RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Way I Found Her

Rose Tremain

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About the Author

Rose Tremain is a writer of novels, short stories and screenplays. She lives in Norfolk and London with the biographer Richard Holmes. Her books have been translated into numerous languages, and have won many prizes including the Orange Prize, the Whitbread Novel of the Year, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the *Prix Femina Etranger*, the Dylan Thomas Prize, the Angel Literary Award and the *Sunday Express* Book of the Year.

Restoration was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and made into a movie; *The Colour* was shortlisted for the Orange Prize and selected by the *Daily Mail* Reading Club. Rose Tremain's most recent collection, *The Darkness of Wallis Simpson*, was shortlisted for both the First National Short Story Award and the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. Three of her novels are currently in development as films.

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THE WAY I FOUND HER

Rose Tremain

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For RH,
who navigated along the route.
With love.

Part One

There are days when it feels really cold in here.

I'll admit, I hope it doesn't get much colder, because then I might have to move and I don't want to move. I'm OK where I am. I like lying in the dark and listening to the wind.

I've begun to believe, anyway, that the cold comes from inside me, not from outside. Moving might not change a thing. Because it's like some kind of frost has got into me. It's forming icy crystals along my spine. It's telling me that time is going along differently in me and making me old in the space of this one winter.

Not that I care, really. I don't want to talk about the present. It's Valentina I want to talk about. She's the only subject that's in my mind.

I think I'll start with something else, though. I'll start with the moment when I noticed that my mother had become a beautiful woman.

I once thought beauty was something only found in old paintings. It never really occurred to me that ordinary people could be beautiful, here and now. And then I saw – that day in July – that they could be and that my mother was one of them.

She was sitting in my room, by my window, trying to mend my Action Man, whose name was Elroy. Or at least, it *had been* Elroy. But now Elroy's torso had parted from his pelvis, so I personally knew that he was dead and finished and I told Mum not to bother with him. I never played with him any more. But she took no notice of me. She just sat there, very intent, like a lacemaker or like a mathematician, with the sun on her crazy hair, trying to bring Elroy back into existence. And that's when I noticed it: the fantastic, gorgeous beauty of my mother, Alice Little.

She was thirty-seven and I was thirteen. She'd had me when she was twenty-four. The birth had been easy, everyone said, because I was so small, such an absolute

pune. I weighed about five pounds. In the photograph they took of me in the nursing home, I look like a piece of Play Doh. I'm amazed anyone wanted to keep me. Under the photograph, some nurse has written *Baby Lewis, aged three days*. It's embarrassing to think I started out so pathetically. Luckily, parents don't see you as you are. What they see is beauty.

It was the day before we left our house in Devon and went to Paris. I could describe it as the day before my real life began. Mum was wearing a little mauve skimpy top and a drapey kind of skirt she'd bought from an Indian shop. Elroy, in his Royal Marines uniform, lay on this skirt and his motionless blue eyes looked up at Mum's hair, which is extremely startling kind of hair, like a red thorn tree. Her arms are freckled and she told me that when she was a little girl growing up in Scotland she used to believe that freckles were in the air, like snow, and fell on your arms and on your nose when you went roller-skating on summer afternoons. She used to try to wash them off in the bath with a loofah.

She had to give up on Elroy, as I knew she would. Everything plastic is difficult to mend. Nothing bonds with it. So I kicked him under my bed to lie in the darkness and dust and I thought, that darkness and dust that he's lying in, there's something else in it too: it's the boy I was when I imagined Elroy was real.

On the plane taking us to Paris, I saw that other people had noticed Mum's beauty. They sat in their blue-and-red airline seats, watching her. Not just the men. I saw the women wondering if her thorn-tree hair was really growing out of her scalp.

The man sitting next to Mum on the aisle side had been so disturbed by her that he was having difficulty opening the little foil packet of peanuts he'd been given with his drink. He began to tear at the peanut packet with his teeth. He tore so frantically that peanuts exploded over his drinks

table and cascaded down into his silk-suited lap. He was Italian and he swore under his breath. Italian swearing sounds as if it's the dirtiest language on earth, as if the swearer's tongue is licking the grating over a drain.

Then I got out the brand-new notebook my father had given me before we left and wrote in it the first of all the things I came to write down in the coming weeks. The notebook was bought at the airport Smith's and had a photograph of Concorde on it. 'There you are, Lewis,' my father had said: 'Concorde.' 'Oh, great,' I said. 'Thanks. Brilliant.' Except that we weren't *on* Concorde. We were on some enormous jumbo plane about ten seats wide. The stewards wore draylon shirts. At the back was a gaggle of babies, mewling. It wasn't the best place in the sky to be.

'What are you writing?' asked Alice.

'Nothing much,' I said. 'Just a private theory.'

I called it *Lewis Little's Exploding Peanut Theory of Beauty*. Its first premise was: *Beauty causes alteration. I'm talking about the beauty of women. Alteration may frequently result in some accident or other. These accidents might be small and of no significance (cf. the Italian in the aisle seat) or they might be important, even a life-or-death matter. Alice Little, my mother, has come into the category of beautiful women. (NB: she may have been there for a while without my noticing.) Ergo, it's probable that she is going to be the cause of an accident of some kind in the near future. This probability is heightened by the fact that the near future is going to take place in Paris*.

Ours wasn't a family which ever did really interesting things. We would never have thought up the idea of going to Paris. We would have stayed in Devon that summer as usual and flown our bird kite on the windy cliffs and gone shrimping in rock pools.

But then came the call from Valentina. I answered the telephone one Sunday in May while Mum and Dad were in

the pub and I was doing my history homework and Valentina said to me: ‘Listen, darling. I must have your mother here this summer. That’s it, you know. You must persuade her to come, Lewis. I’m sure she does everything you ask, because that is what the mothers of clever sons do. I’m counting on you.’

I used to be a very accommodating little boy. When I was still made of Play Doh, people were able to mould me to fit their whims and desires, but now I was going through a phase of disliking being counted on. So later I said to Mum, ‘Valentina wants you to go to Paris in the holidays, but I don’t want you to. Don’t go, will you?’

I remember that Mum sat down and took my hand and stroked it with the back of hers, like she was trying to snow me with freckles. ‘If I go,’ she said, ‘will you come with me?’

I’d been to Brittany once, but never to Paris. All I could remember of France was a high wind and a vast hotel and the salty smell of oysters. And I remembered Valentina. She’d been with us in the vast hotel and worn gold jewellery at breakfast. She’d been born in Russia, but had lived in Paris for thirty-eight of her forty-one years. She’d told me that her only memory of her Russian life was standing in a maize field and looking up at the moon.

‘Where would we live?’ I asked.

And then I was told that it was all already planned. This is what parents are in the habit of doing: they pretend to ask you a question when really they’re giving you an order.

Mum told me that Valentina had a huge apartment and we would stay there with her – just Mum and me. Dad didn’t want to come. He had a summer ‘project’. Dad was a school-teacher and the word ‘project’ gave him a kind of gladness of heart. But he wanted us to go. He was all for it, in fact. He told Mum that he thought it was a good idea to introduce me to a great European city.

I said: ‘What will I do in this great European city while you and Valentina are working?’

Still snowing my hand with freckles, Mum said: ‘Well, you’ll discover things. Your French is good and now you’ll be able to perfect it.’

‘Who will I perfect it with?’

‘I don’t know. Valentina’s friends. You’ll meet people your own age, too. And they play chess in the parks. You could talk to the chess players.’

‘Will they talk to me?’

‘I don’t know. I expect so.’

‘Will I be able to play chess with them?’

‘I can’t say. You’ll have to ask them.’

I looked at Alice and she was sweetly smiling, as if she were laughing at me or as if everything in the world were as easy as looking for shrimps in a pool. I wanted to tell her that I thought I’d feel stupid going round Paris begging people to talk to me or play games with me, but I didn’t. And then she took the hand that she was stroking and put it to her cheek and said: ‘We’ll watch over you. Of course we will.’

Before we left for Paris, my father, Hugh, had told me in confidence what his ‘project’ was. We were sitting on a cliff at the time, watching gulls circling in the air. Hugh said: ‘Lewis, I’m going to build a hut in the garden.’

He said this as if he were old Brunel about to start on the Clifton Bridge. He seemed to want me to marvel.

I don’t remember what I did say. Perhaps I just looked up at the birds, trying to think of something, and then Hugh went on: ‘It’s a secret between you and me, OK? I’m building it for Mum. We’ll put a desk and a chair in it. It’ll be a place where she can sit and read or work in the summer.’

I didn’t look at him. If I had looked at him, I would have seen a short, neat man with gentle brown eyes and thick hair just smartly flecked with grey. His mother, Gwyneth, was Welsh and his father, Bertie, English. With my mother being Scottish, I have the DNA of almost the whole of the

British Isles sloshing round in my body, but I've wound up with the Welsh name Dad insisted on.

Dad loved the Devon cliffs. He kept pointing things out to me – tamarisk trees and standing stones and larks' nests in the gorse and wild snapdragons. He'd pointed these things out about ninety-nine times. After a while, he said: 'The thing is, I've never built anything in my life. I've got a DIY manual that makes it all look easy, but it almost certainly isn't. So listen. If, when you come back from Paris, there's absolutely no sign of a hut in the garden, don't mention it in front of Mum, OK? I'll invent another project – something to do with school. OK, Lewis? It might be because the hut has fallen down, or it might be that it's simply proved too difficult.'

I said I thought a hut ought not to be too terribly hard, but Dad said you never really knew, in life, what was going to prove hard or prove easy. People's assumptions about their own capabilities were often amazingly wrong.

I remember picturing the finished hut at the bottom of the garden, sort of red and oblong with one tiny window and a little squat roof. I thought it risked looking like a public toilet, or even a private outside toilet for us, like houses had in the old days, and I didn't think Mum would want to go and work in an outside toilet, so I said: 'Dad, wouldn't a summerhouse be better than a hut?' And he said yes, of course it would, and that maybe, in the autumn, that's what we'd find there: a beautiful summerhouse with a wooden floor and an ironwork balcony and a weather vane on the top. But it was better not to imagine it.

My Paris room was a maid's room in the roof of the apartment building. I don't know why I'd been given it, because Valentina's apartment was huge, with loads of rooms in it, but I had, and I didn't mind; I enjoyed feeling that I was up there alone.

You reached my room by a little narrow staircase. The thing I really liked about it was that it had a round window, looking out on to the street, which was called the rue Rembrandt. I didn't know whether, long ago, Rembrandt himself had come there and said in Dutch: 'What a nice street! Please name it after me', or whether he never set foot in it.

When I looked out of the round window, my head filled it up completely, as if the window had been measured for me by a person who made astronaut helmets. It was also positioned at exactly the right height for me, about five foot above the floor, so I could stick my face into it and examine the roofs opposite for as long as I wanted, and be perfectly comfortable.

As soon as I first saw these roofs on the other side of the rue Rembrandt, I realised they were different from English roofs. Nothing much ever seems to grow out of an English roof, but here there were dormers and balustrades and TV masts and chimney stacks and bits of ironwork and flowerpots and an ornamental gold cross, all sprouting out of the slate and jostling each other for space. So I got out my Concorde notebook and, leaving some blank pages in which to develop my Exploding Peanut Theory of Beauty, wrote down an instruction to myself to investigate the life of a Paris roof, inside and out. I put: *NB: I am well placed to do this*.

Next to my bedroom was a peculiar bathroom with a huge iron bath standing on claw feet in the middle of the floor. Valentina had said: 'I had to put this bathroom in, darling, because of course nobody used to consider that maids needed to bathe. The smell of them must have been extremely disconcerting, mustn't it?'

This bathroom was the chosen place for the overspill from Valentina's wardrobe. I counted thirty-one dresses and evening gowns and nine coats, wrapped in polythene, hanging on a movable chrome rail. I wondered whether they

were cast-offs or whether Valentina would sometimes come up to my bathroom in just a satin slip or something and choose a dress for the evening.

While I was counting the ball gowns, I found a door. It had been hidden by the clothes rail and it was locked and there was no key. I put my ear to the keyhole. I supposed that what the door led to was another maid's room like mine, so I listened for the kind of sound I thought a maid might make; a sigh, for instance. But I couldn't hear anything at all, and at this moment Valentina called up my stairs and said we were going out to supper.

I combed my hair and went down and stood at the door of the salon. The salon had a parquet floor with a gleam on it like on the surface of still water. And it was as if, suddenly, I didn't dare to cross this water or thought I'd disturb it or muddy it or something and so I just stayed by the door, watching.

Valentina was alone in the room, sitting on a spindly sofa, smoking one of her Russian cigarettes. The cigarette was yellow. When she saw me hesitating, she held out her arm, which was plump and golden-skinned, and said: 'Come on, darling. Come and tell me all the secrets of your life!'

I didn't have any secrets. I felt like I was waiting and waiting for the day when my first secret was going to appear. And then, as I walked across the watery floor and the mingled smell of the yellow cigarette and Valentina's expensive perfume wafted into my brain, I thought, this feels like the kind of place where this famous day might happen.

We didn't go straight to a restaurant but walked into a park near Valentina's flat called the Parc Monceau.

You can't sit on the grass in Paris parks, so Mum and Valentina sat on a bench and I stood staring at the grass, admiring how green and shiny it was, as if it had been washed and combed by a hairdresser.

‘Now,’ said Valentina, ‘you see the evening begin to come down.’

Mum and Valentina kept very still on their bench, watching the sky and the way the colour in the park was beginning to fade away. ‘Look,’ I heard Valentina say, ‘the evening is a bird covering us with its wings.’ Then she laughed and put her arm round Alice’s shoulder, and I remembered this from Brittany, that she was always touching people and holding them to her, as if she wanted to keep everybody safe and near her, within reach all the time.

I was looking around now, to see if I could spot some chess players, but I couldn’t see any. I decided they had their favourite bit of the park and we didn’t happen to be in it.

‘Valentina,’ I said, ‘where are the chess players?’

‘Chess players?’ she said. ‘Oh, Lewis darling, it’s almost dusk and anyway I don’t think there are any chess games in this park. You must go to the Luxembourg.’

‘OK,’ I said.

Then I heard Valentina whisper to Alice: ‘You know, Alice, I forgot about the bloody chess. But I will find him someone to play with.’

‘He can find someone himself,’ said Alice. ‘Don’t worry about it.’

Then Valentina got up. She was wearing yellow sandals, which matched her cigarettes. ‘OK,’ she announced, ‘now we are going to walk through the park to the Place des Ternes and have supper in a restaurant there. Come on, Lewis. Are you as hungry as an anaconda?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’m as hungry as an anaconda, Valentina.’

Valentina laughed again. That laugh of hers was the kind of laugh you imagine women having long ago, before they realised they were an oppressed category of people.

She said to Alice: ‘Lewis is a good sport, you know. I hope he’s going to be happy up in that room.’

When we got to the restaurant, we sat outside at a table on the pavement. I remembered this from Brittany, hundreds of tables on pavements, except that there a cold wind blew off the sea, and here the air was really hot and full of car fumes and light. Opposite the tables on the pavement was a flower seller. He was packing up his stall and I watched him going backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, loading his buckets of flowers, one by one, into a dented old Renault van.

I think this flower seller put me into a kind of exhausted trance. Him and the neon lights in the Place, blinking on and off, and the sound of Valentina's voice. I was finding it hard to eat my meal and hard to concentrate on what anyone was saying. I kept wondering how long the unsold flowers would last and whether, in the morning, they'd all be set out again, or if some would be chucked on to the flower seller's compost heap – if he *had* a compost heap; if he didn't live in a maid's room on a top floor . . .

'So, you see,' I suddenly heard Valentina say: 'this is why I have vowed these things.'

'What things, Valentina?' I asked.

'I've just been telling you, darling. Never to be poor again. Never to be hungry. Never to live in a cold room smelling of coal.'

'Why would you have to be poor and hungry and live in a cold room smelling of coal?'

'Well, I hope I won't, Lewis. I hope all that is in the past.'

I couldn't remember what Valentina was talking about.

'Are you tired?' asked Mum.

I nodded. Valentina reached out and touched my forehead. Then she stroked one of my eyebrows with the back of her index finger. I thought, the eyebrow isn't a part of me that anybody has ever stroked before. Stroking it must be a special Russian thing. It could have a secret significance that I'm not yet able to understand.

What Valentina called her ‘job in life’ was writing.

Mum told me that certain writers make millions of pounds and others don’t make enough to pay their gas bills, but Valentina was in the first category. The books she wrote were called *Valentina Gavril’s Medieval Romances*, and all round the world people clamoured to buy them. In a survey done in the States, it was revealed that eighty-nine per cent of Valentina’s readers were women, but Valentina said to Alice that she didn’t give a toss who her readers were, they could be orang-utans, turning the pages with their feet. She said that what mattered was that, through her books, she had become rich and so escaped from her old life and had been able to install her mother in a nice apartment near her favourite church.

I asked what her old life was and Mum told me that the Gavrilovich family was poor and that they owned something called a *café, bois et charbon* in some dismal little bit of Paris with hardly any trees. Not many *café-charbons* existed any more. They were places that opened very early in the morning, where you could have breakfast or a drink or buy a sack of coal. I said I didn’t think drinks and sacks of coal went very logically together, but all Mum said was: ‘Ask Valentina to tell you about it.’ And then I realised she’d been *trying* to tell me about it the evening we went to the Place des Ternes, but I just hadn’t been able to take it in.

Alice was Valentina’s English translator. Her French was really brilliant and she’d passed a minute bit of this brilliance on to me.

Translators don’t make millions; they just make enough to buy their clothes from Indian boutiques and give their hair mud baths of henna. The reason we were in Paris was that Valentina’s English publishers were so keen to get their hands on her next Medieval Romance that the translation was being begun even before Valentina had finished writing the book. That’s what she’d meant when she said to me that

she *needed* to have Mum with her in Paris. She was going to give the manuscript to her, chapter by chapter.

I'd never read any of Valentina's books. I thought the idea of a Medieval Romance sounded drippy. And Mum told me the novels were 'all the same'. She said they all had something Valentina called her 'long-shot opening'. 'I become a cinematographer, you see,' she'd told Alice. 'I start with a wide shot of the beautiful medieval countryside of France, all unspoiled and full of forests. Then, gradually, I go in closer and we see a house or castle, its sleeping roofs, its moats and battlements. And by this time, the reader knows where she is: she is in long-ago time. She can forget the difficult present. She can relax and surrender herself to another world. And then I go in closer still and we see a window; then a face at that window. It is our heroine. We go inside the room and there she is, waiting for life and romance to start, and so last of all we see inside her heart.'

I listened to all this and didn't pass any comment. Apparently, Valentina had only one worry – that she would eventually run out of stories. What I was thinking was, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing if she did.

That first night in Paris, in my maid's room, I couldn't sleep, even though I was tired, so I went down, about one o'clock, and knocked on the door of Mum's room. Her light was on and she was reading Valentina's manuscript.

'Is it good?' I asked.

'It's odd,' she said. 'It's different from the others.'

'I thought you said they were all the same?'

'They were. But this one is completely different.'

Mum's bedroom in the flat was huge. She looked small in the colossal bed. There were blue curtains at her window that reminded me of the curtains in old-fashioned theatres, with gold tassles hanging off them. The street beyond would be the stage. Mum said: 'Listen to the air conditioning. It's like the sound of the sea at home.'

So then she put away the manuscript and we sat there, thinking about Devon. I was privately thinking about Dad and his tragic hut, but what Mum was thinking about precisely I don't know.

Valentina's dog was a fantastic animal. He was an Irish Setter named Sergei. His coat, in certain lights, was the colour of Mum's hair.

After breakfast the next morning, Valentina called me to her and put her arm round my waist. 'Now, Lewis,' she said, 'you are going to get to know Sergei. Sergei, come here. This is Lewis. You must show Lewis what a clever dog you are.'

We'd never had a dog at home. The only non-human creature I'd talked to in my childhood had been Elroy. I'd even taken Elroy on walks and showed him the larks' nests and the standing stones. Now, for the first time, a dog's lead was put into my hand.

'OK, darling,' said Valentina, 'Sergei has to be walked every morning and this will become your job. He will show you Paris. He knows his way right round the city. Not round the *banlieue*, of course, where we never go, but right round the centre of Paris. And he is an angel. He will find his way home from wherever you are. So off you go, Lewis. Here's the lead. Take some money.'

Sergei's lead was a string coiled inside a kind of hand-shaped box. Valentina had said: 'With this, you can let Sergei walk a long way ahead of you and then rein him in again, like a kite.' As soon as Sergei and I got down to the street, Sergei turned left towards the park. He extended his lead so far so quickly that he was at the park gates before I'd even got into my stride. I tried to rein him in, as instructed by Valentina, but Sergei was a strong dog and he didn't want to be reined in. He wanted to arrive at the park and sniff the juniper bushes and piss against the marble statues.

I made a mental note about the inaccuracy of Valentina's kite analogy. It seemed to me that she didn't know what flying a kite was really like and that it was probable she'd passed her whole life without ever flying one. I thought, perhaps, when she was a little girl in Russia, a kite was too expensive a thing for her family to buy? The most difficult thing of all with a kite is getting it to go up. Whereas the difficult thing with Sergei was getting him to come back to me. And only on certain kite-flying days, when the lift factor is very strong, is the task of winding in the kite remotely hard.

Sergei tugged me round the park. My arm began to ache. My arms were still the puniest bits of me. I could only rest when Sergei found some smell on the dusty paths delicious enough to make him pause. He saw some pigeons and began chasing them. His long lead went whirring out like a fishing line with a shark on the end of it. Then I heard an unexpected noise. It was a long blast on a whistle, like the PE instructor at school ending a game of football. And a man in a uniform came striding over to me, shouting and wagging his finger. The pigeons flew away and Sergei sat down and looked at the man accusingly, so I just stood and waited.

The man was really angry. Under his summer tan, his face was quite red. I hoped he wasn't carrying a gun. All along the path, old people sitting on the benches began to stare at me. A jogger passed, wearing a luminous bandana, and gave me a glare. And then I understood: dogs weren't allowed in the park. The uniformed man pointed at Sergei and made an X-shape with his arms. 'Défendu,' he kept saying. 'Défendu, défendu!'

I shrugged. It was meant to be the gesture of an innocent, of the person who's landed from outer space, knowing nothing. If Valentina hadn't told me about the blow-dried grass, I might have trespassed on that too. How was I

supposed to know the etiquette of the park without her help?

‘Sortez, s’il vous plaît,’ said the man. I could tell he thought I was an idiot. It hadn’t occurred to him that I was a schoolboy from Devon. ‘OK, d’accord,’ I said. And I tugged at the lead until Sergei came grudgingly towards me and there we were back in the rue Rembrandt. I noticed then that on the green park gates was a little picture of a dog with a line through it, but in a strange place your eyes can skim right past important things.

I stood in the street. ‘Now where?’ I asked Sergei. He was shitting in the gutter, between a Renault Clio and a Volvo Estate, and while I waited for him to finish I looked all around me anxiously, hoping he wasn’t breaking some invisible law.

When I got back, Alice and Valentina hardly noticed me. ‘Later, darling, you will tell us where you’ve been,’ said Valentina.

They were sitting in Valentina’s study, talking. The subject they were discussing was medieval time. This was one of the things I’d begun to like about Valentina: you never knew what weird subject she was going to start on next.

Sergei lay down on the parquet in the salon and I got myself an Orangina from Valentina’s fridge (she remembered I used to drink Orangina on that holiday in Brittany) and sat down by him, listening to this peculiar conversation coming through the open study door.

Valentina said: ‘You know how they measured time in the Middle Ages, Alice? In hours of differing length. Because they counted twelve hours from sunrise to sunset and twelve hours from sunset to sunrise, no matter what season they were in. And so you see what happens? The hours of the night in summer become thirty-minute hours and the hours of the night in midwinter ninety-minute hours! But you can imagine that people might forget what kind of hour

they were in, can't you? In the darkness, especially, they could measure the hour wrongly. And this is what happens to Barthélémy.'

'I see,' said Alice. I wanted her to ask who Barthélémy was, but she didn't, because she already knew.

'So,' she said, 'when he's doing his experiments at night, he forgets that the hours are getting shorter as the spring comes?'

'Yes. He is calculating in ninety-minute hours, when really an hour at that time of the year lasts only eighty-five minutes and then eighty-four and then eighty and then seventy. And this forgetting is fatal. You see?'

There was a silence at that moment. It seemed to be Mum's turn to speak, but she didn't say anything. Then Valentina went on: 'I have no difficulty in understanding the concept of the ninety-minute hour. In my other life, I *lived* ninety-minute hours. Even in summer, I don't think the hours were any shorter than seventy or eighty minutes.'

Alice said: 'Time alters as we get older.'

'No,' said Valentina, 'it's not to do with age. It's to do with *movement*. When I worked for my parents in the *café-charbon*, the places I moved between were the wine cellar and the café. Down, up. Cellar, café. Café, cellar. Up, down. That was all. To a prisoner, time is different.'

'Is that how you think of your old life – as being in prison?' asked Alice.

'Yes, of course,' said Valentina. 'Worse for my father. The places he went between were the coal bunker and the yard. All day. Coal bunker, yard. Yard, coal bunker. Fill up a sack, take it up to the yard. You know how much a sack of coal weighs?'

'No.'

'As much as a child of seven. All day, my father puts this child on his back and carries it to the yard. Perhaps one day I will write something about that. But no one will publish it.'

'Why not?'

‘Because from me, from Valentina Gavril, the readers want Medieval Romances. That’s all they want, Alice. A little terror, a little chivalry, a lot of fucking, a happy ending. Why not? A book can shorten an hour. But you know my last translator used to change things around. She was an American feminist and so she tried secretly to change the women in my books and make them more like feminists. She forgot my English was almost as good as hers. I had to kill her in the end.’

‘What?’ said Alice.

I put down my Orangina and leant nearer the study door. I heard Valentina laugh. ‘Yes, I killed her,’ she said.

There was a pause here. Being a Scot, Mum isn’t afraid to dismiss totally bluntly everything that strikes her as untrue. She has this haughty, withering look she can give you, worse than any look the teachers give you at school.

‘I kill my characters all the time,’ Valentina went on. ‘I decapitate them, disembowel them, poison them, burn them. I know so many methods. And I killed that translator.’

The trouble about eavesdropping is you’re just left alone with the things you’ve heard. You’re marooned with them, like on a really uncomfortable rock, and all around you is a silent sea. I was trying to imagine Valentina taking off her jewellery and her expensive shoes and tiptoeing along the corridor with a carving knife, when she and Alice came out of the study and sat down with me and asked me to tell them about my morning.

We’d walked such a long way that Sergei was exhausted and he went to sleep with his head on Valentina’s foot. She wasn’t wearing yellow sandals today, but white ones. The colour of her toenails was dark shining red, like wine, or like blood.

I told her and Alice that I’d seen the river and the Eiffel Tower. I said the hugeness of the Tower had made me feel strange. What I meant by strange was ‘happy’. The thing I

used to envy in my games with Elroy were how large the world must have seemed to him.

I told them I liked it when things were vast and made of iron. And I described a courtyard I went into where there was an iron girder strung between two houses. It seemed to be holding the two buildings apart, as if one was the Capulet house and the other was the house of the Montagues. I'd had *Romeo and Juliet* on my mind lately, because we'd been studying it at school and I really liked the absolute total sadness of it, I don't know why.

I said I realised after a moment that the girder wasn't really holding the two houses apart, but making a bridge between them. Creeper had climbed up the wall of the Montague house and along the girder and hung down in tentacles, and so Romeo could have climbed out of his window and inched his way along the girder, holding on to the creeper, until he reached Juliet's bedroom.

Valentina laughed when I said all this. Mum and Dad hardly ever laughed at the things I said, but I seemed to amuse Valentina, or else she was a woman who, now that she didn't have to work in a coal yard, was easily entertained.

She asked me what else I'd done. I said Sergei had tugged me across one of the bridges over the river and that I was so thirsty by that time that I'd sat down in a café and ordered a Coke for me and a bowl of water for Sergei. Near his bowl Sergei had found a perfectly formed strawberry tart in the gutter.

Then I told them about the woman I'd seen in the café while I was drinking the Coke and Sergei was snaffling up the tart. She was old, but she had this little face like a kitten. She kept dabbing her nose with powder. It was hot in the café, so she dabbed loads and loads of times. I said: 'I felt really sorry for her.'

'I expect she was waiting for someone, darling,' said Valentina.

‘Well, maybe she was,’ I said, ‘but no one came.’

‘Then what do you think was happening, Lewis?’

I could tell Mum wasn’t in the least interested in this conversation. She was looking away from both of us, staring into her own separate thoughts. Valentina put her arm through mine. She smelled of some special delicious perfume I’d never breathed before. I took some deep sniffs of it before I said: ‘I think she thought people passing would mistake her for some old movie star and come in and order up champagne, or something. She kept scanning out for the one person who was going to see her former beauty, but that person never came by.’

Valentina laughed again. Then she said: ‘That’s really very sad, Lewis. I don’t know why I’m laughing.’

‘I thought about pretending to *be* that one person,’ I went on, ‘but I couldn’t remember the names of any old movie stars.’

Valentina began to reel off a list of names of former beauties. They were mostly French and I’d never heard of any of them. I remembered one name: Simone Signoret. Valentina said hers was the saddest story of all.

When it was almost lunchtime, I went up to my room. I got out my Concorde notebook and added a Second Hypothesis to my *Exploding Peanut Theory of Beauty*. It didn’t have the simplicity of the first, but all the same I quite liked it. It went like this: *Female beauty, if or when lost by the former owner of it, can cause insanity. The brain, which might have roughly the same mass as a Family Size pack of dry-roasted peanuts, ‘explodes’ into irrational behaviour, searching for signs – such as the passing glance of a stranger in the street – that the irretrievably lost beauty has suddenly been found again*.

It was stifling in my room. Maids weren’t meant to be in their rooms during the day; they were meant to be dusting parquet or polishing the silver downstairs. I went into my

bathroom and ran some cold water in the washbasin and laid my face in it, till it began to cool. It was while I had my head in the water that I remembered something my father had said to me about happiness. We were shrimping at the time. Hugh said: ‘See this deep pool, Lewis, and see the little grey shrimp? Think of the pool as your life and your quota of happiness as the shrimp and then you won’t expect too much of anything, and when disappointment comes you won’t drown.’ At the time, I’d thought this a kind of wise and fathomless thing to say, but now it seemed to me, standing there with my head in the basin, that to equate happiness with a shrimp was completely stupid.

When I emerged from the water, I heard a new sound. I dried my face and listened. Someone was whistling on the other side of the locked door.

I tiptoed across the bathroom and bent down by the keyhole of the door. I tried to see into the room beyond, but I couldn’t. Perhaps the key was in the lock on the other side, or perhaps some piece of furniture had been put in front of it? But there was definitely whistling going on. It sounded like the sad song of a maid, except it was a man whistling, as if he might be reading some boring newspaper. One of my teachers at school did this, whistled while he marked dull assignments, and only stopped when he found something to interest him. He’d whistled all through my essay on *Romeo and Juliet*, right to the last full stop.

There was no sound of the whistler moving about – no footstep or anything. I imagined someone sitting on a stool, in front of a round window identical to mine, reading about all the thousands of things going on in France and in the wider world and whistling right through them.

I thought about knocking softly on the door. I then considered asking the whistler if he played chess, but I thought, it might be a maid after all and a maid could misinterpret the question. So I stayed still, just listening, until I realised how starving I was. I started to hope that

Valentina had made or bought a huge strawberry tart even better than the one Sergei had found in the gutter.

Before I left England, Dad had told me about the *bouquinistes*, who sell old books and prints and cards from little stalls alongside the river, and the next day Sergei led me right to them. I reined him in tight and browsed slowly past them. The stall holders didn't seem very interested in selling anything. It was like they just enjoyed chatting there, where a breeze was coming off the water. I prefer people like that to the kind who try to stick their crappy wares up your nostrils.

I hadn't really intended to buy anything, but then I saw a copy of *Le Grand Meaulnes* bound in chalky leather and I picked it up. I tied Sergei to a plane tree and opened the book. The previous owner had written his name and a date inside it in faded blue ink: Paul Berger, 1961. I worked out that if Paul Berger had been, say, thirteen or fourteen in 1961, he was now in his late forties, about the same age as Dad. He might now be a banker or a futures trader and not even remember the name of Alain-Fournier. On the other hand, he could be a writer himself by now, the kind of writer no one has heard of but who makes a puny living writing the books he once liked to read. The favourite authors of this kind of writer are all dead, but he still tries to become like them. He doesn't notice that the world he's writing about no longer exists. Paul Berger might now be on his tenth attempt to rewrite *Le Grand Meaulnes*.

I bought the book. The stall holder looked quite miserable to part with it. He put it in a used brown paper bag and handed it to me carefully, with a kind of solemnity. Sergei, when I unwound him from the tree, thought it was a waffle or something and tried to bite it.

That night, in bed, I began reading it. Reading in French is always harder than speaking it. It's almost as if each word has three dimensions.