

There's a Lamb in my Boot

'Do you have anything to declare, Sir?'

'No, Officer,' I replied.

'And what is the purpose of your trip to France?'

'I am a school teacher and I'm going to spend a weekend Dieppe in order to set up a new school exchange. I work over there, in Coastlands School,' I explained, and pointed up towards the cluster of four-story, square buildings perched precariously towards the edge of the East Sussex cliffs.

Even though this would normally have been a quite plausible reason for going to France for the weekend, I am only 26 years old, black and traveling alone in a three-year-old white VW Golf GTI. I don't think the anthracite leather jacket from *Woodhouse* and the new 501s helped either.

'Just pull over to the side here, please, Sir,' requested the customs officer.

'Can I have your passport, please? Can you confirm your name and nationality?'

'My name is Amir Abdullah. My father is African, my mother Pakistani. I was born in Islamabad and we moved to England when I was four. As you can see, I am a British citizen.'

This whole search routine had become so predictable that I always gave myself an extra half hour to get to the harbour. While the customs officers carefully examined my Golf with the latex gloves, screwdrivers and mirrors, I looked up across the narrow harbour towards the school. The sun was forming a sea of shiny chocolate coins on the surface of the water.

In those days - it was 1990 - Coastlands' headteacher was Colin Sexton, a truly visionary educationist, though not everyone appreciated his genius. He had managed to introduce a continental school day with lessons from 8 am to 1:30 pm, followed by a wide range of voluntary clubs and activities in the afternoons.

This micro-educational system worked very well, especially given the school's intake: the discipline was okay because the pupils were too tired to rebel so early in the morning; parents

were happy because school went on for the whole day so that both mother and father could work; and the pupils liked the school because it was where they could live out their hobbies and social life as well as their endure their education.

Mr Sexton knew to turn a blind eye to imperfect school uniform, told his staff to adopt a non-confrontational approach to unruly working-class pupils and promoted setting by ability in the comprehensive context. Mr Sexton also introduced whole weeks of cross curricular study in order to break the mould of the Modernist curriculum, which the University of Sussex was at that time proving via empirical research to be disadvantageous to working-class pupils <sup>1</sup>.

The challenge was, Mr Sexton lacked the time and other necessary skills to build a management team around him that could properly understand and communicate his avant-garde vision. Furthermore, the school's intake came largely from Peacehaven and Rottingdean, where the aims of daily life sadly had little to do with those of Mr Sexton.

The geographical location of the school also had some unusual advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side you could see the ferries leaving for France every day from my classroom window, which had the wonderful effect of bringing France a little nearer to England and making the French language just a little more relevant to the pupils.

On one occasion, two armed police officers came rushing unannounced into my classroom and asked whether I could quickly come to the Newhaven police station in order to translate during the arrest of a dangerous criminal. The pupils were immediately impressed.

I went with the police and illegally left my class, the infamous 9XZ, unsupervised while I went to translate. Fortunately, it is an established pedagogical principle that if unruly pupils are left on their own without a teacher, they always behave very well.

By the time I arrived at the police station, and entered somewhat nervously the man's cell, everything had sorted itself out. The drunken French lorry driver could speak English after all.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The myth of modern mathematics teaching in UK secondary schools.' *How working class children are disadvantaged by situation-based teaching methodology*. Smith and Williams, Journal of British Education, October 1990.

And he had already confessed to carrying 6 kg of cannabis and to threatening Her Majesty's customs officers with a gun that turned out to be a convincing toy.

On the way back to my car, I seized the moment and punched my right hand against the brick wall of the police station a few times until my knuckles bled. I then smeared some of the blood onto my face and pale-blue shirt.

I got back to 9XZ just before the official end of the lesson and explained that the man had become aggressive when my translation led to an arrest, but that I had managed to punch him to the ground. I was a bit shaken but otherwise fine.

Now the pupils were even more impressed. Suddenly French *was* relevant to daily life, after all. You never knew when you might need it. From that day on no pupil ever dared to mess around in my lessons and the uptake for French GCSE in Year 10 doubled <sup>2</sup>.

The disadvantage of the school's location became abundantly apparent in the hurricane winds of 1987 and 1989. I was one of the poor people who believed weather forecaster Michael Fish when he assured us that there was no hurricane coming. Indeed, I was so trusting that I actually tried to carry on teaching as the storm was building. Shortly before Mr Sexton made the decision to close the school and the Fire Brigade arrived to rescue the pupils from my block, some of the pupils in my lesson had got up without permission and gone over to look through the window.

Others began quickly to join them and one exclaimed suddenly, 'Fucking hell!'

I was just about to give him a detention for swearing in my lessons (in the heat of the moment completely forgetting Mr Sexton's policy of adopting a non-confrontational approach) when I too saw the entire flat roof of our block flying slowly through the air and eventually land in the middle of the playground.

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<sup>2</sup> In case any of my former pupils read this story, I am sorry for lying to you.

It was an unforgettable, bonding moment for all of us. We rushed downstairs and every child from every occupied classroom in our block had to be taken one by one to safety by two fire officers, all vigorously holding on to a rope that was secured to the main administration block.

The worst thing was: from the ground floor we could all see the rescue operation through the windows and how some smaller children were almost blown away from the rope. There were loud, corporate gasps of fear and an understandable element of mass hysteria crept in, until one colleague saw the television in the corner of the room and had the genius idea to turn it on.

'Neighbours' was just starting.

Suddenly, all the pupils calmed down, sat on the floor and began watching the Australian soap opera, their eyes glued to the large school TV set. The rest of the rescue operation went very well. No one got hurt, but the school had to be closed for repairs and the side window of my lovely Golf GTI got smashed by a flying piece of wood that I found on the back seat.

'Everything is fine, Mr Abdullah. Thank you for your patience. Have a nice time in France. My daughter goes to Coastlands, by the way. Maybe she can come on your exchange? Though I think she learns German.'

'Oh really? What Year is she in?'

'Is it Year 3 or Year 9? The stupid headteacher's changed the numbers around so I'm not sure any more.'

'Oh yes, all very confusing,' I sympathised as I closed the electric window, started the fuel injection engine and engaged first gear. The Germans really know how to build cars, especially gearboxes and transmission. God only knows why or how they lost the Second World War.

I drove slowly onto the ferry with the familiar 'clunk, clunk' as the tyres squeezed over the steel ridges of the horizontal hydraulic door linking the ferry to the harbour.

'Bye-bye, England.'

With dipped headlights I approached the ferry employee in his luminous waistcoat as he guided me into my slot. I'm always glad when that bit is over. First of all, there is no coherent

system, so I always end up in the slowest lane, just like at the supermarket check-out. Secondly, the angry expressions on the employees' faces always make me feel guilty, as if I have committed some crime.

As I walked up the blue metal steps from the lower car deck to the passenger deck, I was assaulted by the familiar forest of smells: from oil and grease at the bottom to naphthalene in the middle and finally to fried fish and chips at the top.

I went out on to the rear deck and watched the *Seven Sisters* slowly disappear behind us. Many seagulls decided to come with us, arduously chasing the foam from the boat's stern.

I wondered again why any British native would fly or travel through the Tunnel to France. Quite apart from the fact that I am scared of flying, being trapped inside a narrow, underwater tunnel was also extremely unpalatable. For me, there was always something very special about crossing the sea on a boat to get to the Continent. The swaying motion of the ship, like a mental massage, caused me to slow down and to relax. It reminded me, too, that I really do live on an island. A key factor in the forming of the British mentality.

I made my way to the cafeteria in the hope that the long queue of families with four or five children would by now be shorter and ordered my usual steak and kidney pie and chips, together with a 37.5 cm bottle of French dry red wine. Never did steak and kidney pie taste so good as on the ferry, sitting at a table in the bar looking out on to the dirty grey waves ahead, waiting for the first sign of France and the promise of a culture is so different from the British. The only thing that could ever ruin these moments was a group of drunken Englishman who seemed to have no limit to the amount of lager they could consume. Thankfully, there were none of them on board today.

Dieppe is much nicer than Calais. It is like a Mediterranean seaport that has been accidentally transposed to the north of France. Its harbour is surrounded by small cafés and restaurants where you can sit outside on the terrace and eat fresh mussels in cream-white-wine sauce or fresh oysters that are still alive when you eat them. After your meal you can walk straight to the beach, the town centre or the market. In Calais, however, all as you can see are ships, trucks,

thousands of containers, a spiralling road network and police officers searching for hidden African migrants trying to sneak their way into England. You need a map, a compass, basic knowledge of French plus at least half an hour simply in order to find your way into the town centre, where you will *not* be able to park your car anyway. That said, don't contemplate making this 5 km journey by bus unless you have studied French at University.

I drove off the ferry and went to the children's play-park in between the harbour and the beach where I was to meet, for the first time, Jean-Jacques, the teacher with whom I was going to organise the school exchange. He was actually a maths teacher who spoke almost no English. I must admit that I found that a bit strange because exchanges are nearly always organised by modern foreign language teachers who speak the language of the exchange country. In this school in Dieppe, evidently he was the only teacher who had a heart to organise such an exchange. He was single, 35 years old and had time on his hands. None of that bothered me. My main goal was simply to make learning French more relevant and interesting to working-class English school pupils, especially while the Newhaven police station incident was still live.

Okay, so I was a little bothered when Jean-Jacques didn't show up at the play-park, as planned. Or so I thought. I had no telephone number and no idea what he looked like. Just an address.

I looked around and could see lots of children playing while their mothers talked passionately - the French are only ever able to talk passionately - amongst one another. The only man I could see had turned up in a noisy, old, red 2CV with the roof rolled right back and a black and white sheep dog in the back. The man had got out of his car with the dog and sat on a nearby bench. He had messy, dark brown hair and a scruffy beard and a very significant hump on his back. He looked about 50. Even though he couldn't possibly be Jean-Jacques, after about a quarter of an hour I decided to go and ask him the way to the teacher's house, which was meant to be about half an hour's drive away from Dieppe in the beautiful Normandy countryside.

'Bonjour, monsieur, excusez-moi mais je viens de l'Angleterre et je cherche la maison d'un ami qui a oublié de venir me chercher au port.'<sup>3</sup>

The man stood up abruptly and replied with a very broad smile on his face: 'Il n'a pas oublié du tout! Moi, je suis celui que vous cherchez. Je suis Jean-Jacques! Salut, Amir. Bienvenue à Dieppe.'<sup>4</sup>

I pretended - unsuccessfully - to be not at all surprised. It was my custom, whenever I greeted a male friend, to shake him very cordially by the right hand and to place my left hand affectionately on his shoulder. Realising quickly that this wasn't appropriate since Jean-Jacques's hump was on his right shoulder, I instead greeted him with a non-contact kiss, first on his right cheek, then on his left, and then his right cheek again - as a French man would often greet a French woman. He looked a little surprised but said nothing.

To me, Jean-Jacques certainly looked very French. His dark brown skin was heavily lined, either from the sun during summer holidays spent in the south of France or from the experiences of living through life with a significant disability. He had a large, aquiline nose, typical of so many French people, like that of Charles de Gaulle. Personally, I think this has something to do with their passion for excellent food.

His mouth had that equine pout which the French are either born with or which is formed, over time, by the pronunciation of their beautiful language. I noticed a few years ago when preparing a lesson for my pupils that if you hold your palm in front of your mouth when you speak English, hardly any air comes out of your mouth. If you try doing this when speaking French, for example, saying the words: 'Bon, bien, bof, fumer, ranger,' great gusts of air emerge from your mouth, which eventually causes a natural Homer-Simpson-like look to your mouth. This also explains, by the way, why, when a French person talks to you, you are more likely to

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<sup>3</sup> 'Excuse me, sir, but I've come from England and I am looking for the house of a friend who has forgotten to come and meet me at the port.'

<sup>4</sup> 'He hasn't forgotten at all! I am the man you are looking for. I'm Jean-Jacques! Hi, Amir. Welcome to Dieppe.'

smell his or her breath. In the case of Jean-Jacques, this was a pungent mix of espresso, cigarettes, mainstream halitosis and garlic.

I turned down his kind offer of a quick coffee. Instead we took the dog for a brief walk along the promenade and he told me a little about his background, how he had grown up in Normandy, how he became a teacher and what it was like living as a hunchback.

‘Nowadays I could have an operation,’ he concluded, ‘with only limited danger, but I have decided instead just to live with it. The only thing I don’t like is that I also have a very hairy back, which to me makes the hump more grotesque. So I never go swimming and I don’t date women.’

We walked back to our cars and I then followed Jean-Jacques’s 2CV through the Normandy countryside to his home. It really was so hard to believe that only 36 km of water separated France from England. *Everything* was so different. The early summer sun seemed to be warmer. The sky was somehow a cleaner, more intense blue. The symphony of greens and yellows that adorned both sides of the country lane made such a lasting impression on me. The yellows ranged from bright citrus through pale primrose to warm mustard. The greens from lime through shades of emerald to olive. Everywhere you could see short, leafy fruit trees laden with apples or pears and nearly every idyllic, detached home was either an old converted wattle and daub barn or a tasteful replica of one, always with a sun terrace and sometimes with a swimming pool.

When we arrived at Jean-Jacques’s house, he opened the wide wooden gate and the dog jumped out over the roof of the 2CV and ran ahead of us up the tree-lined, bumpy grass path that led to his renovated barn, barking excitedly all the way. We parked our cars under the shade of the apple trees near the house and went inside.

He had renovated the barn himself, with only the occasional help of a few friends, over a period of ten years. For a decade he had slept in a caravan in the field outside. Everything seemed authentic, from the iron latches on the tongue-and-groove barn doors to the enormous beams that carried the weight of the roof. He had used only wooden dowels. There was not a single nail or screw in sight.



The floor was made of large, slate paving slabs. Downstairs, only the kitchen and the bathroom were rooms unto themselves, and the rest was a spacious, open-plan area with a dining room and a living room divided only by a large, open fireplace whose chimney went up through the middle of the house.

Upstairs there were only two small bedrooms separated by the central chimney wall. Only in the roof above the beds had Jean-Jacques allowed himself a concession to modern architecture: four large Velux windows. Even the kitchen had a wood-fired Aga stove and almost no electrical equipment.

After I had unpacked my bag, we sat out in the garden for a few hours during which Jean-Jacques also explained the overall plan for the weekend. Much of it seemed to revolve around eating and drinking, which was fine by me. As we were chatting, a rather overweight black and white cat came up to us and suddenly jumped up and sat on my lap. I really do not like cats at all. Yet they always seem to seek me out. They doubtless have an instinct for detecting people don't like them.

'Oh, that's the neighbours' cat. They call it "Black and White." Yes, in English, strangely enough. It always comes into my garden. I don't think it is very well.'

As much as I wanted to push it off my lap, I began to feel sorry for it and let it stay. It purred loudly and fell asleep.

'The only thing we need to do tonight is to have dinner together with Céline, the English teacher who will be joining us on the exchange, and I'd be really grateful if you could collect the lamb for Sunday's lunch while I am getting tonight's dinner ready.'

'But of course. Maybe I could collect Céline on the way back from getting the lamb?'

'That's a good idea, but I insist that you take my car in case the lamb is a bit messy.'

'Fine,' I replied, actually with no concept of what he was trying to communicate.

So, my first encounter with Jean-Jacques's 600cc, 2 horse-power, top-down automobile was a mixture of fun, bewilderment and incredulity. The gear-lever protruded horizontally from the

middle of the dashboard, so that changing gear was like playing the trombone. The window latches had broken off so that the windows flapped open and shut as I bobbed along the country lanes. When I tried to open the vents in the front of the car to lessen the smell of the exhaust gases inside the car, the lever broke off in my hand. The reclining mechanism in the passenger seat was also broken and the seat seemed to be held fixed at one angle with a thin metal pin. And there were so many rust holes in the floor of the car and the boot, which probably explained where all the exhaust fumes were coming from. Every time I turned a bend the car would wobble like jelly to one side as if it were going to tip over, so by the time I had reached the farm just 5 km away, I was feeling decidedly sea-sick.

The Norman farmer greeted me exuberantly.

‘Salut! Alors, vous êtes le prof anglais qui va réanimer l’entente cordiale, n’est-ce pas?’<sup>5</sup>

He explained that he loved the English because they had liberated his father from becoming a Nazi prisoner of war during the German invasion of France. I loved the way my skin colour seemed to have no influence on his thought process. He insisted on giving me a square block of his favourite cheese and a bottle of Calvados – both produced locally. The cheese is called *Maroilles* and it is the only cheese I know whose exquisite, awesome taste increases in proportion to how badly it smells. Thank God I had a car with an open roof and lots of holes in it! I was about to pick up Céline.

The lamb was another new experience. The farmer had only just slaughtered it, he explained, by hanging it up and slitting its neck. There was still a fair amount of blood dripping from it as we lifted it together into the boot of the 2CV. He also handed me a punctured, see-through plastic bag containing lumps and loops of viscera with even more blood dripping through its perforations. The door of the boot wouldn’t close properly.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said, as if he could read my mind, ‘it’s too heavy to fall out.’

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Hello. So you are the English teacher who is going to resurrect the Entente Cordiale?’

I told the farmer that I hoped I would see him again and bounced my way back down the road to collect Céline. She lived alone in a more modern barn along with Charlie, her sheepdog, whom she wanted to bring with her to dinner.

Céline too, was also very French, for me the epitome of a young French woman. Her green eyes looked as if they had medicinal properties. Her skin was tanned, olive-brown and her hair black and glossy, cut in a very meticulous bob. She wore a thin, cotton tartan dress that hung down from her breasts over her perfectly flat stomach. She also wore also a black, cashmere *Benetton* cardigan loosely over her shoulders. She carried no bag and wore only a watch as an accessory. She smelled divine: one of those very expensive French perfumes that really does smell different on every woman. I could so easily imagine her astride an old-fashioned bicycle, pointing at some non-existent hills in the distance, in an advertisement for *Yves Rocher*.

To think that *this* was going to be the colleague with whom I would be doing the French exchange. Her very attractiveness, as natural and unassuming as it was, made me so nervous that I at first didn't know how to make conversation with her. I felt like a pubescent school boy on his first date. As we drove off towards Jean-Jacques's, I made my cool gambit.

'We have a dead lamb in the boot of the car.'

'Really?' she replied, pretending to be surprised. 'I have a spare wheel in mine. It's more practical if I have a puncture, you know.'

She said this in such a serious tone. But then I glanced across at her and she laughed out loud. I laughed too. It sounded so much funnier – and of course, please excuse the cliché, sexier – in French. I was so mesmerised by her unaffected charm, her natural beauty and infectious humour that I managed to get lost on the way back. I was almost very glad that I did, since getting lost gave me more time to be with her on my own, until I suddenly had to swerve to avoid a massive pothole in the road. As we swung abruptly to the left, the metal pen that was holding the passenger chair upright slid out on to the floor and her chair fell back on to the rear passenger seat, leaving Céline lying on her back and her dog wondering what the hell was going on.

'My God!' she laughed. 'You *are* a fast worker.'

She unruffled her short tartan dress back down to cover her white underwear. I immediately pulled the car over to the side of the narrow lane and lent over Céline's giggling body in order to undo the jammed seatbelt and to erect the back of the seat. At this point I couldn't stop laughing either. Her dog started barking madly, obviously thinking that I was trying to molest her owner in some way.

At this very moment a male voice told me to stop what I was doing straight away and to get out of the car with my hands behind my head. As I obeyed, I saw not one, but two, police officers staring first at me, then the car, then Céline and finally the dog who also seemed to have picked up on the seriousness of the situation and had stopped barking.

'We have been following you for the last five minutes. Not only are you driving all over the road like someone under the influence of alcohol, but you also have blood dripping out of the boot of your vehicle. Are you aware of this, Monsieur?'

As you might imagine, the next five minutes were taken directly from the Theatre of the Absurd.

'What is your name?'

'Amir Abdullah.'

'Where were you born?'

'Pakistan.'

'Where are your passport and driver's license?'

'At the house of a friend.'

'Where does this friend live?'

'Fairly near here, somewhere, I think. I don't know the address but I know what the house looks like. It's a barn with apple trees in the garden.'

'Is this your car?'

'No.'

'Are you insured to drive it?'

'I'm not sure. I think so.'

The policemen saw the bottle of Calvados on the back seat of the car.

'Have you been drinking alcohol or smoking cannabis?'

'No, well, yes, I had a bottle of red wine on the ferry. I always do.'

'And what is the purpose of your visit to France?'

'I am planning to bring some English children here, on an exchange.'

'And why is there blood coming from the boot of your car?'

'Because there is a dead lamb in there.'

Pause.

'For Sunday lunch.'

'And who is this woman?'

'Céline. Céline ....? I don't know her surname. We only met about ten minutes ago.'

Céline, who had by now just managed to get out of the car, began to try to clarify the situation in fluent, mother-tongue French. I stopped sweating and felt a huge sigh of relief. Everything would be all right now.

But unfortunately, it wasn't. Once I had opened the boot of the car and had shown the policemen the dead lamb, they insisted on taking me to the *commissariat de police* in Dieppe. At this moment in time, I wished I had been in Calais after all. There, none of this would've happened.

One and a half hours later the French police finally seemed satisfied that my story was true, but I was still going to receive a caution and 2,000 Franc fine for dangerous driving.

By the time Céline and I got back to Jean-Jacques's house, the dinner was just ready. Unbelievably, Jean-Jacques never even noticed how long I was gone. He had simply assumed – so he told us over dinner – that I had collected Céline first and that we had then taken a relaxed aperitif with the farmer. How wonderfully liberating it must be to live in such a relaxed pace of life. I went upstairs and changed my blood-spattered clothes.

Dinner was a masterpiece. Fresh fish soup, followed by warm veal salad, followed by fillet steak flambéed in Armagnac with pepper sauce, sautéed potatoes and broccoli soufflé, followed by a selection of the most exclusive French cheeses and concluding with a tarte au framboises accompanied by home-made ginger and vanilla ice cream. Each course came with an appropriately selected wine, and we rounded the evening off with an intense coffee, handmade pralines and, of course, the bottle of Calvados. One small sip of this liqueur was like savouring the distillation of 10 kg of apples, and I have never been able to drink it since without being immediately transported back to this evening sitting in front of Jean-Jacques's open fire with Céline. I also noticed that night, for the first time, that the unique genius of a French meal lies not only in the individual courses but also in the afterglow left on your palate of all of them mixed together.

During the meal I tried not to look at Céline too often since it must have been so obvious how I was falling in love with her. I was intoxicated by everything about her: the bright sparkle in her fire-lit eyes, the way she shook her head and stroked her exposed collar bone when she laughed. The way her heavy bob fell elegantly back into place and the tiny dimples that appeared either side of her perfect teeth when she smiled. I loved her sense of humour and I was fascinated by the way she could switch from small talk to profound, philosophical observations about life without seeming at all pretentious. On the few occasions when I couldn't stop myself from glancing at her, she caught my eye. I felt embarrassed but was desperate to know if she had any feelings for me too.

Towards 1 am the evening came to a close. The fire had almost gone out and warm drops of summer rain had started to fall. Jean-Jacques insisted on driving Céline home. I had had too much to drink and had had enough trouble with the French police for one evening. Jean-Jacques had also had too much to drink, but he knew from past experience none of the local police would trouble him.

As I got into bed there was no way that I could sleep. First of all, it was far too warm. The heat of the day had risen into the roof of the barn, the chimney wall was still hot from the fire

below and I couldn't open the Velux windows because of the rain. I stripped down to my boxer shorts and threw the bedding on the floor. I pulled the shutters down over the windows in order to dampen the sound of the rain, so I now lay in the complete dark, tossing and turning, planning each detailed step of my desired future together with Céline. The same thoughts repeated themselves in a series of circular dead ends.

This restlessness was not helped by Jean-Jacques either, whose 2CV came vibrating back up towards the house about two hours later. I heard him finally come up into his room where he seemed to fidget around for ages until I was finally ready to fall asleep.

As I turned over to face the wall and sensed myself dozing off, I heard my bedroom door open. Someone came in and I felt them climb on to my bed. Knowing it had to be Jean-Jacques, my fears were confirmed as I felt a warm, hairy lump touching my back between my shoulders. While I plucked up the courage to turn over and confront him, I tried hard to think of the right words to say. As I rolled over, I was immediately confronted with a deluge of sloppy kisses.

*Oh, thank God!* I thought to myself as I realised it was his dog.

I quickly got up, pushed it out of my room, opened both Velux windows – for it had now finally stopped raining – got back into bed for a glorious two hours of deep sleep.

At 5:30 am I was abruptly awoken by the loudest cockerels I have ever heard in my life. 'Cock-a-doodle-do! Cock-a-doodle-do!' There must have been at least a dozen of them in the neighbours' garden. I knew that it was pointless trying to go back to sleep so I got up and took a shower and waited for Jean-Jacques to get up for breakfast. It was another beautiful summer day with clear sunshine and not a cloud in the sky.

Jean-Jacques had invited six guests to what was to be – no exaggeration – a six hour lunch à la française with five courses. As well as Céline, there were two other English teachers from her school, a German teacher, the school's deputy headteacher, a colleague from Jean-Jacques's maths department and a retired Englishman who used to teach English in the school about ten years ago. Helped along by the wine, the atmosphere was genuinely convivial and the six hours passed

remarkably quickly. This was the European Union working at its best and I was already optimistic about a successful school exchange. In my experience, when the teachers get along well, so do the pupils.

The conversation covered educational policy, politics, history, pluralism, religion, the social integration of migrants and refugees, taxation, the European economy, and of course generalised comments about the characteristics of the nations represented. The French had the best cuisine and couture, the Germans had the best cars, and the British had the worst table manners.

‘This is the main reason why we had to stop the exchange with another Sussex school five years ago. We had so many complaints from the children and their parents that in England they were given ready-meals and frozen food and chips every day. No salad! No fresh fruit! No mineral water! Just imagine! How awful!’ said one of the English teachers.

‘And then, when the English children came to France, they refused to eat the wonderful fresh food the parents had prepared for them. They just asked for crisps and Coca-Cola! Unbelievable!’ added the other.

‘Some of the English children had never eaten at the table with the family so they could not understand why the French children sat at the table for over an hour in the evening sharing with their parents about their day. So, many of the English pupils just left the table after three minutes, having eaten nothing and without even saying thank you! I mean, this is one aspect that we will have to change! Wouldn’t you agree, Amir?’

Just as I was thinking about how on earth I was going to effect this enormous, radical social change in Rottingdean, one of Céline’s colleagues suddenly screamed at me across the large, oak dining table:

‘Non, non, non, pas comme ça!’<sup>6</sup>

Evidently I was doing something wrong with my oysters.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘No, no, no. Not like that!’



I had always believed you were meant to swallow them quickly. Whole. Apparently not. Instead, first I was told to add a little lemon juice and vinegar to them to test that they are still alive. If they are, I would see them move. If not, they are dead and I mustn't eat them. If they are alive, then I was to put them in my mouth and chew them slowly so that I could enjoy the whole gamut of seafood flavours that would thereby emerge on to my palate. As I tried valiantly to follow these instructions, my enjoyment of oysters rapidly diminished to the point of me never wanting to eat them ever again. They are, in a word, disgusting.

When we got onto the subject of social integration, I asked whether there was much racism in the area. Not because I am black, but because I did have a few Indian and Chinese children who might be interested in the exchange.

'No, no, no, Amir. We have no racism here, none at all,' said Jean-Jacques's maths colleague.

'That is because we have no foreigners here,' confirmed the deputy head mistress.

'Except for the ones who work in the local brothel!' laughed the old Englishman.

'And the rest are all in Calais, trying to get England!' laughed the German.

Although Céline frequently took part in the conversation with her usual mixture of witty comments and philosophical reflections, she seemed much of the time to be thinking about something else. On several occasions she looked across at me and smiled. At one point it even looked as if she had nodded towards the front door, as if to say, *Can you and I go outside alone and talk together?*

As I started to think about what excuse I could use to get us to go outside together, I was suddenly overcome by an absolutely overwhelming sense of nausea. It was the oysters. Of that I was certain. The problem was, the oysters now lay at the bottom of five layers of French cuisine, so I quickly worked out that I was not just about to be just a little bit sick.

As the earlier conversation about rude English people dashing up from the table before the meal was over and without saying thank you for their food flashed through my racing mind, I jumped up from the table, ran out without a single word of explanation into the garden and

projected in reverse order the delightful five-course gourmet meal into the pond in Jean-Jacques's idyllic garden. The fish clearly thought it was Christmas Day as they raced to gather round and consume my technicolour deposit. In the corner of my eye I noticed Black and White looking at me, pitifully. Or was it cathartically?

Céline came out to find me.

'Oh, Amir,' she exclaimed. 'Are you okay?'

'Yes, thanks,' I replied. 'I think it was the oysters.'

'Yes, you must be careful with shellfish, especially if you're not used to them. It looks as if you will have to change your jeans again!'

I asked her if we could talk properly alone the following day. She explained that she wouldn't be coming to lunch as this was for Jean-Jacques's family, but that I could call in and see her in the afternoon if I would like to.

I went back with Céline into the house, excused myself and explained that I needed to go and lie down as I wasn't feeling too well. I took off my clothes, threw myself on the bed and fell fast asleep until the manic cockerels woke me up at 5:30 am the next morning.

Céline was right. Sunday lunch was to be a family affair. Invited were Jean-Jacques's mother, father, sister, brother-in-law, niece and nephew. I put on my favourite white cotton shirt from *Woodhouse* and my last pair of clean jeans: my slightly looser 501s that had been washed from denim blue to almost white. They were my favourite jeans. The cotton felt like silk and they hung on me exactly as a pair of 501s should hang on a 26-year-old athletic, black man. It was again sunny and 26° so we ate outside on the sun terrace. No seafood in sight, and the main course was Larry the Lamb out of the boot of the 2CV. Today had a good feeling about it, except for the absence of Céline. But everything was going to be all right, and I would get to be with her straight after lunch.

Conversation during the meal flowed freely and the children thought the stories about the lamb in the boot, the dog in the bed and the oysters in the pond were hilarious. What they didn't

know – and I didn't know – was that there was about to be a fourth story about the cat on the lap. For while I had been telling the family my adventures, Black and White had jumped up onto my lap and nestled herself between my legs. She seemed to be asleep most of the time - still indefinably ill - until she suddenly woke up, pulled herself with a slow struggle up on to her front legs and began a kind of violent cough. At first I assumed that she was trying to cough up a giant fur-ball.

'Is the cat all right?' asked Jean-Jacques's mother.

'I'm not sure,' I said.

As I lifted the cat up in order to put it on the ground, I saw three stillborn kittens lying in my lap, their tiny eyes tight shut and their inert bodies still wrapped in a kind of transparent jelly, mixed blood and gunge.

Jean-Jacques's mother got up, came over to me and picked up the lifeless kittens from my lap and went off to dispose of them at the back of the house. I went into the bathroom to try to wash the blood off my favourite, almost-white 501s, without any real success. Jean-Jacques's mother returned, evidently not feeling any need to wash her hands, sat back down at the table and tucked into her roast lamb again.

As soon as we had finished our crème brûlée, I made my excuses to go and make some final preparations for the exchange with Céline. After all, I was going back to England on Monday on the 6 o'clock ferry. As we said goodbye, Jean-Jacques's brother-in-law recommended a picturesque walk to a restaurant overlooking a lake within 30 minutes walk from Céline's house.

I drove my Golf along the country lane to Céline's barn. As I arrived, she was sitting outside under the shade of an apple tree, drinking herbal tea and reading a novel I had read at university called *La Princesse de Clèves*. She seemed genuinely pleased to see me and invited me to sit down for a while, poured me some tea and then began peeling a variety of fruit as we chatted. She cut the fruit carefully into pieces, put it on to a plate with a desert fork and gave it to me.

I suggested the idea of the walk to the restaurant.

'Sounds wonderful,' she smiled, 'but you will have to show me the way because I have only lived here since Easter and don't know my way around that well.'

'I'll do my best,' I replied.

'Charlie, come on! We're going for a walk with Amir!'

Charlie barked with excitement as we got up to go. She went to fetch her ball.

'Oh dear!' observed Céline. 'What has happened to your jeans? It looks as if someone has given birth on them!'

'Very funny,' I replied.

When we got into the centre of the village I realised I had no idea where to go so I asked an elderly couple if they knew the way.

'Which way?' replied the old man.

'There are paths around here everywhere. One goes to the forest, another to the abattoir, another to the cheese factory, yet another to the graveyard and another to *Lovers' Seat*, the little restaurant overlooking the lake.'

'I like the sound of *Lovers' Seat*,' said Céline with a wink and a stroke of her collar bone.

'Ah well, in that case, you go through the gate behind the church and you follow the path over the two hills, keeping parallel to the stream, until you come to the restaurant. It's only closed on Mondays,' explained the old man.

We thanked them and began walking towards the church.

'It's a wonderful place for getting engaged,' shouted the old lady as she gave a husband a knowing nudge with her elbow.

'Thank you!' replied Céline loudly.

Then she looked at me, put her arm through mine and added, more softly, 'You see, I told you that you were a fast worker.'

When we got to the restaurant, we decided not to go in but instead to sit on the bench outside overlooking the small lake. It was surrounded by willows that hung elegantly over the water's edge. She asked me when was my birthday.

'The end of December. Why?'

'Oh, so you're a Capricorn. I'm a Cancer and that means we are sadly not compatible.'

'Do you believe in astrology, then?' I asked her.

'No, not at all. I am an empiricist. I only believe in what my five senses experience and my mind can comprehend. And you, Mr Abdullah? What kind of person are you?'

'I'm an impulsive romantic. *Le cœur a des raisons que la raison ne connaît point.*'<sup>7</sup>

She laughed out loud and kissed me briefly on the lips.

'There, I've even given you some help. I've made the first move.'

I moved towards her, closed my eyes and placed my lips on hers. I will never forget the taste of her love. Like honey and fresh berries.

As we walked back to Céline's home, sometimes we ran and threw the ball in order to give Charlie some exercise, sometimes we walked hand-in-hand, and occasionally we slowed right down, walked with our arm over one other's shoulders and kissed. I was so very in love.

Just before I drove away from her that evening, I promised that I would call her occasionally from England and that I would come back to Dieppe for a weekend as soon as I could. I managed to embrace her for long enough for her perfume to impregnate my shirt. I wanted to be sure that I could still smell her when I got back to England.

Jean-Jacques and I spent the last two hours together drinking Calvados and reminiscing over what an eventful weekend I had experienced. He had also worked out that I had fallen in love with Céline and he was pleased to hear that we had determined to see one another again soon.

'Tell me. Is your life always this intense?' he asked as we prepared to go to bed.

'Not at all,' I replied. 'Only when I come to France.'

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<sup>7</sup> 'The heart has its reasons that reason cannot understand.'

As I crossed the English Channel the following morning, everything felt as if it was suddenly in reverse. Instead of going home to England, it felt as if I were now going abroad and that the next time I travelled to see Céline, I would be coming back home to France. This precise feeling seemed confirmed to me by what was about to happen at Newhaven harbour. The police were looking for a black man in his twenties who had recently visited Paris from England to meet with a Pakistani terrorist cell who were plotting a bomb attack in central Paris.

‘Just pull over to the side here, please, sir.’

‘What is your name, please, sir?’

‘Amir Abdullah.’

‘And where were you born?’

‘Pakistan.’

‘And what was the reason for your trip to Paris?’

‘I never said I went to Paris,’ I replied as the customs officer opened the boot of my Golf and found two pairs of bloodstained Levi’s in a carrier bag that Jean-Jacques had given me, most unhelpfully labelled *Galleries Lafayette, Paris*.

I was arrested and put in the same cell in which I had briefly met the drunken French lorry driver while the police and customs officers checked out the veracity of my so-called story.

Four hours later I was released to go to work. No apology. Nothing. I phoned the school and said I was too sick to come to work today after all. They were fine about it.

I couldn’t face going home to my empty apartment so I drove round to the other side of the harbour where it was easier to sit on the beach. As I threw pebbles into the sea, I pondered how love changed your perspective on everything and how empty life felt without Céline: work, hobbies, friends, the apartment, the future. The last weekend in France was, by contrast, full of adventure, symbolism and meaning. Months of life here seemed to be compressed into hours of life over there, even though the pace of life was paradoxically slower. For as long as I was there, I was pumped with an intoxication that neither wore off nor had any nasty side-effects.

With a loud blow on its horn, the ferry left the harbour for Dieppe. I so wanted to be on it. As I skimmed more stones across the surface of the sea, I heard a voice in my head reply: *Why shouldn't you be on it? What is stopping you from being on it?*

I don't know where that voice came from, but I swear I heard it, those actual words. I drove up to see Mr Sexton and explained that I was going, breaking my contract and ending my career. He had enough people wisdom and life experience to know that it was pointless trying to dissuade me. He was very disappointed for the pupils but he was so understanding towards me.

'Farewell,' he said. He looked so tired and exhausted from the pressure of his vision.

I caught the next ferry.

'Good afternoon, Mr Abdullah. Nice to see you again. Please drive on.'

When I arrived at Céline's, it was already 11 pm and she was just turning out the lights to go to bed. I hadn't told her that I was coming. She heard the car and came out to meet me in her nightdress. Charlie jumped up to greet me.

'Tu rentres déjà?'

'Ouais. J'ai ma valise dans le coffre.'

'C'est pas vrai! T'en es sûr? Pas d'agneau saignant?'<sup>8</sup>

She laughed out loud, hugged me tight and gave me a passionate kiss, as if she hadn't seen me for weeks.

Since it was still so warm, we sat down outside, lit some candles and drank some chilled white wine. I explain my thoughts, we exchanged ideas and agreed that I should stay.

That night, indeed for the first few months, I slept downstairs on the sofa. We wanted to take things slowly and to savour the journey. Or, as Céline put it, *il faut toujours laisser du temps pour sentir les roses.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 'You're back already?'

'Yeah. I've got my suitcase in the boot.'

'Never. Are you sure there's not a bleeding lamb in there?'

<sup>9</sup> 'You should leave enough time for smelling the roses.'

In the months that followed our love grew and grew. One day we bumped into the old couple in the village.

'We knew you were perfect for one another,' said the old woman.

'And we knew you'd find the way!' added the old man.

Whenever we weren't working, we would be walking the dog, reading, cycling, cooking and talking. We were best friends and we were lovers. Provoked by our long conversations with Jean-Jacques and other friends, we even began talking about marriage and children. Céline was in no hurry, she kept saying.

Then, in December, Céline started to feel sick. We assumed it first it was winter 'flu.

But then her periods stopped too.

So we thought she was pregnant and went for a test.

The doctor confirmed that she was not pregnant, but seemed very worried.

Céline had some more tests and she was diagnosed with cancer just before our first Christmas together.

She had no chance of survival as it had virulently spread to almost every major organ in her body.

It was such a moving privilege to care for her during those last precious six months of her life. She was so brave, so strong and so calm. She never complained and she never lost her sense of humour. She would've been the most amazing mother.

In June, soon after her 26th birthday and almost exactly a year after I first met her, she passed away peacefully at home. Charlie and I had been by her side all night. I will never forget how serene she looked as her life disappeared from her beautiful, green eyes.

In the weeks that followed I would often catch Charlie sniffing around the house and garden as if she were looking for Céline. When she gave up, she would come and place her wet nose on my leg and look up at me with her big black eyes and start to whine. Each time, I would look at



her, the piercing sadness breaking my heart, and tell her: 'Charlie, Céline n'est plus là. Elle est morte. Elle ne revient jamais.'<sup>10</sup>

Then, one day, as I said these words, Charlie stopped whining and gave me a different look, as if she had instinctively grasped the meaningless tragedy.

I sat down on the floor next to her and hugged her tightly. Then I cried. I cried until my tears ran dry. Outside, the symphony of summer colours faded to grey as the heavy curtain of the night fell on the shortest, most beautiful and important act of my life.

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<sup>10</sup> 'Charlie. Céline's not here any more. She is dead. She is never coming back.'