





The child's name is Mélodie.

Long ago, before Mélodie was born, her pretty mother had had a stab at composing music.

Mélodie is ten years old and she's trying to eat a sandwich. She prises apart the two halves of the sandwich and stares at the wet, pink ham inside, and at the repulsive grey-green shimmer on its surface. All around her, in the dry grass and in the parched trees, crickets and grasshoppers are making that sound they make, not with their voices (Mélodie has been told that they have no voices) but with their bodies, letting one part vibrate against another part. In this place, thinks Mélodie, everything is alive and fluttering and going from one place to another place, and she dreads to see one of these insects arrive suddenly on her sandwich or on her leg or start to tangle its limbs in her hair.

Mélodie's hair is dark and soft. As she looks at the

slimy ham, she can feel sweat beginning to seep out of her head. Sweat, she thinks, is a cold hand that tries to caress you. Sweat is something strange inside you trying to creep from one place to another place . . .

Mérodie puts the sandwich down in the dusty grass. In moments, she knows, ants will arrive and swarm round it and try to carry it away. Where she used to live, in Paris, there were no ants, but here, where her new home is, there are more ants than you could ever count. They come out of the earth and go down into it again. If you dug down, you would find them: a solid mass of them, black and red. Your spade would crunch right through them. You might not even have to dig very deep.

Mérodie lifts her head and gazes at the leaves on the oak tree above her.

These leaves are yellowing, as though it were already autumn. The wind called the mistral keeps blowing through the tree and the sun keeps moving and piercing the shade and nothing in this place ever ends or is still.

‘Mérodie,’ says a voice. ‘Are you all right? Don’t you want your sandwich?’

Mérodie turns to her teacher, Mademoiselle Jeanne Viala, who sits on a rug on the grass a few paces away, with some of the younger children hunched up near to her, all obediently chewing their baguettes.

‘I’m not hungry,’ says Mérodie.

‘We’ve had a long morning,’ says Mademoiselle Viala. ‘Try to eat a few mouthfuls.’

Mérodie shakes her head. Sometimes, it’s difficult to speak. Sometimes, you’re like an insect with no voice,

which just has to make a movement with some part of its anatomy. And everywhere around you the mistral keeps blowing and autumn leaves keep falling, even though it's a midsummer day.

'Come and sit here,' says Mademoiselle Viala. 'We'll all have a drink of water.'

The teacher tells one of the boys, Jo-Jo (one of those who tease and bully Mélodie and imitate her posh Parisian accent), to pass her the picnic bag. Mélodie gets up and moves away from the sandwich lying in the grass and Mademoiselle Viala holds out her hand and Mélodie sits down there, near the teacher whom she quite likes, but who betrayed her this morning . . . yes she did . . . by making her look at things she didn't want to see . . .

Mademoiselle Viala wears a white linen blouse and blue jeans and white canvas shoes. Her arms are soft and tanned and her lipstick is a bright, startling red. She could have come from Paris, once. She takes a little bottle of Evian water out of the cumbersome bag and passes it to Mélodie.

'There,' she says. 'There you are.'

Mélodie presses the cool bottle against her cheek. She sees Jo-Jo staring at her. Bully-boys' faces can be blank, absolutely blank, as though they'd never learned to say their own names.

'So,' says Jeanne Viala in her teacher-voice, 'I wonder who can tell me, after the presentations we saw at the museum, how silk is made?'

Mélodie looks away, up, sideways, far away at the jumping light, at the invisible wind . . . All round her, the children

raise their arms, bursting to tell Mademoiselle Viala what they know, or what, Mélodie suspects, they have *always* known, because they're part of this landscape and were born out of its earth.

Jo-Jo says it: 'Silk is made by worms.'

He, like the others, always knew it. Everybody learned about it from their grandparents or great-grandparents and only she, Mélodie Hartmann from Paris, had never ever thought about it until today, until Jeanne Viala took the children to the Museum of Cévenol Silk Production at Ruasse . . .

'Right,' says Mademoiselle Viala. 'Don't all shout out at once. *You* tell me, Mélodie. Imagine you wanted to breed a healthy crop of silkworms, what would be the first thing you would do, once you'd bought the eggs?'

The first thing. She looks down at her hands, which are dirty with sweat and dust – with human mud.

'Keep them warm . . .'

She whispers it. Her voice smaller than the voice of some tiny creature living between two stalks of corn, or underneath a tree root.

'Yes,' says Jeanne Viala. 'Good. And how would you do that?'

Mélodie wants to say: I said my answer. I said it. I don't want to say any more of it. But she just keeps looking down at her muddy hands, clutching the Evian bottle.

'I know!' says Jo-Jo.

'We know!' say two girls, two inseparable friends, Stéphanie and Magali.

'Go on then, Magali, you tell us,' says Jeanne Viala.

Magali's face is scarlet, puffed out with pride and embarrassment. 'My Gran told me!' she explodes. 'You put them in a pouch and you stick the pouch up your knickers!'

As laughter breaks round her, Mélodie gets up. Her legs feel trembly, but she walks as fast as she can away from the huddle of children.

Red-backed crickets jump and flit in her pathway. She snaps off a stick with a brittle seed-head at its tip, and tries to stop the insects from coming near her with this. She hears the teacher call to her, but she doesn't turn. Surely, Jeanne Viala knows . . . surely she does . . . that if you've lived your life in Paris – ten years of it – then you're homesick for the city, for a nice clean, carpeted room in a nice apartment, and you don't want to talk about worms writhing in a pouch under your skirt. Because it isn't as if Paris had been obliterated. It's still there. Your street is there. Your apartment. The room that was once yours. And it's only you who are never going back. Never. Because Papa has been given a 'great opportunity'. Papa has been offered a promotion. He's been made the Head of a Laboratory of Medical Analysis in Ruasse. *Head*. 'It's fantastic,' says Maman. 'You have to understand that it's a wonderful chance.' And all it means is . . . Paris has disappeared. Now there is a house made of stone, way out on its own in a shadowy valley. Mosquitoes whine in the dark, hot nights. The house is known as a *mas*, pronounced 'masse'. In the crannies of its stones, where the mortar has flaked or fallen out, scorpions hide from the sun. And sometimes there is one, black and deadly, on the wall of your bedroom and Papa has to come and . . .

... he brings a wooden mallet or a hammer. Blood comes to his face.

The blow of the hammer leaves a mark on the plasterwork of the wall.

‘There,’ he says, ‘it’s all right now. It’s no more.’

No more.

No more walks home from school, past the optometrist’s shop and the flower shop and the pâtisserie on the corner. No more winter afternoons when the Paris sky is electric blue behind the shoulders of buildings.

No more ballet class, swimming club, violin lessons. *No more.*

With her seed-head stick, Mélodie flays her path through the grasshoppers.

She opens a rusty iron gate and walks into a tussocky pasture, going towards shade, towards yellowing ash saplings, a place where she will be alone and drink her water. The teacher is no longer calling her. Perhaps she’s walked further than she realised? The air is quiet and still, as though the mistral has died.

Mélodie opens the water bottle. Not cool any more, but dirtied by her muddy hands and smelling of plastic. Not meant to smell of plastic, but smelling of man-made plastic only here, where Nature is so . . . determined . . . so . . . *everywhere*. Only here, where Nature fills the ground and the air and the sky. Where it fills your eyes. Where you can taste it in your mouth . . .

Halfway through gulping the water, Mélodie hears a new sound.

People talking on the radio? One of those discussions,

far off, about politics or about the life of someone famous? A conversation you weren't quite expected to understand?

She stops drinking and listens. No. Not people. Something gabbling softly like them, but not them . . . unless they're talking in a language Mélodie has never heard before . . .

She looks down to where the pasture seems to end in a line of nettle-green, feathery-leaved weeds. The weeds grow in clusters, so close together it looks almost impossible to find a way through them. But Mélodie is determined to discover the source of the new sound, so she makes her way towards them. She still has her stick. She begins to whip the weeds down. She thinks: This is the way to treat this place, this land of the Cévennes: you whip it! But then it fights back. The stick breaks. So Mélodie begins kicking and stamping a pathway through the weeds with her white sneakers, bought in Paris, no longer white. She takes big strides. She feels the ground underneath her begin to slope downwards. One of the ash trees trembles between her and the sun, like a flimsy curtain drawn above her head.

She's invisible now. Neither the teacher nor the other children can see her any more. They, the others – every single one of them – knew about old women who incubated worms under their heavy skirts, white worms against the white flesh of their bellies, their thighs, but they didn't come here, didn't dare to come and whip the weeds and stamp them down and make a path towards . . .

. . . a curving beach of grey stones and sandy shingle. And there, beyond the shingle, eddying between huge

boulders, a narrow sliding stream. Not a river. Still *pretending* to be a river, *talking to itself* in the language of a river, but shrunk by the heat to a streamlet. Dragonflies darting above the high stones. Ash leaves flying off and riding on the surface of the water.

Mélotie crosses the shingle to the stream's edge. She stoops and drenches her hand, washing the mud away, loving the cool, the cold, the almost-ice of it. A thrilling feeling, suddenly. And here she is, invisible in the beautiful tree shade, invisible and safe, as though the dark green weeds had sprung up again behind her, cutting off her way back.

Almost happy, she walks along the little beach, following the stream to where it turns a corner. And she turns the corner and sees the water flowing unexpectedly into a deep, sea-green pool. She stares at the pool. A streamlet trying to be a river again! So even Nature could have a memory – could it? – just as she has a memory, of what she thought she was meant to become and where. For this is how it feels to her, that the stream *longed for the pool*. It was embarrassed by being a rill, a runnel. It might even have been sad, sorrowful, as she is, 'heavy of heart', as Maman calls it. But now that it's merged with the great, deep pool, it knows that it's come home.

For a long time, Mélotie stands still, observing. Then, she's overtaken by a desire to bathe her itchy, sunburnt body in the water. She looks behind her, half expecting the teacher to appear through the curtain of saplings. But no one comes.

Shoes. Jeans. T-shirt. She casts everything away except

a little pair of red-and-white knickers, bought at Monoprix in the Champs Elysées. Then she begins to climb the first of the rocks that separate her from the pool. Agile now, she goes from boulder to boulder, towards the highest of them, which stands in mid-stream, and she remembers her instructor at her swimming club saying to the other children: ‘Watch Mélodie. This is how I want you all to be when you dive: like a bird, graceful and light.’

So she’s going to dive now. She’s positioning her bare feet on the edge of the white boulder. She’s a moment from a neatly executed dive, a moment from the drenching, reviving cold of the pool, when . . . at the very corner of her vision, she sees something which shouldn’t be there. At first look, she doesn’t recognise what it is. She has to look again. She has to stare.

Then she starts screaming.



The tapestry (‘French, late Louis XV pastoral, by Aubusson’) depicted a gathering of stylishly dressed aristocrats, sitting on the grass in the shade of some broad-leaved trees. Approaching the group were two servants, an elderly man and a young woman, bringing meat, bread, wine and fruit.

A dog lay asleep in the sunshine. In the distance (‘Some fading evident, texture of weave slightly hardened’) was a flower-filled meadow. The border was intricate (‘Formal frame pattern: escutcheons, roses and oak leaves’) and the colours (‘Reds, blues and greens on a neutral ground’) soft and pleasing.

On a cold spring morning in London, Anthony Verey stood in his shop, *Anthony Verey Antiques*, warming his hands on a mug of coffee, staring up at this tapestry. It had been in his possession for some time. Four years? Five? He’d bid for it at a private sale in Suffolk. He’d

wanted it badly enough to pay more than a thousand pounds over the reserve price of £6,000 and when it was delivered to the shop he'd hung it on a wall at the very back, opposite the desk where nowadays he sat all the time, pretending to do work of some kind, but in fact existing in a shallow state of reverie, keeping watch over his marvellous possessions – his *beloveds*, as he called them – and sometimes peering beyond them to observe the passers-by on the Pimlico Road.

Once the tapestry was in place, Anthony found that he was dismayed by the idea of selling it. The sale-price he put on it – £14,000 – was intended to discourage buyers, but in fact this price only existed in Anthony's mind and wasn't written down anywhere. Sometimes, when people asked him about the tapestry, he told them it wasn't his, he was just looking after it. Sometimes, he announced that the sale-price was 'in the region of £19,000' and waited for dealers to wince. Sometimes, he just said baldly that the tapestry wasn't for sale. It was his: his own Louis XV Aubusson. He knew in his heart that he'd never part with it.

Anthony was a sixty-four-year-old man of medium height, with abundant grey crinkly hair. Today, he was wearing a red cashmere polo-neck sweater under a jacket of soft brown tweed. It was never very warm in the shop because the *beloveds* had a tendency to crack, bulge, fade or split in temperatures above 60° Fahrenheit. But Anthony himself was thin and he feared the cold. By his desk, he kept a heavy old oil-filled heater, which creaked companionably on winter afternoons. He drank a lot of

very hot coffee, occasionally spiked with cognac. He wore thermal socks. Even scarves, sometimes, and woollen gloves.

He knew that this inconvenient palaver for the *beloveds* was eccentric, but he didn't care. Anthony Verey had no wife, mistress, lover, child, dog or cat. Across his life, at one time or another, in various pairings and combinations, he'd possessed all these things – all except the child. But now he was alone. He was a man who had grown to love furnishings and nothing else.

Anthony sipped his coffee. His gaze remained on the tapestry, in which the aristocrats sat on the right with the trees behind them and the servants approached from the left. The dog's slumber and the happy expectation apparent on the faces of the people suggested a moment of undisturbed, hedonistic contentment. Lunch was arriving. The sun blazed down.

But there was something else. At the very edge of the scene, to the extreme right of it, almost hidden among foliage, was a sinister face, the face of an old woman. On her head was a black cap. She was directing towards the people a look of exceptional malevolence. But nobody paid her any attention. It was as though they hadn't seen her.

For long periods of time, Anthony found himself looking at this old woman's face. Had she been part of the original design? She seemed insubstantial: a disembodied face, a gnarled hand on her chin, the rest of her hidden by the trees. Had the tapestry weavers ('Probably from the atelier of Pierre Dumonteil, 1732–1787') alleviated the monotony

of their work by adding this small but telling detail of their own devising?

Anthony drank the dregs of the coffee and was about to walk over to his desk, to make a half-hearted beginning on his weekly accounts, when something else caught his eye. It was a loose thread in the tapestry.

A nearby halogen lamp illuminated it. This black thread hung down over the old woman's brow, as though it might have been a lock of the crone's hair. Anthony put down his mug. He reached up and took the minute silk filament between thumb and forefinger.

The filament was less than a centimetre long. The feel of it was exceptionally soft, and Anthony kept his hand there, rubbing the little thread for a short space of time which could have been a minute, or could have been three minutes, or four, or even seven, but which was in any case long enough for him to come to full consciousness of the shocking and incontrovertible fact about his life that it had suddenly revealed to him: when he died, not one shard or splinter from any one of his *beloveds* would he be able to take with him. Even if some afterlife turned out to exist, which he doubted, he wouldn't have with him *anything* to console him, not even this black silk thread, less than one centimetre long.

The door buzzer sounded and woke Anthony from a trance which, in all the days and weeks to come, he would see as being of paramount importance. A man in a pinstripe suit and wearing a pink tie came into the shop. He looked around him. Not a dealer, Anthony concluded swiftly, not even an amateur collector, just one of the

Ignorant Rich, looking first at this thing and then at that, not knowing what he's seeing . . .

Anthony let the ignoramus move towards the most expensive piece in the shop, a marble-topped giltwood console table ('The top assorted specimen marbles within *verde antico* moulded borders, first quarter 19th century, Italian. The gilt frames and supporting standing Atlas figures, 3rd quarter 18th century. Also Italian.'). Then he wandered slowly towards him.

'Need any help, sir?'

'Yes,' said the man, 'I probably do. Looking for a wedding present for my sister. They're buying a house in Fulham. I'd like to give them something . . . I don't know . . . for the hall, I was thinking. Something everybody will . . . erm . . . notice.'

'Right,' said Anthony. 'For the hall. Well . . .'

He saw the man's eyes bulging in startled appreciation of the gilded Atlas figures, so he moved straight to the console table and caressed its marble top. 'This is a beauty,' Anthony said in a voice which still had about it an unfashionable English drawl he could no longer be bothered to suppress. 'An absolute dreamboat. But it needs space to show itself off. How big is your sister's hall?'

'Haven't a clue,' said the man. 'Haven't seen it. But I really like the gold cherubs or whatever they are. Quite a wow-factor there! What's the . . . erm . . . price?'

Anthony put on his glasses and bent down, searching for a minute label taped to the marble plinth on which the Atlas figures stood. He straightened up and said without smiling: 'Twenty-eight thousand.'

‘OK,’ said the man, fingering his pink silk tie with a meaty hand. ‘Let me have a wander, then. I guess I was hoping to find a bargain.’

‘A *bargain?*’ said Anthony. ‘Well don’t forget this is Pimlico.’

Pimlico.

No, not Pimlico itself. Still Chelsea. The westerly end of the Pimlico Road, London SW3, Anthony’s home, his living, his life for the last forty years, the place where his knowledge, shrewdness and charm had once made him rich. Not only rich. Here, he’d become a star of the antiques world. Dealers said his name with awe: Anthony Verey; *the* Anthony Verey. There had been no important auction, no private sale, no gallery preview to which he was not invited. He knew everyone: their place in the dealer or owner hierarchy, their weak spots, their failures, their maddening triumphs. He was like a spoilt prince in a small but opulent realm, courting *invidia*.

At the height of his celebrity, he’d been able to lull himself to sleep by counting – one by delectable one – the people who envied him.

And now, on this cold spring morning, he’d suddenly seen . . . well, what had he seen? He’d seen how *alone* everything was. Not just the man who’d once been a prince, once been *the* Anthony Verey. But all the *beloveds*, too, all these wonders, made with such care, with such dedication . . . these things which had endured and survived for so long . . . even these were tragic in their separateness and solitude. All right, he knew this was a

sentimental thought. Furniture couldn't feel. But you could feel for it. You could worry about that day when you had to leave it behind, to the mercy of other people's neglect and ignorance. Particularly now, in these times, when there was a universal letting-go of objects like these, seen as belonging to an old, irrelevant world. What awaited them? What awaited?

Anthony was seated at his desk now, on a hard Windsor chair, but with his still-narrow arse carefully placed on a green silk cushion. This cushion, bought at Peter Jones, was moulded so perfectly to the shape of his bottom that he seldom dared to plump it up or shake the dust from it. Nobody else came into the shop. Outside, the day was lightless.

Anthony took down his accounts ledger, put on his glasses and began staring at columns of figures. The ledger was old and thick and worn and was one of seven that contained all he had of a written history: every purchase, every sale, every tax payment, every expense. Ledgers 2 to 5 held all the dazzling figures. In Ledger 6, prices began to fall away and the volume of sales to diminish in a horrible descending curve. And now, in Ledger 7 . . . well, all he could do, frankly, was to avoid looking at bottom lines.

He turned to the Sale Entries for the month of March: an undistinguished portrait ('English School, early 18th century. Sir Comus Delapole, QC, and Lady Delapole. Pastel with touches of watercolour'), a majolica jar ('Ovoid, Italian 17th century, decorated with large scrolling foliage clusters'), a George III silver teapot ('The

circular body engraved with a band of anthemions and wrigglework'), and – the only thing of any real value – a Regency mahogany sofa table he hadn't particularly wanted to part with. These things had earned him slightly less than £4,000; barely enough to pay the month's share of the repairing lease on the shop.

Pitiful.

Anthony now vaguely wished that he'd tried harder to sell the peachy Italian console table to the man with the pink tie, who, in the end, had bought nothing and had been seen making straight for David Linley's shop on the opposite side of the road. He knew that not only the price of the table, but also his unconcealed disdain for this person, had driven him away, as it drove many customers away. But that couldn't be helped. The fact was that Anthony enjoyed being disdainful. Disdain – born out of specialist knowledge, or what he thought of as *secret knowledge* – was a habit perfected over forty years, and was now one of the few pleasures left to him.

Anthony put his head in his hands. He clung to tufts of his hair. At least he still had that: he had hair. He might be sixty-four but his hair was fantastic. And of course what he liked most about it was the envy it provoked among his male friends – the few that he had – with all that pink head-shame they had to endure day in, day out. And he found himself admitting, as he could have admitted long ago, that the envy of others – the blessed *invidia* to which mankind is so ruinously prone – had really and honestly been the thing that had kept him alive. This was an outrageous realisation, but a true one. Lovers of both

sexes and even one brief wife, Caroline, had come and gone, but the admiration and envy of others had stayed with him, moved with him through his work and his rest, fed and nourished him, allowing him to feel that his life had meaning and purpose. And now that, too, was gone.

Pity had replaced it. Everybody knew he was struggling, that he might even go under. They certainly discussed it round their dinner tables: 'Nobody wants brown furniture any more. Interiors look completely different now. Anthony Verey must be in grave trouble . . .' And of course there were many who wanted him to fail. Hundreds. If the shop were to close, how triumphant certain people would be . . .

Bitter thoughts. Anthony knew that, somehow, he had to resist, had to labour on. But who or what would help him? Where could meaning any longer be found? It seemed to him that outside the confines of his shop, where the *beloveds* clustered round him, keeping him safe, now lay a heartless wasteland.

His telephone rang.

'Anthony,' said a brusque but kindly and familiar voice, 'it's V.'

An immediate feeling of relief and gratitude rushed like an adrenalin shot into Anthony's blood. His sister, Veronica, was the only person alive for whom Anthony Verey felt anything like true affection.



In that same cool springtime, Audrun Lunel, a woman who had never moved from her village of La Callune in the Cévennes in sixty-four years, walked alone through a forest of oaks and chestnuts.

This forest, a sighing and beautiful thing, belonged to her absolutely by the instruction of her dead father's will ('*To my daughter, LUNEL Audrun Bernadette, I bequeath in its entirety that parcel of forested land designated Salvis 547 . . .*') and Audrun often came here alone, to feel under her rubber boots the contours of the earth with its carpeting of leaves, acorns and chestnut husks, to touch the trees, to look up at the sky through their branches, to remind herself that this place was hers 'in its entirety'. She had memories of this wood which seemed to go back beyond time, or to be *above* time, or above what people called 'time' with its straightness, its years in a line, its necessities. These memories, in Audrun's consciousness, *always had been*.

She knew she was often confused. People told her this. Friends, doctors, even the priest, they all said it: 'You are sometimes confused, Audrun.' And they were right. There were moments when consciousness or existence or whatever it was that you had to call being alive, there were moments when it . . . faltered. Sometimes, she fell down – like her mother, Bernadette used to do, fall in a faint when the wind blew from the north. At other times, she went on seeing and hearing the things that were there, but it was as if they were seen and heard through glass, at some oddly terrifying remove, and then, a moment later, she wouldn't know what it was, exactly, that she'd just seen or heard. There would be the feeling of an absence.

Episodes, the doctor called them. Short episodes of the brain. And the doctor – or doctors, for it wasn't always the same one – gave her pills and she took them. She lay in her bed, swallowing pills. She put them on her tongue, like a Communion wafer. She tried to imagine herself transfigured by them. She lay in the Cévenol night, listening to the scoop-owl, to the breathing of the land, trying to envisage the chemical river in her blood. She saw this river as a marbled swirl of purple, crimson and white; the colours drifted in skeins, expanded into almost-recognisable shapes, like clouds. Sometimes, she wondered whether these envisagings were inappropriate. She'd also been told that her mind was liable to fabricate 'inappropriate ideas'. It could imagine terrible things. It could imagine torture, for instance. It could discover, inside the old abandoned wells of La Callune, the bodies

of her enemies hanging upside down, their ankles tied with wire. This wire bit into their flesh. Blood seeped from their eyes. The water in the wells kept rising . . .

‘*Enemies*, Audrun? You haven’t got any enemies,’ said the people of La Callune.

But she had. Her closest friend, Marianne Viala, knew who they were. The fact that one of these enemies was dead and buried in the churchyard didn’t remove from his hated form the mantle of enemy. It often seemed to Audrun Lunel that the dead, becoming formless, also became agile and could seep not only into your dreams, but into the very air you were breathing. You could taste and smell them. Sometimes you could feel their disgusting heat.

Audrun walked on. Her eyes were keen and never dimmed, except when an *episode* was nearing and objects and faces appeared to stretch and shift. Today, she could capture the signs of spring, clear and sharp and filled with light: pale leaves on the chestnuts, dog’s-tooth violets at their feet, catkins on a hazel bush. Her hearing, too, was exact. She could recognise the song of the willow-warbler, be troubled by the squeak of her rubber boots. And now, at the centre of the wood, she stopped and looked down at the earth.

About the earth she knew she was not wrong. About the earth of her beloved Cévennes she never conjured inappropriate thoughts. There was a pattern to how things *became* and she – Audrun Lunel, child of the village of La Callune – understood it perfectly. Fire or flood could come (and often did come) to sweep everything away.

But still the rain fell and the wind blew. On the bare mother-rock, tiny particles of matter accrued in cracks and declivities: filaments of dead leaves, wisps of charred broom. And in the air, almost invisible, were specks of dust, grains of sand, and these settled in amongst the detritus, making a bed for the spores of lichen and moss.

In one season, the burned or washed limestone could be green again. Then in the autumn gales, in the drenching rains falling under Mont Aigoual, berries and seeds fell onto the lichen and took root. Box and bracken began to grow there, and in time wild pear, hawthorn, pine and beech. And so it went on: from naked stone to forest, in a single generation. On and on.

Except there could be trespass.

‘People can come and steal from you, Audrun,’ whispered her mother, Bernadette, long ago. ‘Strangers can come. And others who may not be strangers. Anything that has existence can be stolen or destroyed. So you must be vigilant.’

She’d tried never to cease this vigil. Since the age of fifteen, when Bernadette had died, Audrun Lunel had followed her mother’s instruction. Even in sleep, she’d felt the long weariness of the watcher. But it hadn’t been enough to save her.

The sun was warm. This was like a spring day from childhood, when she’d sat on the steps that led to the heavy front door, waiting for the arrival of the bread van.

Hunger.

She could recall its power over her will. She was four

or five years old. She took the two loaves from the van into the kitchen, which was cool and silent. But she couldn't walk away from the bread. She tried to, but she couldn't. She broke one of the loaves and began stuffing the crusty white bread into her mouth.

Such wonderful bread! But then her older brother, Aramon, had found her, caught her, told her that his father, Serge, would whip her with his belt. She pushed the broken loaf away. Willed it to be whole again. Terrified because it had led her into temptation. And then Aramon had sat her down and told her a fearful thing: that she didn't really belong in this family and had no right even to a share of the bread they had to buy so dearly. Because she was somebody else's child.

In 1945, he said, when she was a few days old – 'a stinky baby' – she'd been wound round with rags and dumped on the steps of the Carmelite Convent at Ruasse by her mother, who had been a *collaboratrice*. But the nuns didn't want her. She was a child of sin. The nuns had gone from village to village, asking, did anybody want a baby, a girl? Would anybody agree to care for an ugly baby with a belly-button like a pig's tail? But nobody wanted her. Nobody in their right minds wanted the baby of a *collaboratrice* with a belly-button like a pig's tail – except Bernadette.

Bernadette was an angel, boasted Aramon, his angel of a mother. And she had persuaded Serge to let her adopt the baby. Adopt. That was the word Aramon used when he told this story. He said it meant taking pity on something that wasn't yours. He said that Serge had

screamed and shouted that no, he already had a child – his son, Aramon – and that was all that mattered to him, and what in the world did he want with a mewling girl?

But day and night Bernadette had pleaded with him – God knows why – to let her take in the baby dumped on the doorstep of the Carmelite nuns. And, in the end, she'd won. God knows how. And so they all trooped down to Ruasse and went into the freezing cold convent and heard the baby's cries echoing round the freezing cold walls, and brought her home and she was given the name of the Abbess of the Convent of the Carmelites: Audrun.

'And that was you,' Aramon concluded. 'Adopted. See? And now my father's going to swipe your arse for eating our bread. Because he never takes pity on things that aren't his.'

For a long time, Audrun had believed this story which the brother, Aramon, kept alive.

'I expect you've been wondering who your father is, Audrun. Uhn?'

Yes, she had. She knew babies had to have two parents, not one. Everybody in La Callune had two parents, except those who had 'lost' their brave fathers in the war. So she asked Aramon: 'Was my father one of those "lost" men?'

'Well,' he said, laughing, 'lost to evil! Lost in Hell now! He was a German. An SS man. And your mother was a *putain de collabo*. That's why you've got a belly-button like a pig's tail.'

She didn't understand what any of this meant, only that she was supposed to feel ashamed. Aramon told her that the people of Ruasse had shaved off her mother's hair (not the hair of her mother, Bernadette, but the hair of this other mother she'd never known, the *collaboratrice*), shaved off her long blonde hair and marched her naked through the market, and the market traders had thrown handfuls of fish guts at her breasts because this was what you had to do to women who 'went' with German soldiers, this was their punishment, this and the birth of deformed children with pigs' tails growing out of their stomachs.

Hunger.

For the bread that day. For closeness to something.

Little Audrun sat in the dust inside the wire pen where the bantams foraged. She tried to clutch the smallest of the hens in her skinny arms. She could feel the terrified beating of its heart, see its gnarled feet, like baby corn cobs, clawing the air. Not even the bantam wanted to be close to her. She was the daughter of a *putain de collabo* and a German soldier of the SS. In nearby Pont Perdu, twenty-nine people had been killed by German infantry in a 'reprisal operation' and their names had been engraved on a stone monument, on a wayside shrine above the river, and flowers were laid there, flowers which were not real and never died.

Audrun drew her old and frayed cardigan round her body and walked on through the wood, her face lifted to the warmth of the sun. In another month, there would be

swallows. In the hour before dusk, they'd circle, not over her bungalow with its low, corrugated iron roof, but above the Mas Lunel, where Aramon still lived. They'd be looking for nesting sites under the tiles, against the cracked stone walls, and she would stand at the window of her flimsy home, or in her little *potager*, hoeing beans, watching them, watching the sun go down on another day.

She would see the strip-light blink on in the kitchen of the mas – that old green-tinged rod of light – and picture her brother stumbling to and from the electric stove, trying to fry *lardons*, gulping from his glass of red wine, dropping ash from his cigarette into the fat of the frying pan, picking up the bottle and drinking from that, his stubbled face wearing that fatuous grin it acquired when the wine excited his senses. Then, with a shaking hand, he'd try to eat the burnt *lardons* and a burnt fried egg, spooning everything in, with another cigarette smouldering on a saucer and outside in the dark the dogs in their wire pound howling because he'd forgotten to feed them . . .

Upstairs, he lived in grime. Wore his clothes till they stank, then hung them at the window to wash themselves in the rain, air themselves in the sun. And he was proud of this. Proud of his 'ingenuity'. Proud of the strangest things. Proud that the father, Serge, had named him after a variety of grape.

What a brother to have!

Who was your mother, Audrun?

Putain de collabo.

*Who was your father?
SS prick.*

She went to her other mother, Bernadette. She took a pair of scissors and asked Bernadette to cut off the pig's tail. And the mother held her close and kissed her head and said, yes, it would be seen to. They'd go to the hospital in Ruasse and the doctors would make everything 'sensible and tidy'. But doctors were expensive and life was hard, here in La Callune, and she would have to be patient.

So Audrun patiently asked, 'Who was my other mother, the *collabo*? Did she die? Was she hung upside down in a well by her ankles tied with wire?'

Bernadette began weeping and laughing, both at once, and sat Audrun on her knee and cradled her head against her shoulder. Then she tugged her arms free of her pinafore and undid her blouse and showed Audrun her white breast with its brownish nipple. 'I'm your mother,' she said. 'I nursed you here, at my breast. What's this nonsense about *collabos*? There were none of those in La Callune, and you mustn't use that word. I'm your mother and this is where I suckled you. Feel.'

Audrun put her small hand on the bosom, soft and warm to her touch. She wanted to believe this mother's words, comforting to her as bread, but Aramon had warned her: 'Bernadette will lie to you. All women lie. They're descended from witches. Even nuns have witches for mothers. Nuns lie about themselves, about their chastity . . .'

So she took her hand away and climbed down from Bernadette's knee and began to run away from her.

But this upset Bernadette and she came after her and lifted her up and said: 'You're mine, Audrun. My little girl, my darling. I swear it on my life. You were born in the early morning and I held you in my arms and the sun shone through the bedroom window and in my eyes.'

Audrun stood now in front of a sweet chestnut tree, moved, as she was each spring, by the sight of the new leaf. In her childhood, the family had fed their pigs with chestnuts and the pig flesh had skin that bubbled up into beautiful dark crackling, and it tasted sweet and had no taint about it.

But now a blight had come. *Endothia*, it was called. The chestnut bark split and reddened and fell and the branches above the reddened scars began to die. All over the Cévennes, the chestnut forests were dying. Even here, in Audrun's wood, the signs of *endothia* were visible. And people told her there was nothing to be done, there was no magician or saviour, as there had been long ago, when Louis Pasteur had travelled down to Alès and discovered a cure for the terrible silkworm diseases. *Endothia* was part of life now, the part that had changed beyond recall, the part that was old and blighted and withered by time. Trees would soon die in this wood. There was nothing to be done except to cut them down and burn the logs on the fire.

Audrun's bungalow had no fire. It had four 'night-storage' heaters, heavy as standing stones. As the winter afternoons drew on, the heaters cooled, the air cooled,

and Audrun had nothing to do but sit in her chair with a crocheted blanket over her knees. She folded her hands in her lap. And sometimes, in this deep cold stillness, she would feel an *episode* approaching, like a shadow that laid itself across her, a shadow attached to no solid form, but which took the colour from everything in the room, which bleached her mind and made the furniture stretch and shift behind a plane of glass . . .

Audrun examined the trunk of the chestnut tree. No sign of disease on this one yet, but she said the dread word to herself: *Endothia*. The air was so still that she seemed to hear her own soundless voice. Then, the next moment, she became aware that she wasn't alone and she turned and saw him, stumbling as he did these days – he who, as a boy, had been as agile and swift as an Indian brave – gleaning wood for the fire, putting the fallen pieces into some kind of sling on his back, a sling he'd cobbled together out of an old moth-eaten blanket.

'Aramon.'

He raised his arm, as though to prevent her from coming near him. 'Just a bit of wood,' he said. 'Just a bit of wood for the fire.'

He had trees of his own, a dense thicket of holm oaks behind the dog pound. But he was too lazy to take the saw to them, or else knew that he shouldn't trust himself with the saw; the saw would have his hand.

'Just a branch or two, Audrun.'

His hair was dirty and wild. His unshaven face was pallid, almost grey in the sharp sunshine. 'And I was coming to ask—'