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Anna Gavalda
**French
Leave**

“Gavalda’s sparkling impertinence and
her childlike joie de vie are irresistible.”

—*Marie Claire* (France)



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Anna Gavalda

FRENCH LEAVE

*Translated from the French
by Alison Anderson*



With one buttock in space and my hand still on the car door, I hadn't even had time to sit down and already my sister-in-law was nagging me:

"For heaven's sake . . . didn't you hear the horn? We've been here for ten minutes!"

"Good morning," I answered.

My brother turned around. A little wink.

"You okay, sweetheart?"

"I'm good."

"You want me to put your things in the trunk?"

"No, thanks. All I have is this little bag, and my dress . . . I'll stick it up back."

"Is that your dress?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at the ball of chiffon on my lap.

"Yes."

"What . . . what is it?"

"A sari."

"I see . . ."

"No, you don't see," I corrected her gently, "you'll see when I put it on."

Was that a grimace?

"Can we get going?" asked my brother.

"Yes. I mean, no . . . Can you stop off at the corner store, there's something I need to get . . ."

My sister-in-law sighed.

"Now what do you need?"

"Some depilatory cream."

"And you get that at the corner store?"

"Oh, I get everything from Rashid! Absolutely everything!"

She didn't believe me.

"All set, now? Can we go?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you going to fasten your seat belt?"

"No."

"Why don't you fasten it?"

"Claustrophobia," I replied.

And before she could start in on her refrain about transplants and the horrors of public hospitals, I added, "Besides, I want to sleep a little. I'm exhausted."

My brother smiled.

"Did you just get up?"

"I never went to bed," I explained, yawning.

Which was a patent lie, of course. I'd slept for a few hours. But I said it to annoy my sister-in-law.

And I was right on target, bingo. That's what I like about her: I'm always right on target.

"Where were you this time?" she grumbled, rolling her eyes to the sky.

"At home."

"You threw a party?"

"No, I was playing cards."

"Playing cards?!"

"Yes. Poker."

She shook her head. Not too hard, though. Wouldn't want to muss the blow-dry.

"How much did you lose?" asked my brother, amused.

"Nothing. This time I won."

Deafening silence.

"Might we ask how much?" she relented, adjusting her designer shades.

"Three thousand."

"Three thousand! Three thousand what?"

"Well . . . Euros," I said, acting naïve, "rubles wouldn't be much use, now, would they . . ."

I chuckled as I curled up. I had just given my little Carine something to chew on for the rest of the trip.

I could hear the cogs turning in her brain: Three thousand Euros . . . click click click click . . . How many dry shampoos and aspirin tablets would she have to sell to earn three thousand Euros?... click click click . . . Not to mention employee benefits, and business tax, and local taxes, and her lease, subtract the VAT . . . How many times did she have to put on her white coat to earn three thousand Euros? And the Social Security . . . add eight, take away two . . . and paid vacation . . . makes ten, multiply by three . . . click click click . . .

Yes. I was chuckling. Lulled by the purr of their sedan, my nose buried in the fold of my arm and my legs tucked up under my chin. I was pretty proud of myself, because my sister-in-law, she's a piece of work.

My sister-in-law Carine studied pharmacy, but she'd rather you said medicine, so she's a pharmacist, and she has a drugstore, but she'd rather you called it a pharmacy.

She likes to complain about her bookkeeping just when it's time for dessert, and she wears a surgeon's blouse buttoned up to her chin with a thermal adhesive label where her name is stitched between two blue caduceus logos. These days she sells mostly firming creams for buttocks and carotene capsules because that's what brings in the most cash; she likes to say that she has "optimized her non-med sector."

My sister-in-law Carine is fairly predictable.

When we heard about our stroke of luck—that we were about to have a purveyor of anti-wrinkle creams in our own family, a licensed Clinique vendor and Guerlain reseller—my sister Lola and I jumped up on her like little puppies. Oh! What a warm welcome we had in store for her that day! We promised that from then on we would always go to her for our shopping, and we were even willing

call her Doctor or Professor Lariot-Molinoux so we'd be in her good books.

We'd even take the suburban train just to go out to see her! That's really a big deal for Lola and me to take the train all the way out to Poissy.

We suffer physically whenever we're dragged past the Boulevards des Maréchaux.

But there was no need to go out there, because she took us by the arm at the end of that first Sunday dinner and confessed, lowering her eyes, "You know . . . uh . . . I can't give you any discounts because . . . uh . . . if I start with you, after that . . . well, you understand . . . after that I . . . after that you don't know where it will end, do you?"

"Not even a teeny tiny percentage?" replied Lola with a laugh, "Not even any samples?"

"Oh, yes . . . yes, samples, yes. No problem."

And when Carine left that day, clinging to our brother so he wouldn't fly away, Lola grumbled to me as she blew kisses all the while from the balcony, "She can stick her samples you-know-where."

I totally agreed with her, and we shook out the tablecloth, and changed the subject.

Now we like to ride her about all that. Every time we see her, I tell her about my friend Sandrine who is a flight attendant, and about the discounts she can get us at the duty-free.

For example:

"Hey, Carine . . . Give me a price for Estée Lauder's Double Exfoliating Nitrogen Generator with Vitamin B12."

You should see our Carine, lost in thought. She concentrates, closes her eyes, thinks of her list, calculates her margin, deducts the taxes, and eventually goes: "Forty-five?"

I turn to Lola: "Do you remember how much you paid?"

"Hmm . . . Sorry? What are you talking about?"

"Estée Lauder's Double Exfoliating Nitrogen Generator with Vitamin B12, the one Sandrine brought back for you the other day?"

"What about it?"

"How much did you pay?"

"Gosh, how do you expect me to remember . . . around twenty Euros, I think . . ."

Carine repeats what she said, choking on her words: "Twenty Euros! Estée Lauder's D-E-N-G with Vitamin B12! Are you sure about that?"

"I think so . . ."

"I'm sorry, but at that price, it's got to be a counterfeit! What a shame, girls, you've been taken for a ride . . . They put Nivea in a counterfeit jar and no one's the wiser. I hate to tell you," she insists triumphantly, "but your cream is rubbish. Absolute rubbish!"

Lola looks absolutely devastated: "Are you sure?"

"Ab-so-lutely sure. I know what the production costs are, after all! They only use essential oils Estée—"

This is where I turn to my sister and say, "You don't happen to have it with you, do you?"

"Have what?"

"The cream . . ."

"No, I don't think so . . . Oh, yes! I just might . . . Wait, let me look in my bag."

She comes back with a jar and hands it to the expert.

Said expert puts on her half-moon glasses and inspects the offending item from every angle. We watch her in silence, waiting with bated breath, vaguely uneasy.

“Well, Doctor?” ventures Lola.

“Yes, yes, it’s Estée Lauder all right . . . I recognize the smell . . . and the texture . . . Lauder has very special texture. It’s incredible . . . how much did you say you paid? Twenty Euros? That’s incredible,” sighs Carine, putting her glasses back in their case, and the case back in her Biotherm pouch, and the Biotherm pouch back in her Tod’s handbag. “That’s incredible . . . at that level, it’s a cost price. How do they expect the rest of us to survive if they undercut prices like that? That’s unfair practice. No more, no less. It’s . . . there’s no more margin so, they . . . It’s downright disgusting. It saddens me, you know . . .”

Carine is plunged into an abyss of perplexity. She turns to her cup for consolation, stirs her sugarless coffee with sugar into a coffee without caffeine.

After that, the hardest part is to keep our cool as far as the kitchen, but when we finally get there we begin cackling like turkey hens in heat. If our mother happens to go by, she says despairingly, “You two can be so nasty . . .” and Lola replies, offended, “Uh . . . excuse me? I actually paid seventy-two Euros for that piece of shit!” And we burst out laughing again, holding our ribs above the dishwasher.

“Well that’s good, with everything you won last night you’ll be able to contribute to the gas, for once . . .”

“Gas AND toll,” I said, rubbing my nose.

I couldn’t see her, but I could sense her smug little smile and both hands placed nice and flat on her knees squeezed tight.

I raised my hips to pull a big note out of my jeans pocket.

“Put that away,” said my brother.

Up she piped: “But, uh . . . really Simon, I don’t see why—”

“I said put it away,” my brother said, without raising his voice.

She opened her mouth, closed it, wriggled a little, opened her mouth again, dusted off her thigh, touched her sapphire, put it straight, inspected her nails, opened her mouth to say something . . . and then closed it again.

Things were not going too smoothly. If she was keeping her mouth shut, it meant they’d had a fight. If she was keeping her mouth shut, it meant that my brother had raised his voice.

Which is a rare thing.

My brother never gets annoyed, never says anything bad about anybody, doesn’t have an unkind bone in his body, and does not judge his fellow man. My brother is from another planet. Venus maybe . . .

We adore him. We ask him: “How do you manage to stay so calm?” He shrugs his shoulders: “I don’t know.” We ask him again: “Don’t you ever feel like letting go sometimes? Saying really mean nasty things?”

“But that’s why I have you, gorgeous . . .” he replies, with an angelic smile.

Yes, we adore him. In fact, everybody adores him. Our nannies, his teachers, his professors, his colleagues at work, his neighbors . . . everybody.

When we were younger, we’d sprawl on the carpet in his bedroom, listening to his records and

drowning him with kisses while he did our homework, and we played at imagining our future. Our predictions for Simon: “You are too nice . . . some bitch will get her claws into you.”

Bingo.

I had a pretty good idea why they’d been arguing. It was probably because of me. I couldn’t reproduce their conversation down to the last sigh.

Yesterday afternoon, I asked my brother if they could give me a lift. “What a question . . .” he said politely offended, on the phone. After that, the charming chick must have thrown her tantrum because coming to pick me up means a major detour. My brother must have shrugged his shoulder and she’d have laid it on even thicker: “But darling, from her place to the road for Limousin . . . The Place Clichy is not exactly a shortcut, as far as I know . . .”

He had to force himself to be firm, they went to bed angry, and she slept at Hotel Cold Shoulder.

She got up in a bad mood. While drinking her organic chicory, she started up again: “No, really your lazy sister, she could have gotten up and come out here . . . Honestly, it’s hardly her work that’s wearing her out, or is it?”

He didn’t react. He was studying the map.

She went to sulk in her Kaufman & Broad bathroom (I remember our first visit . . . With some sort of purple chiffon scarf around her neck, she was twirling around among her potted plants and commenting on her Petit Trianon, absolutely gurgling: “Here we have the kitchen . . . so functional. And now the dining room . . . utterly convivial. And as for the living room . . . so versatile. Here’s Léo’s bedroom . . . isn’t it playful? Now this is the laundry room . . . just indispensable. And of course the bathroom . . . double, natch. And as for our bedroom . . . so luminous. Here’s . . .” It was as if she wanted to sell it to us. Simon drove us back to the station and just as we were leaving, we said “You’ve got a beautiful house . . .” “Yes, it’s functional,” he echoed, nodding his head. Neither Léo nor Vincent nor I uttered a single word on the way back. We were all kind of sad, each in our own corner; we were probably thinking the same thing, that we had lost our older brother, and that life would be a lot tougher without him . . .), and then, she must have looked at her watch at least ten times between their house and my boulevard, she must have groaned at every traffic light, and when she finally she blew the horn—because I’m sure she’s the one who blew the horn—I didn’t hear them.

Oh woe, oh woe is me.

My dear Simon, I am so sorry to have put you through all that . . .

Next time, I’ll make other arrangements, I promise you.

I’ll do better. I’ll go to bed early. I won’t drink anymore. I won’t play cards.

By next time, I’ll have settled down, you know . . . of course I will. I’ll find someone. A nice boy. A white guy. An only son. A guy who’s got a driver’s license and a Toyota that runs on colza.

I’ll get me one who works at the post office, because his dad works at the post office, and who’ll put in his twenty-nine hours a week without ever getting sick. A non-smoker. That’s just what I put on my Meetic profile. You don’t believe me? Well, you’ll see. Why are you laughing, you dork?

That way I won’t bug you anymore on Saturday morning to go to the country. I’ll tell my little honeybunch from the post office: “Hey honeybunch! Will you drive me to my cousin’s wedding with your beautiful GPS that even includes Corsica and Martinique and Tahiti?” and wham, all taken care of.

And why are you laughing like an idiot, now? Do you think I’m not clever enough to manage the

way other people do? To find myself a nice guy with a yellow cardigan and a Euro Disney badge? fiancé I can go and buy Celio boxer shorts for during my lunch break? Oh, yes . . . just thinking about it makes me go all wobbly . . . a decent sort. Serious. Simple. Batteries included, not to mention the savings-account booklet.

And he'd never worry about things. And he'd be only too glad to compare prices in the store with the ones in the catalogue and he'd say, "No two ways about it, darling, the difference between Ikea and Habitat, you're really just paying for service . . ."

And we'll enter the house through the basement so as not to get the entrance dirty. And we'll leave our shoes at the bottom of the steps not to get the stairway dirty. And we'll be friends with the neighbors who will be incredibly nice. And we'll have a built-in barbecue and that will be really awesome for the kids, because the housing estate will be super safe like my sister-in-law says and . . .

Oh, bliss.

It was too awful. I fell asleep.

I stumbled out onto the parking lot of a gas station somewhere on the outskirts of Orléans. Feeling groggy as hell. Woozy and drooly. I had trouble keeping my eyes open and my hair felt incredibly heavy. I even put my hand up to it, just to make sure it really was hair.

Simon was waiting by the cash register. Carine was powdering her nose.

I stationed myself by the coffee machine.

It took me at least thirty seconds to realize that my cup was ready. I drank it without sugar and without much conviction. I must have pressed the wrong button. There was a weird, faintly tomato-ish taste to my cappuccino.

Oh, man . . . It's going to be a long day.

We got back in the car without saying a word. Carine took a moist alcohol towelette from her makeup bag to disinfect her hands.

Carine always disinfects her hands when she's been in public places.

For hygiene's sake.

Because Carine actually sees the germs.

She can see their furry little legs and their horrible mouths.

That's why she never takes the métro. She doesn't like trains, either. She can't help but think about the people who put their feet on the seats and stick their boogers under the armrest.

Her kids are not allowed to sit on a bench or to touch the railings. She has major issues about going to the playground. And issues about letting them use the slide. She has issues with the trays at McDonald's and she has a ton of issues about swapping Pokémon cards. She totally freaks out with butchers who don't wear gloves or little salesgirls who don't use tongs to serve her her croissant. She gets downright paralytic if the school organizes group picnics or outings to the swimming pool where all the kids have to hold hands as a prelude to passing on their fungal infections.

Life, for Carine, is exhausting.

Her business with the disinfectant towelettes really gets up my nose.

The way she always thinks other people must be sackfuls of germs. The way she always peers at their fingernails when she shakes hands. The way she never trusts anyone. Always hiding behind her scarf. Always telling her kids to be careful.

Don't touch. It's dirty.

Get your hands out of there.

Don't share.

Don't go out in the street.

Don't sit on the ground or I'll smack you!

Always washing their hands. Always washing their mouths. Always making sure they pee exactly ten centimeters above the bowl, dead center, and that they never ever let their lips touch someone's cheeks when they go to kiss them. Always judging the other moms by the color of their kids' ears.

Always.

Always judging.

I don't like the sound of any of it. What's worse, when you go to dinner at her family's they have no compunction about mouthing off about Arabs.

Carine's dad calls them ragheads.

He says, "I pay taxes so those ragheads can have ten kids."

He says, "What I'd do with 'em, I'd stick 'em all in a boat and torpedo the whole lot of them, even the last parasite, I would."

And he likes to say, "France is a country full of bums and people on welfare. A country full of losers."

And often, to finish, he goes like this: "I work the first six months of the year for my family and the next six for the state, so don't go talking to me about poor people and the unemployed, okay? I work one day out of two so Mamadou can go knock up his ten wives, so don't go lecturing me, okay?"

There was one lunch in particular. I don't like remembering it. It was for little Alice's baptism. We were all at Carine's parents' place near Le Mans.

Her father runs a Casino (the supermarket, not the Las Vegas variety), and that day, when I saw him down at the end of his little paved driveway between his artsy-fartsy wrought iron lamp and his gleaming Audi, I really understood the meaning of the word complacent. That mixture of stupidity and arrogance. His unshakeable self-satisfaction. That blue cashmere sweater stretched over his huge gut and that weird way—real friendly-like—he has of reaching out his hand to you even though he already hates you.

I'm ashamed when I think back on that lunch. I'm ashamed, and I'm not the only one. Lola and Vincent aren't too proud, either, I don't think . . .

Simon wasn't there when the conversation began to degenerate. He was out in the garden building a cabin for his son.

He must be used to it. He must know that it's better just to get out of there when fat Jacquot starts mouthing off . . .

Simon is like us: he doesn't like shouting matches at the end of a nice dinner, he hates conflict and runs like hell from power struggles. He says it's a waste of good energy and that you have to keep your strength for more worthwhile struggles in life. That with people like his father-in-law, you're fighting a losing battle.

And when you talk to him about the rise of the extreme right, he shakes his head: "Bah . . . they're just the dregs on the bottom of the lake. What can you do, it's only human. Best leave well enough alone, otherwise they'll rise to the surface."

How can he stand those family dinners? How can he even help his father-in-law trim the hedge?

He concentrates on Léo's cabins.

He concentrates on the moment he'll take his little boy by the hand and they'll go off together into the deep and silent woods.

I'm ashamed because on that particular day, we didn't dare say a thing.

Once again we didn't dare say a thing. We didn't react to the words of that rabid shopkeeper who never see any farther than his distant navel.

We didn't contradict him, or leave the table. We went on slowly chewing every mouthful, thinking it was enough just to register what a jerk the guy was while pulling hard on all our loose threads, trying to wrap ourselves in what might remain of our dignity.

What wretches we were. Cowards, incredible cowards . . .

Why are we like that, all four of us? Why are we so intimidated by people who shout louder than others? Why do aggressive people make us go completely to pieces?

What is wrong with us? Where does a good upbringing end and spinelessness begin?

We've talked about it a lot. We beat our breasts over pizza crust and makeshift ashtrays. We don't need anyone to force us to. We're big enough to go about it ourselves, and no matter how many empty bottles we have at the end, we always come to the same conclusion. That if we are like this—silent and determined but absolutely useless when it comes to jerks like him—it is precisely because we haven't got a shred of self-confidence. We are sorely lacking in self-esteem.

We don't love our own selves.

We don't think we're all that important.

Not even important enough to splutter our indignation onto old man Molinoux's vest. Or to believe for one second that our squawking could ever influence his line of thought. Or to hope that a gesture of disgust like tossing our napkins onto the table or knocking over our chairs might have the slightest impact on the ways of the world.

What would that good taxpayer have thought if we had given him a piece of our mind and left him in his demesne with our heads held high? He would simply have battered his wife all evening with remarks like: "What complete pricks. Total pricks. I mean, have you ever seen such a hopeless bunch of pricks?"

And why should the poor woman be subjected to that?

Who are we to spoil the party for twenty people?

So you might say that it isn't cowardice. You might allow that it's actually wisdom. Acknowledging that we know when to stand back. That we don't like to stir shit up. That we're more honest than those people who protest all the time but never manage to change a thing.

Or at least that's what we figure, to make ourselves feel better. We remind each other that we're young and already far too lucid. And that we're head and shoulders above the ant farm, so stupidly can't really reach us up here. We don't really give a damn. We have other things, each other for start. We are rich in other ways.

All we have to do is look inside.

We have a lot going on in our heads. Stuff that's light years from that man's racist ranting. There's music, and literature. There are places to stroll, hands to hold, refuges. Bits of shooting stars copied out onto credit card receipts, pages torn out of books, happy memories and horrible ones. Songs with refrains on the tips of our tongues. Messages we've kept, blockbusters we loved, gummy bears, and scratched vinyl records. Our childhood, our solitude, our first emotions, and our projects for the future. All the hours we stayed up late, all the doors held open. Buster Keaton's antics. Armand Robin's brave letter to the Gestapo and Michel Leiris's battering ram of clouds. The scene where Clive

Eastwood turns around and says, “One thing though . . . don’t kid yourself, Francesca . . .” and the one in *The Best of Youth* where Nicola Carati stands up for his patients at the trial of their torture. The dances on Bastille Day in Villiers. The scent of quinces in the cellar. Our grandparents, Monsieur Racine’s saber, his gleaming breastplate, our country kid illusions and the nights before our finals. Our favorite comics: Mam’zelle Jeanne’s raincoat when she climbs on behind Gaston on his motorbike, or François Bourgeon’s *Les Passagers du vent*. The opening lines of the book by André Gorz dedicated to his wife, which Lola read to me last night on the telephone when we’d just spent ages bawling about mouthing love, yet again: “You’re about to turn eighty-two. You’ve gotten six centimeters shorter, you weigh only forty-five kilos, and you are still beautiful, gracious, and desirable.” Marcello Mastroianni in *Dark Eyes*; gowns by Cristóbal Balenciaga. The way the horses would smell of dust and dry bread when you got off the school bus in the evening. The Lalannes, each working in their own studio with a garden in between. The night we repainted the rue des Vertus, and the time we slipped a stinking herring skin under the terrace of the restaurant where that stupid ass Poêle Tefal worked. And the time we rode at the back of a truck, face down on sheets of cardboard, and Vincent read us all of Orwell’s *Road to Wigan Pier* out loud. Simon’s face when he heard Björk for the first time, or Monteverdi, in the parking lot of the Macumba.

So much silliness and regret, and the soap bubbles at Lola’s godfather’s funeral . . .

Our lost loves, our torn letters, and our friends on the other end of the line. All those unforgettable nights, and how we were forever moving house, and all the strangers we bashed into all those times we had to run to catch a bus that might not wait . . .

All of that, and more.

Enough to keep our souls alive.

Enough to know not to try to talk back to stupid idiots.

Let them croak.

They’ll anyway.

They’ll die all alone while we’re at the movies.

That’s what we tell ourselves so we’ll feel better about not getting up and leaving the table that day.

Then there’s the obvious fact that all of it—our apparent indifference, our discretion, and our weakness, too—it’s all our parents’ fault.

It’s their fault—or should I say it’s thanks to them.

Because they’re the ones who taught us about books and music. Who talked to us about other things and forced us to see things in a different light. To aim higher and farther. But they also forgot to give us confidence, because they thought that it would just come naturally. That we had a special gift for life, and compliments might spoil our egos.

They got it wrong.

The confidence never came.

So here we are. Sublime losers. We just sit there in silence while the loudmouths get their way, and any brilliant response we might have come up with is nipped in the bud, and all we’re left with is a vague desire to puke.

Maybe it was all the whipped cream we ate . . .

I remember how one day we were all together, the whole family, on a beach near Hossegor—because we rarely went anywhere together as a family—family with a capital F, that wasn't really our style—our Pop (our dad never wanted us to call him Dad and so when people were surprised we would say it was because of May 1968. That was a pretty good excuse, we thought, “May '68,” like a secret code, it was as if we were saying “It's because he's from planet Zorg”)—so our Pop, as I was saying, must have looked up and said, “Kids, you see this beach?”

(Any idea how huge the Côte d'Argent is?)

“Well, do you know what you are, you kids, on the scale of the universe?”

(Yeah! Kids who aren't allowed any doughnuts!)

“You are this grain of sand. Just this one, right here. And that's it.”

We believed him.

Our loss.

“What's that smell?” said Carine.

I was spreading Madame Rashid's paste all over my legs.

“What . . . what on earth is that stuff?”

“I'm not sure exactly. I think it's honey or caramel mixed with wax and spices.”

“Oh my God, that's horrible! That is disgusting! And you're going to do that, here?”

“Where else can I do it? I can't go to the wedding like this. I look like a yeti.”

My sister-in-law turned away with a sigh.

“Be very careful of the seat. Simon, turn off the A/C so I can open the window.”

Please, I muttered, my teeth clenched.

Madame Rashid had wrapped this huge lump of Turkish delight in a damp cloth. “Next time come see me, I take care of you next time. I do your little love garden. After you see, how he like it, you man, when I make it all gone, he go crazy with you and he give you anything you want . . .” she assured me with a wink.

I smiled. Just a faint smile. I'd just made a spot on the armrest and now I had to juggle with my Kleenex. What a mess.

“And are you going to get dressed in the car, too?”

“We'll stop somewhere just before . . . Hey, Simon? Can you find me a little side road somewhere?”

“One that smells of hazelnuts?”

“I should hope so!”

“And Lola?” asked Carine.

“What about Lola?”

“Is she coming?”

“I don't know.”

“You don't know?” She looked startled.

“No. I don't know.”

“This is unbelievable. Nobody ever knows anything with you guys. It's always the same thing. Complete bohemian shambles. Can't you just for once get your act together? Just a little bit?”

“I spoke to her on the phone yesterday,” I said curtly. “She wasn’t feeling too good and she didn’t know yet whether she could make it.”

“Well well, what a surprise.”

Oooh, just listen to that condescending tone of hers . . .

“What’s surprising about it?” I said, between my teeth.

“Oh, dear! Nothing. Nothing surprises me anymore with you lot. And if Lola is that way, it’s her fault, too. It’s what she wanted, right? She really has a gift for ending up in the most incredible fixes. You just don’t go around—”

I could see Simon in the rearview mirror, a few lines suddenly creasing his brow.

“Well, as far as I’m concerned . . . ”

Yes. Exactly. As far as you’re concerned . . .

“ . . . the problem with Lo—”

“Stop!” I exploded, in midair, “stop right there. I didn’t get enough sleep, so . . . leave it for later.”

Then she got all huffy: “Oh, well! No one can ever say a thing in this family. The least little comment and there’s a knife at your throat, it’s ridiculous.”

Simon was trying to catch my eye.

“And you think that’s funny, huh? Both of you, you think it’s funny, don’t you? It’s unbelievable. Completely childish. I’m entitled to my opinion, no? Since you won’t listen and no one can say a thing to you, and no one ever does say a thing, you’re untouchable. You never stop to question the status quo. Well, I’m going to give you a piece of my mind—”

But we don’t want a piece of your mind, sweetheart.

“I think this protectionism of yours, this way you have of acting like ‘we’re all in this together and the rest of you can go hang’ won’t do you any favors. It’s not the least bit constructive.”

“But what is constructive here on earth, Carine love?”

“Oh please, spare me, not that, too. Don’t start on your pseudo-Socrates disabused philosopher act. It’s pathetic, at your age. And have you finished with that goop, it really is revolting—”

“Yeah, yeah . . . ” I assured her, rolling the ball over my white calves, “I’m almost done.”

“Aren’t you going to use some sort of cream, afterwards? Your pores are in a state of shock now, you’ve got to re-moisturize your skin otherwise you’ll be covered in little red spots until tomorrow.”

“Darn, I forgot to bring anything.”

“Don’t you have your face cream?”

“No.”

“Or moisturizer?”

“No.”

“Night cream?”

“No.”

“You didn’t bring anything?”

She was horrified.

“I did. I brought a toothbrush, and some toothpaste, and L’Heure Bleue , and some condoms, and mascara, and a tube of pink Labello.”

She was shattered.

“That is all you have in your toilet bag?”

“Uh . . . it’s in my handbag. I don’t have a toilet bag.”

~~She sighed, and started foraging in her make up bag, and she handed me a big white tube.~~

“Here, put some of this on.”

I thanked her with a genuine smile. She was pleased. She may be a first-class pain but she does like to please others. Credit where credit is due.

And she really doesn’t like to leave pores in a state of shock. It breaks her heart.

After a few minutes she added, “Garance?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“You know what I think is deeply unfair?”

“The profit that Seph—”

“Well, that you’ll be lovely no matter what. Just a little bit of lip gloss and a touch of mascara, and you’ll be beautiful. It hurts me to say it, but it’s true . . .”

I was floored. It was the first time in years she’d said something nice to me. I could have kissed her but then right away she calmed me down:

“Hey, don’t use up the whole tube! It’s not L’Oréal, I’ll have you know.”

That’s Carine all over. No sooner does she suspect you might catch her red-handed in a moment of weakness than, systematically, after the caress, she plants the needle.

Pity. She’s missing out on a lot of good moments. It would have been a good moment for her if I had wrapped myself around her neck without warning. A big bare kiss, between two trucks . . . Nope. She always has to spoil everything.

I often think I ought to take her to my place as an intern for a day or two to give her a few lessons on life.

So that she could let her guard down for once, let herself go, roll up her sleeves, and forget about other people’s miasma.

It makes me sad to see her like that, straitjacketed by all her prejudices and incapable of tenderness. And then I remember that she was raised by the dashing Jacques and Francine Molinoux at the far end of a dead-end street in the residential outskirts of Le Mans and I figure that, all things considered, she isn’t doing so badly after all . . .

The cease-fire didn’t last, and Simon was used for target practice.

“You’re driving too fast. Lock the doors, we’re getting near the tollbooth. What on earth is that on the radio? I didn’t mean twenty miles an hour though, did I? Why’d you turn the A/C off? Watch out for those bikers. Are you sure you’ve got the right map? Can’t you read the road signs, please? It’s so stupid, I’m sure the gas cost less back there . . . Be careful in the curves, can’t you see I’m painting my nails? Hey . . . are you doing it on purpose, or what?”

I can just make out the back of my brother’s neck in the hollow space of his headrest. That fine straight neck, his hair cut short.

I wonder how he can stand it, I wonder if he ever dreams of tying her to a tree and running off as fast as his legs can carry him.

Why does she speak to him like that? Does she even know who she’s talking to? Does she even know that the man sitting next to her was the god of scale models? The ace of Meccano sets? A Legos System genius?

A patient little boy who could spend several months building an awesome planet, with dried lichen for the ground and hideous creatures made of bread rolled in spiders' webs?

A stubborn little tyke who entered every contest and won nearly all of them: Nesquik, Ovomaltin, Babybel, Caran d'Ache, Kellogg's, and the Mickey Mouse Club?

One year, his sand castle was so beautiful that the members of the jury disqualified him: they claimed he'd had help. He cried all afternoon and our granddad had to take him to the crêperie to console him. He drank three whole mugs of hard cider, one after the other.

First time he ever got roaring drunk.

Does she even know that for months her good little lapdog of a hubby wore a satin Superman cap day and night that he folded up conscientiously in his schoolbag whenever it was time to go through the gate into the schoolyard? He was the only boy who knew how to repair the photocopier in the town hall. And he was the only one who'd ever seen Mylène Carois's underpants—she was the butcher's daughter, Carois & Fils. (He hadn't dared to tell her that he was not all that interested.)

Simon Lariot, a discreet man, who'd always made his own sweet way, gracefully, without bothering a soul.

Who never threw tantrums, or whined, or asked for a thing. Who went through prep school and got into engineering school without ever grinding his teeth or resorting to Tenormin. Who didn't want to make a big deal when he did well, and blushed to the tips of his ears when the headmistress of the Lycée Stendhal kissed him in the street to congratulate him.

The same big boy who can laugh like an idiot for exactly twenty minutes when he's smoking a joint and who knows every single trajectory of every single spaceship in Star Wars.

I'm not saying he's a saint, I'm saying he's better than one.

Why, then? Why does he let people walk all over him? It's a mystery to me. I've lost track of the number of times I've wanted to shake him, to open his eyes and get him to pound his fist on the table. Countless times.

One day Lola tried. He sent her packing and barked that it was his life, after all.

Which is true. It's his life. But we're the ones who are saddened by it.

Which is idiotic, in a way. We've got more than enough to keep us busy on our own turf.

He opens up the most with Vincent. Because of the Internet. They write each other all the time and send each other corny jokes and links for websites where they can find old vinyl LPs and used guitars and other model enthusiasts. Simon made himself a great friend in Massachusetts, they swap photos of their respective remote-controlled boats. The guy's name is Cecil (Simon can't pronounce it right, he says, See-sull) W. Thurlington, and he lives in a big house on Martha's Vineyard.

Lola and I think it sounds really . . . chic. Martha's Vineyard . . . "The cradle of the Kennedys," they say in Paris Match.

We have this fantasy where we take the plane and then go up to Cecil's private beach and we shout "Yoo-hoo! Darling See-sull! We are Simon's sisters! We are so very ahn-shahn-tay!"

We picture him wearing a navy blue blazer, with an old rose cotton sweater thrown over his shoulders, and off-white linen slacks. Straight out of a Ralph Lauren ad.

When we threaten to dishonor Simon with our plan, he tends to lose some of his cool.

“Hey, are you doing it on purpose or what?”

“Well how many coats do you have to put on, anyway?” he says eventually.

“Three.”

“Three coats?”

“Base, color, and fixer.”

“Oh . . . ”

“Be careful, and at least warn me when you’re about to brake.”

He raises his eyebrows. No. Correction. One eyebrow.

What can he be thinking when he raises his right eyebrow like that?

We ate rubbery sandwiches at one of those freeway rest stops. It was revolting. I’d been plugging for a plat du jour at one of the truck stops but “they don’t know how to wash the lettuce.” True. I forgotten. So, three vacuum wrapped sandwiches, please. (Infinitely more hygienic.)

“It may not be good, but at least we know what we’re eating!”

That’s one way of looking at it.

We were sitting outside next to the garbage dumpsters. You could hear “brrrrrammm” and “brrrrroommm” every two seconds but I wanted to smoke a cigarette and Carine cannot stand the smell of tobacco.

“I have to use the restroom,” she announced, with a pained expression. “I don’t suppose it’s too luxurious . . . ”

“Why don’t you go in the grass?” I asked.

“In front of everyone? Are you crazy?”

“Just go a little bit further, that way. I’ll come with you if you want.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll get my shoes dirty.”

“I don’t think so, the time it will take you . . . ”

She got up without condescending to answer.

“You know, Carine,” I said solemnly, “the day you learn to enjoy having a wee in the grass, you’ll be a much happier person.”

She took her towelettes.

“Everything is just fine, thank you.”

I turned to my brother. He was staring at the cornfield as if he were trying to count every single ear. He didn’t look too great.

“You okay?”

“I’m okay,” he replied, without turning around.

“Doesn’t look it.”

He was rubbing his face.

“I’m tired.”

“What of?”

“Of everything.”

“You? I don’t believe you.”

“And yet it’s true.”

“Is it your work?”

“My work. My life. Everything.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Why wouldn’t I tell you?”

He had his back to me again.

“Yo, Simon! Hey, what’s going on? Don’t talk like this. You’re the hero of the family, in case you need reminding.”

“Well, yeah, that’s kind of the problem . . . the hero is tired.”

I was speechless. This was the first time I’d ever seen him in such a state.

If Simon was beginning to have his doubts, where were we headed?

Just then—and to me this was a miracle, although on the other hand it doesn’t surprise me, and I kiss the patron saint of brothers and sisters who has been watching over us now for nearly thirty-five years, and who has never been out of work, poor guy—his cell rang.

It was Lola, who had finally made up her mind, and was asking him if he could stop and pick her up at the station in Châteauroux.

Our spirits immediately revived. Simon put his cell back in his pocket and asked me for a cigarette. Carine came back, scrubbing her arms right up to her elbows. She immediately reminded her husband of the precise number of cancer victims who had died because of . . . He gave a limp wave with his hand as if he were chasing a fly and she walked away, coughing.

Lola was coming. Lola would be with us. Lola hadn’t let us down, and the rest of the world could just go hang.

Simon put on his dark glasses.

He was smiling.

His little Lola was on the train . . .

They have this special thing between them. First of all, they’re closest in age, only eighteen months apart, and they were really children together.

They were the ones who were always getting up to mischief. Lola had an irrepressible imagination and Simon was pliant (already . . .). They ran away. They got lost. They got into fights, tormented each other, made up. Mom likes to tell us how Lola would needle him all the time, always going into his bedroom to bug him, grabbing the book from his hands or kicking something straight into his Playmobil. My sister doesn’t like to recall these acts of war (she worries she’s being lumped in the same basket with Carine), so then our mom senses that she’d better change tack and she adds that Lola was always eager for something new, she’d invite all the kids in the neighborhood and invent all kinds of new games. She was like one of those cool scout leaders who can come up with a thousand ideas in a minute, and she watched over her big brother like a broody hen. She’d make all sorts of inedible snacks for him with mustard and Nutella and she’d come and lift him out of his Legos when Grendizer or Captain Harlock was on television.

~~Lola and Simon grew up during the Golden Age. When there was Villiers. When we all lived out the sticks and our parents were happy together. For them the world began outside the front door and ended on the far side of the village.~~

They would streak across fields pursued by imaginary bulls, and creep into abandoned houses haunted by ghosts that weren't imaginary at all.

They rang the bell at old mother Margeval's until she was ripe for the asylum; they destroyed the hunters' traps; they pissed into washtubs, nicked the teacher's dirty magazines, stole firecrackers, stole off the ones called mammoth, and rescued little kittens that some bastard had sealed up alive in a plastic bag.

Boom. Seven kittens all at once. You bet Pop was happy!

And the day the Tour de France came through our village . . . Lola and Simon went and bought fifty baguettes and sold sandwiches by the dozen. With their earnings they bought practical jokes and gags, and sixty Malabar candies, and a jump-rope for me, and a little trumpet for Vincent (already) and the latest Yoko Tsuno.

Yes, childhood was different back then . . . They knew what an oarlock was, and they smoked creepers and knew the taste of gooseberries. And then there came the biggest major significant event of all, what a huge impact it had, and it happened right behind the door to the shed:

Today Ar April 8 we saw the preist waring shorts.

Then they went through our parents' divorce, together. Vincent and I were still too little. We only really figured out what a raw deal we were getting when the day came to move house. But they'd been able to witness the entire show. They would get up in the middle of the night and go and sit side by side at the top of the stairs to listen to the "discussion." One night Pop knocked over the humungous kitchen cupboard and Mom drove off in the car.

While ten steps up from there they sat sucking their thumbs.

It's stupid to go on telling that side of the story: they were close for any number of reasons that, in the long run, meant more than the tough times. But still . . .

For Vincent and me it was completely different. We were city brats. Less bicycling and more time in front of the box. We had no idea how to stick on a rubber repair patch but we did know how to dodge a subway fare or repair a skateboard or sneak into the movies through the emergency exit.

And then Lola got sent to boarding school, and there was no one around anymore to fill our heads with whispered mischief or chase after us in the garden . . .

We wrote to each other every week. She was my beloved older sister. I idealized her; I sent her drawings and wrote poems to her. When she came home she would ask me whether Vincent had behaved himself during her absence. Of course not, I'd say, of course not. And I'd describe in detail all the horrible things I'd had to undergo the previous week. At which point, to my supreme satisfaction, she'd drag him into the bathroom to acquaint him with the riding crop.

The louder my brother screamed, the wider I grinned.

And then one day, to make it even better, I wanted to see him suffer. To my complete and utter flabbergasted horror, I burst in to find my sister whipping a bolster, while Vincent bleated in time, reading his Boule et Bill comic book. A mega disappointment. On that day, Lola fell from her pedestal.

Which turned out to be a good thing. Now we were the same height.

Nowadays she's my best friend. We're sort of like Montaigne and La Boétie, for example . . . Because she is who she is, and I am who I am. The fact that this young woman of thirty-two years of age is also my older sister is totally beside the point. Well, maybe not totally, it's just fortunate we didn't have to waste time trying to find each other.

She's all into Montaigne's Essays—she likes grand theories, the notion that one is punished for stubbornly wanting, and philosophy is just learning how to die. Give me the Discourse of Voluntary Servitude—infinite abuse and all those tyrants who are great because we are on our knees. She'll take true knowledge, I'll take tribunals. As the wise man himself said: “I was so grown and accustomed to be always her double in all places and in all things, that methinks I am no more than half of myself.”

And yet we are very different . . . She is afraid of her own shadow; I sit on mine. She copies out sonnets, I download samples. She admires painters, I prefer photographers. She never tells you what's in her heart, I speak my mind. She avoids conflict, I like things to be perfectly clear. She likes to be ‘a little bit tipsy,’ I prefer to drink. She doesn't like going out, I don't like going home. She doesn't know how to have fun, I don't know when it's time to get some sleep. She hates gambling, I hate losing. Her embrace is all-encompassing, my kindness has its limits. She never gets annoyed, I'm forever blowing the gasket.

She says the world belongs to early risers, I beg her to tone it down. She's romantic, I'm pragmatic. She got married, I flitter and flirt. She can't sleep with a guy unless she's in love, I can't sleep with a guy unless there's a condom. She needs me.

Ditto.

She doesn't judge, she takes me as I am. With my gray complexion and my black thoughts. Or my rosebud complexion and my buttercup thoughts. Lola knows how it feels to lust after a pea jacket or a pair of heels. She completely understands how much fun it can be to max out a credit card then feel guilty as hell when the bill comes. Lola spoils me. She holds the curtain for me when I'm in the fitting room, and she always tells me I'm beautiful and no, not at all, it doesn't make my butt look big. She asks, every time, how my love life is going, and pulls a face when I tell her about my lovers.

Whenever we haven't seen each other in a long while she takes me to a brasserie, Bofinger or Balzar, to look at the guys. I focus on the ones at nearby tables; she zeroes in on the waiters. She's fascinated by those dorky dudes in tight waistcoats. She can't take her eyes off them, she imagines little stories for them straight out of a Claude Sautet film, and she dissects their perfectly trained mannerisms. The funny thing is that at some point you always see one of them going out the door at the end of his shift. And then she wonders what she ever saw in him. Jeans or even jogging pants in lieu of the long white apron, and an offhand shout to a co-worker as he takes his leave: “Bye Bernard!”

“Bye, Mimi. You here tomorrow?”

“No way. Dream on, dude.”

Lola looks down and traces patterns in the sauce on her plate with her fingertips. Another one goes . . .

We sort of lost sight of each other for a while. First boarding school, then studies, then her wedding

vacations at her in-laws', dinner parties . . .

~~We still knew how to hug, but we'd lost the art of letting ourselves go. She had changed sides~~
Teams, rather. She wasn't playing against us so much as playing for a league that was, well, kind
boring. Some sort of half-assed cricket, for example, with lots of incomprehensible rules, where you
running after something you never see, and it can really hurt, too . . . some sort of leathery thing with
cork core. (Hey, Lola! I didn't mean to, but I've just summed it all up!)

Whereas we younger kids were still busy with a lot more basic things. A lovely lawn⇒yabba dabba
doo! Heineken and neckin'. Tall boys wearing white polo shirts⇒honk, honk! The bat in your behind
Well, you see what I'm driving at . . . Not really mature enough yet for strolls around the Bassin de
Neptune at Versailles . . .

There you have it. We'd wave to each other from a distance. She made me the godmother of her
first child and I made her the trustee of my first broken heart (and did I weep, a regular baptism
fount), but between two of these sort of major events there was not much going on. Birthdays, family
luncheons, a few cigarettes shared on the sly so her honey wouldn't see, a knowing look, or her head
on my shoulder when we'd browse through old photos . . .

That was life. Her life, at any rate.

Respect.

And then she came back to us. Covered in ash, with the lunatic gaze of the pyromaniac who's ju
handed in his box of matches. Plaintiff in a divorce that no one expected. It has to be said she playe
her cards close to her chest, the vixen. Everyone thought she was happy. I think we even admired her
for it, for the way she'd found the exit so easily and quickly. "Lola's got it all sorted out," we'd sa
without bitterness or envy. Lola is still champ when it comes to treasure hunts . . .

And then crash bang boom. A change of program.

She just showed up at my place one day, and at a time that wasn't like her at all. At bath and
bedtime story time. She was in tears, apologizing. She truly believed that it was the people around her
who justified her existence on this earth, and everything else—her secret life and all the little noo
and crannies of her soul—was not really all that important. What was important was being cheerf
and carrying your yoke as if it were the easiest thing in the world. And when things got harder, the
was always solitude, drawing, and going for ever longer walks behind the baby carriage, and the kid
books and family life that offered such a deep and comfortable refuge.

So it seemed. That little red hen in the Père Castor series, she was right, the perfect model
housewifely escapism . . .

Red Hen's the perfect housewife:

Not a speck of dust on the furniture,

The flowers all in their vases,

And carefully ironed curtains at every window.

What a treat to see her house!

Except that, here's the thing, Lola had gone out and cut that little red hen's throat.

I was stunned, like everyone else. I didn't know what to say. She'd never complained, never let o
that she had her doubts, and she'd just given birth to another adorable little boy. She was loved. She
had it all, as they say. "They" being a load of idiots.

How are you supposed to react when you find out your whole solar system is off its orbit? What are you supposed to say? For Christ's sake—she was the one who'd always shown us the way. We trusted her. Or at least I trusted her. We sat on the floor for what seemed like ages, knocking back the vodka. She was in tears, and over and over she said she didn't know where the hell she was going, then she fell silent and burst into tears again. No matter what she decided, she'd be miserable. She could stay or she could go: life was no longer worth living.

Bison grass to the rescue. Together, we managed to shake her out of her apathy. Hey! She wasn't the only one who'd been shipwrecked. When the instruction booklet is as fat as a Manhattan phone book and you're running circles on a lawn the size of a pocket handkerchief with no one at your side or at least not your lawful wedded, well, at the end of the day . . . time to hit the road, girl!

She wasn't listening.

"And what about the kids . . . couldn't you hang on a bit longer, for their sake?" I eventually murmured, handing her another pack of Kleenex. My question dried her tears on the spot. I really didn't get it, did I? It was for their sake, this whole mess. To spare them the suffering. So that they never hear their parents fighting and crying in the middle of the night. Besides, you can't grow up in a house where people don't love each other anymore—or can you?

No. You can't. You can grow, maybe, but not grow up.

What came after that was more sordid. Lawyers, tears, blackmail, sorrow, sleepless nights, fatigue, self-sacrifice, guilt, it hurts me more than it hurts you, aggression, recrimination, courthouse, taking sides, appeal, lack of air, heads leaning against the wall. And in the midst of it all, two little boys with clear bright eyes for whose sake she went on playing the clown, telling them her bedside stories about farting princes and airhead princesses. This is all fairly recent, and the embers are still warm. I wouldn't take much for the sorrow she felt at the sorrow she caused to drown her again, and I know there are mornings she has trouble getting out of bed. She confessed the other day that when the kids went off with their dad she stood for ages watching herself crying in the mirror in the hall.

As if she were trying to dilute herself.

That was why she didn't want to come to this wedding.

To have to deal with family. All the uncles and aging aunts and distant cousins. All these people who didn't get divorced. Who settled. Who found other ways. Who'll look at her with their vaguely sympathetic expressions—or maybe they're just dismayed. Then all the theatrics: the virginal white dress, the Bach cantatas, the vows of eternal fidelity you learned by heart, and the schoolboy speeches, the two hands joined on the knife of the wedding cake, and Strauss waltzes by the time your feet are really beginning to ache. But more than anything else: the kids. Other people's kids.

The ones who'll be running all over the place all day long, with their ears red from sipping the drinks in people's glasses, with stains on their best clothes, begging not to have to go to bed yet.

Kids are the whole point of family reunions—and they console us for having to attend them.

They're always the nicest things to look at. They're always the first ones on the dance floor, and the only ones who will dare to tell you that the cake is disgusting. They fall madly in love for the first time in their lives and fall asleep exhausted on their mommies' laps. Pierre was supposed to be the party boy, and he'd worked out that his cybersaber would fit perfectly beneath his cummerbund; he wondered, too, whether he'd be able to filch a few coins from the collection basket. But Lola had confused the dates on the judge's calendar: it wasn't her weekend for the kids. So no little baskets, n

rice battles outside the church. We had suggested she call Thierry to see if she couldn't swap weekends with him: she didn't even reply.

But now she was coming! And Vincent would be waiting for us! We'd be able to sit down at a table off to one side behind a tent, just the four of us and a few bottles we'd grab on the way, and we could indulge our comments on Aunt Solange's hat, or the bride's hips, or how ridiculous our cousin Hubert looked with his hired top hat jammed down over his big sticking-out ears. (His mother would never entertain the possibility of having his ears pinned back, because "one must not undo the work of God.") (Wow. Lovely as the day is long, no?)

We would be reunited, the four of us, life picking us up where we'd left off.

Trumpets, sound! Larks, sing! It was time for some sibling swashbuckling—all for one and one for all . . . and all that jazz.

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