

## A Winding French Road

Creative Writing Dissertation 12,000-15,000 words

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### Synopsis of opening chapters. (6,000 words)

It is 1982. Peter Williams is an English writer of 42 who moved to France to write a travel book following an acrimonious divorce. He hasn't seen or heard from his daughter since he left London when he was 30. His life in France has been unsettled - there have been lots of women, but none has lasted. His present girlfriend may prove different. She is the 29-year-old daughter of the mayor of the nearest town, Lourmarin. His completed travel book now enjoys modest but steady sales and adds to the income he makes from writing assignments and fees from his old publishers in London for translation and looking after any problems they have in France.

By this stage in the story he has moved into a large house in the village of Puyvert, in Vaucluse, to look after it for the owner, a Mme Loupi, while he rents out his own cottage in another village. He has introduced himself to the people of the Puyvert and learned a little about the earlier owners of the property.

He is intrigued by the story of an Englishman who once lived in the house and whose presence he still senses. He thinks this may be the ideal background to the novel he intends to write.

## Chapter 6.

After breakfast I logged on to my computer and had a look at the story I had started. Whether it was the unsettling effect of my house move I didn't know, but as I read it I just knew that it wasn't going to fly. It would just turn into a job, one thousand words a day wrung out by obstinacy. No matter how much I tried to use the techniques and tricks I had learned over the years, it would never come to life and catch the imagination of the reader. I swallowed hard and pressed 'Delete.' Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I could get it back from the Recycle Bin so I emptied that as well, just to make it finally clear to myself that it was time to start again.

I decided that the most useful thing I could do to unblock my mind was to start keeping a journal. I had never done this as an adult. Once, when I was about thirteen or fourteen, at the age when everyone is thinking hard about life and relationships and philosophy, I made some notes in a little book. I labelled it 'Private' in blood red ink on the front, but my mother found it in my sock drawer and showed it to my father. I am sure there was no malice in his intent and he probably saw it as an opportunity to relate to me more closely. The subsequent discussion of what I had written stays with me as the most mortifying experience in my entire life and recalling it still makes my toes curl. Anyway, nobody could get at my new journal because it would be safe on my computer behind a password and 128-bit encryption, whatever that is.

### Journal-Monday

My mind isn't focussing properly and if I can't find enthusiasm this early in the draft I am never going to be able to find it later. I think I am getting subconsciously aimless, and I guess the next step is depression. This is new. I am not introspective by nature so why am I welcoming the idea of keeping an introspective journal? Nobody is going to read it

because nobody is close enough to me to want to- even if they could wheedle the password out of me. Why should they bother. 'They'—who am I kidding?

My speculation was interrupted by a call from the courtyard. The young mechanic stood at the bottom of the verandah steps, 'Monsieur, the little Citroen will be alright. It would not perhaps satisfy Michael Schumacher, but it will run again. It is going to need a new battery and some oil and some other bits and pieces. I shouldn't have to spend more than 150€. Will that be alright?'

'Certainly. Come on up here and I will get cash for you. Would you like a cup of coffee?'

'Thank you, Monsieur.'

I sat him down at the verandah table. He was commendably clean, a trait I've always associated with engineering talent. When he had his coffee, I asked, 'Do you know who used to live in this house?'

'Certainly. Mme Loupi was here before I was born. Before her, until nearly the end of the war, I was told that there was a famous Englishman and his wife. They were both very old and died before the Germans left. I don't know if there was anyone between them and Mme Loupi. I heard someone say that there had been some sort of treasure and a robbery, but I don't know if it was true.'

I didn't think he knew anything more than this and we went on to talk about his family and their time in the village. When he had finished his coffee he thanked me and went off to get the parts for the car. After he left I looked again at the man in the old sepia photograph on the wall. He stared back at me and I suddenly decided that there could be a story in the people who used to live in this house. Why had a famous Englishman left home for this fairly remote part of Provence? I would have to find out.

Journal—Wednesday.

There is something liberating about having a blank computer page to write whatever comes to mind in the certain knowledge that nobody is ever going to be able to read it. I don't even have to correct spellings or grammar.

So where do I start?

Perhaps by trying to put on paper what I am doing with my life and where I think it might be going. This will have the double benefit of getting me writing and perhaps, at the same time, give me a clue as to how to sort out my future.

I wonder if that first incident with my father and the first diary was more important than I realise. I don't often think about it, but perhaps it is in part a reason for my unwillingness to fully lower my guard with other people. This is no bad thing in the work environment where too much openness inevitably backfires in the white heat of office politics

It is probably not such a good thing in relations with women, who seem to take a natural reserve as a lack of commitment. I love women. Perhaps one day I will be able to write this about a single woman, but I haven't found her yet. I often thought I had and then found myself clocking up things which were irritating or less than perfect and as a result losing interest. Perhaps a shrink would say this was an intentional defence mechanism, but I'm not a shrink so will leave that alone.

One thing is for sure. I know of no more satisfactory achievement than to get an attractive woman on her back with her legs open for me. Come to think of it, attractive is a pretty flexible definition. Think of it as a bonus.

My journal has stirred me up a bit. I need some time with Ann Marie--soon.

Ann Marie phoned as I was getting some cold stuff together for my lunch.

'Would you like me to do any shopping for you, Peter? I could drop it in towards the end of the afternoon.'

This was a great help to me in my carless state. There was a bus that went to Lourmarin and beyond, but it only did the trip out in the morning and back quite late in the afternoon so it really wasted the day. She led me efficiently through a list of needs and rang off with her usual kissing sound.

She hooted outside and I went to help carry the bundles up the steps into the house. There seemed to be an awful lot of things and I insisted on giving her the cash straight away.

‘How about a cup of tea? It is a very English habit and extremely good for you.’ She wrinkled up her nose, and accepted provided I didn’t put milk in it as she had heard all English did. In fact it was years since I’d had milky tea, but I pretended to be seriously shocked.

We drank our tea sitting in the big comfortable armchairs. It was really rather pleasant to relax there with this beautiful girl who seemed to enjoy my company as much as I enjoyed hers. I suppose I reacted in much the way any man of forty- two would with the undivided attention of an attractive woman of not quite thirty. It wasn’t long before the mood of my journal entry returned to the front of my mind. Relaxation over a cup of tea became a distraction from my real need for Ann Marie. She sensed my mood without any words being necessary.

There was a telepathy that transmitted my desire and she responded without any hesitation, coming to where I sat, standing between my knees and putting a hand on each shoulder while looking deep into my eyes. I returned her stare until we could bear no more suspense and I led her to my warm afternoon bed.

When we had sorted ourselves out and were sitting back at the table with our tea, Ann Marie said, ‘Peter, tell me about your daughter. Do you ever get into contact with her? How old is she now?’

‘She is called Emma and she will be 20 on November 11<sup>th</sup>. I haven’t seen her since she was seven. My marriage to her mother broke down. They gave her custody. It was hard when the court refused me access. Helga, my wife, complained that I was obsessive and was stalking her and the child.’

‘How could the court do that? It wouldn’t be possible in France. Weren’t you able to write to her or telephone even?’

‘I really tried. I think the whole business sent me off the rails a bit. I’ve written to Emma every birthday and sent her cards and presents, but never had any reply. Ever. I miss her terribly. It is hard, knowing your own flesh and blood is beyond reach and probably couldn’t care less. Luckily my publishers in London had this opportunity in France. I had a little French then so they offered me the job.’

‘Well, why don’t you do something about it? If it was my father I would be curious about him and want to find out if we were alike.’

‘She has probably been told all about me by Helga, and you can bet it is all bad. I am scared of seeing her and being snubbed.’

Ann Marie was getting a bit excited, ‘If you don’t do anything you will never know, will you? She is 19 now and old enough to have a mind of her own. What have you got to lose? You haven’t seen her since she was a child and at this rate you never will.’ She was beginning to press the limit a bit and we both realised this was something to avoid.

‘OK,’ I said, ‘I will see if I can get in touch. I don’t even know where they are living now. Knowing Helga, she has got some poor fellow to support her and she will be called something else entirely.’

Ann Marie held my face in both hands and kissed the tip of my nose. ‘I am sure you would be a father any girl could be proud of. Try to get her back.’

She said she had to go and when her car went off down the road I very nearly wept.

## Chapter 7

Life had been fun when I first arrived in Vaugines. I got on well with Asmussen, the illustrator of my travel book, and with the other expatriates. There were lots of girls who came and went. The pattern of these relationships was amazingly consistent. First, the

conviction that the current emotional desert was about to bloom with the love affair of all time. Then into a crescendo of enthusiastic coupling which rose to a blissful peak before cooling into realistic appraisal, discord attended by impotence and, finally, separation with a sense of escape. This was a wearing process, but the good bits were so enjoyable they induced a sort of amnesia that allowed the whole cycle to repeat.

I needed to get on and do something positive to put things right. This meant getting Emma back. I knew would never be able to sustain the enthusiasm to write well until I had made a real effort.

Journal- Friday

I am not entirely clear why it is so important to get Emma back into my life. Emotionally, there is no question, but in reality? After all I haven't seen her since she was seven. I haven't even exchanged a word with her, yet I am convinced that she won't have changed into a small female clone of her mother. I have absolutely no evidence for this; indeed it is far more likely than her taking after me. Anyway, how do I know that a girl who takes after me would make a more satisfactory daughter? Doing a brief, but merciless inventory of my own characteristics gives me no comfort. I am like a balloon growing bigger and bigger on the surface, but at the same time the empty bit inside is growing as well. I am convinced that the only way to lower the pressure is to make a positive attempt to regain my lost daughter. She is the safety valve.

Nevertheless, I am as sure as I can be that now is the time when I need to try and get her into my life. Even if we agree afterwards that we aren't suited to a more regular relationship, I shall know that I tried and will have something to remember. Even if it is only a photo. The present vacuum is doing me no good. Why now? Perhaps it is a sign that I am growing up. A bit late.

It was a problem to know where to start. I only had a twelve year old address for a woman whose name had probably changed as well. Friends Reunited wasn't going to be much help with an alienated ex-wife who I couldn't believe would respond, even out of curiosity. Then I remembered a talk at school by a man and woman from the Salvation Army. We giggled about the uniforms and ranks and her bonnet, tied with string under her chin. It might have

been funny at the time, but something had stuck. They explained how they were the biggest and best missing persons agency in the world and that this was largely due to their record for discretion.

I wondered how best to approach them. I wasn't due to go to England and it didn't seem sensible to make a special trip. If I suddenly turned up on the doorstep there was every chance that Helga's first reaction would be to fly off the handle. It would be even less likely to succeed if there was a man in the house.

I looked the Salvation Army up on the internet. They had a whole site dedicated to finding missing persons. They couldn't trace people under 18, so I hadn't wasted much time by doing nothing because Emma was only 19. It might make sense for me to tell my story to a local branch in France. There were addresses in Marseilles, Toulon and Nice. Then I found I had to go through a French office anyway, so I sent off a request by e-mail.

Having now done something concrete about tracking Emma instead of just feeling sorry for myself, I thought I should have another go at my new novel.

I decided that for background the best person to talk to would be old M Gregoire who had called on me soon after I arrived and told me that he and his wife had looked after the couple before Mme Loupi.

Later that morning I found a pretext to stop and talk to him as he worked on his plot at the top of the village. At eighty-ish he was a walking advertisement for the southern life style of easy pace, good olive oil and congenial neighbours. He was, however, clearly glad to have a reason to stop digging and lean on his spade.

'When the Englishman came to live with Mme Alles it must have been about 1930. In those days they went to the coast in the winter for a month at least, to get out of the way of



the mistral. There isn't much frost here, ever, but that mountain blast seems like the breath of death.

'Quite often after the second summer they would have guests and Rose would help Madame with the arrangements. The Englishman must have been important because they nearly all arrived in big black chauffeured cars. Rose said he showed them his paintings and antiques and they would listen with real interest to his stories of his ancient family.'

'What was his name, M Gregoire, perhaps he was famous?'

'Mr Jack Peterhouse. I remember this well because he always tried to teach me how to say Jack and not Jacques. It made little difference. I would never have called him anything but M Peterhouse, any more than I would have dreamed of calling Madame by her first name.

'Yes, those were the days. I must have been in my twenties and life was good. We had our son in 1934 and I remember they sent us a bottle of Champagne with a note saying that it must be a good year because he had just heard that he had a grandson.'

I said, 'I am glad you knew them. There is something about La Louveterie that makes me want to know about how they lived and what they were like. Perhaps we can talk again?'

'That would be a pleasure, Monsieur.' He turned back to his digging.

Journal- Tuesday

I wonder if it is possible to compare the life of old Gregoire to mine. A pretty pointless exercise I suppose, but a journal is the ideal place for pointless exercises. What have I got that he hasn't?

I have travelled to places he hasn't seen (But I wonder if he misses that?)

I speak a second language. (He would say he hasn't found the need. He managed with the old man whilst he was alive).

I have had the freedom to live where I please and sleep with many different women.  
(I bet he would have done the same if he had half a chance and probably thinks about it still).

One out of three to me.

He knows who he is and where he stands as ex-mayor of Puyvert. Successful as a husband to Rose and happily married. No unfulfilled ambitions. Three more out of three to Gregoire.

So, perhaps six out of seven to him, if you count the women.

He wins hands down.

What do I need to do to redress the balance?

First. Try and get my family life in order. That means getting Emma back and making a real commitment to one woman (But it must be genuine, not just for the sake of having an experiment. I don't want to get saddled with another Helga).

Second. Get on with my book. It isn't going to write itself.

Third. Stop being envious of an old French peasant.

I am not so sure that this journal self-analysis is a good idea. OK to write, but a bit pathetic to read. Am I really an unfulfilled career and creative failure?

I had better do something. Things don't just change themselves. That's just tooth-fairy thinking.

I tried to look up Jack Peterhouse on Google. There was the usual problem of masses of entries, mainly about colleges at Cambridge, but after patiently looking through masses of irrelevant detail I came across one which had potential. It was about a family that came from Alltyvaynan which was somewhere in Wales. They had apparently been substantial land owners since the middle ages until an eldest son sold their land and property in the 1920's and left the country. That was the last entry so it seemed I might have something to work on. I needed to have another talk with the Gregoires to see what gaps I could fill in. I might have got a starting point for my new book. Well, a subject at

least. It will be the old man and how he got here. I don't think I shall be able to do a proper research, but perhaps that is a good thing. After all, I am writing a novel and this should give me a lot more freedom to make him what I want. Just the bare bones of a skeleton to hang the flesh of the story on. I can dig enough out of the locals to provide a plot I can follow in my mind and then see where it leads me. There is lots of scope for alienation and inbreeding and ancient family curses.

I know he broke with his rather grand family early and I am going to make him wander about, living on cheques from trustees. A remittance man! I have heard the expression, but never wondered what it really meant. He arrived here with heirlooms and pictures when he was in his fifties. He married a good Frenchwoman. He was happy here. For the first time in his life? A daughter he didn't see, but longed to know, would be something I could write about first hand.

Journal- Wednesday

Good. Perhaps this journal is worthwhile.

But it is no substitute for sex and I am getting frustrated as hell...

## Chapter 8

The phone rang and an English voice asked, rather sarcastically, how I was enjoying my holiday.

'Bob, when you can speak French and decide to live on a diet of frog's legs and stuffed goose liver just let me know. How are things in London? Seen any English people recently? Hold on a moment while I find my sunglasses.'

'OK David, that's enough or I will come and visit you for a month or so and cramp your style with the latest live-in dolly.

'Listen-- we are having problems with Maison Latour in Paris. They are holding 500 copies of 'Winter in the Lakes' and refusing to pay because they claim the deal was 'Sale

or return' and they haven't yet sold them all. This way they will still be sitting on their sales revenue as well as the last stock copy in a couple of years. Will you go up and sort them out please? I will send you copies of the paperwork by email later today.'

'Fine. I will get on with it. Edouard will always try it on until he is pushed and then he just shrugs and pretends it was a mistake. Is he expecting a visitation?'

'No, you will be a surprise. Usual fee. Day rate and expenses. We will throw in the cost of a dinner for you to take him out when it is sorted. They are doing well for us overall and I want to keep him sweet. Take him somewhere decent, but don't swing the Crillon or George V on us. OK?'

'Yes, Bob, I will do my best. Send me the stuff and I will get you a result within the week.'

This was good news. I didn't enjoy Paris, but the firm were fairly generous and paid my bills by return, so it made the rush and noise and rudeness of the city bearable.

I went downstairs and found that Pierre, the mechanic, was ready for his test drive. Off we went at a modest pace, trailing an enormous cloud of smoke and dust down the village street. After a little while the engine warmed up and the smoke subsided and he handed over to me to drive back. There was something homely about the unpretentious little car with its canvas roof rolled back, lurching like a camel over the rough bits in the country lanes. Everything seemed to work in its fashion. Perhaps adequate is a good word. The modest speed wasn't too much of a challenge for the leisurely brakes and the steering kept us on the correct side of the road. I was happy with my acquisition, particularly as it had been given to me by Mme Loupi for nothing. Pierre's bill was surprisingly modest too.

I couldn't get Ann Marie on the phone so I sent her a text that I would be away for a few days. Then it was just a matter of packing a small bag with some Paris clothes and

washing things. I drove myself all the way to Marseilles, unlicensed and uninsured, where I left my small new friend in a car park whilst I caught my train.

Paris was as unpleasant as ever. Crowded, rude and uncomfortable after Provence. I feared that I was going native because I no longer got enough of a buzz when I visited to make up for all the city rush and the self centred attitude of the Parisians.

I sorted out Edouard as quickly as I decently could. He wasn't such a bad chap really, just incapable of undertaking any transaction without trying it on. Once I read him the riot act he backed off, transferred the due payment whilst I was in his office and reverted to his charming self. We spent a very enjoyable evening gossiping about the book world over dinner at the publisher's expense..

I took the opportunity to call an old girlfriend and we discovered that it was surprisingly easy to find our way back to remembered habits. As a result I stayed over for an extra day and night and kept my phone discreetly switched off. I answered the text messages from Ann Marie when I was in the TGV on the way south again.

Journal-- Friday

Paris came back to life a bit when Elizabeth answered her phone. It was eighteen months since we drifted apart and I didn't really expect to be able to find her still available, willing and able. How wrong I was! I never did get to check in to the hotel I had booked. I went straight round to her apartment in the 8<sup>th</sup> arrondissement and was even greeted by the concierge like an old friend when she peeped out suspiciously to spy on Elizabeth's male visitor. Formalities dissolved in about one minute and in five we were in bed. I think both of us knew that this was an episode simply to enjoy and should not be complicated by any thought of 'What next?' I did my company business but the rest of the time was spent between the covers, with short trips to local cafes for refreshment and

recuperation. We had always been good together in bed and we rediscovered all those little intimate moves and ideas which had been such a joy to invent the first time round.

All good things come to an end. There were a few tears, but no calls for commitment. We had revisited a happy experience and I certainly felt better as a result. I think she did too.

Somehow, things are different with Ann Marie.

Back in Marseilles the little car was waiting for me. Pierre had done such a good job that it clattered into life almost immediately. I rolled back the roof and we made our way through the maelstrom of city traffic at a dignified pace until I was able to opt for minor roads to take us home to Puyvert and La Louveterie in the gathering dusk.

I decided to christen the little car after Don Quixote's horse. As soon as I returned Rosinante to the garage under the house, I plugged in my laptop to catch up with events. I had typed a report to the London office on the train, together with my expenses, so I sent these off before anything else and then went to my inbox to see what might have arrived. There was a brief note of thanks from Edouard, hoping I enjoyed the rest of my stay in Paris. I wondered how he picked up that idea as I certainly hadn't announced my intentions to him. Indeed, when I saw him there hadn't been any intentions. Still, there was nothing I could do about that now and I guessed he would be discreet if the need ever arose.

There was a message asking me to contact the Salvation Army in Marseilles. No explanation, but a telephone number. This would be the first job in the morning. I telephoned Ann Marie to announce my return, establish alibis for my lapse in communications in Paris and claim tiredness pending a chat in the morning. I boiled myself an egg, which I accompanied with a large glass of whisky. I really was tired after the previous night so I was in bed by 9.30.

## Chapter 9

I woke late, still feeling tired. I knew there was something good to look forward to, but for a few moments I couldn't remember what it was. Then I remembered the Salvation Army. To get myself half-way coherent I had a shower and some coffee. I would visit the baker later.

After only a couple of rings a pleasant female voice answered. She recognised my name, congratulated me on my French and explained, 'We have been in contact with our missing persons unit in London. They have read the information you sent and said they will take on the search for your daughter, provided you agree to some conditions.'

'Please tell me what these are, Madame.'

'First, and most important, you must realise that we will not release any information to you about the result of our research. If we trace your daughter we will give her the means to contact you. It will be entirely up to her to decide whether to do so. We can, however, tell you if we have been able to trace her so you know if she is alive or dead. Is that acceptable?'

'Yes, certainly. Will it take long?'

'We can't even guess. As you will be aware, the Salvation Army has to make a charge towards covering the cost of the search. This is a fixed sum and there will be no extra cost, whatever expense we incur. You will need to send us a letter addressed to your daughter so we can pass it on if she is located. This will mean that she knows where you are, but you don't know how to contact her. Is that also acceptable?'

'Yes indeed. Shall I write to you in Marseilles or London with the letter and cheque?'

'You are on the internet, so download the form, complete it and post it, with your letter and a cheque for £45 to the London address.'

‘Thank you, Madame. I am infinitely grateful. I will get on with it straight away.’

‘I wish you success, Monsieur. May God bless you.’

## Chapter 10.

I wanted to talk to Ann Marie about my attempts to contact Emma and get her to come down to Provence. I would need some help because I wasn’t used to entertaining 19 year old daughters and Ann Marie was much closer to her age, and probably outlook, than I could be. I rang her and suggested lunch.

Ann Marie listened without any interruption as I told her about the Salvation Army missing relative search service and explained what I had in mind. I showed her the form I had to complete and asked her if she would be prepared to help me if I could eventually get Emma down to Provence.

She had tears in her eyes when I finished. ‘David, you are such a stupid, lovely man. Of course I want to help you find your daughter after all these years. Anyway, you are so insensitive you would probably frighten her off and never know why. You really do need help.’

She came into my arms and I found myself weeping silently over her shoulder.

We made a plan together. It would be too intense to ask Emma to come on her on her own. If she had a friend with her they could treat it more as an ordinary sort of holiday and she would have someone she trusted to confide in.

It took me two days and countless crumpled versions to strike the right note. Not too heavy, interested in her, remorseful about being out of her life and full of friendly stuff about my life in France. I decided to play my trump card in the first hand, as it were, and



said I would be happy to pay the airfare for herself and a friend to fly to Marseilles and stay in Provence for a few days. I enclosed an advertisement for a good small hotel in Lourmarin and crossed my fingers as I took the letter to the post office and crossed my fingers as I dropped it into the box. Then I had to wait for the Salvation Army to do their search

I was as impatient for her reply as any young boy with his first girlfriend. I couldn't settle to anything and found myself pacing the house at all hours of the night. I tried to set out the synopsis of my new story, but wasn't able to concentrate for more than a few moments at a time. I kept visualising different possibilities. She would probably ignore my note. Perhaps she was already married. I doubted if Helga would bother to let me know, even if she had died. Then I would switch my thoughts into a more positive mood and plan where we would go together and what I would show her of the South of France. The location, at least, was a real asset. If I was inviting her to Southend it wouldn't do much for my chances.

## Chapter 11.

I made myself sit at my computer after breakfast and just try to empty my mind to make a space for a plot to land. I knew from long experience that no amount of excuses and evasions were as likely to get me started as just sitting at the keyboard.

Then I remembered that the mechanic, Pierre, had mentioned treasure and I wondered where that could lead. It was time to find out more about what sort of life the couple had led in La Louveterie and what happened after his wartime death in the house. Village solidarity is strong in Provence and it would cause everyone to clam up if they thought I was getting too inquisitive about their affairs.

Journal- Tuesday

I couldn't really exist anywhere except France, and in France nowhere but Provence. I am getting to love this old house. I think it has something to do with being built around a courtyard. It turns a blank face to the outside world with windowless walls and big iron gates. The casual passer-by can't see anything of what goes on behind these gates. Perversely, this means that anyone one who is invited in feels much more involved than they would if it was open. I don't think I could now live comfortably in an American suburb without fences and with windows onto the street. The Provençal thing is due to the tiles, the trees shading the courtyard and the way the house is designed to open up to cool breezes in the summer and seal against the chilling blasts of the mistral off the mountains.

There is a completeness about it and its place in the village that makes it easy to understand how Jack Peterhouse must have felt about it after his years of wandering. I understand now why Mme Loupi didn't just sell up and go off to live with her sister. You would want to be very sure before giving up something like this for good. I could never afford to buy it, or even rent it, but I am happy just to borrow my time here. Also, the rent I am getting for my cottage in Vaugines will help pay for my daughter's visit.

I decided to have a gamble and offer an open house for drinks and canapés on 14<sup>th</sup> July as a gesture towards the French and their independence day. This gave enough time for the arrangements and I gambled that most people would have plans of their own for the evening of Quatorze Juillet so they would drop in out of curiosity, but not stay and break my rather delicate budget.

This plan would enable me to get closer to M and Mme Gregoire, who I was sure knew much more, having worked for the couple. I called on them at their little house up the street and put my suggestion to them. Perhaps they would care to come down later in the day to discuss the idea? They agreed.

Before they came I telephoned Mme Loupi to see if I could buy some of her wine stock and she agreed to to release as much of her surplus vintage from M Nicolas as we needed at a very good price.

‘And how is life in Puyvert, M. Williams? Quiet, I imagine, after London and Paris—or even Vaugines.’

‘I am very happy Madame. I am getting to know the people in the village and they are most welcoming and friendly.’

‘And the young lady from the mairie in Lourmarin?’

She must have had an intelligence network like the Sureté. I was glad Ann Marie and I had been discreet. ‘Very well, thank you, Madame, but very busy at home. She visits me from time to time and helps keep the house in a condition you would like.’ It was time to change the subject.

‘I also see the Gregoires, who seem to know everything about the village. They were telling me about the English couple who had the house before you. Did you know them?’

‘No. They were long dead and the house unoccupied and boarded up before I bought it. I didn’t take too much notice and I knew those Gregoires would go on and on if I encouraged them. There was talk of treasure and a robbery, but you know what village gossip is. I certainly never found anything. How is the little car now Pierre has worked on it?’

I would have to watch out. She would probably comment on my choice in toothpaste next.

‘He is a good mechanic, Madame. The car is working as well as anyone could expect. I am enormously grateful for your generosity.’

‘Think nothing of it Mr Williams. Can you imagine me driving it nowadays? You are very welcome. Just take care. I wouldn’t want you have an accident.’

‘Thank you Madame. I shall take great care.’

Mme Gregoire set about preparing a mountain of canapés with the care and attention of a good Frenchwoman who knew that they would be judged by the entire village for both quality and quantity. I asked her to give me the bills, and allow enough for her to get in something for our own dinner afterwards, if she and her husband would accept my invitation to join me after the guests had gone.

My writing had to go on the back burner as I prepared for my party. The Gregoires and I looked around for the best way of accommodating an unknown, but potentially large group of guests. We decided between us that it would be best to use the big space under the house. It was more or less empty after I took the little car out and put in the car park opposite. The boiler, a dusty old dresser and the pile of cut logs were all against the back wall so we had plenty of space.

‘We are going to need some better lighting.’ I said to Gregoire, ‘These bare bulbs won’t do. What do you suggest?’

‘I will get young Pierre, who fixed your car. He is sure to know where to lay his hands on some decent lights.’

Gregoire was right, and the barn-like space was transformed with strings of bright fairy lights connected to the ancient spaghetti wiring of the house. We unloaded a number of trestle tables Gregoire acquired from the church hall and Mme G put the sort of paper table cloths on them that you find in workmanlike French cafés.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> July it was looking appropriately festive by lunchtime, when we all dispersed for a siesta before the job of setting out the food and wine.

Ann Marie and I had agreed that she would attend her parent's celebrations in Lourmarin, so I wouldn't have to make endless explanations to intrigued women who would have been working out just what was our relationship. It avoided the risk of even more messages getting back to Mme Loupi about me setting up a nest in her house in contravention of our agreement. Being alone would also help me to achieve my plan of interrogating the Gregoires under the influence of some calming alcohol and post-party food, though I didn't tell Ann Marie that bit.

The first guest arrived exactly ten minutes after the scheduled start of six-thirty. He was one of my labouring acquaintances from the café, almost unrecognisably clean and shiny and accompanied by his wife. They greeted the Gregoires and were soon at their ease with some of the wine from M Nicolas. The husband was very French in his formal tasting, sniffing and peering before relaxing and pronouncing it excellent. He took it upon himself to report his findings to each arriving guest in a proprietorial manner after they had shaken hands with me where I stood by the wicket gate in the enormous barn doors, greeting new arrivals. I hadn't yet managed to remember everyone's names, but I managed to bluff my way rather well.

There must have been over fifty people and it wasn't long before the rather low ceiling and the beneficial effect of M Nicolas' vintage combined with a mild evening to cause my guests to spill out into the courtyard. The Curé came to give the evening his approval and was kind enough to ignore my absence from his services. I had the feeling that he considered it impolite to refer to English Protestantism at such a jolly event.

At eight people politely made their thanks and were soon away to their own celebrations, cheered, I hoped, by the enormous number of empty bottles which were in crates by the tables. I reflected happily on the difference between the ingrained good manners of the French and the likely outcome of access to unlimited wine in northern Europe among a similar group of working men, even if they had their wives to supervise them.

When the last happy guest had gone we closed the gate and I said, 'Now Albert and Rose, we will leave all these glasses and tables. I want to offer you some dinner which I have ready upstairs.' We made our way up the outside stairs to the dining room of the house and I settled them down with some good chateau bottled Cote de Rhone while I cooked some rare steaks and added my special sauce.

It was a pleasant dinner and there was certainly an atmosphere approaching good fellowship in place of the formality prior to the party. We gossiped about the guests and I learned more from the pair of them about my café acquaintances than I should have in five years otherwise.

I removed the plates, in spite of the protestations of Rose Gregoire, and brought in some ripe cheese and fresh bread. Over coffee and some cognac I moved on to the subject of the Englishman. My patience was rewarded, because they clearly now treated me as if they thought of me as reliable, and almost French.

Albert started, 'Madame had lived here for several years. She was correct in her manner with everyone and kind to the children she met. She was a lady of character, however. There had been a custom of piling old straw from the market across the drainage channels in the street for a day or so before they were collected by cart and taken away. Nothing unusual about that in an agricultural village, you might think.

Madame didn't agree and she gave the mayor, M Benoit it was then, such a hard time that it never, ever, happened again. It had probably been going on since the Romans left. Nobody ever tried to take advantage of her after that!

'She had an eye for the land and for property. Over the years her vineyard became better maintained than most of her neighbours'. She kept a strict eye on old M Nicolas who looked after it and her garden. That's the father of the present M Nicolas. I think she owned a couple of other properties, but of course I never asked. It is considered impolite to be too curious in the country. I don't know how they are in Paris.'

Rose interjected, 'She used to go down to the coast for a few weeks in the winter when it became cold up here in the foothills. I would look after the house for her and my Albert made sure the property was properly maintained. I think she was rather lonely up here, being an educated single lady of a certain class who had no equals to socialise with. Her stay in Monaco used to set her up with a bit of a sparkle that lasted until the spring came and kept her busy again. One winter, it must have been around 1929 or 1930, when she brought him back with her to La Louveterie.'

'Who did she bring back, Madame?' I said.

'Why, the Englishman.' she replied, as if surprised that I didn't already know all about him. 'He was in his fifties, I guess. A man of medium height and a substantial build. He was very courteous, as far as one could tell anyway, because he spoke hardly any French. I had the feeling that he understood quite well, but never found it necessary to trouble with the speaking. Here in Puyvert, he had Madame to do it for him and she could easily speak for two.' She reddened slightly. 'Pardon, Monsieur. It does not do to speak lightly of the dead.'

‘I have been wondering about that.’ I said. ‘About how he died, I mean. It seems very sad to be separated by war from your family when you are old and in another country, however comfortable your circumstances.’

Albert replied for her. ‘I don’t think he cared about his family in England. They never came to see him at La Louveterie, although I know he went to Marseilles on a couple of occasions to meet people on ships. I think he saw his daughter at least once. I don’t know about his son. He was never here while the old man was alive, I do know.’

Rose added. ‘Madame told me that he had met his son’s estranged wife and her son on one of those visits. He was very proud to have a grandson and relieved to know that the family name was as assured as it could be. He didn’t have much time for his own son, it seemed.

‘Anyway, his life was full here. He obviously adored Mme. and she treated him with affection and cared for him almost as a large, but rather awkward child. She always spoke English to him, so I don’t know what they talked about, but her manner and speech were kind and loving.

‘It was tragic to see his collapse after Mme. died. From being content and healthy he became drawn, melancholy and ate nothing to keep out the cold. It was February and damp. He went downhill so fast.’ She dabbed at the corner of her eye with her handkerchief. M. Gregoire reached over and patted her hand.

He took over. ‘Madame caught a bad chest infection. Doctor Hilaire came over to see her from Lourmarin when she was unable to shake it off. He only had a quick look before he said she must go immediately to hospital in Marseilles. These things were not always easy to arrange in the occupation, but the German Commandant was a real gentleman, in spite of being a Boche, and fixed up a car to take her there. He even allowed Monsieur to accompany her.



‘The car returned with him later that day and when I went to see him, he was slumped in that chair, where you are sitting, with tears pouring down his face. He just said ‘I had to leave her, Gregoire.’ and then waved me away because he seemed to want to be alone.’

I asked, ‘How did he manage on his own? It sounds as if he was dependent on her.’

Rose replied, ‘Totally dependent, Monsieur. It was if a vital spark had been extinguished in his heart. I did my best to get him to take hot food to keep out the chill, but he just picked at it. He sat in his chair as I cleaned up the house around him and it was as if I wasn’t there. Some nights the bed wasn’t slept in and he must have just stayed in his chair. The Curé called but couldn’t help. About the only visitor who he noticed was M Benoit, who used to take in a bottle of rum. It was all he seemed to live on.

‘We couldn’t tell his family what was going on, and anyway there wasn’t anything they could do with the war raging. Then, on the evening of 7<sup>th</sup> February, I remember because that is my sister’s birthday, there was a knock on our door and there he stood. We asked him in, of course, and he came into our front room. He had a small box in his hands and he held it out to my Albert and asked him to look after it. Albert and I were convinced he had some treasure or jewels in the box. We had to refuse. It would have been quite improper for us to be in possession of his property if he were to die, which seemed to be what he had in his mind. He didn’t argue. Just nodded and went out into the night.

‘When I went in the next morning he wasn’t in his chair as usual. I found him dead on the steps down from the verandah. Perhaps he fell, poor old man. He had on only a thin vest and there was an empty rum bottle by his hand.’

‘What a sad ending,’ I said, ‘after he had been so happy here with Madame. What were you able to do, with the war on and nobody from his family to contact?’

‘There was very little indeed. In fact M.Benoit from the café, who was then mayor, arranged that there should be a funeral and that he should be interred beside her in Lourmarin. Albert and I went, of course and M. Nicolas who looked after the garden and the vineyard. Their graves are side by side in the protestant plot outside the Churchyard. They are still unmarked today. When we came back there were signs that someone had tried to break into the house so we all got together and moved everything of any value, like the pictures and some of the historic things. We stored them in a lean-to at the back of the Café and M. Benoit locked it in front of us and said the key would be kept in the safe at the Mairie. There was no sign of the box of treasure. I looked specially before they came to collect the body and I am sure it was not in the house.

‘Everything stayed like that until after the war. Monsieur’s son came to Puyvert eventually and arranged for the sale of the house and sent the old paintings for auction in Marseilles. He was very different from the old man. Taller. Spoke fluent French with a Swiss accent. He didn’t seem to want to speak about his father to all the people who had known him for so many years and would have been glad to pass on their memories so they would be kept in the family. He wasn’t even interested in where they were buried.’

Albert said, ‘It was about 1953 when M.Benoit sold the café to Jean Aguitton who was some sort of dealer from the Marseilles area. It didn’t seem right that the new patron should come from so far away, but everything was changing in those years. Anyway, it wasn’t long after he took over that he suddenly came into money and built those two big new houses at the top of the village on the hillside. None of us trusted him and we still wonder whether he found that treasure.

‘So there it is, Monsieur Williams. It was a long time ago now. The house was bought by Mme. Loupi, but you know all about that. We still think of Madame and her English Milord and how happy they were. Puyvert has been different since they went.’

‘I am most grateful to you for telling me this story, particularly as I am a stranger. It will make me appreciate the house and Puyvert even more. Thank you both.’

‘You are welcome Monsieur’ said Albert. ‘Perhaps one day you will write about our English.’

With much handshaking and the exchange of effusive thanks, I saw them out into the summer night. I knew I had a story to work on and I felt the old familiar excitement about starting something new.

Journal- Tuesday

So now I have it all. A tragic love story, where the protagonist had found happiness after years of lonely wandering and made a new life which was cruelly ended with the death of the only person he had really loved. His sad and lonely death shortly afterwards of a broken heart led to the missing ‘treasure’ and a robbery.

Even I ought to be able to make something out of those ingredients. The estranged daughter was an added coincidence.

I wonder if Ann Marie is turning into another good Frenchwoman? Surely lightning can’t strike twice?

## Chapter 12

After what seemed an age of alternating hope and despair, an email arrived from Emma! My letter had arrived, together with reassurance from the Salvation Army that she was free to ignore it.

She wrote, ‘Dear Father,

‘It seems strange to start an email like this. I never have before. I don’t know why you weren’t in contact when I was younger and needed a real father. When we meet, perhaps you can explain.

So—thanks very much for your invitation. I would like to come to Provence and would also like to bring my friend Sally. We have known each other since we were in primary school and are at university together now. It seems wrong not to at least try meeting on neutral ground and make our own conclusions about each other without the influence of mother. The summer vacation has six more weeks to go. When have you in mind?

Emma.’

I rushed to call Ann Marie and give her the good news. This time we were both weeping on the telephone. My daughter seemed to have triggered something emotional in me that I had lost many years ago.

Journal—Friday

I am finding something new and, I think, important with Ann Marie. I don’t mind talking to her about my own deeper thoughts. I have never done this with anyone else. Perhaps it is the ingrained vulnerability learned by a small boy at his first boarding school, where the slightest chink in a hard-armoured shell was the target for all sorts of cruelty. That, plus being an only child of unemotional parents who treated me as an extra person who lived with them at holiday times and was expected to entertain himself quietly and without disturbing the established routine and order. Now I come to think of it, I can’t remember either of them using the word love. It would probably have made an enormous difference if we had a dog, but we never did, so I didn’t know what it was like to be loved. Of course, I never consciously missed it either.

I am finding out that I can talk to Ann Marie without weighing my words carefully. Without weighing them at all, in fact. It gives me a feeling of confidence verging on elation. The nearest parallel is when we have made love. I have a rush of relaxation and

comfort when I lie with my head on her breast—almost like a child with its mother I suppose.

Helga suited me when we were together at first. There was something adversarial and challenging about our relationship. I had always to take care to show my manliness and make a good impression with her friends. Of course, that sort of façade can't stand the test of an intimate relationship and eventually she got through the shell and found out just how vulnerable I was. She felt short-changed and it was the beginning of the end. I wasn't the man she thought she had married and she let me know it. Those sorts of verbal cuts leave scar tissue which builds up between people until it is the biggest thing they have in common. Those last years when Emma was small were impossible. We competed for her affection whilst growing apart ourselves and the eventual parting was inevitable and unpleasant.

When I arrived in France I was off the lead and I made the most of it. I didn't lower my guard with any of the women, just worked on their defences. I was very good at it, but I didn't know then what Ann Marie is beginning to show me now.

It took no time to exchange dates a fortnight ahead and for me to book return flights with Air France from London to Marseilles and return. Emma would be with me for a week and said she was looking forward to her first visit to France. I now felt sufficiently at home in the village to announce the good news in the café and risk offering drinks all round. I had apparently arrived, because I was taken up on my offer and each of the regulars came to shake me by the hand and wish me a happy reunion. There was some good natured enthusiasm about the arrival of a beautiful blonde English goddess in the village and someone gained roars of applause for seeking reassurance that my daughter had not inherited my bushy black beard. I went home slightly erratically but excused myself on the grounds of a very special occasion.

Chapter 13.

I started early so I could get on with my writing. If I put in a solid couple of hours after breakfast I would be able to get on with planning Emma's visit. I phoned Ann Marie and invited her over for lunch. If she brought the food I would fix the wine.

When she arrived we talked about what we thought the girls would enjoy during their week in Provence. Ann Marie said, 'You should decide, not me. I have lived here all my life so I might overlook something interesting.' She then proceeded to argue with all my suggestions on the grounds that she knew Provence and girls best.

We eventually concluded that they should see the contrast between the tourist's Provence and the real country with its markets and old perched villages. They would not want to return without a visit to the Cote d'Azur and perhaps Monaco. Ann Marie said we should give them time for a girl's outing on their own, which seemed to me to make good sense.

It was surprisingly enjoyable, having a lively, intelligent and good looking girl to share the planning with and I thought she was pleased to get involved in this part of my life.

It took the rest of the day to sort out a programme, what with one thing and another, before she kissed me goodbye and roared off to help prepare her parent's anniversary dinner in Lourmarin.

Journal--Friday

'One thing and another' with Ann Marie is different from 'one thing and another' with Elizabeth in Paris. A straight description of what I did to her and what she did to me and what we did to each other would adequately explain to a man from Mars how Earthlings mate. It would totally miss the deeper reality and the difference in my feelings. As this is a journal, and encrypted, I think I can try to explain this to myself and perhaps clear my mind in the process.

Sex with Elizabeth is a wholly enjoyable act. She is warm and passionate and welcoming. She makes me feel like a giant when I penetrate her and I can bring her to a thunderous simultaneous climax which is glorious and leaves me empty, relaxed and satisfied.

When I am in bed with Ann Marie all the same things happen, but I realise we are making love. I want to make her have that giant feeling and I want to make her own climax leave her feeling fulfilled and satisfied. It is giving, instead of taking, that makes it satisfying.

I sat, content and comfortable in the gathering dusk, thinking about life in general and my own in particular. It really looked as if the tide of aimlessness might be turning and leading me towards something worthwhile. I hadn't yet done very much about my book, but these were special times and I knew the story would go on developing in the back of my mind until I was ready to set it down in words.

Journal—Saturday

In spite of all the distractions I can now sit down at my laptop and transmit the story that comes into my head straight into words. The characters are as familiar as if I had known them for years, but even so, are developing in ways I haven't planned. There is something heady about the mixture of the sad old man and his lonely life and then his long delayed happiness in this house. The story really hinges on this progression from a sad and wasted life to true happiness and then sudden misery and death. I can't leave it there, but I haven't yet decided what to do next. The confidence I feel at the moment may let me write on about the burglary and the mystery of the 'Treasure Box' without doing any planning. I will just see what happens. Perhaps he finds a missing daughter!

## Chapter 14.

At last the great day dawned and I spent a long time washing my hair and combing my beard and generally making sure the house was clean and tidy while I waited for Ann Marie to collect me for the drive to Marseilles airport. Her Twingo was considerably more respectable than my little grey car and with her doing the driving, I wouldn't have to worry about the parking and pick-up arrangements. Provence was at its most beautiful, mild and calm and we drove with the mountains of the Luberon glistened in the north. The air that day had the magical clarity which enhances colours and has attracted artists since the Romans lived here.

We had plenty of time in hand for parking and a coffee in Marseilles-Marignan before the arrivals board announced the plane from London. I persuaded Ann Marie to go and get the car so she was ready to collect us in front of the airport. Then I paced up and down in a state of nervousness that I hadn't experienced since Emma's birth. It seemed an age until the announcement that the BA flight had landed, and even longer until the first obviously English people came out of customs into the arrivals area.

The plane wasn't very full and I had no trouble identifying two tall blonde girls among the passengers. I need not have worried about deciding which was Emma. She looked very like her mother at the same age and I felt a surge of excitement with the recognition. When I met her at the gate I instinctively gave her a great hug and kissed her on both cheeks. She looked pleased and returned the embrace. I was close to tears as she introduced me to Sally, who shook my hand politely and said how glad she was to meet me. I explained that a kind friend had come to collect them with me and was waiting for us outside.

Ann Marie gave them a happy smiling welcome and we all slipped into English as we sorted out the luggage and who sat where. Neither of the girls had much French and it was their first visit to the country so we took them a bit off the direct road to Lourmarin, bumbling gently up the D road to Coudoux and Lambesc in order to stop for lunch at a cafe in La Roque. It was a great success. We sat outside, sheltered from any chill wind, and basked in sunshine over a salad nicoise and a bottle of local rosé. The mountains were looking at their best for the occasion and it was as though we had been accustomed to having companionable lunches like this for years. It helped that Anne Marie's age was nearer that of the girls than my own and they got on splendidly from the start. Over coffee I sketched out the plan for the week and established that they would



particularly like to see the glamorous parts of the Core d'Azur as well as our more picturesque mountains.

After lunch we drove to the girl's hotel in Lourmarin. On the way we passed Puyvert and I pointed out La Louveterie from the main road. I don't think they could see it, but at least it gave them an idea of where it was. We checked them in and left them to have a rest and a look around before dinner. Ann Marie drove me the 2 ½ kilometres back to Puyvert so I could sort myself out before making my own way back in the 2CV at dinnertime. I gave her a peck on the cheek as she dropped me outside the house and watched as she turned and drove away. She was turning out to be a real asset.

I almost floated up the steps to the verandah. All these lonely years without any contact with my own flesh and blood seemed to be dissolving in just one reunion. The dark times when I imagined a lonely decline to old age were impossible to remember clearly in the face of such deep happiness. I sang as I did my few chores around the house and forced myself not to turn on the computer screen. The euphoria around Emma's return was too important to be interrupted.

I was like a lovelorn youth as I tried on my Paris suit and peered at the result in the long mirror. As I did so, I could see the reflection of the man in the sepia picture staring at me with his chin in his hand. 'How about it, old man.' I said. 'Suit or something less formal for dinner with a beautiful young lady?' I sensed that he would never have considered dining without at least a tie, and would probably have worn a dinner jacket and a hand-tied bow of the sort I could never manage because I was unsighted by my beard. I chose to interpret the silence of the picture to convey approval for a tweed jacket, check shirt and well pressed chinos, but no tie.

I paced around the house in pursuit of the crawling clock, moved pencils around my desk, *fiddled with the tally*, tried to read the latest neglected pages of my book and

remembered to slip my camera in my pocket. I eventually left too early and had to spend some time waiting in the little car so that I didn't upset their preparations by barging in too soon.

When she came into the bar where I was waiting, Emma reduced me to silence. She was simply dressed in white with her long blonde hair twisted into a bun on the back of her head. She radiated that uniquely feminine glow and freshness. It wasn't until she had greeted me with a kiss on both cheeks that I could gather myself and tell her, tell both of them, how proud I was to be seen with such in lovely company.

Ann Marie made her entrance a few minutes into the first drink. By any standards she was a sophisticated, smart brunette, but in this company she looked positively frumpy. She appeared not to notice, was generous with her praise for the girls and set the tone for what was to be a memorable evening. She had a warm and friendly way about her that even I hadn't really noticed before. Something in her manner bridged the gaps of age, nationality, gender and any remaining sense of the oddness of the reasons that brought us together.

The hotel dining room was formed in the base of an old mill and we sat beside an enormous millstone that had been worn down over many, many years. Once the important matter of the menu had been sorted out we settled down to planning how the girls would like to spend their week in the South of France. Of course they wanted to see all the places they had heard about. St Tropez, Cannes, Nice and Monaco were essentials and Ann Marie and I decided that these would mean a very early start and a long day, or even perhaps two. I wanted to get Emma to myself for a while so we could talk freely as father and daughter without being part of a group. This would be best arranged later in

the week when we knew each other better and could relax enough to achieve something meaningful

I wanted the girls to see Provence at its best, as far as the herds of summer tourists permitted. We would go to the old walled fortress of Les Baux de Provence and come back through Cavaillon and the villages of Oppede, Menerbes, Lacoste and Bonnieux, made famous by Peter Mayle's books, before crossing the pass across the Luberon mountains back towards Lourmarin.

Time dissolved over dinner and by the time we were sitting over coffee everyone was talking at once and totally relaxed. I sat back and let the conversation flow. I had to give full marks to Ann Marie as hostess. She was at ease in English and was encouraging both girls to open up and speak about themselves and their life in London. The girls had clearly conferred about the extent to which she and I were an item and I guessed that they were pretty accurate in their assessment.

I was overflowing with happiness as I drove my little grey car back along the dark deserted roads towards Puyvert. Emma seemed to have inherited all the qualities that had attracted me to her mother in the first place, without the acid tongue and corrosive manner. She was a young woman now, so I had missed those precious years of her childhood, but I looked forward to being closer as she matured, married and started a family which would give me a grandchild of my own.....

I was back in the village before I realised it and left the car in the square so I wouldn't disturb any neighbours by opening and closing the big doors under the house.

Journal—Friday late.

I wonder if this evening is the nearest I have been to finding out about fatherhood? Sure, there is an emotional overload about seeing one's own child for the

first time. Realising that whatever one produced and exchanged in a moment of long forgotten intimacy has turned into a small wrinkled bawling person.

But the sort of fatherhood I am wondering about is the sort that comes much later and I haven't ever known. It seems to be a kind of fulfilment, where one's own sense of identity doesn't stop in one's own head or heart, but is just part of a natural unit of two parents and their offspring. This evening seemed to put each of us in our designed relationship, with Ann Marie falling easily into the role of mother, Emma accepting us both as older adults, friends or whatever is the healthy successor to a child's parental relationships, and with me proudly presiding. Even the presence of Sally had a bearing on this thought process. Although, in reality I had known her as an adult just as long as Emma, she remained an outsider. Not in any negative sense, but nevertheless not one of the family.

I wonder what Emma would say if she could read this? Or Ann Marie?

## Chapter 15

So much had happened that I almost forgot the habit of rushing to the computer as soon as I woke each morning. I took my steaming coffee to the desk to check on emails and see if I was needed in the real world.

I was now sure that the portrait on the wall was my Englishman, so I saluted him and said, 'Good luck,' before I went on to dress and get ready. I couldn't get my mind round writing about him at the same time as dealing with Emma's visit.

We had arranged over dinner that we would do the circuit of the parts of Provence that I particularly wanted to introduce to them. Ann Marie would collect them in her Twingo and then call for me at around 10.30, so they would have plenty of time for breakfast and a look around Lourmarin.

By 10.15 I was pacing up and down outside the house and peering down the road toward the direction from which I expected them. I counted 42 vehicles on the lightly used road before the bright red Twingo appeared, complete with the latest woman in my life, the one who I desperately wanted to impress in the short time I had available.

I had arranged to show them my house after we returned from our day out, so I piled straight into the front seat they had kindly left for me and off we went. Ann Marie drives well and it was a perfect morning as we followed the D973 with the Luberon foothills rising parallel to our road on the right. We stopped for a while in Cavaillon to have a look at the market. The girls were enthralled with the noise and colour and liveliness of it all. Emma said her supermarket would never be the same again and both girls enjoyed being flirted with by the male stallholders, even if they couldn't fully understand what was being said.

Then on to St Remy where we turned up the winding D.5, following the signs to Les Baux de Provence. It was as well that we had chosen to come in Ann Marie's car. My little 2CV would have had a struggle on that hill and enraged the locals who were showing off their powerful BMW's and Golf GT 6's.

The car park at Les Baux was packed as usual, but we managed to find a small corner for the Twingo and walked in a happy little group through the massive arch into the walled fortress and up the cobbled street towards the summit. The girls admired the elegant little boutiques set into the stone walls, with their displays of glass and jewellery and pictures. I began to despair of ever getting them up to the top, but at least we managed to find the place where we could meet for lunch if we became split up in the crowds.

At last we left the shops and walked past some life sized reconstructions of medieval siege engines to the ramparts overlooking the plain below. The girls were almost silenced by the grandeur of the setting as they stood at the walled battlements looking out into the blue of the far distance to the south, but they soon recovered enough to climb to the top of the old castle keep where they could see right around the horizon.

We were all ready for our lunch as we retraced our way to the table we had spotted, overlooking the valleys to the north of Les Baux. We shared a bottle of cold rosé de Provence with our baguettes and chatted as our feet recovered from the cobbles.

Ann Marie drove us back via Cavallion again, but this time we continued to the north of the Luberon and made our way by small roads through those picturesque villages that had attracted people to move down from England and settle in Provence. We admired the views from Oppède, Menerbes and Bonnieux before turning onto the steep road that crossed the mountain pass to Lourmarin.

We were held up for about half an hour by an accident. The rescue helicopter was clattering off in the sky as we came to the tail of the queue. People were wandering around or sitting on the parapet smoking and looking at the view. Nobody seemed to have much of an idea what had happened, but as no traffic was coming up the pass from the south it wasn't hard to guess. Eventually blocks of cars came through and we began a stop-start progress downward. When we got to the site of the accident a policeman directed us past a stationery bus with a slight scar on the side which was facing uphill and, against the side of the cliff a little further down, a 2cv like mine which had presumably hit the bus and bounced into the grey rocks. There was a group of police standing around the car, but no sign of occupants. They had probably gone off in the helicopter. It wasn't nice. The little car was crushed like a casually crumpled sheet of paper where it lay against the side of the mountain. We tried not to appear too ghoulishly interested, as one does on these occasions. Seeing that accident sparked off the usual 'there but for the grace of God...' thoughts, particularly as it was just like my Rosinante. We were all quiet for a few minutes before once again being overtaken by the happiness of the day.

The girls dropped off at their hotel to have a bit of a break before they came to dine at La Louveterie and Ann Marie drove me back so I could get on with preparing the dinner.

By the time the girls and Ann Marie arrived I had everything just the way I wanted it. I had moved the dining table onto the verandah and pushed it against the outer wall so we could eat overlooking the courtyard and under the stars. I had found a shiny-white tablecloth and washed all the glasses and cutlery. Two candelabra, each with three red candles, stood ready. I was very happy with the whole arrangement.

I am not really a good cook, but this evening I pulled out all the stops to make sure a simple menu would be memorable. We would start with fresh fillets of plaice I bought from the visiting fishmonger's van, continue with thick tournedos of beef, on to a really ripe camembert and finish with ice cream. My imagination and stamina couldn't run to a fancy pudding course. At least my sauces for the fish and beef were well practiced.

By the time I heard the gate open I was satisfied with the ambiance and looking forward to showing off my prowess as a chef. The girls followed Ann Marie up the steps to the verandah. They, too, had taken real trouble to be at their best for the dinner. Emma was really beautiful and looked mature and sophisticated in a tight dark blue dress that showed off her long golden hair.

There was a lot of ooh'ing and aah'ing as they took in the arrangements at the dinner table and they insisted on a guided tour of the house before we sat down. I gave them each a cold glass of rosé to take with them as we went from room to room.

I lit the candles and put Emma next to me, where I sat at the end nearest the kitchen. Beside her, on the long side, was Sally whilst Ann Marie faced me from the other end.

The candles made an island of light in the soft southern night and their reflections sparkled in the glasses and on the cutlery.

It was a memorable dinner, with light-hearted conversation as a counterpoint to what they all said was a masterpiece on the part of the chef. In retrospect, it was as if we were generating good memories to carry us over whatever might face us in the future.

Emma made a point of asking about my life since I had left England and I responded in some detail. I felt that she wanted to catch up with the years apart and was storing every word to fill the gaps in her knowledge. They all wanted to know about my writing so I explained about the book with Asmussen and my consultancy with my old publishers. It was less easy to explain the hack work I did copywriting for advertising agencies and French firms who needed translations made by a native English speaker.

They were most interested in the new book. I normally refuse to discuss projects in any detail until I have completed a first draft, because of a superstitious feeling that I will give away the spirit of the story before it is ready. I suppose this is about as logical as primitive natives thinking a photograph will allow the photographer to capture their souls instead of just a picture. In this company, though, I was in no mood to hold back. I wanted to open myself completely and draw them to me. Ann Marie and the girls sat quietly in the candle-light as I told them about the Englishman who had lived in La Louveterie, his miserable life, late-flowering love and tragic death with a broken heart. I also told them about the missing treasure.

‘There, how about that as a plot to build on?’

There was a rush of questions about what was true and what I had manufactured to fit. They all said what a great plot it was and they looked forward to buying the book and showing it off to their friends at home. The girls were all set to start digging up the floors



to find the treasure and I promised them a chance to search around before they went back to England.

It was a contented time as we relaxed over coffee and a little cognac and I could feel my big bubble of unhappiness deflating by the minute.

The girls relived the sights of the day and both swore that they would marry rich husbands who could afford to buy them houses in Provence. Emma told me about her success in passing her driving test at the first attempt and how her mother now let her drive their family car whenever they were out together, but wouldn't let her use it for solo trips. In an attempt to go one better than Helga I said Emma was welcome to take my 2CV and drive Sally around the part of the Luberon we had missed earlier that day. She was really excited by the prospect and asked if they could go in the morning instead of doing our planned trip in Ann Marie's Twingo to the Cote d'Azur. I agreed immediately. I would have given her the moon if she asked for it.

After coffee they tried to get me to allow them to help with the washing up, but I wouldn't let them. I knew it would take me some time to calm down enough to sleep and I didn't want to let them risk spoiling their finery. It had been a truly memorable evening. Perhaps one of the best in my life. Somehow I felt more complete and content than I remembered being for years. I am sure I went to sleep with a happy smile.

Journal—Saturday

I date my own happiness to those dinners. I still can't really believe that there can be such an unsuspected depth of character in someone who you think you know intimately. For the first time in my life I wonder if it might not be possible to live with one woman for years and still have something new and nice to find out about her.

I now know for certain that I have something to look forward to. For the first time.

I had a dreamless night and woke with a feeling of excitement and anticipation. It was going to be a memorable day for the girls and I was looking forward to teaching Emma the idiosyncrasies of the 2CV.

The girls arrived with at 9.30. They were all talking at once as they piled out of the little Twingo and their laughter was like a tonic on the clear morning air. I gave them each a coffee and we planned the day. I would take Emma out in the 2CV while Ann Marie and Sally would stay in La Louveterie to give it a womanly going-over before the girls set off for their trip into the Luberon. They planned to make a day of it and, if the car could manage, perhaps get to the lake of Ste Croix and even do the circuit of the canyon of Verdon. I had my doubts. Not about the car, which I felt sure would reliably apply what little power it had, but whether they had the patience which would be needed on those twisting passes. They said they planned to be back at around 5pm.

Emma and I took the map out to the 2CV and I said I would drive as far as the filling station while it warmed up and she could drive us back. It was only a kilometre to the garage on the corner of the main Cadenet- Lauris road. The little car started with a clatter and a wheeze and its normal cloud of smoke, and sat shaking while it warmed. I explained that this didn't last long because it was air cooled and then led Emma through the procedure of changing gears with the sort of umbrella handle that stuck out of the dash. This was a source of great amusement to her as we trundled off, out of the village and between the fields. Apparently her mother had a VW Golf GTI which was powerful and modern and had all the things the 2CV so clearly lacked. Emma said she loved its quaintness.

At the garage I filled it up with petrol, checked the oil and tyres and showed her the way the roof rolled right back to open it all up to the fresh Provencal day. Then it was her turn. We spent some time lurching and stalling until she got the knack of giving it lots of

revs to start with. By this time we were nearly hysterical with laughter and the mechanics had come out to see what was going on. At last we shot off and kangaroo'ed across the forecourt to the Puyvert road exit where we repeated the procedure, to the sound of faint cheers from the garage men. When we got onto the road she practiced with the umbrella handle and soon managed the process of changing through the gears. We went past the Puyvert road and nearly as far as Lourmarin before she announced that she was confident and we could turn back to the others. It was wonderful to sit there, half turned to be able to look at her long blonde hair blowing in the wind of the open car. She was laughing and so beautiful that I felt as if my heart was being gripped by a big hand. We pulled into the car park opposite La Louveterie and she switched off, causing the usual convulsions and death rattle as the engine shook itself to a stop.

Ann Marie and Sally came out, carrying a basket of essential rations and two broad brimmed hats they had found in a cupboard, which would give a bit of shelter from the midday sun. Emma kissed me and promised she would be very careful and not drive too fast. This provoked another gale of laughter, and then they clattered their way down to the road and away, trailing a thin plume of smoke and waving through the open roof.

I didn't really want them to go. As Ann Marie and I stood and waved them off, I had a flash of déjà vu; a sense of something ominous.

Her hand slipped into mine and squeezed.