

## PART ONE

Jean-Yves

1999

From this distance it may look very much like a stick insect clinging to the battlements of a toy castle, a tiny trembling form silhouetted against an inky blue moonlit sky, but it's actually a man, a middle-aged male. Hard to tell, but, yes, it *is* a man, breathing heavily, pausing then lifting himself out of the shadows on to the ledge of the pitted stone wall, one hundred metres above the glassy river, now edging along on his hands and knees, closer and closer to the very rim of the parapet.

Zoom in closer and you can see the torment in his eyes, the beads of sweat caught in the lines of his brow, the strain on the cotton of his shirt as he stretches to reach the next precarious handhold. He has ripped a small hole in his sleeve. Is that blood leaking from a graze at his elbow? Look harder and you may even see the hands on his watch, strapped to a quivering wrist, pointing to the dots which represent time, now at its most meaningless: it is a quarter to midnight.

It is a warm, windless night, it is early September, and the dark ephemeral shapes of soft, wispy clouds drift here and there, their fraying edges fringed in silver light which glints off the tortuous blade of the Dordogne as it cuts west through the silent, shadowy valley. Now the man is pulling himself up on to his knees as if to peer over the edge, to calculate his angles, and, quite suddenly, to realise his mistake.

Arriving at this point, at this fixed destination, has been the easy part. He has been here once before, of course, several weeks ago with the lighting crew, and he knows a little of the lie of the land. The castle walls, the higher ramparts, the towers and the turrets are all securely closed off, quite inaccessible, at this time of night. Somewhere on the far side are the residential apartments, still used but perhaps unoccupied tonight. Who knows? Their light has not reached the shadows of these lower confines. Save for a feeble streetlight and a dim curtained glow from the upper rooms of a pair of houses close to where he has abandoned his car, his short,

deliberate walk has been in a grizzled darkness. He strode along the narrow cobbled path beyond the castle entrance, down the hill, passing high defensive flanks of earth and castellated stone, reaching in no time the iron gate to the enclosures of the chapel. The air was faintly scented by a trace of jasmine.

His eyes now accustomed to the gloom, and aided in fleeting moments by the moonlight, he found his way to a barrier of fixed wooden posts blocking access to the perimeter walls. As expected it was firmly shut and a familiar notice posted at eye level as a warning to trespassers: *CHANTIER INTERDIT AU PUBLIC*. Several weeks ago, when the workers renovating the walls were forced to accommodate on their patch a team of lighting technicians, he had watched as part of this heavy rustic fence was forced open without disturbing the padlock. The strength of an average man was enough to pull one of the loose end-pillars out of the ground and thus create a gap for a slim workman to fit through. And this is exactly what he did a minute or two ago, allowing him to squeeze through and on to the flat grassed expanse that is bound on three sides by the long rim of stone.

Look hard at his face. Is that a smile on his lips? A nervous, shallow smile of resignation? Now the man is rubbing his eyes as if he is waking from a deep sleep. Perhaps he's just wiping away the sweat with his knuckles.

It had been one of his final acts as a respected employee of the bank, that earlier visit to Beynac. The *Caisse d'Epargne du Périgord* was one of several companies in the area that had co-sponsored the lightshow and firework display as a contribution to the region's Bastille Day celebrations, and he had been invited to watch the creative director and his team at work for an afternoon. The bank: his saviour and his downfall. It had gone so well: a brilliant evening, a spectacular triumph, the flashes of blue, white and red flickering on and off in mesmerizing patterns over the ghostly surfaces of the castle, reflected in the watching faces of the hundreds gathered entranced in the valley. Then the crackles and cascades of the fireworks, fizzing explosions of light, dazzling crimsons and blues, glowing greens, blinding whites and sparks of gold dust had ripped into the night sky. A sky darker still than tonight's.

Once again the moon, almost full, peeps shyly from behind a bank of cloud and floods the valley with a shivery glow. Still kneeling, still shaking, he sees the outline of the wooded hills to the south, massed beyond the curve of the river, then its narrowing throat to the west, the flatter forested horizon to the east. But not a soul stirs in the moonlight, no voice can be heard, only the soft whine of a motorbike rolling invisibly along the strip of road far below. He is leaning forward, unsteadily, as if to see the rider, curious to locate the source of the fading sound. The pit of his stomach feels like it's falling to his feet as a wild fluttering fills his chest. The

dizzying aspect of the drop confirms his mistake, as the moon slowly hides its face once more. Instinctively he shuffles back a little on his perch.

His plan, such as it is, is to put an end to his miserable, desperate days by striding off this wall to land, giddily free, some unimaginable moments later, on the iron-hard surface of the river. Had his memory played tricks on him? How had he misjudged the angle of descent? For at no point from the castle nor from this chapel enclosure could a person reach the water with a perpendicular drop. Directly below him, beyond rough outcrops of rock, is the faint outline of a pathway on a strip of land at the base of the cliff, which, only part way down, itself lies high above a level of tiny gardens, chimney tops, the roofs of houses tumbling a further distance to the hidden road, then finally to the riverbank. Even if he ran and threw himself off this wall he would land on the raw, unforgiving earth, broken and wretched, to be found, *the horror*, by some poor villager in the morning out walking his dog.

But these thoughts, and the guilt, the anger, the horror, all come and go in an instant, flitting and fading, jostling for space in a tortured, bewildered mind. Whether or not the cloak of the river is attainable, he knows he is prevaricating, and forces himself to refocus. To refocus on his purpose. He tells himself there is no going back.

Colour has drained from the unlit sky, and with its blackness returns the bitterness and the pain of the open wound in his soul. He is contemptible, a figure of hate, and like a cancer the revulsion will only grow; he knows this, there is no escape from it, and he knows too that he is to blame. Entirely. No-one else. Not his mean-spirited employers, not his vicious mother, not even Stéphane Garrigue. No-one else. No-one else has done what he did, no-one made him stoop so low, no-one forced him to become a criminal, took away the last shreds of his dignity, stole from him any last hope of redemption.

Look now: he is trying to get to his feet. He is clumsy, he wobbles, he steadies himself. From somewhere he has found a small bottle; he is unscrewing the lid, putting the neck to his mouth, tossing his head back to drink in a full, long gulp.

He tells himself this was meant to be. He is not a superstitious man but on his way here, as he drove his car hard along the dark country roads, he played a game with himself, he gave himself an escape. If he were to see the letters of his name, Jean-Yves, he told himself – all the letters, E twice, no particular order – in the licence plates of the other cars he came across before he reached Beynac, then he would abandon his plan. The roads were quiet, it was late, and in almost thirty kilometres he spotted only a J, an E and a V. But had he really been paying attention?

Look again: he is breathing deeply, stretching his arms high above his head, now out beyond his face as if he is about to dive into a swimming pool. The air that surrounds him is warm, sweet, comforting. His heart is pounding so hard in his ribs

he thinks he can hear its beat. His mind is a blur but he thinks to give himself one last chance. A chance he knows he doesn't deserve. No-one will miss him. No-one will mourn his death. Not even his wife; no, not even Noisette. They will all still despise him whether he is dead or alive.

One more roll of the dice. There's a heavy cloud covering the moon, but if it reappears, he tells himself, if that frigid disk of white shows itself again before he can count to ten – not too fast, not too slowly, just a steady, unhurried count – then perhaps he will climb down off this rampart after all.

He feels very weary. He is gazing up at the scuffed blackness of the sky. *One*. He is facing out towards the indistinguishable horizon of distant treetops, silently groaning with their burden of dying leaves. *Two*. He lowers his eyes to find the snaking line of the river. *Three*. He takes another deep breath, and suddenly feeling a sense of clarity, of lightness, he steps off the wall, out into the void, into the liberating embrace of gravity, and he falls forward like a tired old puppet whose strings have been cut.

## PART TWO

### Books

#### 1

I don't give much thought to my brother's life any more. After all, it wasn't very long, it ended almost twenty years ago, people prayed for his soul, grieved for him a little and then moved on. I moved on too, quite painlessly in fact. As adults we weren't especially close even though the accepted thinking is that twin siblings always are, or at least ought to be; that they are somehow spiritually bound together, that their ties of kinship are somehow mystically fixed simply because they came into the world from the same womb on the same rainy afternoon.

We were born twenty minutes apart in the autumn of 1950, a pair of twins, boy and girl, and by no means identical. We shared the thick black hair of our mother and the soft grey eyes of our father but as we grew up, the physical differences – Jean-Yves taller and leaner, myself shorter and more rounded – became more pronounced. We rubbed along well enough as children, living in this very same house where I now sit with my pen and paper scribbling these words. Sometimes we played together in our tiny shared bedroom at the top of the creaky

staircase until the patience of one or the other grew thin and the squabbles would begin over a broken toy, a ripped page, an accusation of cheating. We ran around the garden when the sun shone, which in my memory was often. We called it a garden but you might think of it rather as a field: a large flat field, close to one hectare I would say, which rises and tapers over a crest at the far end, a field planted to this day with neat lines of walnut trees, more than one hundred, enchanting to us children, a vast open playground to explore or a space which offered quiet hidden corners for a moment of solitude.

The wide kitchen window gave on to this grove of nut trees, at the very front of which, a stone's throw from the house, lay our special circle of earth, ringed with bushes of thyme and sage and rosemary. It measured about ten of our father's long strides across its diameter: an area that could have been covered, more or less, by a children's fairground carousel. Which is exactly how I imagined it in my dreams – a private roundabout with a dozen leaping horses spinning around to the sound of an invisible accordion. My brother begged our father to buy him a trampoline and set it in the centre of the circle:

"Just for winter, *papa*, when nothing is growing. I can be an acrobat, like in the circus!"

But there was not a chance of him ever relenting, for nothing would be allowed to restrict, never mind replace, his sacred *potager*. It was his *cercle magique*, which our father, Jean Puybonieux, worked each springtime, pulling the winter weeds, feeding the soil, meticulously planting out his array of vegetables: onion sets, garlic, seeds for beans and squash and whatever else took his fancy. Jean-Yves loved to help, especially in the weeks of harvest.

"Come here, little man," our father might call out. "See where the bugs have been after our haricot leaves. You'll need to pick those beans today. Go and fetch your mother's basket."

And the boy would skip away and into the house, his heart swelling with the responsibility.

I was allowed to water the plants if our father was feeling too tired.

"Be generous, Amande! Those courgettes are as thirsty as a cyclist at the top of Ventoux."

I had little idea of what he meant but would obediently go and refill the can. He was rarely tired, it seemed. He was a tall, vigorous man. The grove provided only a meagre income and he worked in the town as a part-time labourer for a pair of brothers who ran a decorating business. He was never short of energy, he was always on his feet, and he never missed the chance to smile at his twins. Madeleine, as our mother was called, was the only part of his life that seemed to grind him down. Even as a little girl I had a sense that he would rather be outside in the rain with his spade and his wheelbarrow and his walnut trees than be shut up in the

confines of the house listening to his wife. To me her voice from all those years ago still echoes around the walls of this old building:

“You spend all your days painting shelves for other women in the town, yet you’ll do nothing for your own wife!”

“I’m at my wits’ end, Jean,” I can still hear her complaining. “You expect me to provide a tasty meal for you and the children but you give me enough to buy only scraps of meat one or twice a week.”

“Get out of the house with your muddy boots, you blind fool! Can’t you see I’ve swept the floor?”

“You give more attention to those damn onions than you do to your family!”

Our father would sometimes wink at his son and let the insults wash over him. There was little doubt that Jean-Yves was his favourite. Often he would take him up to the top of the field, to the crest where they would sit together and look back over the ranks of trees, through the lines of space between them to the circle of earth and the house. There they would talk for hours, about plants and insects and animals, about the town and the antics of its folk, about the past and the present and the future. Our father would explain about the cultivation of the walnuts, the value of the crop and of the land his son would one day inherit. Sometimes I would follow them at a discreet distance with a picture book in my hand, eager to hear what they were discussing, what they were laughing about.

“Stop spying on us, Amande!” my brother would call.

“I’m not. I’m reading my book in the shade.”

“You’re a liar. Go away! Go and make us some bread and butter!”

My father assumed I would prefer to spend time with my mother, that I would naturally seek a feminine bond with her, and she with me. But there was no warmth in the woman; she was a brooding spirit, she tolerated rather than celebrated us children, a rebuke far more natural on her tongue than a word of kindness. She would often sit alone in the dark, deep in her thoughts, in a kind of trance, I thought, and she hated to be disturbed. Like a flower deprived of light I grew stilted; I was irritable, I became introverted, I squabbled at school.

Madeleine wore rough, unfussy clothes from day to day, saving her best – an embroidered blouse or a soft woollen coat in the winter with an inch of fake fur on the collar – for the church of St Lucien on a Sunday morning. Jean-Yves and I were obliged to accompany her, rain or shine, but our father only ever came with us on Christmas Eve.

“It’s the least I can do once a year to say thank you to the baby Jesus,” he said once with his familiar grin.

Our mother was known in the town, but only as a communicant or a customer, as an acquaintance or a neighbour; she had no friends to visit, and I don’t ever remember anyone calling at our house to keep her company beyond her doctor or her priest.

My brother and I were twelve years old when our father left Fretignac and disappeared from our lives forever. From this distance I can understand him, I can even forgive him, but on that day I remember hating him for his betrayal with every fibre in my body. It was an execrable time and the pain still aches: we had started at a new school and were at our most vulnerable. Madeleine was distraught and blamed Jean-Yves for some imagined conspiracy: the boy was desolate, bereft of his father and the target for his mother's vitriol, but he was strong, stronger than me, and with the help of his friends and his teachers he steered a fairly steady path through his adolescence, troubled only by Madeleine's sniping and insults. As for me, I built up a shell around me, withdrew into the shadows, numbed my feelings and waited for something better to happen in my life.

There is a history behind our father's departure and now might be the time to relate it. I knew nothing of this as a schoolgirl, of course; it was revealed to me much later by an old woman in the town, a market trader named Pierrette, who took me under her wing. Like much of late 20<sup>th</sup> century France, events and the reactions to them were coloured by the war – which we all understand to mean the German occupation of our country. Some of her account is true, I know. Madeleine herself spoke to me about her time alone when our father was away. Some of it, however, I refused to believe: gossip turned into fact, as far as I was concerned, rumour retold as gospel.

For two years after 1940 Fretignac, like most of our region, was part of the territory under the theoretical control of the Vichy government. At that time my parents had been married for barely a year. The German involvement in so-called unoccupied France was generally at an arm's length but men were recruited from here to work at the strategically important port of Bordeaux, one hundred and fifty kilometres to the west in the occupied zone. When Vichy fell and the Nazis took full control, and as the Battle of the Atlantic intensified, more and more dockworkers were required; my father and half the men in the town were given no choice but to join up. He was there, I believe, from early 1943 until sometime after the city's liberation in August of the following year. Meanwhile Madeleine, a pretty young woman, vulnerable and alone, was a target for many a German soldier's roving eye. She was pursued, in spite of her protestations, by one particular officer, a handsome man of some authority, no doubt, who tried to convince her that he could make her life a little more comfortable. Eventually she gave in to his approaches and, secretly, they became lovers. She wasn't the first desperate French girl to fall for a German soldier and I offer no judgement on her. I cannot imagine how I would have behaved in those wretched times had I been in her shoes.

Sometime towards the end of 1943 – and here is where I believe that Pierrette had strayed into fantasy – to the horror of both of them she became pregnant, only

realising her condition four or five months into her term. Her Kommandant had to use both his influence and his cunning to arrange, after some delay, to have her moved away from the town, and transported to an inconspicuous private clinic, in Grenoble, I was told, where the baby was prematurely induced and allowed to die. Nobody seems to know what happened to the German officer, but Madeleine never saw him again. She was given a railway ticket with her little bundle of possessions and made the long journey back to Périgord alone.

Jean returned a year later and their life together resumed. Happily or not, I am uncertain, but in 1950 Jean-Yves and I were born and a new family was created. The old market woman intimated to me that our father headed straight back to Bordeaux when he left us twelve years later; in spite of the conditions and the dangers, he had grown to enjoy working on the docks. He had been an adventurous, robust young man, he had made new friends, he had drunk the local wine, and he had slept, she guessed, with many pretty Bordelaises.

When I was thirteen I began to have visions. A little later the voices came: children's voices, clear and shrill, singing playground songs in a language I knew to be nonsense. The visions appeared mostly at twilight: I saw the walnut trees walking, marching in ranks like an army on parade, sometimes up away from the house, other times towards it, approaching in silence, a stealth attack. I would scream and shake with fear, and only a hard slap from my mother would bring me back to my senses. In my dreams I saw children hiding from the Nazis in caves: groups of them, in tattered clothing, running and crawling deeper into the darkness of the hillsides. The war had been over for almost twenty years. Of course there are caves, many of them, in our region, not so far from Fretignac, in fact, but at that age I had never seen them for myself. Only in the dreams.

Madeleine insisted that I speak to a doctor; she demanded that he prescribe some medicine to cure me. Months later he in turn recommended a psychiatrist in Bergerac who visited me once, came to some kind of financial arrangement with my mother, and who then received me in his consultation room once a fortnight for about six months until he concluded that I was a troubling case, psychologically disturbed but generally harmless, and recommended confinement in a convent school. And so, a few weeks short of my fifteenth birthday I was admitted to the *Couvent des Soeurs de Supplication de la Sainte Thérèse* in Périgueux where I remained until I was released on a day of heavy snowfall over thirteen years later.

So, no, I don't give much thought to my brother's life any more. When I returned to Fretignac my mother had already turned into an old woman, and my brother was a man I hardly recognised and whose life I knew so little about. Jean-



Yves Puybonieux had done well enough at school to secure an administrative job at the town's savings bank, with both training and prospects. He had grown in confidence despite the relentless tirades of Madeleine's sarcasm. She still undermined him, to his face and behind his back, comparing him with an old schoolfriend who had a better job and a beautiful wife, or to another who had moved to a large house in Le Bugue, or to another who was working for a firm in Paris.

"At your age your cousin Daniel was running a newspaper office in Poitiers," I can hear her saying. Jean-Yves would shrug his shoulders.

"You should be doing more with your life than stamping cheques in a poky little office in that bank."

"But I won't be doing that forever, *maman*."

"Oh, really?"

"I could be the manager's assistant this time next year. Old Labrousse is talking about retirement."

"We'll see," she would sneer.

When Labrousse offered his notice and my brother was given his promotion, I encouraged him to look for an apartment of his own down in the centre of town, which, to his credit and to our mother's dismay, he did.

I give even less thought to my brother's death. I have no reason to make it appear any more or less noble than it was. It was a suicide, of course, a mortal sin if you believe what the church teaches. My mother never forgave him, you can imagine. She had even more contempt for him in death than ever, managing to put aside her own part in his final act. I kept a few cuttings from the newspaper, headlines and then diminishing additions to the story, tittle-tattle. I rarely look at them at all but I have them here in front of me now to help me recall some of the details. When you have a fuller picture you may agree with me that Jean-Yves deserves a little of our sympathy.

By the middle years of the 1990s things had much changed. I had my own small apartment by the river in Les Saules – then a new complex for "modern Fretignac living" – on the other side of the town. My brother was now the manager of the *Caisse d'Epargne* and had recently married a sweet-natured girl, almost twenty years younger, called Yvette. She too was the child of a single mother, in her case a widow, and both were hairdressers, originally from Périgueux. Jean-Yves met her at a summer fair, was captivated by her long golden hair, her open smile, her bright hazel eyes, and was determined at once to marry her. For what seemed like the first time in his life, Madeleine gave him her approval, and as their wedding day approached she invited him to start his married life in the family home, at least for a while.

"Your apartment is too small, Jeannot," she said. "A girl like Yvette needs space. She likes it here, *non*?"

"She does, *maman*."

"Well then. I'll move into the little room. You can have my room, the two of you. We can be a family again. She can breathe the fresh air of our hills. You can work on the walnut trees. They've been neglected since your father left. Amande is no use; her head always in a book, a newspaper."

"I think it's perhaps a good idea, provided..."

"What?"

"Provided you give us space for ourselves. Properly, *maman*. You know, privacy, independence. Please don't interfere."

"Of course not, my boy."

"You promise?"

"I promise. I'll just be here to keep an eye on you. And help where I can."

"Perhaps I could revive the circle. It looks so sad as it is, covered in weeds and moss."

"That would be nice. I do miss your father's plantings."

"Then I'll start with some strawberries, that's what I'll do. Yvette's favourites."

With her amiable character and her pretty face, Yvette Puybonieux was quickly accepted in Frettignac, and before very long the banker's wife with the hazel eyes who lived in a walnut grove was given the nickname of Noisette. She was sociable, she loved to play her guitar in the park, to chat, to join in. She offered her services as a hairdresser, but finding no openings in the salons in the town, decided to advertise as a travelling stylist. She would take her box of tackle to the houses of clients and provide a home service instead.

It was inevitable that she drew the attention of the young men of the town, some even asking her to cut their hair even though she was only really available for ladies. Jean-Yves, overloaded at work and too trusting, failed to spot what was happening. Madeleine, however, did not.

"You'd better treat your wife this weekend," she would tell him, "or somebody else might."

"What do you mean, *maman*?"

"She's missing your attention."

"She hasn't said."

"She won't have. Women don't say these things to their husbands, Jeannot. Not directly. They expect you to notice for yourself."

Silence would descend on the pair for a moment.

"She has telephone calls."

"Telephone calls?"

"Yes. From men. I hear her gossiping and giggling on the telephone. When you're at the bank. When you are stamping your cheques and tapping on your stupid computer thing."

"Then I'll talk to her."

"You should. You must."

"I will."

"And take her out on Sunday. Somewhere nice."

"Yes, I will."

"And you should lose some weight too. All that sitting around in your office all day and your heavy lunches. You're getting a belly, you know. I expect she's told you."

"No."

"Well, now *I* have."

The wide hectares of land which border our walnut grove on its western side, sloping up and out of the valley, have been in the Garrigue family for as long as anyone can remember: gravelly, well-drained ground that in my lifetime has always been given to vines. There was a time when I was a small girl that I recall old man Garrigue asking our father to sell part of our field, the top corner that catches the afternoon sun, so that he might plant a new strain of vines on it. I remember it only for our father's reaction. He listened patiently to the outline of the neighbour's plans, then rejected the "fair" price as an insult.

"Then name your price, Jean, you old mule," persisted the other man.

"You're wasting your breath, Garrigue," stated our father before turning to walk away. "I wouldn't sell my grandfather's land, not a square metre of it, for a million francs!"

Just as my brother's grip on Noisette's attention was loosening, a similar request over land acquisition came to him from Stéphane Garrigue, now the owner of the vineyard since his old father's death. Stéphane was a bully of a man, huge and handsome, in his early thirties at that time. He was well educated, had studied business at a school in Paris and was determined to make the most of his rural inheritance.

"It's not for vines, Puybonieux," he told my brother one day. "I'm going to build a camping site up there on the top field. You know, the patch of scrub on the ridge. Added to your little triangle it could be ideal. The little spring still runs, doesn't it?"

"I'm sure you know very well that it does," said Jean-Yves.

"Plenty of fresh water, then. It's perfect. I'll fix up electricity, reshape the land a bit, maybe terrace it, set up a few buildings: office, sanitary block, maybe add a pool later. You can imagine it, up there in the sunshine, the tourists will love it.

Those Dutch, those English. Such a quiet spot, lovely views over the valley. There's room for up to thirty pitches, I'd say, maybe forty. What do you think?"

Like our father but more politely, my brother refused to even consider the proposition, and, of a neighbour with whom relations until then had been distant but never cold, he made an immediate enemy.

Garrigue wasn't blind to the attractions of my brother's beautiful wife. He began visiting the house during the daytime hours when he knew, the often sleeping Madeleine aside, she would be alone. He brought her gifts: one day a box of fresh cherries, the next a bottle of his *réserve du propriétaire*, or a small piece of jewellery, expensive yet discreet, something she could keep hidden from her husband. He persuaded her to trim his hair, once even to shave him. If he couldn't have Jean-Yves' land, Garrigue would steal his wife instead.

"You're losing her, you fool," Madeleine would shout at her son. "Are you blind or stupid? You must woo her all over again. Take her away. Have a holiday together. Buy her some new clothes. Make her see how much you love her."

"I cannot afford to be extravagant, *maman*."

The old woman would sigh. Exasperated, she would take a different tack:

"Then there's another way."

"Another way?"

"You must make me a grandmother. Amande never will. It's up to you – don't you see, Jeannot? – to keep the family name alive."

A rueful smile from her son.

"We have tried."

"You have?"

"But so far without luck."

"Then you must try again, my boy, and keep trying."

And so this was how my brother's troubles began. He did as he was told, buying expensive new fashions for Noisette, flattering her with diamonds, taking her away on holidays to Paris, to Italy and twice to luxury beach resorts in the Caribbean. Of course none of this could he afford. He lied about the holiday destinations – and made her promise to do the same, he secretly arranged irregular loans at the *Caisse d'Épargne* and as the months and years passed, and as his debts mounted up, bad credit upon bad credit, he began to set up false accounts which allowed him effectively to steal from his own bank. Could he have sold off a portion of our field? I don't believe the thought ever occurred to him, not that the land strictly even belonged to him.

Noisette meanwhile was enjoying a lifestyle she could only have dreamed of, no questions asked. Cosseted by both a kind, simple-minded husband and a passionate secret lover, she felt that all the stars had aligned in her favour for once, she was still young and for now motherhood could wait.

Madeleine was the catalyst for the eruption of the truth. Garrigue had become careless and one morning she caught the pair in the act of love, or *fornication*, as she called it, and having berated her daughter-in-law for her deceit, she reported the *crime* to Jean-Yves on his return later that day. I can only imagine the sorry scene: my brother's anger would quickly subside, he would take part of the blame, he would see his wife's point of view, and when she threatened to leave him for Stéphane he would beg her to stay. Our mother's harsh words for both of them would only fan the flames. And as darkness fell Noisette left the house, a small suitcase in her hand and tears in her eyes. She headed up the hill to the Garrigue estate, and she never returned.

Within a week the embezzlement scandal broke. Jean-Yves had lost his wife, he was losing his grip on his affairs, and he had started to make mistakes. Investigations by agents of the bank, according to the newspaper reports, revealed the scale of the theft: over 250,000 francs had disappeared, all of it indirectly from the funds of what people still regarded as *la caisse locale*. In the great scheme of things it was not a huge sum, but the scorn of the local people – investors, borrowers, savers in what was still seen as *their* bank, as *the town's* bank – had more resonance than any I felt during more recent financial scandals which involved the loss of billions. Many people in Fretignac felt betrayed by a man they had believed in, years of trust and service swept away in an instant. It was the end for my brother, the pariah. And such a harsh, sudden end: he was dismissed, he was arrested, he was accused, then charged; he pleaded guilty and was due to be sentenced. He saved everybody's time, I suppose, by taking his own life, shattered on the cliffs below Beynac castle.

For all the drama of my brother's death, however, he is not the protagonist of this story. It does not revolve around him; he is merely a character who finds himself, literally, at the story's edge. And, for certain, it is not a story about me. I just happened to be a witness to parts of it. Besides, I am too modest, too self-effacing to believe that anyone would want to read about my unremarkable, uneventful life. If you know somebody who might push forward from the crowd for a moment in the spotlight, then you'll recognise me as the very opposite of that person. I'm the one stepping out of the way, deeper into the shadows, to let them elbow past.

And neither is this a story about moral cowardice. There is an echo of Jean-Yves' deceitfulness, I suppose, of his sense of injustice, even of his vanity. But far greater than his is the vanity of the real figure at the heart of this tale, the burnished vanity of a certain type of Englishman who for a while made his home in our town: an Englishman named Trevor John Penny. You will see how the story I tell has at its geographical centre our pretty cream-stone town, Fretignac-du-Périgord, sitting in its hidden, crinkled, wooded valley halfway between the city of Périgueux and the Dordogne river. We have our own river too, you should know: slow and

meandering, reflecting on its southward course the lush greenery of its banks, the Vézère flows beneath the bleached stone bridge, *le Pont Napoléon*, which over its wide double arches connects Fretignac *nord* and *sud*. You will understand how the small savings bank, our library, the town hall just across our dusty square and many other points of local interest have linked the lives of Jean-Yves and Penny. To tell the tale in its fullest sense, however, I need to take you away briefly to the north-eastern corner of the United States of America, to visit a small university town in Canada and, less surprisingly, to lay out a deeply shaded backcloth which is England.

I have to admit at the outset that I knew Trevor John Penny only superficially. I observed him from a discreet distance, and on occasion I watched him from closer quarters; I engaged with him infrequently, exchanged pleasantries, talked a little business, patted back his flattery, quietly absorbed his jokes. I knew his girlfriend a great deal better, if girlfriend is the right term. A girl she certainly wasn't; she was already a woman turned thirty when she first came to France. She was his lover, I suppose, that goes without saying, his confidante, his co-pilot and his conscience. Confidante, most clearly, and she confided in me too. I think she found in me a lost spirit – she could sense that – with a gift for listening and a sympathetic soul. Where are you now, Columbine? I loved you more and more, and then you were gone.

It is a story in which I have gladly sacrificed my position of authority and have stepped off my first-person pedestal, dissolving from an *I* to a *she*. Forgive me, it seems more comfortable to be enveloped in the bosom of the narrative in that way. I apologise for any errors I might have made, mistranslations from English into French and then back again, insecurity with idioms in spite of a growing confidence in a feel I had for his turn of phrase, for his train of thought. And hers too. Much of the detail is direct from Columbine, recalled from our hours of hushed conversation, listening to her calm voice, laughing at her observations of the ironies in her life, hugging her close for consolation, wiping away the tears in our moments of sorrow. Parts are imagined, invented even: a snatch of dialogue here, a detail noticed there, but all are as true to the overarching spirit of the whole as my limitations as a storyteller will allow. Be certain that I know this story as well as that of my own long life, for it has carried me to heights of joy and to depths of sadness, the memories of which will stay with me until the day I leave this earth.

## 2

It was such a crisp, bright morning, the low November sun radiating the purest light, if little heat, that he had decided to leave his car in the *Place de la Résistance* and stride out for the address on foot. Angélique, the pretty estate agent he had taken a shine to, was tied up with some other business, but, *n'importe*, he had

told her, much as he would have wished to spend another hour in her scented company. He was keen to see the place and, if she could arrange for the owners to be in to meet him and show him round, he could manage perfectly well on his own.

She had said he would find it about a kilometre's drive away, just five minutes from her office, across the bridge, up the hill along the *départementale* and out on to the edge of town past the first farmhouse on the right. She had underestimated the distance, he decided, as people who spend their lives in cars often do, having no sense of the inclines that an engine will manage effortlessly. He had been walking for over a quarter of an hour and the winding road was now bordered by trees on both sides. Had he missed the farm? He unfolded the printed page of notes she had given him and looked again at the photograph of the squat stone house with its discoloured red-tiled roof, its little windows and the faded blue paintwork. There was a telephone number. He adjusted his sunglasses, which had slipped down along the line of his nose. He lowered his hand and touched his trouser pocket to feel the outline of his mobile. He changed his mind and walked on. It wouldn't be much further, it was a glorious day, he was fit and healthy and, to be honest, he was enjoying the exercise.

And sure enough, around the next bend, there it was. The woodland opened up and a wide stony driveway of several metres presented the house, its blue door a darker shade than was suggested by the photograph. As the hillside grew steeper beyond it, his eye was drawn to the vast flank of wintering vines in their ordered rows, dark and skeletal, line after line of them rising and then disappearing at the horizon. By the side of the house, in the shade of a pair of low fir trees, someone had parked a car: a silver Clio, dusty and scratched at the bumper but fairly new. He strolled past it and approached the building. The front was as plain as could be: the shutters were bleached of colour, no patch of garden softened the advance of the stark driveway, no shrubs decorated the walls, no baskets of winter colour hung from the little porch. Nevertheless he had a warm feeling about the place; he had been determined to like it, for some reason, the moment Angélique had shown him the images on the website. He knocked three times on the door, commanding and authoritative, and, as he waited, he looked up and noticed above the frame a weathered wooden plaque whose varnish had long ago lost its sheen: the name of the house, painted on the darkened strip in a stylised hand, read *Puis Bonheur*. He smiled, heartened by the words, as if they confirmed that living here would bring him good fortune. *Then Happiness*.

He heard footsteps scratching on a stone surface behind the door, the click of a lock and then standing there before him was the figure of a lady of late middle age, short and plump, in a shapeless faded orange jumper and loose denim jeans. Her fluffy grey hair covered her head like a little crown of curls. Her round face had a pale, flat colouring but lively eyes sparkled behind her frameless glasses, and fixing him with an inquisitive gaze she said in a gentle, vaguely musical voice:

*"Bonjour, monsieur."*

*"Bonjour, madame,"* he replied, removing his sunglasses.

She looked blank, expecting more.

*"Je suis John Penny,"* he went on, *"Pour voir la maison? Angélique vous a parlé, n'est-ce pas?"*

*"Angélique? De l'agence? Oh, pardon. Je m'excuse, monsieur. Entrez, entrez. Vous êtes en avance, non? Elle m'a prévenue midi."*

*"Je reviens plus tard?"*

*"Mais non. Non, ce n'est pas grave. Mais vous êtes anglais, monsieur? Vous parlez parfaitement français."*

And offering him a soft hand to shake, she added:

*"Je m'appelle Amande."*

Watching from the downstairs window, she had seen him arrive. She had already noted his confident gait, his healthy complexion, his neatly parted fair hair and his trimmed, stubbly beard which showed a touch of grey by his chin. He looked very foreign, she thought, and not just by his face. The cut of his jacket, the swish of his stripy varsity scarf and, now staring directly into hers, the pure blueness of his eyes suggested, moreover declared him to be an Englishman.

Penny was confident in his spoken French, and had been since shining in the Sixth Form, but it was always gratifying to be complimented by a native speaker. And so, buoyed by her words, this is how it was, an apology for arriving earlier than expected, then a conversation of fluency and some subtlety ambled along as the woman led him inside and took him around the unlit rooms of the house one by one. A couple of the windows were wide open, he noticed, in spite of the season, to dilute the fleeting smell, he assumed, of turpentine and bleach. At least it was a clean smell.

*"The house is empty, isn't it?"* he asked. *"I mean, I could move in straight away?"*

*"Yes, of course, monsieur,"* she said, leading him back on to the narrow landing. *"That is what I told the agency."*

*"It's just that it still looks lived in, if you know what I mean."*

*"It is true that I myself have spent some time here recently. I have my own place in Les Saules but I have had some workmen in and I like to keep an eye on how they are."*

*"The rooms are small but nicely done."*

*"The place needed a lot of work after my mother moved on."*

*"You inherited the house, madame?"*

*"No, no. Not yet at least!"* she sang. *"Maman is still alive. She's frail, she's losing her mind, poor woman, but no, she's living in an EHPAD in Le Bugue."*

*"A what?"*

*"An EHPAD. It's a state-run home. You would call it a nursing home."*

*"I see."*



"Quite a good one."

"And is the work here finished?"

"More or less, yes. As you saw, the main bedroom is freshly painted. The other rooms upstairs need work but I would be able to get a man in at your convenience. This door is the small bedroom. That's where my brother and I slept as children. And this one," she said, pushing open the door to a room no larger than an oversized cupboard, a dark space that was filled with boxes and bits of furniture and rolls of carpet, "this was my room when we were too old to share. Can you imagine? No window and room for a little bed and nothing else!"

But Penny was not inclined to imagine. He had come to inspect the house, not to listen to a dull old woman chattering on about her past.

"Shall we see the kitchen?" he asked.

"Of course. It's a new kitchen," she said, following him down the creaky staircase. "New plumbing at last. The sink we had was here since Napoleon's time, I am certain!"

The view from the kitchen window offered Penny his first clear sight of the walnut grove.

"It's our land," said Amande. "All of it. You are free to wander around."

"All the way to the top of the field?"

"Yes, of course. These are our trees."

"Peach trees?"

"No, they're walnuts. It's hard to tell when they're bare, I confess."

"It's wonderful," he said, then seeing that the rickety back door was already ajar, added: "Shall we go outside?"

Penny was captivated by the sight before him: the dry, cropped field was the size of a football pitch, narrower but longer, rising gently to a ridge in the middle distance. Several rows of bare, spindly trees, neatly spaced up to ten metres apart, marched up to the crest like a stiff platoon of soldiers heading over the lip of the trenches at the Somme, their spiky upper branches disappearing over the near horizon. He wandered into the shadows of the nearest group and let the columns guide his eye line. There must be at least a hundred of them altogether, he guessed, one hundred and fifty, maybe even more, some looking withered, as old as the house itself perhaps, but most looked healthy. Beneath them on the tramped earth and the patches of short, tufty grass lay rotting leaves that had been missed a few weeks earlier when the grove had been cleared for the winter.

"We pay men from the *coopérative* to collect the nuts these days," she said, as if reading his mind, anticipating his questions. Penny noticed she had removed her glasses; without them, he thought, she had the look of a tawny owl.

"They harvest, they rake over the leaves," she was explaining. "Of course they pay me back for what they collect. It makes a little money still, our grove."

"They press them for oil, don't they?"

"Generally, yes. It has a fine, delicate taste, as you know, perhaps. Or they are crushed for cakes and pastes. But with the better crops, they can sell the nuts themselves, the whole fruit. Our nuts are often the best ones. They are a small quantity but they are respected."

"And all those vines?" he said, waving an arm in the direction of the neighbouring hillside.

"No, they're not ours," she answered. "They belong to somebody else, to our neighbour. Just the walnut trees."

"And what's this?" he asked, turning back towards the house and indicating a circular patch of unprepossessing earth, fringed here and there by desiccated, spindly lavender. "This circle of garden?"

"That's my old father's circle. He grew his vegetables there when we were children. As you can see, it's been neglected. My brother used to live here some years ago with his wife. He tried to plant it out just like *papa* but nothing would grow for him. He tried everything. Different varieties, different feeds, but it was as if the land had lost its magic."

A cold breeze began to blow across the field, the sun had dipped behind the roof of the building and they were standing in its shadow. Penny tied his scarf into a loose knot just below his throat and rubbed his hands together.

"Shall we go back inside, *monsieur*?" the woman suggested. "It is chilly, no? Such a beautiful day but you can forget we're in November already!"

Curiosity beckoned him around the corner of the house, however, where he saw a most unusual garage, a long structure attached to the main building whose walls of less than a metre in height were fitted at intervals with thick wooden poles, which supported a kind of roof of wire mesh overrun with a dense canopy of vines.

Amande had followed him.

"You can keep a car there," she said. "Out of the sun. Two, in fact. You can see how long it is."

"I've never seen a garage like it!"

"No, I can imagine. You can see it is what we made from a half-built frame. My brother started it for an extension to the house. Over twenty years ago. His wife wanted a bigger kitchen. It's normal. An extra bedroom too, and the rest."

"He ran out of money, did he?"

"No," she replied curtly. "He ran out of time."

Had he been impertinent? Had he offended the woman? It didn't really matter. He was about to press her but she had already disappeared.

"Come inside and I will prepare a pot of coffee," he heard her call.

"I imagine this place will suit me perfectly, you know. At least for a short while."

Penny was standing in the main downstairs room, a modest sitting room with a low ceiling, a parlour it might have once been called, furnished with two large armchairs, an empty woodstove in the hearth, an old sideboard, a bare bookcase and a folded wooden table, chipped at the edges. In front of the window was an ironing board stacked with folded plain blue fabric. Amande followed him into the room and switched on a central light which struggled to brighten the gloom.

"The initial lease is for six months, as you know," she said, readjusting her glasses.

"Yes, I know."

"I'm sorry about the ironing," she laughed. "You caught me doing the curtains. They'll be hanging when you come again. If you come, that is. Upstairs in the bedrooms you have to close the shutters for darkness."

Penny had nothing more to say to her. He had declined her offer of coffee and seemed in a hurry to leave, or else he had simply seen enough and was running out of patience. Nevertheless, a small framed photograph, screwed to the wall by the fireplace, caught his eye and he stepped past one of the armchairs for a closer look. It was a wedding photo whose colour had faded to browns and dull oranges: a smiling middle-aged groom, dark hair ruffled in a gust of wind, wearing a suit that looked one size too small, was posing hand in hand with his bride. She was rather beautiful, Penny decided, and rather too young for the husband. She wore a white dress with a fussily embroidered bodice, her blonde hair was tied up in an arrangement of lace and flowers, and her eyes were not quite looking into the camera.

"That's my brother on his wedding day," said Amande.

"I see. He looks like he's just won the lottery."

The woman sighed softly before resuming:

"Well, it *was* a lucky day for him, I suppose."

"But..."

"But his luck did run out. You are perceptive, *monsieur*."

"So, they are no longer married?"

"No. No, they are not."

"I don't mean to pry."

"No, no need to apologise. They were very happy together for a time."

As he moved back into the centre of the room she added:

"One thing I would ask you to respect, *monsieur*. You know, if you do rent the house. You must leave the photographs where they are. They are fixed to the walls, as you can see."

"Yes, of course."

"For my mother's sake."

"You said photographs. There are more? I didn't notice..."

"Just one other. It's at the top of the stairs. Just a small one of my parents together. A small black and white. It's a favourite of mine."

"None of you?"

"Oh, no. I don't take a good photo myself. Never did."

"Oh well."

She noticed that he didn't offer even a pretence of polite dismay.

"And what about you, Monsieur Penny?" she asked suddenly. "What brings an Englishman to Fretignac, and moreover, to live here, not just to visit like the tourists?"

"I'm at the university," he replied, resolving to keep his story as abbreviated as possible. He had been here long enough, listening to her rambling on about her family. He liked the house, he had already decided it would suit him, but it was time to be bidding the old woman goodbye.

"Which university?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Which university, *monsieur*? Are you a student or a teacher?"

"I'm at the AULA. In Périgueux. I give lectures there. But I must say, the accommodation there doesn't agree with me. I don't have to be there every day by any means and here is not too far to commute."

"Forty-five minutes."

"Well, exactly."

"A little winding but a pretty route through the countryside."

"And then there's the Steeples connection." He couldn't resist displaying his knowledge.

"Of course. The great English writer. So you are a literary academic, Monsieur Penny?"

He was surprised that the name had registered at all with the woman.

"Yes. Yes, I am. English literature. And Steeples was a great attraction for me here."

"Well, we are proud of his links with our town. A few of us, anyway. I must say that most people here have no idea who he was."

"That's a pity."

"It is. I think so, too. There is a small display in the library."

"Yes, I have seen it. You are well informed, *madame*."

She laughed, following him out into the dark vestibule.

"I worked at the library for many years, *monsieur*. Until they retired me. I still volunteer from time to time."

"Then I may very well see you there some day."

"I dare say."

"But for the moment, I think it's time I left you in peace."

"You have seen everything you need to? Have you any more questions?"

"I don't think so. Angélique can talk to me about the details. Thank you. I do like the house, *madame*. I am sure I will be happy here."

They were already standing on the threshold.

"I was thinking that the moment I arrived," he went on. "The moment I saw the house name. Such an uplifting choice."

Amande was about to offer her hand to be shaken once more.

"Uplifting?" she wondered.

"*Puis Bonheur*," he said, stepping outside and pointing above his head to the plaque.

"Where? No, no," she said, smiling at his mistake. "You are misreading the word, *monsieur*. I can see it is hard to decipher these days. It says Puybonieux, our family name."

"Does it? So it does, I suppose. So that's a letter y, is it? And an x. I can see it now. How stupid of me."

"Not at all! I agree it could be misread. You *were* wearing dark glasses, I believe. And *Puis Bonheur*, well, it is an unusual name for a house, but a pretty one!"

Penny smiled through his embarrassment, shook her hand in farewell with exaggerated functionality, then tightened his scarf and turned to walk away towards the road.

She watched him reach the corner and disappear, glanced up again for a moment at the ancient nameplate, and then stooped back into the recesses of the house to resume her ironing.