

MARION
HALLIGAN
valley of grace


ALLEN & UNWIN

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*For Bianca Lucy,
Julie and James*



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All things, said Plato, are produced either by nature, or by chance, or by art; the greatest and most beautiful by one or other of the first two, the least and most imperfect by the last.

MONTAIGNE ESSAYS

Book 1, Chapter 31, 'On Cannibals'



THE MASONRY DANCER

SOMETIMES ON MONDAYS LUC WOULD have lunch with Julien. They liked to go to a cheerful cafe on a corner where they could sit in the sun under a plane tree. The most popular dish was steak tartare. Enormous mounds of raw red meat glistened in the sun. Luc preferred the planks of salad: wooden chopping boards loaded with ham and cheese and greens and tomatoes.

Opposite was a handsome empty building that one day turned into a building site. It was rather grand, with sober decoration on the facade and elegant spaces glimpsed within, all gradually becoming derelict. Windows were removed and gutting seemed to be going on inside. A snake of linked bottomless buckets carried rubble from the top floors down to a skip on the ground. There were muted crashes and puffs of dust. Several ladders were propped against the facade and a young man ran up and down them. He stepped on to windowsills and jumped inside, then darted out and somehow swarmed over the face of the building, down a ladder, up again.

Luc and Julien admired this performance. The man was very beautiful, lean and fit with olive skin and dark curls. Mediterranean man, Julien called him. A Greek god, transported to the Roman province, said Luc, for sometimes the man shouted instructions at his workers and they heard the melodious pure notes of his southern accent.

Luc said, It's a performance, you know. Street theatre. We're the audience, we the cafe customers. We come and go, but the performance runs its course.

You mean, it has no other meaning? Like a trapeze artist? An exhibition of skill and daring, for its own sake.

Yes, said Luc. Of course, some building gets done, I suppose, the building is being renovated, but mainly it is the sheer joy of the act.

They could have gone to another cafe while the works were happening, avoided the rattle of debris crashing down the buckets, the dust, the rapping of hammers and the whining of saws. But they didn't. They sat in the sun and ate lunch and admired the beautiful man running up and down his ladders and dancing across the facade of the building.

It's like all such performances of daring, said Luc. It's dangerous. There's the fear he might fall. I don't think we want him to, but how exciting is the thought that he might.

The exhilarating fear of falling. For watcher, for performer.
For watcher, for watched.



VALLEY OF GRACE

FANNY PICART WORKS IN AN ANTIQUARIAN bookshop. She takes the old books off the shelves and smooths the leather bindings with her palms. Old books die if you don't handle them, says the bookshop owner, her boss. Luc is a thin and transparent young man, with pale spiky hair. He looks like a silverfish. Fanny thinks perhaps he would like to be a silverfish and live all his life in a book. Except of course that silverfish are his deadly enemies. When there are no customers she takes a volume down, rests the spine in her hand and sometimes reads what's in it. Le Vieux Latin, the shop is called, it specialises in books about the Latin Quarter, and old prints, like the sixteenth-century engraving of the church of Saint Etienne du Mont and beside it the Romanesque church of Sainte Geneviève, just round the corner from the shop.

Demolished, says her boss with huge sadness. A jewel, and demolished. Soufflot got the job building the replacement. That's the Panthéon, you know that. Meant to be a church. No sooner finished than the state pinches it for a monument to great men. It's

certainly pompous enough. Luc doesn't like the Panthéon. Fascist, he says. Not Soufflot's idea, of course, to have no windows. That's the Revolution stuffing things up.

Fanny has climbed up and walked on the roof of the Panthéon, on the galleries of the roof. She was terrified, they seemed to plunge and roll and try to tip her over the edge. Even though there were low balustrades to hang on to she felt a vertiginous panic, as though the building did not like her and wished her ill.

I think it's a malicious building, she says to Luc.

Malicious, eh? I like that idea.

She agrees with him that it is a tragedy that the church of Sainte Geneviève should have been demolished. Sainte Geneviève is her birth day saint, January 3, as well as the patron saint of Paris. From her fourth birthday Fanny has known the story, how Geneviève was all her life a virgin, and especially holy even as a small child, that it was her praying that kept Attila the Hun out of her beloved city, which was called Lutèce then. Fanny carries a little shiny card in her wallet with a photograph of a statue of the saint on one side, her face pink and blue-eyed, her expression pensive, her robes and the niche she stands in painted in gold Gothic patterns. She's holding some big gilt keys. On the back is a prayer which recalls her success at praying and vigil.

Luc buys a set of eighteenth-century watercolours of different views of the church, inside and outside, possibly done when it was known that the building was to be knocked down, as a kind of record. Fanny would like to own them, but there is no way she can afford such a treasure. Works on paper are not like old books, they must not be handled else they will crumble, or be exposed to light,

when they will fade. She has to look at them as little as possible, in the dim back room, even dimmer than the shop itself.

Luc is a friendly person to work for. He comes from a prosperous family. His parents own pharmacies in Lyon, and several apartments in Paris and Vichy, and a villa in Biarritz. André Picart would like his daughter to marry him. Fanny is twenty-five, and no prospects. Her mother says she is timid, gentle, she'll come to it sooner or later. Leave her alone. Fanny is a slender aristocratic looking girl; André considers the stockiness of himself, the round fleshiness of his wife, and wonders how they produced her, her small bones, her narrow waist and hands and neck, her pale brown smooth hair, the plain slightness of her. Her willowy graceful manner. He drops heavy hints at her about marrying Luc. He's not the marrying kind, she says. Marrying kind, sniffs André. No man is the marrying kind. It's women who make them. Do you think I'd have got married if it hadn't been for your mother making me want to? You've got him all day to yourself in that bookshop. Show us what you're made of, girl.

Fanny knows Luc isn't the marrying kind because she's seen him in the cafe with his friend. A man as pale and thin of skin as Luc, with the same fair spiky hair. Sitting on opposite sides of the table, not touching, but the curve of each body so conscious of the other, so responsive, that their connection was plain. Their voices were soft and their eyes locked. Fanny envied them their singleness, their stillness, their occupying of their own private place, in the noisy cafe.

He's a silverfish, she says to her father. I couldn't marry a silverfish.

Now you're being frivolous, says her father.



Fanny likes the bookshop. Her friend Séverine started work in a chocolate shop, with a family making and selling chocolates. Any that were not perfect enough for the sharp eyes of the master chocolate-maker were put in a bowl and the staff could eat them. After a while you're just not interested, Séverine said; at first it's marvellous, but then you couldn't care less. Séverine married the son of the chocolate-maker and still works in the shop sometimes; it makes a change from minding the baby all day. She ties bows in her curly black hair and paints her face and wears tight bright clothes; she sings her welcome to the customers. In the pink and gilded space of the shop she is another delicious confection, with her rosy cheeks and black curls and eyes like amber toffee. Sometimes she brings Fanny chocolates but still doesn't care to eat them. Fanny thinks how different the bookshop is. She doesn't get sick of the books, she's addicted to them. To their leather, smooth but slightly grainy to delicate fingers, the weight and solemn bulk of them in her hands, their throat-catching smell, and the sense of them as porous, dense with the knowledge they contain but also soaking up not just the body oils but some more ethereal essence of the people who have held them. Their souls, spirits: there ought to be a word.

She and Luc are their own best fans. Not many people buy things. People browse, sometimes the same ones, over and over. Like the young man who reverently turns the pages of volumes, gazing at the pictures. He's handling the books, says Luc. Keeping them alive.

He should buy, says Fanny.

I don't think you ever exactly own books like this, Luc tells

her. They have their own life. They just stop in certain places at certain times. Then they hold court, you might say.

Fanny thinks of the books sitting graciously on their shelves, waiting to hold court with their admirers. With their subjects. It's a charming idea. And exasperating.

They come from before us, says Luc. And go on after us.

Most of the transactions are with sellers, especially people who have inherited. They bring along boxes of old books, as junk they no longer want but expect to get a high price for. Fanny thinks Luc is too generous. When he isn't in the shop she offers paltry amounts; the sellers protest but nearly always accept.

Both the bookshop and the chocolate shop close for three hours over lunch. Sometimes Fanny and Séverine meet. Séverine skips the large matriarchal midday dinner, which does not best please her mother-in-law, but she loves Séverine and the baby so lets her go. Fanny loves seeing Sylvain; he is a most beautiful child, with stiff straight black hair like his father and his mother's rosy golden complexion. She is his godmother, she hugs him, buries her nose in his neck, drops kisses on his little scented head. The two young women eat salad and talk about inconsequential things. Her family may make comments about Fanny not being married yet, but Séverine never does. She is happy to let Fanny enjoy Sylvain whenever there's a chance. Fanny doesn't ask Séverine what being married is like. She has on a number of occasions met her husband Thierry in the large apartment above the shop, which is also pink and gilded, but she has never been conscious of them making that same dense and quivering space for themselves in the world as Luc and his friend in the cafe, but maybe that is because they can fill

the whole apartment. And maybe Sylvain kicks his way out and lets the outside world in. And there is the doting mother-in-law, and the father-in-law, the famous chocolate-maker, whose skills Thierry has inherited as well as learned, though whether he has his genius only time will tell.

Fanny sees that maybe that oneness can only happen in solitude, of the kind that is possible in a large noisy cafe but not in the bosom of family and friends. This is the public face of marriage, even when it is in the privacy of its own home.

Gérard Tisserand is a builder. His father is a builder too. Gérard began by being apprenticed to André Picart. Then for a while he worked for a friend of his father's who'd got the job of repairing a church. Gérard was moved by the complexity of the medieval building, its weight and yet its lightness, the simple ingenious skills with which it was created. He discovered he had a knack, a flair, for this kind of restoration, and more than that, a kind of gift, maybe spiritual would be a word for it, as though the structures communicate to him their original intent and substance. It is not to do with the religious intent of this first building, the church, but of its essential nature as a construction of the human spirit.

So Gérard became a restorer of old buildings, working at first for other builders. Then he bought a ruin, a wreck—He's mad, said his friends—he borrowed heavily, mortgages and high interest rates—What a fool, he's crippling himself for life.

In fact, it is a success. He rips out partitions and lean-tos and false walls, renews the rotten and returns the wreck to its original

eighteenth-century elegance of pale stone and panelled walls and high glittering windows. He rents out the apartments and buys another wreck, starts again.

André Picart usually comes along when buildings like Gérard's have been knocked down. He puts up new ones, concrete, steel, good quality, no shoddy workmanship, very modern and comfortable, spacious even, though with today's lower ceilings you can get an extra floor in the same space as those extravagant old places. In his early days Gérard often worked with him, but not any more.

At dinner with his wife and daughter André Picart speaks of Gérard Tisserand, his gift, the knack, it's uncanny. He is a figure in Fanny's mind before she meets him. The young man who senses buildings. The stairs, the panelling, the balustrades, all just right, either the original uncovered and restored, or a new one made to fit exactly with the old, or else pieces recovered from demolition sites. He has a gift, no doubt, says André. And patience. And he's a skilled craftsman, oh, no doubt—I taught him all he knows. Well, not quite all. But there's no money in it, not like that, he'll not make even a living at that rate.

André speaks as people do when they are obsessed with someone, full of disapproval, full of envy. He sits in the spacious dining room of the apartment he built exactly as he wanted, with every modern convenience, in the block he constructed on the site of an old grand house, a magnificent old building, but no good in modern times, it had to go, though he saved a sliver of the garden.

This new project, he says, it's a sink to pour money down. He'll come a cropper for sure.

Where is it? Fanny asks.

Some crooked old street in the Latin Quarter—down near the Institute for Deaf Children. Towards Port Royal, somewhere.

He looks at her. Oh no, my girl, don't go getting ideas, he's not your type. One of those nuggety swarthy characters. A gypsy, I wouldn't be surprised.

At least he's not a silverfish.

More like a cicada.

His wife and daughter laugh. He has made a joke, and it's important to recognise it.

The building is not in some crooked street but in the rue St Jacques. Fanny walks through the small oval place in front of the Val de Grâce and just past it is the building, eighteenth-century, five-storey, classical. It is a wreck, in the process of being gutted. A segmented orange worm descends from the top floor, a set of elongated bottomless buckets chained together, through which rubble is poured into a hopper in the street. It rattles and crunches all the way until the final clanging arrival in the hopper, and quantities of dust rise. Gérard Tisserand Builder, says a banner hung from a balcony.

Against the facade is a ladder and she sees a man she supposes to be Gérard though not so swarthy, not so nuggety, run up it, balance on a windowsill, sway, lean out and look up, climb in. Fanny pauses to read unseeing a plaque on the wall of the building next door. Gérard appears again, walks along a windowsill, teeters. Fanny's heart teeters too.

One day she comes home from work and finds the man from the ladder sitting in the drawing room and it is indeed Gérard Tisserand, and he is, close up as well as dancing over a building, by no means so nuggety and swarthy as her father would have her believe. His skin is sun-tanned a coppery colour but is fine in texture; she thinks of the books in their elegant bindings that desire to be handled. He has black curls and dark eyes. André sends his daughter to fetch the tray of apéritifs. She puts olives and small salty biscuits in bowls, ice in a bucket. The men drink Suze, bitter herby yellow, made from gentian, the smell even is too sharp for Fanny. She has an Orangina. Her mother will have a small vin doux when she comes in. These apéritifs speak of the south; she wonders if Gérard comes from there as well.

The men talk shop. Neither pays attention to Fanny. She has plenty of time to look at Gérard. At his long fingers, very clean, the nails short and stubby but scrubbed. He's cleaned up after work, he wears fresh jeans and a white linen shirt, turned up a little at the cuffs so she can see his brown wrists and the black springy hairs. At the neck, too, no tie, but buttoned quite high, there is a glimpse of smooth skin and just a suggestion of black curls. His cheekbones are broad and carved, the skin slides into a slightly shadowy hollow beneath them, and above are the deep velvety sockets of his eyes, with straight generous brows. The black curls cropped, but not too short. Square chin, with a dimple. Gérard does not appear to see Fanny at all.

As she is not listening to what they are talking about. Something about finishing the job earlier, borrowing a couple of André's workmen, reinforcing the structure, needs modern engineering principles, all formally done of course. Fanny sits not drinking her

Orangina and imagines holding Gérard in her hands as she would a rare book.

André Picart says he will have to think about it. They will talk further. There needs to be more precision about figures. Of course, says Gérard.

André Picart is wrong about the unprofitability of Gérard's work. Gérard knows exactly what it costs him to restore his buildings, the money borrowed, the interest rates, the labour of his team, the raw materials, the time. He factors in a considerable return on his own expertise. The resulting figure is a large one, but his apartments are so desirable he has no trouble finding clients. Certainly not at so good an address as the rue St Jacques. The building will have a large apartment on each floor, with the main room running from front to back, so there are windows at both ends. Had Fanny stood at the first floor windows of the building opposite she would have been able to look across and see the trees in the garden behind. There will be a shop on the ground floor. Gérard plans to rent out all the floors except the top one, where he will live.

What will be worth a lot of money in these apartments is the light, because of the long main rooms being lit on two sides by the high paned windows. Enough of the original windows remain, in good enough order, to make all seem original; and even where they will be newly constructed he will use old glass, which is thick, uneven, sometimes ribbed, sometimes warped, with whorls and knots. The light shines sweetly through such windows, and the view the other way is subtly strange. It might be the eighteenth

century out there, as it is inside. Clients won't necessarily work any of this out, they will simply covet it.

Gérard's apartment on the top floor is the finest and lightest of all, which is unusual in such buildings. It is usually the first or the second storey that is the best, the *piano nobile*. He is planning to make a secret staircase to the attic, in a cupboard, so there will be unexpected rooms. When on his top floor he removes mouldering partitions the ceiling falls in, and there, much higher, is a plaster ceiling, dingy, dusty with the long-hidden dust of decades, but almost intact. It has a central oval, domed, like a little cupola, with cupids, fat winged baby creatures, looping ribbons around it.

It's at that moment Gérard decides it is time he got married. He's thirty-eight.

And he'll find space for a lift. A wife cannot climb to the top floor of an eighteenth-century building on an old steep turning staircase.

Fanny is in the shop dreamily holding the pale brown calfskin of a nineteenth-century account of the Luxembourg Gardens, discovering that in the thirteenth century the area was inhabited by a devil which had to be exorcised. In summer she and Séverine take Sylvain there to sail his boat on the pond. She hadn't realised the place's antiquity. The book with its fine etchings will fetch a lot of money if ever somebody buys it. She is gazing at a painting like a pattern of a vegetable garden belonging to the monks who cultivated the area for some centuries when Gérard comes in. This is shortly after the false ceiling fell in and he discovered the

precious plaster mouldings above it. Although he paid little attention to Fanny in her father's house he recognises her with no trouble, and is pleased to see her. Hi, he says, looking round, and back at the young woman in a plain jumper and skirt of caramel-coloured cashmere that is like a second sinuous skin to her slender body. Hi, he says, do you work here?

He tells her about his ceiling. Maybe there is a book with his house in it? Or something like it? He's never much bothered with old books before, just worked by instinct, but this ceiling's something special.

He looks at Fanny. His ceiling has fat cherubs on it, and she is slender, but somehow she seems to go with it. He looks at her again. There's something eighteenth-century about her, her paleness, her elegance, the elegance that goes with tall pale rooms where the light falls in subtle if not ambiguous ways.

And so he falls in love with her, and she with him. His request needs a good deal of searching out, he has to call in often to see how it is going. Her father is still not certain that the restoration business is all that viable, whatever the figures say, but there is no doubt that Fanny isn't getting any younger, and she seems keen enough on the chap, and he on her. And it's certainly the case that young Gérard is an interesting fellow. What do you think, my angel? he asks his wife, and she says, They are in love, how can we not agree? And what if we were not to? They're old enough to decide.

Fanny and Gérard get married, and invite guests afterwards to the apartment. It isn't furnished yet, so it can be filled with round white-clothed tables for the luncheon of the wedding guests. The

rows of wineglasses, the fishbowl vases full of pointed yellow roses refract the light almost as cunningly as the windows, and Fanny, in her silk dress that flows like cream and is of the same luminous colour as the tall panelled walls and the high patterned ceiling with just a touch of pale blue on its ribbons, seems so utterly to belong that people blink their damp eyes and say, a marriage made in heaven.

Gérard supposed that Fanny would stop work when she was married, since his wife doesn't need to work, but Fanny cannot bear to leave the bookshop. Just part-time, she says, and he agrees, Gérard doesn't want to refuse Fanny anything. Just until the babies come, anyway. Don't they make a lovely couple, said everybody at the wedding, and indeed they do, he so dark and vigorous and glowing with sun-browned health, she so slender and fair and radiant. Now she is married and beloved, words like pale and smooth are not enough, she is fair, radiant, luminous, still gentle, still delicate, but strong in her beauty. She's quite a gorgeous girl, really, isn't she, says her father to her mother, I never noticed. The mother smiles, as she often does with her husband. You can show him things, but he takes his own time to see them.

Luc in the bookshop doesn't notice this, but other customers do, and Gérard, who has taken to dropping in and browsing, marvels at the way she shines in the dim shop. He's become fascinated with the books which have pictures of his kind of building; he loves to look at them, not so much because he learns things, what he needs to know about buildings he learns from them, from the nails and screws and dovetails, the joints and joists, the beams, the levelling and planing and piecing together. It's as though the

work and the skill and the passion of the hands that made these things is still present in them, and his hands can feel them there. It's not information he gets from these books so much as recognition, and satisfaction. It's like being with a lover and knowing her in more and different ways. Of course Gérard doesn't say any of these things, not even in his head. Fanny guesses some of them, watching his reverent receptive hands holding the books. She marks things for him, with slips of paper, puts books aside on a back shelf. Luc seeing them together says to himself, how wonderful to see two people so much in love. He and his friend are still in love, still full of the delight of living together, but he does not imagine it shows with them as it does with this couple, so transparently glowing for all the world to see. He thinks that he and Julien are discreet, that they appear to be just good friends.

Gérard begins to buy books. He becomes a good customer. He puts them on the bookcases set in alcoves either side of the pale marble fireplace in the sitting room. How well they go there. Old books in an old room. He has a joyous overflowing sense of rightness. Everything is beginning to be complete. He looks at the cherubs looping their ribbons round the small cupola of the ceiling and thinks of this as a talisman. He has some stationery made, thick and cream-coloured, and when you look at it closely you see that it is printed with the image of this ceiling. It pleases him, the hard dealings of business overlaying this charming image of a folly.

The children's wear shop on the ground floor, Plaisir d'Enfant, does not need all the space so he sets up an office in one of the back rooms, which has French windows opening on to the garden. His desk is a long wooden refectory table, seventeenth-century

and marvellously battered, and he takes a couple of books down and leaves them open on it. Customers admire them. From the Vieux Latin, he tells them, they have terrific stuff. Between Gérard and his clients Luc is starting to do quite profitable business. Quite a surprise for Luc's father, who had his reasons for wondering if he would ever make the rent.

The apartment is beginning to be furnished. Gérard takes Fanny shopping for necessary things. He isn't purist about it. They have an early twentieth-century carved walnut chest of drawers that's a Picart family piece, and several armoires from his aunts. They buy sofas in pale yellow leather to catch and replicate the light in the room. And there are mirrors. No curtains, the shutters are enough. They go to flea markets and find candlesticks, old pewter plates, a seaman's chest that might have sailed with La Pérouse. Not too much, they don't want clutter. The floors are honey-coloured wood, wide boards, some original, some from demolished buildings. There is an Aubusson rug in ancient worn golden colours with a bit of red that has faded to brownish pink. Is it all a bit too pale, do you think? Fanny asks Gérard, and he says, No, that is exactly how it should be, it suits you perfectly. He likes her to wear the pale colours, camel, fawn, caramel, the beiges that he first saw her in. And occasionally plain black, that delineates her in the mysterious shifting light of the rooms.

Séverine comes to visit Fanny. Thank god for the lift, she says. I wouldn't fancy lumping this heavy boy up all those stairs. Séverine is pregnant again. She is quite envious of Fanny. The pink and

gilded apartment she lives in above the chocolate shop is certainly vast, but it is not hers, it belongs to her mother-in-law who runs it with a firm hand. She dotes on Séverine, and on Sylvain, and doubtless will on the new baby, but it is still not Séverine's house.

I keep wanting Thierry to get us a place of our own, but he says why should we bother? All that extra expense and so much less convenient—as it is it's down the stairs and he's at work—and of course he's right. But still.

You'd miss your mother-in-law, Fanny says. Passing the baby over any time you feel like it.

Not any time, says Séverine. But yes, sometimes.

Her belly is enormous, she suffers from the heat, is always tired. You'll feel better when the baby's born, says Fanny. Sylvain the beautiful godchild sits on her lap and strokes her cheeks. He smooths his fingers over her eyelids as though tracing the solid shape of the eyeballs underneath. Fanny shivers with delight at this questioning delicate touch. She loves the way small children make you look at the world as though you, like them, have never seen it before.

The wedding was in late spring. In August the Vieux Latin closes and Gérard's business takes its holidays. They spend some time in the house on the Mediterranean coast near Marseillan which belongs to Fanny's family, on a property where André's brother grows grapes and melons, and in the country behind St Tropez where Gérard's family has a place. There is a lot of family stuff with Gérard's brothers and sisters and their children who are just

about teenagers and Fanny's cousins who all seem to have babies. They come back to Paris in mid-September to days beginning to turn cool and a city energetic and ready for a new start after the lassitude of summer and the dusty tourist-infested heat of the dog days. The chestnut trees in the garden are beginning to change colour. The apartment waits, serene and welcoming in its cool manner.

They are really married now. There has been the wedding, and the honeymoon. The ordering of the apartment. The summer holiday, with family. And now it is the rest of their lives. Coming home, putting away the summer clothes, back to work: this now will be the pattern of their days. Of course a baby will change things, but it will also be fitting into the mode of life Fanny and Gérard are creating in their handsome apartment in the rue St Jacques. Gradually the light takes on the silveriness of winter, as the trees lose their leaves and the sun doesn't shine. Grey the light may be, but the creamy yellow colours of the apartment prevent the bleakness this suggests. Outside there is the tracery of bare branches against the colourless sky, inside is warm to the eye and the skin.

Séverine's baby Ghislaine was born late in August. Séverine is very clever: a pigeon pair. Her mother-in-law dotes more than ever. Sylvain goes several mornings to nursery school, and often on those occasions Séverine comes to see Fanny with just the baby. Ghislaine's head is covered with a dark fuzz that everybody says will soon turn into black curls like her mother's. Her body is covered with a dark down, almost fur; Fanny finds this attractive in a rather shameful way. She strokes the small furry body with

shivery fingers. She is not so sunny a child as her brother. She yells when things are not to her liking and needs a lot of amusing, doesn't sit quietly in friendly arms like Fanny's but arches her back and crumples her face in what seems like rage. Fanny takes this as a challenge, and holds her over her shoulder and soothes her and murmurs, and is very pleased when the child relaxes and is still. Feeling her small violently beating heart grow calm against her own breast gives Fanny sharp little twisting pulling feelings in her stomach. She walks about the apartment. See Ghislaine in the mirror, she says. Look at the trees, the branches are bare. And down there, see, a man sweeping the gutter. The baby cannot look at any of these things, but she seems to like Fanny talking about them. She curls up, almost dozing. Taking an angry or maybe anguished baby and changing it from a stiff protesting awkward bundle into a relaxed kitten-like creature seems to Fanny as important a thing as anybody could ever do.

Fanny and Gérard don't go to church in any regular way but sometimes on her way home from the bookshop she calls into the church of Saint Etienne du Mont which is given over to the cult of her birth day saint. Luc is very critical of the pink and blue statue of Sainte Geneviève. Decadent nineteenth-century Gothic piety, he says. She looks such a wimp, he says, when the real woman, you know, she got out there breaking blockades to bring back corn for the starving people of Paris, she persuaded the conquerors not to kill their prisoners, she stopped the Parisians leaving the city when the Huns were just about at the gate. She would save them, she

said, and she did. Whereas your creature looks about as saintly and courageous and powerful as a garden gnome.

Nevertheless, Fanny thinks, she is Sainte Geneviève and her birth day saint, and if her job is curing the blind and chasing off demons and looking after the sick, the poor, the lonely and the unemployed, none of which conditions Fanny suffers from, that is her luck.

She's the patron saint of security men, you know, says Luc. He seems to think this pretty funny. I should get a statue of her over the door.

You could get somebody to make you a saintly courageous and powerful contemporary version, says Fanny.

Find a medieval one, I'd rather. Gothic, real, not pseudo, is the only thing in churches and holy statuary. The earlier the better.

I thought you were keen on Romanesque.

Yes, well, Romanesque of course. I said early.

One day after she'd bought the bread at the bakery in the little place which was hardly more than a bulge in the rue St Jacques, she went into the church of the Val de Grâce. She'd often looked at it, its pillars and dome. A solid baroque edifice, its bowl-like curves and virtuous straight pillars anchoring it to the ground. A building haughty, confident, supercilious even. Not soaring, a rocket ready for heaven, like a Gothic church, a rocket fuelled by faith and the aerodynamics of its shape to lift its mighty weight into the air. The Val de Grâce presses its weight into the earth. It's beautiful, with its pale intricate stone, its charming

repetitious symmetry, and it's the grand relation of the building she lives in.

Inside it is full of cherubs, fat babies. Flocks of the gilded creatures swing from the baldaquin. There are twisted dark marble pillars garlanded with gilt foliage and others in paler marble round the dome. Wherever there's space there's a fat cherub. Not babies exactly though that is the shape of their limbs, their plumpness, but their heads are too small, their proportions are wrong. They are like men who have kept their baby chubbiness of long torsos and short limbs. Rather sinister if you look too closely. And there is the Christ Child, solemn little manikin, subject of prayer by his mother and amazement by his father.

Quite often, after that, when she goes to buy the bread she visits the church. Often outside the bakery there are two men sitting drinking on the pavement, beggars, vagrants, their clothes and beards and bodies all ragged, but they talk and laugh and enjoy themselves. It's a party they are having over their wine on the edge of the pavement. She puts money in the ancient cap placed for that purpose, they bow elaborately and go on drinking. She knows the money will be spent on more drink. But she is glad to help people who have nothing, yet seem . . . She can't say happy, who knows what anguish lies underneath, but she can say, seem to get so much pleasure out of their situation. Then she crosses the road and goes into the church and sits for a moment in this great humming space. She looks up at its immensity of pale grey stone. Even with all the decoration, the cherubs, the frescos, the marble and gilt columns, it has a bareness, a coldness. It's the colour of concrete. There's no stained glass. The light is silvery; when the sun

shines, lemony. There is no comfort in it, as there is in her house. It is splendid, but God does not love her in this church.

Time passes. Gérard prospers. Fanny blooms, as young women do who make love very often. Gérard likes to come home for lunch, Fanny wears a skirt and stockings so she doesn't have to take her clothes off and they lie on the Aubusson rug. Or she will sit on the edge of the table with her legs round his waist. Or stand leaning against the window while the street below goes about its business. It's fun, fully clothed like this, it feels illicit, they laugh breathlessly. Then she will have some favourite thing of his to eat. Not difficult, Gérard has a lot of favourite things to eat. At night in bed there is time for languor and play. Both marvel at this unexpected gift of sex that just goes on getting better. Who would have thought, they say, Fanny out of innocence, Gérard out of experience, as their hands touch each other's bodies, who would have thought, and they gaze into one another's eyes with shameless delight.

At Christmas the shops in the rue St Jacques wreath their windows with evergreen branches. Real ones, not plastic. When you walk along the street their peppery smell prickles the nostrils, becoming more pungent as the boughs dry and release their scented oils in the cold air. Plaisir d'Enfant has wonderful thick evergreens, and the window inside has a few tiny garments arranged on crumpled white silk, all brightly coloured, a little green smock, a red velvet dress, a minute pair of socks printed with purple jelly babies. The woman in the shop changes them often. Red leather boots with orange buttons, mittens embroidered with holly, a tiny hooded

coat in navy blue printed with red rosebuds. When you see them from across the street they look like jewels in the snow.

Whenever Séverine comes to visit her she can't resist calling in to Plaisir d'Enfant. Just to look, she says. But she always buys something. Fanny looks on enviously as she chooses among the small garments. Hand-stitched, says the shop woman, look, and shows them the exquisite craft of an outrageously expensive tiny dress. It's made of pale blue linen embroidered with white daisies. So fine, says the woman, look, you can pull it through a wedding ring. Wouldn't Ghislaine look just gorgeous in it, says Séverine. I think she has to have it.

While the woman is wrapping it up Séverine says, She's going to have to have tests, you know. They think there's something wrong.

Fanny stares at her. Séverine has picked up the baby out of her pusher. There, precious, you'll look so gorgeous, won't you, treasure? Ghislaine frowns, her thin little furry arms poke out like rods.

What . . . starts Fanny, but Séverine says, Oh let's not talk about it, you know how doctors fuss. She signs the credit card docket. I'll have to run, she says.

Let me know, says Fanny.

What? Oh yes. Yes, I will.

Fanny who never suffers from insomnia sleeps very badly that night. She can't stop thinking of Ghislaine and her anguished crying. What do you do when a baby is so full of pain? And is it

her body that hurts, or her mind, or her spirit? How can you ever know? Does Séverine understand this little scrap of human life that she buys expensive dresses for? How can clothes help? They are like offerings to the gods. Or maybe a diversion. Either way, the baby in so fine a dress must be safe. Fanny turns restlessly in her bed, trying to shake off these thoughts. Finally Gérard puts his arms round her and his loving fingers caress the bones in her spine, one by one down her back, and she goes to sleep.

Sylvain goes to school. Ghislaine is a solemn child who likes to walk by herself. The tests? Oh, says Séverine, they're monitoring. Fanny is hurt that she does not tell her more, but then understands that it is too hard for her friend to talk about. Two is enough children, Séverine says. Fanny is still not pregnant. Her father stops asking: Any news yet? When's that grandson of mine coming along? Fanny talks to her doctor, who says, Let's be patient, eh? After all she is still young, not even thirty yet. Not quite, she says, but isn't that the point? I thought it was supposed to be better when you were younger. And anyway I want to have my children before I'm too old.

Hmm, says the doctor. Is there a problem with frequency of intercourse? Maybe, missing the fertile period?

No, says Fanny. Not a chance.

You're very narrow, he says. Who knows how safe childbirth might be. Maybe we should listen to our bodies.

Narrow women have children.

True.

So the doctor arranges to have her checked out. There's nothing wrong, he says. Not with you. What about this husband of yours?

Curiously, for all their intimacy with one another's bodies, they do not talk about children. Not now. They did at the beginning, how they would arrange the nursery, what names they would choose, whether it would be better to have a girl first or a boy. Gérard saying that of course she would stop working in the bookshop, and Fanny saying what about one or two mornings a week, just to keep up the connection, and Gérard supposing that would be all right.

She still occasionally visits Sainte Geneviève, in her pink and blue and gilt seemliness, but doubts she can be any help; she's her birth day saint but pregnancy isn't one of her interests, she was professionally a virgin and not ever a mother. Fanny wondered who did look after that department, it didn't seem to be anybody she could think of. And yet infertility must often have broken women's hearts, there must have been endless prayers offered up for children to be conceived. Who had the job of mediating them?

She still sits from time to time in the Val de Grâce. One day, perhaps she was tired, she tipped her head back and stared at the dome and its silvery clear light, which seemed very pure and illuminating. As she stared the dome began to spin, its columns blurred and she felt its turning weight pressing down upon her as the dome spun closer and closer. She wasn't afraid, though dazzled and dizzy; she closed her eyes against the whirl of it and when she opened them it had slowed and was stopping, back in its rightful place. She sat for a while, feeling overwhelmed but excited. When she got up to go she had to hang on to the chairs to make her way out, and when she got to the stairs at the door she stumbled. The light outside seemed bleak and cold after the spinning dazzle of the dome. Her muscles ached as though they had held themselves against a heavy weight.

She didn't tell anybody. She didn't stop her visits to the church but the dome stayed sedately in place. That day had been hot. She'd walked quite a lot doing her shopping and was tired and thirsty. Had walked in the sun without a hat. It was just after her period. There were explanations.

Sometimes she sits in the oratory of Anne of Austria, one-time queen of France. It's cold and dingy, even though a plaque announces it has recently been restored by gifts of the King of Morocco. How recent is the plaque? The paintings seem rather boudoir-like. Not inspiring. Were they Anne's choice? Anne's heart was buried here, but like so many others disappeared at the Revolution. It's a mournful place, why would anybody want to sit there? But sometimes Fanny does.

She looks Anne up in the *Petit Larousse*. She was a Spanish princess, despite her title, and judging by her portrait remarkably plain, with a pudgy flat face sloping down to enormous shoulders and eyes like currants in dough. In contrast Anne Boleyn, on the same page, has a sharp and sparkling face which woos the viewer. Fanny thinks how horrible it must have been to be obliged to sleep with a person chosen for you, whether you fancied him or not. Imagine meeting your new husband for the first time, and thinking, Oh God I have to make love to this person. And a man looking at his new wife and wondering how he will persuade his flesh into a state of desire for this creature. The woman probably young and a virgin, the man probably not. A queen could quite likely never make love out of love, only ever duty.

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