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A Wing to Fly

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A Wing to Fly

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

In

Film, Theater and Communication Arts

Creative Writing

By

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Introduction

In France, as in other countries, the historical record of the events that occurred before, during WWII and the aftermath is well documented in history books. Not so well known are the stories of the ordinary families who lived during these years, the period 1925-1956 and the consequences on their lives. The refugee families, those that fled the military fields of Eastern, Northern and the Parisian regions of France, spoke of their struggles as they reached their welcoming destinations, mostly the unobtrusive, non-strategic, agricultural region in the center of France, Le Berry. But like their region, the inhabitants of Le Berry, proud and lovers of their traditions, display a quiet, natural reserve, a silent endurance that has kept their voice hidden. Fictional narration has lent its flexibility in the raising of that voice and in highlighting the parallels between the war, outside in the country, and the war inside the home as ordinary families must endure and deal with family struggles. Fictional narration has also enabled the highlighting of rapid change, as a consequence of the war, in the country as well as in Le Berry, of human spirit being smothered, even killed by traditions, or being raised above them, victorious. A fictional Berrichon extended family, its rural branch and its urban branch, has been chosen to explore these themes.

Chapter I

Crafting

1951

Monique woke up and, at once, remembered that the finals had ended at three o'clock the day before and the undergraduates had been dismissed immediately after the bell. Something strange had fallen upon the campus, an eerie silence. Her plan had been to remain at the university and let the absence of people from classrooms, yards, the absence of noise, give her the peace she needed to finish her manuscript. From her bed she saw, spread on the table, the letter from her mother and remembered precisely the irritation she felt at the suggestion that she change her plans. "You need some country air," her mother wrote. "Get away from Poitiers. Bring your trunk here, then go and stay at the little house in Fley. Aunt Célesta said in her letters that it has been well maintained. I'm sure that it's just as quiet there as within those stark gray walls of the university."

Since her family moved to the new house, in the center of Châteauroux, Monique visited only once, for a few days last Christmas. The façade, of gray stucco, rose straight up from the narrow sidewalk. Three cement steps led to the front door.

It opened on a hallway of highly polished floorboards leading to a short stairway and landing. The first door on the left led to the bedroom of Monique's parents, the door on the right to her brother's bedroom but he'd stayed away at school last Christmas. The next door opened onto too small a space to be called a bedroom, but a folding bed was kept there and placed up against the wall.

Monique hesitated all day long, walking about the solitary yards of the campus, thinking of Fley, of the burnt domain. She knew that the main farmhouse had remained standing long after her great aunt moved to Paris. Her grandmother had been glad, she'd said then, to share her apartment with her sister Célesta, glad to have her company.

Monique imagined the farmhouse, lifeless, a reminder of the outrage that had taken place there, the loneliness of its furniture covered with discarded sheets. Finally it had been sold with all the land around it. She knew of the small house her mother spoke of in her letter. It had belonged to a great-great grandmother but she had never been there. *It might be interesting and nice to be in the country.* She returned to her campus room.

She easily found a ride with a colleague and the next day she was in Châteauroux. She placed her trunk in the storeroom,

contemplated the folding bed and decided to leave for Fley as soon as possible.

"Maman, I'm going to check the bus schedule."

"But wait, . . ."

"I'll be right back." Monique was already on the other side of the front door.

There were few passengers when she got on the bus the next day. She found a seat by the opened window and, as best she could, settled her back still aching from a restless night in the hard and narrow bed. Her father would pack her typewriter and send it along later on. She was only carrying a soft bag with a few clothes, paper and pens and her manuscript. The early July air had not yet forgotten the sweetness of spring. The leaves waved by as the speeding bus disturbed the stillness of the trees lining the road. The fields exposed their rich, brown earth turned over following the recent harvest. It would rest until fall planting; probably sugar beets, thought Monique, as she imagined the large green and red leaves of the plant. She envied the peacefulness of nature as passages of her novel churned in her mind. She was writing a fictional version of the true love story a young teacher she had befriended told her; the terrible drama of her impossible love for a German soldier, the tragic end. But the writing was not flowing well. Had she made

a mistake undertaking a full-length work with so little experience? Perhaps away from the university walls, where the story had been told, the words would flow more easily. Perhaps in the wide-open space of the country, she could free the words from the tightness she felt in them. And seeing Fley again after so many years was beginning to fill her with an anticipation she had not expected.

It was nearly two o'clock when the bus pulled on the square, and stopped next to a large sign made of white porcelain with green letters. It said simply: BUS. Women dressed in black and men in blue overalls were sitting on the bench waiting to get on to their own destination. Of the village, Monique remembered only the church in the center of the square lined with chestnut trees. Her great aunt Célesta had never brought her to the village except to hear the Mass that she never understood. As she stepped down from the bus, the driver said, without looking at her, "I'll be back at five o'clock." Monique did not respond and instead walked quickly toward the only shop with an opened door: the *Café-Tabac-Bus Depot*. As she walked in, trying to think of words to explain her presence without having to give more details than necessary, the woman behind the counter greeted her with a friendly smile.

Surprised, Monique managed to blurt, "My great-aunt used to live here, Célesta Basson."

"You're little Monique? I should have known; you have the wide-open face of Célesta. I'm Marguerite Broussard. Your father may have mentioned," she began, but stopped when she saw the blank look on Monique's face.

Perhaps to break the awkward silence, she spoke again: "I was there the night the domain burnt. Well, your father said you'd be coming; we didn't expect you today. I'll show you the way to the small house."

She started walking toward the door and Monique followed her.

"Monsieur Leblanc has been taking care of the house. You can be sure that everything is in its place."

When the girl still had not said a word, she added, "Aren't you going to be lonely, here?"

"I need a quiet place; I must finish some writing."

"Are you a teacher, Monique?"

"I will be finished with my training in about a year, July 1952."

The woman shielded her face from the sun and pointed her arm.

"Go back in the direction the bus just came from. After you've passed the last house, you'll see a wrought-iron crucifix on a stone pedestal. It marks the dirt path that forks off the main road. The house is on that path and Leblanc's villa is

about fifty yards beyond, up the footpath. He'll be in his workshop around the back; you can get the key from him."

Madame Broussard took Monique's hand.

"I'm glad you're here, among us, Monique. Anything you need, let me know."

The grass had been recently trimmed. The cement square in front of the door was swept clean. Even the windowsills were free of dust. The house looked as if someone had just closed the shutters before going shopping. Isolated enough for solitude and quiet, yet close enough to the village for an easy walk to the bakery and grocery store. *That's just what I need.* After looking all around the house, Monique stepped back on the path to the 'villa' as Madame Broussard called it. It was not a large home. Made of beautiful white stone, probably extracted from a local quarry, the roof, in contrast, was not of the usual blue slate but covered with red tiles like those she had seen in Paris, the only time she had gone to visit her grandmother and great aunt Célesta. As she approached the house, the scent of fresh sawdust brought a sharp tang to her heart. A clear image of her father leaning on his workbench steadily sculpting the handles of the pushcart he'd made to bring the bags of potatoes from the fields--that was years ago, before she went away to school--formed in her mind. She stood quietly for a moment,

listening to the two-tone singsong of the saw: one forward, firm and biting, then the return, soft and light.

The back opening of Leblanc's workshop was as large as that of a church door and shaped like an arch. The two opened halves rested against the wall. She remembered that, as a young child, she would stand by the door of her father's much smaller workshop, pretending that she was on the threshold of a magic forest. She hoped that Leblanc wouldn't see her right away. On the right, leaning against the wall, floor to ceiling, were two large planks, fleshy, of different shades, the smoothness of which called for the hand's touch. The cases built along one side of the workbench contained the tools of different shapes and sizes, the tools she knew well. She recognized the lathe, the planes with edges varying from thick to razor-thin, the tips for gouges, the smallest of which, used to sculpt decorative lines, was no bigger than the head of a pin.

How patient her father had been when she asked again and again the names of the tools. Often, she remembered them, just wanted to hear the sound of the words as he said them. That was before, before he became distant and preoccupied, before the middle of the war, when she was still a child.

Instinctively, she gazed toward the other side of the bench, looking for a large binder like the one in which her father kept his sketches. There was none. Had her father's

decision to accept a safe job at the post office been hard to make? After she'd learned basic elements of art and recognized the quality of his sketches, she had questioned him about his early thoughts for a career, perhaps in the art world. His simple answer had been: "It was not practical."

She moved inside and approached the closest plank, hand extended.

"Don't touch."

The voice, soft, even, stopped her step and increased her heartbeat. When the saw stopped, she faced a tall man, slender, with awry hair nearly the same color as the sawdust. His eyes searched her face. She told him who she was.

"You look amazingly like Célesta; your brown eyes, the way you hold your head to the side; do you have the same name?"

"No, I'm Monique; Monique Bonin."

"Ah, yes, that was his name. Bonin. Marcel Bonin."

"You knew my father?"

"He was going to be my apprentice. That was long ago. Before he married the girl from the domain."

Stupefied, Monique stood still, waiting, she didn't know for what, then she said, "I didn't know."

He may not have heard her or her answer didn't matter.

"You're about my daughter's age."

The words barely reached her ears. She stepped a little closer.

"No," he continued. "She's older than you. The last time she came was two years ago for her mother's funeral, Christmas 1949. She was twenty-four, then."

Leblanc returned to his workbench. Monique waited, wondering if he had forgotten her.

"What is your daughter's name, Monsieur Leblanc?" she said hoping to bring his attention back to her.

"Geneviève. That was her mother's name too, Geneviève. We hoped that she would marry a fellow from around here. Maybe marry young and have boys so I would have time to teach them all I know about wood and cabinetmaking. We made a mistake when we sent her to the Business College in Châteauroux. As soon as she finished her studies, she went off to work in Paris. We didn't see her after that very often. It's a shame."

Monique felt that the last words sounded like thoughts gone over many times, but she was not sure whether he was still talking about his daughter.

"Why didn't you get another apprentice, Monsieur Leblanc, after my father . . . "

"Well, I didn't have enough work during the war years. After that, the young boys left the countryside in a hurry to find fun in Châteauroux or in Paris."

"I understand," she said. "During the war, the movie houses were closed. The dancehalls were closed. There was no music, no light. We lived in darkness and without sounds. I spent most of my leisure time reading. Luckily, the Germans didn't burn all the books."

Leblanc raised his head and stared at her as if what she had just said was incomprehensible. Then he said, "But it's wrong! It's just plain wrong, young people leaving like that. Who's going to do the work around here? I'm not getting any younger. People will have to go far to get their furniture made; or buy the ready-made furniture you're beginning to see in the stores. Ah! Shoddy work that is, shoddy work. Disrespect for the wood. I won't stand for it."

Monique remained quiet till she saw softness return to the wood worker's eyes. He left the workbench, walked to the wall and removed a long metal key from a hook.

"Everything is in order at the small house."

A sense of guilt that she was disturbing something or someone spread over her. Her voice rose. "I brought what I need with me. My father will put my typewriter on the bus in a few days."

He stood close to her.

"Monsieur Leblanc, how long does it take to know wood so well that your hand immediately reaches for the right board

without thinking? How long does it take to produce one beautiful piece of furniture right after another?"

"You learn not to worry about time. Little by little your hand gets used to the feel of the wood and puts its own nuance on the surface." His voice had gotten strong; she waited to hear more. "Your tools truly become your friends," he continued. "They drive your skill, let you mold the wood, sculpt it as you wish. You get in the habit of it."

She noticed that his thumb was thick and knotty but his fingers were surprisingly nimble and slender.

"I admire your love of wood, Monsieur Leblanc; when you smooth it, rub it, sculpt it, it must feel as if you were bringing new life into it."

He looked at her, held her eyes, but did not respond. She turned to leave.

"When you visit the church again," he called after her, "take time to look at the side panels on some of the benches. Your father sculpted them. And the stalls were built and sculpted by my father. When I was but a boy I spent a lot of time in his workshop before he allowed me to start using the tools. You have to get in the habit."

She walked toward the small house, head bent, humbled, discouraged. Her manuscript needed a lot of work. How did she think she could do this, writing a novel? Poor Paul! Did he

really read all the short stories she'd written and sent him? Knight stories, animal stories. Later detective and romance stories. *He probably did.* She promised herself to apologize in her next letter. Leblanc's last words, "You have to get in the habit," comforted her a little. *Yes, she would rewrite, practice until she'd gotten into the habit of it.*

Suddenly a shower pierced clouds that had shown no sign of darkening when she walked to the villa. She had left her bag on a bench on the side of the house and worried that her manuscript would get wet. Then she worried about the long, heavy key in her right hand. The door might not open. Even though she'd been assured the house had been kept up, it had been vacant for a long time. Was there a shed where she could get shelter? She didn't notice one when she first saw the house. She bent against a sudden gust of wind. Her dress was wet, her feet cold inside her muddy shoes. She grabbed her bag from the bench and dropped it at the door. Awkwardly she inserted the key, leaned her shoulder against the door ready to push hard but the key turned smoothly in the lock and the door opened as if an invisible hand had pulled it from the inside. Some leaves pushed their way inside the doorway and rested on the shiny reddish tiles.

Monique opened the shutters. The sun had retreated behind the clouds that brought the sudden rain shower, and only a

meager light entered the room. The yellow rush seats of the chairs around the square oak table were the only bright color in the room. A dark armoire took up most of the width of the wall. The skin gave her a shudder of pleasure as she opened the doors. She gasped as she saw stacks of linen, neatly arranged, freshly pressed, whiter than snow. With the tips of her fingers, she removed two towels and a blanket feeling guilty again, feeling that she had trespassed upon lives, gone, whose spirits had been carefully kept. Slowly, she brought the doors of the armoire back together.

While she dried herself near the opened window, she pulled paper and pens out of her bag and placed them on the small table under the windowsill. *There won't be much working space left when the typewriter is on it.* She pushed the binder containing the manuscript inside the drawer of the table without opening it. Tonight she wanted to write to Paul. He'd said in his last letter that he'd be in Bourges until the end of the month. Maybe he could come and spend a few days here, before going to *La Bauderie*. He spent every August there. Couldn't they go together this year, from Fley? So many times before their plans had been thwarted. She imagined the bushes full of black currants, raspberries and gooseberries, peach tree branches bending under the weight of the fruit. The month of fruits,

Paul had called August. She imagined the air full of the mixed scents.

She picked up her pen and wrote a very short letter: *I want you to come and meet Fley and the spirits. Then we can leave for La Bauderie from here. I want to see Jean and you and your Mom Lisette again, and I want to pick the peaches off the trees and help Lisette with the canning.*

After folding and placing the piece of paper on the upper corner of the small table until she could mail it the next day, she looked for a place to hang her two skirts. She found a rod behind a curtain in the small bedroom furnished with a high bed. Behind another curtain of the same yellow calico were a wash basin and a toilet. *Barely minimum, but not much smaller than my room at the university.* She returned to the main room and settled in the big chair next to the darkened fireplace, her legs folded under her and the blanket covering her knees. She was comfortable here and could even doze off.

The metal shutters folded neatly against the window jambs and Monique wondered why she didn't think, last night, that this modern replacement of the usual flat wooden shutters was odd. Wouldn't it have bothered Leblanc? Maybe it had. From a distant farm, a rooster screamed. It was barely past five o'clock but she'd always been up early. Dressed only in her nightgown, she

stepped outside. A lovely patch of emerald green grass covered the tiny yard and the bench on which she'd left her bag the day before was an inviting place for sitting and reading. But now, she had to work.

In her mind the words were knocking over each other, and she put them down on the yellow-lined pad as fast as she could. She'd been working more than two hours when she heard the Rat-tat-tat of a motorized bicycle. She watched Leblanc lower the kickstand of the machine and turn the ignition off as he waved to her.

"This crate came in last night on the workers' bus. Marguerite Broussard sent word but I thought you'd probably be sleeping. Where do you want this? I'll set it up for you right now if you want."

"Right here, on this table, please. Will you have some coffee? I saw some in the pantry."

The wood worker removed pliers from his belt and pried the slats open, easily, rapidly while talking to Monique.

"Yes, I don't mind some coffee. There are preserves, too."

"Monsieur Leblanc, you keep this little house as if you waited for someone to return any moment."

"Well, Célesta writes to me, you know. We always thought she would come back to the domain's farmhouse after the war, but I guess she couldn't deal with . . .how everything changed . . ."

.Have you seen those ugly apartment buildings that have been put up on the North side of the village? Cement boxes is what they are . . . ”

Monique busied herself preparing the coffee over the hot plate. She watched the labyrinth of the electric element turning slowly from gray to red-hot. When he spoke again, Leblanc's agitation had subsided.

“This house, that's all that's left here of Célesta . . . ” The voice trailed off then came back as if from a dream. “But now . . . you've come.”

“The garden in the back. You keep it up too, don't you Monsieur Leblanc?”

He followed her thought.

“I take my time reading my paper, and I smoke a pipe before dinner.”

Nothing more was said till he finished his coffee. He put his flat hat, his *casquette*, on his head and headed out toward the back of the house. Monique picked up her pen and started writing again but it was useless. The images that had been in her mind were gone. She closed the binder, returned it to the drawer, pulled a pair of boots from her bag and walked fast across the yard, toward the nearest path. Soon it became but a narrow line dividing fields of wheat as far as the eye could see. The whole countryside seemed to have taken on the blond,

golden hue of the wheat. Yesterday's rain must have interrupted the harvest. Sheaves of wheat were lined alongside the edges of fields. Silence. A fear of disturbing edges, leaves on low branches, blades of grass underfoot, quieted her step. She walked a long time till she arrived at a field where an empty wagon, shafts resting on the brown, rich earth, reminded her of an Angelus landscape. But where did the people go? The absence of any human disturbance gave her again the odd feeling of guilt. Did she intrude also here in total nature? Anxiety seized her at the sight of the wide expanse of solitude. No life was near; neither beast nor man was in sight. Yet she began looking about watchfully. The air smelled of humid, damp straw mingled with a scent of honey and bark. In the distance a luminous ray thin as a needle pierced a tree.

When she arrived back at the house, Leblanc was standing by the door holding a basket of gleaming red and green lettuce.

"Here's your salad for lunch," he said.

"Please stay, Monsieur Leblanc, I would love to hear more about your daughter. What does she look like?"

He removed his muddy shoes by the door, entered in his stocking feet, sat at the table and started talking.

"She's a brunette. She was a pretty child, like her mother, looks like her a lot. In one of her last letters, she said she was engaged and might come to visit soon."

"That's wonderful news."

"We'll see. She's been engaged before. Is it quiet enough for you to write here?"

"Oh, yes. I like to write in the morning. Thank you for setting up the typewriter for me."

He turned toward the table, gazed at the pens and yellow pad, the few books on the floor, and said, "Did you always like words?"

Surprised, she couldn't answer right away.

"You must come to the shop tomorrow afternoon," he said. "There's a piece I want to show you, and I'll introduce you to the school teacher and his family. It's his house you probably saw standing in a field not far from mine. They're my nearest neighbors."

The next day Leblanc greeted her at the door with a wide smile.

"What are you so happy about, Monsieur Leblanc?"

"My daughter telephoned Marguerite Broussard and left a message."

Monique looked on both sides of the shop.

"No, I don't have the telephone. She'll be here in a few days and is bringing her fiancé. I have to hurry up and build her hope chest so they can take it back with them. I'm going to

use that walnut plank you almost stained with your finger. Do you see how beautifully veined it is? It was cut at least seven years ago, not too close to the bark and not too close to the heart. Working with this beautiful wood, well, it gives me great pleasure. I can't wait to let my hands get the feel of it."

He leaned on his workbench and again seemed to forget Monique standing there. For a long time, her gaze rested on a lowboy of exquisite proportions and symmetry. Sun rays shined on it obliquely. Was it the piece he had wanted to show her? She heard the dimmed sound of the village's bell. It must be nearly four o'clock, she thought. The only movement in the shop was the rhythmic pushing and bending of the woodworker's arm.

Quietly, she turned away and headed back toward the house. On the path, bluish rays were cutting the foliage of the oaks. The tranquility and immutability of the nature around her held her senses. As she neared the house, she saw a boy, eight or nine years old sitting on the small bench. He got up as she approached.

"I live in the house next to Monsieur Leblanc. My mother wants to know if you'll come to dinner tomorrow night."

"You know, I have not had a really well-cooked meal since . . . well, in a long time. Tell your parents, 'thank you' and I'll see you then. What is your name?"

"Jacques. Jacques Martin."

A young woman dressed in a sleeveless white dress stepped down from her house to a narrow walkway lined with blue hydrangeas to meet Monique.

"Thank you for coming. It's so very seldom that we have visitors, especially young visitors."

"Isn't your family here in Fley," asked Monique as the two women walked into the house darkened against the heat by the closed shutters.

"Oh, no, we're from Orléans. My husband's first teaching post was in Châteauroux in 1942."

Bernard Martin was slicing a roast while his young son raised his eyes from the table now and then to observe Monique. She smiled at him broadly and asked of his father, "How long did you stay in Châteauroux?"

"Just a few months, till I was very nearly sent to Germany. The Germans wanted to send as many teachers away as possible, mindful that teachers are known to spread ideas. One man saved me."

Because the faces around the table were looking up at him, waiting, it seemed to him, he continued.

"I had orders to board a train for the North of France. An older teacher at the school told me to escape. 'They're really

sending you to Germany. To work in a factory.' Those were his words."

"Papa, what did you do?"

"That teacher put me in contact with a person who gave me instructions. I was to go to the railroad depot and enter the quay at exactly 9:17; the time is etched in my memory forever. There a postal worker was to meet me and I was to do as he said."

"Did you do that, Papa?"

"Yes. Every minute I wondered what I'd do if the man didn't show up. But he did and within what seemed not more than seconds I was hiding in a postal wagon loaded with bags of mail."

The boy had stopped staring at Monique and his eyes, round and wide with astonishment, watched his father.

"You're a hero, Papa."

"Oh, no, Son. I was very scared. I was to slip out on the other side of the rail track at the postal man's signal. I asked his name. 'No name,' he said. The mailbags were hiding me. Maybe my hesitation was putting both our lives in danger. Anyhow I think the man pushed me. When he bent down I saw a badge on his shirt. I only caught the first part of the name: Marcel. I fell rather than jumped and landed on a horny shrub."

"Did you hurt yourself, Papa?"

"I just went around the bush, my feet found the path the man mentioned and I began running. I couldn't think of anything; I just ran a long time. Finally when I stopped I realized that my hands were hurting. I brought them to my face and felt some blood; but they were just scratches."

Monique put her fork and knife down and picked up her glass. *What did Martin just say?* But the man continued speaking.

"After I arrived here, in Fley, I hid in a room above the café for a couple of days, then Madame Broussard asked if I would teach the children because their school had been closed. Classes met in the barns of different farms. I hope that I managed to teach some basics to the children; that lasted for more than a year."

Monique had regained some composure and asked Martin, "So the postal worker would not give you his name?"

"That's right; I didn't insist."

As soon as she could, Monique got up and said she'd be getting on the early bus in the morning as she needed books from the library, and she added mostly to herself, "And I need to talk with my father."

"But the early bus . . . it takes the workers to the factories. Some are rough men; you'll be the only woman," Martin said.

"I must go."

An approaching storm had darkened the sky. In the trees, the birds had become silent and the leaves motionless. Lightning sent long needles of red and yellow through the sky, far in the distance uncovering the tips of a forest. The rumblings of thunder seemed to come from everywhere running toward each other, meeting with great roars. Words of anger built and fought in her mind, in her heart, as she walked faster and faster. *All these years, he let me think . . . I've hated him at times.* On the verge of the path bramble and shrubbery huddled together awaiting, as the land itself, the burst that would trigger the rain. A large drop fell on Monique's arm; more drops fell on the ground, furrowing in the dust. She began to run and as the last clasp of thunder fractured the air, a great cheer came from deep within her and she began to sing at the top of her voice into the wild wind.

She found her father preparing a row in the small back garden for spreading parsley seed. He spoke only when she was finished describing her dinner with Bernard Martin and his family.

"It would have been unsafe to tell you or anyone," he said in answer to her last question. "I didn't even tell your mother. Madame Broussard, the lady from the bus depot, she was

the contact when we were sending someone; her code name was Solange. Quite a few young men slept in her attic a night or two before moving on."

"Do you remember this man . . .? "

"No. I avoided looking at their faces."

"And Aunt Célesta?"

"Thérèse was her code name. After her domain was set on fire, word came from England that she should not remain at Fley. She was unsafe even in her grandmother's house, where you are staying, and the safety of our other contacts would have been compromised as well."

"But after the war, father, why didn't you say anything?"

"Ah, it was over; I just wanted to experience being alive without being afraid for my family and for myself. Anyway, have you ever known me to make speeches?"

The parsley seeds slid along the fingers and were dropped evenly in the narrow trench.

During the few days she spent with her family, Monique's mind again became filled with doubts about her manuscript. *Is this what I want to write about, a romance with the enemy my father could have lost his life resisting? Perhaps some day, but it's too soon.*

There was a note from Paul waiting for her when she returned to Fley. He was thanking her for offering to help with the picking of the fruit: There's always the possibility of a sudden hail storm destroying the harvest; the more hands available, the faster it can be brought in and saved from damage. She knew he meant to say: "I'm glad you're coming."

Monique was so happy that she decided to go visit Leblanc; the hope chest would be nearly finished.

Chips were flying all around. From the door she could see the left side of a handsomely carved chest. Leblanc was holding an axe and tearing into the right side of the chest. She let out a scream.

"Monsieur Leblanc, wait, what are you doing, what is happening?"

The shrill of her voice surprised him; he stopped.

"She is not coming. They got married already, in Paris. She wants modern furniture, ready-made. A hope chest is old fashioned, she does not want it. Well, she'll get it anyway. I'm sending it to her. See! I nailed this white pine case together in minutes. And now I'm filling it with the chest, see!"

With armfuls he filled the white pine case with a litter of chips. And he began to chant, "Shoddy work, shoddy work."

Monique tried to move closer to him but he turned and said, "Get out of here, get out!"

Paul and Monique walked the same path she followed the first day she arrived. The land was naked now. From time to time, a bird bent his wings downward and quickly picked up a seed. In the distance a silhouette was walking away from them in the direction of the wood.

"It looks like Leblanc," Monique said. Let's see if we can talk to him. At the bakery, this morning, someone said he closed the big doors of his shop and told the teacher he would do no more work."

Paul glanced at Monique.

"Changes are coming too fast for certain people. It may be unbearable for this man as you described him to me."

"Yes," she said, slowing her step.

"Does this have anything to do with your decision to leave your novel aside for the time being?"

"I think so," she said, excitement returning to her face. "I know for certain that the voice in my mind now is that of another age, that other age I was given the chance to spy on."

Paul thought that Monique's eyes were particularly luminous in the evening light. He moved closer and pushed a strand of

hair away from her face. "Tell me more about the voice," he said softly.

"It's the voice that resonated from the sanctuary of wheat fields I walked on, on that first silent July day. It's the voice from a small house whose past inhabitants I am a part of, who left the mark of their lives in a grand armoire for me. It's the voice from a master craftsman who may not have known he was teaching me. The spirit of this place, as it has touched my soul, is the story I must write now."

"But not before you come with me to *La Bauderie*."

"Returning to *La Bauderie* with you is part of the story, Paul. It's part of the story."

Chapter II

Portrait of a *Grand-mère*

July 1925

A July evening. People lingering outdoors well into the night. In the sky all the stars were just been born and the frogs celebrated loudly in the sleepy water of the pond. Lisette and her grandmother had placed their high-backed chairs outside on each side of the door. Each was eating strawberries from a bowl in her lap. That afternoon, Lisette had carefully checked the patch.

"It's the last of them, there's not even one late green one left."

"They've been plentiful this year," the grandmother said.

A bat flew by silently, grazed the wall and disappeared toward the garden. The grandmother put her bowl on the ground and leaned back a little against the wall, resting her hands on her knees within the folds of her large black skirt. Soon, she would be eighty years old. Years had not bent her body. Tall, the tallest woman in her village, her back was still straight as a shaft. Like her body, her face was thin and long. Weather-tanned skin, wrinkled and dried, highlighted the pale blue of her eyes.

Today, July 17, 1925, was a special day for the grandmother: Lisette, her granddaughter, was thirteen years

old. The old woman thought that it didn't seem so long ago when she brought the little girl to come live with her. Till that day she had expected nothing from others but what she gave: care for the animals and for the few objects one owned and treasured, respect for property of others and her own, work. After Lisette came, it had been different: the child had needed schooling, playmates, doctoring the few times she had been sick, attending church regularly. The grandmother understood that more persons would matter now, that others would become part of Lisette's life.

This morning, she'd pulled from her armoire a fresh summer blouse Lisette had worn on her last birthday. It was too tight and the sleeves were too short. Lisette had laughed and left the room to go prepare their breakfast but the old woman had remained standing in place, holding the garment against her chest, wondering at the fast pace of the years behind, worrying about the time ahead. What future was there for Lisette here, among the rocks of Tulac and the few neighboring farms? She'd heard that young sons and daughters had left for the larger villages. What if she died next month or in six months? Who would care for her Lisette still so innocent? She felt angry at the sudden thought of her death. She knew she would carry her love for Lisette to her grave. Would her granddaughter's grief be unbearable? And would her loneliness? Was there someone with

a generous heart capable of sheltering her, of forgetting itself for the well being of her Lisette? A thin light crossed the dark thoughts of the old woman. Perhaps there was, perhaps there was.

"*Grand-mère* are you crying?"

"Of course not, child, it's just the eyes of an old woman tearing."

"Were you thinking about my mother? Was she pretty?"

"She was. You looked a lot like her. As you grow older, though, your face reminds me of your father. Now that you are thirteen, you'll want company. You'll want to visit your cousins, and think of your future."

"*Grand-mère*, all I need is you; I never want to leave you. Would you leave me, *grand-mère*, would you?"

"I will never leave you as long as you need me and there's a breath in me."

The old woman fell into the silence she liked best. Lisette, knowing that her grandmother was not going to say any more, picked up the bowls and went inside the house. The window was opened to the night. The young girl listened to its sounds. She imagined that she heard footsteps. "It must be Germain," she thought. A newlywed couple lived in the house next to her grandmother's. The young bride was just a few years older than Lisette and friendship grew quickly between them. Claudine

simply smiled when Lisette, curious, asked questions. What is it like to be married? What is a husband? Lisette had not yet met Germain. At the beginning of the summer, the young man had hired himself to work at a farm some distance away and returned home late at night. But it was not a footstep she heard. Soon she clearly distinguished the click clank sounds of a bicycle and stepped quickly outside of the house, her heart beating a little faster. What could bring someone here at this hour? Her grandmother was already standing by the roadway whitened by the dust of summer.

"Denis, did you come all the way from your place on this machine?"

"Yes, Mère Landry. Daylight was barely cracking when I left."

Although two years older than her granddaughter, Denis was not much taller than Lisette but he was strong with a wide face and powerful hands, now resting on the handlebar. The grandmother was remembering two children fighting over stolen blueberries and hazelnuts one of them had spent the whole afternoon picking. She read on the boy's face his memory of the tomboy who used to stick her tongue out at him as he stared at the young girl now standing quietly next to her. The parents and grandparents of these two children used to live in her village. The Basson family. Eleven children and she had known

all of them when they were small. She saw them move away, one after the other, not caring very much about the exodus, till one took her only daughter with him.

Standing now in her yard was a son of the last of the Basson boys to leave the village. He left after his wife died. Vincent was his name. The grandmother had not known the wife, knew only that she'd been ill maybe a few short weeks, or maybe for a long time and no one thought of calling the doctor until it was too late. He'd moved forty-five kilometers east of Tulac to take over the management of the lands and cattle of a manor called Bois-Chauds near the village of Villars. The old woman had heard that Céleste, one of the sisters, had gone to live with the family to take care of the household.

"Denis, is everyone all right in your family?"

"Yes, Mère Landry. I have a message for you and Lisette from my father."

"Well, if no one is sick, it can wait. You'll eat something, and we'll talk about it in the morning."

"Feels like a long time since I finished my last piece of bread and lying down sounds awfully good. My legs ache and if it had not been for the full moon, I'd be lost by now."

"Come inside, then."

The boy hesitated. "I'll have to leave at dawn, though. I wouldn't want to disturb you this early."

The grandmother understood that he was going to say tonight what he had come to say. Till the dishes were cleared and put away, she wouldn't ask anything.

"That domain, my father took over when we left here, is bigger than anyone thought. There's so much work; we're never done. We need you, Mère Landry. Aunt Céleste, she never stops; Père is worried about her. You could be a real good help and maybe Lisette could help her with my two brothers. Albert is nine now, and Louis is seven. They're a handful."

Denis paused, trying to remember everything he had been told to say.

"Might be good for Lisette to have company too; now that she's almost grown up.

Except for the narrow strip of light that the lamp threw on the table, it was dark in the big room. Denis's voice had dropped slightly. The grandmother ignored the trace of redness rising on the boy's face and let him continue with his explanation.

"There are always people at Bois-Chauds, coming and going. Especially when it's time to cut and bring in the hay. Harvesting the wheat is even more work, but exciting too."

When Denis didn't say: "I wish Lisette was there," the grandmother just looked in his eyes. She remained seated and listened without putting in a word till it looked like Denis was

completely finished speaking. Then she turned her head toward the night seeming to look for an answer in the darkness.

So that's what it had been about; the dark thoughts she had had earlier; about a different tomorrow for Lisette and for herself. Maybe leaving *La Roche* forever. No, not so soon. It couldn't be so soon.

She had known no other place but *La Roche* since the day of her marriage. The house, the fields around it, the barn, the animals, belonged to her. The traditions of the village, the fairs, the church services, she followed them and attended them specially since Lisette came to live with her.

"You know that I cannot leave my house, Denis. I have to take care of my goats, you understand, and I don't know when they'll be bringing in my harvest. You understand, I can't leave like that."

Denis waited. He had been told to expect objections.

"Lisette, she'll be treated just like she was a daughter. And as I said, Aunt Céleste could use help in the house, taking care of all these people. But you wouldn't have to do a thing if you didn't want to. Or you could just take the animals to pasture, if you liked. It would be just like you want."

"We'll talk about that again. I have to go see when Roland Binet can ring in the oats."

She got up and went out. But she didn't go see her neighbor. Instead she took the path that descended toward the fields. She walked slowly, head bent, paying no mind to the darkness.

Even though time had passed so quickly, it had been nearly ten years since she brought Lisette to her home. She had seen her only once before, as a newborn. Her daughter had died giving her birth but her son-in-law insisted on raising the baby himself. A few years later, when the news came that the young father was seriously ill, she asked simply: *Is he going to die?* She could never call him anything other than "he." It's not that she disliked her son-in-law particularly, he had taken her daughter away, that was all. So, for the second time, she left the promontory above the *Creuse* River where her farmhouse and a few others were gathered. Her hand clasped the metal handles of a large black bag, the need for which she was not sure of, and walked the fourteen kilometers to Crozant where her daughter had lived.

When she returned, she had a little child with her, a girl who held the rough hand and looked up toward a face beyond reach, hidden under a black kerchief. She tried to continue with her life as it had gone on before. She crossed the village with her goats, barely acknowledging the greeting of men and women, most of whom she had known since they were born. Only

now, there was always a child following just behind her heels. Sometimes, as the two of them pushed the goats among thickets, they came across two or three women from the village gathered in the shade of a grove, their sewing on their laps. The women called to the grandmother. Unless one of them was of her generation, and few of them were left in the village, she said no more than a word or two and continued on her solitary path followed by the little girl. To Lisette, she didn't say many more words than she said to the village women, except during the long winter evenings when darkness came early. Then she would gather the child in her lap and tell her the old fairy tales filled with princesses whose long dresses swept the mosses of enchanted woods.

Those times, not Denis's proposition--she wouldn't think of that yet--filled the old woman's mind as she descended the path lower and lower into the valley and her eyes filled with tears.

When she came back to *La Roche*, two hours later, Lisette was sleeping in the big bed they shared, and Denis had found a blanket and soft hay in the barn. But if they had waited for her return, they would have seen on her face no trace of the tears she had shed.

Denis was just an awkward boy the last time the grandmother saw him. In the bright morning light she looked at him. *He's a*

man now. She kissed him and he threw his leg over his bicycle. As if he had read her thought, he said suddenly: "I'm master teamster now."

Grand-mère cut large slices from the round loaf of country bread for breakfast and Lisette poured the black coffee in the porcelain bowls.

"I wouldn't mind visiting my Uncle Vincent and my cousins for a while, *Grand-mère*. We could go after the harvest is completely in. There's not much to do after that for a while."

"You heard what Denis had to say. They want us to move there permanently. We wouldn't be visiting. You'd work hard from dawn to dusk."

Lisette looked up in the face of her grandmother uncomprehending. Didn't she do now what work needed to be done? And didn't she still have time to climb the high rocks and sit and watch for a long time the birds flying below, the silver ribbon of the river, and listen for a change in the wind?

"Is it very far, *Grand'mère*. Have you ever been there?"

"Once. When I was just a bride. Some of my husband's family lived in a farm near there."

"Did you like it there, *Grand'mère*?"

"The lands around the manor, they run all the way to the edge of the forest. I remember some dark woods."

For a week after Denis's visit, the old woman went about her tasks even more taciturn than usual. The torment in her mind could be seen on her face. Sometimes a sudden brightness appeared in the blue eyes, the step became a little faster. Sometimes the long face looked sadder. The village women had noticed and talked among themselves; none dared to talk to the old woman directly.

Finally, there were no more times when the blue eyes sparkled. One night she told Lisette: "You need to be around people your age. I'm going to send word that we'll go when they can come get us."

Two weeks later, early one morning, two wagons, each drawn by a heavy black horse, pulled in front of the house in Tulac. The oak table and benches, the big bed, the straw-seat chairs, one armoire, all were loaded in one carriage. The doors and the shutters were closed and the locks were checked twice. Lisette sat atop the table, her heart filled with joyful anticipation. The grandmother sat in the other carriage, her three goats gathered around her.

Lisette had left the village only once since coming to live with her grandmother. That was when she had accompanied her to a funeral.

"You didn't know my brother," the old woman said after she received the notice of his death, "but I want you to come with me. We'll have to stay overnight."

"It's far, then, *Grand'mère*?"

"No farther than Crozant where you were born but the road to Gargillesse, where he lived, forks off in another direction."

For Lisette it had meant a trip and she had been excited. She found that there were more houses in Gargillesse than in Tulac, that the rocks were bigger with more places to hide, and the Creuse River was wider. She saw men fishing from boats. She had liked the church. It was larger and had many more decorations than the one in Tulac; it had reminded her of the image of a castle she'd seen in a book of fairy tales.

Once the wagons began to move, Lisette expected that they would take the same road and almost anticipated the sound she'd heard on her first trip, the slow tolling of the church's bells, when they reached the crossroads. But Denis turned the carriages sharply to the right. The road was descending and descending and, occasionally, was lined by dark woods Lisette did not know the names of. Once the woods were behind them, there were blond, freshly harvested fields on each side of the road. Sometimes Denis left the first wagon and walked back to the second horse, taking its bridle as if to encourage it. The

flight of pigeons in the fields, the sound of the wheels on the narrow road, Denis's step, all this was beautiful. Lisette was forgetting the sadness of her grandmother, the sadness she had guessed when she saw her closing the barn, and closing the door of the small house.

They rode for hours on the narrow road without seeing another carriage or another person. Sometimes they saw, faraway, the glittering roof of a farm house. After the short time, when they stopped to rest and eat, the wagons turned onto an asphalt road. It was lined on both sides by elms. Toward the horizon Lisette saw thick forests. Denis turned toward her, "We're getting close to Bois-Chauds." Soon Lisette saw a stone wall on her left between the ditch and the tall trees. It was a low wall, of uneven stones, covered in places with ivy. The wall seemed to follow the advancing carriages until it met a huge gate of black metal. Through it Lisette caught sight of a white building. *This must be the manor.* Past the gate, the low wall followed the road again until it stopped abruptly as the carriages entered into an alley lined with wild chestnut trees. After another sharp turn, the carriages stopped in the courtyard of a farmhouse. A man came and helped Lisette off the carriage.

"Don't you recognize your uncle? And this is Aunt Céleste, your father's sister and mine."

"She was too little the last time she saw me," said the woman.

To Lisette, Aunt Céleste seemed old. Younger in years than her grandmother, Lisette knew that, but looking old just the same. She was, however, much shorter. Tiny really. In her face . . . in her face was something very soft. She wore a white kerchief over her hair, but her skirt was also full with folds and black like Grand-mère's. Lisette thought that she was meeting a new life. Her grandmother was not as appreciative of the uncle and aunt's welcome. She was not related to them. But her own daughter had married the brother of the man and woman who would now take care of her Lisette. Could there be any human being closer to her?

"The land's mighty flat around here," she said.

She meant to say that this place was not her place and they shouldn't expect her to forget her village above the *Creuse* River. They understood that, but pretended to take no notice.

"It'll be easier walking around here," said Vincent.

Aunt Céleste took the grandmother's elbow and walked with her to the house. Lisette, left alone in the yard, surrounded by the furniture left on the ground, held the three goats by the rope and felt dizzy.

Chapter III

The New Boy

June 1925-July 1926

Georges observed the moving van's maneuvers as it edged closer to the sidewalk and thought of the day his mother was brought to the apartment after her release from the sanatorium. She'd walked along the walls, touching them, then quickly removing her hand from the faded paper, recrimination in her eyes, while his father stood still, head lowered. Of the farm implements business he'd built up, nothing was left. The pretty house with the nice garden had been sold also. His family was reduced to poverty.

Georges didn't remember how long they'd been living in the shabby apartment--maybe a year, maybe more--when his father left the family. On a rare sunny day when the last of winter's snow was melting, he said goodbye and left carrying just a change of clothes and a spare pair of shoes in the sack that hung from his shoulder. "I have to find work," he said. That was all.

To Georges's astonishment, his father returned just two months later and said: "I've bought a farm, near the village of Villars. I've been working as a day worker in the farms around there." Neither his son nor his wife said anything. His gaze resting heavily on his wife's face, searching, he added: "it's a

quiet place, you'll like it Madeleine, you'll see. You'll be able to grow roses again."

That night he explained how he found the farm.

"I was leaving the farm where I'd been hired for two days. It was a Sunday morning, and I wanted to buy tobacco. The nearest village was Villars."

"But Papa, we've always lived in the city. I don't want to live on a farm and the school year isn't finished yet."

"It'll be all right, son, let me tell you." And the father continued.

"I got to the square when the church's bells were ringing. People approached in small groups. I moved with them but I didn't want to go in. There was a bench near the steps."

Georges's mother looked at her son then at her husband. "I am completely unsuited for life on a farm, you know that."

"But Madeleine, this small, dingy apartment . . . I'll make you a garden."

She lowered her gaze and he continued: ""Near the bench, there was a board with some announcements. One caught my eye. I remember every word." And he recited: "*La Bauderie*--house, barn, three fields, fruit trees, poor condition, terms negotiable."

His wife repeated, "poor condition . . ."

"I'll fix it. Georges and I, we'll fix it. I went to look at it. The same day. I spent the night in the barn."

"There's a barn?" The question was Georges's only sign of any interest.

"Yes. Part of the roof is missing. The exposed laths made me think of ribs. But it can be repaired. It can be repaired."

"So, we're moving there?" Georges was not completely sure he'd understood his father. His mother had not added a word.

Georges watched as his family's belongings were being loaded in the moving van. Hoping to reserve for himself the seat next to the window, he stood by the passenger door reading the painted inscription again and again, *Messageries Du Berry*. So it was final. They were really moving to the country, to a farm.

The back panel of the truck was slammed shut.

"Georges, get in first," his father said. "Sit on that box behind the driver, there's only room for your mother and me on the front seat."

With a sort of lenient affection, farmers from the surrounding area considered the new arrivals harmless, inexperienced strangers. What could they know about farming?

They weren't from around these parts, people recognized that. Even their name was strange. Timbalier. They'd taken over the old Belliau farm, *La Bauderie*. It had been vacant for a long time, years maybe, no one could remember. It was a small farm, too small an acreage, men said, to ever be profitable, but large enough, in a good year, to sustain a small family. The man had asked for help and it had been willingly given to him. The woman was pale, a narrow person, blond with dreamy gray eyes, unsuited, women said, for the hard work of a farm. Their boy--thirteen or fourteen years old--looked like his mother.

Of the farm's three fields, one had produced wheat till old Belliau died, and one had always been left in grass to accommodate a cow. Oats had been grown on the other because the Belliaus used to have horses. The house was small, but the roomy barn, back of the house, had been the envy of many farmers. Unfortunately, the roof had been neglected for a long time.

When school opened in October following the summer of the family's arrival, the boy was enrolled in Mademoiselle Bernard's class. She was in charge of the older boys, ten to fourteen-year olds. With large doses of warnings, she prepared the seniors for the end of their studies and the award of the

diploma which would take place in July following the exit exam, the dreaded *Certificat d'Etudes*.

"Only those of you with superior achievements will be eligible for the prizes." The prizes were hardcover books with gilded edges by authors read during the year in literature class.

A few days after Georges had been enrolled in her class, Mademoiselle Bernard called on him: "Is Brazil in North or South America?"

"I don't care."

"So, our new student does not know on which continent Brazil is," said Mademoiselle Bernard in the pitch of voice she reserved for expressing her most extreme contempt.

"I know but I don't care."

"You will have to work very hard, Timbalier, to catch up with this class."

Georges understood that, as a result of his provocation, Mademoiselle Bernard would design obstacles to trip him and he resolved to learn his lessons so well that he could always refute her strategies. Occasionally, when Mademoiselle asked a question of the class, Georges would raise his arm, but she never called on him. Someone watching him as he lowered his arm would have noticed a curling of his lower lip.

His written compositions were returned to him with so many red marks that he readily understood their intent to overpower and discourage his writing. When the days were fine and games were organized in the schoolyard, Georges spent the recreation time watching from the sidelines because Mademoiselle Bernard could never find a position for him. Georges never complained. When occasionally her gaze turned to him, he returned it with the same kind of knowing smile as his lips wore when she pretended not to see him in class.

Georges' friendship with Denis Basson grew from their long walk together on their way back to their farms in the afternoon. Most of the other students lived in farms closer to the village or in the village itself. The two boys walked together along the same sandy, dusty lane until they reached the cut-off where Denis had to turn and walk another three kilometers to *Bois-Chauds*. The two boys did not speak much but were comfortable with each other. A week or so after the beginning of school, Denis mentioned Mademoiselle Bernard's strange attitude toward Georges.

"She seems to bait you, Georges. There must be a way to stop this. Next time there's a game, I'll make it a point to stay on the sideline so you can play."

"No, don't. It's okay. I know what she's doing. She won't break me."

Denis was about to say more, but thought Georges's remark was as strange as Mademoiselle's behavior, and that it was best if he didn't add anything.

When the school year came close to the end, the School District Board prepared the exit exam. The official list of results was posted on the office door of the school's director. Georges' grade was the third highest. When Mademoiselle Bernard handed him his diploma, her face was red and her eyes were flashing. She showed no surprise at the smile that lingered on Georges's lips. In past years, there always was a third place prize. But not this year. No gilded book this year to recognize Georges' achievement.

On the way home, Denis tried to compensate for the slight: "Please take this book, Georges, you know I don't like to read."

"Never mind, Denis, it's all right, really. The wheat field is looking really good. The harvest date still holds? You and your folks can still give us a hand?"

"For sure, Georges. I'll see you soon."

The two boys parted and saw each other only occasionally after that.

Chapter IV

Mushrooms

September 1925

Lisette couldn't help feeling that she was seeing the beginning of a beautiful day and was glad that no one else was up yet as she stood in the middle of the yard. This moment could be hers alone. It had rained during the night. At the horizon the line of woods was dark and the hedges were still wet, but the sun was beginning to tear through clouds of white foam, and the scent of flowers was filling the morning air.

Since the day they arrived at Bois-Chauds, Lisette and her grandmother had followed the farm's dawn to dusk rhythm of the harvest work. Endless baskets of food and drinks carried from the house to the fields left Lisette's arms numb and her hands red and burning. Returning to the house, she'd pause to rest against a tree. Her blistered hands let go of the baskets. They dropped to the ground and bounced off. Too soon the fear that her uncle's eyes were watching her interrupted her rest. She recalled the day he surprised her on such a return trip sitting down and dozing off: "The men will be waiting, Lisette, you take too long." He'd picked up one of the baskets and three it, nearly threw it at her, before walking away fast.

Once inside the house, the sight of her grandmother bent in the hearth over steaming pots of food filled her with anger and

sadness. Not once did she hear her uncle say, "Rest a while, *Mère Landry*." Even as others ate, the grandmother continued cooking. After supper, when everyone had gone to get some sleep, it was Lisette who set a lone plate at the huge table for her grandmother. The old woman ate little while Lisette put the clean dishes away.

"Eat some more, *Grand-mère*."

"I'm too tired. I just want to go and lay down."

But it was over now. Tall, handsome stacks of straw lined the entrance of the yard. Lisette's hearing was recovering from the incessant noise of the threshing machine. Now I can get away from Aunt Céleste's 'do this and do that'. I'll find hidden places. Like I did in Tulac. Lisette reentered the house.

"We'll need some eggs," said Aunt Céleste, as Vincent came into the room.

"I'll get them." Lisette picked up a basket and ran into the yard heading first for the back of the house where the blackberry shrubs were. She'd pick a handful, move on to the next shrub, and watch a bird taking off from its hiding place. In the hen house she'd pick a conversation with her favorite hen: "how many do you have for me today, *chère madame*?"

"Lisette takes an awful long time to do the smallest thing you ask her to do," Vincent remarked to his sister.

"Sometimes, I just as soon do it myself."

"Céleste, you've got to tell her grandmother. Lisette has to learn the ways of work."

"I mentioned it to Louise as nicely as I could, Vincent."

"And?"

"She said that, since this was not her home, she had no right to order anyone about."

Vincent had already opened the door on his way out when he said over his shoulder: "This has to be straightened out or it won't work."

Lisette quickened her step; the table needed to be set for breakfast. After church, I'll take the sheep to the meadow with *Grand'mère*. We'll sit by a clump of trees and she'll let me talk as long as I want. It's going to be a great Sunday. With both hands the basket of eggs was gently placed down on the table.

"That was quick," said Vincent.

Lisette ignored the sarcasm.

"It's such a beautiful day, Uncle Vincent, I want to make myself pretty, wear my best Sunday dress for church."

"But I need you to take the cows to pasture this morning."

No one had seen the grandmother standing in the embrasure of her room.

"Lisette has to go to mass; she hasn't been to church since we've arrived here. She should meet the priest and the other children of the parish. I'll take the cows to pasture."

"But we need you stay at the house, Mère Landry. There'd be no one here. Céleste is getting the two young ones ready right now; they'll be making their communion next spring."

The grandmother's mouth stiffened in anger but she set the black coffee and cups on the table without adding another word. About an hour later Uncle Vincent pulled the mare harnessed to the light cabriolet to the front of the house. Albert climbed in then Vincent helped Aunt Céleste in before taking his seat. Louis had stepped back, nearly hidden behind Lisette, in the vain hope that he too might be told to stay at the farm. His father's voice vibrated through the air.

"Louis!"

Lisette grabbed the boy around the waist and lifted him up to the carriage.

"Take the cows to the Aubin field today, Lisette. You've never been there before, but I know you'll find it easily. It's the last one of the domain. It backs up against the edge of the wood."

The grandmother, who knew that his field was far and isolated, cringed as she heard this, but made no reply.

When the dust raised by the tall, slender wheels settled, Lisette turned back and embraced her grandmother.

"You must do as he said, Lisette. He's the master here."

"But *Grand-mère*, I thought we'd both go to the pasture and talk like we used to."

"I'm going to prepare you a good lunch, and maybe I'll join you this afternoon. I know where that field is. It'll do me good to walk a long while. But it's a far away place. I want you to take Faro with you; he's a good dog and knows the way."

Several times Lisette had heard Aunt Céleste tell farm hands that Albert and Louis were too young to be sent to that solitary place alone. But Lisette didn't mind and soon felt glad to be going to the distant field. To get there, it was necessary to follow the pathway that lined the edge of the manor's park.

Lisette's thoughts settled on the past few months when for the first time in her life, someone other than her grandmother gave her instructions she had to obey without saying a word. Often she resented it. But when trying to catch her grandmother's eye, looking for her support, she found her either occupied at her own task or as if she had not heard Céleste's words. At night, in their room, both were much too tired to

remember the incidents and just wanted sleep to take them right away.

Faro watched the cows closely and intervened as soon as one attempted to stray. Lisette tried to get him to come near her, but he remained aloof to her flattering words and kept running along the herd, his nose close to the ground, ready to carry by himself the responsibility of the trip. The oldest cow took the head of the file and led the others, slowly and steadily. It was a tall animal, white with large reddish spots, used to the different pathways and crossings; with no hesitation, where two pathways merged, she took the one headed to the field. Once there, the cows dispersed and began to graze.

From the edge of the field an alley opened inside the wood. Lisette walked toward it and settled at the foot of a tree. Soon Faro came to join her, sitting on his hind legs.

"Faro, where does this alley go? Does it circle around the wood and lead back to the path toward the manor?"

Lisette stood up. Faro headed into the alley and she followed him. High above them, the trees joined their highest branches in a vault, filtering the midday rays of the sun. Along the shrubs lining the alley, Lisette looked for hazelnuts. Someone had picked them already; few remained. Then Lisette's gaze fell to the ground, followed the shiny trace of a red slug and discovered a spread of *girolles*. The mushrooms grew from a

mossy spot near a large oak. Lisette picked them and deposited them at the foot of the tree. *I wish I'd brought a basket.* She continued to search for more but mostly took pleasure in the walk as she went deeper into the wood. The low branch of a young beech touched her face. She looked up and saw a large nest. Wrapping her knees around the slim trunk and using her arms and the pressure of her knees, she climbed up to the nest. It was empty. *They're long gone. I'm much too late.* Little by little, by placing her feet on branches closer to one another, she reached the top of the tree. The view dominated the cover of the forest. At that moment, she saw a sea of green, undulating over the domes of lower or higher oaks. It looked like a wave that far, far away joined the horizon. She saw two birds flying through a bright ray of sun, the first heading in a straight line, the second one zigzagging in search of a different path, avoiding the first one, and finally descending in free flight toward the horizon where it disappeared from sight.

When she reached the ground Lisette could find no sign of the direction from which she'd gotten to the tree. She looked for the pile of mushrooms at the foot of an oak, but did not see it. She searched all around, became anxious and failed to keep twigs away from her face and her arms. Several times, she thought she recognized the mossy spot where she saw the

girolles. She began calling for Faro and wondered if he had returned to the pasture where the cows had been left grazing. Her head began to ache. Giving up looking for the mushrooms, she took the first path that she found and hoped it returned to the pasture. When she arrived, it was empty. The edge of the wood that she had just left began to feel mysterious and hostile. *You'd think Faro would have kept watch on the cows till I got back.* Lisette began to run and arrived behind the buildings of the farm as her cousin Denis turned the corner of the house.

"What have you done, Lisette, where did you go? Twice I went to the pasture looking for you. The cows came back by themselves. They came through the vegetable garden, trampled the new beds of winter lettuce, tore through the flower beds around the manor."

"Stop a minute, Denis. Your face is all red."

"You don't know the damage the cows did. They stood in front of the manor's steps till someone from the kitchen chased them away. The housekeeper came. She was furious. She yelled at my father at the top of her voice."

"You're out of breath, Denis. Is she still there?"

"Her husband came and took her away. My father and Aunt Céleste didn't say anything. Your grandmother left to look for you. And me too. And we called you and called you."

Denis' chin began to tremble and he seemed on the verge of tears: "My father is so mad at you, I don't know what he's going to do."

"What can he possibly do to me? I will apologize."

Lisette straightened herself up and walked resolutely in the courtyard where Aunt Céleste, Uncle Vincent and her grandmother were gathered. She felt an ominous silence fall on her shoulders.

"Come here," said Uncle Vincent.

Lisette did not budge.

"Come here. Where were you?" Lisette was afraid to answer. "I asked, where were you?"

"I got lost in the woods."

His hand, enormous, rose ready to hit Lisette's cheek very hard. A long arm, thin and dry, caught it at the wrist.

"I forbid you to hit my granddaughter. Do you hear me? I forbid it." The grandmother stood in front of the uncle, as if daring him to strike her.

"I will do as I please in my own house, and I will teach my niece how to behave."

"And I'm telling you that I forbid you to ever raise your hand to my granddaughter."

A whisper: "Vincent . . ." But he heard his sister. His body relaxed, leaving his hand limp against his pants. He

turned slowly and headed for his barn. The grandmother watched him walk away, barely holding back the insults she wanted to throw at him. Then she took Lisette's hand and walked with her toward the back of the house. They both sat near the pond.

"At *La Roche*, you and me were the whole world, Lisette. But now that you're almost grown up, you will have to contend with the wills of others and still keep that part of yourself which is yours alone."

"I didn't realize I stayed so long. The valley looked so beautiful from the top of the tree."

"You are too old now to climb trees."

Lisette put her head on the knees of the old woman and let her tears flow freely.

"You understand, Lisette, I'm not in my house here." Her hand stroke Lisette's hair. "Your aunt Céleste, she's the one to tell you what to do here." She let out a sigh. "Your uncle, your aunt, they're nearly strangers to me. I can't talk to you in front of them."

The words stopped, perhaps too painful, the eyes focused on a point, far away. Patiently, she waited till Lisette's tears stopped.

Aunt Céleste had been watching them. She approached and wanted to say: "Come in the house now, it's nearly suppertime." But the terrible sadness of the grandmother frightened her. She

knew that Lisette would get over her tears soon but that her grandmother's mind had looked beyond the moment, ahead in Lisette's life, and that she would neither forget nor forgive.

Chapter IV

Two Minds Around

November 1925

Months passed quickly. The sunny fall gave way to a rainy, dreary winter. The great fire that was kept burning in the fireplace till everyone was in bed barely kept the big room warm and did not keep the dampness out of the bedrooms.

Mindless of the weather, Lisette found more and more pleasure in her daily tasks. She had been complimented on the crustiness of her pie dough and had forgotten her uncle's great anger toward her the day that she let the cows wander off. She sometimes joked with him as he sat at the table after the dishes of the evening meal had been cleared.

But the grandmother had not forgotten. She spoke as few words as possible and began leaving the house when her tasks were done. One day she left as soon as she was up, not returning either for breakfast or lunch. Lisette searched the barns, the fields, called her name in every direction. She began to imagine her grandmother fallen in a ditch unable to get up, and started her search again across muddy fields, along pathways, pushing hedges and branches left and right out of her way with her arms. Shapes, familiar on an ordinary day, had become anonymous and unrecognizable on a gray day thick with

fog. Suddenly the old woman walked out of the fog at the edge of the forest.

"You didn't need to call so loudly, I wasn't lost."

"But Grand'mère, I was afraid you might have fallen; I thought you might be dead."

"So what! I'm an old woman, good for nothing to nobody."

That night, Lisette felt cold in her warm bed. Cold like the dampness dripping always from the branches, drowning the half-rotten leaves on the ground, swelling the mosses already filled with humidity. The grandmother came to her and took Lisette's hands in hers and little by little warmth filled the girl's heart.

An uneasy fear, though, gripped Lisette almost constantly after that day. If she didn't see her grandmother for several hours, she would walk in the yard, look out, take some steps to the edge of the road, and return till she saw her again.

"Where were you, Grand'mère? Where did you go?"

Often, the old woman didn't answer at all. She spoke less and less even when Lisette and her were alone in a field close to the manor guarding the sheep. The grandmother would stand against the trunk of a tree, looking at nothing in front of her, her pale eyes misty with tears, while the November wind brutally crashed in the high branches of the trees.

Lisette liked the wind. She followed it as it raced through to the next treetop, forcing her ears to retain the sound as long as possible.

"Grand'mère, talk to me. Please tell me why you're so sad."

The grandmother would mumble words: "He's succeeded . . . her mind . . . molded" Lisette didn't understand.

"Grand'mère, what are you saying?"

"Just watch the sheep. They're getting too close to the lawn."

When they lived in the little house atop the rock, above the noisy *Creuse* rushing below, they had been as one, the old one and the child, even when few words were said between them. But here, the grandmother felt that a wall was separating her from her granddaughter, a wall no word could pierce. This place was not her place; these people--they had brought her sorrow--they were not like her. Here, she was unable to tell Lisette, "Even though my mind cannot be with you in this new life you have, I love you as always and even more because I worry. I worry that you will soon lose your free spirit."

"Grand'mère, it's getting dark," Lisette said on such an evening. "We'd better return to the farm."

"A little while longer."

Lisette was cold. She sensed the great distress of her grandmother and feared that something terrible may happen to both of them. The wind blew around the tree against which the old woman stood.

"Grand'mère, you are so unhappy here. Like you, I miss *La Roche*. I miss sitting by our fireplace for as long as we wished. Here, I always worry that I may be in someone's way. Mostly I miss being close together, the both of us, on winter nights like now. Let us go back."

"Stay here, Lisette, where there are young people like you. You will learn many useful things about work from your aunt Céleste. Only, well, just keep freedom in your heart."

"Grand'mère, what are you saying? You've been saying strange things, what do you mean?"

The grandmother made no reply but moved to push the sheep toward the path back to the farm.

After supper, that night, the old woman wrapped her shawl around her shoulders and walked to the door.

"Grand'mère, no, don't go out, it's too cold." Ready to follow her grandmother, Lisette picked up her long cloak from the peg on the back of the front door.

"No," her uncle said. "I will go and talk to her."

Instead of walking closely on the heels of the grandmother, he took a converging path that brought him face to face with

Mère Landry as she was about to enter the woods. He stood on a rise in the path so that his eyes were level with those of the tall woman.

"A woman other than you would die of cold on a night like this. I want you to tell me why you leave for hours in all kinds of weather. What's wrong with the house?"

"Your house is spacious, comfortable. There's nothing wrong with it."

A short hesitation, as if he'd weighed the words, then: "Lisette seems to adjust well at last. She was an undisciplined child when she arrived here."

"I've noticed that Lisette gets along."

"Her cousins, the farm hands, everyone tries to be good company for her."

"I've brought her here so she could have the company of young people."

She guessed by his silence after each of her answers that he tried to read in her mind words other than those she spoke. But he couldn't have perceived, in her thoughts, the depth of her contempt. I have always had a home; my little house was much more precious than your offered comfort. My little granddaughter had a mind of her own when I brought her here. You are molding her--as if she were made of clay--with your so-called discipline, into a girl obedient and dependent to suit

you. You sent her into the Aubin woods knowing how far and dark this place is yet you wanted to strike her--my beloved Lisette--because she made a simple childhood error.

That's what he would have seen if he could have read her thoughts. He could read none of that. He said: "What can I do to make you happy here?"

"I want to return to my house."

"You can't stay alone at your age."

He said this knowing fully well that he wouldn't be able to reason with her. He sensed that she was well aware of her moral isolation and that if she wouldn't even allow Lisette to reach her, no one could.

"My own judgment has served me well all my life. I have always counted on no one but myself. I don't need to hear from you what I know."

"It will be as you please," he said. "Tomorrow, after you've talked with Lisette, let me know when you want to go back if you have not changed your mind. But now, you must come back to the house with me."

He started on the path, and she followed him back to the farm, neither of them saying a word. He opened the door wide, and she came in the large room. The long wooden table had been scrubbed and smelled of soap. Vincent placed a chair near the brightly burning logs. Was it the warmth of the hearth, the

quiet order of the room that caused the old woman to be unable to contain her distress any longer? As soon as she was seated, tears overcame her, running down her parched face. Vincent walked out as quietly as he could, certain that the grandmother had never before allowed her sadness to be seen by another.

Having admitted the horrible change about to take place in her life, the loss of her Lisette, having realized that the separation was inevitable, she felt at last some relief and her tears dried. She stretched her legs toward the flame.

Vincent came back and set two plates on the table, a bowl of creamed cheese and a round loaf of bread. They ate, staring at the flame without exchanging a word.

When Céleste entered, Vincent raised his head and looked at her sadly. She walked to the fireplace, poked at the logs, and came to sit near them at the table. Shadows stretched in the corners of the vast room. The flames reddened the white tiles of the floor. Anxiety spread on the three faces. No sound came from the stables as the night soothed the animals. Céleste spoke first.

"Have you agreed that everyone here, in this large household, with all the work that needs to be done, must be understanding and friendly toward one another?"

"Mère Landry has decided to return to her house."

"But Lisette has gotten used to everyone. She is not unhappy here. What is she going to do in Tulac?"

"Lisette can stay here if you want her to," replied the old woman. "I can see that she gets along without me. I'm sure that you will raise her well."

"Just tell me when you're ready to leave, Mère Landry," added Vincent. "I hope you will change your mind, but I want to say in front of my sister that I had hoped you would be happy here."

"If it's convenient for you, I would like to leave tomorrow."

"As you wish." Vincent put his hat on and went out. When the door closed behind him, Céleste moved closer to the grandmother.

"Louise, why are you hurting yourself so, and Lisette, and my brother? I know he hoped you would have been good company for me, and I hoped so too. Why Louise? Why?"

For a moment, the old face softened. The grandmother had not heard her first name spoken in a very long time. Even the old women of her village seemed to have forgotten it.

"I want you to make me a promise as you would promise a request made on a death bed. Your brother is master here; that is the rule in our farms. That's how it is in every household. But he depends on you and in everything he will do as you say.

You must stop him if he should raise his hand to my granddaughter again."

"It will not happen again, Louise. But in any case, I promise."

The old woman got up. When Céleste heard the bedroom door close behind her, she went to meet Lisette.

"Your grandmother wants to leave; she wants to return to Tulac tomorrow. I'll help your uncle secure things here in the milk shed and in the barn. You go and talk to her."

Lisette nestled against her grandmother's bosom as she did when she was a little child.

"Grand'mère, it is not true that you want us to leave tomorrow, is it?"

"It is the truth; but I'm returning alone."

"Grand'mère" The grandmother placed her fingers on Lisette's lips and was silent until the words, raised from a deep well, it seemed, came.

"There is no future for you in Tulac. Soon, all the old women like myself will have died. What would you do at *La Roche* by yourself? Here, there are always people coming in and out, all the farm hands in addition to the family. If you were mistreated here, then you must come back and join me. But I don't believe it will happen and I see now that you get along

real well. Your cousins are good company for you. By next spring, they'll take you to the fairs that are held around here. Later, you'll go dancing. You need them, your Uncle Vincent, your cousins, Aunt Céleste."

"Grand'mère, I beg you to try and get along here. Please stay with me. You say that there's no future for me in Tulac, but what about you, who's going to take care of you?"

"You know very well that I've taken care of myself, and I'll continue to do so. Now go to sleep or, in the morning, the animals will be awake before you and that won't do."

Lisette continued to beg, knowing it was useless. Finally, she saw that her grandmother was sleeping.

Vincent decided not to leave the next day. Céleste seemed angry with him and did not talk. Lisette would not stop crying. Her cousins were afraid to get close to her, to the grandmother, to their aunt even. Meals were dreadful, everyone eating silently, leaving the table as soon as their plate was empty. Vincent began to think that it was wrong to separate Lisette from her grandmother.

Then the day came for the weekly baking of the bread and Vincent could not leave. All the women were needed in the kitchen. He had to take up their chores in the barn and the milk shed. In the morning Lisette removed all the dishes from

the *maie* and scrubbed the hutch until the wood was nearly as white as milk. While Aunt Céleste and her grandmother mixed the flour with the leaven and, taking turns, kneaded the heavy ball of dough--their sleeves rolled up past their elbows--Lisette prepared the flattened rounds of mashed potatoes encased in overlaps of dough. She then guided them in the oven built in the wall, next to the fireplace. When lunchtime came, the galettes would be served hot fresh out of the oven and then the door would be closed so the bread could continue baking, undisturbed.

That's when Lisette went to the room she shared with her grandmother and began to cry again. She had done all she could to change her grandmother's mind, and now, their separation was imminent. Tomorrow night, she would be all alone in the room; her grandmother's clothes gone, her lingerie, handkerchiefs, lace collars, starched, pressed, scented with lavender, all would be gone. It would be as if the extra arm she always felt kept her attached to her grandmother were suddenly severed.

The next morning, as the grandmother sat at the table for breakfast, Céleste insisted on serving her.

"You've worked hard, Louise. Go back and lie down a while when you're finished eating." She had hoped, like Lisette, that

time could be stopped, that something would, at the last minute, cause the old woman to change her mind.

When the grandmother got up, she did walk to the bedroom, but locked the door behind her. Lisette glued herself against the door and hit it with both fists. "Grand'mère, what are you doing, please come out!" Céleste, who was holding a pile of dishes in her arms, dropped them on the table and went outside. When the grandmother finally opened the bedroom door, she was wearing her Sunday dress and her embroidered bonnet. She took Lisette in her arms.

"Now listen to me. Remember the flight of birds you saw from the top of the tree the day you got lost in the woods near the Aubin field. You saw one either trying to guide the other or trying to prevent it from flying where it wanted to go. Don't ever forget to fly by your own wing."

"Grand'mère . . ."

The grandmother shushed Lisette.

"Remember also, in Tulac, all the birds you brought back to the house, to be mended; birds with broken wings. There is a spare wing inside you; it's always there for you to use; one wing to fly."

"I don't understand. Grand'mère!"

"If the time comes when it matters, you'll remember what I said."

Those were more words than the old woman had spoken to Lisette in weeks. She stopped when she saw the cabriolet standing in front of the opened door.

"Grand'mère, don't leave me here; please stay here or take me with you; I don't want to be without you."

"I have to go little one. Put your arm in mine and walk with me to the cabriolet." There she held Lisette in her arms again, a long time and whispered to her, "Remember what I just told you."

As soon as she was installed in the cart, Vincent cracked the whip. The mare started off at a gallop. Lisette ran behind the cabriolet screaming. She ran behind it till it turned off the long alley onto the main road. When Lisette got there, the cart had already covered a long distance and was disappearing below the hill.

Lisette stared at the deserted road. The trees, the sky, nothing was making any sense. How could things stand still and be the same when inside her something felt dead. She turned around and sat on the verge. There were no more tears in her eyes, and no more tears in her. Her swollen face burned, and her head ached. She got up and walked along the road. On the right side, beyond the high edge of hawthorn, Lisette had sometimes caught a glimpse of what she thought was a clearing. She wanted to walk across it but when she got closer she realized that it

was a pond. She looked down and saw three small silver fish caught in frozen death looking like the glistening blades of knives. Below, there were grasses gracefully bent, also stopped by the ice in their delicate dance. The rushes along side the pond, frozen hard as glass during the night, stood straight. Daylight had not been warm enough to soften them. Lisette came closer to the edge of the pond and felt the ice with her shoe. She forgot the cold, the cart that was taking her grandmother further and further away. She thought she heard a step.

She had expected that Denis would be sent after her and she prepared words that would send him away. She didn't want to be in the house.

The steps came closer. She turned around and faced a youth, taller than Denis, taller than her even, but younger, she thought, than her cousin.

"Is this your pond?" she asked.

The boy, his head wrapped in a woolen scarf that let one strand of brown hair escape, came closer.

"No, we call it Nobody's Pond. It's part of Villars' commons. Do you know how to skate?" he said. "Here, give me your hand."

He dashed on the ice, pulling a crouching Lisette behind him, but then she straightened up sliding left and right on the

ice in rhythm with the boy. Soon she could make turns, slide away, and slide back. He could glide very fast while she gained confidence but could not catch up with him. Lisette felt that she had entered a different world, a world of flexibility, suppleness, a pliable world unknown to her till this moment. But then, the boy spoke.

"We'd best stop; it's going to get very cold. Darkness will fall suddenly and I have a long way to go."

He let her reach the frozen grass on the edge of the pond before him.

"I've never seen you around here before," she said.

"What's your name?"

"Did you know this pond was here before?"

"No. I think I'll call it Our Pond."

The boy stood still for a short time.

"I'm Pierre Guillot. Our farm is four kilometers on the other side of the Aubin wood. Your uncle bought a horse from us; I just delivered it to Denis. He's taking care of it."

They walked together till they reached the first of the wild chestnuts that lined the alley leading to her uncle's farm then the boy said good bye and started running toward his farm.

Chapter VI

A Place Called Belle-Fontaine

December 1925

The driver of the milk truck pulled to the side of the narrow road to allow for the passing of a two-bench horse carriage that was headed toward them at a brisk pace. Marcel Bonin had time to see the head of a goat between a woman wrapped from head to toe in a thick blanket and the man holding the reins. Two more goats looked as if they were sitting on the back seat. Then the cart was gone and the driver of the milk truck broke into laughter that shook his shoulders.

"Ever see anything like that, boy?"

"Where are they heading?"

"The village of Tulac is just a few kilometers up the hill at the crossroads we just passed."

The driver returned to his silence. He had not said many words since Marcel Bonin stood at the door of his house trying to explain why he was there. The man interrupted him and said, "Yes, I know. Just put your bag in the truck. We'll be leaving in a minute." Marcel didn't spend much time wondering how Sister Marie-Paul knew so many people when she never left the orphanage. *If that's not just like her.*

Earlier he'd left her office holding close to his chest the folder she gave him. It contained the passport to his future: his papers, the record of his past life. On his way back to his dormitory he'd searched his mind as far back in time as he could for his first memory of her. The image that came to his mind was that of a woman wearing white wings on her head and leaning toward him.

"I'm Sister Marie-Paul," she said, and, obediently, he had repeated: "I'm Sister Marie-Paul."

"No, you're not. You're Marcel Bonin."

Marcel smiled as he remembered thinking then that she had no hands. Later, much later, when he got to be maybe five years old, he'd realized that she kept them hidden, each hand in the opposite wide sleeve of her gray habit. Till then, he had believed that she could never touch him since she had no hands.

He learned to step on a stool by the wash basin and turn on the faucets without being shown. She told him to place his hands under the running water, let the washcloth get wet, then rub the soap on it before applying it to his face. This had been repeated every morning for a very long time until he had mastered the face washing exercise, until she had been satisfied that all the spots to be cleaned were memorized by the hands if not the mind. He had, at times, lain awake in his bed wondering if she would examine his nails in the morning, counting the

number of times she might make him wash his hands. He imagined her pointed nose bent over his out-stretched fingers. Sometimes he thought that she smiled but had never been quite sure, so to prevent the possibility of a mistake, he never smiled.

He remembered the feeling of annoyance he experienced when the empty bed next to his was assigned to a new boy. The boy whistled in his sleep. He whistled through his nose. Richard Janvier was his name. Marcel never knew if that was his real name or if it had been given to him because he'd been a foundling in the month of January. His black eyes shone feverishly in a face the color of hardened clay. He was the only boy in the dormitory with very black, straight hair and as a result his head had been the target of many plans that would have subjected it to a bleaching. Sister Marie-Paul always seemed to appear at the most inopportune time to the dismay of scheming boys.

It had been nice in dormitory A with Sister Marie-Paul in charge. By the time their thirteenth year approached, the boys were transferred to dormitory B. Things began to lose their orderly ways. A back door led to a yard and across it was the building where classes were held. The yard was large. So many running feet had so grounded the earth that grass never grew on it. The boys gathered in threes or fours and played marbles or

split into teams and played soccer. To the left of the yard was a huge arch and beyond was the girls' yard and the building where their classes were held. To the right side of the boys' yard was a walkway with a domed ceiling supported by columns. Sister Marie-Paul had said that the orphanage had been a Capucins monastery. Richard Janvier had asked where the fountain was. "There's a grotto in the girls' yard. In the back of Marie's statue, running down the rock, is a small waterfall; that may explain why our house is called *Belle-Fontaine*." Richard, not completely satisfied with Sister's reply, said that he would continue to explore and search for the fountain.

The beds in dormitory B were larger, longer. In Marcel's estimation that was the only improvement over dormitory A. The walls were covered with the same, cold, gray, paint. The blankets were of the same rough, brown material. Even after he was no longer gripped by the fear that used to keep him awake when he was smaller, he missed Sister Marie-Paul's reassuring nightly rounds.

Sister Anne-Thérèse told the boys on the first night that they became her charges, that since they had reached the age of self-responsibility, she didn't see the need for her to make nightly rounds. "You know the rules," she said, "I'm sure

you'll abide by them." After she'd turn lights out in their dormitory, the boys listened for her step as she walked up and down the corridor, reciting her prayers.

They were not yet free. Each boy's head kept time with each clicking bead of the rosary until midnight. Then once the thump of her door closing was heard, the whispers about escapades into the girls' yard would begin. "Who's in? Let's take turns, someone has to stay and watch." Marcel refused consistently to participate but agreed to be watchman. After a few nocturnal exits of the building, reports of successful contacts, and arranged meetings, were told. Two boys returned one night bragging of having been laid. Marcel didn't believe them, not even when Charles Meunier gave details and told how one girl was not wearing drawers.

The boys began taunting Marcel for his continued refusal to participate in the nightly recreation. He would offer no reason, make no reply, just stood his ground. During games of soccer, Armand Lepuis, a head taller than Marcel, harassed him with blows unrelated to the game. One night, Marcel's nose started bleeding again, hours after Lepuis had pounded him. Richard followed him to the lavatory.

"Marcel, why don't you go with them just one night, so Lepuis will stop beating you up." He lowered his voice. "He says you're a sissy."

The look on his friend's face--a mixture of cold anger and reprobation--moved Richard to speak again quickly before Marcel had the chance to.

"I don't know if they really meet girls but I know that they steal money from the grotto."

"Go ahead, Richard, tell me how they do this!"

"Lepuis got glue from the crafts class. He puts a trace of it on the tip of a stick then slides it under the screen that protects the statue and pulls the coins out."

"So that's how they always have extra money!"

"What are you going to do, then, Marcel?"

"I have no interest in Lepuis. He's just a coward. His insults wash over my back. I don't have to stay in this orphanage much longer. I want no trouble. No bad mark in my folder."

"Lepuis said he has a plan. He wants to leave the orphanage, Saturday night, for a couple of hours. And go to the village. He asked for a show of hands. Will you go?"

"I don't care about Lepuis' plans. But you, Richard, you should stay in your bed at night and rest. Two weeks, they kept you in the infirmary the last time you were sick. Wasn't that enough?"

"I only watch them, Marcel. I don't really follow them. Once, I did. I wanted to see what they were doing."

"You'd be better off in your bed."

"What are you going to do, Marcel, when you leave here?"

"I don't know; it doesn't matter."

Even though Richard was his best friend, Marcel felt suddenly that he'd said too much about himself. He knew he'd find work after he left the orphanage, he didn't know what. He had believed her when Sister Marie-Paul told him arrangements could be made for him to continue studying art. She would contact an art school, she had said. Sketching, wood sculpturing, he liked that and was good at it. But that was before she became Superior and he became the charge of Sister Anne-Thérèse. Not a word about him going to an art school had been mentioned since then.

One night, well after the sound of her door being shut was heard, Sister Anne-Thérèse stood in the dormitory's doorway.

"Who's got a light in here?"

"It's me, Sister Anne-Thérèse, I was just reading."

In her usual manner, she waited as if evaluating the amount of truth in the answer that was offered before going on with another question.

"And did I not, Bonin, confiscate the last one?"

Marcel had already turned the flashlight off but not before shining it into the window, the signal for the boys outside, to wait. After what they thought was a safe moment, the boys filed

back in the dormitory. Sister Anne-Thérèse had returned to her room, but during the night her mind must have explored other possibilities surrounding the presence of Bonin's flashlight besides his avowed thirst for reading. Why did she trust his explanation? Deprived of a few hours of peaceful sleep, before chapel, before daylight broke, she had examined the grounds around the building.

The door of the dormitory slammed hard against the wall.

"Who left the building last night after lights out?"

Hands rubbing eyes and shoulders slumped, one foot on top of the other in a vain effort to stay off the flagged, icy floor, each boy stood up.

"I'm waiting!"

She waited. Then she said, "Very well. Since I know that you, Bonin, were here, you will tell me who went out last night. Come with me."

Marcel slipped his uniform short pants on and his bare feet into his shoes. He followed her, forgetting his jacket. She had already turned into the hallway when Lepuis barred his way and whispered, "She's had it in for you. She's got you, this time." It took only a few minutes to cover the short distance to the chapel, but the cold air had left him shivering. She entered the chapel, held the door for him.

"You will walk on your knees from this point to the altar, up and down, until you're ready to give me the names of all those who went out last night. You will recite the rosary while you march on your knees. I want to see your lips moving."

He began to repeat, silently, the length of time he had left to remain at the orphanage, "Fourteen months, and twenty days; October 15, 1925; Fourteen months, twenty days; Fourteen months." His eyes were lowered but he knew she was standing just inside the jamb of the opening to the sacristy.

As he passed each bench on his way up to the altar he began imagining the detailed scrolls he would design--given the opportunity--on each side board and of the delicate Queen-Anne style legs he would fashion for the few velvet covered seats in the front row. He knew what tools he would use and how many hours it would take. Daydream.

When the prolonged contact with the cold flagstones caused a painful irritation to his knees, he scooped some water from the font and smoothed his red, exacerbated skin with it. The water had a soft, oily feel. He dipped and soaked his handkerchief into the water and put it in his pocket. The water began dripping on the floor as he resumed rubbing the cold flagstone with his knees.

"Whenever you're ready to tell me who went out last night, you can get up, Bonin."

He stopped but didn't get up. A voluminous fold of her skirt appeared in the doorway. Still, he didn't move. Instead, he pulled the soaked-handkerchief from his pocket and squeezed it hard letting all the water out.

She took a few steps toward him. He started off again, continuing and adding to his silent litany, "fourteen months; I hate you Sister Anne-Therese, I hate you more than you hate me. Fourteen months, fourteen . . ."

"How many Hail Mary did you recite, Bonin?"

He didn't answer.

She looked over his head rather than at his face as was her custom and repeated, "Bonin?"

She came nearly level with him and extended her hand but as she took another step forward, her feet slid from under her and she glided feet first, landing near the font. He rushed to help her up.

"Don't touch me, you . . . you . . . what have you done?"

"I had to pee."

"Go, go away from me, right now."

Marcel stood in the empty refectory, an unusual look of self-satisfaction on his face, but he didn't know what to do. He had missed breakfast, was famished, and it was too early for

lunch. He was going to turn away when Sister Marie-Paul came in holding a bowl.

"Come and sit here, Marcel."

She sat on a bench and placed the bowl on the table.

"Drink this warm milk."

He sat next to her, his thoughts on what had just happened in the chapel.

"What are you smiling about?"

"I, I was not smiling, Sister Marie-Paul."

"You were already in the charge of Sister Anne-Thérèse when I received word from an art school that they would accept you as a boarding student. The State would continue to pay for your care as it does here. Sister Anne-Thérèse thought that your work didn't warrant the opportunity."

"She's right. It does not matter."

"I feel differently. It is not too late. I can submit your sketches with your application. Your drawings of the buildings, the yard, I've kept all of them. Shall I proceed with the transfer, Marcel?"

He had never truly looked into Sister Marie-Paul's face. He had never dared. His eyes rose to her face and he expected to see in her eyes a reflection of his crime against Sister Anne-Thérèse. He only saw great kindness. He bent his head in the bowl of warm milk and didn't care that traces of the white

liquid would remain on his nose and lips when he looked at her again. He didn't try to wipe them off.

"No, please. I couldn't, I couldn't."

He started to get up. She placed her hand on his arm and made him sit down again.

"I insist that you tell me the truth." It was just a whisper, a force that had to be obeyed.

"Richard Janvier is my friend; I know he's sick. Nobody cares for him or likes him. I want to stay."

"Stay and what?" she asked

"I have fourteen months left here. I want to see if he's going to be all right."

"But with Sister Anne-Thérèse . . . it's going to be difficult for you."

"No, Sister Marie-Paul. I'll be fine."

She got up and picked up the bowl. He remained seated on the bench until he no longer heard the swishing of her habit.

The classroom Marcel should have spent the morning in was empty except for Monsieur Peynet, the math teacher. Since he did not raise his head when he walked in, Marcel felt that he shouldn't say anything about missing class. He sat at his desk and began copying the assignment that was written on the blackboard. Soon the other students filed in quietly. No one looked at Marcel and there were no whispers. In the refectory

at dinnertime, nothing was said and when Sister Anne-Thérèse walked in the dormitory and turned lights out that night, she made no mention of the morning's event. Marcel had hoped that neither the time he spent on his knees in the chapel nor Sister Anne-Thérèse's fall (walls held no secret) would become the topic of discussion for days on end but the silence tormented him just as well. Nothing was mentioned.

Usually, on Thursdays afternoon Monsieur Peynet took the senior boys hiking. It was nearly always to the same place. They'd walk out, single file, from the back door of the orphanage and up a path leading after about three miles to a promontory above the Creuse River. There the boys were free to gaze down at the river or climb rocks. It was a solitary place with sparse shrubbery, heather, juniper, boxwood and the sound of the river below, sometimes rushing and roaring as a torrent if there had been rain or a storm.

Once, Marcel asked Monsieur Peynet if the cliffs continued far along the river and if the landscape was as desolate everywhere as it was here, on the promontory. "There's a small village not far from here, Tulac. A bakery and a general store and a couple of farms around it, that's all. The land here is picturesque but the soil is poor, it can't sustain more than a few goats," replied the teacher.

Sometimes, from a narrow pathway that rose from the riverbed, one or two fishermen, with rubber boots up to their knees, would come up, each with a string of wet, blue trout. They exchanged a few words with the boys, who were never allowed to go down to the dangerous waters, and moved on. Mostly, Marcel and Richard lay on their stomachs looking at the water below, their senses alert to the tiny, mysterious sounds around them: a squirrel shuffling leaves, the flutter of a bird before darting off. That's what Marcel told Richard they should listen for, but mostly, during that time, he waited to hear his friend's harrowed breathing subside.

When he was at last able to speak, Richard would ask, "Do you remember your parents, Marcel?" And Marcel would reply, "I don't remember ever being anywhere other than at the orphanage." This conversation took place almost every time they were at the promontory, but Marcel was patient. He knew that his friend believed there was an explanation for his being at the orphanage and that he would find it eventually.

One year went by with no change in the boys' routine. An uncle of Armand Lepuis came to get him and Richard Janvier began telling Marcel that he had an uncle too and surely he would arrive at Belle-Fontaine to take him away very soon. During the summer, his wheezing having become more painful, the visiting

doctor said that he could not go on the hikes to the river. Marcel stayed behind and the two boys played endless games of chess on the huge refectory table. On such an afternoon, Sister Anne-Thérèse walked up to them: "Bonin, what are you doing here, you are not excused from the outing." Marcel felt that this time he was not going to be able to restrain himself; he got up. From the doorway came a discreet cough. Marcel sat down again as Sister Anne-Thérèse walked away.

"Who was that?" Richard said.

"That was Sister Marie-Paul; she's got an extra set of ears behind those wings she wears on her head. Sister Anne-Thérèse won't bother us anymore, let's play."

In early December, Richard was taken to the infirmary again. It was the third time in less than two months. The doctor came almost every day. About a week later, Marcel was crossing the yard when he saw Sister Marie-Paul walking toward him. He stopped because he knew.

"He's waiting for you, Marcel."

When he entered the room, Marcel tried not to notice the smell, the color of his friend's face, the bloodless hand lying on the sheet. He took the hand anyway; the black eyes motioned him to come closer.

"Listen, Marcel, I know you've been putting off leaving because I'm sick. You could have left in October, on your

birthday. I'm going to be all right now, you go on, just tell me about the places you're going to see."

Exhausted, he stopped talking, closed his eyes, but put a slight pressure on the hand that was holding his. Marcel spoke.

"We're going to go together, Richard, I have a plan."

And Marcel said the words his friend had been waiting to hear. He'd found Richard's uncle. They'd go together to his house; he was waiting there, for both of them. He held the limp hand until Sister Marie-Paul came and took him away.

Richard died during the night. A hard freeze sealed the ground in the morning. When he left Sister Marie-Paul's office the dark clouds had brought in snow. He remembered the last thing she'd said to him. "Resisting and fighting can be necessary tools in the world outside our gate." He had felt a redness rise on his cheeks. She gave no sign of noticing and continued, "Until Sister Anne-Thérèse told me of the bruises she sustained in the chapel--the day you spent some time there on your knees--I was not sure I should grant you your separation from the orphanage. I was not sure you were ready, just yet, strong enough."

His few belongings quickly packed, he closed the door of the dormitory behind him. In the corridor a few boys stood still. One stretched his hand out, and then another. None said a word. In the yard, white flakes shined as they descended

toward the earth, erasing forms. Marcel knew that his steps couldn't be heard. Yet he experienced a noise sensation, his mind perhaps counting his steps to the gate. He remembered having told Richard that he wouldn't look back once he reached it. But when he grabbed the scrolled iron work, he did look back, because he knew she'd be there, her white wings nearly hiding her tender face, there behind the window, her hand slightly raised.

"We're near the station now. It's going to be cold while you wait for the train."

Marcel rubbed his hands together.

"I'm sorry. I haven't been good company."

"Things on your mind," the driver said. "Got everything?"

Marcel felt the inside pocket of his jacket for his train ticket. Then his fingers found the rumpled sheet of paper on which was written the address of the woodworker's shop that was his final destination: Fley. He would not get there till night came, Sister Marie-Paul had said.

When the truck stopped, he extended his hand to the driver but before he could find the words, the man said, "I'll tell her you got off all right."

Yes. That's what he wanted to say. *Would he ever see her again?*

Chapter VII
The Apprentice

December 1925

The train left the Crozant station at two o'clock and left the Creuse River behind almost immediately. To his surprise, Marcel did not mind the sudden change in scenery and felt an instant liking to the vast spread of flat land, fields, forests, and more fields that extended beyond his eyes. The early darkness of winter nights had fallen when the train arrived at Fley. Lights shone on men walking up and down the platform, waiting to get on the train, tapping their shoes on the pavement in an effort to warm their feet. Marcel picked up his bag, stepped down from the train and walked quickly to the building.

The only person in the station was the clerk behind the ticket window.

"Can you tell me how to get there?" Marcel said as he slid the paper marked with his final destination under the separating glass.

"Yes. But you can't go to Dureau's tonight. Not even someone who knows the way can start for that place now, on this cold moonless night."

"Is it that far?"

"It's five kilometers. You'd get lost, I tell you, and you'd freeze to death."

Marcel frowned, wondering why Sister Marie-Paul had not said anything about such a situation.

"Go to Marguerite Broussard's café. Her place's the only one that still has a light on, just across the square as you leave the station. She'll put you up for the night."

Marcel waited for more instructions but the clerk just stared at him.

It was warm inside the café. Fatigue was numbing Marcel's limbs and clouding his mind but he carefully chose the words that would explain his presence.

"So you're going to be Dureau's new apprentice?"

The woman who just spoke placed a smoking plate of cabbage soup in front of him. He began to look in his bag for the envelope that contained the few francs Sister Marie-Paul had given him.

"Eat this while it's hot. Then I'll show you where you can sleep."

"I wouldn't want to disturb you."

Marcel didn't know if the look on the face of the café owner was one of tenderness or amusement.

The sun was approaching the high of noon when he arrived at Dureau's place the next day. When he saw the buildings he

stopped and turned around for another look at the deserted surroundings. No, didn't miss a thing. It's a wonder customers don't give up just trying to get here. Before he reached the gate to the front garden, he saw a woman waving at him.

"You'll find my husband over there." She pointed to a wooden structure less than fifty yards away.

"I should change clothes."

"Your bed's in the loft over the kitchen. There's a hutch. You can keep your things in it." Then she turned away from him, walking in the opposite direction, her basket flopping against her hip.

He placed the clothes he'd traveled in, neatly folded, in the hutch and put on his only other set, washed many times, but in good condition. Dureau was sitting on a bench leaning on a side of his workshop. Marcel felt that the man had been watching him arriving and talking to his wife.

"Ready to work, son? You got tools?"

"I don't have any tools."

"I'll lend you mine. But you'll have to get your own, little by little."

The only tools Marcel needed for the next few weeks were the broom to sweep the dirty workshop and the wheelbarrow to carry debris away. Disheartened by the poor condition of the

woodworker's tools, he filed them, oiled them, put them in order in the manner the instructor at the orphanage had taught him. If Dureau approved he didn't mention it to Marcel in any way. One Sunday morning after breakfast, Marcel brought up the question that had been on his mind. "When are you going to pay me? So I can begin to buy my own tools, I mean."

"Pay you? You've got free room and board and I'm teaching you all I know about woodwork. Isn't that pay enough?"

Marcel thought that he'd learned much more at the orphanage about woodwork than he had from watching Dureau.

"But I was told I'd be paid."

"I tell you what. Maurice Basson wants some shelving done. His domain is about three kilometers on your right on the way back toward the village. Fley's the name of the place. Just like the name of the village."

"He'll pay me?"

"No. He'll pay me and I'll do the shelving. But you could go and take the measurements today. And since you're free on Sundays, they might use you on that day as a farm hand. See Célesta. She handles all the workers."

Marcel went up to the loft and put on his best clothes. Might as well go to church.

The woman who stood in the yard wore a blue wool dress but no coat. Marcel, who had not been able to feel warm enough since he arrived at Dureau's, felt embarrassed by the tightly wrapped muffler around his neck. The woman surveyed rows of potted geraniums, in descending shades of red, that were stacked against a hedge of forlorn-looking honeysuckle. He squared his shoulders and said *Good Morning* while still walking toward the blue dress. Large, patient, brown eyes calmly observed him.

"I'm Dureau's apprentice. I'm to take measurements for some shelving."

Marcel watched the look--a mixture of surprise and curiosity--slowly fade from the woman's face before she spoke.

"So, he lost his last apprentice, again! When is this man going to learn that he's supposed to pay people for their work. Has he been paying you?"

"Not yet. That's why . . ."

He stopped talking when a girl, dressed either for Church or going to a dance, came out of the house toward the woman in the blue dress.

"What are you looking at?" the girl said toward Marcel.

"Vonnie!" The woman admonished the girl but the unfriendly remark had not bothered Marcel.

"Your hair . . . your black hair. My friend Richard had hair very black like yours."

The woman took a few steps and stood closer to Marcel, facing him. Since she was taller he could no longer see the girl.

"I'm Célesta Basson. I'll take you to the room where we want the shelves put up. Did you bring some work clothes?"

"I thought I'd go to church first."

"Well, you can go with Vonnie, that's just where she was going. Weren't you Vonnie?"

The girl started walking away, then turned toward Marcel who had not moved.

"Are you coming? Come on then."

After Mass, Marcel watched as Vonnie walked toward a group of girls, and all of them began laughing. He wondered if they were laughing at him but waited politely. When he became aware that Vonnie did not intend to walk back with him to the domain he left by himself.

"Vonnice stayed with her friends, didn't she? She's my niece," said Célesta Basson as she took Marcel to a large room furnished only with a chair and a desk covered with papers.

Marcel pulled his notebook and measuring tape from the pocket of his jacket. Célesta watched him. He thought now would be a good time to ask if he could help around the farm on

Sundays. He spoke up hesitantly and was not sure whether Célesta Basson heard his request or not.

"Marcel," she called. He stopped suddenly. He had not yet told her his name.

"Marguerite Broussard, the lady who owns the café, told me a little bit about you."

He began writing numbers down again.

"I have a first cousin, the daughter of one of my father's younger brothers, who lived in Tulac, near the orphanage."

"I know where Tulac is. But I've never been there."

"Her name is Lisette Basson. I have not met her yet."

Marcel had finished taking the measurements and Célesta had not told him yet whether he could come to work on Sundays and earn a little money. He was standing, shifting from one foot to the other.

"I think you're too smart, Marcel, to do farm work. We've got enough workers anyhow. But we always need some woodwork done around the house or the outer buildings. You could help there, if you want."

Pleased, he wrapped his muffler and was heading for the yard when she called back.

"Wait. There's another wood worker in the village. His name is Leblanc. I bet he could use an apprentice like you."

There's bad blood between him and Dureau, though. Anyhow, something to think about."

"I have to stay at Dureau's for at least a year."

"Ah, well, we'll see you next Sunday, then."

Chapter VIII

An End, A Beginning

1927

The rain had been relentless since the first day of March. Feet slowed and tracked their muddy shoes. Faces lost a last expectant look for a ray of sun. On the fourth day, as she was closing the gate to the sheepfold, a farm hand came to get Lisette.

"You're wanted in the big room," he said.

"What's the rush? I was on my way there, anyway." She heard the rudeness in her voice and wanted to apologize but didn't. She headed toward the house.

When she stepped inside she saw that Uncle Vincent was holding a folded yellow piece of paper and Aunt Céleste was standing close to him. Both were looking at Lisette and both started speaking at the same time. She heard, though. She didn't feel a great sadness right away. She didn't feel a change. Her grandmother was still there in her heart. Nothing was different from what it had been ten minutes ago. She sat on the bench by the table and waited, she didn't know for what. She watched Aunt Céleste coming near her, facing her, then moving away. She saw her aunt pulling clothes from armoires, and heard her talking, saying there'd be black clothes somewhere

on a shelf and she was sure to find something that would fit. Then Lisette was trying on a black dress.

The next morning, a bitter damp cold replaced the rain. Lisette was helped onto the cabriolet a blanket was placed on her knees, and a hot brick under her feet. The air shimmered low, near the ground, and white fog wrapped the lower part of the long, naked poplars looking like statues. She heard the sad scream of ravens flying away from branches. When they arrived in Tulac, Uncle Vincent stopped the buggy on the church's square. A few sycamores hid the bare façade of the tiny church.

It's only when she saw the hearse, the coffin draped in black, that a profound anxiety seized her. Someone came, took her hand, brought her near the coffin, and handed her the sprig with which to spray blessed water on the coffin. She recognized Claudine, the young bride who had been living in the house next door to her grandmother and her first real girlfriend.

The small church filled with people but the crowding of bodies did not succeed in raising some warmth within the cold walls. Lisette distinguished no faces, only bodies wrapped in black, walls covered by black draperies. When the service was over people spoke to her and still she could not see them. When she was seated in the buggy again and Aunt Céleste took her hand, Lisette sighed.

Not once since her grandmother left her to return to her house, did the thought of leaving Bois-Chauds enter Lisette's mind. Now, since the funeral, every day, vague plans formed in her thoughts no matter where she was or what she was doing: drying dishes or getting milk in or scrubbing the floor tiles of the big room. She had never spent the money her grandmother placed inside the few letters she had sent to Lisette. In her plans she thought she would avoid Villars even if it meant a longer road. She would cut across fields. She would have to ask directions. She thought she could spend a night in an inn, and arrive at Tulac the next day.

Late spring came, the work became more pressing, more demanding, but her thoughts remained on her plan. Sometimes she felt Aunt Céleste's gaze resting heavily on her. She overheard her uncle saying he had expected a lot of tears from Lisette and was relieved, but Aunt Céleste replied that she was worried.

"That's just it, Vincent. I wonder what Lisette is thinking about."

Lisette wondered if Denis would look for her and smiled internally: she could always make Denis see things her way. Then summer came with its exhausting work and Lisette decided to leave her plans till harvest time was behind. It was just a matter of organizing the final lines of her thoughts. The rest was easy. She had very little to carry and knew her first stop.

Then she would simply ask directions to the next stage. She was sure that she could complete the trip to Tulac in two days.

Lisette was guarding the sheep in the meadow that was lined with old, gnarled apple trees. It's awfully cold for September, she thought. A weak sun was trying to soften the grass the morning frost had stiffened. She had been picking small fallen apples and gathering them in a front panel of her cape when she saw the boy coming across the field toward her.

"Just cutting through," he said a bit too loudly as he got close to her. "I'm going to clear the beets field at the Guillot farm."

"I know where it is," Lisette said.

"So?"

"So why are you tell me and you've a way to go. Help me get the apples from the top of this tree. It'd be a shame to let them rot."

"I don't climb trees, I'm seventeen."

"What?"

"Your cousin Denis. We were in school together. He told me about you."

So Denis has been gabbing about me, and the whole village knows that I climbed a tree once and the cows went off on their own?

"You're scared," she said.

He took his hat and coat off and began climbing the tree.

"The next branch, just above your head. I'll shake them out."

And she started shaking the tree. The boy lost his footing and crashed to the ground.

"Are you hurt? I'm sorry."

His hands and his face showed scratches with traces of blood. He grabbed his hat and coat and left without saying a word.

"What's your name?"

If he heard her he gave no sign of it. She watched his back as he walked so fast that she thought he floated through the air. When she turned to leave, Denis was coming up the path.

"Georges left awfully quickly. I wanted to talk to him."

"So that's his name. Do you have to tell tales about me to people I don't even know?"

Denis burst out laughing.

"I only speak the truth. Anyway, you might never see him again; Georges is always planning to leave. One day, he'll do it, I guess."

Lisette turned her head quickly so Denis wouldn't notice the change in her face.

"Why does he want to leave?"

"His folks. Well, his father drinks a lot and his mother is almost always sick."

Lisette lowered her head and whispered: "he's almost like an orphan, almost like me."

"What did you say? Here, Lisette, put your apples in my hat and I'll help you get the sheep moving."

The last sheep was forced in the sheepfold and Denis was closing the wooden gate when Lisette asked, "Your friend, Georges, wouldn't it be cowardly of him to leave his folks when neither can work the farm?"

"Guess it would. Georges was strange sometimes. In school, I mean."

Chapter IX

At the Fair

1928

One Saturday, a few weeks before Lisette's sixteenth Birthday, Aunt Céleste returned from the market carrying dress material. To respect the mourning tradition--it was just a little over a year since the death of the grandmother--she had chosen a tint of pale mauve. The material was as light as a veil. Aunt Céleste said that to do this lovely material justice, the employ of a professional dressmaker was absolutely necessary. Juliette Mornay arrived one afternoon carrying fashion magazines under her arm. She was about eighteen years old, blond with a pleasant and friendly face.

"Juliette does all the young girls' dresses from all the surrounding farms," Aunt Céleste said. "Old gnarled hands like mine can't be trusted to make a real pretty Sunday dress."

The magazines were spread on the long table. Lisette knew what she wanted, but could not explain it without showing part of the picture of a dress and part of another one. She noticed that Denis, sitting across the table, was watching the slight swelling in Juliette's blouse as her graceful white arms opened to display the images inside the magazines, then closed. Her cousin's interest pleased Lisette. Often she wished Denis didn't stay so close to her or held her arm so tightly.

Finally, it was agreed that Juliette would cut a pattern in old newspaper, and would bring it back to the domain for the approval of Lisette and Aunt Céleste.

Denis got up.

"Since Denis has to take care of the horses," said Aunt Céleste, "Lisette can accompany you a bit of the way. She knows all the short cuts through the woods. There is no shade on the main road, and it's too long that way anyhow."

"I know where . . ." Denis started but his aunt's eyes were on his and redness began to spread on his face. He walked toward the door, said goodbye without a last glance toward the table.

"Good," said Juliette after a moment's hesitation. "Cutting through the woods alone would be scary for someone who does not know the pathways."

The two girls started off through fields and pastures.

"The fair at Beauchamp is in two weeks. Your dress will be ready, Lisette."

"We're supposed to go, all of us. My cousins will ride on their bicycle. There's not enough room in the buggy for all of us."

"We'll be dancing all afternoon. It's a lot of fun, you'll see."

"But I don't know how to dance. I'll be sixteen soon. I should know how to dance, shouldn't I?"

"I've been knowing how to dance for a long time."

Juliette sent her hair away from her face with a slight movement of her head. "Sometimes I dance well past midnight."

Lisette walked ahead as the path was not wide enough for two persons to stand side by side. Small, pale blue flowers adorned the grassy verge. Nearer to the forest, the trees seemed to bend under the weight of their summer leaves.

Juliette was asking questions about Denis.

"Yes, he's almost eighteen. Our birthdays are so close, Aunt Céleste said she'll bake two cakes and we'll have both of them the Sunday between our two birthdays."

Because Juliette was behind her, Lisette had not pursued the conversation about the dance, so Juliette thought that she was not interested. She was wrong. The words spoken by Juliette had given rise, in Lisette's mind, to a world of magic. There had been a fair in Tulac once. Her grandmother had taken her. There were brightly painted booths where *berlingot* candies and *crêpes* and waffles were made and sold. There were people calling each other, laughing, children running, discordant and exciting music.

"Do lots of people go to this fair, Juliette?"

"Everybody from all the farms around. The dance floor is set up early. All the boys come to this fair to dance."

"Did you ever see . . .?"

"What Lisette?"

"Nothing, really, nothing." *A certain strong boy, hair the color of chestnuts, who skated with me on the iced pond the day my grandmother went away.* Lisette could not tell this to Juliette. She couldn't tell anyone. She had never seen him again, but she had thought about him many times. That was her own secret; she would not share it.

"You'll see, Lisette. Boys will come to get you and take you dancing once they know you. They buy me candy at the fair and I love for them to kiss me when they bring me back home."

Kissing, loving? Lisette had only known the love of her grandmother. For her only, she had felt a total emotional attachment. With no one else had she felt such trust in her affection. Not even toward Aunt Céleste for whom she had grown fond and who was kind to her. The great love she had felt for her grandmother could no longer exist since she was dead. How was it possible for what had been to end so soon when she had not really had time to understand?

A sudden, clear image of *La Roche* came to Lisette's mind. The door and the shutters were closed. The goats' stable was

empty, and the straw and the hay were rotting. No longer raised by the hand, the lock on the front gate had lost its patina. Grass had grown between the few slates to the front door. *The furniture must still be there, sleeping,* thought Lisette. It would be dusty; spider webs would have taken over the corners. Only the echo of grand'mère's step would remain.

Lisette began to cry.

"What is it, what did I say?" Juliette took Lisette's arm.

"I was just thinking about my grandmother, Juliette. We have arrived at the junction with the main road."

"I know. I can see my house from here. I'll be back in a few days with the pattern. You'll see, Lisette, it's going to be a beautiful dress, and I'm sure, all the boys will want to dance with you."

"I'd better be getting back." But Lisette stood a while in the pathway, looking at Juliette's figure getting smaller and smaller until her own heart felt a little less heavy. Then she turned back to the edge of the wood hoping that the great peace it held would also bring her a little peace.

On the Sunday of the fair everyone got up early. Lisette hurried to the garden to gather a few sprigs of *finest herbes* to cut up for the omelette her uncle had asked for just before going to bed the previous night. Quickly dew dampened her shoes

and the edge of her skirt. From the barn came Denis's voice yelling at the horses. He caught up with his cousin as she was about to enter the house.

"Is your new dress ready, Lisette?"

"Yes, it is."

"Albert and I will leave early on our bicycles. It's too far for Louis's short legs. He'll ride in the buggy and we'll meet you at the fair. I might let you dance with me."

"Is that so? And who else is going to be there in case I have a choice?"

"Lots of fellows from all the farms around. You don't know any of them. We'll stop at the Guillot farm and meet up with Pierre. He'll be riding his bike with us. He's not a good dancer like me, and he's sweet on Marie Milliet, but I'll ask him to dance with you."

"No, Denis, don't you dare."

"We'll see." Denis went away laughing while Lisette's heart sank and the sun rising over the edge of the forest no longer seemed so beautiful.

After the animals had been cared for and everything in the courtyard put away, Uncle Vincent went to get the buggy while Aunt Céleste and Lisette went to get dressed.

A large basket had been filled with bread, cheese, and thick slices of ham, and jars of fruit compotes. When Lisette stepped in the yard, her cousins and her uncle fell speechless in front of her young beauty. Her long black hair had been brushed to a delicate shine, pulled away from the white skin of her face; her dark eyes were bright and unusually happy. She rested her long, slender hands in front of the new soft dress. Her uncle walked up to her.

"I'll help you get on the buggy so your dress won't get mussed."

"Thank you, Uncle. Let's wait till Aunt Céleste is ready. I'll sit next to Louis on the back seat."

"I'm not riding in the buggy like a girl. I'm riding my bike with the fellows."

"Good enough. You'd better be off then, we'll see you boys at the fair."

Vincent turned to Lisette: "It'll catch up with him this afternoon. We'll have to carry both the boy and the bicycle on the way back."

Many buggies were already lined around the fair grounds when they arrived at the village. They found an empty trestle table and settled their provisions. People approached, shook hands with Vincent, said a few words to Aunt Céleste and quietly gazed on Lisette sitting on the bench next to her aunt. The

sounds of the *cornemuse* and the *Vielle* pierced through the noise of the crowd. People were tapping the ground in rhythm with the music. Not since harvest time had Lisette seen so many people together and so much excitement. Denis, holding a pie in his hand, arrived followed by a young man.

"Aunt Céleste, there's a table filled with all kinds of pies, next to the musicians. I've bought you a cherry pie."

The young man moved close to Uncle Vincent and shook his hand.

"Bonjour, Pierre. How's Père Guillot?"

"Just fine. He'll be around later."

Head down, Lisette slowed her smoothing of the white cloth she was spreading on the rough surface of the trestle table. Denis put his hand on her arm. "It's good enough, Lisette, come, you can be Pierre's partner. Juliette's waiting for us to dance a *bourrée*, the four of us together."

Juliette had come several times to the farm while Lisette's dress was being made even when a fitting was not needed. On those days, Denis kept busy near the house, and Aunt Céleste had finally decided to be busy somewhere else when it was time for the seamstress to go back home.

"But, I can't dance," said Lisette.

Pierre was already by her side whispering: "It's easier than skating on an iced pond."

Lisette felt redness rush to the roots of her hair but she let him hold her hand and lead her to the dance floor.

Neither Pierre nor Lisette moved when the dance ended and their fingers still touched. As the music started again, a young girl with very curly hair and a fresh, round face caught the arm of Lisette's partner.

"You made me save this dance for you, Pierre, and now I have no partner to dance with."

Pierre's eyes became large with embarrassment. He released Lisette's hand, bowed his head and said, "That is true; I did ask Marie to save this dance for me." Denis, taken over by the excitement of the dance, grabbed the arm of a lanky youth standing on the side, watching them.

"Come on Georges, join us, we can't break our foursome."

Georges took his place facing Lisette. As their feet advanced and receded according to the dance, he never let his eyes wander away from her face, never turned his back to her even when the dance allowed it. He seemed to glide on the hard floor rather than step up as the other dancers did. Lisette wondered why she had not noticed how pale his gray eyes were. When the music stopped she felt brave enough to say, "You dance better than you climb a tree."

"It must be the first time you've danced. I had to guide your every step." But the touch of his hand on her elbow was very gentle as he led her back to her table.

Vincent was cutting large slices of bread; the unwrapped ham smelled good.

"It was hot on that dance floor, wasn't it, Lisette?" Aunt Céleste thought that heat was not solely responsible for the coloring of Lisette's cheeks.

"Denis, you look like you've not eaten in a week," said his father. "How are Georges' folks doing?"

"I seldom see Georges. Juliette says his father spends a lot of time at Vannier's Café in the village. Georges must be doing most of the work at their farm."

Lisette was not listening. She had noticed Marie and Pierre standing on the far side of the dance floor. Marie's face, raised toward Pierre, was full of anger, Lisette was sure. Pierre's arms hung lifeless alongside his body. When Lisette turned her gaze away she saw that Georges was also looking at Pierre. Was it a mocking twitch at the corner of his mouth?

When the music started again, Pierre and Marie were not among the crowd gathered around the dance floor. Georges was near Lisette when one minute before he had not been. She got up from the bench and put her hand in his. Maybe she too could learn to dance slightly above the ground.

The rhythm of the horse's hooves, the fatigue and excitement of the day got the best of Louis. Laying on Lisette's lap, he slept till they arrived back at the farm as dusk shaded everything.

Lisette was tired too, but that night she could not sleep.

"What is it, child? You have been tossing about for a long time," said Céleste from the next bed.

"I guess I had too much fun today. Did you, Aunt, ever like a boy very, very much?"

"I've liked several boys. There was one . . . with a smiling face and sparkles in his eyes. After lunch, on Sunday afternoons, I'd watch for him from our doorway and we met at the bottom of the footpath to our house."

"Would you have talked to him, Aunt Céleste, if you knew another girl liked him too?"

"I couldn't go dancing with him. I had to stay home and help with my younger brothers and sisters."

"But if you had thought he liked you and that other girl, would you have talked to him?"

"He came for a long time . . . months maybe.

"But if you knew that him and another girl were sweethearts, would you have talked to him and gone dancing with him?"

"Well, that would be nothing but trouble. There'd be no point in it, would it?"

"There'd be no point," repeated Lisette. "Do you regret that you never married, Aunt Céleste?"

"I never thought . . . Every day of my life I did what needed to be done. That's what women do, Lisette. I never wondered. My brothers needed me. They make the decisions, you know, the men."

"When I lived at *La Roche* with Grand'mère, I also worked hard at times, but I also did what I wanted."

"Yes but you're nearly a woman now. There would be no point wanting for yourself . . . Your uncle decides. Someday your husband would make decisions. In the buggy, I told you about your Uncle Maurice, of Fley. His first daughter is named Célesta."

"Almost like your name. Is it because you were taking care of her?"

"Well, you know, in the old families, the name of the oldest daughter was given to the oldest son's first born daughter. It was a tradition."

"Is she married?"

"No. She's Maurice's right hand. Pretty much runs the domain. She's much older than you are but she has a younger

sister who's married and has a daughter your age. They live in Paris."

"Why haven't you told me about my cousins before?"

"*Petite*, your own heart has been too heavy for a long time. After the work slows, this winter, during the *veillées* around the fireplace at night, it will be a good time to tell you about your cousins and all the aunts, uncles you have not met yet."

"Can we go and visit them, sometime? Can we go to Fley?"

"It's far from here. At least one hundred kilometers."

"Aunt Céleste, you've never had a house of your own."

"Now, why are you thinking that? I did have a house. In Tulac. After our parents died my sisters and brothers decided to sell the farm and the land. I bought a house in Tulac."

"How come I never saw you?"

"It was a distance from your grandmother's house. Anyway I soon left for Fley after Maurice sent word that his new baby was sick and he needed me."

"Aunt Céleste, is Denis going to marry Juliette?"

"Hum . . . "

"Aunt Céleste, are you sleeping?"

Chapter X

Seduction

1928

At the Bassons' domain, Marcel repaired the chairs, benches, buffets and armoires and replaced gates in the outer buildings. He sensed Vonnie's eyes watching him wherever he worked but he gave no sign that he was aware of her hidden presence. She often walked with him when he went to church and no longer left him, without explanation, to go and meet her friends after the service. She had introduced him to Father Thériot and the priest had taken a quick liking to him.

"You know, Leblanc and his father before him have done most of the work in this church, but some of the panels, on the sides of the benches, need replacing. Would you do some of the sculpturing?"

"I have the few gouges Dureau lets me use. They're not very good."

"I'll bring the case of gouges I inherited from my father. I am quite useless with tools. My father did renovation work at the church of Colchester in England."

"You have English gouges?"

"Yes. They're supposed to be the best."

"The instructor at the orphanage where I learned drawing and sculpturing told us so. I'd like to see them."

"I'll have the case here, next time you come."

Marcel no longer waited for Vonnie after the church service. He just started on his way back and she usually walked next to him. Neither offered much about what their lives had been like before they arrived at Fley. Sometimes Vonnie mentioned a letter she'd just received from Paris but when he didn't ask about her family she wouldn't mention what her mother had to say. He couldn't have known the feeling of missing one's mother and she didn't resent that he didn't ask.

Two years had passed since Marcel's arrival at Dureau's workshop. Most of the work was left in the hands of the apprentice but fewer and fewer clients visited the out of the way workshop. Often there was no work to do so Marcel would go for long walks in the surrounding countryside. It was not unusual for Vonnie to meet him on her way back to the domain from the Vigny post office where she worked. Marcel knew she could have taken a much shorter route.

"How long are you going to stay here, at Dureau's?"

"I don't know. He does not really get enough work to pay me."

"There's an opening at the post office."

"The post office? I don't know that I'd like that. I wish I could learn more about making fine furniture, sculpting."

He lowered his head. Never before had he dared to express his secret wish to become so skilled and knowledgeable about wood sculpting that it could reach artistry.

"I'd have to move on," he added. "Dureau can't teach me very much and he hasn't got enough clients."

"Move where? The post office, it's steady work and steady pay, you know."

About a year later, on a warm June day, having walked longer than usual, he lay in the dry grass, pulled his hat over his eyes and thought of Vonnie. She was eighteen now, older than him by more than a year. He wanted to touch her black hair, wondered if her breasts were of the same very white skin as her face. He dozed off.

She saw his jacket hung on a tree branch. She hid the bicycle in the hedge, sat down and took her shoes off. She'd wait till he woke up. The sun was burning her legs. She removed her skirt, unbuttoned her white blouse. She lay next to him and waited. He felt the presence before waking up. She let the sides of her blouse fall apart.

"Oh, my God, Vonnie."

When Marcel worked at the Basson domain on Sundays, Vonnie avoided him and he felt relieved. He liked to meet her at "our

place", he told her. His passion overtook him almost as soon as she was near him. They hardly ever spoke. Vonnie only spoke of her life at the domain if she thought it might interest Marcel.

"Aunt Célesta said she has a cousin named Lisette who's an orphan too. She lived in Tulac. That's near the orphanage isn't it?"

"Yes. She told me about her."

"But now she lives with a brother of my grandfather, near the village of Villars."

Marcel said he didn't know where this was and neither had found anything else to say.

At Father Thériot's suggestion, Marcel had sculpted some panels to be affixed to the sides of the church's benches. On a cool September afternoon when dusk arrived early, warning of the approach of the short days of fall, he waited for Vonnie at the crossing of the path. He had Dureau's bicycle and thought he would ride to the village with her. He was surprised when she left her bicycle by a tree and walked the rest of the way to meet him.

At that very moment, he felt certain that Vonnie, standing a few feet away from him, was a very beautiful girl. He felt just as certain that he did not love her and hoped that he could avert his face so she wouldn't stroke it with her fingers.

"I have something to tell you, Marcel."

"Well, let's ride. I need to bring this panel to the church and I'm going to see Leblanc. His shop's bigger than Dureau's and he's got better tools. Father Thériot recommended me."

He took a step closer when she didn't move.

"I'm pregnant."

Vonnie placed her already lipstick-stained cigarette between her lips and smoke streamed from her nose. Marcel admired the beautiful shape of her face during the brief moment when the light from the dashboard lighter framed her pale skin against the darkness in the car.

"It's cold in the car. Aunt Célesta, will you roll up the window back there, please?"

"You know that I can't stand cigarette smoke, Vonnie."

Maurice Basson, sitting next to Célesta, remained quiet as he did during the short marriage ceremony at City Hall. He had said all he had to say when his granddaughter and Marcel announced their news. He had talked to Father Thériot about giving a blessing at the church in Fley but Vonnie had replied that she didn't see the point.

His feelings toward Marcel had turned from anger to commiseration. *Seventeen years old. A boy with talent.* When

Vonnie had asked his help in securing a job for him at the post office, he'd turned to Marcel, surprised:

"Is that what you want, Marcel? What about wood working? Leblanc is ready to take you on."

"I need a job with steady pay; that's not guaranteed in a woodworking shop. I want to take care of my family."

Wind blew in from the car's opened window. Maurice shivered.

"Put the cigarette out, Vonnie."

Vonnie turned her head back toward her grandfather, said nothing and put the cigarette out.

Marcel pressed slightly on the accelerator. It had been arranged that they would share a simple supper at the domain and spend the night there. The next morning, Vonnie and he would return to Vigny, to the one-room apartment they had rented, on their bicycles.

Chapter XI

Destiny

1929

Lisette saw Denis and Juliette coming out of the Aubin woods. They stopped and she watched them kissing lips to lips. What does a kiss like that feel like? Juliette and Denis told her many times, "You should meet young men. Come with us when we go to a dance. We'll introduce you to dancing partners." Fearful--she was not sure of what--she had always refused.

To accommodate the modern dances, particularly the waltz, the accordion had replaced the scratchy sounds of the *vielle* and the *cornemuse*. Just as quickly as the change in musical instruments, the open dance floor had been replaced by an enclosed dance-hall that was taken down and rebuilt in another village with the speed used in dismantling and putting up a circus tent. One summer Sunday, the building was set up in Villars.

"You can't complain that it is too far this time, Lisette, since it's right in our own village."

"All right, then."

Lisette sat at a small round table--too small for three chairs to fit properly--sipping the orangeade Denis had bought. When the dancers whirled near the crowded table, they stopped to talk to the young people from Bois-Chauds. Pierre Guillot came,

followed by his bride. He had married Marie Milliet just three weeks earlier. Lisette had excused herself from going to the wedding saying that she was needed at the farm since Aunt Céleste needed to rest more often. After the newlyweds left her table, Lisette felt relief. Her heart had not missed even one beat when Pierre Guillot stood near her. She turned her head to the side as she felt a gaze upon her. Georges was looking at her over the shoulder of his dancing partner. Their eyes met for just an instant.

"That was Georges Timbalier," Denis said as the couple passed near their table. "I hope he'll come and talk to us. I haven't seen him in a while."

"His father is in the village a lot, around either of the two café-bars," Juliette said. "That's trouble for Georges."

"What kind of trouble? Denis, you told me he was going to move away."

"People change their minds, Lisette."

Lisette had never spoken to anyone about her plans to leave Bois-Chauds. She certainly wouldn't have confided in her cousin, blabbermouth Denis. But Aunt Céleste's gaze weighed on her often, especially when she was deeply preoccupied with her plans, although, lately, they were less prominent in her mind. The sweetness and kindness Aunt Céleste constantly showered her with mellowed Lisette who felt a stronger bond building inside

her for her aunt. Particularly since the day she'd gone to the fair, day by day, a sort of comfortable torpidity grew in her mind as she went about her tasks. Cleaning the big room to a shine and a fresh scent, preparing exquisite breads and desserts, these tasks left in her an imprint of pleasure, domestic pleasure, and at the same time dimmed her plans to leave and moved them to the back of her mind. She began to embrace the monotony of her daily activities, and no wish to break it rose in her.

Georges glided past Lisette's table twirling in his arms a girl in a blue dress, then one in a green dress and then others, too quickly for her to recognize faces.

At the insistence of Juliette, Lisette agreed to dance with Denis, a head shorter than her. She also accepted to dance with the young men who came to talk to them after leaving the refreshment table, all along hoping the music would stop soon so she could free her hands from their sweaty palms. Finally Denis and Juliette could stand her evident discomfort no longer and offered to leave. Lisette was first near the door.

"You're not going to leave without dancing with me, are you Lisette?" Georges Timbalier's hand was on her arm and he was moving her back to the dance floor without waiting for an answer.

Georges held her closely and Lisette barely heard the music. They did not speak. The moment was enough. It was all right that she felt so light on her feet. She was simply happy.

When the music stopped, he whispered, "A fool will come and knock at your door next Sunday."

"Oh?"

"He'll want to take you to a ball."

"Does the fool have a name?"

"Will you come dancing with me, Lisette?"

She said nothing as he walked beside her to the door where Denis and Juliette were waiting.

The following Sunday Georges came to take Lisette dancing. And he came again, on many Sundays. Lisette felt that there was in him something that evoked a great wish to be loved, a need she thought she'd recognized a glimpse of within her but refused to get close to.

During a full week Aunt Céleste kept to her bed, coughing and feeling weak. When Sunday came, Lisette walked to the edge of the road to meet Georges.

"I won't go dancing today, Georges. I'm worried about Aunt Céleste. I've never known her to be sick for more than a day or two."

"Can't Denis's girl take care of her? Isn't she always at Bois-Chauds on Sundays?"

"I want to take care of Aunt Céleste myself, Georges. I'll see you soon."

Lisette returned to her aunt's room and sat on the high back chair next to the bed.

"Aren't you going dancing today, Lisette?"

"No, Aunt Céleste, I want you to get well."

The thin fingers of the old woman wrapped themselves around Lisette's hand.

"Lisette, I think you and I have gotten to be very good friends, and I'm getting very old so I want to talk to you."

"What is it, Aunt Céleste?"

"Denis knows many good young men from all the farms nearby. Give yourself the chance to meet people other than Georges Timbalier."

"Why Denis? And what is the point? You said so yourself. If the one . . . "

"What, Lisette?"

"You told me about woman's destiny, that night, when we came back from the fair on my sixteenth birthday. It's not for us to decide, you said. Anyway, it's not Georges's fault if his father drinks too much and his mother is too proud."

"Of course it's not. But Denis has observed Georges pouring alcohol from a flask in his drink, many times, and anywhere, even when he's at work."

Lisette lowered her head. She remembered smelling brandy on Georges's breath once, but how could Denis say things like that to Aunt Céleste?

"What is the real reason you do not like Georges, Aunt Céleste?"

"Child, in this young man's eyes there is not only the useless pride I saw in his mother's when we tried to help them soon after they moved here. There is also . . . I don't know what. Something scary, vengeance, I think."

Chapter XII

Two Weddings

1930

At Bois-Chauds the spring's birth was difficult that year. The month of February had been extraordinarily cold and March brought steady and heavy rains on seeds that had barely begun to germinate. Snow still came now and then, hesitant, preventing the hedges from showing new, pale green leaves. Only the peach trees dared the cold and showed their pink flowers. Young trees bent left and right but quickly straightened their supple branches following the passing of a gust of wind.

Then, suddenly, the weather was calm and spring was here. Along the alley leading to the main road, the buds on the wild chestnut trees grew large in a few days and soon, as if it had taken a deep breath, the entire countryside turned the color of emerald. The morning air felt sweet and fresh.

One Sunday afternoon, Lisette told Georges that she knew where the first wild flowers of the season were hiding. She walked ahead on the path that circled the fields. The wheat, already high, shined in waves under the passing caress of the wind. The violets sheltered their tender stems, their pale blue flowers behind the tall grasses. Lisette saw them first. She crouched to pick some at their base. Georges sat on the ground and pulled Lisette close to him. As always when she was in his

arms, she felt a melting of her whole being, her body warming and softening, malleable as dough. They kissed a long time and she wanted everything around to remain still, the passion in their bodies to be imprinted into the earth. Georges spoke first.

"When are you going to tell your folks that we want to marry. You keep saying it is not the right time. I love you, Lisette. I want to be with you."

"I feel the same way, Georges."

"But your folks, they treat me like an intruder. If we're walking around the fields, their eyes seem glued to the back of my head. If the rain keeps us inside playing cards, I feel I should lose, because they deserve to win."

"It's not like that at all, Georges."

"Denis is all right. Back in school we were good friends. Your uncle, on the other hand, I can sense his animosity toward me."

"Why do you think these things?"

"I want us to be together, Lisette."

"That's what I want too, Georges. But where are we going to live? I always seem to be living in someone else's house."

"What do you mean?"

"I was so little when my father died that all I remember of him is walking with him to a store and being afraid that my hand

would slip out of his big hand. Then I remember being with my *grand'mère*."

"That was your home, where you grew up, wasn't?"

"I thought it was. Grandmère and I . . . we were always together. I thought she was like my mother. But when she left me at Bois-Chauds, I began to feel that *La Roche*, where we lived together, was her home, not mine."

"She must have thought it was best for you."

"That's what she said, but . . ."

"But what, Lisette?"

"She just took care of me for a while, then she brought me to *Bois-Chauds* for Uncle Vincent to take care of me till I get married. Then another man would take care of me in some one else's home, not mine."

"I thought you loved your grandmother; you told me you did."

"I did, but after she left, I didn't think I was like her daughter any more, that's why I didn't follow her."

"You couldn't have, Lisette. Her house was too far from Bois-Chauds."

"I could have. I'd have found the way. I just didn't think she wanted me. But I decided that I wouldn't think of any home as my home anymore, ever, that way I wouldn't be disappointed."

"I thought they loved you and treated you real well at Bois-Chauds."

"They do; I love Aunt Céleste. I just wish . . ."

"We'll have our own house, I promise Lisette. We won't stay at *La Bauderie* long. Just to start. What do you say Lisette? Let's get married soon."

They kissed again and Lisette was sure she wanted to remain in Georges's arms. "I'll talk to Aunt Céleste tonight. I promise."

The sun's rays were already taking back their promise of warmth when they returned to the farm. In the yard, they spoke a moment with Denis and Juliette.

"Come in, Georges, and have a piece of pie."

Lisette realized that she had been gone a long time and Aunt Céleste must have set the table for the afternoon snacks by herself. She caught Georges' eye but didn't say anything as she hurried toward the door.

"I'd better be going," said Georges, "but thanks all the same."

His floating stride covered distance rapidly. *Even when he walks, he looks like he's dancing,* thought Denis.

Many a time, before going to sleep, Lisette had prepared in her mind the words she would speak to Aunt Céleste. Tonight,

when her aunt said "good night," Lisette simply replied, "Aunt Céleste, Georges and I want to be married this year."

"But, child, I thought you had agreed not to make up your mind about him yet."

"There is no point, Aunt Céleste."

Lisette heard a sigh; that was all.

After breakfast, Céleste followed Vincent outside, leaving Lisette to clear the table. Brother and sister never discussed matters that concerned their family inside the house. Outdoors, difficult words seemed easier to say. Céleste opened the low wooden gate of her herb garden, and picked up the knife with the missing handle from the top of an overturned oaken half-barrel. Vincent sat on it and kicked in place the iron hoop that threatened to come loose. He watched Céleste bend, slide the blade in the soil around a head of lettuce and slice the root.

"What is it, Céleste, is Louis still refusing to learn his lessons?"

"Louis is doing fine now. Lisette could have been a teacher; she's turned him around so well. It's about . . . we'd better let these children become engaged at Easter."

"Last Denis spoke to me about this, he said they'd wait till Christmas to announce their engagement and marry next year."

"It's not just Denis and Juliette. Lisette wants to marry Georges."

"What? You know how I feel about this boy. He's been seen with too much drink and he gets in fights. I'll go talk to Lisette."

Céleste held his arm.

"No, Vincent, listen to me. She is not going to change her mind. I'm getting old; I don't feel strong. I want to see Lisette and Denis married before my time comes."

"What are you talking about? Why didn't you say anything? I'll send for the doctor."

"No. I'm not sick now, just old, but I'll get sick again, likely. We're going to have two weddings, Vincent, and all of our brothers and sisters are going to come. It's time we all see each other."

"But that boy Georges, he's not . . ."

"Whatever he is, Lisette loves him and she is strong. She'll have to live her life as a wife. Things weren't always smooth for you, Vincent. Remember?"

Vincent remembered. Since he arrived at Bois-Chauds, about nine years earlier, clemency had spread its protective arms on Vincent's life and on his family and it seemed, when work

slacked and he had time to think, that the terrible times had been a dream. The memory, suddenly recalled, clouded his face.

After the death of his wife, he lost interest in everything. All that he had owned had been mortgaged to pay for the expenses of the long illness. At the auction, he watched his neighbors haggle over his cattle, his two horses, the machinery he'd bought when he still thought that his wife's illness was not serious. The bank had taken possession of the small house he had helped to build with so much pride. All that was left was a barn. Denis, barely out of childhood, had been placed in a farm to guard sheep. Kind neighbors had taken Albert and Louis to give Vincent a little time to arrange his life. But, at times, Vincent disappeared for weeks and never came to see his two little boys. When he was seen coming back to his barn, no one dared to talk to him. His angry stride, his wild comings and goings, the look on his face were signs, people thought, of a demented person. There was talk of contacting the authorities, of abandonment, of orphanage. Someone sent word to Fley, at Maurice's domain.

One night, as he entered his barn where his tools were rusting, he came face to face with Céleste.

"This cannot go on, Vincent."

She searched in the black bag she had left on the floor, pulled and lit a candle, and made him sit on the floorboards

facing her. They paid no mind to the heavy rain that fell in gray sheets and ran in narrow, yellow rivulets in front of the opened door. Vincent found nothing to say but Céleste talked and he listened as the softness of his sister's face brought to his mind those times when he was still a child and she a girl, a young woman almost. He recalled that he loved her more than anyone else, more than his mother, perhaps, and how he would never disobey her. He remembered following her everywhere.

"I have some money," Céleste was saying. "I hardly have need or time to spend any of it."

She explained what needed to be done. Vincent listened, although his mind drifted off often. When the candle burnt itself out, she got up.

"Your neighbors, those who've been taking care of Albert and Louis all this time, offered me to spend the night. It's too late and too dark tonight to walk to my little house. Vincent, why didn't you go there, to my house, why didn't you tell me?"

He didn't answer.

"You must stay here tonight, Vincent. I'll be back early in the morning."

And she did. She came holding the hands of Albert and Louis. Vincent was still in the barn.

"Come now, Vincent, come with us."

They walked the five or six kilometers to the little house she had left when Maurice had asked her to come.

They opened the shutters and the closets and found linen. Logs had been left in the fireplace waiting for a return. Water was put to boil for coffee, Vincent settled in a chair staring at his boys as if he didn't recognize them. Céleste began talking again, repeating what she had said the night before because she didn't think that Vincent had heard her. But when she was through, he walked to the shed. From the threshold she saw him riding her bicycle on the path away from her house. She gathered the two little boys in her arms and said, "It's going to be all right, it's going to be all right."

When Vincent returned near dark, he said, "It's arranged for us to take over the farming of Bois-Chauds's domain. We have to get there as soon as possible."

The next day, Céleste went to look for Denis. She knew the farmers who hired him and knew the field where he was most likely to be found. From a distance, she saw the fire he had built and saw where he was crouching in the shelter of a hedge. He didn't see her approaching. She stopped a moment and watched him trimming with his knife a thin hazelnut branch. She watched his face expecting to see traces of the distress he must have

suffered; but he was calm, blessed perhaps by the forgetfulness granted to little children who suffer unspeakable losses. She thought of the many hours he spent here daily, crouched in the mist, lost in memories, dreams broken only by the bells of his herd, and perhaps, in the distance, the call of another shepherd, the sounds of small animals. He began to cry when she kissed him.

"Warm yourself by my fire, Aunt Céleste, please don't leave right away."

"I came to get you, Denis. Gather your flock. I'll accompany you and we'll explain to the farmer. Your father is going to manage a domain. It's far from here; we'll have to leave tomorrow."

"What about my brothers?"

"They're waiting at my house with your father. You're going to be a family, all together again; none of you will need to work for your bread at someone else's house any more."

With the tips of his fingers, the boy pushed aside the ashes and gathered the few chestnuts that were roasting there. He placed them in the deep pocket of his cape then killed his fire with handfuls of wet grass.

Vincent remembered how Denis had thrown himself into work as soon as they arrived at Bois-Chauds. There had been times when he had had to tell him to slow down.

"All right then, Céleste, it will be as you say. They can be engaged Easter Sunday and married in the fall."

"Maurice will have to be notified, all our brothers and sisters must come. You've worked hard but you've done well, Vincent. It's time for joy, thanks, and it's time we all see each other again."

"What about the engagement? What do you want to do?"

"The priest must be told so he'll make the announcement at mass Sunday. I'm sure he'll join us before vespers Easter afternoon. We'll bake pies and we'll celebrate simply here with Juliette's and Georges' folks."

Vincent looked at his sister; she seemed fine. Had she meant anything out of the ordinary when she said her strength had weakened?

On the afternoon of Easter Sunday, the wedding plans were made. Invitations had to be sent out right away. Dresses and suits would have to be ordered and made. Maurice, the oldest, was also the one who lived the farthest away. Vincent said that he would ask permission at the manor to prepare the small, unoccupied cottage that adorned the clearing near the back of

the house. Vincent wanted Maurice to stay several days. The Saturday of the feast of Saint Michel was selected as the wedding day. All summer chores would be over and bright skies with cooler sunrays could be expected. The wedding party would meet at Bois-Chauds and leave together for highmass at Villars. Friends and neighbors would wait for them and greet them in the farm's yard on their return. The tables would be set outside so people could enjoy the day well into the night.

On the morning of her wedding day, when not even the palest ray of light filtered yet through the slatted shutters, Lisette was kneeling by her bed.

The summer work had been exhausting. She saw Georges only when he could come help at Bois-Chauds and they sat next to one another at the lunch table during the noon break. On such occasion, he'd said, "It's only when you're sitting next to me, like this, that I believe you really love me."

"Why is that, Georges?"

"This place, you're the light of it for me. You're the only thing here that matters."

A farm hand standing nearby had been admiring them.

"A giant I'm like when I'm near you. I could beat any man looking at you."

"Georges!"

He'd reached for her hand and she felt the shiver that ran inside her every time his skin touched hers.

He worked relentlessly, seemed to have split himself in three persons. After years of decline, the harvest at *La Bauderie* had been plentiful. Georges' father had regained some confidence and stamina, given up drinking and worked hard by his son's side. They had brought in two cuttings of hay, repaired the barn, spoke of buying another horse. When he could, Georges also helped at the big Guillot farm. Lisette was bursting with pride. "See!" she wanted to say to her aunt and uncle.

Lisette felt a hand on her shoulder.

"I've prepared your bath water and set some towels; you'd better start getting ready. Juliette will be here soon."

"Aunt Céleste, you don't think Juliette could forget my dress, do you?"

Juliette had made both of their dresses. The closer the wedding day approached, the more anxious Lisette got, the more weight she lost. Juliette had had to make final adjustments.

"She can't possibly forget your dress since she's bringing her own so you can both get dressed here."

While Lisette prayed by her bed, Vincent sat on a log near the oat field that bordered the road. He was searching the sky looking for signs of good weather. Suddenly, dawn had risen

above the forest in the shape of a pink and bright disk. Reassured, he went to the stables because that was the place where he liked to think. His oldest son was getting married. His niece--almost his daughter--was getting married. He had seen Georges work very hard all summer long and felt that he should make up in some way for the doubts he had had about him. Vincent felt a great surge of hope for the children that were getting married today. All of his brothers and sisters, his friends and neighbors would share the joy of this day. Since the arrival at Bois-Chauds, his life had been rewarding. This year he could sell more grain than any other year, the sheep were fat and woolly, he was able to hire more help, he had bought a tractor and was thinking of buying an automobile. Today, even if he could never forget the terrible times of the past, he could believe that there could be happiness, that life could be good.

Vincent returned to the roadway to wait for the first carriage. He heard the thump of a wooden shoe.

"Mère Durand, you're early."

"You want your company to eat well-roasted chickens, don't you? I'd better get started plucking them."

Vincent had hired several ladies from the village to come assist Mère Durand with the cooking, serving and cleaning. Céleste had said that only if she knew that Mère Durand would be

looking after everything could she enjoy herself with her family.

"You'll stay as long as you can, won't you Mère Durand?"

"There won't be a thing left to clean up by the time I leave Vincent. Don't worry."

In the distance, Vincent heard the wheels of the first carriage. Juliette and her parents were talking to him even before the carriage stopped. He helped the ladies down and Juliette ran inside to find her friend. Her mother followed with the bridal dresses on her arm. Soon he heard the two girls shrieking with pleasure. He was standing in the middle of the lane, head leaning to the side, when the next carriage arrived. Of the two women sitting on the back seat, one was his sister, he was sure, even though it had been more than ten years since he'd seen her. The other was his sister-in-law. Maurice had not changed very much. He was an older man now but looking robust. There were tears in everyone's eyes as greetings were exchanged.

"The last time I saw my nephew, he was so short we couldn't find him among the cows," Maurice was saying. "Is he truly getting married today?"

"Yes, he is Maurice. He's a capable man now. Hard working too."

Until his mother died, Denis spent the summers at the domain of his oldest uncle. On his return home, he'd tell his dad, proudly, "Uncle Maurice said he would show me how to be the best farmer and have a large domain like his. He did, *Père*, he did tell me that."

Vincent understood the trust his little boy had placed in Maurice. Even though his hair was gray now, his long and open face had retained the same softness, the softness that was also in Céleste's face. But perhaps, it was Maurice's voice that left people with an impression of reliability. It was sure, tranquil, so when he spoke, people believed him and listened.

"Where's Céleste," one of the sisters said.

"She's helping the young ladies getting dressed. You're about to see the two most beautiful brides you've seen in a long time. But you must come in, have something cold to drink."

Around the table, the laughing, greeting, exchanging of news continued while in the bedroom, Céleste was closing the last of the pearl buttons on the back of Lisette's dress.

"Aunt Céleste, who are all these people? Please open the door just a bit and see if Georges and his folks have arrived?"

"You've asked me two minutes ago and I looked. Be still so I can finish buttoning your dress."

Juliette was giggling.

"At least, I don't have to worry about my groom. He lives here."

On the verge of tears, Lisette looked at her friend. Amazed at the glow of the young woman, she forgot her hurt and said, "You're beautiful, Juliette."

"So are you, Lisette. Look, look at yourself in the mirror."

There was a knock on the door. Vincent called out.

"Everybody is here. We'll wait for you outside."

The men lined up on one side of the front door, the two bridegrooms ending the row. The ladies lined up on the other side. Next to his father, Albert shifted from foot to foot to release the pressure from his new shoes. Louis pulled on the sleeves of the blue jacket he had not worn since his communion. When the two brides stood in the doorway, a hush filled the yard. Lisette only saw the sun shining on Georges' blond hair. Her eyes barely touched his. It was enough.

The two young couples settled in the first carriage, then the immediate parents in the next two carriages until everyone was installed again in the manner in which they had arrived. When the wedding carriage reached the end of the alley of wild chestnuts, the last cart was just leaving the yard.

The village's streets were lined with carriages from the overflow of the small square. People came out of their houses,

pushing here and there to come closer and see the brides, to be part of the excitement. Juliette's father and Maurice were the first to extend their arms to help the brides out of the carriage with extraordinary precautions. The white mousseline of the dresses, inundated by rays of sun, gave the appearance of masses of white flowers. The smiling brides waited while the procession formed behind them and the bells began to ring.

Inside the air felt warm and the scent of flowers was heady. Through the stained glass, the slanted rays of sun left large spots of red and blue on flagstones and seats. The flames of so many candles, vases overflowing with flowers created a sea of white and gold. The organ played. Albert thought that he was in a dream until Louis's fidgetiness forced him out of it. He tried to focus on the brides and grooms standing near the altar and watched their serious faces as they listened to the priest. Albert was about to return to his dream when it happened. Every head turned up toward the loft because they expected music to come from there. But the sound came from the front row where the immediate family sat. A long, pure, soft and lovely voice had risen unexpectedly. All was hushed at once--even breathing, it seemed--as everyone recognized the harmony and tender words of the *Ave Maria*. Georges' mother had stood up to sing; her husband stood up too, gently holding her elbow. When the song ended, people remained quiet, perhaps

waiting for more, but the voice returned to the hidden place where it had been.

The two brides, having been pronounced wives, headed toward the Virgin Marie's statue to deposit their bouquet. Lisette stopped in front of her mother-in-law, pulled white roses from her bouquet and handed them to the woman from whom she had received nothing but a distant coldness until that moment.

The bells pealed, fast and sonorous, as the two young couples made their way down the aisle and down the church's steps.

At Bois-Chauds everything was ready, calm and waiting. Faro had given up his spot near the front door and stretched away at the foot of a tree, barely raising his head when he heard the carriages returning. Men removed harnesses, led horses away, women went inside to put down hats and jackets. The meal was going to be long and slow. There was news to be exchanged: illnesses, communions, school successes, major purchases. Lisette found herself surrounded by ladies--we're your aunts, they all said--all talking at the same time. An older man approached, wrapped his long arms around the women and said, "*Mes mignonnes*, let me take my niece away a few minutes so I can introduce myself."

"Maurice, said one of them, "Be sure and sit next to me at the table, I want to talk to you."

Maurice had taken Lisette's elbow and walked a few steps with her.

"Lisette, it was a day like today, when I sat next to your mother on the day she married my brother Félix. She was beautiful, too. You look just like her."

Lisette blushed a little.

"Uncle Maurice, I haven't yet met my cousin, Célesta. I want to talk to her. Aunt Céleste told me that she took care of Célesta when she was just born."

"She sure did. But Célesta couldn't come. Monique is sick. That's my great granddaughter. Her grandmother is my other daughter, the one who lives in Paris, Christiane."

"Aunt Céleste never told me about her."

"That's probably because Christiane was not born yet, when Céleste left to come live here at Bois-Chauds."

"How old is Monique?"

"She's nearly a year old. Her parents, my granddaughter Vonnie and her husband, work at the post office in the next village from Fley. It wouldn't be possible for them to come pick up Monique every night and bring her back in the morning."

"Did Vonnie meet her husband in Paris?"

"No. He was an apprentice in a woodworker's shop in Fley. After they married he took a job at the same post office where

his wife worked, in Vigny. It's about ten kilometers from Fley."

"I hope to meet them some day, Céleste, Monique and her parents."

"I'm sure you will, Lisette. Marcel, that's Vonnie's husband's name--Marcel Bonin--grew up not far from where you did, near Tulac."

"Maybe I know him, although there were only a few boys in my school and I don't recognize the name."

"I doubt that you would have met him, Lisette, he grew up in an orphanage. Come now, I want to sit next to you at the table so we can talk some more."

Ladies, arms laden with large platters of food, demanded space to put them down on the table. Céleste, surrounded by her sisters, smiled happily. Maurice answered Denis' questions about the latest improvements at his domain and made sure Lisette's plate was refilled with food. Bottles of wine were passed around. Georges drew his glass closer to him and covered it with his hand. Vincent, having observed the gesture, worried, remembering a remark Denis had made about Georges' preference for brandy: *does he want to remain totally sober or does he need the strong alcohol?* After coffee was served, Vincent brought in the *eau-de-vie* that had been distilled from the domain's fruits.

"That's from the best plums we've had in years," he said.

Georges filled his glass, quaffed the drink and refilled his glass.

"Père Morin, you must try this plum," said Vincent to an old man, a neighbor, across the table from him, passing him the bottle.

Georges laughed. Céleste had been watching too and thought she heard a snickering in Georges' laughter. Lisette placed her hand on the sleeve of her new husband, "What is it, Georges?"

He took his bride to the dance floor. If he said something, she didn't hear it. If the answer was in his eyes, she didn't see it.

Then Père Timbalier came up to the young couple.

"I'm going to take your mother home now, Georges."

Georges brought Lisette back to her seat and he walked with his father.

"Son, I've seen you work very hard since you and Lisette decided to marry. You've given me back my confidence, hope. I gave up drinking. Don't need it. Working the farm by your side is all the pleasure I need. Be careful of that hard liquor, son."

"I can handle it."

His father's breath seemed to be suspended in the air for one second. Then he continued.

"You don't want to ruin Lisette's life and yours. When I was drinking, well, your mother's life was unhappier. Take care of Lisette. That plum liquor . . . just take care."

Georges was about to answer when his mother called. His father turned away.

Evening butterflies were beginning to fly around the lamps when someone began playing an old song on a small, red accordion. Aunt Céleste smiled, remembering, perhaps, a time long ago. Lisette, awed by the feast, fatigued by the excitement, put her hand on her Uncle Vincent's arm as he passed near her and said, "Thank you."

The moon appeared suddenly behind the sheep barn leaving a white spot on the ground. Deep shadows recessed around the trees. Men brought horses and carriages. Women went inside and returned with hats and coats. Lanterns were attached to the carriages and people were still calling each other as one by one the wagons moved away. Vincent walked proudly next to his oldest brother as he accompanied him and his wife toward the cottage. Sometimes they talked, but mostly they quietly enjoyed being with each other.

Denis and Juliette stood by the mare and the light cabriolet. For the past several days, while Céleste kept Lisette occupied, they had decorated the cart with long ribbons

of bright colors. When Vincent returned, he touched Georges' arm and shook his hand.

"Take your bride home," he said.

Georges helped Lisette to settle on the bench, the whip cracked in the air and they were gone.

The sound of the horses' hooves was no longer audible but Vincent had not moved. He was looking into the night as if there was something there he wanted to connect with. He didn't hear Céleste right away as she walked up to him.

"Yes, Vincent, Lisette's struggles may have just begun."

Brother and sister walked to the house. One by one the lights inside went out. Vincent didn't sleep. He saw the moonlight decline then the light of the new day coming in slices through the shutters' slats. The first steps he heard were not, for the first time in many years of mornings, Lisette's steps.

Chapter XIII

La Bauderie

1931

Three weeks had passed since her marriage to Georges, and Lisette was still not quite used to the rhythm of life at *La Bauderie*. Her mother-in-law's resistance to accompany Père Timbalier to the market every Saturday for the weekly shopping intrigued her.

"Your parents don't seem to like going to the market," she said one Saturday morning. She poured the dishwater in the sink and handed Georges the last plate to dry off.

"The back and forth, you mean? It's always been like that. He wants to go, but thinks she does not want him to. She pretends she wants to go and gets dressed, then finds excuses, makes him wait, then does not go anyway. I'm used to it."

"Then we'll go, Georges."

Her mother-in-law accepted the offer promptly.

"You take your father's *Peugeot* today, Georges."

The following week, Georges harnessed the black horse to the buggy and told Lisette to go ahead without him, he had work to do at the high field. Since then, Georges had accompanied her only once.

At Villars, Lisette bought the sewing material, the knitting wool, the salt and sugar, new stockings for her mother-

in-law, the *Nouvelles du Centre* for her Father-in-law. If Juliette was at the soft goods shop visiting her parents, Lisette lingered a while. The two brides exchanged news. Lisette wanted to know every detail of life at Bois-Chauds, about Aunt Céleste, about Uncle Vincent, everything. Denis joined them after his own shopping was done.

On a particularly cold Saturday in February, Lisette was preparing to leave the village, disappointed. The usual agitation in the market had been subdued, people said snow was in the air, and she had seen neither her friend nor her cousin. She was arranging her packages when she heard Juliette call.

"Wait, Lisette, we'll take you home."

She waited for them, relieved. Her shoes were wet and muddy and her feet cold. She no longer waited to see if Georges was going to harness the horse or bring her in the car. The wooden gate of *La Bauderie* closed behind her, she gave no thought to the five kilometers in front of her; she simply started walking.

Denis picked up her bags and took her arm. He'd stopped asking if Georges was nearby and Lisette had stopped offering excuses.

"Let's go and have a glass of limonade at *Berry-France* before we leave. Juliette can tell you about our new purchase;

that's why we were late. The car is parked just across the street.

Inside the café, it was warm. People's voices sounded happy and the ceiling fixtures shone brightly. From their table, they could see, on the other side of the wide windows, shoppers walking hurriedly about. Lisette relaxed in her chair.

"Lisette, what's wrong, you look so tired," said Juliette as soon as they were seated.

"Nothing's wrong, Juliette, I'm going to have a baby."

"Oh, how wonderful, I envy you so much." Excited, Juliette asked one question after another. With each additional question, Lisette got excited too, barely listening to Denis' explanations of the new purchase. She just heard words: stove, blue porcelain, metal burners.

To Lisette, the return drive to *La Bauderie* was too short. She hoped that Juliette didn't see her sadness when they pulled up at the farm and she was glad when Juliette said, "We won't go in today, Lisette, because we're late. But we'll see you next week."

Lisette was slowly putting her purchases away. She spread her hands tenderly on the skein of knitting wool, a pastel color this time. She saw that her fingers were stained; her nails untrimmed. *I'm just eighteen, my hands have pulled vegetables*

from the soil, squeezed the juices of fruits since I was a child.

Her mother-in-law interrupted Lisette's thoughts.

"I put the rest of the meal away; you were late returning. I thought you probably had a bite to eat with your cousins."

"How could that be possible? Juliette and Denis are expected at their house for dinner. And I thought I was. But I'm not hungry."

Lisette was angry. She had not said anything when, on occasions, her plate was left out when the table was being set. She had not said anything when the clothes were taken down from the clotheline but her own linen was left there, forgotten. Her mother-in-law knew very well that Lisette wouldn't have eaten in town.

Lisette walked to her bedroom and Georges' but stopped before entering as she did every time since her arrival at the house. She remembered the words her mother-in-law spoke then: "We've worked hard to re-do this room for you, *Chère Petite*." The floor had been covered with a brown, dismal-looking linoleum and wallpaper the color of oatmeal had been hung on the walls. Two framed images of men in military uniforms decorated the wall facing their bed. "They look awful, Georges," Lisette had said and he turned the images so they faced the wall. Both of them

laughed and nothing more was said about the room. But Lisette never pulled from her trunk the small treasures she had meant to surround herself with: her grandmother's bonnet, a yellowed photograph of the parents she had really never known, a metal box with an image of Saint-Michel Abbey painted on the cover. "Maybe your husband will take you there on your honeymoon," her grandmother had said, once, when she was still a young girl and her mind was focused on the cookies inside the box. Now it contained *grand'mère's* letters.

Lisette pulled a folded apron of coarse, blue material from the armoire, wrapped it around her waist, tied the strings in front, closed the door of the bedroom exceedingly hard behind her and picked up the basket that awaited on the side table by the sink.

"I'll go feed the chickens and gather some eggs," she told her Mother-in-law without turning to look at her.

"I'd come help you but I don't feel very strong today. I think I'll rest a while, then prepare the vegetables for the soup."

In the yard, Lisette wished she had paid more attention when Denis described their major purchase. Now she was not sure what he said exactly. *Juliette says she envies me . . . she couldn't envy living here. I wish I could have stayed in the village.*

Absent-mindedly, she threw the feed ahead of the chickens, and walked behind them. She picked up nearly one dozen of brown eggs, each a nice size. When she came back inside, her mother-in-law was sitting in the high back chair near the fireplace, sleeping. Lisette looked into her face, at the high cheekbones, the well-shaped pointed nose, the narrow lips, the dry skin, the glasses nearly falling off, the fading light hair. *She must have been beautiful*, thought Lisette. She imagined truly blond hair, wide eyes intensely blue, skin white and soft. Lisette was not sure whether the wide-rimmed eyeglasses she wore now were needed to enhance the sight of eyes turned the color of washed-out sky, or whether they simply provided a convenient barrier between her and other people.

Lisette sat at the table and began scraping the carrots, and peeling the potatoes.

"Oh, *Chère Petite*, I was going to do this. I must have dozed off. Well, I will start the coffee. The men will be coming in for their coffee soon. Did you bring the rolls from the bakery?"

Lisette had not gone into the bakery. The mixed scents of melting butter, sugar, fruit compote, had brought up nausea from the pit of her stomach; she had turned around.

"No, I didn't. They'll have to slice a *boule* of bread."

"But Lisette, you know how I enjoy a roll once a week."

Fearing a return of the nausea, Lisette went out without offering excuses or explanations. She stepped in the field and leaned against the lone tree that stood at the edge. She took a deep breath.

"What are you doing here? Aren't we having coffee? It's time for our snack."

"I'm sick to my stomach, Georges. You go ahead in."

Georges moved close to Lisette, his knees pressed hers, forced her legs apart.

"Please, Georges, stop."

Georges increased his pressure against her body, his right hand reached inside her blouse, wrapped itself around her breast. His left hand groped up against her leg, moved inside her panties.

"Georges, we're outside."

"We're in a field, all alone. Embrace me. That's my girl. Open your legs. Come."

When Lisette turned her head, she saw her father-in-law in the yard.

"Please, Georges, your father is looking for us. Stop. I'm pregnant."

Georges released his pressure on Lisette, wiped the sweat across his forehead on her shoulder, leaving a wet spot on the material of her shirt.

"You're sure? That's great! Hey, *Père*, Lisette is going to have a baby. You're going to be a grandfather!"

Georges put his arm around Lisette's shoulders and together they walked toward her father-in-law. *Maybe things are going to be all right after all.*

They went inside the house, the three of them, and made the announcement.

"Then you must have warm milk instead of coffee, Lisette," said her mother-in-law, and Lisette began to wonder if she could learn to like her mother-in-law.

From time to time, Lisette glanced at Georges. He buttered his slices of bread in a very careful and determined manner. Her father-in-law was absorbed in his reading of the newspaper.

"This German has been fomenting revolutions everywhere in Europe. He's a dangerous man."

"What man," Georges said.

"Hitler."

Père Timbalier's comments reminded Lisette of bits of conversations she'd heard at the grocery store.

"There's a new family in Villars; refugees from Spain. Their farm was burned to the ground; they lost everything they owned."

"And more will come running ahead of the marching fascists," added père. "With their banners and their insignia, the fascists are marching, destroying . . ."

"Ah, our region is of no strategic interest to anyone. We're isolated here, the warmongers don't know we exist." Georges was cutting a new slice of bread.

The serious look on Père Timbalier's face meant that he thought differently, Lisette understood that.

"We should have a gift for you, Lisette," said her mother-in-law.

"A gift, we should have a gift for your wonderful news," Timbalier père repeated.

Lisette looked at both of them in surprise. Christmas had passed and New Year had passed, and neither had offered the smallest gift. She had missed Faro and asked--at the beginning of winter--if she could get a dog. "A red setter would be nice," she'd said.

"Chère petite, you know, with my health, it's best not to have such an animal near me."

Lisette accepted the rebuff without protest as she had accepted the rebuff at her attempts to enliven the big room with flowers, soon after her marriage. Fall had lingered in

beautiful long days, filling the vines with endlessly blooming roses.

On the day following the news of her pregnancy, Georges came in the kitchen, pulled the dishtowel from Lisette, dropped it on the table, took her hand, and walked out with her toward the barn.

She heard the whimpering sound before they got close to the basket. The puppy was wrapped in a blanket, his ears flapping on his face. When Lisette picked him up and brought him close to her own warmth, his wide eyes looked up.

"Oh, Georges, thank you. But he's going to be cold here."

"Not if we keep him close to the animals. They'll keep him warm. What are you going to call him? I couldn't get a red setter."

"I think I'll call him Basha."

"It's a strange name."

"I remember it from a story I read in school; a soft sound, soft like this puppy's coat."

The puppy got used to being fed and caressed when Lisette came to the barn to take care of the animals. After a few weeks, she took him to the fields with her around the farm. On their return, if Lisette's mother-in-law opened the door, the

dog let out a barking outburst and the light went out of his eyes. He turned himself around and trotted toward the barn.

He quickly became a fairly large dog. His coat seemed to mature, turning from sandy to a golden and vibrant color like the wheat. Harvesting would have to be early as the summer came early, hot and dry. Harvesting was prearranged among the neighboring farmsteads. Because there was only one field, it would come last at *La Bauderie*. Lisette walked more slowly, her child growing heavy in her, Basha growing impatient. He would run far ahead, then would double back at great speed showing every sign that a collision with her was imminent but, at the last minute, he would put on brakes coming to a dead stop and looking at her with a devouring gaze. "I'm coming," she would say, "I'm coming."

The crop was beautiful, each full stalk ready to spill its life-giving grain. Georges had said it would bring in a nice price.

"We'll buy a sow and a shoat. By Christmas it'll be ready to be butchered. We'll make *boudin* and hoghead cheese; we'll have hams."

The immediate consequence of such a purchase would mean more work for Lisette. She knew that. She glanced at her

mother-in-law and thought of the excuses she would offer to Lisette for not helping her.

"We'd have to hire help," said Lisette.

"Help?"

The threshing machine was rented for the first week in August and the helpers hired. Trestle tables were set up for the lunch break. Lisette knew she'd be able to manage the walk from the house to the field to bring up the food and drink only once. As soon as she arrived, she put the provisions on the ground by the shade of a tree, leaned her back against the trunk, slid and sat down. Basha rested his head on her lap, occasionally slavering on her cheek. She looked at the men working feverishly a few yards from her. Georges was not there.

She returned slowly down the path, stopping to rest on a log, on a turned-over barrel, on a bale of hay until she finally reached the barn where the huge doors were wide open. In the house, the absence of any breeze made her so uncomfortable that she spent more and more time in the barn where she liked the scent of crushed straw and Basha was always by her side.

She slept. The cows' mooing woke her up.

"I know, my beauties. It's time."

She pulled the three-legged stool and began milking the full udders in a pail then emptied it in the drum. It was nearly filled to the top when Georges came in.

"Where have you been, Georges? You weren't at the field when I took the lunch up. The truck from the milk processing plant will stop at the edge of the lane in ten minutes. You almost missed it. All this milk would go to waste."

He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "I can go where I please."

"What are you doing, Georges? Let go of me. You've been drinking, Georges."

She saw the stiffness on his face and the threat in his eyes. Her round belly made her awkward but she knew that she would and could defend herself. The thought, though, that her husband would hit her was so monstrous that it filled her with panic.

"It's not possible, Georges, that you would hit me?"

"Why isn't it? Because you're a Basson?"

"What have my folks done to you?"

"Ah, they're always so good! Work hard and they'll smile at you even if they hate you. But I got their pearl, didn't I?"

He held on to her arm, tightening it in his powerful hand, waiting, she thought, for her to speak, to act. She said nothing, didn't move. The two large tears that ran down her

cheeks lost themselves in the corners of her mouth. Then his face got red and he let go.

"I've hurt you. I'm sorry. It won't happen again; I love you so much."

Lisette returned to the kitchen and washed the dishes from the afternoon snack that had been left in the sink.

That night, she believed Georges when he told her again that he loved her and she forgave him.

On the second Saturday in August, Lisette approached the car as Père Timbalier was leaving for the market. After her pregnancy had become too advanced, it was he who had insisted on going. "You'd better bring the doctor back with you," said Lisette.

He got out of the car, took her elbow, brought her inside, then hurried up out again.

"Oh, *Chère Petite*, what can I do? You must lie down. But where is Georges? And this dog! Will it ever stop barking?"

"I'll go and keep him quiet."

Lisette was glad for the excuse to leave the house and be in the barn where she felt at ease with the animals. She quickly spread layers of hay, pulled a jacket from a hook and folded it in the shape of a pillow for her head then she laid down. Basha came near, stretched next to her, whimpering.

"This is not going to be easy; you can help me by staying here and not barking."

Lisette didn't know how long, how many hours, she'd been in the barn. When the searing pains gave her a moment's rest, she would fall asleep. Sometimes she heard her mother-in-law talking to her and felt the cold compresses that were being applied on her forehead.

"What took you so long? And leaving me here all alone," Timbalier mère said. "This dog wouldn't let me near her without trying to bite me."

"Let's get her in the house."

That was Georges' voice. Lisette raised her head.

"Georges, at last you're here. You'd better get the doctor."

"He's here, Lisette. We're going to bring you in the house." George's voice was soft, tender and smoothing, the way she remembered it when ... The pain came again strong. Lisette turned her head and bit into the piece of cloth next to her mouth.

"Lisette, I'm Doctor Paulin. We can't carry you inside now. It's too late. But you're just fine here. Madame Timbalier, I need some room. You'd best go in the house and find lots of sheets."

Paul Georges Timbalier was born the next day, August 16, 1931.

For a week, Lisette rested, sleeping for hours. Finally, she felt strong enough and began walking outside. Basha came rubbing himself on her skirt, asking for the touch of her hand.

"I'll bring you the baby soon, in a few days," she told him. "But you must be quiet." The dog seemed to understand and returned to his bed in the hay. She was surprised not to see him the next time she went looking for him.

"Georges, have you taken the dog to the field with you?"

"No, I haven't seen him today. He's probably roaming around now that he knows you're okay; I'll look for him."

Lisette met Georges when he came back a short time later. He was getting his shovel.

"Basha is dead."

"Oh, no, no."

A long time passed before she could ask, "How, Georges, how?"

"Poison, I think. He must have been poisoned. He scratched the ground till he dug a hole; he must have . . ."

"Poison . . . where?"

"There's some rat poison in the barn," Georges said.

"But Basha couldn't have . . ."

Georges' arm was around her shoulders.

"My dog was poisoned, a long time ago, when I was a boy."

"Who Georges, who?" She had turned to face him, her hands pressing on his shoulders.

"Come."

He made her walk with him toward the door. As they approached, they heard it. The voice, the beautiful, angelic voice that had risen in the church on their wedding day silencing the crowd, stopping the shuffling of restless feet as it sang the *Ave Maria*. It had brought in Lisette such a feeling of reverence for her mother-in-law that, embarrassed by her own Berrichon drawl, she had not dared for some time, to speak freely to her.

"How can God give the voice of an angel to someone so mean?"

"Now, Lisette . . . "

Her mother-in-law was rocking baby Paul cradled in her arms. The voice stopped when Lisette and Georges entered. Quietly, Lisette bent down, scooped the sleeping baby and walked to her bedroom.

"No, I have never seen my parents happy," Georges said that night, answering Lisette's questions. "Not even in the pretty house we lived in when my father had a business. I remember little about that time. There was a garden in the back, lots of

flowers. I had a dog, my mother sang often. Her bedroom window was on the second floor and faced the garden."

"Tell me more, Georges."

"I made sure my friends didn't come over when she practiced so I could hide in the hydrangea bushes and listen to her. My dog, Noirot, he listened too; I never had to quiet him."

"Did you have him a long time?"

"Not very long; I was in the first grade. During the summer vacation, I went swimming in the creek with the other boys. Noirot used to come running to me when I got home. One afternoon I came back late. I remember thinking that something was wrong when I pushed the garden gate."

"What did you do, Georges?"

"I found him almost right away. My father said later that animals die like people. 'But Noirot, Papa . . . ' I remember asking him. 'I think he was poisoned,' he said."

"It was your mother, she did it, Georges, you knew."

"No, I didn't, but my next memory after Noirot's death is of her being gone."

"Gone where?"

"I didn't know then. Only what my father said. I remember his words: it's a different kind of illness your mother has, not of the body."

"Was she gone a long time?"

"Maybe it's when she came back, or before, that we left the nice house and went to live in an apartment."

After this night, Georges never again mentioned his earliest memories with his mother. Lisette began finding empty bottles of *eau-de-vie* in the barn or near his coat when she walked to the field to bring him and her father-in-law their lunch. Sometimes, the bicycle was gone and Georges was not at the field. Ignoring her mother-in-law's offers to watch Paul, Lisette took him with her wherever she went.

Chapter XIV

A gift from Célesta

September 1931

A trailing snatch of song. Surprised, Lisette listened watched the mailman walking away from the house and her mother-in-law returning holding a package and still singing. Since the birth of Paul, three weeks earlier, Lisette seldom left the house. She opened the front door wide perhaps to allow room for the song and for the rare smile on Madame Timbalier's face.

"It's for you, Lisette."

The package was addressed in a neat, applied handwriting. The postmark was from Fley. Lisette opened the box and one by one removed delicately knitted garments in soft blue and white wool, a complete baby layette.

"This is as beautiful as Juliette's gift," said her mother-in-law, "Who is it from?"

"It's from my cousin Célesta. She is the daughter of my oldest uncle, Uncle Maurice. She was not able to come to our wedding so I've never met her."

Lisette had never before received a package. Excited, she didn't notice the envelope right away. As she returned the delicate pieces of clothing to the box until she could put them away, she saw the letter, picked it up and placed it in the pocket of her dress.

"I'll make a *brioche* for coffee this afternoon," said the older woman.

Lisette hesitated a moment. For the past few weeks her mother-in-law had baked delicious treats but went to rest as soon as she'd placed them on the baking sheets ready for the oven, leaving to Lisette the tasks of cleaning every utensil, scrubbing the table, sweeping and mopping the floor. Lisette was about to abandon her plan to admire the baby gifts again, alone in her bedroom, but she said instead, "Good. Don't bother to clean up. I'll do it when I return."

"Where are you going?"

"Georges is working at the Guillot farm. I'll go and tell him about the gift."

The chill of fall was already in the air. She wrapped a warm blanket around herself and nestled Paul near her breast.

For a long time after she'd arrived at *La Bauderie*, Lisette avoided meeting her neighbors. When Georges brought her to his farm as his bride that first night, she noticed smoke coming out of a chimney. It was much too dark to distinguish a farmhouse but Lisette didn't think they had arrived yet.

"Whose place is this," she asked.

"They're our nearest neighbors. It's the huge Guillot farm. You know, I've worked there at times."

Lisette was glad for the sound of the horses' hooves that covered the slight "ah" that escaped from her lips and for the black night that hid any change in her face. She alone felt the missing beat of her heart and wondered why. The last time she saw Pierre Guillot was at the dancehall where Denis and Juliette had brought her. Of that moment she only remembered Pierre's beaming smile when he introduced his new bride, Marie. Then nothing had mattered for Lisette but the music and the lightness in her heart because Georges had held her closely in his arms and she was dancing.

Lisette's first visitor at *La Bauderie* had been Marie. The two young women soon began to enjoy each other's company. Lisette found Marie's quiet simplicity more restful than the vivacious chatter of Juliette. Sometimes she sat in Marie's kitchen, both having a cup of hot milk, not having much to say, but comfort grew between them. Marie had come to see the baby two days after he was born.

Marie came out of her house to meet Lisette.

"Have you brought me baby Paul? Let's hurry in, I want to hold him."

The kitchen smelled good. From a large pot on the stove came the aromatic scent of steamed vegetables.

"We'll have a cup of broth, Lisette. Tell me how you feel."

"I'm just fine. Today a box arrived from Fley full of baby clothes for Paul. They're almost like embroidery so delicately knitted they are. And there was a letter from Célesta; it's in my pocket. Can I read it, Marie?"

"Yes, read it and tell me about Célesta."

"I don't know much about her, only what Aunt Céleste told me, and that was long ago. She was named Célesta, after Aunt Céleste, to continue the tradition of naming the oldest brother's first born daughter after his oldest sister. Now Célesta herself is raising a little girl, a great niece. That's what my Uncle Maurice told me at the wedding after I wondered why Célesta didn't come."

"Read the letter, I'll refill your cup."

Dear Lisette,

We've heard the good news from Juliette. A strong boy, she said. You must plan on coming to visit so we can meet him. We're heading for winter, unfortunately, but we're counting on seeing all of you next summer. Paul will be nearly one year old; Monique will be three. They'll be great playmates, I'm sure. She's made a lot of progress this last year. She's such a joy to me, an old maid. I hope her parents let us keep her till she's old enough for school. When I write to my sister, Christiane, I don't mention how much fun and love Monique is for me. Since she has not seen her granddaughter yet, it would be

cruel to tell her, don't you think? I'm sure Aunt Céleste told you that Christiane lives in Paris. My mother never forgave her for running off to Paris.

Lisette paused when she heard Marie's giggle.

"What happened?"

"I don't know, Marie. Aunt Céleste didn't tell me."

"Read on, Lisette, maybe we'll find out."

Lisette found the line where she'd left off and began reading again.

I've never met my brother-in-law. He's dead now. He was a painter, an artist. Of course my mother said that this was not a job for a family man specially after Vonnie was born. That's Monique's mother. She came to live here at the domain after high school. I think my father had something to do with the offer she received for the position at the Vigny post office. Now both she and her husband work there.

Lisette, this is the most I've written in a long time. Send a note when you can and we do hope to see baby Paul and all of you next summer.

"And she signed her letter: your Cousin, Célesta. That's all, Marie."

"This is very exciting, Lisette. You must ask Aunt Céleste to tell more about Christiane. How did she meet this man, the painter? When are you going to *Bois-Chauds*?"

"Marie, I'm surprised. I didn't imagine you to be such a romantic. We're going to *Bois-Chauds* next Sunday. If Aunt Céleste is in a good mood, she might tell. And I'll tell her how curious you are. Now I'd better go. Paul needs changing and he'll need to be fed. The men will want food also."

Père Timbalier came in for his coffee but Georges was not with him. To distract her from the thoughts he read on Lisette's face, the older man began reading the newspaper aloud.

"On September 18th, an explosion on the Manchurian railway prompted the Japanese troops to increase their activities toward their conquest of the province."

Lisette's brooding face reacted in no way. Père continued his reading.

"More bank failures, more stock-market collapses force countries to abandon the gold standard. 1931, the 'annis terribilis' is likely to become more terrible."

At last, Lisette raised her head:

"But Père, our harvest brought in a good price. Georges said the bank increased the rate of interest on our small savings."

"Yes, it may not be very good in the long run. I'm afraid Germany is stockpiling wheat. Germany has never grown enough wheat to feed its people. Their government is building up their

metallurgic industries based on unsecured, short-term loans. If those loans are recalled, there will be disasters."

"Père, you read all about this in the newspapers. I would not understand even if I did read this."

"My father worked in a bank. What I learned of international banking, I learned from him. I should have paid more attention. Well, something smells good."

Lisette had taken the *brioche* out of the oven. Père Timbalier got up, went to his room, returned after a few minutes and picked up Paul from his crib.

"How about keeping us company, young man. Your grandmother wants to sleep."

They began eating. The newspaper reports her father-in-law just read remained on Lisette's mind.

"Was it wrong for Georges to buy that vacant field?" she asked.

"No. The soil there is not any good for cultivating but it'll be a good place for the sheep to graze."

"How many heads does Georges plan to have?"

"Just a few to start."

"We'll need a sheepdog," said Lisette in a thin voice.

The older man understood.

"A dog won't be needed for a while. By the time there's a herd, Paul'll be big enough to take care of the dog; he won't let anyone near his dog."

The kitchen had been cleaned and put in order again after supper. Her mother and father-in-law had gone to bed after staying up only a short while. Lisette pulled Paul's crib closer to the high-back chair and she settled herself with her knitting. The light from the coals' red embers was sufficient. Her fingers worked the needles instinctively. When the coals grew dark, she reached behind her, pulled the blanket from the back of the chair and spread it on her knees. She did not stir when she heard the door open. The ball of wool rolled from her lap to the floor. Georges crossed the room in his long stride, and closed the bedroom door behind him. She listened till she heard the even sound of his sleep, then she gathered the blanket more closely around herself and closed her eyes.

There would be no questions, no argument, and no tears. To temper the terrible lonely suffering, there would be a waiting, a measurement before each movement, before each word, a lower pitch of sounds, an evasion of scents. The summer straw would be less odorous, the winter freeze less sonorous under the foot.

Chapter XIV

Light and Shadow

1932-1936

Père Timbalier and Georges postponed the purchase of sheep and instead turned the earth in the vacant field, planted sugar beets and turnips and waited out the endless rain and fog that came with December in 1932. With little to do, people also had little to say. When Aunt Céleste sent word that she wished and hoped all would come spend Christmas at Bois-Chauds, especially since Paul had been too little the previous year to be brought out in icy weather, all at *La Bauderie* felt relief. Mère Timbalier said she didn't think she was well enough, but after being reassured that the great log, specially selected weeks before and reserved for Christmas Eve, would still be burning in the fireplace Christmas day, she relented.

When they arrived in the yard, Juliette, returning from the manor, was just stepping out of the alley. Rubbing her hands together, breath misty, she said: "I had to go and help cover all the furniture with sheets. The whole family has moved away. The husband has been recalled to Paris to take a position in a diplomatic mission."

Lisette's face darkened.

"That's a bad omen."

While embracing her, Juliette added: "On the other hand, it may mean some people are working to keep the peace. I really wonder if the newspapers worry us for nothing."

"But the whole family left, you said?"

"Yes. All the silver has been packed, all the fine vases, the portraits and books too."

Juliette was shivering.

"Come in. It's warm inside. Please, give me little Paul, Lisette. Aunt Céleste has been cooking since yesterday."

Lisette pinched her nostrils and breathed in the aroma. She walked up to her aunt and embraced her. "Where are Albert and Louis, Aunt Céleste?"

"They probably ran to the back to get washed and dressed when they saw you." She raised her questioning face to look into Lisette's eyes but what she said was: "They didn't finish their chores on time; they got up late."

Uncle Vincent shook hands with Lisette's father-in-law and installed Mère Timbalier comfortably near the fireplace.

"How have you been, Madame Timbalier?"

"I believe there's been an amelioration. My asthma is giving me a respite."

Stupefied by these words from the woman who, daily, complained of her suffering, Lisette failed to respond to Denis'

greetings. He turned his gaze toward Georges and shook hands with his old school friend.

"We haven't had a feast together since our weddings. It's about time we enjoy ourselves again," he said as Uncle Vincent was bringing out bottles of wine.

Aunt Céleste smiled and finished patting her pie dough while watching Lisette's face for signs of unhappiness, but Lisette, admiring the new stove, was avoiding her look.

Throughout the long meal, Georges refused any wine. He drank a cup of the hot cider that had remained simmering on the stove, complimented Aunt Céleste on the seasoning of the *white boudin*, the taste and perfect doneness of the goose. Lisette insisted on serving and clearing dishes. When Juliette brought out the spectacular desert, the *bûche de Noel*, to the table, Denis got up and took Lisette's elbow.

"I haven't had the chance to tease you since you got here. Come and sit by me. I'll cut the cake."

He took her hand and felt her trembling; he increased his pressure and her hand relaxed.

"We still have your little red accordion, you know, how about playing a few Christmas tunes?"

Lisette played. Even the men participated as Madame Timbalier led the singers. Paul fell asleep while Louis was

telling him the legend of the chickens' unique permission to talk all night to the cows every Christmas Eve.

Madame Timbalier began fingering her silverware. Georges' left hand reached for his cup. He got up and faced Lisette but her eyes were lowered. She saw his free hand on the side of the pants. The fingers tensed, folded, pressed against the cloth but he remained still.

"We will have coffee," Aunt Céleste said.

Lisette found her voice.

"We'd better take Paul home. Mère Timbalier must be tired too, aren't you?" Lisette asked.

Snow had been falling softly, spreading a thin covering of white fluff on the ground, when they stepped in the yard. Georges was already in the car when Lisette, still being hugged by Juliette, felt that she could, at last, let her breath out.

"Yes, isn't it beautiful?" Juliette said, too full of her own happiness to read Lisette's mind.

The freeze came in January and lasted more than two weeks, leaving the ground hard as rock while a relentlessly whistling, frightening wind assaulted peoples' ears, paralyzing the body. No work could be done outside. The older Timbalier spent more and more time reading the newspapers, his legs stretched toward the fireplace, warming his feet. One morning early in February,

he nearly spilled his coffee as soon as he looked at the headline. He read aloud: "Hitler took over the Chancellery of the Weimar Republic on January 30, 1933." Georges stopped on his way out and read the headline over his father's shoulder.

Then he started again for the door.

Without turning away from the sink Lisette saw his angular face. *He's been losing weight.* He seldom was home for the evening meal, and they seldom spoke. For her the silence had a quality of security. Her ears listened for the tones of his step, how close, how steady. When he was gone, she looked in their bedroom, tidied it, and removed signs of his presence. She'd be safe till he returned.

In March, the rain softened the earth but the fields remained neglected. Père Timbalier lost interest in the farm; the mailman brought him more newspapers to read. The harvest that summer was pitiful. At the market, on Saturdays, Lisette declined Juliette's repeated invitations to visit at Bois-Chauds and to bring Paul. As Christmas neared, she told her friend not to expect her family at Bois-Chauds this year.

And so seasons passed at *La Bauderie* and became years. Lisette's heart ached from missing her kind old aunt but the knowledge that her aunt would read her hurt and her shame on her face kept her away. She knew her aunt wouldn't ask questions

but word of Georges' presence, here and there, of drunken fights would come to her from the village. Helpless when confronted by his aunt, Denis would not deny the rumors.

The sun's rays struck the pedals on and off as they went up and down, dizzying Georges as he leaned on the bicycle. He heard the motor as a truck came up closer behind him but paid no mind till he sensed that the truck was slowing down. When it passed him up, Georges felt that the driver had been observing him and was still watching him in his rearview mirror.

Georges left the main road and started on a track that followed the edge of a field and rose toward the distant woods. He knew the track. He'd taken it many times as a short cut to get to his farm. Once on the track, he never stopped to watch a cloud pass or a green spring lizard blow its throat pink. The track narrowed once it entered the woods. Nothing on either side ever attracted Georges's attention. He just focused on getting across to the clearing and then onto the pale clay road. Within ten minutes, the walls of *La Bauderie* would be in sight.

Today, dulled by the alcohol and the sun-drenched ride on the highway, he left the track and followed a grassy path. When he saw the small building he knew he'd taken a wrong turn. He got off the bike, propped it against a tree, and wiped the sweat off his forehead on his shirtsleeve. *This must be Our Lady of*

the Oaks. He'd heard of the chapel and how there used to be services there on the Monday after Easter and how people brought picnic baskets, sat on a blanket spread on the grass, then went into the wood looking for the first Lily-of-the-Valley.

The white paint was chipped. Dead leaves and pine needles rotted on the deeply slanted roof. The door handles were rusty; he expected resistance when he pushed the door but there was none. Inside there were no pews, no benches. The walls were stark having long lost their images, even the memory of voices. Georges walked up, his head still feeling hot. He saw the lone statue standing in an alcove to the right of the choir. One arm was stretched in his direction. The hand had lost one finger. He came closer and saw a spider weaving its threads between the wall and the statue.

He felt very tired, his legs aching. Seeking support he raised his arm, avoided touching the statue, touched the gray stone of the wall instead. When he raised his head he saw the censer hanging from its chain. *"What? Have you been waiting for me?"* He turned to the statue: *"Did you bring me here? Why are you looking at me? I've abandoned my family; I'm a useless drunk. You've abandoned me!"* Fear began to possess him. His head was hurting and his feet were cold. He looked down at his feet. *What happened to my shoes; I've lost my shoes. I'm bare foot.* He leaned his back against the wall and let his body

slump down to the floor. His elbows on his knees, he rested his head. The coolness refreshed him. When he raised his head, his gaze focused on the emptiness of the building. He got up and walked out of the chapel quickly. He closed the door carefully and told himself he would come to fix the lock. He found his bicycle and the right track easily and pedaled hurriedly across the wood.

When he arrived at his farm he went directly to the barn.
Lisette will be there.

"Lisette . . . "

For an instant the old sensation of tenderness she used to feel when he spoke her name, when she believed in him, returned. Then she turned and saw his eyes. She had hoped never to look in his eyes again. But it was there, in front of her, the image of that time. The time when he had come into their bedroom late one night, the smell of liquor pouring out of his mouth. Suddenly he grabbed her hair, pulled her off the bed, pulled her nightgown over her head, un-bent her arms folded across her chest and unfolded her legs raised tightly against her stomach. She had not let out one cry. Paul was sleeping in the small room on one side of the wall and her father and mother-in-law were in the room on the other side.

As soon as he was finished with her he fell asleep. She rolled from underneath him, picked up her clothes, went to the

back door and closed it softly. Against the wall was a bucket of water kept there for washing hands before coming into the house. She poured the water over herself and scrubbed her body. When she was dressed, she went to sit in the big chair near the fireplace and closed her eyes.

"Lisette . . ." he repeated.

It was about that night, nine months before Jeannot was born on April 10, 1935, that Lisette thought about now as she looked into Georges' eyes.

"You have fever, Georges," she said. "Why are you bare foot, your shoes?"

"Lisette, I will be staying home now . . . I will not go." And he left the rest of his words unspoken but she no longer asked for them. He appeared to be swaying. *My eyes are playing tricks on me*, she thought, *they want him to disappear.*

The moment passed, the image put away where it had been, in the recess of her mind. "Go to the house," she said, "I'll be right there."

He didn't move. She led the way toward the house and he followed her.

"You go lie down, Georges, I'll bring you some soup."

When she entered the bedroom, he was already asleep.

Chapter XVI

A Rose Falls

September 1937

Lisette was about to leave the stall of the merchant who bought all her eggs when Juliette caught up with her at the market, on that first Saturday of September.

"Weren't you going to wait for me, Lisette?"

"I want to hurry home. Jeannot has a fever."

"We haven't seen him since he was three months old. I was going to go to *La Bauderie* if I had not seen you today to give you the news. Uncle Maurice is coming next weekend with his daughter Célesta and his great granddaughter, Monique. He wants to see you and meet Paul and Jeannot."

"I'd love to meet my cousin Célesta, finally. When she writes she always says something about her great niece. The little girl writes stories, you know."

"Then, you must come, Lisette."

Lisette had promised and said she hoped Georges would accompany them.

She was scraping the mud from the sole of her rubber boots with a stick and marveled again at the accuracy of her father-in-law's prediction. Early in March he told her, "Observe the magpies. They're not building their nests at the top of the

oaks but rather at mid-height and even in the large blackthorn bushes. We'll have a stormy, rainy year." By the end of April it had already been too warm for the season, and the heat continued throughout May. Then a humid, suffocating heat lasted through the summer. Every evening, thunder rolled and crashed in fields or in the forest. Yesterday, in late afternoon, she noticed purplish gleams streaking dark, fat clouds, pushed left and right by the warm wind. A particularly odd cloud took on the shape of a snout nosing along the earth sucking dust, blowing it out, then moving behind bushes. The chickens closed rank in the barn, the sky emptied itself of swallows.

This morning, like other mornings, the sun emerged from a dirty, washed out mist, and the heaviness in the air announced another storm for the afternoon. *Père's prediction was worthy of the best of Aunt Céleste's*, thought Lisette as she sat a moment on the chair that was kept against the wall near the door. The seat had lost most of its straw but no one sat on it longer than necessary to remove muddy shoes. The boys' clothes --those that would need mending before they could wear them for their visit to Bois-Chauds--occupied Lisette's mind. The clothes would be ready; hers too. Nothing would keep her and her sons from going to Bois-Chauds this weekend.

Céleste had been throwing oats to her hens pecking around the yard when she felt an icy shiver snaking along her spine, stretching and gripping at her flesh. Before the chilling beast retreated, it had nearly forced her to her knees. As soon as she could step back, she leaned against the house. She knew Denis was working in the field, nearby. With a yelp she tried to get his attention, knowing her voice didn't carry. She raised her hand to her face, felt a little warmth. Blood was returning to her face. She waited for her legs to feel a little stronger and went inside.

She helped Juliette with the dinner preparation but when everyone sat around the table, she refused any food.

"I must have caught a cold," she explained.

The next morning, she was not in the big room when Vincent got up. He walked quietly into her room.

"Céleste, are you sleeping?"

"No, Vincent, I'm just resting and thinking. I want to talk to Lisette. Please send someone to get her."

"But Céleste, you know Lisette is coming Sunday, in just three days. Maurice will be here the day before with his daughter and his great granddaughter. You haven't seen Céleste since you left Fley and we've never met the little girl. I'm going to send for the doctor."

"Listen to me, Vincent. I want you to bring Lisette back here with the boys. I'm worried that Georges might hurt them."

"Céleste, what are you saying? Lisette wouldn't leave her home. Anyhow, her father-in-law and her mother-in-law wouldn't let Georges hurt them."

"Vincent, I want to talk to her anyway."

Lisette came the same afternoon with her two boys. Right away, Paul went to the barn to look in on the animals, Jeannot, on his wobbly two-year old legs, running just behind his big brother's heels. When Lisette walked in the big room, Juliette was pouring broth in a bowl.

"I'm so glad you're here, Lisette. There's little I can do; I must get a lot of bed rest during this pregnancy or risk losing this baby. Denis has had to hire a young lady from Villars to help me. It's Lucie; you probably saw her coming out of the milk shed when you came in the yard."

"Here, let me take this broth to Aunt Céleste, Juliette, and you sit down. Has the doctor been here to see her?"

"He was here this morning, the new one. He came in a big car, such a young man, too. He said he'd be back this evening."

Juliette's voice had dropped to a whisper.

"Vincent sent a message to Maurice in Fley to come sooner."

Lisette put the bowl of soup down, sat on the bench and leaned her head in her hands. Then she got up and walked, holding the bowl of steaming broth, to Céleste's room. She set it down on a side table.

"I'll fix your pillows, Aunt Céleste, so you can sit up and eat. This broth smells so good."

"Lisette, sit here, next to me. I've something important to tell you. Don't talk. Let me say what I have to say."

She leaned her head back and seemed to take a deep breath.

"Before your grandmother returned to *La Roche*--that's long ago now, isn't--I made a solemn promise to her. I promised that I would stop your uncle if he ever tried to strike you again. Remember when . . . "

"We don't need to talk about that now, Aunt Céleste."

"What your grandmother meant, I know, is that I shouldn't let anyone hurt you. I've betrayed her trust. I want to ask your forgiveness, Lisette. That's why I asked Vincent to bring you here today."

"What are you saying, Aunt Céleste? You've always loved me and Uncle Vincent has taken good care of me."

"That's not all, Lisette. You have never said a word about Georges' drinking and . . . but we know. And it's my fault. Your uncle wouldn't let you marry him. I'm the one who talked him into giving his blessing. I was wrong."

Her voice grew weaker. She stopped talking but held Lisette's hand.

"Oh no, Aunt Céleste, there's nothing to forgive. I loved Georges; I chose to marry him."

Lisette placed another pillow against Aunt Céleste's back and picked up the spoon.

"I don't want the soup, Lisette. Listen, I'm not finished. Your grandmother said also that we should bring you back to *La Roche* if you were unhappy here. I chose not to tell you even when I knew you were thinking of leaving Bois-Chauds."

The spoon fell on the floor. Redness rose on Lisette's face.

"I never said . . . how did you know?"

"I knew from watching you, Lisette. I've thought since then that it might have been best, if you had gone . . . I knew you would have gone back to Tulac."

"Aunt Céleste. The boys and I are all right. You know that I'm strong. Père Timbalier is a good man and Georges cares for Jeannot quite a lot."

"But what about Paul?"

"He's more distant with Paul, that's all. But that's because Paul is such a serious child; he's curious and watches his father when . . . "

"You see. You are unhappy at *La Bauderie*. You must come back here, Lisette. Uncle Vincent will take care of you and the boys, here, at Bois-Chauds."

"But Aunt Céleste, I don't want Uncle Vincent to take care of me. Anyhow this is Denis' and Juliette's home. My place is in my house, my children's house. It is my life. You must rest now."

Céleste leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes. In Lisette's hand, her hand relaxed. She seemed asleep. *Aunt Céleste would never suggest that I leave my husband, my home, if she weren't very sick.* Lisette picked up the untouched bowl of broth and returned to the kitchen. Juliette, sitting in a rocker Denis had made for her, looked up at her friend's face and saw her profound sadness.

"I'm going to sit by her, Juliette. I hope the doctor will come very soon."

Lisette sat on the floor, next to the bed, and began crying. Through her tears, the room's familiar objects trembled: the small porcelain souvenirs bought at fairs and standing next to one another on the mantelpiece, the pink fan spread on the wall secured with a thumbtack, the vase of dried wheat and heather reflected in the mirror. They seemed so useless, without charm, ugly. She heard the scream of a crow

and looked up at the window. White fog was wrapping its silent, fuzzy web around trees and hedges. *The air must be cold.* Aunt Céleste's breathing was light but regular. The ray of light from the table lamp fell on the two deep lines that extended from her rounded cheekbones on each side of her small, flat nose. Lisette thought that, perhaps, Aunt Céleste had never been very pretty, that it was her exceptional kindness, the softness of her ways that had molded the charm she had admired in her aunt's face for so many years. Her white hair was spread in disarray on her pillow. She looked so very small.

"Are you sleeping, Aunt Céleste?"

"Put my shawl on my shoulders, please, Lisette. Is my hair messed up?"

The doctor came in. When he removed the shawl, the shoulders appeared, narrow, bony, the skin dry. It was pitiful. Lisette began crying again, quietly. The doctor completed his examination, then said simply: "it's going to be all right."

At the kitchen sink, he rubbed his soapy hands, one into the other, under the running water for a long time. At last he turned toward the back of the room where Aunt Céleste's family stood. Not Vincent, and not any one, pressed him to speak.

"She will not suffer," he said. "She will simply go to sleep; tonight or tomorrow."

He was in the yard, walking to his automobile, when Lisette ran after him.

"Doctor, Doctor, wait, wait, maybe something can be done. Maybe it's not true."

"There is nothing a human being can do," he answered. Then he left.

Aunt Céleste died during the night. One instant, Vincent touched her wrist and felt her heart. The next instant, Céleste was no more. Her death had been soft, muted, like her life.

All her brothers and sisters came back to the village where they had been born for her funeral. All walked into the same cemetery where their parents and Lisette's grandmother were buried. Then they left in their automobiles and returned to their cities. Maurice and Céleste did not leave. He got in the passenger seat of Céleste's small *Simca* and she drove following Vincent's and Georges' cars for the ride back to Bois-Chauds through gusts of wind that swept the blinding rain sideways. Maurice, his face drawn, found nothing to say.

"The house is so cold," said Juliette when she opened the door, "I'll prepare coffee."

The men sat around the table, silent.

"I must go find the children," said Lisette. "Lucie must have her hands full."

Maurice's daughter followed her. In the yard, Célesta placed her hand on Lisette's arm.

"Lisette, through the letters we wrote to each other, I've learned to know you a little. We've not had time to talk. You seemed surprised when you first saw me."

"Oh, that's because . . . Well, the way Aunt Céleste spoke about you, I imagined a small girl; with a face like Aunt Céleste's face. I don't know why."

"And instead, I look just like my father, don't I? And I'm old enough to have grandchildren, if I had married."

The children ran toward the two women as soon as they saw them. When they returned inside, they found that everyone around the table had started, in turn, telling of news in quiet tones: what land was bought, sold at too high a price, who moved to the city, whose child earned a scholarship.

The little girl sat close to Célesta, her hands opened on the pages of a book. Paul, his arms crossed on the table, rested his head on them and watched her. Jeannot climbed on his mother's lap and nestled his baby face in her arms.

"Monique is a studious little girl, isn't she Célesta?" Lisette wanted to hear more from the cousin she was meeting for the first time.

"We'll be taking her to her parents in Châteauroux, after we return to the domain. She'll be starting first grade. Since Paul and her are getting along so well, why don't you let Paul stay for the few more days that we'll be here? They may not see each other again for a long time. We'll bring him home when we leave."

Georges had been sitting across the table, awkwardly holding his coffee cup.

"Let Paul stay if you want, but we'd better leave; Jeannot wants to sleep."

Lisette hesitated. "Juliette needs a lot of rest and Lucie has many chores to keep her occupied."

"I'll take care of Monique and Paul, and of Juliette too." Célesta smiled as she pressured Lisette's arm.

"I'd like to stay, please, Maman," said Paul.

During the few days that Maurice and his family remained at Bois-Chauds, Monique and Paul were seen almost always together. The little girl carried a book everywhere they went. When they stopped and sat, she began reading aloud.

"Show me the pictures."

"You're supposed to listen to the story, Paul."

Paul listened as if transfixed, stretched on the earth, his chin cupped in his hand. They walked around the barns, gave names to the cows, accepted Louis's explanation of Big Red's

unfriendliness as having to do with the approaching birth of her calf.

Faro, slowed by old age, usually followed them around, sometimes taking the lead as if anxious to show them places only he knew. A few days later, when time came to leave, the two children were the best of friends and promised to write to each other.

Chapter XVII

Darkness

1938

The wheels raised the dust from the white road. It settled inside the buggy, covering Lisette's hands with a whitish powder. The sudden image of Aunt Céleste's pale hand reaching her face and the warning she spoke one Sunday afternoon long ago came to Liaette's mind. "Vengeance is in this young man's eyes," Aunt Céleste had said. Lisette remembered that in Georges' pale gray eyes, the only thing she could see, then, was her own reflection and nothing else. The signs, she had not noticed them. Except for his strange laughter, the evening of their wedding at the dinner table. When she asked why her uncle's offering the bottle of plum liquor to one of the men made him laugh, he had taken her arm and said, "Let's dance." In his arms, she needed no answer.

Last night he had hurt her again. Her clothing covered her bruises and she hoped that if someone at Bois-Chauds asked about Georges, her face would not reveal her shame and embarrassment. She thought about her sons. Jeannot was only three; his smiling face, round and chubby, kept its baby ways. But Paul was curious and smart; his questioning eyes were often raised toward her. How long could she keep up the excuses?

Lisette was returning to Bois-Chauds for the first time since Aunt Céleste died. Albert arrived at her farm this morning on his bicycle. She had smiled remembering the forty-five kilometers Denis had ridden from Bois-Chauds to Tulac the day he brought the message, on her thirteenth birthday, to her grandmother's house, the message that had changed her grandmother's life and hers so profoundly. Uncle Vincent wanted them to move to Bois-Chauds.

"Denis would like you to come, Lisette," said Albert. "He has to leave. His convocation arrived yesterday, stamped in red ink: May 20, 1938. He's worried about Juliette; the doctor said another miscarriage could be dangerous."

"Couldn't Denis get a dispensation?"

"He thinks so. Anyway, it's just for registration. But I can tell that Père is worried. He said that so many men died during the Great War that there might not be enough younger men, unattached, should there be a general mobilization."

"Really? I can tell Père Timbalier is worried too."

"Yes, Lisette. In yesterday's paper, Père read the speech of a professor warning that Hitler has no intention of preventing war. The speech mentioned a book, written by the German, that is full of hatred for all kinds of people."

"That's what my father-in-law said."

In her mind's eyes, Lisette saw the images of all the work that needed Denis' attention at this time: worry about Juliette, cows birthing, spring planting not yet completed, the harvest in just a few months. Albert would have to take on a lot more of the work. Her husband should be there to help. Instead he worked a few days at a farm, another day somewhere else, earning a little money here and there. He gave her a little and spent the rest at the village's cafés, coming back to *La Bauderie* late at night, only to fall asleep. Profits from the farm were so meager that, to pay bank loans, he'd sold most of their equipment, their buggy, and most of their animals. Lisette's chickens and one goat, that's all that was left.

"Lisette?"

"Yes, Albert, my mind drifted off. Is Uncle Vincent going to accompany Denis?"

"Yes, he has to. Who would return the cabriolet if Denis were to be formally enlisted? Father wants to go with Denis anyway."

"Why don't they take the car?"

"Père wants to leave it in case I should need to get the doctor and bring him to Bois-Chauds quickly."

"We did hear the *garde-champêtre's* drum last night. The worker from the Guillot farm who brought us milk told Père

Timbalier that the guard read the list of those to report, then affixed it on a tree."

"Is Georges going too?"

"No. He received a medical discharge." Lisette bowed her head. It was only a slight lie. *A man who drinks so much alcohol is probably not physically fit for military service.* But it had been the three months he spent in jail at the end of the winter for battery and disorderly conduct in the village that kept him out of the army.

Albert went to talk to Paul who was brushing mud off Jeannot's overalls then waved goodbye and pedaled off.

Père Timbalier came to meet Lisette where she stood still in the yard.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Denis has to report to the barracks in Châteauroux. He thinks it's just a matter of a few days, that he will get a dispensation. He'd like me to come and stay with Juliette. Her pregnancy is not going well."

"Well, you must go."

"I'll bring the boys to Marie Guillot. Will you keep an eye on them, too?"

"Yes. You just go."

Lisette held Jeannot on her hip and Paul's hand in hers.

"Are we going to Bois-Chauds, Maman?"

"I'm going, Paul, because Juliette is sick. You know you always have fun with Marie. You can take the animals to pasture."

"Is Monique going to be there?"

"Oh no, Paul, she won't be. Maybe we can ask her folks to let her spend a couple of weeks at *La Bauderie* this summer. Would you like that?"

"Yes. I like her; she reads real well."

"So do you."

"But she reads aloud like she's telling a story."

Marie Guillot had seen the small group and was coming to meet them.

"When are you going to let me keep these two little ones for more than an hour, Lisette?"

Marie and Pierre had been married more than eight years but they had no children yet.

"Would you keep them for a few days, Marie, Denis has to report to the military office immediately and Juliette is not well. Père Timbalier will look in on the boys."

"Pierre is out, otherwise he'd drive you to Bois-Chauds. Henri'll get the buggy ready; we'll send for it tomorrow. It's going to be hard on your uncle. I'm sure Denis carries on a lot of the work."

"Yes, he does. Are you losing any of your workers, Marie?"

"Most of them have been called already. They won't take Henri because of his lame leg and Pierre is dispensed because the wheat has to be grown and harvested and his father is going to be seventy years old."

Denis was standing in the yard when the buggy pulled up. He helped Lisette down and hugged her a long time.

"I've been telling Juliette it's just for registration they want me. I'll probably be back in a few days but she won't stop crying."

Denis and Lisette walked to the house together. In the doorway, the sudden realization of Aunt Céleste's absence from the big room gave Lisette such a shock that Denis had to hold her for a brief moment. She regained her composure when Juliette embraced her.

"Thank you for coming, Lisette."

"We have lots to talk about; and I want to take care of you."

Denis and Vincent left early the next morning. In the afternoon, they stopped at the farm of one of Vincent's brothers, as much to allow the family to say goodbye to Denis as to rest and spend the night. They arrived in town the next morning. It had been raining; water ran alongside the curbs.

Dreading the moment when they would have to separate, they walked aimlessly about the streets, visited the public parks, stared at statues.

"It's not likely that they will enroll me," repeated Denis.

"That's right; they'll take the young, unmarried men first."

When the moment to report at the barracks arrived, they stood by the metal gate. A soldier came and told Denis to follow him. Suddenly, Vincent was alone looking at the high, stone walls on each side of the gate. If someone were to close the gate, he would be totally alone in front of these ugly walls. He stood there a long time. Then, when he could no longer stand the ache in his heart, he turned and walked rapidly to the inn where he had left the buggy but instead of going inside to eat as he had planned, he left immediately. He harangued the horse until they were out of town, and then let it advance at its own slow pace. The road was deserted. A breeze whistled in the poplars. A rancid scent rose from the ditches. When the late afternoon shadows began to spread on the verges, he stopped the horse, gave it some feed, some water, and fixed the lamps on each side of the buggy. They gave little light except to show the brown roundness of the horse's rump. Vincent pulled a blanket from under the seat to spread on his knees and

settled back, determined to ride after night came until he was home again.

On a warm September afternoon, Vincent carried his restlessness from the stables, across the empty yard, to the head of the wild chestnuts alley and back again. To distract him, Louis came up to him. "Père," he said, "I've been calling you, you're not paying attention." Vincent looked at his youngest boy but didn't ask what was on his mind. "I've had a premonition," he said and returned to the barns.

Once he entered the alley at last, Denis felt relief. He moved under the shadows of the long arch of branches that stole most of the light. When he emerged the yard was empty. No one was about the buildings. The door of the house was opened slightly as he knew it would be. Aunt Céleste's pots of red geraniums were neatly arranged below the window, undisturbed since she died. No one appeared as he walked up. There were no voices. From the doorway he saw Juliette but stood quietly until she turned from the cupboard and saw him; she dropped an armful of plates on the table, ran to him and fell on his chest.

"At last you're here. At last you're here." Her face hidden in the rough cold material of the military jacket, she cried. Denis closed his arms around her, so moved that he too

wanted to cry. Albert ran out of the house to warn Vincent, forgetting to greet his brother. When Vincent came in, his face, pale and drawn, was wet with tears. He hugged his son. It seemed to Juliette that all of them, in one voice, repeated: "How good to see you, how good to have you home." When Denis was able to speak, he said: "Looks like the war has been cancelled. We were told the crisis had been resolved at Munich between Germany, France and England."

That evening, the *veillée* lasted a long time. The clock rang eleven o'clock and still no one thought of going to sleep. The more Denis spoke, the more he thought of things to tell his family. He spoke of the long convoys of trucks in which many soldiers like him rode in for days till they reached the Eastern part of France, and of the miles and miles of trenches they dug up. He spoke of his doubts about the safety of the arms he had been taught to handle, of the accidents he had been a witness to. His family was so glad to hear his voice, to feel him there, near them, around the fireplace, that each one remained quiet, just listening. He had been gone only a few months but now that he was back everyone felt as if they saw him again after years of absence. His voice seemed larger, as if it tried to fill the empty space that remained after he left Bois-Chauds. When his voice stopped, only Louis found questions to ask.

"Even if there had not been peace, the Germans couldn't have invaded, right Denis? Because of the Maginot line?"

"Maybe not from the East, Louis. But the Northern border is not being protected well enough."

"What needs to be done, then, Denis?"

"Hush, let Denis talk," someone would say.

And Denis' voice came on again with renewed sonority, patiently answering Louis' questions.

"Some of the men in my section studied military strategy. They agree with the officer, de Gaulle, that there should be more light tanks for rapid deployment, the air force should have more bombers."

Only in the days that followed did Denis ask about what had happened at the farm during his absence.

Yes, Lisette came several times with Paul and Jeannot, especially when Juliette had been so sick and lost the baby in spite of everyone's care. Yes, Juliette was really, really well now. The new farm hand? A good worker, still they had been very short-handed during the summer.

To avoid burdening Denis, no mention was made of his father's profound sadness, of his endless wanderings, of his long silences, of his constant look of distress.

Soon, though, it appeared that Denis was not quite the same. Something was changed. He'd go in the stables and the barns as soon as he was up in the morning but never remained very long. Albert would bring his favorite mare to him but he did not caress her as he used to. He would sit on the bed he had made for himself in the barn long ago when all of them first arrived at Bois-Chauds and watched Albert take care of the horses. He ate little, lost weight, often wore his military jacket to Juliette's dismay.

"This jacket is so sad looking, Denis. Look, I knitted new sweaters for you."

He wore the new sweaters but his manner did not change. Vincent told him to stay in the house in the afternoon and spend time with Juliette. Albert, himself and the new farmhand could take care of the fields and Louis could take care of the animals. But Denis insisted on walking through all the fields, looking at them as one searches a face, to find the hopes that had been placed in them once, to remember the joys of beautiful harvests. His memory refused to bring him joy. One day, as he stood by a plowed field blanched by the first frost beneath which the wheat would sleep till the first signs of spring came, the thought came to him. "It's a long time till next harvest. I won't be here."

The newspapers continued to relate the efforts made to keep war at bay, but they also reported the stories told by the refugees who began to filter through the less dangerous center of France, through the small towns and in the countryside. A few families reached Villars. Denis thought that it was just a matter of time before war broke out.

Winter came with a bitter cold. In January snow fell abundantly, froze and covered every bit of earth. Everything was silent, buried as in death. On days when it didn't snow, the sky hung close to the earth, mournful. The birds flew close to the heat of the barns and darted to the front door when Juliette opened it in the morning to throw them some bread crumbs.

Toward the end of a pale, drenched March afternoon, the dreaded blue envelope arrived. The mailman removed his hat promptly, handed the envelope to Albert, and left without a word of greeting. That night, Vincent said to Denis, "Albert will take you to the train station, tomorrow, in the car. You must understand, I can't."

Tears gathered in his throat and strangled his words.

"I'll be back, Père. You'll see, I'll be back."

In the morning, Denis let Juliette go in the kitchen to prepare the breakfast before putting on his military uniform.

When he walked in the big room, she began to cry. She threw herself in his arms, clawed his clothes fiercely.

"It's not possible, it's not possible that you're going back over there. Don't leave, I beg you."

"It's not dangerous where I'm going," he said and hoped his voice didn't betray the lie.

Vincent and Albert had to hold Juliette. The sight of his sister-in-law's immeasurable sorrow frightened Louis. Never had he witnessed such grief, not even when Aunt Céleste died. Denis put his arms around Vincent and Albert and he kissed Juliette one last time. Then he went out and into the car. One moment later Albert sat behind the wheel and they left quickly.

War was declared the third of September 1939.

On a bright late October morning, a letter arrived at the farm. It was addressed to Vincent so Juliette walked to the field where he and Albert were cutting alfalfa.

He took the envelope, did not open it.

"I'm afraid this bears bad news."

Juliette dropped to her knees on the ground. Albert opened the letter.

"He has been wounded. It's a friend writing."

Vincent saw the hope on the faces of Juliette and Albert.

"Quick, get the car. I'll go to Chateauroux, to the military center. They'll have details."

Within fifteen minutes, Vincent was on his way. As he drove, a sense of uselessness filled him. *I sensed it; for several days, I have sensed that he's dead. I'm sure of it.*

When he arrived inside the gates of the military post, he calmly turned the motor off and went to sit on a bench near the sentinel's cabin. In a few words he explained why he'd come. An officer appeared promptly and asked Vincent, with much courtesy, to follow him.

"I'll wait here."

It was a different officer who returned holding a square white card bordered on all sides with a black stripe and stamped on the front with a small flag.

Vincent knew the vain message contained inside; other parents of other noble youths who had gone off leaving their families and their beloved villages without a moment's hesitation had already received it. He unfolded the card slowly. Because of the dizziness he felt, the words danced in front of his eyes: *Mort Pour La France.*

Chapter XVIII

Alone

1940 - 1941

Lisette had begun to relax. Since the day he came home sick, Georges had given up the awful *eau-de-vie* liquor she called water-of-death. She breathed more easily, worried less.

One morning in late December, she watched Père Timbalier staring into the dark liquid inside the coffee bowl she had placed in front of him. Next to it, his newspaper remained unopened.

"German trucks are coming up the road," he said in a fuzzy voice. Her hands flat on the table she leaned close to his face. *That's not his normal voice and he can't see what's on the road. The door is closed.*

She went to the door and opened it. The stark, flat, edgeless, frost-covered fields stretched without any boundary to mark the space except for the mass of dark woods far on the horizon. As she turned to tell him of the emptiness, her father-in-law got up from the bench, passed her in the doorway without looking at her, walked a few steps in the yard and fell. She screamed. Georges came running from the backdoor basin, water streaming down his face, running through his fingers. He picked up his father. "Go quick. Ask the Guillots to send Henri for the doctor." And he carried his father to his bed.

When the doctor arrived, it was too late.

Lisette did not feel the absence of her father-in-law until several weeks after he was gone. Then she realized she was missing him. Not that he had been particularly kind to her, and she never heard or saw him reproach Georges on his behavior, but there were times when he looked at her in ways that made her feel that he understood her sadness.

Every morning, he read aloud to her the events reported by the newspaper. To her alone, he explained their significance. Lisette had developed an admiration and appreciation of his mind.

She didn't know if her mother-in-law missed him. Madame Timbalier spent little time in the large kitchen. By speaking to him about school, she tried to engage Paul in conversation.

"What did you learn today, Paul? What did you do?" Madame Timbalier would say.

"Arithmetic. Some problems; like how long before the train overcomes a speeding car?"

He waited politely for the next question but couldn't sit still very long. Many chores were waiting for him, and Jeannot clung to him, shifting from foot to foot. He told his big brother that *mémère Timbalier* smelled of medicine.

Lisette got used to her mother-in-law's illness and whenever she heard: "I'm coming down with a cold, I think I'll stay in bed," she automatically pushed the kettle closer to the burners and began preparing the cup of chamomile.

In late March, after the rains wore themselves out, the sun began to make short appearances before hiding again when the wind rose. Then fog, gray and thin like gauze, would spread across the landscape. On such a day, when Lisette took in the morning herb tea to her mother-in-law, she saw the redness on her face. Her pillow was damp with sweat and she did not respond to her daughter-in-law's greeting. Lisette opened the back door and called Georges, hoping that he was in the barn and would come out. When he didn't respond she had to enter, she had to see him raising a bottle to his mouth, she had to tell him, "You'd better fetch the doctor; I think your mother is very sick this time."

On March 28, 1941, three months and ten days after the funeral of his father, Georges Timbalier buried his mother.

After that he spent more time alone in the barn or more time away from the farm. Lisette thought his face was taking on a darker look.

One Sunday morning in June they had been waiting for him in the car, she and the boys. Jeannot, just six on his last

birthday, was quiet in his corner. "You want me to go see what's keeping him, Maman?" Paul said, sensing her nervousness. "Don't go, maman, let me go," he pleaded, thinking he was a man. But she had gone to see what was keeping him, rushing in her high heels. He came to the door, the bottle in his left hand. She had stopped a few feet away from him.

"We're going to be late for church, Georges." She kept her voice low so as not to irritate him.

"We're not going to church," he replied and started to laugh. The kind of laughter she despised. She started to turn back when he put his hand heavily on her shoulder. "You hear that, girl? We're not going to church today."

The awful smell of his breath hit her before the back of his hand hit her across the face. The blow caused her to jump and she began to run toward the car when she saw Paul, standing half way to the barn, looking at her, his eyes big, his mouth opened. He moved past her toward his father and screamed, "If you hit Maman again I'll kill you." She gathered him in her arms, got Jean from the car and the three of them went into the house. She heard Georges slam the car door and drive away.

All night she was scared, but he didn't come home till early in the morning and went straight to bed. She got the boys ready and on their way to school, then she went to feed her chickens, pulled some carrots, picked up the corners of her big

blue apron and dropped the carrots inside. When she straightened up she saw the policeman.

"I'm sorry Madame Timbalier. It's more serious this time. I have to take your husband in. He got in a fight in Henriette's bar. The other man was cut badly. At the hospital, they said he might not make it."

After they left--the policeman and her husband--she just sat. The boys came home from school and night came. She couldn't sleep trying to keep the next day at bay. But dawn and light arose, and as she opened her door, her fear evaporated. The air felt different, as if it was new. She took in a deep breath and it felt good. Soon though, image after image brought in front of her eyes the starkness of her situation. How was she going to provide, all alone, for her two boys? Last night they had asked no question. This morning she would have to tell them that their father would be gone for a long time.

She told them that there had been an accident and the police would sell the car for damages and their father would have to be incarcerated since they couldn't pay the fine. She thought that Paul probably found out the truth but they never spoke of it.

Chapter XIX

At The Domain of Fley

August 14, 1941

Lisette's letter lay opened on the small table. Paper and pen had been gathered to answer it. When she found the words, Célesta would start writing but now she was wondering at the fierceness of a fate that kept digging its claws in the same person again and again. She would have to acknowledge the bad news.

Célesta began writing:

I learned of the deaths, closely following each other of your in-laws. I wish I weren't so far away, Lisette. I would tell you how much I miss my father. If Uncle Vincent were well, he would help too, you know he would. Juliette says in her letters that his mind continues to deteriorate since Denis' death. Yes, I've learned of Georges' trouble too. I read of his trial in the *Nouvelle République* of August 1st.

A shadow passed in front of the window. No, it couldn't be a worker. It might have been a bird, or a cloud. Célesta picked up her pen again.

Most of our workers are gone, as if sucked away by the war. I miss their noisiness, the noisiness I used to hate, the way they scraped their shoes on the kitchen tile. I miss the smells too. They brought in, and dropped on the table, crates full of fresh vegetables and fruits. I've had to let the *Mirabelles* rot on the trees. It broke my heart. Of all the plums, these little yellow ones are sweetest and the most juicy. I almost gave up harvesting two of the fields for lack of help but I wouldn't have been eligible for coupons to get fuel for the tractor and the delivery van. I've hired a man who was sent by Marcel Bonin, Monique's father. That is a good man this Marcel. I'll

tell you about him sometime. The man he sent me was not a farmer. I could tell right away, and he was surprised when I spoke to him in my Berrichon patois, but he's a good worker. I call him Fernand. That's what he said his name was.

She thought she heard a noise. All afternoon she'd seen the German patrol car driving along the dirt roads that led from farm to farm. It had returned; there was no mistaking the sound of the motor. She turned her small light off, went to the back door, followed the darkness around the familiar walls of the house. Her steps needed no light. Looking into the distance, she saw the car's lights. It was parked on the dirt pathway of the high field. *What are they waiting for? Who are they looking for?* Last Saturday morning, at Potier's grocery, she was told that the Jolliet farm--less than twelve kilometers from Fley--had been burned down by the German soldiers.

"Why did they pick on the Jolliet farm?"

"We think it might have had something to do with the plane, Mademoiselle Basson."

Nobody really knew why the German soldiers had swarmed in on the Jolliet farm but rumors spread that the throbbing of an airplane motor had been heard the night before, and that traces of footsteps, some leveling of freshly plowed rows in a field could be seen. This led to the thought that a resistance

parachutist from England might have been dropped, then disappeared.

“It was a *Whitley*,” August, the laborer, said.

A voice mocked, “You’re an expert on airplanes, aren’t You, August?” All knew he was right, but it couldn’t be admitted. No stranger and no parachute were found but the German soldiers needed no proof to set the Jolliet farm ablaze as an example.

A sense of foreboding overcame Célesta. She returned quickly inside her house, folded the letter, wrote Lisette’s address on the envelope, stamped it and placed it in the pocket of her dress. Then she pulled whatever clothes her hands grabbed from her chest of drawers, filled her bag, went outside again. She opened the barn doors, shooed the horses, pushed the lumbering cows out, and looked for Fernand. There was no trace of him. No trace of the bed he’d made for himself in the hayloft; his dirty backpack was nowhere. She got down the ladder, returned to the house, locked the door and picked up her bag, then climbed in the delivery van. The bushels of turnips and carrots she was going to bring to the village the next day were in the way, too close to the driver’s seat; she didn’t bother to move them. *If anyone else were in this van surely they could hear my heart beating through my chest*, she said loudly.

The van was parked on the decline in the back of the garage; she let it roll down till she was on the road before turning the motor on. In the village she stopped to drop the letter into the postal chute, 'just in case,' and drove on across the cluster of shops and houses till she reached the last house, isolated from the others, the house one turns to for a last look before leaving a village.

"Where's the fire?" The truck's siren brought people out of their houses. The carpenter Leblanc started walking followed by Potier the grocer, Lucien Pichon the mechanic, August the laborer. Madame Broussard was walking up the ten steps of the Veterans of the Great War monument for the highest point of view. *"It lools like the Basson domain,"* she said.

The others started walking faster down the road toward the redness in the sky. Leblanc had walked about a hundred yards when he saw it, the wall of fire. The old fire truck had pulled to the side and stopped, helpless. The crackling was deafening, the heat unbearable. Panels of the huge barn doors, transformed in griddles of embers, flew a moment in the night and fell to the ground in a crash.

Leblanc headed toward the left, in the direction of the farmhouse. A few of the men followed him. "It's the back

buildings," he said and added almost to himself, "surely Célesta saw it, surely she got out?"

Madame Broussard heard him: "I saw her drive in less than an hour ago. She stopped at the mail chute then drove toward the end of the village."

"What about the animals?" Suddenly, from a low wooden building, the screams of pigs were heard, piercing, terrifying. The men and women in the group covered their ears with their hands. Then all at once, the screams stopped. Flames, smooth and fast, very fast, stretched, competing for height with each other, devouring each wooden building, one after the other.

"The cows, the horses must have been let out. I can hear them running. The patches of winter vegetables will be ruined; that will hurt us too."

"Yes, the barns were opened but the pigpens were forgotten probably because they're not near the barns. There'll be no Christmas ham and not *terrines de pâté*."

"Auguste, is that all you can think about, your stomach?"

Leblanc yelled at the man atop the fire truck: "Don't you have a tank of water in the truck?"

"Yes, but it's too little to help and the hose won't reach. I wish there was a source of water around the domain."

"There was a well."

The truck was moved in a half-circle to the right and brought a bit closer. The well, between the burning barns and the truck, was in view. The chain had turned a dark red. The metal of the round circle covering the opening also glowed, red-hot.

"What about the pond, Maurice's fish pond?"

"I don't think Célesta kept the pond going after her father died but it's worth checking."

Pichon hurried past the dark farmhouse in the direction of the pond where he had, once, caught twenty large carps. His eyes were searching for the gleam of water, his ears alert for the sound of a splash, his nostrils breathing in for the scent of grassy, fishy water.

When he returned, his step was too slow.

"*Hey bien, Pichon?*"

Pichon scraped the garden mud from the sole of his boots with his pocketknife.

"It's empty. The pond is completely dry."

Leblanc, and those who had joined him, looked to the horizon far into the darkness, to the edge of the forest. Like a cat's eyes, the two yellow circles of the headlights of a car seemed to be watching.

Pichon racked his throat, sent a spit toward the ground.

"*Les salauds!*"

"What did the bastards want with this domain? Célesta lives here alone, doesn't she?" someone asked.

"She had hired a stranger, a refugee maybe," replied one of the men.

Célesta lifted a geranium pot from the window's edge, got the key and opened the door of the small, low house. For a moment she stood in the dark threshold, her heart still beating too fast. Without flipping the light switch, she walked the few steps to the table, drew a chair and sat. Although the night was warm, the house was cold. She should have come more often, she thought, but she'd been too busy and she knew Leblanc took good care of the house and the garden. She felt cold. She should light the stove; most likely Leblanc left it stocked with wood. Instead she got up and walked outside. She had to go and see.

It was a long walk back toward the domain. She walked faster and faster. She reached the square, crossed the street and stayed close to the trees that edged the sidewalk. She stretched her arm and her hand touched each branch.

She smelled smoke and slowed down before a triangular splash of light; someone forgot to close a door. Her feet carried her forward and she heard voices, familiar voices. She saw the silhouette of a group. At the same time, she saw the

flames. She watched the fire truck being moved around her farmhouse.

She raised her head as the spray of water was being directed toward the sky. The spray reached the flames. She prayed. The spray stopped as if a gigantic breath had suddenly blown it out and her hope died. Was there so little water in the truck's reservoir? Was it useless then? It was, and it was too late. The charred remains were useless to the fire; out of fuel, it was dying of its own.

"That's it, then," she said and did not recognize her own voice. "My father's lifetime of hard work, watchful, careful husbandry has come to this. Are you watching, you, Almighty God? Should I thank you that he died before seeing this? Should I . . . ?" Her words were strangled in her throat as her knees buckled. Strong hands held her up.

"Célesta, we were wondering about you. Did you see them, the Germans? What about your farm hand?"

"I saw them. I knew we had to get out. I looked for Fernand; he was gone."

"He left?" someone said.

"Better for everyone; that was best," Leblanc said and several in the group agreed. "Better, no questions."

The scent of charred debris, the smoke, the stench of burnt animal skin, were suffocating.

"There's nothing that can be done here now," said Madame Broussard. "You come stay with me tonight, Mademoiselle Basson."

"Thank you." The rest of the group had begun to disperse walking slowly back toward their houses. The two women took a last look at the farmhouse. It looked both naked and defiant, its walls, amazingly, remained stark white.

Célesta took Madame Broussard's elbow as they too began the walk back, holding their handkerchiefs to their mouths against the smoke that was making them cough.

"I'm going to be all right Marguerite; Leblanc took care of my mother's little house. I'll be staying there. The walk will do me good and when I get there I'll have something hot to drink. But you must send word to our Resistance contact, to Marcel, right away. We'll probably be assigned new code names."

"Of course. Leblanc would walk with you, you know."

"I know. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Lisette had pulled some sorrel leaves to make her soup and was walking toward her kitchen door when she saw the mailman. *A letter from Georges*, she thought, and was surprised. Since beginning his prison term, Georges had sent only one short letter. The envelope the mailman handed her was thicker than one containing just the half page Georges would have written.

Lisette didn't recognize the handwriting right away but saw that the postmark was from Fley. Célesta Basson was writing again. Before checking on lunch, Lisette sat down and opened the envelope. There was no date, no greeting. Célesta just started saying what was on her mind. That was her way.

When her reading brought her to Georges's name her face blanched. Why hadn't she thought that the village of Fley would get the newspaper from Châteauroux? The confirmation that her own disaster appeared in a major newspaper, perhaps next to headlines reporting momentous war disasters, left her breathless, her body limp. She felt slapped by yet another insult. She folded her arms on the table and covered her face with her hands.

When she could pick up the letter again and finish it, its abrupt ending gave her another shock. *What had interrupted Célesta? Yet the letter had been mailed, so her cousin must be all right,* she reasoned and began thinking about Célesta's mysterious words concerning Marcel Bonin, "I'll tell you about him sometime." Lisette had spoken little to him the day he brought Monique, that summer of 1938, to spend two weeks at *La Bauderie*. Under Paul's guidance, the two children had explored the farm to its remotest corners, fished in the creek and fished the frogs from the pond. When her father came again, Monique had a hard time leaving and had insisted on showing her father

everything from where the gooseberrymbushes were to where she'd left her pole in the barn for the next time she'd come.

"Did you always live in Fley before you moved to Châteauroux?" Lisette asked. He smiled before answering: "No, I was born in Crozant and grew up in an orphanage a little farther away near the village of Tulac."

He'd stopped when he saw Lisette's eyes filling with tears.

"My wife told me you lived there with your grandmother; we were almost neighbors, Lisette."

The memory of her life with her grandmother in the small house above the Creuse River rushed in her mind's eyes.

"You must bring Monique again, soon, to spend some time with us," she had said.

Lisette began to imagine what the Basson domain in Fley was like and how it would be again after the war was over. Much bigger than Bois-Chauds, she was sure. A lot of land, many fields, she had been told, and many animals, such a large herd of goats that the cheese made from their milk was sold all around the region and the label carried the name of the domain. There would be buildings to store hay, wood, equipment, and there would be barns for animals. The house itself might not be very large.

She folded the letter and placed it in her pocket. She couldn't let her children read it. Paul would ask, she knew,

about mail. "Just a short letter from Célesta," she would say, "nothing really new," and when he would ask, as he did whenever Célesta wrote, "When can we go to Fley, I'd like to see the domain?" she'd tell him, "When the war is over, we'll go. When the war is over."

Célesta was sitting by the opened window. Slowly the day was leaving; it would be long past ten o'clock when the darkness would be such that the trees would be black, straight poles separating the space and she could no longer distinguish the patches of grass and the shrubbery. The tea water was not hot enough. She'd need a new hot plate, she thought. Her heart, finally, had slowed. Her elbows crossed on the narrow table below the windowsill, she looked calmly into the night.

She thought she heard whistling, a whistling she knew. *Might be my mind playing tricks on me. After a night like this, I shouldn't wonder.*

A low whistle. Now she was sure. She recognized the notes of the melody she'd heard many times. She waited then she spoke into the night: "They've burned the domain; just the house stands."

"I know. I saw you leave. I wanted to be sure you were all right. Your code name - Thérèse - is retired effective immediately. You'll get new instructions."

"What about Marguerite Broussard?"

"She'll be contacted too. I'm going back to London tonight."

"Sazeray is eighteen kilometers from here. The plane will land in less than two hours. You won't make it. In the dark."

"I used to be a runner."

She heard a swish; maybe the wind rose slightly. She knew he was gone. *Tomorrow, I'll send a note to Lisette.*

Chapter XIX

Monique's News

1943

Paul's dog preceded him along the short walkway from the gate to the front door. Lisette stood in the shadow of the doorway and pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders against the wintry cold of November. She was watching the animal and admiring her son. Thin like a boy, but not angular. Hair curly and black, like hers, but a light complexion like his father and the same dancing kind of walk. Not yet thirteen years old; so young yet so strong already.

In her mind's eyes she saw the morning, last June, when she had taken a freshly baked pie to the Guillot field where men were cutting hay with the scythe because the narrow field didn't allow for the maneuver of the reaper. Paul had been hired for the day. Other provisions had been left in the shade and that's where she left the pie she'd brought. She retreated behind the tree so her boy couldn't see her watching him.

He followed the man ahead of him, step for step, gathering the swath laid by the scythe, made a fat sheaf that he wreathed with a handful of straw. Then tipping the sheaf to the ground, he sank his knee in its crunching belly and with both hands twisted the bind and pushed it into the straw. Not a single gesture wasted.

"Fanny moves slowly today," she said.

"I think he's getting deaf as well as slow," answered the boy.

When his great uncle Vincent gave him the puppy, it was so cute and fluffy that Paul thought it was a female. The little dog already answered to the name and didn't seem to mind when the mistake was discovered.

"He's getting old, Paul, I feel that way too sometimes."

Paul just smiled. He knew his mother was only thirty-one years old but she worked so hard every day that it would have been strange if she didn't feel tired.

"Célesta wrote me from Paris and you have mail from Monique. A small envelope marked, *Open me first* and a large one. Go wash up while I set your snack on the table."

"Where's Jeannot?" Paul said.

"He went looking for blackberries with little Michel Guillot."

Lisette heard the splash of water near the back door. When she turned from the pantry her son was already sitting at the table.

"That was quick; you dried your hands on your clothes?"

He didn't answer, just tore open the smaller envelope.

Lisette watched disappointment settle on her son's face like fog.

"What is it?"

"She's moved to Poitiers. She's finishing school there at the lycée, then she'll go to the university."

"Remember, Paul, she's about two years older than you are. Célesta often mentioned in her letters that she hoped her parents would allow Monique to go to the university. Célesta wanted to take care of all the expenses. I told you, remember?"

"Yes, but . . . I thought she might have come here next summer."

"She might. Next summer, the war might be over. It'll be easier to travel; Célesta might go back to Fley."

Slowly the cloud lifted from the boy's face. He got up and picked up the larger envelope.

"She says it's a different kind of story she's sending this time. It's about where she lived with her family in Châteauroux."

Lisette wrapped the bread and cheese in a linen towel of red and white squares.

"Take this with you. Are you going to clear the beet field today?"

"Yes. Tell Jeannot to come help me when he comes back."

He grabbed his coat from the hook on the back of the door, shoved the wrapped food in his pocket and stepped out. A dank mist was already fading the early evening light.

He picked up a slender and flexible hazel switch from the ground--*the handiwork of Jeannot*--and began to whip the nettles as he walked up the footpath on his way to his favorite spot. Split by lightning, a huge oak had opened itself up like a welcoming invitation. Paul had installed a plank for sitting and one above for cover. It was meager shelter when it rained, but it was a perfect reading place.

He held the letter, reluctant to read the contents again. He had felt betrayed. She had left, widened the distance between them, probably wouldn't come to *La Bauderie* during the summer as he had hoped. Rather than experiencing the hurt again, he skipped the explanation for her presence in Poitiers and read the last paragraphs again:

You asked a number of times about my life here in Châteauroux with my family. Selfishly, all I wanted was for you to read my pitiful detective, or romance, short stories. Well, before leaving, I've done what you asked. I wrote about the kinds of things I like and don't like here, about my folks and my brother Robert. I wish you knew him, I'm sure you'd like each other. He's a good kid.

There were the few words for Lisette and Jeannot he'd already read to his mother and the assurance that she would write again soon and the reminder that he must not forget to

write back, and then the last line, an order: *Open the envelope now.*

Chapter XX

In the Alley

Winter 1943

The first frost of the season came on the first Saturday of October. It covered ground and roof tops, bright as shards of glass, as white, pure and breakable as a miracle. It's the time of the year I like best, Paul, I really do. I like it better than the glitter of the Christmas season, better than June when I gorge myself with cherries right off the tree and the grasses smell good and the days are long.

Nothing stirred yet in the neighborhood when father and my brother pulled the cart out of the shed. You see, the first frost has been the signal for us--a family tradition, you might say--that it's time to dig up the potatoes and bring them in. I'll be fifteen on my next birthday. You'd think trampling all day in a potato field wouldn't hold much interest but, at that time, nature is unlike any other time of the year and for such a fleeting moment.

Robert pushed the cart ahead. Eleven years old, getting tall and strong. Everything was so calm when we arrived at the field that we began to speak softly, perhaps in fear of disturbing the air. The frost had spread itself along the branches and on the remaining leaves, with evanescent shine. The trees appeared resting, perhaps regrouping from the storms

of late fall, gathering strength against the wild attacks of the November winds.

For the beauty of a morning like this one, I thought that I could stay here forever, that all things could be bearable.

Fenol--his farm is the nearest East of our field--used to truck our bagged potatoes to our house until 1941. That year he came to the field just as father began shoving his pickaxe into the soil.

"I'm going to help you out this time, Bonin, but it'll be the last time that I can pick up your bags of potatoes. All my farm hands are gone now."

"All?"

"Yes. To avoid the orders from the Obligatory Work Service Bureau, my last two men have joined the underground resistance."

"What about Sarpy? He's been with you a long time, hasn't he?"

"At the Bureau, they told him they'd send his brother back if he signed on. His brother had a sick wife and a couple of kids, you know."

"And he believed them?"

"Yes, the fool. Now both are gone. Old Aimé and me, we're left to run the farm; he's eighty years old."

My father was just shaking his head.

"I tell you, Bonin, some of the crops will rot in the fields for lack of hands to pick them. Damn shame."

Then father said--you know how slowly my father talks, Paul--"your farm hands were right to leave, Monsieur Fenol. The 'free zone' was just a lie even though our quiet Berry, mostly farmland, does not seem to have any strategic utility. The Germans will mobilize motorized vehicles, horses and wagons, and they'll seize the crops."

Monsieur Fenol scratched his beard.

"You don't mean that."

"Yes," father said, "I think so," and he lowered his voice. "They might even requisition these fields if they need them to put up buildings--*la convention d'armistice*--you know."

Monsieur Fenol bent his body, his hand extended toward the soil as if he wanted to gather it, feel its richness in his fingers. "Not my land," he said.

"It's worse. It's not just the soil of France they want, it's her soul . . . her soul."

Father's voice had risen, in anger, I thought, and I was surprised. I'd never seen him angry. Neither man spoke for a while, I remember feeling a little scared, maybe father saw that because he looked at me, and said: "In time, they'll leave. They will leave."

"The newspapers lied to us in 1939," said Fenol, "they said that the war would be over in six months. It's been two years. Who would have thought?"

There was a silence, then father told Fenol: "Well, we'll do what we have to do to bring the crop in. Potatoes are our main food, especially in winter. We have to find a way to bring them in."

We watched Monsieur Fenol walk away, shoulders slumped, toward his farm.

When we got back home that day, father began dismantling his Samson, his first car. He sold it for parts except for two of the wheels. With miscellaneous boards and the two long, curved handles he chiseled lovingly for many days, he built a beautiful pushcart that rode smoothly and effortlessly on the wheels of his Samson. You should have seen him. His demeanor, as he paraded the cart up and down the alley, was a mixture of victory and pride.

Fenol didn't come over this year, as he usually does, just to shake hands with father. The only other neighbor near the field is Jules Verret, the discard collector. His house is no more than a shack, across the dirt road on the right and beyond a meadow.

Papa worked rapidly with his pickaxe. I gathered the *fanés*, you know, the brown, dried stems and leaves of the potato plants, and brought them to Robert. He had dug a hole and started a fire in it. The *fanés* burnt quickly. Once his fire had turned to ashes, he buried some potatoes deep below the hot cinders. At noon, when we stopped for lunch, the potatoes were cooked, odorous, delicious, but we couldn't linger. By the time the sunlight paled, in mid-afternoon, the bags had to be loaded on the pushcart. With the remaining loose potatoes, Robert built stacks and covered them with empty sacks. We'd be back the next day.

It was dark when we got home but the lamppost illuminated the alley brightly between the street and the dirt road. We had to hurry. At eight o'clock the curfew would turn all lights out.

"Let's get them in." Father opened the hatch to the cellar, tilted the cart, and the potato bags rolled down the chute to the large bin below.

Bertot, our neighbor, came into the alley from the blacktop road on his bicycle. Every time I looked at his face, as it was that day, dark red, nearly purple, his ability to ride has amazed me. How many glasses of wine does it take to turn a face this color I wonder? Once his foot found the ground, he managed

to get off the bicycle. He was safe. The front wheel and the handle bar, on which he leaned heavily, pulled him to his shed. Suddenly my throat tightened because I knew what would happen next. The sheer joy of the day was wiped away.

When I opened the kitchen door, Maman was busy around the stove. She said, without turning around, "Please set the table."

The soup tureen was in the center of the table. Every night, at suppertime, we sat like this, silently, waiting, anticipating the first eruption. The walls are very thin between ours and the Bertots' attached house. When the first dish hit the wall, it was almost a relief. Mother ate her soup a little faster, and father folded, unfolded his napkin. That night Madame Bertot screamed. Mother got up and walked to the stove. "More soup?" she said.

The physical exertion in the field, the great quietness of the day may have sharpened my senses, I don't know what it was. That night, I just couldn't stand the silent complicity. Words gathered at the tip of my tongue, knocked against my teeth, forced me to speak out.

"He's going to kill her! We have to stop him," I said.

My father got up and got his coat and hat from the hook on the back of the door. "There's nothing we can do," he said, and

opened the door. He was going to work, night shift. He might work till four in the morning.

"Marcel," mother said but let her voice trail. He was already outside the door, going into the cold night air.

My father didn't used to be this distant, uncaring man, Paul. It's since the start of the war . . .

Porcelain, unevenly stacked, clanking. It's my mother's way of calling me to help in the kitchen. I'll tell you more about us, Paul, when I get back here, at my desk.

Chapter XXII

Escape

October 1943

Marcel Bonin rushed out of his apartment. He walked faster and faster until he was almost running. The tension around the dinner table tonight was almost more than he could bear. His daughter's questions were becoming harder and harder to ignore, her disdain more and more painful. *Monique is quite capable of probing, perhaps discovering and placing herself, all of us, in danger and the operation in jeopardy. I must find a way ---*

When he arrived at the station a colleague inside the postal shack had already loaded the mailbags on a cart. Bonin pushed the cart around the building, onto the wooden platform, across two of the railroad tracks and finally aligned it by the last wagon of the train that was stopped on the third track. A short train. The engine that had just been attached to a lone passenger wagon. A few boys, school sacks on their backs, were getting on. And a few women clutching a bag that pulled an arm down. With some mended clothing, they carried a few purchased items to the daughter left alone to work and raise children in a little village after the husband became a soldier, a prisoner, or a forced labor recruit.

The train would stop at every village between the city and their destination to let the postal worker, alone in the last

wagon, drop the sack of mail for that village on the platform. The many stops didn't bother the women. They used the time to let their thoughts wander. A daughter would meet them at the train stop, or perhaps a grandson, there would be talk late into the night about the fitting of the pants, or sleeves lengthened just right, about finding yarn to knit a new sweater. The next day, the women would get on the train, returning, and time would go by while, in their minds, they'd be planning for the things to bring next time.

The boys would not be returning. They had been sent to an uncle's or a cousin's farm because it was good for them to be in the country, a young mother would have said. Not spoken was the wish to get her boy out of harm's way because she worried of the danger in the city trampled by men hated and dangerous, men in green uniforms and heavy black boots.

Sometimes, Bonin would be the postal worker who stayed on the train throwing down the mail sack at each stop. But not so that night. Someone else would relieve him when all the bags had been loaded in the wagon and he would return to his family. He would not enter the apartment immediately. Until his heart had slowed, until the fear that gripped his throat had released its vice, he would fiddle in his shed.

That night, as he pulled the first bag off the cart, Bonin positioned himself so he could watch the other train, the one

that was stopped on the siding tracks, slightly out of the way. Two days already since that train had been parked there. Young men, usually in pairs, had been trapped inside. Recruited mostly from *Ecoles Normales*, they were told of a great need for them in the North of France. Their training, as young teachers, would begin there, and they would gain rapid advancement, they were told. The noise that came from the train was more and more painful to hear as the young men sometimes screamed once they realized they'd been duped, were helpless prisoners, and would probably never see their families again. That train too would leave that night.

The sound of the boots stomping on the cement walkway between the train and the station was right on time. *The boches, you can count on them to respect schedules, not fickle like us Français.* Bonin focused on his task. He knew he was being watched. He knew that the German sentinel had a good view of anything and anyone coming out of the station and crossing the tracks.

Bonin lowered his head as he threw a mail sack into the wagon, then another one, but his gaze was on the sentinel. Two men just came into view framed by the arched entranceway to the walkway. The soldier's extended arm stopped them. His flashlight shined on the papers handed to him then on the faces. Through the narrow line of light, Bonin caught the fear on a

face. *This one couldn't be more than nineteen! He wouldn't survive the cold, the hunger, the brutality, the ten-day ride into Germany.* The sentinel walked closely behind the two men to the waiting wagon and Bonin counted: one, two, three . . . He checked his watch: 9:15. The sentinel would be back at his post by the door at 9:25. Bonin returned to the mail shack, partially loaded his cart, and pushed the door open with the back of the cart. A silhouette moved next to him, and said 'combat.' Bonin pointed to the cart, the narrow body disappeared among the sacks, Bonin pushed the cart across the tracks to the mail wagon. He threw one sack and said: "now." The dark body, tightly wrapped like a sausage, rolled into the wagon rather than jumped in it.

"Before I throw the next bag in, you must jump out through the opening on the other side. As soon as your feet hit the ground, feel for the hedge; go through it and turn left for one hundred feet. Count them--it'll be pitch dark. You'll be at the edge of a wood. Make a sharp turn right and walk all night. At daybreak you'll be near the village of Fley. Go to the café and ask for Solange."

Bonin heard the soft thump of the body landing. *Maybe his life will be saved. At least he won't be working in Germany. If he gets killed, he'll die on French soil.*

Bonin picked up a new bag from the cart and threw it inside the wagon. The sentinel's boots were hitting the pavement hard as he walked back to his post at the door of the building. Bonin's watch said 9:23.

Chapter XXIII

Under the Eaves

November 1943

Kitchen duty done. All's quiet downstairs now, Paul. I should tell you what my room up here is like. It used to be the attic, the place where racks of apples on one side and onions on the other, spent the winter. We turned the apples now and then so they wouldn't spoil, and we watched the outer skins of the onions till they turned a pale rusty shade, friable as old book print. To let the onions 'breathe,' father installed a skylight that opened by pushing a stick up against it. Hoisting myself through it, when I was small enough, I spent happy times sitting on the roof, high above the world. Varnishing the floorboards, covering the walls with plaster of Paris transformed the space into a happy place for me. A yellow gingham bedspread--which I liked--covered my narrow white metal bed. Mother sewed white curtains for the window but I took them down because I couldn't see the clouds pass by. The wallpaper with yellow tulips, I couldn't guess where she got it from. The small desk fit nicely under the windowsill. The locking drawer doesn't have a key but Robert didn't know that so I don't think he's been foraging through my diary or my unfinished short stories.

"Monique!" Robert knocked and came in.

"What do you expect them to do, Monique?"

"Papa could stop at the police station and say that Madame Bertot's life is in danger."

"You know he won't do that! A German guard is always on duty at the station. Information is the last thing we need to give them."

"You're right."

"Anyhow, all Bertot's done so far is break a lot of dishes," Robert said.

"Haven't you noticed that Madame Bertot doesn't go outside sometimes for two or three days? And when she does come out, it's always the same tale. 'I'm so clumsy: I hit myself on the corner of the buffet again'."

"Monique, you know it's always been like that around here, even before the German troops came. Nobody in the neighborhood tells anything of what goes on in the neighborhood."

"I'm sick of it, Robert. I'm taking matters into my own hands. I'll sit by someone's office door in the Social Services building until I'm listened to."

Robert was stretched on the threadbare rug covering the floor next to my bed, staring at the ceiling.

"You better not do that. Anyhow you'd be wasting your time; nobody will pay attention or do anything."

On Sunday morning around ten o'clock, the discard collector's bell woke me up. The cold air slapped my face as I opened the window. The housewives, with only a shawl around their shoulders, walked quickly out of their houses to gather around the bric-a-brac cart.

The man was of ordinary height but his neck was so short that his square head seemed to rest directly on his shoulders and reminded me of a weight placed in the center of a board to balance it. I never saw his harsh face shaven. He seemed impervious to cold or heat wearing a long black overcoat winter and summer, always bare-feet in sandals made of various strips of leather or rubber. He bought just about anything. The women brought bags of rags, pans, pots, and the skin of the rabbit killed that morning for the civet, the delicious Sunday stew flavored with mushrooms and a filet of cognac.

"How much will you give me for this beautiful skin, M'sieur Verret? How much?" repeated one of the women.

"It's too spotty. It isn't worth but three francs."

"But look, I brought a pot too."

The pot could no longer be repaired. The husband had plugged holes with a small circle of metal secured with a washer and a screw. In our neighborhood a pot retained its status of kitchen utensil until three holes had been plugged.

"D'accord. Four francs, not more."

Madame Gervais was the last woman to approach the cart. I could tell that she was upset. She held nothing in her hands but her head jerked slightly from left to right. She pushed an arm here, tugged a sleeve there, and finally got attention.

"My white rabbit is gone. You all know it. It's pure white with a tiny black spot in the middle of the back. Have you, any of you, seen it? Monsieur Verret, did some kid talk to you about a pure white rabbit?"

This rabbit was kept inside a wire enclosure in a corner of Madame Gervais' yard for several years, waiting, she would say, to be dinner for a special occasion. The neighbors simply smiled, the general understanding being that this rabbit, having long passed its prime as food value, was kept as a pet and would never see the inside of one of Madame Gervais' pots.

The weather changed just before noon. A layer of milky clouds moved in, insidiously hiding the sun. Rolls of fog hung closely to the ground. There was no time to waste. The cart had already been pulled out of the shed by the time I joined father and Robert.

"By this time next year, " father said, "the war will be over. Our town may be completely free of German soldiers by next Christmas."

"Then, there soon won't be any more danger," I said.

"Yes. It'll be more dangerous. For retaliation, for the slightest suspicion, they will shoot and burn."

As soon as we arrived at the field, Robert gathered the *fanés* to quicken his fire.

"*Papa*, someone has stepped on the hot ashes. The mark is recent."

"It is probably an animal, Robert."

My brother glanced at me and then toward the pile of potatoes he left last night.

When *Papa* is not at work, he's in the small garden the one that's in the back of the house, growing the vegetables that feed us all. He sleeps only a few hours. How could he know that all the boys from the neighborhood, including his son, spend all their spare time in the woods tracking animals and practicing their skills with the slingshot on the quails, *poules d'eau*, wild rabbits that they sell to housewives? How could he know that Robert could identify the print of any animal living in the woods at a glance?

Robert insisted. "I know exactly how I squared off the pile, Father. Someone has been taking potatoes."

"And whoever it is got burnt doing it," I added. "Look how deep the imprint is. The foot went deep in the soft hot ashes

and must have been burnt; this does not look like the imprint of a heavy boot, does it Robert?"

"It is not. It's a light sole, maybe a sandal."

"We don't have any proof," Papa said. "I'll ask Bertot if he saw anything since his field is right next to ours. There can't be many potatoes missing."

"Enough to fill a bag," said Robert.

Dad turned his head and whispered, "that's food for two weeks in the heart of winter."

"Verret's is the only shack around here, Papa," I said. "Let's go see."

"No. We can't do that. Anyhow we must hurry and finish today. Clouds are coming in. It'll be dark early."

Robert was born with measurements, dimensions in his head. I am convinced of this. His friends wonder at his ability to strike every time with his slingshot, but I don't. I know that his mind has configured the angle of the V-shaped branches of the weapon, and the best height at which to place the rubber band. That's the way it has always been with him. He knew exactly how many bags of potatoes would be filled from the stack because of the way he prepared the base.

A light rain was beginning to soften the ground as we finished loading the bags. We moved the laden cart to the

roadway before the wheels could become trapped in the soil. As we headed home, I noticed Robert glancing toward Verret's shack.

Later, he came in and sat on the floor of my room.

"I'm sure our potatoes were stolen."

I put my book down.

"Yes, they were. Papa knows too; he just won't do anything about it."

For a week following the Sunday we brought the last bags in, I was too sick to get out of my room. Verret didn't come the following Sunday. The housewives complained and the complaints were retold by mother patiently, accurately. "Just as I heard them," she said. 'What are we going to do with the rabbit skins? And with the bags of clothes that have been prepared?' Another said, 'Maybe he finally froze his toes in those ugly sandals.'"

Or burnt them, I thought as I remembered the foot print in the ashes of Robert's fire. The thought remained with me throughout lunch. I felt much better. Getting out of my room, out of the house and in the fresh air would be good for me, I believed.

"Mother, I'm riding over to the field!" She objected loudly but I pretended not to hear, and pedaled off out of the alley.

I left my bicycle inside our lean-to and walked across the meadow to Verret's shack. The windowpanes were filthy but my eyes adjusted quickly. Verret's back was nearest to me. He was wearing his coat. Against the back wall, a rope, strung above a black stove, held socks just slung over it. To the right was another rope, the length of the wall, holding rabbit skins stretched on makeshift wood frames looking like frozen shirts on a winter clothes line. They were fastened to the rope with clothespins. The last one, the last one was a beautiful white skin with a tiny black spot in the middle of the back. Poor Madame Gervais! And to the left, soil-caked potatoes were piled atop newspapers spread on the floor. My gaze returned to the man's back. His head was bent. I moved slightly to see what he was doing. His left foot was resting on a cardboard box, and he was unwrapping dirty bandages. Robert was right. The thief stepped in the hot ashes. The foot was swollen, the skin bluish, ugly. *Gangrene, perhaps, it must stink*, I told myself. I backed away from the window feeling sick and ran to the nearest tree. I retched on my clothes, on my shoes.

I rode back like a blind person. Nothing of what was in front of me, or on each side of the road, caught my attention. My heart was pounding in my chest.

I headed straight for my room. I knew it was him, at the door, before he knocked.

"Come in, Robert."

"Where have you been? Mother is furious at you."

We agreed, a long time ago, that he and I wouldn't lie to each other, wouldn't rat on one another, if for no other reason that it would make keeping our schemes more easily manageable.

"I found our stolen potatoes, I also found Madame Gervais' rabbit; you'd better tell me how it got there."

"Where? Look. One of us let the rabbit out of the pen. It was just a prank; we were going to put it back. I didn't expect this fat rabbit to run away but it did; it ran into Michon's bed of lettuce and carrots. We had it cornered just when the back door opened. We scrambled."

"So, you figured the rabbit would just go back to its pen when it had had enough."

Robert ignored this.

"We went back later that night. At great risk of a beating if found out, Joubert brought his father's flashlight. The rabbit was nowhere in sight; we did see footprints, though, the same as those that were in our potato field."

"Verret wouldn't come out here, with people all around, to set a trap."

"He did, though, because none of us did it."

You wonder, Paul, what I did? You think I went to the clinic, told the receiving attendant of the condition of Verret's foot. He would send a doctor to visit the patient. Then, I would visit the Social Services building and fill out a report explaining my concerns about Madame Bertot's safety. I would tell our parents where the missing potatoes were and what was left of Madame Gervais' white rabbit?

That is precisely what I wrote in my diary, Paul, I wrote that I did these things.

But that's not what happened. No, it was not like that. I didn't go to the clinic. I didn't tell anyone of Verret's injury. I didn't tell about the white rabbit nor where the potatoes could be found. I kept silent. I kept the silence of the neighborhood, the silence that I detested.

Verret's funeral procession moved slowly down the dirt road on this first day of November 1943. The wind rode in, lumbering from the edge of the forest, then picked up speed as it swept the open road of the last fallen leaves. Giant gray clouds moved about in the sky holding the rain off a little while longer. The fields on both sides of the road were bare and dark. A lone relative walked behind the horse-drawn cart, then the two men who helped to load the coffin draped with a black cloth. As the cart moved along, past houses, women in black and

men wearing black armbands joined the procession. That was the tradition. Verret was not a good man. He was not liked, but he lived in the neighborhood, at the end of the road. As the cart approached our corner, people who lived in the alley came out of their houses. First, Bertot and his wife came out. He would lose a few hours of work, but he would find consolation and compensation at the café near the church, after the Requiem mass at Saint André. Then my mother would come out, and last, Madame Gervais since her house was closest to the corner. They'd wait at the intersection till the casket had passed. Then they'd close ranks at the rear of the procession, marching silently.

I was in my room under the eaves, and from my opened window, I could only see the people of the alley as they stepped out of their houses. But I knew how the cart holding Verret's casket got to our corner. It was always like this when someone from the neighborhood died.

The bells of Saint André would toll. The priest and one or two altar boys behind him, wearing a white chasuble over their black robes would be walking out of the church to meet the casket. Verret would have, then, left the neighborhood.

In about one hour, I will walk to the bus station and get on the bus that will take me to Poitiers. I'm going to finish my last year of *Lycée* there and then enter the university.

I have torn the short stories and the diary. I have packed my few favorite books, the miniature sail boat you gave me, Paul, remember? The day my father came to get me after that wonderful time I spent at your farm in the summer of 1938? I told you I'd keep it till we met again and I will. I'll write to you from Poitiers and hope you'll write me if you can still think of me as your friend.

There is nothing left, here, in this room, that was part of who I was. I have removed the bed sheets. The naked blue lines of the mattress are exposed. The yellow gingham coverlet is folded at the foot of the bed. I have swept the floor, dusted the empty furniture. No speck of dust remains to remember my smell. When the shutters rattle, when the hail beats on the window, when the sweet spring breeze breathes in, when the thunder of a summer storm knocks at the skylight, it will have nothing to do with the girl who used to live here.

Chapter XXIV

Another Returns

1946

Lisette folded the sheet of paper, placed it on her lap and crossed her hands on top of it. She'd read the notice many times since it arrived a week ago: "Georges Timbalier will be released from the gendarmerie of Châteauroux on Wednesday, April 20, 1946."

Today was the day. Lisette knew that, but she thought that she still had a little time. The train ride from Châteauroux to Villars would take two hours and walking to *La Bauderie* would take nearly another hour. Throughout the long years of the war many a stranger, walking from a far away farm to the village, seeing her sitting on the side of her front door as she was now, stopped to say a few words. Many asked, "Your husband, was he one of the farmers rounded by the Germans and sent to work on their farms across the Rhine?" She'd simply bowed her head as if acquiescing. It was much easier to allow the deception than to say: no, he's in jail because he committed a crime. Saying nothing did not seem such a big lie to Lisette. She remembered wondering then why the Germans had not rounded all the able-bodied men that year in 1942, and that she had understood when harvest time came. The trucks came back and took away half of

the freshly cut wheat. The next day, Pierre Guillot had brought her a load of chopped wood for winter.

"I'm bringing you your stock now, Lisette, because I'm leaving," he said. The *sales boches* aren't going to feed themselves with my grain again. I'm joining the *maquis*.

"What about Marie and little Michel, Pierre?"

"Well, *Père* will be here, and Henri. Between them they can handle what they need and the other fields can be left uncultivated. Henri is like family, he's been with us so long, and he doesn't talk much either. Michel and him don't seem to have much use for words. They get along just fine. Still, Marie'll be lonely."

"She and I can spend *veillées* together; I've got plenty of loneliness to share and you know that Jeannot likes to spend time with Michel. If Jeannot sees that Marie needs something, he'll tell me."

"Thanks, Lisette."

On Saturdays, at the market, the women gathered and exchanged information in whispers: the underground resistance had blown up this bridge, or that warehouse.

Soon after the end of the war, nearly a year ago, those men who had been taken away from their farms and sent to cultivate the German farms, or who had gone underground, returned. Some

had died. Some, like Pierre, had contracted tuberculosis. When he returned, Lisette saw a narrow shadow wrapped in a black coat, the head smaller—it had seemed to her—the hair thin and gray, as she observed him walking around his fields. Then the image of how he looked the day he brought the load of firewood to her farm came to her mind. He had removed his shirt and stood on the end of the cart. His torso glistened with sweat. The hair on his chest was thick and curly, golden like bread fresh out of the oven. He bent and seized the logs, three or four at a time. She watched his arms get hard as they held the load, his shoulders move rhythmically, the easy turn from the waist as the load was dropped on the pile just inside the barn. He did this steadily, without moving his feet, without hurry. She remembered walking into her kitchen to pin up the long braids that had fallen on her shoulders, feeling shameful.

Now Georges too was returning. Five O'clock. She imagined the sound of the train's whistle as it pulled into the station. Within an hour, she would hear his step. Unless. Unless he missed getting on the train; maybe he wouldn't come this day. She hoped he wouldn't come. She imagined that he took the wrong train, the one that went in the other direction, toward Paris. One could disappear in Paris.

He has no place to go but here, she reminded herself. She wondered what he would look like, if he had changed much, if his hair had thinned, what kind of clothes he'd be wearing. Lisette had a memory of the brown corduroy pants he wore the day he was taken away, a memory of his hands closed in fists below the handcuffs, of the flush on his face. She had tried to hide her own free hands deep inside the pockets of her housedress.

Why am I thinking about that now? She asked herself as she got up to check on the meal cooking on the stove. She and the boys had managed pretty well keeping up with the chores, especially the last two years. The hardest one had been the year after he was gone. Paul was only eleven then. He tried to plow the fields as he had watched his father do, but he was not very strong yet. Between the two of them, they managed to sow the grain and grow one field of wheat. The harvest was meager. Lisette thought that it might have been why the Germans had not bothered them. They had had so little flour, that first year, that it had not lasted through the winter, the coldest, that winter of 1942, that Lisette had ever known. For a week, the road to Villars had been closed by snow. They had run out of cooking oil, roasted chicory, this bitter root, despicable substitute for the real coffee beans that had not been seen since the beginning of the war, and sugar. The rationing

allowed only a precious bit of sugar and Lisette conserved it carefully for the chicory brew that was called coffee anyway.

As soon as the ground had thawed, early in March, she and Jeannot--she must remember to call him Jean, 'Jeannot is for babies' he had said on his last birthday--they had planted the snap beans, the tomato plants, the pickles. They nurtured the plants and picked them when they were just right for the canning. In summertime, it was the peaches from the trees in the lower field that had to be picked by hand, one fruit at a time. Lisette knew they could go on like that. She wanted things to go on like that; it was getting better all the time, the boys getting strong too. Warmth filled Lisette's chest. Her two boys, they were good sons, very good.

Georges hesitated a moment as the door of the station closed behind him. Four years it had been since he walked for a long time. Unsure of his legs, he looked across the square and thought of the long distance of dusty white road he would have to cover to get to his farm. Having crossed the square, he leaned his back against the nearest elm. Henriette's bar was within his field of vision but he did not look at it. He knew well enough that this was the place, the place where it happened.

He remembered thinking that he didn't know the man who sat at a table near the bar; no one else was there. When he entered and waved away the fly that was buzzing around his face, he'd noticed Henriette stepping through the opening behind the bar that led to the kitchen. Had he stared at the man because he didn't know him? A stranger in the village, of that Georges was sure. Before he moved his gaze away the man had spit a ball of tobacco off his tongue and it had landed on Georges' shoe. The man just sneered with his eyes and his lips. The buzzing of the fly became louder. Georges extended his long arm, closed his fist on the fly and flicked it in the man's glass.

Georges thought that after so many nights of remembering he had stripped away the vision of how the man looked after he hit him. The swollen face, the nose, the jaw broken, and the blood . . . and the cut on the side of the head where the bottle had broken.

Better concentrate on where I'm going. He threw away the butt of a dark, twisted cigar he'd been smoking. Soon his step found its rhythm and the long strides brought him closer and closer to her.

She followed him in thought getting off the train at Villars and walking away from the station. She saw him looking left and right at the changes on the road: the new dry cleaning

business, a new barber shop, a new café which sold sandwiches and foreign cigarettes, and a brand new cinéma. That's what Lisette saw when she brought her canning to market on Saturday mornings.

She saw him, in her mind's eye, turning off the main road at Gottard's lumberyard and kicking the sand of the dirt road that rose up to their farm and beyond. He wouldn't be sweating. Coolness still hung in the air though the sky was clear blue today. Would he meet anybody they knew? Even if he did, she thought, he probably wouldn't talk to anybody. She saw him looking at the flowering fruit trees as he reached the edge of the lower field.

Lisette stirred the food, tapped the wooden spoon on the edge of the pot and set it down on a small plate. She thought of the day it happened. The drinking had gotten worse for a couple of years; he was getting meaner and meaner. She remembered the empty bottles of 'eau de vie' she found in the barn. *More like 'water of death,'* she told herself again.

Today, he was coming back. Lisette placed mittens on the two handles of the pot to set it on the table and was thinking of things she might say to him. When she turned, he was

standing in the doorway, his nose pinched, breathing in the warm and succulent steam escaping from the pot.

"It smells good, Lisette."

Food splattered as she set the pot down unevenly.

"Isn't the rabbit stew the Sunday meal any more? You didn't make it especially for me, did you Liz?"

"Yes, Georges, I did. But I didn't have mushrooms."

Their eyes met for a moment. Neither moved toward the other during the silence. Then she walked up to him put her right hand to his shoulder and placed her lips to his cheek. His arms rose to hold her but he let them fall.

"Come sit down. You must be hungry."

He had not moved but his hand touched the spot where her lips touched his face.

"Where are the boys?"

"They'll be in from school soon," and she gestured to him to sit down at the table.

"I see the fields have been plowed and wheat is looking good. Who's been here?"

"No one has been here. The boys and me, we did the best we could. Paul, he's a real good worker. He did the plowing and sowed the grains. Jean and me, we planted the vegetables, fertilized them with the manure, and picked them when they were ready."

"You and the boys did all that? I don't believe you."

"It's the truth, Georges."

She found that she could hold herself straight and search into his eyes. *The malice, the scorn is still there*, she told herself. She watched him turn his glance towards the cupboard lined with rows of jars of tomatoes, pickles, snap beans, peaches, and jams. Rows were stacked upon rows till you could barely see the mirror in the back.

"What's that?" he said.

"I've been selling my canning at the market," she told him. "That's how I've been able to earn a little money."

"Paul isn't going to do my work no more," he hissed between his teeth.

The violence is still there. She followed his glance as it rested on each jar, one after the other. Should she tell him of the many hours she spent each night preparing the fruit and vegetables, lifting the heavy pots of water in which she set the jars to cook? Should she tell him how many times she scalded her hands?

He had not eaten from the plate of food she'd set in front of him. Lisette waited. During the silence she thought of the past brutality when he was home, then of the hard but good life her and the boys have had since he was gone. *He hasn't changed but I have; I am strong*. She thought of ways she might find to

protect her family because she would not let him hurt her or the boys anymore. She wanted her good life with her boys to go on.

She thought of the winter evenings when she'd spread a blanket on the floor in front of the stove. She could see the three of them now, huddled, looking at the red flame through the glass door at the bottom of the stove. She thought of the wondrous looks on the boys' faces as she told them stories. Old stories she had heard from her *grand'mère* when she was a little girl and they lived together in *La Roche*, their small, remote farmhouse perched on a rock above the *Creuse* River. The story of the *Druiders* and the beautiful maidens who came to dance, with flowers on their heads, around the large rocks assembled in a circle on a meadow lush with thick grass. Paul had smiled. "There are hundreds of enormous rocks in the *Creuse* valley," he had said. But Jean, he'd raised his eyes at her in wonder and asked for more. "Tell us about the valley of the *Demoiselles*," he'd say. "Is it true that they play tricks on visitors who come too close to their sleeping quarters?" Paul, he'd just stare a little harder at the red cinders, but she knew he listened, and that the warmth which spread on his face came also from inside. She decided that she wouldn't tell Georges of those precious evenings.

"You tell Paul I'll do my own work," he repeated. She saw his eyes narrow as he turned his face toward hers and he spoke again. "You think I'm a fool if you think I'm going to believe the three of you did all this work. I'll find out who's been around here."

Before Lisette finished feeling the hurt from his insult, she told herself that he was hurting because he had been alone, while she had been happy with her boys. She saw his long hands, no longer used to handling a farm tool, hanging, helpless, at the end of coat sleeves too short for him. Those lovely winter evenings, she would not share their memory with him.

"Eat some food," she said.

She didn't think that he heard her.

"I think I'll take a walk around the place," he said.

She saw the back of his head, his untrimmed hair on his neck. He opened the back door, and did not close it. He walked slowly, as if counting his steps, in the direction of the barn.

Lisette sat at the kitchen table and breathed deeply.

Jean was pulling weeds from the strawberry patch. He had on the worn pants he wore only when he was working in the garden and his old blue sweater, too tight around the arms. He left his school clothes in the barn, neatly folded on a crate, near his book sack. He bent, wrapped his hands around the bottom of

the plant to find the hidden weeds, pulled them, and dropped them in the broken, flat basket he kicked along with his foot. He was working fast.

"There are lots of fruits on these plants; they'll be ripe for picking in a couple of weeks. They're looking real good."

Jean straightened up, surprised, but not scared. He looked, without shyness or awkwardness, at the man who spoke. He did not remember the face, but the eyes . . . they reminded him a little of his brother's eyes.

"You're my father, aren't you? Maman said you might come today."

"You were a little boy when . . . I can help you with this . . . I . . . "

The voice, low, flat, also was a surprise for Jean. He expected harshness but did not know why. He wished he knew what to say. *I must say something*, he told himself.

"No, thanks."

"Right. That's what I would say too. You look like Liz . . . your mother. When she was younger, I mean."

Jean was sure he didn't remember this voice. He looked at the weeds faltering in the basket.

"I'd better let you get back to work," the man said.

Jean bent down and moved along the row. Nothing more was said. He thought his father had left. But when he turned to work down the next row he saw that he was watching him.

"Where is Paul?"

"He'll be at the high fields checking on the wheat."

Jean wished he could throw his hand in the air and catch the words that just flew out of his mouth, and claim them back. *Maybe Paul didn't want him to go up there just yet.*

"But he'll be down for supper!" he added quickly.

"Yeah. I'll see you then."

Jean caressed each plant with his left hand, then his right, but he was not pulling weeds. He was listening for the sound of the steps walking away, waiting for them to be gone. *He does not seem so scary*, he told himself. He wished he could remember something about the time when his father was home and he was a little boy. When he asked Paul, his brother looked angry and said, "He was mean," and when he asked his mother, well, it seemed to make her sad.

Jean tried to think; his father's name had been mentioned a few times since he went away. There was the day when Marie Guillot brought in a pitcher of fresh cream. Jean remembered that he'd been sitting at a corner of the table doing his homework, and his mother had been peeling vegetables at the other end. "How is Georges?" said Marie. Jean pretended to be

studying hard, his eyes down on his book, but he really was trying to listen to the conversation. His mother waited before answering, and finally replied, "All right, I suppose, Marie. I hardly ever get any news." And there was the time when they had gone to the post office to pick up a box of seeds his mother had ordered from a catalogue. The lady behind the counter also asked about his father. Jean remembered having to run to keep up with his mother after they left the building. She said to him, or *maybe she was not really talking to me*, he thought now; she said: "This Renée, she always did have a tongue too long, even when we were in school."

Jean was just kicking the basket along now, not even bending down. *I wonder if I should go to the house*, he thought, but instead ran across the garden, up the road, followed the edge of the Tullier wood, crossed the pasture where little Michel Guillot whistled at his sheep, but did not stop to talk to him.

Jean reached the top of the wheat field, and gestured with both arms in the air uselessly. Paul had already seen him and was striding toward him.

"He's here, Paul; he's coming up here by the footpath. I came the long way but I ran real fast. I knew I'd beat him here. He'll be here soon, though. He's tall like you, Paul, or

maybe you're taller. He came to talk to me in the garden. He was nice."

"*Bien*, then. Everything will be all right, just go back home. You don't want him to think I needed warning, do you?"

Jean did not head back toward home. He waited a while inside the edge of the wood, then crawled in the field, his stomach flat on the rich dark soil between two rows of tall wheat grass. He saw Paul walking to meet his father just coming in from the footpath on the other side of the field. Jean crawled closer. He must be able to hear.

"You did a good job, Paul." Jean saw his father walking along a row, and Paul following him. Jean placed his ear to the ground. He read once, that the Indians of Canada did this to hear faraway sounds.

"I see you tried to fence in the field from the Guillot's cow pasture."

Jean did not hear Paul's answer. He didn't think that the Indian way of listening was very good. He crawled closer and saw his father looking at the picks holding the fence. *What's he looking at?* His father pulled out a pick, then another.

"You want to show me how I should have done it, Pa?" Paul said. *It does not really sound like Paul, it must be because of the distance.* "Old man Guillot helped me a little."

"I'll do my own work from now on."

That's all that Jean heard his Pa say, but next he saw Paul walking away, walking away fast toward the foot path. *What happened?* Jean crawled back to the edge of the field, got behind a tree, into the wood, and headed back home hoping he'd meet his brother. As he reached the alley edging the Guillot house between the footpath and the road, he saw Paul waving at him.

"Did you, by any chance, get your sweater full of mud while crawling in the field to keep an eye on us?"

"I wanted to hear what Pa said about the wheat. He likes the strawberry patch."

"Then you saw him taking down the picks I had set to fence off the wheat. Pa doesn't want me around the farm. It's time I earn my own living anyway. Since Pierre came back sick, they've been shorthanded at the Guillots'. Old Père Guillot offered me to work here at their farm; he'd offered me before, you know. He's still the boss, here, and he's strong too. This man works in the fields from daybreak to sundown. Even though Pierre is not sick any more, he's all right."

Why is Paul speaking so fast? "But Paul, what about Maman and me?"

"Papa will be there. And you know where I'll be. Run over here as often as you can, and tell me about . . . well, you tell me about things. Now go, and tell Maman not to wait for me for

supper. Père Guillot said he has things to show me. I'll be home as soon as I can."

"When are you going to tell Maman?"

"After supper."

The holding post, nearest the edge, was too deeply set. Georges' weakened hands could not pull it. He watched the long narrow back of his son quickly descending the path. *What am I doing?* A sudden vision of the prison courtyard came to his mind. A boy, barely older than Paul, stood in front of the guard. Because of the far corner where he was standing, Georges had not heard what the boy had said. He just watched as the kid removed his jacket, kneeled by the guard's feet and rubbed the shoes with his jacket. When he got up, the guard said something and the boy again kneeled and rubbed the shoes with his jacket. Was it five, six times? Finally, the boy crumpled and just lay on the ground. The guard kicked him but the form didn't move. A stretcher arrived after a long time and took the boy away.

Georges placed the picks back in their holes, each one of them, then sat on the grass, and closed his eyes, exhausted. Darkness again. But it was not the same darkness; not the darkness of the nights in his cell, when his eyes were wide open. All night long, he would stare in the darkness pushing

the nightmares away. Only near dawn did peace come with dreams that brought Lisette near him, him sucking her honey breasts.

Lisette set a fresh plate of food in front of her husband, and one in front of Jean sitting across the table from his father. She brought a platter of bread, walked back to the stove, and turned the spoon inside the pot.

"Come sit down, Lisette," he said. "That stew's been stirred enough. Fill your plate and sit down."

Lisette brought her plate and sat next to Jean. She wished Paul would come and chatter with his brother as they usually did. She couldn't look in the face, in the gray eyes, across the table. She hoped night would be a long time coming. She thought that she could make dinner last a long time.

"I've made a pie with last fall's apples," she said, "they were plentiful this year." *What can I do, what lies can I say so he will not touch me,* she asked herself.

"How come you sit over there?"

"It's my place, Georges, I always sit next to Jean. A habit I got from the time when he was a little boy, I guess, so I could help him cut his meat."

"He don't need no help any more. Paul ought to be at the table for supper like everyone else. This is going to change."

"He probably had things to finish up, Georges."

"We'll see."

"Yeah, Pa. Paul's working around the farm all the time, me too, when we're not in school."

"I didn't ask you nothing. You'd better eat your supper."

"Yeah, Pa." *He is not nice, the way he was in the garden, maybe that's what Paul was talking about when he said he was mean.*

During the silence Lisette thought she ought to tell him of the time she tried to visit him, and the guard said "No." She had insisted: "I brought some jam that I made," and immediately regretted her words. The guard took her basket. "I'll give it to him," he said, his eyes saying otherwise.

But instead of explaining this, Lisette just said, "Jean, has the cat got your tongue? You must have something to say."

"No, I can't think of anything. Except, well, Pa, what was it like in prison?"

George slammed his hands hard on the table. The plates rattled, and a fork fell on the floor.

"He didn't mean nothing, Georges." Lisette begged with her eyes.

He pushed his chair back, and walked around the table toward her.

"You come sit by me," he said.

She didn't move, not even when Jean got up and ran to the back door.

"Let's just have dinner quietly, Georges." She hoped her voice was not shaking.

He was standing right next to her, grabbed her arm, high, near the shoulder. The mending she did last night on her pink and white flowered dress hoping he might remember it, tore.

"I said you come sit by me," and he pulled her up. She heard the cloth being torn; she felt the nails digging in her flesh, his breath on her exposed skin as she tried to cover it with her hand.

"You're hurting me, Georges."

Then from the back door: "Stop!"

Lisette sighed at the sudden sound of Paul's voice. She saw him, as tall as his father, and the familiar slight jerk of the head to throw a black curl away from the eye. Only in their color were her son's eyes the same as the father's. The caring haze in Paul's eyes, she never saw that in George's. What she remembered was his blond handsomeness. How she had admired his grace when he danced with other girls before he ever noticed her. Then, one night, when she had reluctantly accompanied her cousins Denis and Juliette to a dance, and the accordion was playing a waltz, he took her hand, whirled her inside his arms,

and she felt warm and light, and thought their dancing didn't really need music.

Paul moved from the darkness of the back door. She saw the gun.

"I told you once what I'd do if you were to hit my mother again."

"You think I'm afraid of you, boy?"

He let go of her shoulder, unsnapped the clasp of his belt buckle, pulled his belt out, and took a step toward Paul before stopping in front of the cupboard. His eyes followed each jar, each row. He seemed hypnotized by the balls of yellow peaches, red tomatoes, strings of green beans, the seeds of the strawberries inside the jars of jam. He took one more step, and with one scoop of his long arm, swept the stacks of jars that crashed and spilled their odorous fruits and syrup on the red tiled floor. Lisette heard her heart beating in her veins. She waited as she heard his snickering laughter and the sound of his heavy soles crushing the broken glass.

Then she heard the cocking of the gun.

This man, this man I chose to be my husband, my lover, has brought his good son to the verge of committing a murderous act.

"No, Paul!" Lisette threw her arms in front of her. At the same time she saw Jean's head peeking inside from the

doorframe and the large, sturdy shape of Père Guillot. He saw them also.

"What are you . . . you little snitch you went to get him?"

"No, Pa!"

Paul's lips trembled when he heard his brother. Lisette saw that.

"Jean didn't come to get me, Georges. I wanted to tell you myself that I hired Paul, and ask you to come visit when you were settled."

"I don't need no help, and I've got to teach that boy with a gun, here, a lesson."

"We've done without your lessons, Pa." Lisette thought that Paul's voice was too soft, a delicate veil that could be pierced by the mounting waves of an anger she knew was too close to the surface. "We can continue to do without them," he added, and he stepped closer to his father.

Lisette feared that she soon would not be able to put a foot forward, that her legs would fold under her. She was amazed at the thought that had entered her mind. She forced herself to walk to the cupboard, holding the torn sleeve of her dress with her hand, and pulled a jar out of a drawer. She held it tightly against her chest, and stepped between her son and her husband. She looked in her husband's face, in the pale eyes.

"There's enough money in this jar to buy a milking cow," she said. "It's taken two and half years to save this much money."

His eyes widened as he stared at the folded bills filling the container. Then she told him, and her voice sounded strange to her, "The evening train to Paris will pass in one hour. You have time to catch it."

"You're not the Lisette . . . the one's that's been in my mind every day and every night ... "

There was the voice again, an echo of long ago tenderness, waking a response in her breast, warm, melting. During the silence, she could not think. She saw her husband watching her, watching her as if he was truly seeing her for the first time since he came in. Did he see the streaks of gray in her thick dark hair? The wrinkles left by the sun around her eyes? Her arms tanned brown up to the line where her sleeves were rolled up? Her reddish hands thickened by the daily, harsh, endless chores?

She was unable to utter a word, a strangling in her throat prevented any sound, but he did not know that. He seemed to wait for her to speak. She held her arms out, held the jar towards him and he took it.

Georges crossed the threshold. She saw his back moving away, one step away, two, three, farther. She heard the

disengagement of the gun. Deeply, she breathed. She felt profoundly sad.

Chapter XXV

Leaving

All night long, Lisette lay quite still in her bed. Sometimes she rested her hands on her abdomen and felt the distended flesh. How hard the birth of Paul had been! With her hands placed where they are now she had tried to help him leave the safety of her body, tried to push him out. When, at last, the struggle was over, and Georges placed the baby's tiny little body next to hers, she had known that the love she felt at that moment was everlasting. It was a feeling not hoped for, unexpected, a feeling that took entire possession of her, and that, she knew, would be for life.

Now she had to send her first born away. He was not safe near her. That old gun, stored in the barn since his father left for prison, probably would not have fired. Although Georges couldn't see the gun well from where Paul stood in the darkness of the back entrance, he might have recognized it, might have known the gun wouldn't fire. If Père Guillot had not arrived when he did, Georges would have hit Paul and hurt him, Lisette was sure. *What if Georges was still nearby, what if he didn't get on the train? Paul would still be in danger.* She had to find the way to send him to safety. But how could she bear the pain of such a separation? Had she not suffered enough after her grandmother's departure so long ago? *"It's best for*

you," her grandmother had said when she returned to her house in Tulac leaving Lisette at Bois-Chauds. Now her Paul would be leaving her? Would she have to tell him she was sending him away because it was best for him? How could she bear this sorrow?

Dawn was already filtering through the shutters when finally she tumbled into sleep.

Jeannot stood near the night table.

"I brought you your coffee, Ma. Paul and I, we have to leave for school."

"Did I sleep so late? Wait a minute."

She brought her hands to her face and smelled on her fingers the scent left by the tears she tried to keep from flowing during the night. Then she got up, wrapped her robe around her gown and followed Jeannot to the kitchen. A plate, bread, butter had been set on the table. Paul was not there. Blood drained from her face, her knees weakened.

"Where is your brother?"

"He's all right, Maman. We picked a few strawberries. I came in to fix your coffee while he checked the last row."

They want me to pick up where I left off yesterday before . . . before . . . Paul walked in with a basket full of fruit, smiling, his face, calm. Wasn't he scared, or did last night's

horrible scene not happen? Was it a nightmare? Her gaze insisted, searching.

It was the same face that for years, since he was just a young boy, shook her doubts from her, pulled her from the dark waters of despair where she sank in at times. The last time . . . but the last time had been different. Quickly, she'd recognized the feeling that she knew would soon engulf her in a wave of sadness and loneliness. Before the sobs overcame her, she'd stepped out through the back door and hurried up the path to the very spot Paul used when he wanted to read or just be alone.

She saw Pierre Guillot and desired him again. He was advancing toward her, pushing one leg in front of the other, as she mounted the slight rise toward the old oak tree. Her whole body opened up, tears flowing from everywhere. He took her hands and made her sit in the grass.

"The last time I saw you this sad, Lisette, was the first time I saw you; at the pond. You'd been running behind the cart that was taking your grandmother away. Your face was all red from tears. I showed you how to skate on the ice pond, remember? I wish I could pull you again across the ice, Lisette, if it'd stop your tears."

"That day, at the pond, I was thirteen years old. My grandmother had left me; she went back to Tulac and left me at Bois-Chauds."

"Yes. You told me," Pierre said as his lips touched her hair.

She shuddered, held her sobs and backed away slightly. "I must go."

After that day, when she could not contain her sadness inside the house, her walks took her to a direction opposite from the Guillot farm.

"Maman . . . Maman!"

Paul's voice was insistant.

"Yes, what?"

"I have to take Monsieur Jordan's exam today. Otherwise I'd stay home, Maman. I'll stop at the Guillots' and ask Marie if she can come; she'll help with the strawberries, I'm sure. Take her mind off things; Michel told Jean that his mother was tired a lot lately."

Lisette did not answer, instead she asked, "How long have you been up?" She was sure Paul had already talked with Père Guillot.

Slowly, slowly she spread a thin layer of butter on the large slice of bread. *Monsieur Jordan, yes, he's the one she must speak with, today.* She remembered the day she met Paul's teacher.

It was earlier this year when winter was still holding its grip on nature and people. She had gone to Villars to say goodbye to Juliette's folks who were moving to a rest home. Their Notions shop would be closed in a few days. When she turned the handle and the bell rang over the door, a man dressed in a suit, turned to face her. A strand of thick white hair hid part of his forehead; thick glasses sat precariously close to the tip of his nose, his eyes above them faced her directly.

"Isn't it a beautiful day," he said in a booming voice. "How am I going to keep my students in the classroom on such a day?"

Lisette stood still for a moment, rubbing her cold hands together, conscious of the icy February air on the other side of the door, and unsure that he was addressing her, yet she knew his eyes were looking straight at her.

"Lisette," said Juliette, "this is Monsieur Jordan, the teacher; Paul is probably in his class."

"Yes, I've seen Monsieur Jordan's name on some of Paul's notebooks. I'm Lisette Timbalier," she said and extended her hand.

"Ah, Paul is an excellent student. Unfortunately my class is not designed to teach the more technical theories he needs. He must go on to a more advanced school where the farmers of the future are being formed. He needs to go to the Agricultural College in Bourges. I will make a recommendation."

"But, that's not possible . . . I need him . . . Paul manages our small farm pretty much by himself now, and we couldn't afford it . . . and I . . . "

"His grades qualify him for a grant; there could be a great future for Paul. I see no problem with his ability to adjust to the more advanced classes. Farming in a few years will bear little resemblance to what it has been for the long past."

"I don't see how that's possible . . . his father would have to decide . . . ". Her voice faltered and she receded a little farther in the corner of the store.

"I'm sorry," Jordan said, "I speak too forcefully."

"It's just . . . I never imagined Paul going away. It would be good for him . . . I don't see how I could manage without him."

"I understand. Will you think about it? You can come and see me at school or at my house. I can explain the grant; most of the expenses are covered."

He said "goodbye" and he was gone. Lisette watched her friend slide the drawers that contained handkerchiefs back into the square holes that were waiting to suck them in.

"Come in the back, Lisette. My mother baked a cake for you."

"Juliette, will you be going back to Bois-Chauds once the store is finally closed?"

"Oh, no, I'm going away too, Lisette. Denis has been dead six years. No one needs me at Bois-Chauds. Albert's wife is mistress of the household. Two daughters-in-law in the same house wouldn't work, you know."

"But Juliette, we have been friends so long. Where are you going?"

"When I was little my parents took me to Auvergne. They thought the mountain air would strengthen my lungs. I don't know whether it did or not but the beauty of the scenery left a spot in my heart."

"But that's far, Juliette. Where in Auvergne?"

"I'm moving to Vichy. The air is crisp and dry there and the thermal waters bring tourists. My parents want to give me some money from the sale of their store; I'm going to open a dress shop. Their rest home will not be very far; I'll be able to visit now that I drive."

Lisette remembered holding the edge of the table repeating, "We have been friends for so long . . . since you made my first fancy dress, for my sixteenth birthday, remember?"

Juliette moved closer and took Lisette in her arms. "I'll miss you too, Lisette. We've both been through so much heartache; but your neighbor, Marie is a good friend, isn't she?"

"Oh, yes, she is so good; we see each other almost every day. Her little Michel spends a lot of time with Jeannot. But . . . Marie, well, since you are leaving I don't think I'd be betraying a confidence. One morning, soon after Christmas, Marie came to the house, her face was so white I knew before she spoke: 'The lump in my breast I told you about, Lisette, . . . well, it's cancer.' I took her hands, neither of us could say anything."

Juliette covered her face with her hands and Lisette felt the kind of numbness that had overtaken her after Marie had left her kitchen that awful day.

"Oh, Lisette, wasn't her husband sick when he returned from the *maquis*?"

"Yes. Pierre was not allowed to stay at his farm, on his return, for fear of contagion. He was sent to a hospital and given a drug newly discovered for the treatment of tuberculosis. He's completely well now."

"What tragedy in that family!"

Lisette had not answered. The cake was eaten in an awkward silence. She left as soon as she could and, at the door, her friend had said simply, "I'll write often."

Lisette did not clear the table right away. Instead she walked to her room and got dressed. When she returned to the kitchen, the sweet smell of the strawberries annoyed her. She placed the basket in the sink and went out to the vegetable garden. She picked up Jeannot's mostly broken crate and checked the pickling cucumbers patch, breaking one at the stem, rubbing her finger on the hairy, rough and bumpy skin and scratching it with her nail. The acrid, strong scent calmed her. *Some faces hiding behind curtains will be wondering what I'm doing in the village, she thought, I'll stop at Tulla's grocery for vinegar and salt. At a quarter past noon, Jordan should be getting to his house for lunch.*"

She'd picked a dozen or so of *cornichons* when she closed the garden gate behind her, left the basket by the front door and washed her hands at the outdoor faucet.

The sun bathed the back of her neck and shoulders as she pedaled fast toward Villars. Halfway there she passed the school, but did not stop. She wanted to speak with the teacher at his house. Her boys, she would see them later in the

afternoon. She worried about her clothes, *they'll be damp and sweaty*, and slowed her pace. The alfalfa fields on her right were covered with a white dust. *We need rain, but not today, please.*

At the village, the square offered the cooling darkness of its enormous sycamores and she'd hoped to refresh herself there, to smooth her hair and brush off her skirt, but the teacher saw her from the other side as he emerged from the bakery with a baguette in his hand.

"Madame Timbalier, Madame Timbalier!" He crossed the square in a few strides waving his arms. She didn't wait for his greeting. "I came to see you, Monsieur Jordan."

"Perfect; let's go see what my housekeeper prepared for lunch."

"It's about Paul," she said as she adjusted her step to keep up with him.

He lead her to a house much like the others in the village, pushed a freshly painted gate and leaned her bicycle unceremoniously against a silvery moss-grown trunk, around which curved the path to the house. Inside, it was cool. They sat in a room simply furnished with comfortable chairs around a low center table. Lisette had already said why she had come and she refused any food or even coffee.

"You see, it's late, Madame Timbalier, and Paul's file should have been at the college since March. Something important, I suppose, must have happened to make you decide . . . " He waited but Lisette offered no explanation.

The teacher then spoke again. "The director of the school is a good friend of mine. I will talk to him. But at any rate, Paul would have to leave in a few days to attend the two-week seminar. It is required of all applicants who will enter in September. Madame Timbalier, is there something wrong?"

Lisette finally raised her head.

"Yes, there is." Her hands clasped the arms of the chair. "I cannot tell you, Monsieur Jordan. Paul will be safe away at school."

"Safe?" He looked at her, saw her eyes filling with tears, and, after an awkward silence, simply said, "I'll do all that's necessary. Don't worry."

Lisette got up to leave and he followed her outside.

"Madame Timbalier, I understand how hard it is for you to let Paul go away. The last time we spoke, you said . . . well, you didn't think you'd be able to manage without him."

"We've given up growing cereals. No need any more. It's just the vegetable garden: lettuces, snap beans, tomatoes and the fruit trees, of course. Paul's brother is nearly twelve

now, and I have good neighbors; we'll manage. Thank you Monsieur Jordan."

The teacher understood that the garden work Lisette spoke of was simply hiding the real burden in her mind and the sorrow in her heart.

"Paul won't be alone, you know," he said softly. "The Laney boy is going too." Lisette's sigh of relief was barely audible but left a vibration in the air much like a musical note.

The village, she thought, as she walked alongside her bicycle until she reached the head of the road to *La Bauderie*, looked brighter than she had seen it the last time she came. All the windows were opened to let the spring in, and lace curtains fluttered gracefully.

The sun chafed her face as she strained to pedal up the only rise before the descent toward her farm. She paid no mind to the Bachelor Buttons and Poppies floating on the surface of the stalks of wheat, their blues and reds embracing at the slightest breeze. In the distance, the air shimmered just above the low field of *La Bauderie*.

The thoughts in her mind were fixed on what she had to do. Monsieur Jordan said that most expenses were covered by the grant but there was the matter of travel expenses to Bourges and

some pocket money. On Saturday, the collecting van would stop and the driver would pay her for the five dozens of eggs, chickens, preserves and the tray of her goat cheeses she sent the previous week. That would be more than enough for a round trip ticket. She wanted Paul to have a return ticket. What about the expenses of a whole school year starting in September? In the months that followed her first meeting with the teacher, in February, she had remembered her grandmother's property in Tulac, hers now, and had wondered then, '*Perhaps, we'll see, when Georges returns.*'

Lisette never returned to *La Roche* after her grandmother's funeral. She had barely seen the house then, but she remembered feeling that it was still alive. Now she imagined grounds taken over by thistle and walls in ruin covered with climbing weeds. What was left of the house and barn would be of no use, but there was the land. The beauty of the *Creuse* with its rocky wilderness had attracted artists who came to paint the picturesque scenery. Lisette remembered reading about this in the newspapers. Near Tulac, in Gargillesse, tourists came to visit George Sand's house. An inn, a few shops, new houses had been built. Of course that was a bit of a distance to Tulac where the ruins of *La Roche* and the land were, but it may have some value. She had some time to find out about that.

Lisette busied her mind with the details of the picnic basket she was preparing. A tablecloth, glasses and plates, thick slices of cured ham, bread and butter, a bottle of cider. She got three fishing poles from the barn and leaned them against the wall just outside the entrance door.

Jeannot came in first.

Not as handsome as Paul, not as smart, his face full of freckles, her Jean was solidly planted in common sense, happy, untroubled by the anguish of others.

"Are we going to the creek, Ma?" he said as he watched her turning the key in the door, the first time he ever saw her doing that. *She is scared*, he thought. *Locking the door won't stop him if he wants to come back.* "Paul's coming. He was talking to André Laney; his father is sending him to the Agricultural College. Maman, you'd said Paul could go to that school in Bourges after Papa came back because there wouldn't be that much to do. You know I could take care of things, M'man. We don't even have to plow any more."

"Here, you carry the basket, I'll grab the poles. Paul can catch up with us," she said.

Paul caught up with them as they neared the small pond, and suddenly and all at once, the frogs fell silent. Then they crossed the meadow, rendered dark green by the recent rains, and arrived at the fishing spot. The bough of oaks shadowed the

creek; the water sent its icy breath toward them, surprising them. They moved away from the trees and Lisette laid the cloth where the sun had dried and warmed the grass.

"Come, Paul. I bet I can be first catching a fish." Jean ran out to the bank and Paul followed him.

Kneeling and sitting on her heels, Lisette put the food out. She searched her mind for the words she would speak to Paul but none came. Finally she took the last fishing line and approached him. She threw her line to the side so that her face was turned away from him and she said simply, "Paul, I want you to leave with André Laney on Wednesday for Bourges."

Her son was silent for a long moment because it takes time for certain words to reach the heart. At last he said, "You think I'm afraid of Pa. You want to send me away!" She looked at him. His eyes hung onto hers, pouring out his hurt.

"No, Paul, I know you're not afraid. I am. I don't want him to hurt you nor do I want you to hurt your father, and there is more, Paul. You are smart. You need to learn more, new and interesting things, see new places and have fun with people your age. Monsieur Jordan explained the grant to me."

Paul wasn't listening; he wanted to run from her. She saw that. "No. Go talk to your brother and we're going to eat."

She noticed the sudden tender look on Paul's face when she reminded him of Jean. And something else for a flicker of time,

she thought. Last night she saw a man, but just now, didn't she catch the expectant, hopeful and dreamy look of a boy as she spoke of his future?

"I'll have everything ready for Wednesday. We'll borrow the Guillots' buggy."

On the platform, he laughed at Jean's last joke and thought of giving him a last recommendation but had not. He had placed his hand in Père Guillot's and the old man had pressed it long and hard. He almost faltered when, in her embrace, he felt his mother's heart beating fast and her arms trembling. It was she who had backed a little and said, "You'd better be getting on board. André Laney is waiting for you." He watched his brother's arm, raised and waving, long after the train had pulled from the station.

Nose smashed against the window, he recognized this bough of trees and a path that led to a distant farm where he had worked once for a few days, now hidden in mist, a heavy smoke rising from the unseen chimney. An emptiness buzzed inside his head, the rhythm of the train's wheels pounding, stretching the bond that had attached him to his village, to *La Bauderie*, to all those who had been his connection up to now; another turn of the wheel and all this would snap. Those that would come his way now would be strangers. Paul felt alone. When the burning

wetness in his eyes relented and his mind could think again, it was the letter he sent to Monique two days earlier that he saw in his mind's eyes. He had understood, that night, as he was trying to put words on paper, that when he would walk his fields again, it would be as a visitor. That certainty had drenched him like a sudden summer shower. He wrote that to Monique, and now he wished he had not sent the letter. She would sense his sadness in the words; he was embarrassed. A fly crossed his field of vision. He turned and remembered André Laney seated on the banquette. The boy's ears, too large, distracted from an otherwise pleasant, happy face. He was sharpening a pencil over a piece of paper spread on his knees. As Paul joined him on the banquette, he put the pencil down and blew the black powder off. Then he carefully closed his pocketknife.

Chapter XXVI

A Wing to Fly

1956

The day was waking when Lisette opened her door. From the nearby farms came familiar sounds: the lowing of cows calling their calves, the whining of hungry hogs, the cackle of chickens, the soft moans of lambs, and great clacking of shutters against walls. A faint cold hung in the air although it was only early September. She walked to the gate and picked up the newspaper. *I should have put my shawl on.* She returned quickly inside the house. Instead of preparing coffee, she warmed some milk in the small saucepan and watched the steam cloud the glass as she poured the liquid slowly.

Still on the table were the wedding pictures and a few unsent invitations in Chantal's beautiful penmanship, the down strokes heavy and strong, the loops fine and elegant. Lisette wanted to look at everything again in luxurious slowness before reading the newspaper. Chantal and Jean, still in their wedding clothes. The last five years had passed all at once, not one at a time, and suddenly her boys were men. *I was not watching.* The newlyweds stood on the steps of the house directly across from *La Bauderie*. The railroad worker who had it built was transferred to a new location when the house was barely finished. Chantal and Jean had rented it and bought the field

next to it. Vegetables were easily found at the store, now. There was no need to grow them, but Lisette knew that the will to plant and harvest would never ever desert Jean. On another photograph Paul, looking solitary, was toasting the newly married couple. Lisette wondered if he was sad. Had he been disappointed that Monique couldn't come to Jean's wedding? Of course he wouldn't say. Lisette had never seen Paul as happy as during that whole month of August when they both came from Fley. Laughter rang in the house, in the fields that summer--1951 it was--even though the work of hand picking the fruit as quickly as possible, bringing it in, preparing the canning, was as hard as always. Monique didn't come with Paul the following year. When Lisette asked, he said she was busy writing a novel. Little had been said about it since then. Had Paul told Monique how much he cared? *Probably not*, thought Lisette.

Once Monique began writing, he'd set up a desk for her in his apartment so she could work there when she came to visit. On a beautiful evening, as he stood on the balcony, she got up and joined him.

"You seem . . . perplexed," he said. "Anything wrong?"

"No. It's just . . . the novel; it's going to take a long time."

She couldn't have known the depth of loneliness she was condemning him to by those simple words. Her visits were shorter and fewer after that. Her notes were too bulky, it was not practical, she explained. As Jean's wedding date approached, the 'maybes' became whispers. And then: "There'll be one more chapter to write, Paul. One more chapter. I can't leave now." He had not asked again.

And Lisette had not asked about Monique. Last night, Paul spoke a long time about his work. He was proud of his research into a new strain of wheat, she could see that on his face, and he'd grown to love his school. To stay in Bourges he'd turned down offers of superior positions.

Lisette returned the photographs to their jacket. She was glad the wedding had gone well and she was glad now to be alone. Chantal and Jean would be away on their honeymoon for a few days and Paul had left in his car early this very morning, before she was up.

Why am I glad to be alone? What a solitary woman I've become!

When the last of Juliette's letters came, Lisette didn't know it was the last. But mulling it over when a simple greeting card came the next Christmas, she remembered imprecise wording, and a sense of reluctance. Understanding the futility

of writing back a long letter she accepted the simple exchange of greetings once a year.

For a long time she had missed Juliette's old friendship and on several occasions visited her cousins Albert and Louis at Bois-Chauds. After Albert married, Louis moved away and Lisette soon realized that Albert's young wife did not want the companionship her husband's cousin offered. The young woman's polite rejection had not mattered. *It's after Marie's death in 1953, Lisette realized, that I kept more and more to myself.*

Marie. She seemed to be all right after the first surgery. For a few years--was it two? three?--she was again healthy, happy, good, the helpful neighbor she'd always been. Then the invader returned with a vengeance. *I watched her being robbed of her flesh little by little until she foundered. I watched her slip away, day by day, changing from a sweet friend to an angry, unknown stranger like a calm pond becoming a raging creek. I saw the pain eroding love from a heart that had only known loving. Still, even when she no longer knew me, I kept watch, holding her hand, hoping for a sign in her eyes that might say: it was all right, all this pain, it was all right. The suffering, the sorrow, separations, hardships, all in one life, how could it be all right?*

Lisette had not touched her glass of milk. She pushed the newspaper away. The box on the chair next to hers came from

Paris and probably contained another wedding gift for Jean and his bride but the letter affixed to it was addressed to Lisette. *Célesta will not let me fail to continue our correspondence.* Lisette smiled. *Her letters always require an answer.* Lisette opened the letter, passed over the greeting and looked for the conversation. "You need a change, Lisette. You need to change. You." How does one change? All Lisette knew is what she had been, what had been.

After her grandmother left her at Bois-Chauds, she'd learn that work was her life. She knew she'd worked and fulfilled her duty every single day. Every single day, she did what needed to be done. What was there to change? What did Célesta mean? The writing seemed to blur as Lisette picked up the letter again. "We'll meet you at the train station . . . an excursion on a *bateau-mouche* on the river . . ." Did Célesta suggest she go to Paris by herself? Lisette put the letter down. She thought Célesta capable of anything and had been surprised when she had not returned to Fley to rebuild the domain, the domain that had been her whole life, her way of life. Did Célesta consciously decide to change her life and remain in Paris? Did she embrace—with ardor--the change she was speaking of? *I think I'll ask her to come spend Christmas at La Bauderie, her and her sister. I've never met Christiane.*

There was a knock at the door. Another package being delivered, another gift for Chantal, Lisette thought. A second knock, harder than the first one, annoyed her.

"Just a minute," she said louder than necessary.

Her toe hit the foot of the chair when she got up. A frown spread on her face as she limped to the door and unlocked it. There he stood, disheveled, a face deeply furrowed, unshaven, but it was his face. He seemed to wait for her to speak or move but the floor held her feet as if glued and her throat held shut any sound or scream.

The silence between them, heavy, thick, was frightening. He spoke first.

"Lisette . . . Lisette," and for a moment, for an instant, the tenderness that was of long ago when he spoke her name, when she believed in him, returned vividly to her senses. Then it was gone. When she could speak she blurted out: "You'll want to eat."

A dark coloring rose in his face.

"Ten years of hell. In the jungles of Vietnam and Laos. I got lost, became an animal, killed people I couldn't even see just because I was a soldier. You think" And he started laughing and she remembered the sardonic laughter she had hated most of all.

He kicked the door closed with his heel. When he placed his hands on her shoulders she thought of the cold weight of marble. He pushed her. She fell backward, her shoulder struck the floor, and her arm went numb as if turned off by a switch. He jumped on top of her, pulled her hair, smashed his face onto hers, and tore her clothes off. At last from her throat came the shriek, one scream, and then the merciful darkness she had silently begged for.

When she regained consciousness, she was alone. On her knees and hands she crawled to the door. Hand over hand, she pushed herself up, turned the knob and stumbled outside. The low sky added its weight upon her. She walked past her gate, turned left and walked on, advancing toward the clouds hanging low in the distance.

Père Guillot remained sitted at the table after he'd finished his bowl of black coffee, breaking the shells of walnuts. His thoughts were on the visits of Lisette's two sons. First it had been Paul, a few days ago.

"Père Guillot," he'd said, "I'm a bit worried about my mother being alone since Jean's going to take his bride on their honeymoon . . . "

"We'll look after Lisette, Paul, you know that. She looked after us after our Marie died; she's been like a mother to

Michel and you know that the two of them, Jean and Michel, can hardly make a move one without the other. Until we could hire Mère Jeanson to take care of the house for us, Lisette made sure that everything was in order, that we didn't miss anything."

Then Jean came, just the day before, and gave the Guillot men nearly the same speech as his brother. "I'm a bit worried about my mother being alone . . . "

And they had reassured him as well as they had reassured Paul.

"I think I'll bring those cracked walnuts over to Lisette," he said to Mère Jeanson hanging the laundry in the back yard. But instead of walking across the back fields, he turned to the front of the house and walked down the white pathway made muddy by the morning dampness, mindless of the footprints that preceded his own. When he pushed Lisette's gate to her front yard he wondered why the patch of grass on each side of the few stepping stones had been trampled. Instead of knocking, he called her name. When there was no response, he turned the knob. A chair was turned over, the table pushed at a strange angle, and milk spilling from the top had dripped down to the tiles. He crossed the room to the back door, headed for the barn. Till his eyes got used to the darkness, he stepped forward with his hands feeling the warm air by his sides. Then his chest knocked against the legs and he saw and he knew. With

the rope that had been used to haul hay to the loft, Georges Timbalier had hung himself.

After laying the body down on boards long free of straw, Père Guillot hurried out cursing the pain in his hip. "*Sacrebleu, that arthritis.*" He began hollering Pierre's name at the top of his voice. His son had been checking the two rows of vineyard he'd planted on the narrow strip of land that separated the Timbaliers' property from the Guillots' and sensed rather than heard his name being called. When he saw his father's face, he ran to meet him, sure something was wrong.

"Call the Villars police, Timbalier's hung himself from the cross beams, in the barn."

"Lisette? What about Lisette?"

"She's not in the house but I saw footmarks on the road; I'm going to follow them, she can't be too far."

"No, Père, I'm going after her. Bring a lantern once you've called the police. She may be heading for the wood. With those clouds, it's likely it'll start raining hard; it'll be difficult to see anything."

As she neared the dark shadows of the wood, she left the path, stepped onto a muddy field and reached the line of trees. She followed the edge, entered the wood at the big oak that marked the start of a track. The wind was stronger, the bushes brushed against her wet wool skirt. Mindless of the rain

drenching her, she just kept on walking, mumbling *no more, no more*. Soon she could no longer distinguish the alley from the trees, the darkness wrapping every shape. She heard the lapping of water, wondered whose pond she might have reached, stumbled on a root, felt the shape of a boat, and let her body fall into it. She stretched on her back, lay her head on the raised board that crossed the boat, felt water beneath her, closed her eyes and hoped she would die soon.

Half asleep, half-conscious, she saw clouds drifting in a dead gray sky, felt the wind as it blew in her hair, and blew the torn cloth over her arm. The slight tossing of the waving water caused the boat to travel. She saw a light moving quickly and erratically and thought of an enflamed bird. She thought she heard voices, but the wind flattened any word before it reached her. She raised her head. *Those shadows in the distance, what were they?*

"Hook the pole under the gunwale. That's it, pull a little more."

The boat was being pulled when a wave tossed it harder and it slammed against the shore, nearly tumbling her out of it. She felt strong arms picking her up.

"Jean, is that you? Paul?"

"It's Père Guillot, Lisette, and Pierre. We're bringing you to our farm; you'll be all right. Just hang on to me. That's it, won't be long."

She felt a heavy cloth being placed on her chest, and that was all. Darkness filled her mind again.

"That hip again! Durn!"

"Here, let me have her, Père. That lantern, we've got to see the path, yes, that's it."

Lisette began shaking her head from side to side.

"You're safe, my Lisette. Hold on to me, please hold on to me."

"Pierre? No, leave me, leave me . . . you don't know."

"Shsh . . . don't talk. I just found you where I left you long ago. Remember? When I told you the Villars pond had no name since it belonged to everybody, you'd said 'I'll call it Our Pond.' I'll bring you skating again, Lisette, I will. This winter we'll come skating, you just wait and see."

Lisette closed her eyes. *What was Pierre saying?*

They had not yet entered their yard when the older man began calling loudly: *Mère Jeanson, Mère Jeanson!* The woman appeared, took a few steps and said, "Oh, Mon Dieu, Mon Dieu!"

"We'll need some blankets, quickly, *Mère Jeanson.*"

When Lisette woke up she saw that she was in a bed not hers, wore a gown not hers. She was trying to sit up as the housekeeper came in.

"Madame Jeanson, why am I here? How long have I been here?"

"You've been sick. I've got some hot broth here for you, you're going to be fine, but we sure got a scare. We had to call Doctor Tarpin; you've had a fever."

Lisette's palm moved lightly across her forehead. Then she remembered, all at once.

"Oh, no, no." She sat on the edge of the bed, but felt dizzy.

"Your boys are here. It's going to be all right."

"No, they can't be here. I must go home . . . *where is Georges, he would have come looking for me.*

The housekeeper was leaving the room, the door left slightly ajar. Lisette sat up and began to hear bits of conversation: "He waited till she was alone. The coward." Then another voice, "maybe he was nearby all along . . ." Then the strong voice of Père Guillot: "no, he was not; if he'd been in any of the surrounding farms, someone would have told me." *Are they talking about Georges? How would they know he's here?* "He must have been watching the house; would he have learned of Jean's wedding?" That was Paul. *What has happened to bring*

Paul back? Has he seen his father? The door opened and her son came in.

"Paul, why have you come back? I've heard you speak. You know he's here."

She began shaking. Paul took her hands in his.

"It's over, maman. He's never going to hurt you again, or anyone." With his arm around her shoulder, holding her as she began to rock herself, he told a few words at a time, waited, and began again.

The priest not only refused to hold a funeral service for a suicide, he would not allow that Georges be buried in the church cemetery next to his parents. In death, as he had done in life, Georges Timbalier had set himself apart.

They stood at the foot of the grave, the three of them.

"I'd like to be alone for a few minutes," said Lisette.

The brothers walked toward the small group of people who had attended the burial.

"I will find out where he was all this time."

"When you do, don't tell Mother, Jean, don't tell her. She must have loved him, once."

The barn was demolished a few days later. Lisette entered her house only from the back door to the small alcove that had

always been used as the place to leave raincoats and boots. Jean had installed a cook plate, a small pantry and a sink. From there, a short hall led to her bedroom. The door to the kitchen had been walled off.

Flush against the wall of the Guillot farmhouse, the bench faced the narrow whitish road that snaked from the upper farms then to *La Bauderie* and beyond, joining the newly asphalt-covered road to Villars. Pierre and Lisette had been sitting there, on the bench, not speaking for a long time. With a sky like that, so full of stars, what need would there be to speak? Anyway, they had already said everything. Lisette had spoken of her shame, embarrassment. Pierre had hushed her, simply placing his large hand on hers. And now he spoke to her again, as softly as he could. "After we're married" It felt so natural. Little by little Pierre's voice became a drone, a sort of numbness wrapping itself around Lisette while some words did penetrate her consciousness: "... bring your things ... my house." *His* house. Then, in Lisette's mind formed the plain, friendly, calm face of Célesta. Would she ever see her again? And the wonderful buildings of Paris she spoke of in her letter? Of course, she could take the train by herself! Suddenly and for the first time she understood the words her grandmother had

spoken just before she left her at Bois-Chauds. "There's a wing inside you. A wing for you to fly."

"I'm going to go see my cousin Céleste and her world."

"What?"

"Listen to me, Pierre. Ever since I went to live at Bois-Chauds men have been making decisions for me. Aunt Céleste said . . . well, I thought it was my destiny. Uncle Vincent raised me the way he believed I should be raised: as an obedient girl, docile, submitted to his paternalistic authority. Even during the years Georges spent in prison, I thought before doing anything: *What would be decided if he were here.* On the day that he came back from prison, at the door, after he took the money, . . . your father . . . he didn't say anything, but he was there, I felt I was leaning on him. Don't you see, Pierre, I've been afraid to have my own ideas."

Pierre had gotten up and she was facing him. He placed his hands on her arms, waited.

"I need to feel that I exist independently, that anything I do is with the certitude that it is of my own choosing. Do you understand, Pierre?"

"You said you loved me."

Fear had spread on his face, in his eyes.

"I have loved you from the moment you took my hand and pulled me across the icy pond; I'm sure of that."

A breath, or a sob, escaped from Lisette's mouth. She tried to think of other words to tell him. He placed a finger on her lips.

"I'll be here."

Vita

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