my face growing red with anger : why was I always comparing what was happening to me now with what could have happened with Francis ? Let’s forget the wretched man.

I must love him more than I realise, I reflected. He thinks I am wild, whereas I am, in fact, the most stable, boring, routine-loving person there is. I never wanted more than one job in my whole life. The Japanese idea of starting with

a company the minute you graduate and taking your retirement from that same company forty years later appealed to me. I never wanted more than one partner in my life, but I wanted my partner to *be* my life. I wanted to delight in him (or her) and I wanted him (or her) to delight in me. Dreams, dreams, dreams...

I tried to put Francis out of my mind and concentrate on the pleasures to come. I wondered how often I would drive these same streets, turn left after the hospital, left again at the T junction with the row of crummy little shops, and left a third time in Vivian's dead-end street with its horrendous parking problems. I wondered how often I would push the small, black garden gate, walk on the narrow cement path and knock at the door. It had no bells. I wondered how many more times I would be welcome in the tiny two-bedroom house cramped with the sort of furniture normally designed for bigger places, how long it would take before Emilio finally lost patience and

demanded that Vivian should join him in Spain... and join him she would, I was certain of that. She was under his spell. The minute he pulled her strings firmly and decisively, she would be his puppet again.

Vivian was dressed as I had asked her to : white top, Summer skirt and white socks. We kissed and sat at the dining room table. She was fidgety : “Shall we start taking pictures ?” She said, almost short of breath.

Living with Francis (there I go, comparing again) had made me think that asking your lover to do anything unusual would be a battle, a see-saw of resistance, acceptance, reluctance and, if you were *very* lucky, embarrassed capitulation. Of course, with Francis, it didn't have to be unusual : asking him to do anything at all was a battle that I would lose every time.

Here, to my amazement, I was back to the enthusiastic days with Oliver. “Shall we do that ?” “Oh, yes, let's.” Only this time, there was more than

sexual freedom, enthusiasm and creativity : there was, on my part at least, Love (with a capital “L”) and it made an enormous difference. To hear the person I loved express eagerness at being photographed in the most immodest of poses, and photographed by *me*, was a dizzying, delightful experience. I too was short of breath, my heart beating wildly.

I asked Vivian to go to the living room, and at first take nothing off, but sit in an armchair with her legs wide open and her buttocks on the edge of the chair. Then I asked her to insert one hand in her knickers and pretend that she was masturbating. “Nothing to say that you can’t actually do it if you wish” I added.

“Not a chance. If I play with myself now, I’ll come within seconds. I want to come with you later.”

Then, I asked her to pull the gusset on one side and I took my very first picture of her superb pink flower, then a close-up. Her labia were beautifully

swollen. She opened them for me without being asked.

When we got to the bedroom, she disrobed. I noticed that she had no net curtains.

“I hate them, she said.”

“Can’t the neighbours see you ?”

“I don’t think so. I draw the curtains at night.”

Evening sunlight was flooding the room. To anyone looking out of a first floor window from the other side of the street, the scene would have been lit like a stage. “So”, I thought “you really are an exhibitionist and not just in front of a camera.” As I took photos of her on the bed, there was such an incredibly peaceful expression of happiness on her face that I was almost jealous. I had asked her to smile only if she felt like it. Otherwise, I said, just think of something calm and delightful. She smiled most of the time and it was the furthest I have ever seen from a command smile, or a silly or superior smile : it was the smile of someone who

is floating through a wonderful experience. For the last shot, she knelt on the bed, facing the sunlight and I knelt on the floor, looking up her legs. Her protruding inner lips had turned vivid red. She was the most beautiful and erotic vision I can ever recall.

The 36-exposure film rewound with a shrill buzzing sound. "That's it." I said.

"Only one film?" she asked, clearly disappointed and still in the same position, kneeling on the bed.

I cursed myself silently. What a fool I had been! Vivian had expected a much longer session. *Next time I thought, next time, I'll bring a four-film pack, and you, my gloriously immodest love, will bask in your exhibitionism for hours if you wish.* I took my clothes off and joined her on the bed. The sun went down within a minute or two and the room turned almost dark. Had anyone been watching us from across the street, they would have been disappointed.

As an amateur photographer, I had feared that I would not be up to the

task. I had never taken nudes before but I knew what sort of lighting I should have had. Would a simple flash in the living-room and sunlight in the bedroom be enough to provide satisfactory pictures ?

The end-result went beyond my wildest expectations. Of course, the fact that Vivian was so beautiful had a lot to do with it. I showed her the prints the very next day. Only a few were below par, when I had made the mistake of using a wide angle setting, so that protruding limbs seemed out of proportion to the rest of the body, but the vast majority of the shots were stunning.

As we were sitting at her dining-room table and Vivian was looking slowly at each print in turn, I asked : “Did you realise how beautiful you were ?” She replied : “No, I didn’t” and there wasn’t a trace of vanity in her tone of voice. She was genuinely amazed, and was looking at herself with the same

objectivity that she would have displayed for someone else.

“I made two sets” I said. “You keep these.” But she gave them back to me : “I can’t. If Emilio found them, he’d kill me.”

I put them away in my bag. “You can have them any time you want. The negatives also if you wish.”

She shook her head : “No”. She stood up, came to me and pressed my head against her dressing gown : “Let’s go upstairs.” I detected a great deal of sadness in her voice.

That evening something quite extraordinary happened. At one point, she was lying on top of me and we were touching from head to toes. We were hardly moving. We often spent indeterminate lengths of time just enjoying the soft nakedness of our bodies against each other. It was a deep-seated need, something of which we had both been starved for years and we never seemed to be able to get enough of it. When we looked at the

clock, the amount of time we spent just cuddling amazed us. We were like mother and child clinging desperately to each other in the middle of a storm. Who was the mother and who was the child ? I suspect that I was the child.

“Am I not too heavy ?” she whispered, while still lying on top of me.

“You are as light as a feather. I love it. Our hearts are beating next to each other.”

“Impossible. It would mean that one of us had got her heart on the wrong side.”

We did not laugh but I could feel the skin of her stomach pulsating gently against my own stomach in wavelets of silent laughter. She kissed me, slowly, deeply, beautifully. I felt saliva run on one side of my mouth. Her saliva. Suddenly I gasped, I yelled “Vivian, Vivian !” I could not catch my breath. My heart and my lungs hurt as if they wanted to burst out of my chest, and I was shaken by wave after wave of unbearable, painful pleasure which ran

through my whole body, from the sole of my feet to the root of my hair and back, several times. Vivian opened her legs and propped herself on her hands and knees. Without her weight on me, I kept heaving and bleating, quite unable to say anything intelligible.

“Are you all right ?” she asked. I nodded “yes” and smiled.

“My goodness !” She went on : “I’ve never seen an orgasm like this before... and we weren’t even doing anything... well, not really.” Panting and swallowing hard, I managed to mutter : “I don’t know... I don’t know what happened. Perhaps it’s what they call a whole-body orgasm. It certainly felt as if every part of me was climaxing. It was frightening.”

“You scared me too.”

After a couple of minutes, we switched positions and I lay on top of her. Then I kissed her and it happened all over again. Not to her : to me. Only, this time, not quite so strong, but

strong enough to make it the second most unforgettable orgasm of my life.

Later, at the kitchen table, in front of a hot chocolate, Vivian suddenly announced : “I’m going away”. I knew what she had just said. I had always known that she would say it one day but, for a while, it did not register. Nor did it hurt. As at the time of my separation from Monique, I just went numb. She had put on a dressing gown. I was naked.

“Emilio ?” I asked. She nodded.

“When ?”

“Tomorrow.”

Only then did the pain surge forward in my bloodstream. I felt tears welling in my eyes. “So, when will I see you again ?”

“In June.”

We were in April, and I felt almost relieved. It could have been worse. Vivian went on : “Emilio has apparently bought some property in England. He wants me to come back from time to time and deal with letting agents,

council and tax people and God knows what else... That means I'll be back two or three times a year."

"For how long?"

"A few days only. I'll have to spend a week or so with my mother in Wiltshire, but we are keeping this house as a pied-à-terre. I won't be able to stay very long, though. Emilio would wonder why. He's very jealous, you know. He's already wondering if I haven't got a lover."

"What makes him wonder?"

"The fact that I don't seem at all keen to fly over to join him and the fact that I have already postponed my move twice in the past few weeks."

"You never told me."

She shrugged and added : "What he would never understand is that even if I didn't have a lover, I still wouldn't relish the idea of joining him. I've enjoyed my freedom too much."

"No more photos?" I managed to say, half whispering, half squeaking. I could feel my voice getting weaker, like that of

a little girl who's about to burst into tears. At that very moment, I thought : *what a stupid thing to say ! There are surely more important aspects to our relationship. What will she think of me ?*

“No, not before June the 11th”. She stood up, placed a tape of soft music in the hi-fi stack and let her dressing gown fall to the floor. Then, she opened her arms and said with a sad little smile : “Will you save the last dance for me ?”

I got up and we ‘danced’ very slowly, our heads buried in each other’s necks, occasionally kissing or letting our hands slide between each other’s legs. After a while, I could not contain myself any more : I fell on my knees and started licking her but it was not so much a sexual move as the best way to express my feelings of love.

“Let’s return to bed.” Vivian said. “I’m tired. Stay as long as you like. I’m not going back to the office. It’s all wrapped up.”

In the morning, I clung to her with desperation. “Come on,” Vivian kept saying, “you are going to be late for work.” She prized me away from her, dragged me to the bathroom and turned on the shower. She washed me as one washes a child while making soothing noises. “Won’t be long, now. We’ll see each other again soon enough.”

Chapter Ten

“Something wrong ?” “Something wrong ?” “Something wrong ?” I was sick of hearing it. I did not want sympathy because I could not explain why I should need it. I felt determined to act as normally and as casually as possible but, obviously, wasn’t doing a very good job of it.

“Do you miss Vivian ? You two were such good friends.” I am quite certain, however, that from the head of the firm to the youngest secretary, no one asked the question in a way suggesting that it could have been more than a friendship... at least not that I could detect. The men all knew that *girls* have awfully strong friendships. As for the *girls*, they probably knew what that friendship meant, but there was no mockery or condemnation in their tone of voice. More *girls* than we think have (or have had) friendships like mine, and those who have not, wish – if only unconsciously – that they had.

“Do you miss him ?” Asked Francis as I sat at the dining-room table, playing with my food and not eating. I looked quite blank. “Who ?”

“You’ve had an affair, haven’t you ?”

“Yes.”

“I knew all along that you didn’t really go to Vivian’s most evenings.”

“How clever you are !” I muttered as tears started rolling down my cheeks.

He shrugged : “These things happen. I don’t understand why people go through the trauma of having an affair, but they do. All very distasteful, really.”

“I want to be alone.”

“What do you mean ?”

“I want to go on holiday all by myself.”

“Will they let you take time off at work ?”

“Yes.”

“That’s all right, then. Where will you go ?”

“Somewhere cold and windy. A Scottish Island perhaps.”

On the long train journey, I could only think of one thing : I had never said “I love you” to Vivian. I had so often wanted to ! To be fair, Vivian had not said it either, but somehow I did not expect her to. In every relationship, or so I’ve been told, there is always one person who loves more than the other. There was no question about it : I loved her more than she loved me. Yet, in a weird, self-deprecating sort of way, I thought it was to be expected. No one had ever said to me “I love you”. No one ever would, probably. I must have the sort of face that freezes the “I love you” in the throat.

It is a widely accepted notion among reasonable folks, that if you want to change the world, you have to start by changing yourself. I did not want to change the world but I desperately wanted to modify or improve my own little world, and so, if I wished to hear these magic words, I would have to

start by uttering them myself, however hard it may prove to be.

Just as I never expected anyone to say “I love you” to me, I had, before meeting Vivian, never felt like saying it to anyone. That, according to the way I was brought up, was the norm : people who say “I love you” are liars. They just want to take advantage of you. As for you saying it, don’t be silly, girl, you would only make a spectacle of yourself. People would laugh at you.

Had I any right to complain ? At least my parents did not beat me up. They killed part of my soul but they gave me food and clothing. Many children throughout the world do not even have that.

To my parents, especially to my mother, love was a weed. She had sprayed me with weed-killer and, so far, the ground had remained bare and dry. Now, by some sort of miracle, the “weed” started to grow again, a very timid, fragile weed indeed. Perhaps the

weed-killer was beginning to lose some of its strength...

Now, I desperately wanted to say “I love you” and I was desperately cross with myself for missing the opportunity of doing so. I had been a bad lover and I was afraid there would be a horrible price to pay for it. Instead of thinking : *I love the way she kisses*, I should have said “I love the way you kiss.” Instead of thinking : *What a wonderful skin she has !* I should have said so. I should have sung her beauty, her softness, I should have showered her with a running commentary of all that I felt for her, all that I admired and loved in her ; but mostly I should have told her, over and over again, that I did love her. If she had, almost absent-mindedly, muttered a little “I love you” of her own, it would have smashed open the fragile floodgates retaining all my sentimental modesty. It would have made me delirious and she might have stayed in England... with me. Who knows ?...

I could not write to her. Her husband had a nasty habit of opening her mail and looking through her things when she was not at home. I could not phone either : too many extensions throughout the house. He would be bound to pick one up, just to find out, on the face of it, if the call was for him.

I would simply have to wait... wait for the 11th of June but then I was resolved to say the magic words, to shout them if necessary. Our bodies had been naked together. Now I wanted to bare my soul and it was much harder. I trembled at the very thought. It was like preparing for a parachute jump. Other people do it but it is still incredibly frightening... till one gets used to it and then, I suspect, even with the thousandth jump, the heart still flutters at the last second.

I would do it, I would do it, I would say it... on June 11th. I would take the plunge and fall, screaming with fright. And later, I would look her in the eyes

and laugh with relief and with happiness.

SCOTTISH ISLAND DIARY

Day 1

I am homesick. Homesick for a humble terraced house with a garden in front and a garden behind ; a terraced house in a genteel suburb, a rather dull house, really, but hiding such a wealth of ecstasy !

I am homesick for a blue car showing up suddenly, through wind and spray of Winter days : a morning drive to work.



I am homesick for the newly acquired taste of a philtre : that of her mouth and its subtle powers.

I am homesick for a country I would explore when, kneeling at her feet, I used to gasp, in awe, as I finished undressing her.


Day 2

From my house to your house or from your house to mine is no distance at all : ten minutes' drive ; a little more perhaps.

From my feelings for you to your feelings for me is no distance at all : a tiny gap you can fill as you wish.

Day 3

Would I howl at the Moon and behave like a fool if you left me ? Would I melt in tears, stay awake for hours if you left me ? Would I smash porcelain and be rude to my friends ? Oh no, not me : I'm too "reasonable".

I'd grow old a little faster, that's all... and I'd die a little sooner... if you left me.

Day 4

From time to time on the conveyor belt which, inexorably, from birth to death, drags us along, you held my hand.

My only hope is that, before we both tumble over the sombre void, we could savour again a chance to love again, your hand in mine, from time to time.

Day 5

Fresh, salty wind. Iodine in the air. Road sign : Little Drizzle, 4 miles. Thursday is market day : black pudding, wriggly prawns.

Road sign in my day-dreams : Burgos 3,000 kilometres.

Hikes along the coastline, wind howling in the cliffs, howling in obsession...

Fresh, salty air. Body stretched in the night, racked with lust and sadness.

Next morning, salty smell on my busy fingers.

Outside, clear skies and yet another day... without her.

Day 6

Oh you, so far away, do you still, now and then, think of my lips on yours and my tongue on your tongue?

... my lips on your nipples and my hands on your hips, my cheeks brushing against the white silk of your thighs and my mouth on your clitoris ?

Do you dream of long and warm afternoons when, to soft music, we danced in the nude ? When I waited for you, when you waited for me, when my heart exploded at the sight of your car and yours at the rusty creaks of a garden gate ?

Do you still wish I undressed you slowly, savouring and kissing each alley of delight ?

Would you still like me to look you in the eyes, asking if you were real or a dream, and so much in love that I thought I'd die ?

Day 7

With your burning mouth full of my wetness, kiss me, quench my infinite thirst with a mixture of you and me.

From me to you, from you to me, let us get drunk on each other.

Let's open our minds and hearts to daring games and dizzy twirls, as birds who'd be flying too high and who, lost in a dreamy sky, could never...

... and, on the eighth day, the long train journey back home and the steely resolve, all fears gone this time, to pronounce : "I love you."

Chapter Eleven

With the ruthlessness of a mediaeval gridiron gate, the grey screen of a sexless, loveless existence was threatening to come down again between me and the world. In order to keep the screen at bay, I had Vivian's photographs to look at. They reminded me that I had not been dreaming, that I had actually made love to this enchanting woman and that she had made love to me. She was real... would be real again.

I went back to work and managed to behave sensibly, even to the point of indulging in the odd joke during coffee break. No one ever mentioned Vivian to me again.

Francis also behaved sensibly. What else ? He asked me if I'd had a nice holiday. All very civilised.

On the eve of 11 June, I could not sleep and yet, to say that I was a nervous wreck would have been an exaggeration. I felt stiff and dull all

over. Going to work the next morning was positively a relief. In the afternoon, I went straight to Vivian's from the office, without bothering to wash – I would do so at her place – or change.

The drive was like a nightmare filmed in slow motion. I could not quite believe that she was now in the same country, in the same town, over there, by the hospital, not far from the small, squalid parade of shops, up a narrow close with parking problems. My heart beating wildly, I did get to my destination. I even managed to park the car, taking all my time about it. As I walked up the narrow, cemented garden path, I had difficulty breathing. My throat felt tight. I kept thinking : I'm going to say "I love you". I am actually going to look her straight in the eyes and, for the first time in my life, say "I love you." Uttering those three words felt like the most wildly indecent thing I could possibly think of.

There was still no bell. I knocked. She opened the door. She was dressed

to kill, which I found a bit strange. She had put on a very expensive-looking white silk top and a gold choker around her neck, a shiny, plaited, dark-blue skirt, light tan tights and black, high heel shoes. Also, she was made up, which had always been unusual for her. She kissed me on the cheek but I was prepared for the fact that she was never very emotional at first.

“Vivian.” I croaked.

She took me firmly by the elbow and led me to the small living room cramped with dark, forbidding furniture.

“I’m going out this afternoon” she said matter-of-factly as we were walking together. “It’s an old girls’ reunion at my alma mater”. We stopped by the door. “And tonight” she added “I’m going to a concert in London”. I looked at her, dumbfounded.

“Sit down” she said, more gently but with a tinge of superiority in her voice which reminded me of the way my former headmistress talked to us when we had done something wrong.

I sat, and she went to another armchair, facing mine.

“Quentina” she started in a cold, reasonable tone, sending a shiver through my spine, “I’ve decided to give my marriage a second chance. I enjoyed making love to you but it must stop.”

My head was swimming. I could not see shapes and colours clearly. I knew she was jilting me but I could not see what her marriage had to do with it. *You, lying toad*, I thought. *Why do you give me all this shit ? Why don't you say that you are tired of me or that you have found someone else ? Why don't you say something I can believe ? The truth would be so much easier to take... or is lying a part of that premeditated torture you're inflicting on me ? Does that make it more enjoyable for you ?*

Painfully, with a throat which felt as if my body had just crossed a desert, I managed to pronounce : “I never asked you to leave your husband, I never wanted to jeopardise your marriage in any way, and you know it. You said

you'd be back in England two or three times a year. Vivian, that's all I ask : two or three days a year. How can that possibly affect your marriage ?”

I knew, of course, that I was wasting my time. Logic has nothing to do with this sort of situation. She had used a stupid argument, the only one she could think of at the time. So what ? Her decision had been made and I would not change it. She only shrugged. I tried again : “Vivian...”

“No, Quentina. Please don't insist. I've thought it through. I want a fresh start.” She then twisted the knife in the wound by uttering the most cruel remark a rejected lover can possibly stand without dying on the spot : “But we can still be friends.”

I felt a hand of steel slowly crushing my heart. No, this is not a figure of speech. I do mean a hand of steel, I do mean crushing and I do mean my heart, the physical organ called a heart, the blood pump in the chest. That is exactly what I mean.

I don't know how I managed to stand up. At the door I turned round and heard a voice in my head which seemed to state, as a judge would in court : *You have been found guilty as charged. Do you have anything to add before sentence is passed ?* I desperately wanted to say something important, something Vivian would remember, something that would make an impact on her but all I could come out with was : "I would have left Francis for you."

I shuffled towards my car like a little old lady. As I placed my hand on the door handle, the pain in my chest became almost unbearable. I managed to open the door and slide in behind the wheel. There, I closed my eyes. The pain was going away, slowly. *Come on, I heard myself thinking, you are not going to die. People only die of love in Mediaeval novels, not in the Twentieth Century.*

Chapter Twelve

Sometimes I even managed to burst out laughing, but then I could not stop, and my colleagues at the office used to look at each other as if to say : “She’s gone completely bonkers.” The rest of the time, I buried myself in office tasks and became a recluse. If I was spoken to, I did not hear. If the telephone rang I would jump out of my skin.

Someone shook me by the shoulders and introduced me to a charming young man who had joined the firm two weeks previously and whose existence I had not had the courtesy to acknowledge. Given his previous experience, he had been appointed *Entertainment and Morale Manager*. He exuded cheerfulness and he could have rented out his smile to a toothpaste company. He made me sick. I don’t know how often I was told his name... but kept forgetting. At the same time, I could see that my reaction was both

illogical and unfair. I called him *Mr. Wonderful*. I also used to think of him as *The Brown Man* because he had brown hair and brown eyes and used to wear brown suits and brown shoes.

The Brown Man's first venture as Entertainment and Morale Manager was to organise a trip to Boulogne. I was drinking a cup of coffee when I heard this and I found the idea so preposterous and so crass that I burst out laughing and sent a spray of hot liquid across the room. My immediate punishment was to inhale a few drops that made me cough for several minutes, my eyes filling with tears. I ended up with a series of sneezes.

"I didn't realise that you were such an attention seeker." Said Mr. Wonderful, though not unkindly.

"Come on." Said the others. "Oh, yes, come on." Echoed the secretaries. "It will be fun."

I did not feel like going. I did not feel like not going. I did not feel like anything. I was back to square one with

no one to love and no one to love me. I kept telling myself that there was nothing particularly odd in that. I should be used to it by now, surely. But I was no longer the same person and never would be again. I was like someone who has won the lottery but lost the ticket. It would not win a second time. Back then, I was not in the least bit suicidal.. I just drifted aimlessly, barely able to see the world through the thick, grey screen that had descended in front of my eyes. I gave my £20 or whatever...

Going to Boulogne was not such a bad idea after all, I reflected, while, two Saturdays later, the coach was speeding us towards Dover. On the boat, my solicitor-colleagues acted like a bunch of kids. There was not one of them whose daily income did not match the average worker's weekly take-home pay, yet they were getting all excited at the idea of saving a few "bob" buying duty-free on the way out, and again on

the way back, plus God knows what else in Boulogne itself.

“Quentina, you don’t smoke. Can I have your cigarette allowance ?” My personal secretary : a plump little thing with vocal chords already as scratchy as an old vinyl record. She smoked like a chimney, was diabetic and her little boy had asthma. Yippee !

“Yes, of course. And you can have my booze allowance as well if you want.”

“Can I ? Oh, thanks, you’re the best. Can I have your pass then ?”

Off she went, happy as a lark. Why can I not be content with little things like that ? Why can I never be happy with what I have ? There were exceptions : the golden moments I had known with Monique and the few months spent with Vivian.

No, Quentina, no : stop thinking about Vivian. Stop torturing yourself. I almost heard myself saying : “Don’t be such a silly cow !” It made me laugh. I did not normally use such expressions out loud. Perhaps I should. A touch of

vulgarity could be just what the doctor ordered. I could start smoking as well, why not ? And drinking ? No, not drinking. I need my job. I know Francis could support me but I do need my job for other reasons. If I lost my driving licence and stayed at home moping, I would go out of my mind.

“Nice to see you smiling again,” said Mr. Wonderful as he sat next to me. “Looking forward to the hypermarket ?”

“Sorry to be a party pooper but I’m not going to the hypermarket. I’ll stay in town, wander around. Seems like a nice day. I can’t see myself fighting among a dozen English coachloads for wine that’s just as easily available at home.”

“But it’s the fun of it.”

“I can’t see it.” Silence. I did not have to justify myself to him but I felt a little guilty just the same. “Do you think I’m stuck up ?” I added.

The slight hesitation in his voice showed me that yes, he did think I was stuck up but he recovered quickly. “No,

not at all. I just think that, maybe, you're unhappy."

"Possibly."

"Tell you what... I'll let you into a little secret. I can't stand the hypermarket myself. On the other hand, I know a very decent restaurant somewhere. I don't really know where it is. I just give the address to a taxi and bingo : a lovely meal at a reasonable price. What do you say ?"

It sounded quite nice but, when we got there, it would only be half past eleven and I did not fancy him trailing next to me for an hour or so. I gazed at the mucky sea spray aggressing the windows. He was fidgeting on his seat next to me.

"I..." he hesitated then went on : "I'm not asking you for a date or anything. Just company. A meal in a restaurant, that's all."

A date ! I felt like laughing in his face but I didn't. Women who do that sort of thing invariably think : who the Hell does he think *he* is, asking *me* for a

date ? Whereas the reality of the situation is that they think so highly of themselves that they despise everyone else. In the next few seconds, I sobered up and asked myself : *who the Hell do you think you are, Quentina ?*

“All right. Let’s meet at the Tourist Information Office at twelve thirty. You can take me to your nice little place.” I saw a flicker of panic in his eyes and I quickly added : “We’ll go Dutch, of course.” He smiled with relief and left me, but not without giving me an affectionate slap on the thigh, which I hated.

By the end of the first course, I knew he was divorced. The main course brought me up to date with his law degree, his specialisation and his job hunting. The dessert saw him quite happy and a little tipsy, and telling me about a wonderful woman with whom he had fallen in love and who, he assured me, loved him dearly in return. They had met on a plane, a few weeks beforehand. He had taken a holiday

between his two jobs and, flying back from Burgos, had met the lady of his dreams. She was married, a few years older than him but had no intention of leaving her husband.

They had both wanted to meet again and they had made love in the most memorable way. She was so exceptional, in fact, that he was quite prepared to wait for her showing up two or three times a year, i.e. when she would come back to Britain, ostensibly to see her mother in Wiltshire but, in fact, to spend a few unforgettable days with him. He went on and on, explaining that he had known quite a few women in his life but that this one made all the others pale into insignificance ; so much so that he would be willing to remain chaste between her rare visits. Lucinda was the light of his life... she was... “Quentina, please don’t take it wrongly but are you alright ? You look grey.”

The sunlight was almost burning when we came out of the restaurant.

Boulogne felt as if it had been moved to the tropics.

“Meet again at the coach in an hour. Allright ?” Shouted Mr. Wonderful.

I nodded. “I’ll go back on foot. The walk will do me good.”

He disappeared. I started in what I assumed was the direction of the ferry port. I felt tired, so tired ! My legs weighed a ton. I waited for a light to turn red for traffic, so that I could cross a dual carriageway. When the cars stopped I wanted to walk briskly to the other side but could not. I was dragging myself like an invalid. “Come on,” I thought, “you are going to get caught in the middle of the road.” I saw the light turn orange and lurched desperately forward trying to reach the pavement in time... and... woke up in hospital.

When I say “woke up”, I’m being very kind. I was bound, strapped at a 45° angle with a tube in my throat. A gentle, young Omar Sharif sort of face with a fiercely black beard was leaning over me.

“That’s fine,” said Omar, “You are in the recovery room, everything went extremely well. We induced an artificial coma for forty-eight hours and then, you had an emergency heart operation.”

A dozen questions formed in my mind all at once : where am I, who are you, what happened ? but the tube in my throat meant that I could not even moan. I could only look at Omar. He was a good man and had anticipated my questions. “My name is Idriss. I am your recovery nurse. I’ll stay with you for a while, then I’ll remove your drains and your breathing tube.”

Am I in England ? I thought. Again, he read my mind and smiled. “You are still in France. I come from Mauritius. We speak French and English over there”.

It did not take me long to realise why they take the drains out before they tackle the tube in the throat. This way, you can’t yell. A gush of thick, grey liquid came out and ended up in a large kidney-shaped bowl that had appeared

out of nowhere. A few seconds later I also realised that I had a catheter stuck deep inside my urethra.



Chapter Thirteen

Back in England, Francis was a wonderful nurse. In everything but sex, he was the most loyal partner one could ever dream of. Needless to say that sex was the furthest thing from my mind for a very long time afterwards. It probably helped me forgive Vivian.

Am I suffering from some kind of psychological deficiency ? I know a few people who would only be too glad to answer : “Yes, several” (ha, ha !). What I mean, more specifically is : why can't I hate ? There is something wrong with me in that respect. People can make me suffer, lie to me, be dishonest with me, cruel even, and I still cannot hate them. I did hate my mother as a child. I no longer do. She, herself, as I discovered, had been through a horrendous childhood. Had my inability to hate developed at the same time as my inability to love, way back during my early days ? Is it a case of insensitivity expanding in opposite directions, not

unlike those painkillers I am familiar with, that are also pleasure killers ? Why, then, did I finally learn to love but never learned to hate ? It makes me feel like a bird with only one wing. Surely you need both in order to fly, in order to be normal.

Francis is not normal. I am not normal. What a fine pair of dingbats we are ! I do not hate him either but I cannot forgive him. Yes, there is a difference. I have needs that he does not seem to have, needs which he cannot be bothered to satisfy in me. This is not a case of *Vive la différence* ! I need to be cuddled, to feel a naked body against mine. I need (when I am not recovering from a heart operation, that is) deep kisses, body kisses, uninhibited sex, fun sex, passionate sex, inventive sex, delicate sex, excruciatingly slow sex and, above all, oral sex... I need this as others need a drug and I cannot forgive the one person in my life who, by the very token that he is called a spouse, did not do so... or would not.

Does that make me weird... or just unlucky ?

I also lost my job, of course. After all, I was only a glorified temp. The English consultant who had taken over from the staff at the French hospital did not want me to go back to work full-time... ever. I found this rather strange when other heart patients are happily returned to their offices, factories or even building sites less than a year later. He was proved right, though. By the time I could walk normally, looking a picture of health, I seemed to be able to keep going for a couple of hours or so, feeling on top of the world. Then, like a kitten, I would fall asleep. Well, not “just like that” but I *had* to go to sleep or else I started to move about like a zombie. “A part-time job is what you need” boomed my six-foot Consultant – *for goodness’ sake, I’m not deaf!* – during my final check-up (and why final ?).

Miracles do happen, or so I thought at the time, for I did find a part-time job

very soon after I started looking. My new boss was a one-man show and he just needed a bit of help. His history was not unlike mine, including redundancy from an established firm, only he had more guts and, perhaps also, more money than I had to start with. He set himself up as an “independent”. As usual in such cases, many clients who used to deal with him in the old firm wanted to continue dealing with him. A solicitor is often like a priest or a GP. You get used to your own. He becomes part of your mental family. Changes are uncomfortable, painful even. This man needed a helping hand, a few hours a day. That suited me fine.

I drove to my interview in a state of total relaxation. I couldn't care less whether I got the job or not. I had answered an advert in the paper and, to my surprise, been asked to present a complete CV and be ready for an “eyeball” at a few days' notice.

I arrived at one of those brand-new brick complexes with a variety of parking spaces daintily arranged among flowerbeds. The flowers and the bushes among them were still in their infancy and everything was so recent that I almost expected to see smears of yellow clay peeking, here and there, through the wood-chip cover. The building itself snaked in and out, sections of which jutted out a bit towards the car park, others had little arcades and still others were somewhat higher than the rest. It was an honest architectural effort at avoiding the dreary, soul-destroying monotony of the sixties ; sixties which, if my memory serves me right, had aggressively survived through most of the seventies and eighties. The place would look quite nice indeed when the vegetation had done its bit,

At an imposing reception desk, womanned by a miserable-looking and pouting school-leaver, I was first told that there was no Mr. O. Raine in the building. There was, however, a Mr. Paine who ran an employment agency,

if I was interested... I rummaged through my bag in order to find the letter I had received and showed it to the Brain of Britain.

“Oh, yes !...” she whined. Then suddenly shouting at the top of her voice : “Jerry, do you know a Mr. Raine, a solicitor, who’s moved in lately ?”

Jerry, who was carrying a basketful of supplies for the fast-food restaurant, did know. It was only three doors from the reception desk, on the right. “Well, I never...!” I heard as I made my way to a discreet copper plaque announcing : O. Raine, Solicitor.

I knocked, went in and found myself in a rather small room ; an outer office, it seemed. O. Raine was sitting behind a desk on the left and an enormous woman at another desk on the right. He stood up, we shook hands and he introduced me to his secretary, Jane. Her forearm wobbled a greeting.

I had decided to dress all in black. Little black dress, black shoes and handbag, black stockings. I had,

however – should anyone manage to look up that far – opted for white knickers. I find the contrast quite devastating in attractive women and I simply assume that men must feel the same.

I was dying to know what the “O” of O. Raine stood for. It sounded Irish but obviously was not. The real Mr. O. Raine did not look Irish either. A small man, very neatly attired in an impeccable dark blue suit, he had a pleasant, smiling, round face with pale blue eyes and corn-yellow hair combed in a see-saw fringe over his forehead. I estimated that he was younger than me by about ten years. In fact, it turned out to be more like twelve.

I cannot remember much about the meeting, just that I was completely relaxed about it. Breaking all the basic rules of American-style interviews, I talked mostly of my limitations and of what I had never done. That is partly why I got the job, as Octavius told me

later ; all the other applicants had been so full of themselves !

“Octavius !” I exclaimed when I got to know him better : “Like the Roman emperor ?”

“Oh, please, everybody says that. My father is American and he entered a television game called *The \$64,000 question*. Very controversial later on, as it turned out. A lot of cheating going on, but he won the \$64,000 with the final answer : *Octavius*. I was born, he named me Octavius and promptly took off with the money. My mother, who is English, came back to this country.”

“So, where did you get that slight American accent you’ve got ?”

“I went back to visit an aunt in New York State and ended up spending a few years with her. My father hadn’t kept in touch with his own side of the family either. Mother had been so horrified by the level of Comprehensive schools in England that she didn’t think I could do any worse in America.

So, I enrolled at the local High-School in the small town where my aunt lived. As an American citizen, I was allowed to. We were in a small Upper New York State community and the working atmosphere was quite good but I came back to a British University : I really wanted to read English Law. Now I can't get rid of my accent. Very irritating."

"Don't say that. It's not strong and it's quite charming. Don't try to get rid of it."

"You're too kind."

"Can you put on a really thick American accent if you want ?

"Yes ma'am."

"A Southern accent ?

"Yaaall come back, now d'you'ear ?"

So, from the start, Octavius and I had a pleasant working relationship that soon developed into a pleasant social relationship. He had invited me over to his house the day before we started work. I met an elegant, very beautiful po-faced wife and a snappy, spoiled, eleven-year old daughter. As

Francis had not been invited, I reciprocated by asking Octavius over to our place by himself. Everyone seemed to think that it was the normal thing to do.

What did surprise me at first, were the daily phone calls I kept receiving from Octavius in the evenings. They were both strange and innocuous. His office was only a thirty-minute drive from my house. The phone would ring. I would pick it up : “Hello.”

“Did you get home alright ?”

I was quite amazed at first, and felt a little uncomfortable. There were no big bad wolves on the way. In the end, I became used to it and finally, one day, at work, asked him why he did this. He became a little pink in the face and said that he was obsessed with road accidents. He, himself, had an almost pathological hatred of driving. Yet, the few times when he took me anywhere, I thought he was a superb driver, almost impossible to fault in any situation and making me feel quite safe, but he

insisted that he hated it and was always worried when someone he knew was going anywhere at all. During these phone calls, usually while we were watching television, Francis would have a silly smile on his face. He could not understand either.

I thought from the start that Octavius was a very good-looking man and that was that. I had worked with a lot of good-looking men over the years and if I had been sexually attracted to all of them, my life would have been impossible. Before I quite realised what was happening, however, I found myself inviting him for an evening meal two or three times a week : Tuesdays and Thursdays for certain and sometimes Sunday nights as well. We became like these people who, for thirty years or so, meet with mechanical regularity in order to play bridge or canasta. I did wonder, at first, what Isabel, Octavius' wife, made of all his evenings away from home but I did not broach the subject for a while.

Neither Francis nor Octavius said much during these quiet evenings. Octavius would normally arrive around seven o'clock. He and Francis watched M*A*S*H on Sky-One while I put the finishing touches to the meal and served apéritifs. Meal at eight. By ten o'clock, Francis was doing the dishes and Octavius and I remained at the dining-room table, pushing real or imaginary bread crumbs with our fingertips while talking about this and that. Topics went from childhood memories to the latest book we had read. We were both avid readers and borrowed extensively from each other's bookshelves. By eleven o'clock we would drift over to the living room where Francis would serve coffee and offer a digestif, which was always refused and, by midnight, Octavius had left. A handshake with Francis, a peck on the cheek for me and, with a friendly wave, he would disappear towards his car.

“And another day bites the dusk”, muttered Francis, one evening. It was

so unusual for him to say anything funny at all, let alone a silly pun, that I remained frozen for a second then laughed much more than it was worth. I did notice, from now on, that whenever Octavius was in the house Francis seemed a little more alive than usual. It started me thinking : *Does he miss male company? He is not the type to go out "with the boys" but he can if he wants to, I shan't keep him.* And more deeply : *does he think that Octavius is attractive ? Even unconsciously ? Is my Francis a latent homosexual ?* No, I concluded, coming back to earth, *not Francis. Impossible. I am so desperate to find a tiny spark of sexual life in him that I am imagining things that are totally insane.*

There was another possibility, of course. He hadn't exactly made a scene when he had mistakenly thought that I was having an affair (with a man, that is). Could it be that behind the Francis for whom the whole definition of sex was simply to engage in a good old-fashioned screw, there lurked

another Francis after all, who relished the idea of his wife making love to another man ? Was there a faint chance that my one-dimensional husband had another dimension, that my monochromatic partner had another colour ? Was there a glimmer of hope for the both of us ? How could I ever be sure ? The idea of making love to Octavius just to find out how Francis would react seemed preposterous. Besides, would Octavius want to make love to me ? Nothing was less certain. The age difference, for one thing, would probably put him off.

He and I were in the dining room, one night, pushing breadcrumbs and speaking softly, almost as if we had been in a confessional.

“What does your wife think of all these evenings you spend away from home ?” I asked.

“She welcomes them. She can accommodate her lovers.”

We were almost whispering by now and it felt as if, in the suffused light of

the room, anything could be said, nothing could shock, freedom of speech was total, and souls could be stripped bare. Bizarre as it may have been, our conversation sounded perfectly natural.

“Does she have many lovers ?”

“Only one at a time but she never keeps any of them for long.”

“Why is that ?”

“On the one hand, she is, by nature, very fickle : the latest toy, the latest gadget, nothing lasts. The next one is always supposed to be, not just better, but the best ever. Same with men. On the other hand, she says that her lovers try to rule her life.”

“And do they ?”

“One of them did but the others haven’t.”

“Then why does she say that ?”

“Because she’s paranoid. She is preparing a bitter, miserable old age for herself.”

“What exactly do you mean by paranoid, in her case ?”

“I’ll try to put it in a nutshell – no pun intended – ...” but we both had a fit of giggles. He took my hand over the table and went on : “It’s so nice to have a good laugh with you every once in a while !” I took my hand away : “Come on, don’t change the subject : in a nutshell ?”

“In a nutshell, you could say that her motto is : *I do what I want*. It could be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on how you look at it. So, she takes a lover. All very well. But then, she starts changing her mind about this and that. She says : *I’ll pick you up Sunday night...* and she doesn’t show. Or : *Tomorrow, we’ll go for a walk on a footpath*. Mr. Lover shows up in corduroy trousers and hiking boots but the lady has changed her mind : no footpath. She’s going shopping. If he survives the treatment – and very few do – she starts making serious promises : *We’ll go to Venice together. We must spend a week-end in the Lake District at some point. I’ll take you to a hotel in London and we’ll have a ball,*

etc... As these things never materialise, the lover makes one fatal mistake. Some last longer than others but inevitably – and I can almost time it to perfection by now – he will pronounce the dreaded words : *but you promised*. That's it : he's cooked his goose. She flies into a rage : *Are you trying to rule my life ? I do what I want*. Off he goes with his tail between his legs and, in my mind, I can almost hear her shout : *next !*"

"Why do you remain with such a woman ?"

And why do you ask such stupid questions ? I wonder. Why don't you, Quentina, leave that pretence of a man you call a husband ? Why do you stay with him ? Why does anyone stay with anyone else ?

"Because" he answers "I am a weak, despicable, wretched individual. She is wealthy. I don't need to work. I do so in order to retain a shred of dignity, but I enjoy her money. On the other hand, my work is well paid and I should be

able to lead a nice, normal life without her help... You know, Quentina, if you never wanted to speak to me again, I would understand. If you handed me your resignation tomorrow morning, I'd understand as well."

I chose not to pursue that line of thinking. I asked instead : "Do you still make love to her now and then ?"

Long silence which obviously meant "yes". I asked in a different way : "Do you still find her attractive ?" Finally, very slowly, and obviously weighing his every word, he admitted : "I utterly despise her, though I despise myself even more, but when she wants to make love to me, when she turns on the charm, I can't resist. I never could. She rules my life. I am her little poodle-dog. I don't pay any attention to anything she promises. I pretend to believe all her insolent lies. I never criticise. With me around, she really does what she wants. That's how I survive but I'm not proud of it."

"You ever tried to change her ?"

“Never.”

Wise man, I thought. I made the mistake of trying to change Francis but that's a ridiculous undertaking. “The leopard and his spots”, people, their habits and prejudices, nothing ever changes. So much for bleeding-heart prison reformers ! I was a fool. I should have accepted Francis as he was, I should have given him the good old-fashioned screws he wanted twice a week and gone out with a string of lovers, treating myself to a whale of a time. No soul-searching, no heartbreaks. And yet... and yet... could I go off and have sex with people who meant nothing to me ? Yes, I suppose I could... just as much as any woman who would doggedly put her mind to it. Trouble is, I don't really want that. Desperate as I am for good sex (perverted sex, as Francis would put it) I also want someone who will say “I love you” to me... someone to whom I can say “I love you” and be sincere about it. I am a greedy sod. I want it all : sex and love.

Is there a special punishment for people like me ?

I, this time, took Octavius' hand. I squeezed it and said : "I have enormous respect for you."

"I don't understand."

I could hear Francis making coffee in the kitchen. I took my hand away and added : "I shall tell you more about it some other time."

Chapter Fourteen

Our next evening together took place on a Tuesday. Octavius and I came to refer to that day as *Fatal Tuesday*. We had both been in court, which did not happen very often. Octavius had driven to London in his brand new car.

We had heavy casefiles to take in and out of the car and carry around the corridors of Justice. Octavius could not carry them all and, at any rate, I would not have let him.

In the end, we won the case, but I was exhausted, especially when it came to taking the files back to the car. The weather was hot and muggy. I could feel my white shirt sticking to my back, and sweat building around the top of my ski-pants. I used Octavius' mobile to reach Francis.

“We are caught in rush-hour traffic coming out of London. We'll be late but we are going straight to the house. I'm bringing Octavius.”

“Did you win ?”

“We most certainly did.”

“Congratulations ! I’ll put the M*A*S*H glasses in the freezer and make you a hell of a dry Martini when you get here.”

“Could you go to Waitrose and grab some ribeye steaks, microwave chips, a Sarah Lee dessert of some description and a bottle of Champagne ?”

“Consider it done.”

We had a marvellous evening. Francis shared our excitement at winning the case, and duly disappeared in the kitchen at the end of the meal, leaving Octavius and me in front of two unfinished flutes of champagne. We were both a little tipsy and I was beginning to think that Octavius would have to call a taxi to get home. We remained silent for a long time, then Octavius said, softly as usual : “Will you and Francis make wild, passionate love when I’ve gone ?”

It was a good thing that I was not drinking when he said it or I would

have sprayed him with champagne. I burst out laughing. The very thought of Francis and I making wild, passionate love ! When I calmed down a bit, I managed to say : “My dear Octavius, Francis wouldn’t know *wild* or *passionate* if it hit him in the face. For that matter, he wouldn’t really know what making love is either”. As Octavius kept looking at me with a rather puzzled expression on his face, I added : “I better explain.”

And explain I did. At great length. Finally Octavius asked, even more softly if possible : “Is there... anyone else ?”

“There was, until about a year ago.” And I explained about Vivian as well. At the end, I asked : “Are you shocked or disappointed in me ?”

He just shook his head : “Do you still love her ?”

“I dearly, dearly wish I didn’t but I do. I still love her. I forgive her, even though I shouldn’t. It’s not the fact that she took a new lover that I find

unforgivable : it's the lies and the cruelty. I felt like this Greek character who had warmed a serpent against his chest and the serpent bit him. Vivian enjoyed biting me, jilting me, hurting me... I could see it in her eyes. Something like the kill at the end of a hunt. I was asking for so little ! Two or three days a year, that's all. Has any lover ever asked for less ? I was so much in love with her that I would gladly have shared her with Mr. Wonderful as well as Emilio and a whole rugby team if I'd had to... That's why I should never forgive her if I had any sense. I'm sure that, once you have, as she did, indulged in lies and cruelty, you can do it again. Indeed, you *will* do it again. To forgive such things is incredibly stupid. That makes me incredibly stupid, I guess. I hope you can understand why I had no right to judge you the other night when you explained to me that you were not proud of your relationship with Isabel. I'm not proud of my own life either .”

I saw his hand move towards mine and stop halfway. Suddenly a wave of nausea filled my whole body and I thought I was going to throw up right then and there, on the dining room table. It passed, but it left me scared, weak and wobbly. My cheeks felt wooden and the whole room started to gyrate. It then occurred to me that after a morning's travelling, followed by the court case, then the drive back, I had not drunk any water for more than twelve hours. By the time I got home, I hadn't realised how thirsty I was. Then we had Francis' excellent dry Martinis in M*A*S*H glasses, red wine with the steaks, and champagne with dessert. All this alcohol in a dehydrated blood stream ! I must have been quite drunk, but not so drunk that I did not realise that I was drunk and why. "I need some water." I muttered.

Octavius went to the kitchen, where Francis was finishing the dishes, and explained the situation. He came back with a large bottle of Perrier.

“I’ll take it outside,” I said. “I need some fresh air as well.”

As I crossed the kitchen and the hallway, I could not help reflecting on the fact that my walk was remarkably steady for one who is supposed to be drunk ; nor did I think my speech was blurred. Perhaps I was not drunk, simply very tired.

I heard Francis’ voice behind me :
“Are you all right, Dear ?”

“Sober as a judge.”

I changed my mind when I missed the front door by a good six inches and hit the frame with my shoulder. I went out and sat on the steps, facing the garden. The fresh air did me some good and I started drinking water straight from the bottle : very ladylike. It was deliciously cool. The slabs of the steps were also deliciously cool on my bottom, and a nice breeze started drying the perspiration on my skin. I was not drenched in sweat or anything like that but I felt sticky and the air made my skin feel smooth again. The

garden lights were not on, nor had I come out far enough to trigger the intruder spotlights. I could barely make out the shapes of the trees. Everything felt and smelt so clean ! I closed my eyes for a while.

Octavius came out of the house and sat next to me. “Francis asked me not to leave you alone,” he said, then added, “Feeling better ?” I nodded.

We remained silent for what seemed like a long time. Finally, Octavius’ soft voice burred next to me : “I could never compete.”

“Compete ? What are you talking about ?”

“I could never compete with the woman you love. She sounds like she is so beautiful, and like she has such class !”

“You Americans ! *As if*, not *like*... but yes, she is beautiful... and yes, she has class. Are you drunk ?”

“A little.”

Rewinding the imaginary tape of Octavius’ voice in my mind, I went back

to what he had said before mentioning class : “What do you mean, you could never compete ? It doesn’t make sense.”

He put an arm around my shoulder. He wore a beautiful, extremely expensive blue and white striped shirt. He had taken his jacket and tie off and left them indoors. Even after the hard day’s work we had both been through, he still smelled rather nice. There was the crisp, fresh cotton quality of his new shirt, a very faint remnant of aftershave and an engaging personal scent emanating from his whole body. The pressure of his hand on my shoulder felt warm and reassuring. He turned his face towards mine and pronounced with an extraordinary mixture of casualness and childish intensity : “But I love you.”

The silence that followed was the loudest and longest in my life, regardless of its actual duration. There was an explosion in my head. Yet, I remained totally motionless and, as Octavius told me later, expressionless ;

so much so that he thought, at first, that his words had had no impact on me whatsoever. I was paralysed. My soul had never known such turmoil and yet I was floating on an ocean of calm and happiness. I could no longer feel the cold slab of the front steps under me, nor would I have been able to describe who I was or where I was. Someone had just said to me “I love you” and had looked as if he meant it.

My whole background, my whole family culture, urged me to disbelieve Octavius ; indeed urged me to destroy this *ridiculous* statement, to hack it to death, to make fun of it.

In my soul, there had been a room called “Love”. My parents had forced their way into that room and had vandalised it, seemingly forever. Vivian had managed to repair that dusty, dirty room and bring in some sunshine through clean windows and fresh curtains. And now, the room, like an empty but well-prepared beehive, had attracted someone else to the point that

he was saying “I love you.” It was as if the fact that I had actually loved someone in the recent past had made me capable of being loved, or again, as if some psychological pheromone were, at long last, emanating from my behaviour and mannerisms and sending out signals to the effect that I had become a “normal” woman. As with Vivian’s first kiss, I could feel my whole life being steered in a new direction and it made me shake with happiness and fear.

My parents had not said “I love you”, Monique had not, Francis had not, Oliver had not and Vivian had not. Oddly enough, of all these people, it was the “I love you” from my mother that I missed the most. And now, someone had actually said it. What was I to make of it ?

I know that, encouraged by the most inane Australian soap operas one can possibly imagine, teenagers nowadays keep saying “I love you” as casually as “Have a Nice day !” There was every

possibility that, being younger than me, Octavius had acquired this habit and that he was saying “I love you” to any woman to whom he felt physically attracted, just to see if it worked.

Whatever his reasons or his sincerity, or lack of sincerity, Octavius would always be, inevitably, from now on, for better or for worse, the first person who had ever said “I love you” to me. I could never change that. He, of course, was not aware, but it made him very special indeed. I leant over and kissed him. I had drunk too much alcohol to enjoy the full sensuality of a kiss but I felt tender and grateful towards this lovely man. I made it a long, tender kiss. I enjoyed the idea of the kiss more than the kiss itself. I prodded with my tongue. He responded gently.

I heard the patio door slide open behind us. Startled, Octavius stopped kissing and took his arm away from my shoulders. I yanked his head firmly back towards mine. The patio door

closed. We kissed again. I felt his hand stroking the material of my trousers between my legs. I touched his own trousers, noticed his erection...

Suddenly I was cold and said so. Octavius stood up and helped me get on my feet. We went back to the living room where our coffees were getting tepid. No one said anything and, after a while, Octavius telephoned for a taxi.

The next day, at the office, I found my first letter from Octavius. I did not know what it was, at first : just a plain envelope left on my desk. As Jane always arrived late, there was no way that she could have left it. I was suddenly terrified. "Am I being fired ?" I asked. He looked at me, totally amazed. "No, no, not at all. Please put it in your bag before Jane arrives and read it at home. OK ?"

"OK."

I must admit that I had imagined something like : "Dear Quentina, we can't go on like this. Such a relationship is affecting our work.

Perhaps it would be best if... bla....bla...bla.” I had heard that men, particularly sensitive and educated men, often have deeply masochistic tendencies, a temptation to make themselves look big and noble in their own eyes which drives them to take self-defeating decisions and adopt self-torturing postures which they go on to regret all their lives.

Hard work, telephone calls, appointments and clients made me forget all that and, in the afternoon, I managed to drive home calmly, stop in the kitchen for a cool glass of orange juice, go up to my bedroom and flop on the bed before taking the envelope out of my bag. I even teased myself by turning the plain, white, sealed letter several times back and forth before opening it.

Dear Quentina,

Thank you for a beautiful evening.

I cannot put into words just how I feel about you because I'm not sure I've

ever felt such tenderness and affinity with anyone else before. There are no definite rules to life or love and I truly believe that most things that happen to one, be they good or bad, happy or sad, are due to fate.

I never dreamt that I could simply fall in love with someone in only one meeting, or that a total stranger could walk into my life and steal my heart away with no effort whatsoever.

I felt my whole inside melting at your interview. It was one of those days that will be imprinted in my mind forever. The sound of your beautiful voice thrilled me in a way no other voice ever had before. Everything about you seemed so wonderful that I wanted the interview never to end. Stupid, I know, you don't have to tell me, but there are things that happen in life which appear to have no logical explanation. Does everything need an explanation ?

When, on the night before we started work, my wife and I asked you over to dinner, I realised that it was not

just a one-off at the interview and that meeting you again could still make my heart flutter. And since those occasions, it's just been fluttering even more.

You don't realise how powerless I am in your presence. I am a slave to my own heart... and yours. You are wonderful at the office, and I'm not sure what I would do if you decided to resign. Something inside me would just die. One day I would be told that someone must have made me very unhappy... and that someone would be you. You would be the one who had broken my heart.

You nearly did break my heart when you mentioned Vivian. It came as such a shock and, I guess, I felt jealous. When I say "shock", it's an understatement. I had never anticipated that you could be in love with someone else but I realised that I was being foolish and very selfish – and I had no right on earth to feel this way.

You have your life, you are not happy at home, you are not happy most of the time, I fear. Yesterday, when you

were a little drunk, was the first time when you seemed to be able to open your heart. I was a little drunk myself, which is why I was able to open my heart to you. There was always the remotest chance that to hear me say “I love you” could melt your usual reserve a little.

With all my love and a million kisses.

*... and he had signed *Moi*.*

Chapter fifteen

Once more, crude daylight and office work proved to be wonderful passion-killers. The next day, neither of us mentioned anything at all. I just managed to say when Jane was out of the room : “You are coming to dinner tonight, as usual, aren’t you ?”

“You mean I’m not being accused of sexual harassment ?”

“Don’t be silly and don’t be late.”

When, at the end of the day, he arrived at the house, he apologised to Francis for getting drunk on the Tuesday.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Francis. “Quentina likes you to be relaxed. She wants you to loosen up a bit.”

Good old Francis, I thought, he is really hooked on this little game... if it is a game.

“Quite so. Loosen your elastic” I added as I was taking his coat.

“But” said Octavius, on our way to the living-room for a drink, “if I loosen my elastic, my knickers will fall down and I’ll start walking funny.”

“Men don’t have knickers” pontificated Francis. “They have underpants.”

“I know, Francis, but I like the sound of the word «knickers» that’s all.”

I jumped in : “Me too. What do you think of the word «panties» then ?”

“That’s American. Quite nice too.”

The television was on with the sound off. We were waiting for M*A*S*H, which would be my signal to disappear in the kitchen. Not that I didn’t like the show. In fact, I am a fan, but it felt like the right time to start cooking. I would often pop back in the living room while sipping on a drink and, sometimes, be so engrossed in the extraordinary mixture of mirth and sadness on the screen, that I forgot about things I had to prepare or, perhaps, were in danger of burning. To make matters worse (or better) that particular vintage of

M*A*S*H was the one without the inane cackles of canned laughter. A rare treat indeed. I am also, of course, fascinated by Alan Alda.

Octavius offered to help in the kitchen every time, and I refused every time. He was a very appreciative eater and would often say how good a cook I was. I kept telling him that I really enjoyed preparing food for him but he always seemed to find that notion rather difficult to understand. To him, cooking was hard work and he clearly did not want me to do hard work.

Halfway through the show, we were subjected to the usual array of commercials and Francis turned the sound off, for which I was very grateful. It got the conversation going again. We saw a beautiful woman in tiny black-lace knickers and bra.

“Does that turn you on, Octavius?” I asked.

“No, I don’t like black underwear. It does nothing for me. It actually turns me off.”

“And red ?”

“Yeeech !”

“Red with a black suspender belt ?”

“Quentina, are you trying to spoil my appetite ?”

I went back to the kitchen and a little voice whispered in my mind : “Your perfect mate.” “*Don’t be so daft.*” I replied.

At the end of the meal, Octavius and I found ourselves alone again. A slightly embarrassed silence set in. The dining-room lights were dimmed and the soporific aftermath of good food and good wines still wafted around us. I felt supremely comfortable. Finally Octavius said : “As I have mentioned to Francis, I’m sorry I drank too much last time.”

“I was quite drunk myself.”

“Do you remember everything we said and did ?”

“Everything : clear as a bell.”

“I was afraid of that.” And he hid his face in his hands.

For the past twenty-four hours, I had kept asking myself : what would it feel like to say “I love you” to Octavius ? He has said it to me, and it had lit up my soul ; it has made me glow and radiate from the inside, like a church on fire at midnight. It has made me feel as if I had, at long last, become a fully-fledged member of the human race. Now, surely, it must be my turn to say it. Such ordinary things for everyone else ! Such special moments for me ! I wondered how many times Vivian had heard someone telling her : “I love you”. And I was stupid enough not to go along with it ! Could it be why she left me ? Did she think I had made love to her just for the fun of it, without any emotional involvement whatsoever ? No, it cannot be. She may have punished me for never actually saying the words but she knew full well that I loved her. She would not have taken such delight in torturing me, otherwise. How superior she looked then ! How I hate her ! Yet, I do love her as well. How is this possible ?

I looked at Octavius in a new light. First, he had given me the impression of being nothing more than a nice, neat little man, then I started seeing him as a remarkably good-looking man, then a dear friend and now... Now, everything in him, everything that was him was enhanced, had reached a new set of values. His looks, his smile, his clothes (he was wearing that wonderful shirt again, or a similar one) and, if he touched me, his warmth ; if he approached me, his smell ; if he kissed me, his taste. It was all different now.

Driving home in the afternoon, I had looked at men in other cars or on sidewalks. I had toyed with a few suppositions : would I go to bed with this one or that one ? The answers were overwhelmingly “no”. Next I would ask myself : if that one, over there, said “I love you”, would I feel differently about him ? Then “yes.” By that, I don’t mean that I would have immediately fallen in love or jumped into bed with him, but I would definitely have felt differently towards him. Is that being gullible ? Am

I so starved of love that any Tom, Dick and Harry who says “I love you” can lead me by the nose ? Is this what is happening to me now ? Is Octavius playing a cool game of “let’s try to get in the pants of that stupid cow by telling her what she wants, and let’s drop her like an old sock the minute another stupid cow comes along ?”

And how would I react if I were approached by women in this way ? Same thing, I’m afraid. Simply to imagine Vivian saying “I love you” gave me the impression that the ground was opening under my feet, and that I kept falling, or was being lifted – who can tell the difference ? – into a paradisiacal dimension.

In spite of these misgivings, I had come to the conclusion that if I, Quentina, did not say “I love you” to Octavius, to whom could I possibly say it ? It had taken all that time in my life for someone to say “I love you” to me. It would not happen again. I could not

afford to wait that long again. Octavius was by far the best candidate for a try.

I had waited for weeks in order to muster enough courage to say “I love you” to Vivian and I had been too late but, at least, the background work was done. I had psyched myself up to it. It did not feel quite so scary any more and, by taking the plunge first, Octavius had paved the way. I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, Octavius was looking at me as he never had before. He was a very soft, gentle person but I could see that he was also burning with passion. My doubts evaporated. For this man, I thought, looking at me like that, I am not just a broad, a chick or a silly cow. I am someone he truly loves. What an incredible feeling ! What an extraordinary life I am living ! Do girls usually experience all this when they are sixteen or twenty ? Do they appreciate what’s happening to them at that age ? Do any of their boyfriends look at them the way Octavius is looking at me now ? I don’t think so.

There is a depth of feeling going on here that youngsters cannot experience, a depth born out of the keen consciousness of the brevity of life and knowing that each situation is unique. I looked at him and smiled : “Come and give me a kiss.”

“What if Francis comes back ?”

I made a dismissive gesture. He pulled his chair next to mine. I was sitting at the end of the dining-room table. He had been on one of the sides. We ended up at right angles to each other, which was just fine. He kissed me. This time, I really enjoyed it. I had made sure that I hardly drank anything during the meal and had noticed that he only wetted his lips in his Martini, then in his glass of wine. That night, we were only drunk on each other. I loved the kiss, I loved his tongue, the light pressure of his hands over my shoulder, his clean smell which, because of who he was and what he was, suddenly became the most wonderful smell in the world. I loved it. I loved him and, before

I knew it, I was muttering, my lips against his lips, “I love you, I love you, I love you.” and kissing him again and again. I could not stop. I became delirious and started to say “I adore you, I adore you.” I could guess, rather than hear that he was repeating every word.

I was not only drunk on Octavius, I was drunk on the fact that I had taken the jump : I had said “I love you” again and again. I felt like laughing, singing, jumping up and down, tearing my clothes off, crying, yelling to celebrate my deliverance, and a deliverance it truly was. I had escaped from a cage of contempt and constraints. I had freed myself from a set of chains dragging along since I was a child. I hugged Octavius so hard that I heard his bones creak. I was, quite literally, beside myself : there was the old me and, next to her, the slow-learning escapologist, the perfect insect out of its ugly shell, at long last.

Then I heard him say : “Would you do something for me ?” Those words had such an extraordinary effect that they almost gave me an orgasm as I felt a shiver of both pleasure and delicious fear spread through my whole body. Whatever it was, I was determined to leap into the void like a bungee jumper and let the exhilaration of my first “yes” lead me to a new, magic land. I knew, of course, that, for practical, common sense reasons such as being seated on chairs in a dining-room, it could not be something like tying me to a bedstead or making me dress like a nun. Yet, I was taken aback when he said : “Fill your mouth with saliva and give it to me.”

I did not even say “yes”. I just did it. I fed him with my saliva as a bird feeds another bird. He swallowed it, uttered a light squeak of delight and, breathing deeply, hid his face in my neck. *Now, I thought, that’s what I call making love ! If I believed in God, I would whisper «thank you, thank you, thank you».* He straightened up and, looking at me like

a blond cherub, whispered : “Again”... and I did it again. I remembered Vivian’s kiss when she was lying on top of me and a trickle of saliva that had run down my cheek and how exciting I had found the idea that it could be Vivian’s. So, I asked Octavius to do it to me but it left me rather indifferent. I could not imagine what he saw in this practice but it obviously turned him on, and that was good enough for me.

We could hear the coffee machine making disgusting noises in the kitchen. We drew apart but he brushed my face with the tips of his fingers like a blind person trying to ascertain someone’s features.

“I’ve never met anyone as beautiful as you.” He said.

Oddly enough, I suddenly felt exactly the same about him. I knew that he was just a good-looking man, no more exceptional than hundreds of thousands of other good-looking men, but I was drawn towards him like steel shavings to a powerful magnet. From

one moment to the next, he had become all I ever wanted. I wished I could melt into him, blend myself with him and change both of us into an indivisible, deliriously happy mixture.

Many women equate the word *Love* with the word *Marriage*. I knew Octavius would never leave his wealthy wife. I knew that I would never leave Francis. Our affair, if affair there was to be, would be unpolluted by considerations of separation and divorce and the litany of painful episodes that always goes along : it would be a pure affair.

We drifted towards the lounge and I had to restrain myself from taking his hand in mine. Walking side by side, hand in hand, seemed like such a natural thing to do ! I determined that we must do it some day, go to a footpath or a beauty spot and just walk slowly, dreamily, hand in hand. I knew, deep within myself, that Octavius and I would be making love sooner or later – rather sooner than later I hoped – that

we would be naked together, that our bodies would be passionately intertwined. We would, I knew, reach incredibly erotic heights, and yet, as we were heading for the lounge, I could not think of anything more tender and exciting than walking hand in hand along a shaded canal towpath. Francis would never understand this sort of thing. Would Octavius ? Would he pass the test if I had a chance to put it to him ?

Creatures of habit that we are, we always sat in the same places, either at the dining table or in the living room. There, I would lie on a two-seater sofa with my head resting on one arm and my feet sticking out over the other one. Octavius would sit at the end of the big, four-seater sofa, placed at right angle to mine, facing my feet, and Francis would settle in an armchair at the other end of the big sofa. We and our guests never wore any shoes in the house. I had white socks on.

“Quentina likes to have her feet massaged” said Francis after he had placed the cups of coffee in front of us.

Octavius looked at him : “May I ?” Francis smiled, nodded and, going back to his armchair, buried himself in the TV programmes. It is quite true that I like my feet massaged but, as I had said to Vivian a long time ago, only if I was aroused. Otherwise, I was almost pathologically ticklish, especially on the sole of my feet. Francis must have guessed that, in this instance, it would pose no problem. I was so aroused that the top of my thighs was sticky. I moaned with pleasure when Octavius first started massaging my feet. Francis did not flinch. I was breathing deeply, yet as discreetly as I could muster. I managed to say : “Take my socks off.”

Octavius released the elastic straps of my black stretch pants and removed my socks. I moaned again when he touched my bare skin. I had to bite the knuckle of my thumb in order to keep from whining with delight. I was dying

to introduce one hand in my knickers and play with myself at the same time. I simply *knew* that Octavius would not have found it odd. In fact, he would have considered it as the most natural reaction in the world. Had I touched myself then, I would have reached an orgasm almost instantly but I simply could not masturbate in front of Francis. My inability to do anything at all had the advantage of making the pleasure last. It was an exercise in delightful frustration.

A couple of minutes later, I realised that Octavius was licking my feet. He was sliding his tongue along the base of my toes. With the corner of my eye, I saw Francis lower his newspaper, look at the proceedings and go “Eeehh !” like a child who has found a cockroach in a hamburger. It broke the charm. Francis became shaken with silent laughter and shook his head as if to say “I can’t believe this.” Octavius looked sheepish, obviously not knowing if he should apologise, if he had “gone too far” or

what. As for myself, I was suddenly in a bad mood.

I leant forward and put my socks back on. Francis excused himself. I looked at Octavius whose face was pensive. Caught between Francis and myself, he was not at all in control of the situation and, somehow, I loved it. My bad mood disappeared. I said : “What can I do to make you happy ?” He hid his face in his hands and sighed deeply. Then, and with an unexpected twinkle in his eyes : “Give me your panties.”

There were a few seconds of heavy silence. I was not shocked but I simply never imagined that anyone would be interested in my underwear. I asked, rather stupidly : “Clean ones ?”

“No, the ones you have on now.”

“How can I do that ?”

“Go to the loo, take them off then shove them in the pocket of my coat as you pass through the hallway.”

I felt like laughing, but not at him or his request. I was laughing at the

delightful quirkiness of the situation, at the fact that I had never expected such a request. I wanted to laugh with surprise and happiness but I controlled myself, in case he misunderstood. I just gave him a broad smile and got up. I then kissed him lightly on the lips and, this time, giggled as I ran towards the bathroom but I'm sure that my enthusiasm must have shown and that the giggle could not have been misinterpreted.

I crashed against the door of the downstairs bathroom. Francis was in it, and I was treated to the sound of a foghorn fart. I ran upstairs to my bedroom, took off my trousers and knickers in one fell swoop, separated the two, and put the trousers back on again, enjoying the rough and naked sensation it gave me. I rushed downstairs and managed to smuggle the article in Octavius' coat pocket just as Francis was flushing the toilet. Another second and he would have seen me do it. I got back to the living-room, cheeks all red. I was as

thrilled as a little girl who has done something naughty, and managed not to get caught by her parents. Octavius was standing up and making all the right, polite noises of a guest who must leave.

Chapter Sixteen

At breadcrumb pushing time, two days later, I did not have to say “come and give me a kiss.” Octavius waited only a few seconds after Francis’ disappearance in the kitchen before dragging his chair next to mine. We kissed as feverishly as we had before. We repeated the magic *I love you* until we were both faint and inebriated with it. I sometimes wondered if he was not as desperate to say those words and as eager to hear them as I had been. I gave him his “drink” of saliva, which he obviously craved and, after a while, settled to a more sedate mixture of kisses and conversation. Some of that conversation was mouth to mouth and lips to lips. I loved talking like that, and obviously, so did he, lips brushing against lips according to the arbitrary demands of speech, those fluttering touches often interrupted by deeper kisses, sighs and muffled expressions of delight.

“You may find this hard to believe, Quentina, but your knickers were still warm when I got home. They still had your warmth. I pressed them against my nose and I was in heaven. I don’t think any drug can give you such a high, so instantly. I kept inhaling deeply and I masturbated at the same time. It was wonderful.”

“I love the way you can talk about these things so casually, so naturally. Most men would never mention the fact that they masturbate.”

“Then most men are fools. They have forgotten one simple fact : they will grow old and die. So, what does it matter ?”

“Do you want the knickers I have on now ?”

“Of course. But please don’t misunderstand. I don’t want to start a knickers collection. I just love you, that’s all, and I love anything that is you, that touches you, anything that bears your scent. I just wish you hadn’t

sprayed them with perfume before giving them to me last time.”

“But I didn’t.”

“Really ?”

“Honestly.”

“Then you have the most wonderful scent of any woman in the world. Your vagina secretes the most beautiful perfume ever.”

“You are crazy... but I’m glad you are. If I didn’t believe it before, I would now have to admit that you are indeed in love with me. It’s all in your mind, you know. Doesn’t every woman smell pretty much the same ?”

“Far from it. Ask any dog.”

We both laughed. I thought it was wonderful that we could be so much in love, have such an erotic conversation and still be able to laugh. It made me love him even more, if that was possible. He went on : “I may not be a knickers freak but I am a smell freak. You see, I used to be a wolf in a previous life.”

We burst out laughing again. Meanwhile, back in the kitchen, Francis must have thought that people who laughed out so freely could not possibly be making love. He would have been quite wrong.

“There is one way you can prove to me you didn’t use any perfume” Octavius went on.

“How ?”

“Touch yourself and give me your fingers to smell.”

As on the first occasion when he had asked to drink my saliva, I didn’t even say “yes”. I just did it. I put my hand down my trousers, fought a little with the tightness of the panties (for some reason, the term seemed more appropriate that night) and reached the clitoris. I went further down in a slippery sea of lubricating fluid. My fingers felt delightfully cool on my overheated labia. My eyes fluttered, then closed, with a mixture of pleasure and frustration as I mustered all my willpower in order not to start playing

with myself. I pulled my hand out and placed it in front of his face. He took it gently.

“Watch out, Octavius” I muttered. “It could be a bit strong. My morning shower seems like a long time ago.”

Octavius didn't answer but his reaction was extraordinary. He went quietly wild, like a cat that's drunk on catnip, brushing my fingers against his nose and his lips, breathing heavily and finally licking them. He seemed absolutely ecstatic.

“So” I asked, “is my smell really different from that of other women ?”

“Everyone has a different smell. Yours is the ultimate.”

“You are the most sensuous man I have ever known” I said, before realising that I had known so few. I added : “If I give you my knickers tonight, I want you to give them back to me but I want your sperm on them.”

“You, wonderful woman ! You understand eroticism ! That is so rare !”

In the excitement, his American accent was coming back stronger.

“You are telling me !” I caught myself saying. Spurred by the fun of it, I could not help adding : “Don’t I know it !” No laughter, this time, just a smiling complicity. Totally unrestrained, I delivered the final blow : “You can say that again !” This time, we both burst out laughing. Then, taking his face between my hands I whispered “Tell me what you like to do. Tell me everything. I know you like kissing, drinking saliva, smelling knickers and masturbating. What else ? Bare your soul and I will bare mine.”

“I only like these things because it’s *you*. Quentina, I want you to believe me when I say that I have never asked to drink a woman’s saliva before and I have never smelt anybody’s knickers before. It’s not those things in themselves that count : it’s you, you, you !”

“All right, what would you like to do with me ?”

“All the normal things, I guess. I would like to undress you or ask you to undress in front of me. I’d like to kiss and lick your whole body, and have intercourse with you.”

“As you say, these are *normal* things although I am painfully aware that some men would have neither the patience nor the inclination to kiss and lick my whole body but that’s besides the point. You know, Octavius, there is nothing I wouldn’t do for you : nothing.”

“We all draw the line somewhere.”

“Where do you draw the line ?”

“I draw the line at receiving or inflicting pain or physical damage of any kind. I draw the line at anything to do with what the Chinese call *The ghastly passage.*”

“I’m with you there. Just by the by, what do the Chinese call the other passage ?”

“I don’t remember. How about *The heavenly passage* ?”

“Sounds alright to me. So, apart from pain, the ghastly passage and all the

normal things, what would you like to do when you are with me ?”

“I’d love to watch you playing with yourself.”

“And I would love to do it for you. It would be so exciting ! Would you masturbate in front of me and let me watch you ?”

“I didn’t think women liked that. A man is so ugly to look at, compared to a woman.”

“I’d like to watch you. I’d like to see you crumble with pleasure as you get close to an orgasm and I’d like to watch the sperm come out of you.”

“Quentina, you are a dream come true.”

“I’d like to watch you come as you rub yourself with my knickers.”

“I’d like to watch you sitting naked on an armchair, with your feet on the seat and your knees wide apart.”

It reminded me so much of the photos I had shown Vivian and of those I had taken of her that I could not help

asking : “And would you like to take photos of me like that ?”

“Oh, my God, would you ?” I just nodded. He closed his eyes, unable to take in so much happiness at once. I went on : “You know, Octavius, I think I would come if you looked at me when I sit like that. I would come without touching myself and without your touching me.”

“It would be fun to try.”

“What else ?”

“You would pull your vulva wide open so that I could see everything.” I could not help repeating his words for their sheer erotic impact : “Yes, Octavius, I will pull my vulva wide open so that you can see everything.”

“You said *I will*, not *I would*.”

“That’s because I will, I will.”

“Say it again then.”

“I will pull the lips of my vulva wide open so that you can see everything.”

“I love you more than I ever thought it possible to love a woman. I love you

so much that it hurts. I almost find it hard to catch my breath.”

“What else ?”

He hesitated. It made me even more anxious to know. I pressed him on : “Come on, say it, I’m sure I won’t be shocked.”

“Would you let me watch you pee ?”

I was beyond laughter, surprise or even a sense of wonder : “Yes.”

“Would you pee on my hand while I insert a finger in you ?”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, *yes.*”

We looked at each other, breathing deeply, hypnotised by the vertigo we contemplated in each other’s eyes. He had said that his whole body was hurting. So was mine. I whispered : “Would you like to smell my fingers again ?”

He nodded and watched my hand disappear in my trousers. This time, I couldn’t stop and went on stroking my clitoris. What I had not wanted to do, forty-eight hours earlier, in front of

Francis, seemed so obvious, so natural in front of Octavius that I never thought of it as “indecent” or even “daring”. Sex is freedom. Octavius was *freedom*. Monique, Oliver and Vivian had also given me freedom, but only in a cool, detached sort of way. I had loved Vivian and, as such, the emotional level was much higher than with the other two but, here with Octavius, we were in a situation of reciprocated love, and I felt my mind about to expand as if it wished to become a sphere encompassing the whole of the universe. When I heard him whisper : “I love watching that bulge in your pants going up and down and imagining what it’s doing.” I simply exploded. In an attempt at keeping my outburst from alarming Francis, I ended up with a series of painfully muffled sounds then took my hand out and held it towards Octavius. Once again he became ecstatic, smelling the fingers, pressing them against his lips and licking them.

I rushed out of the room and went upstairs to take my knickers off. I

shoved them in Octavius' coat on my way back. Francis had started coffee. I suddenly had a doubt : a horrible and hilarious doubt. Had I got the right overcoat ? Francis' and Octavius' looked rather similar. I had to go and check : no mistake but I could not help thinking of Francis wanting to blow his nose and pulling my knickers out of his pocket as he arrived at work, his total incapacity at understanding what they were doing there and the ribbing he would take from his colleagues. Almost worth doing for real, one day.

From then on, I had the giggles. Francis and Octavius were both wondering what could be the matter with me. I sat, rather than lay, on the two-seater couch. I felt sated and happy, as well as giggly and did not want to go into a feet-rubbing or feet-licking session.

When it was time for Octavius to leave, I managed to whisper in his ear : "You won't forget, will you ?" I was taking fewer and fewer precautions to

hide my feelings for him in front of Francis. This time, I did take his hand in mine as we walked towards his car and I gave him a long kiss on the mouth before he drove away. From the doorway, Francis watched, seemingly indifferent. Octavius' car disappeared in the night. Francis and I went back to our respective bedrooms. As we got to the landing, he took me in his arms and said gently : "I've never seen you so happy."

"Do you mind ?"

"No, I want you to be happy but be careful also. People often don't realise what chances they take or what misery can be in store for them for the sake of a few spasms."

Until he mentioned *a few spasms*, I thought he had been rather sweet. Now, his ignorance and stupidity repelled me. I pushed him away.

"I've been too careful for too long, Francis, I've got thousands of spasms to catch up with."

Octavius' second letter :

Dear Quentina,

Last night was wonderful. Your kisses are so tender and the things we say to each other are so erotic that I have an erection each time I think of you, but it's not your every-day brand of eroticism : it's the most tender, loving eroticism that I have ever felt. The things you say that turn you on are precisely those that mirror my feelings.

Am I going mad ? I am sitting here, in the study, writing to you and I'm missing you so very much that I am trying hard not to ring you up. I might even give in, in a moment.

I'll stop now otherwise I will bore you and you will resign.

I love you. Perhaps I shouldn't but I can't help it. Here is a quote from an eastern poem I read a long time ago, when I was at School : "If your love is a grain of sand, then mine is a universe of beaches..."

With all my love and a million kisses.

Moi. X...

That second letter came in a padded 5x7 envelope. With it were the knickers I had given him the night before. They were so soaked with sperm that the letter itself was also damp and crinkled.

Chapter seventeen

Millions of people must look forward to the weekend, but during that particular weekend, I only looked forward to being back at the office with Octavius. I could not even invite him over. He and his wife often took themselves off to a second home they had on the Lizard peninsula. For him, there was no question of not going. Her word was law and, as he had pointed out to me not too proudly, he was entirely in her clutches.

For the past couple of weeks, I had viewed Octavius' love for me as nothing but infatuation and, through a remnant of old habits, had tried my best not to give it too much importance. As for my own feelings, I had also judged them to be infatuation. I had played at being in love as a cat plays with a ball of paper and the therapeutic effect had been wonderful. As Francis had noticed, I was happy, light on my feet, in tune with the world. So far, I had very much

looked forward to my Tuesday and Thursday evenings with Octavius but I had not missed him when he was not around.

... but that week-end, the week-end which followed the Thursday when Octavius had smelt my fingers... that week-end had a very different atmosphere. I walked around the house with a weight on my stomach. I was like a lion or a tiger in a cage and felt extremely sorry for such lions and tigers. I ached, body and soul, to be with Octavius again. Every one of my muscles felt heavy and dull. It was not even a sexual need, nothing that could have been alleviated by playing with myself or allowing Francis the luxury of a GOFs (good old-fashioned screw). I never even contemplated doing so. I just wanted to dash into Octavius' arms and remain like that forever. Even Vivian had never had that effect on me. I was always overjoyed at the idea of seeing her again but the certainty that I would see her again was enough to keep me happy the rest of the time.

Whenever he saw me, from breakfast onwards, Francis asked what was the matter with me... if I was all right...

What could I explain to him ? It had taken me so long to reach that stage of delightful unhappiness ! I was, myself, a late developer. I had no lessons to give him... and because I wished him no harm, I did hope that, one day, before it was too late, he would fall in love and experience the same pangs of loneliness and separation. People keep talking about the heart in relation to love but I had the sudden realisation that our stomach is a much more reliable judge of the situation. No need for soul-searching : “Am I in love ? Am I not ?” If your stomach is in knots, you are in love.

And yet... and yet... With my back against the wall and the possibility of walking away into the sunset with Octavius or with Vivian, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that my choice would be Vivian. So, whom did I really love ? Does one ever know for certain ?

The only answer I could muster was that there are many kinds of love and that one is not necessarily better or worse than the other.

With Vivian, I would have had someone to look up to. She was aware of this, somehow. "Please, don't put me on a pedestal." she had said many times. I did not, but I also felt that there was nothing wrong in some sort of admiration, some sort of awe even, on the part of one lover towards the other. When I fantasized about sharing my life with Vivian, I didn't think of her as a maternal substitute. I always saw her, first and foremost, as a loving partner. Yet, if I want to be completely honest with myself, I must admit that I felt, at long last, like a child who can always count on her mother for love and protection. It was as if nothing bad could ever happen to me in her company. My dedication to her happiness would be my mission in life. She would be my strength and my religion.

With Octavius, I felt as if *I* was the protector, the stronger personality. Like some sort of giant bird, I wanted to protect him with my wings and never let go of his warm, sensuous body with its child-like face and innocent looks, an impression reinforced by the letter I received from him when I returned to work on the Monday morning.

Dear Quentina,

You are truly the most wonderful person I have ever met. You are so fascinating and intelligent and so wonderful to be with.

Did you have any idea that I was falling in love with you a while back ? I remember when we went to London, on "Fatal Tuesday", I felt such a surge of love and tenderness for you that it took my breath away. I kept trying to persuade myself that I couldn't possibly be feeling so much for you, especially as I never in my wildest dreams thought that you could ever notice me. A bitter irony, isn't it ? Nobody can make you fall

in love with anyone, it simply happens suddenly and out of the blue and with the most unlikely person.

Octavius was quite right, of course. Older than him, and on a far more modest income, I was indeed a most unlikely person and yet, as a keen reminder that we are all more touchy than we would like to admit, the expression : *unlikely person* did hurt rather ! It was also a reminder that lovers should not talk too much or write too much to each other as they are bound to say something hurtful without thinking.

I didn't believe in love at first sight, but now I do. And it's not just a fleeting feeling of lust. I'm sure that, if it was, it would not be quite so painful. I certainly don't think that I would miss you so much at weekends, and I know I wouldn't be experiencing such deep pangs of love whenever you are close to me.

I didn't plan to fall in love with you, it was either fate, or else, I am truly mad... or both perhaps.

I cannot believe that I am merely imagining that you feel something for me too. I so want to be alone with you at times that it is painful. We must treasure and make the most of the moments when it is possible to be alone. When we were alone the other night, I thought I would die from desire for you. I feel that in our sexual desires you mirror mine so much it's frightening. One day we must spend more than a few fleeting moments together.

I love you... more than words alone will ever show you.

With all my love and a million kisses.

Moi X...

So, Octavius had been pining for me as I had been pining for him. I wanted the world to stop. I no longer felt like going to work. I just wanted to be with him. I wished that his wife, his

daughter and Francis could be changed into statues of salt while Octavius and I gazed into each other's eyes and I whispered for the Nth time : "How can I make you happy ?"

I am not one for writing love letters. I would not know what to say, except "I love you, I love you, I love you..." a whole page of "I love you"s : an attempt at making up for all the times when "normal" people say it and I had not. In the end, I actually made the effort of setting pen to paper. I chose a very expensive paper, one with tiny blue lines barely visible within the thickness of the pulp, one that smelled like a fresh bar of soap, and I inserted it in a stiff, opaque envelope to match. I was a little girl, in love for the first time, and writing to her lover for the first time. Laughable ? But who would laugh indeed ? We live in a desert of indifference.

The next day I left the envelope on Octavius' desk. In the letter, I thanked him for the beautiful things he had

written to me and, under the heading :
 “How can I make you happy ?” I added :
 “I want you to make a list of *all* the
 things you want to do with me : *all* of
 them. The answer appeared the next
 morning.

Octavius’ list :

Dear Quentina,

*You ask me to bare my soul. I find
 it as exciting as baring anything else you
 can think of. Here we go :*

*- I like intercourse as much as any
 one, but to me, it is just one possibility
 among others. Missionary position ?
 Certainly ; why not ?*

*- But also, if you were on all fours and
 I took you from behind, I could caress
 your breasts and your clitoris.*

*- For the same reason, I’d like to sit on
 a chair and you would impale yourself
 on me. Then we would both have use of
 our hands.*

- *Lying down, I would also like you on top, certainly.*

- *Apart from these obvious activities, I would like to lie, naked, against you and not move for a very long time, only kissing perhaps. You know how much I like kissing and the touching of tongues and drinking your saliva.*

Just what I so enjoyed doing with Vivian. Once again, I saw Octavius as my perfect mate.

- *I have already mentioned watching you pee and feeling you pee on my hand while I have a finger in your vagina. If you lie on top of me, I would also like you to pee while I am inside you.*

- *We have also mentioned watching you masturbate. I would like to watch you in so many ways and positions, with and without your knickers on, lying down, sitting down, standing... The variations are endless but I would also like to have all this on video. Four hours of Quentina playing with herself over the*

*months and, why not, over the years ?...
The mind boggles.*

We never did anything of the sort in the end. Other projects of the same ilk were mentioned now and then. I cannot even remember them all. When we were together we only had eyes, ears, hands, lips, tongues and bodies for each other. I was quite thrilled at the thought that he wanted to engage in such exhibitionist games as a 4-hour video and, as he often told me, he was thrilled at the knowledge that I was willing – eager, in fact – to participate (I remembered so fondly Vivian’s enthusiasm at being photographed and how intoxicating were the thrills that such enthusiasm gave me). Octavius and I walked across each other’s minds and desires through wide open doors and this freedom made us so drunk with love that, by the time we actually became lovers, we often spent inordinate lengths of time doing absolutely nothing : just cuddling,

feeling the soft nakedness of our bodies from head to toes, listening to each other's heartbeat, responding to the breathing on our necks as if it had been a sophisticated caress, clinging to each other with a gentle and slow form of despair, never wanting to let go, aching to freeze the moment, stop the clock, merge into eternity.

Being in love means that the slightest touch, the lightest of kisses is heavenly. No need to swing from chandeliers. But when we do, figuratively speaking, swing from chandeliers by doing things which are – or are supposed to be – daring, such as taking photos or videos, then it becomes quite mind-blowing. The instinct leading us to blend bodies is superseded by that of blending minds. Octavius and I were so at one with our respective acceptance of each other's "daring" suggestions that our souls had indeed merged like two overlapping shadows. It was, whether we were together or not, like a painful, wonderful, prolonged, exhausting,

intellectual orgasm. It was being in love at its most devastating and unbearably intense. It was reaching the outer fringes of something quite impossible to understand : the meaning of life, perhaps, or the reason for the existence of the universe... but we also knew that we would always remain tantalisingly close to this revelation while never being admitted to the inner circle of knowledge. It was simply that the contemplation of someone else's soul, without its defence and pretences, a soul in all its nakedness, childishness and naïveté is akin to being allowed a glimpse at infinity : you cannot stare at it for too long without getting vertigo. I resumed my reading of his letter.

- By the way, have you ever tried this: you take the man's penis in your hand and you make yourself come by rubbing it against your clitoris. I don't know how long I could last. Maybe I would come first but it would be fun trying.

- I would also like to masturbate in front of you ; again with as many variations as you can think of. You can tell me what to do.

- I like it when you take the initiative. I love it.

- I would like to play "rag doll". One of us lies on a bed, all dressed up, and goes absolutely limp : no movement, no reaction and the other one does anything he or she wants. I can imagine undressing you slowly and taking all the time in the world gazing at your pink flower which, by the way, I haven't seen yet. I fantasise about opening the outer and inner lips gently and slowly.

- I want to undress you leisurely and kiss your whole body as I do so.

- I would like you to treat me to a striptease and dance naked in front of me in a very hot room until you are quite flushed and sweaty and I would then lick the sweat off your body, especially the big drops running between your breasts. I've never felt like doing that to anyone else. If a top model appeared in

front of me, naked and covered in sweat, I would find her repulsive. I would tell her to go and have a shower but with you, it's different... everything is different.

- I want to straddle your chest while you make me come : one of your hands on my penis, the other stroking my balls. I want the sperm to land on your chest and on your face.

- Above all, I like oral sex, which is why I mention it last. I love to give and receive oral sex : I can never get enough of it. Sometimes, while we are at the office and we act so properly and so correctly towards each other, I wish you could sit on my desk, in front of me, cross your feet behind my back and let me lick you. I am dying to feel your hardened clitoris on the tip of my tongue. I can imagine sliding my tongue and my lips all the way from your vagina to the clitoris and back again. Quentina, why did you ask me to write this list ? It's driving me insane.

Je t'adore.

Moi...X

Before Octavius came back to have dinner with us, I had a heart-to-heart conversation with Francis.

“Francis, I am going to make love to Octavius.”

It was late afternoon, on the Thursday. We both had done some hurried shopping after work : pitch dark, cold weather, drizzle, crowded supermarkets, full car parks, drivers on edge... a nightmare. We had simply plunked the shopping bags on the floor of the kitchen and made a cup of tea in order to catch our breaths.

Francis remained silent for a long time. I began to wonder if he was pretending not to have heard what I said. He took a sip of his tea and stared out of the window. A heavy mist had taken over from the drizzle and inserted its cold tentacles among the trees in the garden. I was looking at him but he kept avoiding eye contact. Finally he

muttered : “I thought you were already. I saw you kiss him.”

“In a manner of speaking, Octavius and I are already having an affair but it falls rather short of what I want.”

“You never asked for my permission when you had an affair before and pretended to go to Vivian’s almost every night. So, why ask now ?”

“First of all, I’m not asking you, Francis : I’m telling you. And second, when I had an affair before, I didn’t pretend to go to Vivian’s : I *was* going to Vivian’s.”

“So, you didn’t have an affair, then ? You were just pretending, in order to make me jealous. Is that it ?”

“Francis, you are so thick !” I then took a deep breath and shouted : “Francis, I *was* having an affair *with* Vivian.”

To my surprise, and almost to my disgust, he sniggered : “That’s impossible.”

“And why is that ?”

“She’s a woman. You are not a lesbian, are you ?” Francis’ stupidity had, at first, made me lose my temper but then I felt so deflated and discouraged by his last remark that the anger disappeared and tears of sadness filled my eyes.

“No, Francis, I am not homosexual, I’m not heterosexual, I’m not bisexual, I’m not anything you can put a label on... I am just me. Is that so bad ?”

“What you mean is that you crave sex.”

“Is that so bad too ?”

“I can give you sex. I’m not impotent, you know.”

“You can give me fast food sex. I want gourmet sex, three-star restaurant sex.”

“You want perverted sex.”

“Francis, you don’t know what you are talking about : perverted sex is anal sex, excrements, chains, rubber, whips, diapers, leather, bondage, slavery, pain, blood and period blood. Shall I go on ?”

And I'll have none of that, if it can make you feel any better."

"Then I don't understand."

"You don't *want* to understand. You never did. I just hope that, one day, when you are too old, and it's too late, you suddenly realise what a mess you've made of your life... not to mention my life."

He shrugged, as I knew he would. In his feeble mind, there I was again, being childish, immature, superficial... I decided to bring the conversation back to more practical matters.

"I'll ask Octavius to take me to a motel or something..."

"**No** !" Francis' reaction was so sudden and forceful that it made me jump. He went on, more calmly : "No, don't do that.... Listen, I don't often ask for a favour but if you are going to have sex with Octavius, I want you to stay here, where it's warm, nice and comfortable. Just look at this weather. I don't want you to drag yourself out at night in heavy traffic and end-up in an

impersonal and depressing motel, not to mention the possibility of muggings and car accidents. Let's keep it all nice and cosy... and discreet."

"You mean you don't mind if I take him to my room?"

"Yes, I would mind that very much." Then, almost pleading: "I'd like you to stay downstairs. You can do what you want. I won't mind. I'll be upstairs. You can have the living room. I'm sure it's quite comfortable... isn't it?"

I looked at the window, got up and closed the curtains. Francis was right on that score. The lazy way, the comfortable way would be to stay right here. It was bad enough that Octavius would have to travel to and from his house. And why not the living room indeed? It's the biggest room in the house, there are two couches and two armchairs and a thick, soft carpet. It's nice and warm, and if Octavius wanted to watch me dance in the nude, there was certainly enough space for that... I went over to Francis, gave him a little

hug and a kiss on the cheek. “You won’t come down in the middle of it all, will you ?”

“Of course not. What do you take me for ? If we have an arrangement, we have an arrangement and that’s that.”

“Will you find it exciting to imagine what we are doing while you are upstairs ?”

No answer. Again, he was avoiding eye contact. I took his head in my hands and made him look at me : “Will you ?”

“Leave me alone.”

“Will you masturbate ?”

I thought he was going to hit me but he controlled himself, his face very red. “Quentina, how can you say things like that ? Only teenagers mm... masturbate.”

“Oh, really ? What a font of knowledge you are ! Who told you that little goody ? Did you pick it up in a leaflet at the back of a church ? Was it called *Growing up as a Christian* or something like that ? Or was it *The*

Sanctity of Marriage by Father Montretout, S.J. ?”

I did not expect answers and did not get any. I headed for the kitchen in order to start sorting out the shopping, but urged by a wickedly funny little devil, I came back. As Francis was getting ready to help with the groceries, I said : “I bet you’d like to watch.”

“Quentina !”

“Well, wouldn’t you, or are you scared you might learn something ?”

He turned around, left the room and ran upstairs. I heard the door of his bedroom slam. There, I thought with renewed sadness, there goes the man who is always telling me to “grow up”. I yanked a shopping bag on the kitchen counter and started taking out various purchases, some to go in the fridge, some to the dry food cupboard... noodles, a roll of rubbish bags, butter...

Suddenly, Francis was back in the kitchen. I had not heard him come down. He took another bag and helped me sort things out. I looked at him as if

to say : “Well...?” He actually managed a little smile : “We’ve agreed on something. Let’s not spoil the rest of the evening. Fancy a drink before dinner ?”

Chapter Eighteen

Octavius arrived at sevenish for what I had, quite deliberately, concocted as a simple dinner : a sort of mashed potato and flaked fish pie with béchamel sauce and grated Cheddar on top, browned under the grill and served with a white Rioja. No first course, no cheese tray, no dessert. Just fruit at the end. I could see that Octavius was far too polite to make remarks about the stark simplicity of the meal and that he suspected that there could be something wrong. I did not give anything away but was either too quiet, almost severe or, suddenly, given to fits of laughter.

Once or twice, I observed Octavius looking at Francis as if to ask : “What’s going on ?” and Francis just raised his eyebrows in a way that was meant to say : “Search me.” So, Francis could be a comedian when he wanted to. Well, well, well... I was tempted to think : “There is hope yet.” But I knew there

was no hope as far as he was concerned. He did not even have the courage to admit that he found the idea of Octavius and I making love in his own house, exciting. He had probably been quite a normal little boy to start with, but just as my parents had, and for decades, numbed my ability to love and had done so with the potency of a general anaesthetic, then something or someone had done the same for Francis' sex life.

As the meal progressed, I became quieter and quieter. I was going to make love to Octavius ! I was going to be naked in front of him. He would kiss me. We would lick each other's most intimate places. It was as frightening as being a virgin on her first "important" date. I was preparing myself to take a serious jump into the unknown. All of a sudden, I could not feel any desire.

Then, and for no particular reason, I started to think of other things : VD and AIDS. Octavius' wife had, apparently, a new lover every three

months or so. That is four a year, forty in ten years. And, by his own admission, he still had sex with her. And... and... he probably would not have brought any condoms with him. I most certainly did not have any in the house.

Octavius and I had told each other many times that intercourse was not our priority and yet, in spite of the fact that my sex drive was suddenly in limbo, I desperately wanted to have intercourse with him tonight. It was symbolic. It was like a seal of approval. All in the mind, of course... all totally unavoidable.

I perked up again, looked Octavius straight in the eyes and smiled as I was thinking : “I am going to have intercourse with you for the first time and you don’t know it yet. How absolutely super !” Octavius smiled back and asked : “What ?”

“What, what ?”

“Why do you look at me like that ?”

“I won’t tell you. You’ll find out.”

Francis stood up : “I’ll leave you two, now. Good night.” Octavius mouthed slowly : “No coffee ?” I shook my head “No” and, as he could hear Francis going upstairs, he asked : “Francis isn’t doing the dishes either ? There is something wrong, isn’t there ? Perhaps I should go.”

“And where would you go ?”

“To a pub or a cinema, somewhere, until the coast is clear at home.”

“And why isn’t the coast clear at home ?”

“Come on, Quentina, you know full well : the current boyfriend and all that. Ever since you’ve started inviting me twice a week, Isabel has summoned her boyfriend over on the same nights.”

I wondered, for a fleeting moment, where their 11-year old daughter was being parked all this time but I had more pressing things on my mind. I stood up. There was a slight look of panic on Octavius’ face. We were not supposed to stand : we were supposed to draw our chairs close together, at

right angles, and start kissing. I could read him like a book. He really did think there was something wrong. I held out my hand and he stood up as well. "We are going to the living room." I said, and led him there.

Octavius was looking around as if to make sure that Francis had not sneaked back. I pressed his hand in mine, turned to face him and gave him a long kiss. With my lips still against his, I said softly but clearly : "Francis is not coming back." Octavius pushed me away at arm's length. It was his turn to look deep into my eyes. I repeated: "Francis is *not* coming back. Would you like to see me naked ?"

"Oh, my God ! Are you sure ?"

"You haven't answered my question."

"Yes, of course, of course."

"Would you like to undress me or would you like me to do it ?"

He did not answer. He seemed petrified but I understood. I had felt exactly like that a few moments earlier in the dining room. Only I'd had time to

sort out my waves of contradictory feelings, from desire to fear and back to desire again. Now, I was really panting to make love to him. He, on the other hand, was taken by surprise. All he could say was repeat : “Are you sure ?”

I untucked my shirt. I had bought a man’s shirt a few days earlier, a shirt very much in the same style as those that Octavius liked so much. I untucked the shirt and, instead of opening it, I lifted it over my breasts and kept it around my neck, a gesture which I found delightfully indecent, even more so, perhaps, than lifting a skirt. I wore no bra. I never do. They are useless. I am too small and too firm. They make no difference. I honestly thought that Octavius was going to faint, but he got hold of himself, came towards me and whispered once again : “Oh, my God !” He slid his lips across my chest, going from one breast to the other and stopping to take the nipples in his mouth and flicking them with his tongue. He then drew back and gingerly extended his fingers towards my nipples

as if they were going to burn him. He touched them so lightly and delicately that I shivered. I unbuttoned the shirt and threw it on the floor. He started kissing my chest again and soon went down towards the belt of my trousers.

In one swoop, I lowered the trousers and knickers and kicked them out of the way. I was naked, save for my socks. Octavius fell on his knees in front of me and started licking me. Then, all of a sudden, he stopped and looked up : “You’ve shaved !”

“I always do. Is that good or bad ?”

“It’s wonderful. I absolutely love it.”

“Isn’t it time you took your own clothes off ?”

He stood up : “Oh, yes, of course. Sorry. It all happened so unexpectedly.” While he was getting out of his clothes, I sat on the couch. When he was naked, he knelt in front of me and started licking me again. The fact that we were both naked, yet *not* in a bedroom, was terribly exciting. I was dying to feel him inside me. His oral technique was

superb and I soon found myself climbing towards a climax. I pushed him away, rolled on the couch, opened my legs and, my voice hoarse with longing, whispered : “Come inside me.”

Once again, he asked : “Are you absolutely sure ?” I just nodded and closed my eyes. Oddly enough, I still had time to think : *If he says “are you sure” one more time, I’ll strangle him*”. He lay gently on top of me and, supporting all his weight on his hands, placed his penis between my labia, stopped there for a couple of seconds then slid effortlessly into me. I was quite tight but oozing with lubrication. I came within seconds and so did he. I looked at him and laughed.

“So much for sophisticated sex.” I said.

He withdrew. I caught his still erect penis and pulled it a couple of times. I’ve always liked to do that, just to see the man’s whole body jerk as he is so sensitive, by then ; but also to enjoy the slippery feeling in the palm of my hand.

He knelt up between my legs and lost himself in the contemplation of my genitals. I could feel his sperm flowing out of me and wetting my anus. "What are you looking at?" I asked.

"A most beautiful thing. You are bright pink and dilated. I can see another blob of sperm poised to come out, and without pubic hair, it all looks so clean, so lovely and so smooth!"

He introduced a finger in me and I shivered as he had when I grabbed his penis. He took the finger out and licked it. "Do you want some?" he asked.

"Yes, I want to taste you." He slid his finger in again and brushed my lips with it before letting me suck it. Then he bent over and kissed me.

We both straightened out and sat, side by side, on the couch. Octavius took me in his arms and we remained motionless for a long time, my head against his neck, his face in my hair.

"Shouldn't we go and wash?" he asked.

“No. Francis doesn’t want us upstairs”. I was then shaken with silent laughter : “The couch is getting soaked under me. His fault entirely.”

“Did you know that butterflies can taste and smell with their feet ?”

Now, how is one supposed to answer such a question from the man you love, minutes after he has ejaculated inside you for the first time ?

“No”, I said, “I didn’t know that.”

“Well, I am now able to describe how they feel.”

“I’m so glad.”

“When the tip of my penis was resting against the entrance to your vagina, I swear I could taste the fluid coming out of you. It was burning hot and salty and that’s what made me come so soon.”

“I owe you an apology.”

“Why ?”

“I thought you were going nuts.” The room was nice and warm and I felt like falling asleep against his chest but I

also shivered. “Do you mind if we put our clothes back on ? I feel emotionally exhausted.”

“No, I don’t mind at all.” Yet, we did not move for what seemed like the longest time. I was cold, I wanted to put something on, and at the same time, did not want to tear myself away from Octavius. I had to, in the end. I got up, put my knickers back on and also my slippers and my shirt but not my trousers. “I’ll go and make some coffee.”

When I came back, Octavius was dressed, safe for his jacket and tie. I cuddled against him again and whispered : “Are you going to drop me like an old sock, now that you have had me ?”

“There are men who do that, I know. I can’t begin to understand why. Besides, I haven’t *had* you. People don’t *have* each other. I love you, that’s all.”

“No notch on the bedstead ? Number 65 or something like that ? School report : C+ if I am lucky ?”

“Sixty-five ? Wow ! Who do you think I am ? Casanova ? I usually have to work hard at it before I can *have* a woman as you put it.”

“Was I too easy ?”

“Quentina, please ! I am neither a teenager nor a puritan. All I know is that even if we were never to see each other again, the moments we just spent together would remain the happiest in my life. I mean it.”

“Even if we rushed things tonight ?”

“Absolutely. That’s irrelevant. I love you.”

“If Francis had seen us, it would have been a kind of sweet revenge for him.”

“It was our first lovemaking. We rushed because we were both a little scared, a little uncomfortable, nervous, taken by surprise, you name it. You’ll see : we will do much better next time... if you want us to have a next time, that is.”

“Of course, we will. Now that I have had you, I’m not letting you go.”

“You’ve asked me to make a list but you haven’t given me yours.”

“It’s the same : you are my perfect mate.”

He kissed me. The coffees were getting cold. He placed his lips against my ear and whispered : “I couldn’t get another erection so soon and yet I feel like making love to you all over again.”

“Me too... in a manner of speaking. I feel all swollen again.”

“Would you like me to lick you ?”

“I would, only I’m all messy and sticky.”

“I like Messy and Sticky, they are my favourite dwarfs. Take your knickers off.”

I did, slid my bottom towards the edge of the couch, opened my legs and let myself go back. “Oh yes, my Perfect Mate” I almost yelled : “Lick away !”

Octavius’ third letter :

Dear Quentina,

I am going to miss you more than ever this weekend. If I had one wish it would be that we could have a whole weekend alone together. Time to hold you and talk to you and love you...

Je t'adore

Moi X...

Chapter Nineteen

If the previous weekend has been an introduction to pining, the next one was sheer torture. Going through the motions of getting up, having breakfast, taking a shower... felt as if I was on a planet twice the mass of Earth, with twice the gravity. My muscles felt twice as heavy, every movement a slow-motion effort. Francis asked me if I planned to do any shopping and offered to do it for me as, in his own words, I looked “awful”. Always nice to hear... I let him go. My whole body was stiff and burning, yet quite cold, if that’s at all possible ; burning inside, cold on the outside. I wished I had a big dog to cuddle... I settled for the cat.

To make things worse, Octavius and I knew that Isabel had booked a Christmas holiday in some tropical island or other. As Christmas day fell on a Wednesday, Isabel had insisted that Octavius should close his office from Friday 20th December to Monday

6th January. She had probably bought his premises for him anyway. With an annual income from shares and property running at roughly £800,000 a year, Isabel often referred to Octavius' activities as his "little games", something to keep him out of mischief, so to speak.

The steady march of time and the approach of the Christmas holiday filled Octavius and me with dread. If it was *that* hard to go through a single weekend, what would it be like to spend seventeen days apart ? Neither of us wanted to contemplate this ordeal.

The telephone rang. It was Octavius. "I am at the cottage", he said. "Isabel and Caroline have gone shopping. Are you alone ?"

"Yes."

"What are you wearing ?"

"A man's shirt, a plain white one, and jeans."

"I've never seen you in jeans."

“I’ll model them for you if you want but I don’t think you’ll find them terribly exciting.”

“Do they have a zip at the front ?”

“Yes.”

“Then I would find them exciting. I would open the zip and slide my hand over your knickers.”

“You, dirty old man !”

“I’m not old.”

“What about yourself ? What are you wearing ?”

“I’m only just getting up. I’m still in my pyjamas. I’m sitting on the side of the bed. And you, where are you ?”

“In the study.”

“On a chair ?”

“No. There’s a small couch in the study.”

“Oh !”

Prolonged silence. Then he started again : “Guess what I would like you to do.”

“I can guess. Is this an obscene telephone call ?”

“Most definitely.”

“Tell me then.”

“Take your jeans down but leave them around your ankles. Don’t take your knickers off but start masturbating through the material. Then, Monday morning, I’d like you to give me those knickers.”

“OK and what are you going to do ?”

“Anything you want. I have, next to me, the panties you gave me a while ago. They still smell wonderful... and I’ve got a free hand. Let’s make it last, shall we ?”

“I don’t always rush things, you know.”

“I know, and I so wish I could watch you !”

“Me too.”

From then on, the dialogue became rather disjointed. Long periods of silence interrupted by audible – if not exactly heavy – breathing. Mumbled

and muffled “I love you”s... I kept myself on the very edge of an orgasm, waiting for him to come, which took a surprisingly long time, although I would have been incapable of saying exactly how long, as my perception of time became rather blurred. When he yelled “I’m coming, *now* !”, I moved my fingers harder and faster and managed to join him a few seconds later.

I felt much better after that for the rest of the day. We agreed that whenever we could telephone each other while enjoying some privacy, we would always start masturbating as a matter of course, even if it did not end up in an orgasm, but we were deluding ourselves : it always did. We saw it as an anti-pining device. It worked, but only partially. We still wanted to cuddle and be with each other afterwards, nor did we want to get off the phone, letting long silences set in and asking “Are you still there ?” On one such occasion, Octavius said to me :

“You won’t believe this.”

“What ?”

“I’m getting a second erection.”

“Are you going to play again ?”

“I’ll certainly try. You know, I’ve never had another erection so soon after an orgasm. Never. Except, of course, when I was very young. What are you doing to me, Quentina ? You must operate some sort of magic.”

“What happened when you were very young ?”

“When I was about fifteen years’ old, my girlfriend and I wanted to find out how often I could come in quick succession. She gave me five hand jobs within a couple of hours or so. I was a bit sore towards the end but it was, shall we say... interesting.”

“It made quite an impression on you, obviously. Would you say it was one of the best moments of your life ?”

“Yes.”

“Would you say you remember it more fondly than, for instance, your first car ?”

“I’ve never thought about it like that but, yes : it is a more powerful memory.”

“From the moment we have an acceptable standard of living, further possessions mean nothing. What we are doing now is much more important.”

“Are you doing it too, then ?” I could not resist using one of his favourite expressions : “Most definitely.”

“Do you think you’ll come a second time ?”

“I think so, and you ?”

“I know so. It’s wonderful, isn’t it ?”

“Yes, it’s wonderful and I adore you.”

“I adore you, Quentina”.

Notwithstanding the dreaded approach of the Christmas holiday, Octavius and I had, during the week, the sort of relationship that I considered “normal” and Francis would have labelled “perverted”. Octavius was indeed a delicate, considerate, but also a remarkably inventive, uninhibited

and enthusiastic lover. To all this he added a subdued, quirky sense of humour which gave our love making extra spice and flavour. As with Vivian, I took things at a leisurely pace, extracting the most out of each second. We spent ages looking at each other, exploring each other's bodies, kissing, licking, cuddling but, in contrast to the way Vivian and I had acted, we also kept saying how much we loved each other, how much we enjoyed what we were doing and what was being done to us, always reinforcing how marvellous we thought the other one was. We did not need the "list". We simply made love for hours, sometimes falling asleep on the living-room carpet.

The rest of the week, I was walking on air. Francis kept saying that he had never seen me so happy. What amazed me most perhaps, was that, with Octavius the feeling of novelty never seemed to wear off. The idea that I might, at some point, get tired of his love seemed preposterous. Whenever he touched me, I felt "born again" as they

say these days. Sensations remained fresh, my skin reacting every time with a delightful shiver, as if it had never been touched before. It would seem that I had the same effect on him.

The other men I had slept with, including Oliver – the best of the lot before Octavius – had remained something of an enigma. There had been, on their part, a few sighs, grunts and murmurs of appreciation but their faces had remained remarkably unemotional. Even seconds before an orgasm, they had looked as if they were in a sort of hard dream. Octavius, by contrast, smiled, laughed, squeaked, moaned and found endless ways of expressing his surprise at the intensity of what he felt, at his delight in being with me and at everything that I did to him. Above all, he kept expressing his love for me and his gratitude for all that was happening to his life. He was in awe of me. He worshipped me, every aspect of me, every movement, every

scent, every secretion, every initiative, every novelty.

Octavius talked a lot while making love. This habit would undoubtedly irritate many women, just as a talkative woman will irritate many men. Whenever I had tried to talk to Francis during our extremely basic sexual activities, he had always asked me to shut up. It was lucky for both Octavius and me that I loved what he said. He would describe, for my benefit, how swollen my labia became and the fact that they turned deeply pink at the edges while the rest of them remained delicate and pale. He would enthuse about the wetness oozing out of me, and the shine it gave to the rest of the genitals. He would talk about the taste of these love juices in the way some people describe great wines. He would try to make me share what the warmth and softness of my skin or the touch of my lips did to him. He would often announce the approach of his orgasms with what I can only describe as the most genuine and unaffected

immodesty. I never tired of listening to him as it lifted our lovemaking to such incredible heights...

I was rediscovering... no... I was discovering sex and its beauty. I felt as I should have felt at the age of sixteen or eighteen, with that wonderful Prince Charming that we all long for but never find. It was as if I had been in a prison for decades and was now savouring each second of freedom.

Like a locust that had spent seventeen years as an ugly, underground caterpillar, I had finally become capable of flying with my own wings in the warmth and sunlight of a brand new life... but for how long? Locusts only last for a few weeks after they learn to fly. Octavius had triggered my metamorphosis and, for that, I too was in awe of him.

Octavius and I did not stop when I had my periods. As I lay on the floor, limbs stretched out, a tampon firmly set inside me, he would often kneel by my side and finger my clitoris

beautifully with one hand while brushing my breasts delicately with the other one. We used Vaseline then, as I remained quite dry. If we happened to be at the beginning of my periods, when I was flooding, I would sometimes keep my knickers on and it reminded me of the first evening Vivian and I had spent together ; only, this time, I was Vivian, letting myself go, closing my eyes, concentrating exclusively on a whole rainbow of sensations. Octavius played with me so expertly, so patiently and, above all, so lovingly ! He did not just play *with* me : he played *me* as a world-famous virtuoso would play the violin.

Periods were also the opportunity to make him come by hand all over me, then bring him against me. We would rub our chests together until we were both smeared... but, above all, these were the nights when I performed oral sex on him. Not since the days of Oliver had I found myself so close to the waves of pleasure going through a man's body, felt his muscles tighten, heard his

uncontrollable moans and received his shooting sperm in my mouth. Sometimes I swallowed it, but I usually kissed him and gave it back to him. From him to me, from me to him, we merged, we attained a unity that made us feel as if we were about to share some universal and eternal truth. He said that every time he came in my mouth, he felt closer to me than ever before. He repeated what lovers say all over the world : “I thought that it was impossible to love you more, but I do love you more and more. I love you madly and it hurts so much ! Yes, Quentina, my whole body aches with love for you. It’s the most delightful torture in the world. It’s unbearable... yet I never want it to end.”

“What have I done to be loved so much ? I don’t deserve it.”

“Oh but you do. From the first moment I saw you, I thought you were incredibly beautiful and desirable. Then you asked : *what can I do to make you happy* ? Then, when I declared my love

for you, you said: *yes, yes, yes !* That makes you the most wonderful woman in the world.”

“My parents would have said, and Francis would still say, that prostitutes can be beautiful and desirable and they always say : *yes.*”

“Very few prostitutes are beautiful. Even fewer are desirable. They don’t say *yes*, they say *all right, then, but it will be an extra fifty quid.* Nor do they say *I love you* unless you ask them to.”

“You seem to be quite an expert.”

“I’m probably being extremely unfair. I’ve never even talked to one, not knowingly, anyway.”

“Would you still love me if you learned that I was a prostitute ?”

“I would still love you if I learned that you were an alien who’s taken over a human form and that, on your planet, you were a green, two-headed, slimy creature with eight legs and a razor-sharp spine.”

“Damn ! How did you know ? Francis told you, didn’t he ? That idiot could never keep his mouth shut.”

“Come here, my little monster. Let me do *things* to you.”

After he’d done *things*, we remained silent for a long time, then I asked : “My loving you hurts me, just as your loving me seems to hurt you. Why is it that love and happiness can be so painful ?”

“I don’t know Quentina but they do. It’s got something to do with man’s yearning for infinity.”

“I can see infinity in your eyes.”

“There is infinity in everybody’s eyes, or so I was told.”

“Yes Octavius, but in my eyes it had been repressed, it had been murdered. My parents repressed and murdered my own capacity for love and happiness... well almost anyway. It took me a jolly long time to recover but it came back after all... I too can see infinity in your eyes. I can drink it from your eyes because you are the one I love, and love opens the gates of infinity.”

“I was born fully armed, like Minerva out of Jupiter’s thigh.”

“This”, I enunciated carefully, “wouldn’t have anything to do with butterfly feet or anything like that, would it?”

“No : it has to do with the feeling that I was born fully grown a few weeks ago, and that I am seeing the world for the very first time.”

“I know what you mean. Until I met Vivian, then you, I felt like a murmillo hopelessly trapped in the net of a retiarius and quite convinced that only Death could get me out. Now, strangely enough... now that there is so much more to enjoy, I feel that, having known such happiness, I could face Death much more calmly. I’ve gone full circle.”

Octavius’ fourth letter handed in the office before going home :

Dearest Quentina,

I am truly going mad. It is going to be unbearable during the Christmas holiday. I used to look forward to holidays but now, holidays have a whole new, and not so pleasant connotation. My heart will just about die when we go away at Christmas – it's not my favourite time of year anyway – but now I think it might be even less so.

Perhaps you won't feel the same. Are you still in love with Vivian ? Perhaps you'll be dreaming about her and forget all about me ? Who knows ?... I'm not even sure I want to know. I cannot believe that she made you as happy as I can. Since you've started working for me, and we've started making love, you seem more relaxed and more at peace with yourself. Happy even, if I dare say so. There was a deep sadness in your eyes when we were first getting to know each other.

I probably should not be writing any of these things. All I know is that I am so deeply in love with you that it is physically painful to be so close to you

at work and not be able even to touch you ; or, when I walk past you, not be able to wrap my arms around you and kiss you. It's 4 pm - you are nearly finished so I have to stop writing. I will write you a long letter later on. I know I'll miss you the moment you leave the office.

With all my love and, to go back to the same oriental poem I once quoted, "If one kiss was a snowflake, I would send you a blizzard."

Moi X...

Octavius' fifth letter, same day :

Dearest Quentina,

I know I've written to you already but I'm missing you so badly that I feel that perhaps, if I write it will ease the pangs of love, even just a little bit.

I can think of nothing else – I can see you in my mind all the time and sometimes I think I can see no further than being with you again. Have I gone

mad ? Why do I experience these things for you ? How can a single woman give me so much pleasure and so much pain at the same time ?

You are the most beautiful woman I have ever met. When you make love, you are so soft, and gentle, and erotic in the most tender and beautiful way. In the opinion of most men, I am probably undersexed because sex means very little to me without love. It is often more fulfilling to masturbate.

But you – you are unique and have ravished me and stolen my heart with a power that I cannot resist. When I say ravished, I don't mean physically because you are no man-eater ; you are far too gentle and beautiful to do that. I mean, you have sent me into raptures. You are capable of taking my breath away with just a glance. You have intoxicated my mind with your soft sensuality and I would give anything to have a whole weekend with you. The very thought brings to my skin the touch of you, to my mouth the taste of you, to

my nostrils the smell of you and to my mind the pleasure I drown into when I am with you. You are the sort of woman that I thought only existed in dreams. You are like everything I could ever want in one single being.

I have a perpetual ache in my heart and abdomen, not to mention the almost constant erection and I can think of nothing but Quentina.

I cannot breathe without you.

I adore you with my whole being.

Moi...

Chapter Twenty

Christmas holidays had never been Octavius' cup of tea. They had never been mine either. Short days, always dark and rainy, or so it seemed; crowds, traffic, exhaust fumes, hysterical shopping, same depressingly cheerful seasonal tunes in every shop...

I usually feel like battening down the hatches and, for a whole week, not even looking out of a window. However, Christmas without Octavius was obviously far worse. I wished I could simply hibernate.

If I had to describe the fortnight Octavius and I spent apart, I would say that it was like being in a dark tunnel. He only sent one postcard from his tropical island. It arrived the day before we were to start work again, but when we did start work he presented me with a shiny black diary in which he had been writing me a letter every day. If I

were to go on living, I would say that I would treasure this diary forever. As it is, I will burn it, along with all his other letters. I keep them in a small portable strongbox and re-read them often. When I open the box, the smell of his *Eternity for Men* always takes me by surprise. It is a smell I was never able to detect on individual letters but which seems to have been building up within the box.

There are people, or so I was told, lonely people, spinsters most of them, who set pen to paper and re-write in longhand one of their favourite novels. And why not ? It is a totally harmless pursuit and it must give them a deep understanding of the novelist, and of his or her style. It must be a mixture of homage and pleasure or they would not do it. My way of paying homage (and also my pleasure) is to re-write here parts of Octavius' Christmas diary :

Day one :

I awoke this morning with a heaviness of heart which only seemed to get progressively worse as the day wore on.

We've known each other for such a short time, and look how far we have come ! It's frightening, really, as I have never felt such tenderness and love towards anyone before. I've certainly never experienced such pain at being apart from anyone before. What is this power that you possess over me ? How will I survive the pain of not seeing you for seventeen days ? For me, it will be an unbearable eternity. For you ? Who knows ?... possibly blessed relief...

Day two :

Today I kept as busy as I could, settling down in the hotel, helping Isabel with souvenir hunting, smothering her with suntan lotion but, busy or not, I keep missing you so ! I play with Caroline, I mix with other "guests" but laughter is hollow without you. Silence is loneliness. Laughter is worse.

Day three :

The resort is gearing itself up for a tropical Christmas. I hate Christmas. I always have. As a child, it meant scenes and rows with a bickering, overprotective mother. It meant relations who expected to be served and did nothing but sit and stare or talk about things which had happened decades before.

An awkward, bickering, overprotective mother ? I must talk to him about it. I have been very selfish, really. I have told him all about my own childhood, my friendship with Monique and my years in school, but had never asked him to tell me the story of his own childhood.

I dislike Christmas for a new reason now : you. I cannot see you. I'm sure Christmas must be a dreadful time for lovers, especially if one or both are married to someone else.

Day four :

Already I am missing you more than words can say. I dream of being in your arms, of hearing your beautiful voice, of feeling you breathe upon my neck, of going quite helpless when your lips kiss mine, of your long, cool fingers stroking my penis, and of licking my own fingers after touching the swollen wetness between your legs...

Day five :

I touched myself in bed this morning. I played with myself thinking about your touching me and touching yourself. I love to watch you play with yourself. It gives me the most tender, erotic feelings I have ever known.

In the short time we've known each other, you have given me more pleasure and happiness than anyone else has in my whole life so far.

Day six : Sometimes I close my eyes and try to will you to be here with me.

Day seven : Do you know, we are so alike in our sexual desires and fantasies, it's frightening ? I don't believe I have ever been so close to anyone, sexually and mentally. The things we like are so erotic ! I have never felt those things, not even at the beginning of my relationship with Isabel, in the days when I thought I loved her.

I ache for you. I ache for you to be with me, to touch me, to kiss me. I want to be with you, to play with you... to do anything you want me to...

Day eight : I dreamt of you last night. You were straddling me as I lay on my back and, by wriggling your bottom right and left and up and down, brushing your genitals against my chest and my stomach, you smeared me all over with your love juices.

One day, in years to come, if you still have it, you will read this diary and remember this year like no other. And if you don't, then you do not love me in the way I believe you do.

They say that children can never imagine their parents making love but they can surely see if their parents love each other. I am sure my parents never loved each other and never knew what love was.

Octavius (I thought) we must talk, we must talk. You are right : we have a lot in common but it goes back a long way. I have told you about my parents. You must tell me about yours. We are two wounded hearts who have found each other... at last !

If we were married, I would never be able to keep my hands off you. You would never want another man for as long as you live.

Day nine : I dreamt of you last night (surprise, surprise). We were walking on a towpath. It was very misty and very cold. We had our arms around each other. I was dying of love for you... as usual.

We kept kissing, that is all... just kissing but they were such tender kisses and we wanted each other so desperately, but there was nowhere to go. We wanted each other so much it hurt. I had my hand inside your underwear and you had your hand in mine. It was like a delightful agony. I woke up at 3.00 am, wanting you and pining for you.

I rolled over and because I just couldn't sleep, thought of all the wonderful, erotic, loving things I could do with you. I imagined us totally naked, lying in a big, warm bed, entwined in each other's arms, kissing endlessly, drowning in each other's love. You would touch yourself. I would smell your love juices and lick your fingers. Then I would slowly cover your whole body in

gentle kisses and lick you so gently and tenderly that your inner lips would swell and grow dark pink.

You would sit up, place your feet together, your knees far apart and open the lips of your vulva. I would watch you while gently caressing my penis and the top of my thighs while you became wetter and wetter. Then you would start masturbating slowly. I find it so erotic ! Masturbation is the most secret, intimate, personal thing in the world and to offer it, to share it with someone you love, is simply mind-blowing. When I am alone and play with myself, I only have to think of you and I come so quickly, yet so fully ! Even writing about it makes me want you so very much that it physically hurts.

Next time you make yourself come, will you rub your clitoris with the gusset of your knickers as you did the first time we were on the phone, then give them to me ?... next time I am with you, that is.

I adore you... more than I think you realise. We are so close, and not just sexually.

Will you still feel the same way about me when we meet again ? I guess I'll have to wait and see.

Day ten : I dreamt of you, last night (again). You were straddling me, one knee on either side of my head as I lay on my back, admiring the view. Then a drop of love juice started to pearl at the edge of one of your swollen labia and it fell on my lips. The pleasure I felt was so intense that I woke up, only to find that my stomach was all wet and sticky. I had come during my dream. You have that much power over me.

Chapter Twenty-One

The first week after Octavius came back was sheer heaven but it was topped by the weekend, for we did, after all, spend a weekend together. Isabel had taken her lover to the cottage and Caroline had gone skiing in Scotland with a friend.

On the Friday night, I drove to Octavius as soon as I could. I flew into his house and felt as if I was no longer a mere mortal, and as if I was leaving behind all my earthly worries. Octavius greeted me gently and closed the door behind me.

“Something wrong ?” he asked as I started to look rather vague.

“Yes... and no. I’ve just realised that I acted like a kid. I didn’t bring a thing : no change of clothes, or underwear... not even a toothbrush. Good job I don’t wear any make-up.”

He laughed softly and gave me a hug. “You won’t be wearing your clothes much and you can use my toothbrush,

underarm deodorant or whatever else takes your fancy.”

“I’ll have to go home Monday morning, though. I can’t wear the same knickers and the same top to go to work.”

“You could choose from Isabel’s linen closet. You are about the same size anyway.”

“No, thank you. I’ll go home Monday morning and I’ll be late for work if it’s all the same to you.”

“Of course.”

We were still in the entrance hall, hugging, when Octavius whispered in my ear. “I want to smell you and lick you now before we do anything else.” I was so overwhelmed with love that I could barely remain standing. “Can I sit down first ?” He nodded and let me go. We drifted towards the living room.

“I’ll go up and fetch one of my dressing gowns for you.” He disappeared and came back with it a few minutes later. He had undressed and wore a gown of his own. His

erection was sticking out between the folds. I got up from the couch then bent down and took his penis in my mouth. After a few seconds, he pushed me gently away, kneeled in front of me, pulled down my trousers and panties and licked me a few times. "Now, he said, that's what I call a proper lovers' greeting. We've said *hello*." and he disappeared in the kitchen, leaving me in the middle of the living-room floor with my stretch pants and underwear around my ankles. I took everything off and put on Isabel's dressing gown. I placed the panties in full view on the back of a chair, as I knew it would turn him on when he saw them. I then progressed to the dining-room.

Octavius had not planned to spend too much time eating but what he had prepared was quite nice : frisée and walnut salad with walnut oil and Parmesan shavings, followed by a microwaved Indian dish and, for dessert, a bunch of grapes. No wine. We

wanted our senses to remain in full working order.

“Eating and making love at the same time is a fairly common fantasy, I hear.” he said as he was clearing the table, and I got up to help him.

“You mean like feeding each other and things like that ?”

“No, I mean like one of you is eating and the other one is under the table, doing all sorts of rather interesting things.”

“You should have told me. You know I’m game for anything.”

“Funny enough, I was thinking about it but didn’t actually want to do it. I feel as if it is only something that rekindles love when two people are getting too used to each other, perhaps.”

“I wouldn’t know. Any more fantasies like that ?I’d love to hear it.”

“There is another one that often crosses my mind but, again, nor for tonight.”

“What’s that ?”

“It’s a beautiful Summer’s day. You are naked from the waist down and you look out of an open window, perhaps even talking to someone, like a neighbour. I am sitting on the floor in front of you, my back against the wall under the window, and I’m licking you while you chat about the weather and try to keep a straight face.”

“I’d really like that.” And I almost added : “*Vivian would have liked that too. She was such an exhibitionist and fancied taking risks.*” But I bit my tongue. Mentioning someone else could have spoiled our weekend and I wanted everything to go right.

Everything did go right. Above all, we had a bed, a real, comfortable, king-size bed, and it seemed to me that the bed itself was loving me while Octavius was loving me. We both had moments of sheer ecstasy but what I remember most about that weekend was the closeness and the unhurried tenderness of it all, the endless

cuddles... also the equally unhurried freedom we both enjoyed.

In the morning, we went into the shower cubicle together and, before we turned on the water, I peed on him and he loved it. We were like two pups playing and frolicking on a garden lawn.

Never had I so enjoyed the moment. Never had I been less aware of the past or concerned for the future. The mere consciousness of being alive filled my soul with a fluid whose flavour and consistency I did not know could exist. I was myself without restraints. I was who I was without the fear of appearing childish, overly sentimental, oversexed, wild, defenceless or, more simply, and as Francis would certainly have put it, “perverted”. Our shared happiness was of and from ourselves. It had nothing to do with money, possessions, ambitions or all the froth of life. It was deep within us, it was us, our very essence. It was driven by ingenuity and inventiveness, by our determination to make the other

person happy. I hoped there would be many more opportunities like this one. Next time, I fantasised, I would like to sit naked in front of a full-length mirror, legs wide open, and playing with myself while, behind me, and looking at me in the mirror, Octavius would slowly and lovingly brush my hair. Why should this odd combination of activities appeal to me is something I could not explain.

Another thing I remember from this magic weekend is the walk we took on the Sunday morning, at a time when our separation was already in sight and, like cirrus clouds in a pale blue sky, a thin veil of sadness was spreading over us.

We both love towpaths, and Octavius drove us to a former canal that we followed for a couple of miles before coming back, inevitably, the same way. He had asked me not to wear panties and I gladly did as he wished.

As we walked through his house, getting ready, I was already enjoying the fleeting touch of my trousers' crotch

against me. When we came out, I realised that the slight chill in the air was penetrating the material in a delightful way. It must have done so on my legs, as it had always done in cool weather but I'd never been conscious of it.

When we parked the car and started walking, hand in hand, along the towpath, this clean and fresh sensation became even stronger, and I felt as if we were recreating the dream he had mentioned in his diary. Remembering the lovely moments of fresh air playing on my membranes while Monique and I enthusiastically displayed our private parts to each other in the woods, I became desperate to recreate this experience. I mentioned it to Octavius. There was no one else around. The air was fresh but the Winter sun was warm, and the silence had an eternal quality to it. We were almost afraid to break it, and even the soft sound of our shoes on the sandy path seemed sacrilegious.

Octavius just whispered : “Do it, then.” I lowered my trousers and, standing in front Octavius, pulled my skin up and apart so as to bare the clitoris and make it jut out. On those overprotected and ultra-sensitive folds of flesh, I was recreating the feel of simultaneous warmth from the sun and coolness from the air that I had so enjoyed all those years ago. The fact that I was in a public – if deserted – place increased the sensations to the point that my legs started to feel weak and I slowly fell on my knees. I closed my eyes while Octavius, entranced, kept staring at me. I do not know how long I remained like this, probably not nearly as long as it felt but, in the end, I could stand it no longer, started playing with myself and came within seconds.

“This is one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen,” said Octavius. “Will you ever cease to amaze me ?”

“Not if I can help it.” I got up, pulled my trousers back on and, after he had brushed the tips of my fingers against

his lips, we resumed our walk. “Have you ever wondered”, I asked, “how, with only a few notes on the musical scale, composers keep coming up with new and wonderful tunes, century after century ? Or, how, with only a trunk, a head, two arms and two legs, dancers keep inventing new steps and new figures ? It’s the same with love, you know. Like dancers, we only have a trunk, a head, two arms and two legs but people in love will, time after time, year after year, find something new and erotic to do... if they *want* to, that is.”

We were still holding hands and feeling immensely, peacefully happy. A long silence followed.

“Will there be more weekends like this one ?” I asked. We spoke softly but the air was so incredibly still, clear and clean that the sound of our voices reached us with the phonic equivalent of a razor-sharp picture.

“Probably. Isabel does everything in series. When she likes a clothes shop, she goes there every week or sometimes

twice a week. Then she stops. She's had enough. She knows no restraint. She gobbles up her life. She wolfs it down, then gets indigestion. She never savours anything, never takes the time. Same with her men, as I've told you. The lover who happens to be the flavour of the month has to remain at her beck and call two or three times a week. She writes him passionate letters in which she tells him that he is everything she ever dreamt of in a man... and then, almost from one day to the next, she drops him. What really makes me sick is that, at this point, she invariably starts making fun of him in front of our daughter. What an example ! Suddenly, she has nothing but contempt for the man. She reminds me of those teenagers who go wild about a pop group and, a few months later, say to their friends: 'How can you still be listening to *that*?' looking all the while as if they are going to throw up. Isabel never evolved beyond that stage. I often feel sorry for her rejected lovers. She hasn't remained on civilised terms with

one of them. Like a female spider, after she has rejected them, she must also destroy them. She doesn't just change toys. She must break the old ones. She's not merely a spoiled brat : she is vicious with it. Isabel's only consistency will always be her never-ending quest for something or someone new. I remember a time when she started taking me and Caroline sightseeing every Sunday. It was rather frantic : London Zoo, Stonehenge... She called it *our new lifestyle*. Thankfully, it only lasted four weeks. It was followed with a sudden passion for fitness machines. They are all idle in the attic now. *Pendent opera interrupta...*

I could go on and on. She has all the money she could ever need, and you'd think that she'd be happy, but her life is quite empty, just rushing from one whim to the next, always firmly convinced that the latest one will bring her total satisfaction. If she could only be genuinely interested in others instead of being so utterly self-centred, she might indeed experience at least

some measure of inner peace, but the idea that others may actually exist as fully-fledged members of the human race doesn't even cross her mind. As far as she is concerned, she is the only person in the world who really feels anything and who has any real needs. Others are but shadows behind a screen. If she has a problem, she fully expects everyone to sympathise with her but if someone else has a problem, her answer is utterly predictable. It is always made of the same three little phrases : Pfffff ! So what ? Others manage.”

How this man suffers ! I thought. He and I have the same cross to bear. We would have given anything to love our legally married partner but the L.M.P. would have none of it.

“Next week OK, then ?”

“Probably. Let's make the most of this one. I can't predict the future any more than you can but I know for certain that her twenty-fifth or so *new lifestyle* of week-ends at the cottage

with her lover will not last any longer than her previous *new lifestyles*.”

“You sound very bitter. Does she have any qualities ?”

“She’s not stupid. She has excellent tastes in clothes, home decoration, wines... but what amazes me more than anything else is her capacity for appreciating literature ; anything from great novels to airport pulp, and also her capacity for analysing these works so intelligently and sensibly ! There she is, incapable of ever putting herself in someone else’s shoes, incapable of ever feeling sorry or sympathetic for anyone, and yet, at the same time, she can understand and dissect the slightest and most delicate feelings, as long as they happen to be in a novel. How does one explain such things ?”

“One doesn’t. Life is so mysterious ! At least you’ll have something nice to say at her funeral service if she dies before you do.”

“Also she has never mentioned jilting me or getting a divorce. I really don’t

know if that's a good thing or not. I really don't know if I should be proud or ashamed of it."

"How about a bit of both ?"

"Whenever I find her unbearably selfish and cruel, I also try to remember that she may have been raped once."

"No kidding ? But can it be an on-going excuse for sustained selfishness ?"

"Not really but, yes, a little, perhaps."

I took him in my arms and gave him a long kiss. "I want you to touch me."

"You want me to make you come ?"

"No, I just want to feel your fingers on me : it's like a need, an urgent need." And indeed, I did not want him to do anything else. I'd had an orgasm a few minutes earlier. It was just that... there was this magnificent morning, the lovely curve of the canal, the tall weeds and stark weeping willows, the lines of skinny poplar trees, the delicate blue of the sky, the inviting line of the towpath, rolling prairies on our right, all bathed in the most beautiful misty, yet clear

light. A painter's dream : a Corot, a Millet in real life. I wanted his fingers on me, simply because it would make the moment a perfect one.

He started inserting his hand in my stretch pants but I stopped him and turned round. Then, with my back against him, I brought his arms around me and helped him put his hand down my trousers in the same, natural gesture he would have used to touch himself. He moved his fingers very slightly against my clitoris and I drifted away in a sort of cotton-wool dimension. Time stood still. I felt so safe and so loved ! After a while, I pulled his hand out, turned round again and gave him a long kiss then resumed walking next to him, my hand in his. I looked at his face and said : "Thank you."

"Any time."

"It's nice to feel so free with each other that we can ask anything, isn't it ?"

“It’s more than nice, it’s the nearest thing to paradise.”

“There is no paradise, Octavius. This is it. Now, tell me about the way Isabel was raped. I can use a good laugh.”

“It’s not funny, really.” But there was a smile on his lips. “You know,” he added “it’s the first time I’ve ever seen the funny side of it. After all, to quote a famous person : *Pfff ! So what ? Others manage.*”

We giggled. “And after all” I went on “why should she be the only one to act childishly towards other people’s feelings ?”

“There it is then, keeping in mind that we are dealing strictly with Isabel’s version of events, of course.”

“Stop talking like a lawyer.”

“That would be rather difficult.”

“Get on with it.”

“She was engaged at some point, to an upper class twit, or so she describes him. Knowing how she despises anyone who has ever slept with her, I have my

reservations when it comes to his exact degree of twittiness. He swept her off her feet at first. He was tall, dark and handsome. He was sporty and elegant, played polo, owned horses, sailed a yacht, you name it. His big mistake was that he also swept Isabel's mother off her feet... not sexually, you understand. Her mother, by the way, was a lush. By ten a.m. she hardly knew who she was and where she was but she had decided that Michael would be the perfect son-in-law. He was exquisitely polite towards her, talked with a plum in his mouth and was filthy rich. The more her mother enthused about Michael, the more Isabel's feelings towards him were turning from warm to tepid, then cold. After all, no one tells her what to do, right ? She does what she wants, right ? So, if you say *up*, she says *down*. If you say *black*, she says *white*. That's how I got married to her. Her parents didn't like me so, naturally, she had to marry me. Perfectly logical. At any rate, one day, as she was doing a bit of tidying up in the flat that she and

the twit were to share in London after they were married, she suddenly admitted to herself that she didn't love him. When he walked in, she told him so. Apparently, he took it very badly and, according to her, raped her. She came home with a black eye and an assortment of other bruises."

"Didn't she sue him ?"

"No, and the fact that, within days, she had another boyfriend, makes me feel very sceptical of this official version of events. I can't imagine someone who has been raped wanting to have sex almost immediately with someone else."

"Everyone is different, I suppose. So, what do you think really happened ?"

"I think that, under his veneer of good manners, Michael was an authoritarian, possessive and violent man, a control freak, and I'm sure that she was right not to marry him, but I also think that he just got mad. I don't think he raped her. Upper class twits are used to treating other people like dirt. They don't like to be at the

receiving end. As I said before, she can never be elegant about terminating a relationship : she *has* to make fun.”

“Served them both right, I suppose.”

“Something like that.”

I looked at the line of leafless poplar trees. *Elegant about terminating a relationship...* The sentence hovered in my mind. How *elegantly* had Vivian behaved? Fairly so, actually : the elegance of a striking cobra. She had been cruel and sadistic but not contemptuous. She had enjoyed hurting me but she had not belittled me, or so I tried to convince myself. I sighed. Octavius squeezed my hand : “Something wrong ?”

“*Life is so sad !* as the Japanese keep saying. Did you know they keep saying that ?”

“Yes, I knew that.” We smiled at each other. He went on : “Let’s go back. We’ll have a swim in the pool.”

As we sat in his car, Octavius remained very quiet for a while, looking at his ignition key as if he didn’t

understand what it was for. Finally he said in a rather hesitant voice :

“Would you do something for me ?”

“You know I’d do anything for you.”

“Even if most people would find what I’m about to ask rather shocking or, quite simply... dirty ?”

“Ask away.”

“You were not shocked when I asked you to give me your knickers.”

“Octavius, I was already so much in love with you that I would have given you all my knickers if you had asked.”

“But how did you feel about it ?”

“Surprised, but not shocked. Somewhat flattered, actually. No one had ever asked me that before. Were you shocked when I asked you to masturbate with my knickers and give them back to me the next day ?”

“No, of course, not. I thought it was a tremendously erotic idea.”

“There you are, then. Ask away.”

“Well, there it is : when you are nowhere near your periods, I would like

you to insert a tampon, make yourself come and give the tampon back to me, full of your love juices. Will you do that for me ?”

I leant over, rubbed my nose against his, placed my hand on his fly and felt his erection through his trousers : “Is that all ? Yes, you silly boy : yes, yes, *yes !*”

*

Octavius and Isabel, or perhaps I should only say Isabel, had a huge indoor swimming pool. When we got “home”, Octavius asked to be excused for a little while. Ten minutes later he reappeared. We stripped in the living room and, with Octavius almost running in front of me, went over to the pool through a corridor.

I have never been poor but I have never been rich either. Private swimming pools, on the whole, do not impress me. This one did and made me realise that I had only been in bad ones. I had reacted like people who say that

they do not like wine. You cannot understand why until you realise that they've always ever drunk rubbish brew. Isabel's pool was tucked away behind the house, on one side, and did not attract the eye. The little bit of it that you could see from the front yard could just as well have been some sort of conservatory, half-hidden behind supposedly unkempt bushes and, whereas outdoor pools often seem to shout : "Look at me, I belong to a *Nouveau Riche*", indoor pools, which cost a lot more to build, do not shout anything. This one, which was extremely well heated, loved you, mollycoddled you, made you feel good : a world away from those school or public swimming-pools that I hated so much.

I enjoyed doing length after length at a steady pace. After a while, I noticed that Octavius could not keep up with me. He had gone back to the shallow end and sat, half-immersed, on the steps. I went towards him, opened my

legs, sat on his knees and kissed him. “Feel how smooth I am,” he said.

I cupped his balls and laughed : “You shaved !”

“Yes, just now. Do you like it ?”

“Love it. I didn’t want to ask.”

“Why not ?”

“I guess I’ve heard *no* so often in my life that I didn’t want to risk it.”

“You’ll never hear *no* from me.”

“We are both very silly, aren’t we ? So warped by our past that we are still afraid of each other.”

I felt him again. He had a solid erection by now. I crept forward and tried to impale myself on him. His penis went in about half an inch then got stuck. However, after a few seconds, as our combined lubrication was doing its best, he managed to get in a little further and, eventually, slipped in all the way. I squeezed my vagina around him three times and he responded by swelling his penis three times. We

kissed again and he started fingering my clitoris.

At this point, the door of the swimming pool flew open and Caroline, stark naked, walked in and shouted cheerfully : “Hi, Dad ! Hi, Quentina !” Octavius saw the panic on my face : “Ssshhh don’t worry, it’s only Caroline back from her skiing trip, don’t worry.”

“Only Caroline ! Octavius,” I whispered angrily “we are having intercourse in front of an eleven-year old girl who happens to be your daughter.”

“Calm down. She’s seen it all before with Isabel and her admirers.”

“You mean, Isabel lets her parade in the nude in front of other men ? Isn’t she scared that they will try something with her ?”

“You don’t know Isabel. She hypnotises people. The men wouldn’t dare. They simply wouldn’t dare.”

By now, Caroline had taken an elegant dive from the side of the pool and was doing lengths, apparently

oblivious to her father's activities. All sorts of thoughts were rushing, pell-mell, through my mind. The first one, oddly enough, was that I had noticed a light growth of pubic hair on Caroline. When I was eleven, I still didn't have any. Are children more precocious these days ? Then I remembered Monique and how fascinated I had been by her body. Would the sight of a naked pre-teenage girl turn me on ? I craned my neck to look at her and was relieved to find out that she left me completely cold. Caroline, who actually brushed against me by accident as she was turning around, swam like a shark and, beautiful as she undoubtedly was, exuded just about as much sex appeal as a shark.

It also brought back to my mind a conversation I'd had with my hairdresser. He and his family used to go to naturist campsites in France or Croatia for their holidays and he said that young girls usually kept something on. They were perfectly allowed to do

so. Had young girls become less shy or was Caroline an exception to the rule? By now, my sexual enthusiasm had completely cooled off so I was surprised when, without any movement on my part or on his, Octavius suddenly uttered a long moan, tensed up and ejaculated inside me. I withdrew and started swimming parallel to Caroline. When I came back to the shallow end, Octavius was still sitting on the steps, with a silly smile on his face. I felt a bit more relaxed by then and sat on his knees again. He kissed me and whispered in my ear: "There was a light trail of sperm coming out of you as you swam away from me." I looked down. There was nothing between my legs but, drifting slowly towards the pool filter, there undulated a miniature Milky Way, not unlike fish spawn, really.

"Perhaps I should go home tonight" I also whispered.

"If you want, but please don't. Caroline will not be shocked. We'll have something to eat then she'll settle down

doing homework in her room. I swear to you : if you stay, she won't think twice about it."

"When's Isabel coming back ?"

"Tomorrow night. She's taking an extra day at the cottage."

"And her boyfriend ?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask."

"Very well, then : but just for a cuddle."

"A naked cuddle."

"Of course. Besides, I'm physically and emotionally exhausted. I don't think I could do much more today."

"Nor could I but I love you and, when I'm not with you, I feel as if a part of me has been torn away."

Later, in bed, I said to Octavius :
"You mentioned a bickering, overprotective mother in one of your letters. Tell me about it."

"Not much to tell. My mother wanted to control every moment of my life and she did so by constantly criticising. I could never do anything right."

I burst out laughing, even though I felt more like crying : “Snap ! No wonder we get on so well. We are alike in so many respects.”

“Possibly. With her, it was either : *That’s fine, son, but it could be better or No, you don’t do this, you do that or, again, You don’t do it like this, you do it like that,* depending on whether she was in a good mood or not.”

“Did she destroy your capacity for love ?”

“She most certainly tried.”

“With me, she most certainly succeeded, till recently that is. Don’t take it wrongly, Octavius, don’t be jealous or anything, but I did love Vivian before I loved you.”

“Don’t worry... and if it can make you feel a bit better, I did love Isabel... for a while.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Bad news” Octavius told me on the Tuesday morning when I got to work. “Isabel will not be going to the cottage next week-end.”

Jane had not arrived yet and we could talk freely. “Because” he went on “she had promised Nathan, the latest lucky winner, who is now the latest loser, that he could take pictures of her in the nude and when, for the Nth time, she found an excuse not to go through with it, he uttered these immortal words : *but you promised.*”

“Oh, dear !”

“Yes, oh, dear !”

“How do you know all that ?”

“She tells me everything. She never takes into account the fact that it can really hurt, at times. I am her sounding board, her Father confessor, part of the furniture... but, to get back to the present situation, you must understand that she is not simply inhabited by a paranoid fear of *losing control*, it also

involves very much the pleasure of being contrary. I could bore you with instances when she was itching to do something but, in the end, didn't ; all because someone said, at exactly the wrong moment : *Go on, then, do it.* Between the pleasure of doing what she originally planned, and the pleasure of being contrary, she chose the latter, time and time again."

"She'll end up in the loony bin."

"I doubt it. With her kind of money, she'll end up with a private nurse... or a string of private nurses, the next one always being the best, of course... No loony bin for her... at least not for quite a few years yet. She is more likely to drive *me* to insanity before that happens."

"If she tells you everything, she must still love you."

"Frightening thought, isn't it ?"

"Still, you are coming to dinner tonight. We'll make do with the couch and the living-room rug."

“And such a nice rug it is too !” He whispered as Jane entered the office.

On that particular Tuesday night, on the living-room rug, Octavius and I made love with more tenderness, more inventiveness and more enthusiasm than we had during our whole weekend together, if that’s possible, but when I got home on the Wednesday night, a letter was waiting for me on the dining-room table. I looked at it for several seconds, unable, unwilling to comprehend. It was a small, rectangular letter made to look like parchment. I almost expected a red wax seal on the other side, as advertised in those *Innovations* booklets that are pushed through the front door. Only this letter was not from a child or from anyone in a fancy, *Season’s Greetings* mood. In the upper right hand corner, was a Spanish stamp. I backed out of the room as if I was afraid that this innocent-looking envelope might bite me, and in truth, I was afraid.

“Aren’t you going to open it ?” Asked Francis as he was bringing me a cup of coffee.

“In a minute. I’ll change first.”

As I slowly went up the stairs, I wondered if Francis’ remark could be taken as an invitation to bin the letter. I was strongly tempted to do just that, but knew that I would not. When I came down again, in blue jeans and light, white jumper, I sat down and took a sip out of the cup of coffee.

“Would you like me to go ?” Asked Francis.

“What ? Oh !... aaa... no, no, not at all. If I wanted to read it by myself, I would simply go to the study. You know that.”

In fact, I was so scared that I was glad to have another person nearby. It was like being left in a cave without any light. My fingers were trembling. I got up again and went to the kitchen. I came back with a sharp knife. I felt obliged to open that beautiful, fake-parchment envelope neatly. You do

not simply tear these things open. I sat down again, took another sip of coffee and inserted the knife as if I had been practising surgery. Francis' eyes looked vacant. It seemed that he already knew what was in the letter.

My dear Quentina,

I'm leaving Emilio and coming back to England. He can't understand why, but he's been very decent about it. I told him there was no other man in my life, which is perfectly true. I did have someone for a while but it's over now.

I had given myself one year to find out if I could still live with him or not.... but now I've reached the end of the rope.

Emilio loves me but I can no longer live with his kind of love. He treats me like a child and keeps organising me and drawing the map of my life for me. I simply can't take it any more. Even as he told me how much he loved me, how much he wanted me to stay, he was already telling me which travel agent to contact, which airline I should choose,

what sort of job I should be looking for when I'm back, how I should go about it... I felt like screaming.

My dearest Quentina, I have treated you very badly and I am sorry...

I was so horrid to you that if you turn me down I shall not grumble. I deserve it. Please let me know...

*A big hug,
Vivian.*

At first, I went deaf. This could not be real. Then, faintly at first and more clearly as minute followed minute, the skies opened and a divine music enveloped the earth. I so needed someone stronger than me, someone to look up to, to admire and to love ! It seemed that with Vivian at my side, life could not do anything nasty to me any more. Our love would transcend all. I took the letter and, in a daze, went up to the study in order to read it again and again.

I lay on the couch, that very same couch on which I used to masturbate

while Octavius was on the telephone... and, suddenly, Octavius appeared to me as an insignificant little man with no dimension, no aura, no ambitions and, in a way, but in a different tone, as weak as Francis.

I placed my hand on the telephone... same couch, same telephone, and all those memories... but I withdrew. I could have called Vivian but thought it wiser to wait until I calmed down. Her letter was two days' old. I had been told that post from Spain can easily take six days. So, if I slept on all this, Vivian would not be concerned. She had no way of knowing that her letter had taken *only* two days. I did, however, reach for the phone again but, this time, called Octavius at home. I had never done so, and yet I was surprised, almost shocked that it should be answered by Caroline. To my chagrin, she was in a chatty mood : "Hi, Quentina, you should come back and have another swim with us one day. It was really cool, wasn't it ? I'd like to

know you better... bla, bla, bla.” She went on and on.

I'd like to know you better ? I can imagine a thirty-year old woman saying that, not an eleven-year old schoolgirl. Still, as Octavius had mentioned, *she's seen it all before*, she is a mixture of a clever spoiled brat and a mature woman, all blended in a child's body.

I did not lose my temper with her. Mostly, in fact, because I did not feel like it. I even enjoyed our inconsequential conversation. I was, all the while, finding this reaction of mine rather puzzling but, as Caroline was chirping away, several flashes of thoughts and emotions went through my mind : what would it be like to have a lively, articulate, good-looking eleven-year old daughter ? Francis and I had never been obsessed by the fact that we did not have children. I had not wanted any, had told him so from the start, and he had accepted it. Every social state, from that of a nun to that of a large family has its good and bad

sides, and it certainly includes the state of childless matrimony but, just then, I felt my heart being pinched with envy. What sort of a mother would I have been ? Could I be a better role-model than Isabel ? (A resounding : yes). What sort of father would Francis have been ? Terrific, probably...

Caroline finally got off the phone. I heard Isabel's voice : "Who was that ?"

"It's daddy's girlfriend" (giggle, giggle). Then an almighty shout : "Dad, it's Quentina." I heard a muffled reply : "I'll take it upstairs". God, you can hear everything in that house ! Wonder what it's like if you fart in one of the toilets... Octavius' voice came out, strong and clear this time. I told him I was ill and would not be at work for the rest of the week.

"I'm not entirely surprised," he replied. "You didn't look 100% this afternoon."

What a stupid thing to say ! I felt perfectly alright, then. Suddenly, I was shocked to admit that whatever

Octavius might have said, I would have thought it was stupid. I was horrified yet could not do anything about it. It was as if I had been possessed by my mother, not unlike the way people used to believe that you could be possessed by the Devil. I had become my mother : criticise, criticise, criticise... Everything you are going to do or say from now on, Octavius, will be wrong. Your slight American accent, which I used to find so sexy, is now merely irritating, the way you park your car too close to mine at work, so that I have to squeeze through a half-open door...

I placed the receiver back on the telephone, hid my face in my hands and shouted silently : “Stop it, stop it, stop it !” I wished I could have burst into floods of tears but did not, could not. Nor could I breathe. Is that what it feels like to have asthma ? Every muscle in my body started to hurt. I staggered towards my bedroom, took three sleeping pills and went to bed with all my clothes on. By then I could not pretend to be ill. I was ill, I was in

agony, I could feel something evil trying to come out of my body, I reached a stage of utter despair before sinking into the blessed relief of drug-induced sleep.

The rest of the week and most of the weekend were a mixture of torture and stupor.

“I’ve seen you acting like this once before.” Muttered Francis at Sunday breakfast. “That was when you stopped going to Vivian’s. I didn’t realise you’d had an affair with her. I didn’t realise she had dumped you.”

Oh, Francis, I wish you did not use words like “dumped”. It wasn’t a teenage romance. This isn’t a Brazilian soap opera... but, of course, you are right, she dumped me... she dumped me because she was already going out with Mr. Wonderful.

“So, now”, he went on, “I suppose Octavius dumped you and that’s why you are in such a state.”

I managed to laugh or perhaps I should say “snort” because my eyes

were filling with tears and my nose was running. Poor Francis was wrong again. I wiped the snuffle with a tissue and laughed ; only, this time, it was more like a coughing giggle : “No, you fool, I’m the one who’s doing the leaving. *I am dumping him.*”

I could see the relief on Francis’ face and hated him all the more for it. *If Vivian wishes me to move in with her, I shall definitely leave you, Francis, and once again you will not understand, will you ?*

“Well” I heard him say “It will be tough for a while but I’m sure it’s for the best in the long run”.

I really do not know how I managed not to throw my cup of coffee at his face. The telephone rang and made me jump out of my skin. Francis answered and came back a few seconds later with a handset. “It’s for you.” I took the receiver and Francis, very sensibly, went out in the garden.

“Did you get my letter ?” It was Vivian, of course.

“Yes.”

“Have you been crying ?”

“Yes.”

“Me too (*That was new !*) Quentina, I have a confession to make. I’ve been having an affair with a younger man...”

“I know...”

“You do ?”

“I know him and he boasted about it but I could never remember his name. Please don’t laugh, but I call him Mr. Wonderful.”

“I’m hardly laughing and he is not so wonderful. He is threatening to hurt me. I wrote him some love letters, you see.” *Love letters ? To Mr. Wonderful ? And what about me ? Didn’t I deserve at least one love letter ?* “I’ve left him now but he won’t let go. He’s threatening to send the letters to Emilio. Quentina, I’m really scared. If Emilio sees these letters he will hit me. I know he will. I live on tenterhooks from day to day, expecting the worst.”

“Vivian, I feel very sorry for you, I really do, but what do you expect me to do ?”

“You haven’t answered my letter. Can I count on you when I get back to England ?”

“Vivian, I’ve always looked up to you, you know that. But please be sensible : I just got your letter and didn’t have time to do anything about it. Of course, you can count on me.”

“It’s just that you hadn’t answered my letter, you see...” I could hear her sobbing, then she hung up before I could reply. She had obviously lost her sense of time... and much more than that, I suspected. She *was*, herself, completely lost, like a child wandering and panicking in a forest.

Suddenly, I felt strangely calm. They often say that there is nothing like being needed in order to boost your morale, even if, in fact, you need help yourself. I was needed. Vivian, the tower of strength, needed *me*. I sensed, flowing in my veins, a new coolness, a

new vigour : the steely certainty of an iconoclast who serves her god, the pitiless indifference of an executioner, a Master of Tortures at the court of a potentate. Your monarch needs you : all the suffering you may inflict from now on will be stamped with his seal of approval. You are doing the right thing for your god, your king and your country. Becoming a fanatic is not so very hard, is it ? It can make you feel ten feet tall. Germans who ran concentration camps, Russians who ran Gulags, Muslims who stone to death women that have been raped, all are, to start with, ordinary people. We can *all* do that sort of thing. Our capacity for evil is infinite. We can *all* inflict humiliations and torture, wallow in the sheer helplessness of the victim, salivate at the sight of public executions. Why not the same in love ? If no longer given the opportunity to watch physical torture, why not have a go ourselves, in our own private world, at psychological torture ?

By the time Francis came back from the garden, I was myself again... or, at least, I was an aspect of myself I had never known existed. It reminded me of what happens when you have long been using a computer for a definite number of tasks and, one day, by accident, your fingers slip onto a different combination of commands and you find yourself muttering : *Gosh, I didn't know it could do that !* It was also not unlike turning the pages of a photo album : from pages 1 to 14, there's Quentina as she was when she had never loved anyone. Pages 14 and 15 represent Quentina as she was between the time she discovered that she could love someone and the moment she found out that she, herself, could *be* loved. Page 16 shows Quentina the killer, Superwoman, the Iron Lady. Watch out, Buster !

Intermezzo

Ursula is asleep on her back, her face calm, her slender body going straight down the bed, hardly making a change to the neat arrangement of the duvet. The wallpaper in the room, the woodwork, everything is tinged with red.

Her face may be calm but she is having a nightmare. The bedroom door is wide open. Bright light floods in. In the doorway is an angel dressed like a Mediaeval knight. In his hand, he holds the palms of martyrdom.

Ursula possesses the typical body of a teenage girl : perfect figure, small breasts, long legs, flat stomach, a firm, lively body that is white, smooth and delicate ; a body at rest. The chest goes up and down slowly, the thighs, harbour the soft down of a clean, sweet-smelling young lady. All is at peace, all is warm and comfortable in the bed, all is well but for a premonition of horror in the sickening reddish light

pouring into the room. Her very perfection has planted hatred in the hearts of others.

Hacked to death ! The reek of fear-induced sweat, sphincters loosening, the desperate recoil of a body which simply cannot believe what's happening, the last shout : "No !", the searing pain of the first cut as soon as sharp steel slides effortlessly in the flesh, the gasp for air at the intensity of the pain, the deafness to one's own shrieks, the second blow, the veil of madness over the eyes, over the mind, then sinking on a sticky, slippery floor, then crawling in blood and excrement, then shaking, cold, twitching, lungs aflame with their death-rattle...

The same enchanting, young body, in its bed... the same body, butchered...

Chapter Twenty-Three

I arrived at work on Monday, dressed to kill ; office-dressed to kill, that is. Instead of my usual slacks and tops, I wore a longish black skirt, cut open to mid-thigh, black shoes with medium heels, black tights, a black jumper with only the collar of a black shirt turned over its neck and a discreet rosary of white pearls pinched in a knot between my breasts. I had pulled my hair back as do dancers (and female school-teachers in silly movies).

Octavius whistled his appreciation, which filled me with contempt for him and anger with the world in general but what unsettled me even more was the fact that fat, wobbly old Jane also gave me a wolf-whistle. I felt like laughing with them while, at the same time, lashing out at them. *Steady on, Quentina, my girl, you are a bundle of nerves. Take a deep breath and ignore them.*

Of course, I had totally wasted my time and efforts. I had psyched myself up for nothing. Octavius and I had honed our little employer/employee routine to such perfection that not even Jane had ever suspected we were having an affair. No one did. I would have ignored neighbourhood gossip but there had never been any for the simple reason that, whenever Octavius appeared at our house, Francis' car was already in the driveway. But for the way I was dressed, that particular Monday at the office was like any other Monday. We acted, as usual, with the cool, friendly efficiency that characterises a good solicitor's office.

By Tuesday, I had given up my stage act and shown up dressed normally. There was, or so I imagined, a lot of tension in the air but it was all of my own making. I knew the whole time that I would *not* invite Octavius to the house that night. He didn't know, of course, and the end result was that I was the one who suffered for five and half hours. Always the perfect gentleman,

Octavius had never assumed, from one rendezvous to the next, that he was expected to come to our place. I had always invited him or reminded him, late afternoon, whenever Jane had gone to the cloakroom to get her bag and change her shoes. This time, I said *good-bye* and left as casually as I could. I noticed a slightly enquiring look on Octavius' face but also noticed that he did not appear overly worried. After all, I had supposedly been ill the week before and I could simply have felt a little tired, still.

He had been worried after all because, on the Wednesday morning, he asked me if I was all right.

“Yes, perfectly.” On the Thursday afternoon, after absorbing the fact that, once again, he had not been invited, he gathered up the courage to whisper : “Have I done something wrong, Quentina ?”

“No, of course not. Good bye.” I placed a peck on his lips as I rushed

out of the office, leaving him, this time, painfully puzzled.

Weekends without Octavius, knowing that I would see him again at work on the Monday and that I would make love to him on the Tuesday were one thing. A week-end without Octavius knowing that I would indeed see him at work on Monday, yet would never again make love to him, was quite another. I experienced a strange mixture of peace, happiness and fear. Here I was, pretending that I was leading a *normal* life again, the life of a married woman with a suburban house, a part-time job, a yearly 20-working days' holiday and a retirement plan when I reached 60. I was about to play the part of a quiet, well-behaved married woman who watched a lot of television because she did not go to keep fit classes, belong to a macramé circle or spend every free minute working in the garden. I did not even have a dog to walk.

Peace... relief... fear... The fear was ill defined. It took the form of an

intuition, of an unidentified monster lurking outside a well-guarded house but whose intrusion was inevitable. The question was not : *will the monster get in* but *when* ? Meanwhile the orchestra kept playing as it did on the deck of the Titanic...

On the second Monday, I arrived at work very early, left my set of office keys on Octavius' desk, cleared my own desk and took all that junk to my car. He arrived just as I was slamming the boot shut and, as usual, parked too close to me.

“What’s going on ?” he asked.

“Come and sit down” I whispered.
“We have to talk.”

I could see on his face that he knew what was going to happen. Zombie-like, he walked around the bonnet and sat in my car.

“Octavius” I said, looking through the windscreen at a future flowerbed, “I have decided to get back to my husband and give my marriage another chance.” I honestly could not think of

what to say next. Octavius' total silence did not help. I would have been grateful for an explosion of anger, an insult even. It did cross my mind, just then, that he may have been relieved, that he had wanted to stop our affair for quite a while and that I was doing him a tremendous favour. A quick glance at his face proved me wrong. He looked grey. Silence settled in. We saw Jane coming to work and throwing a curious look at us before disappearing in the office. When Octavius spoke, it made me jump : "What happened last week when you were ill ?"

"Nothing happened."

"We had a wonderful evening on the Tuesday before you left, and when you came back, you treated me like I didn't exist."

New silence. I was stuck for words. I could have gunned for the truth of course, but somehow it seemed like the last thing to do. I was beginning to understand what Vivian must have felt when she *dumped* me, as Francis

would have said. She too must have realised that the truth was the last thing that could possibly have come out of her mouth. Yes, that was it : *I* could have accepted the truth but she could not say it and now, Octavius would probably be able to accept the truth but it simply would not come out of me. Vivian felt that she had to lie and I felt that I had to lie.

Something else I understood was that the intense pleasure I was experiencing at *dumping* Octavius must be the same pleasure Vivian had experienced. It was almost sexual in nature. I definitely felt pins and needles in my fingers, down my chest and in my stomach. My mouth was dry... usually an uncomfortable experience but, in this case, exhilarating.

I believed, at first, that this exhilaration was the result of trying to destroy someone when, in fact, as I found out later, I was simply destroying myself. We can never be absolutely sure to what extent we destroy the other

person. But if we don't want to miss, the obscure desire, the overwhelming obsession with hitting the target turns us, the hunter, into our very own, ideal target.

The dumping and the lie... The two were intertwined. Without the lie, the dumping would have been less painful, more above board, more acceptable somewhat. So, in order to do a thorough job of it, in order to hurt as much as possible and savour the voluptuousness of hurting someone else, there had to be a lie : it was the icing on the cake. Lying was not just fear of the truth, or fear of the other person's reaction to the truth. It said, quite clearly : *Look, I am lying. I am quite obviously lying to you. It means that you are now totally excluded. It means that you, my former lover, have become a person of no importance, that your feelings are of no consequence, that there are aspects of my life which are no longer any of your business, and you'll*

wonder about these and you'll suffer all the more... Sheer ecstasy !

There was one more thing I had to do. On top of the icing, I had to place a cherry. "We can still be friends" I added, my heart beating wildly, swimming in the delight of finishing Octavius off. For the first time ever, he gave me a look of sheer contempt. Did I want that contempt ? Did I unconsciously crave it, so as to justify my decision retroactively ? I could imagine myself saying : *he took it very badly. I should have known*, or was I simply creating a chasm between the two of us, a chasm that even I would never be able to cross again ? Was such contempt needed, essential, in fact, in order to seal the deed and stop me from ever running back to him, crying "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry !" ? Yes, I had to admit : I needed his contempt as badly as a gorilla needs to soil his sleeping nest before moving on. Octavius reached for the handle of the car, seemed as if he was going to faint and had to try again. Then, in a remarkably steady voice, he said : "In

years to come, when you look back on all this, when you remember this fateful year, you will realise who, in your whole life, has loved you most.”

He opened the door, walked away without looking back but staggered on the brick footpath before reaching the door to the building. I remained in the car for a long time, quite unable to drive. I was breathing deeply, enjoying almost to the point of orgasm the idea that, for the first time ever, I had deliberately made someone suffer. It was like one of those silly challenges posed by the Devil in Mediaeval plays, before he can fully trust you. “First you will kill the pet you love best... then you will hurt the person who loves you most... Then, and only then (whoa ha, ha, ha !...) can you have *power* and *immortality*.”

Something in my mind slid shut with the soft but decisive sound of an SLR curtain shutter, and indeed it was a curtain. It removed all my feelings, all my memories. It made me light on my

feet, even if I happened to be sitting behind the wheel of a car. It had made me... perfect. I laughed : not out of happiness, not in order to respond to something funny, but just because it felt so good !

When I got back to our house, the monster had broken in, but I did not notice at first. Like a hostage-taker who decides to be nice to begin with, *It* had permeated the whole house and was not doing anything, just watching me with a bemused look and a sarcastic smile on its invisible face. I ran upstairs. I ran back to check the post or the *mail* as Octavius would have said. Nothing from Vivian. I ran back upstairs, scared out of my wits and not even knowing why. I only felt safe in my room, in my bed, with all my clothes on. I would have locked the bedroom door if there had been a lock. I pulled the quilt over my eyes and blanked out.

Late that afternoon, Francis did not ask where or how I had spent the day, even if his eyebrow rose at the

sight of my unkempt hair and rumpled clothes. He started preparing some food for both of us. Sitting at the dining-room table, in front of me, **It**, my uninvited guest, my monster, my serpent seemed to have settled in. **It** talked to me but Francis could not hear. Every time I answered, **It** roared with laughter, a silent roar. **It** thought the whole thing was so incredibly hilarious ! **It** was twisted with laughter.

“Let me ask you a few questions” **It** said in a disembodied voice.

“Alright.”

“What did you say ?” interrupted Francis.

“Nothing. Not talking to you. What’s your question ?”

“What ?”

“Francis, for goodness sake, stop butting in. I am *not* talking to you.”

“Oh...”

I faced **It**. All I could see of **It** was a vague shape : a mouth with sharp teeth and a forked tongue. As this

insubstantial head moved slightly and caught puffs of sunlight wafting through the kitchen door, **It** started to sound and look more and more like my mother but **It** was almost transparent, not unlike a net curtain seen through the fog... Net curtains... Vivian hated net curtains... I faced **It** again : “Shoot.”

“In the letter you got from Vivian, does she mention that she loves you ?”

“No.”

“If she dumped you once, she will dump you again. You know that, don’t you ?”

“I know.”

“Say so, then. Say so. I want to hear you say so loud and clear, you stupid bitch.”

“She’ll dump me again.”

His hands on my shoulders, Francis was shaking me : “Darling, what on earth is happening to you ?” *What’s going on here ? He’s never called me Darling before.*

“She’ll dump me again.”

“But of course, she will. A child would know that.”

“Francis” I said, very softly “I am very tired. Please, please. Leave me alone and stop interfering.”

I felt the pressure of his hands letting go of my shoulders. **It** was looking at us with a sickening smile on its filigreed face. I heard Francis go out and slam the front door.

“She’ll dump me again.”

“Who is the only person in the whole wide world who has ever said I love you to you ?”

“Octavius.”

“Who has ever wanted to drink you saliva ?”

I lowered my head.

“Answer me !”

“Octavius”

“Who has ever wanted to smell your knickers, to lick your sweat, to feel your piss on his prick, ever wanted to masturbate facing you ? Who has ever asked to re-slurp his own sperm from

your mouth ? Who has licked you longer and better than you had ever been licked before ? Who has drunk your lubricating fluid as if it was nectar, who has more than loved you, who has worshipped you, body and soul, worshipped every square inch of you, loved everything you said, everything you did, everything you were, every sound you made, every movement, every scent ?”

“Octavius.”

“And if you dumped him once, would you dump him again ?”

“I would dump him again.”

“Say it, you bitch, say it.”

“I would dump him again.”

“That’s my girl.”

The front door flew open and Francis came back, dragging behind him a stout and cheerful nurse who lived not far from us. Did he think that calling a doctor was a bit extreme ? I had no intention of asking. The stout and cheerful nurse obviously did not know what to do. She muttered things

about stress, overwork, being patient, not to worry too much, seeing a doctor in the morning.

I knew perfectly well what I had to do without either of these busybodies telling me anything. I walked past them, went up to my study and started writing. I wrote for three weeks without stopping except to go to the loo, except to eat and drink whatever Francis brought to my desk. I would not wash or change. When I could no longer write, I would go to my room and collapse on top of my bed. Francis must have given me sleeping pills a few times because I occasionally woke up all nicely clean and washed and wrapped in a fresh bathrobe.

Vivian, what you did to me, was quite simply unforgivable. Yet, I forgave you. I know I should not have. I should have told you to go to Hell but, when you fall in love at my age, especially when you have never been in love before, it is usually for good. I am sorry I never answered your letter or returned

your telephone call. I hope you will understand. I also hope you never feel guilty about any of this. The pleasures and sorrows of love are neither a reward nor a punishment. They just happen. From the first kiss that we exchanged, I have loved you with every molecule, every atom of my own self, I have never stopped loving you and it is not your fault that it should be so.

If I wanted to be catty about all this, I might say that being threatened by Mr. Wonderful serves you right. The time you spent with him should have been spent with me... me, your most unconditional, your most reliable, your most adoring lover, she whose love makes your husband's pale into insignificance, she whose life was designed from the start to remain in awe with (as **It** would have said) every inch of your body, everything you would have said and done and, if we had lived together, every breathing moment of your own life... but it was not to be and it will not be and, in so doing, I believe that, in the long run, you have hurt

yourself at least as much as you have hurt me. You have pushed aside an inexhaustible, unquestioning life supply of love for you. It will not happen again. Goodbye, good luck with Emilio, Mr. Wonderful or whoever...

Octavius, what I did to you was equally unforgivable. You are the sweetest, most gentle, most loving man in the world. You are indeed the first and only person who has ever said to me : "I love you" the first and only one to have found me beautiful and desirable and said so over and over again, the first and only one who has worshipped me, kissed me, licked me, drunk me, body and soul, in a way I had never even dreamt was possible... in a way that I certainly did not deserve... I hope my death will help you forgive me.

Francis, I am sorry. I thought I was better than you and I am not. This does not mean I forgive you. You may be a good, generous, attentive male nurse but you are still the most stupid,

short sighted, undersexed and perverse person I have ever had the misfortune to marry. Yes, dear Francis, I did say *perverse*, the very term you used so often to describe me. You are far more perverse than I am. In those few decades Mother Nature was good enough to give us together, you have denied yourself and you have denied your wife a lifetime of pleasures and yes, a lifetime of happiness. If that isn't perversity, I wonder what is. Octavius said or wrote to me once : *If we were married, I couldn't help taking you in my arms twenty times a day. Is Francis blind, made of stone or is he just a God-damn fool ?* So, do not expect me to say that I forgive you : I do not. If I cannot bring myself to commit suicide, if I chicken out at the last moment, I will undoubtedly leave you. I will never forgive you for as long as I live. Yet, I do not feel that I am better than you. I am sorry for what you are and ashamed of what I am...

Come along, **It** : there is only one thing for us to do now... I think we'll

use my car. It's a small car. It will easily be demolished by a big car or a lorry, and if we don't wear my seat belt, there shouldn't be any problem.

Epilogue

When Francis got home from work, he found a Policewoman at the door. After she explained what had happened to Quentina and her car, she asked him if there was anything he could do to help with the coroner's inquiry. He went up to Quentina's study and came back with her writings. "It looks as if she committed suicide" he said lamely, after skimming through the last few pages.

"May we have these ?" the woman asked.

"Help yourself."

When the Police returned his wife's... what should he call it ? Diary ? Journal ? Francis started reading it slowly and carefully. He heard Quentina's voice, faint and persistent in the back of his mind, asking : *If another woman should come along in your life, Francis, would you do with her and for*

her what you never wanted to do with me and for me ?

He hid his face in his hands. His eyes were dry but, on his heart and in his soul, there fell a steady drizzle of tears. *If another woman should come along in your life, Francis...* He snapped back : *Fat chance of that !*

Against her chest, Quentina had warmed up a serpent called Vivian. Then Octavius had warmed up a serpent called Quentina. There is no more satisfying cruelty than to bite someone who loves you. Vivian's serpent had done it once. Quentina's serpent had done it once. Francis' serpent had never been frozen. It had been biting all the time...

Francis heard the delicate thumping noise of a letter falling on the doormat. It was addressed to Quentina and came from Spain. He opened it :

Dear Quentina,

I hope I haven't given you false expectations. I've changed my mind again. I'm staying with Emilio. He did

get my love letters from the man you call Mr. Wonderful and, much to my surprise, he was just immensely sad and not in the least bit angry... I was quite moved, really. When I think how macho he can be...

We had a long talk. He promised to stop treating me like a child. I promised I would remain faithful and stay with him. He and I have reached a new understanding. It may not be happiness but it's an acceptable state of affairs. I am very, very sorry about all this. I shall never try to get in touch with you again. Forgive me ; forget me. The past is but a memory...