

Paris, 11 April

Alex,

Our little parc Monceau already smells of spring. The little ducks you found so pretty are frolicking in the pond, ducking, [no pun intended], under the large *nenuphars* leaves—lilipads, yes? I've been observing them from our park bench, and I lost track of time. Yes, the three Muses still dominate the pond. The mossy folds of marble that had fascinated you are still clinging to their feet, to the hem of their robes

In exactly twenty-one nights, you'll be right here, against my shoulder. I know ... if I hadn't been so childish ... you'd already be here by my side. I know it's my fault. I know there's a price to pay for being a fence-sitter. I know the Humpty-Dumpty story. OK, he was sitting on a wall. Same painfully messy result. But that's all over now, the important thing is that you're coming, soon, relatively soon, as soon as you can manage it. We'll be watching the ducks of this pond together, side by side. We'll share a *gauffre au chocolat* and maybe one with icing sugar, too, still warm from the nearby kiosk.

Ma chérie, are you as happy as I am? Hard to tell now. You seemed to take the news of my latest decision matter-of-factly. I didn't hear you chuckle with glee. I didn't even hear a sigh of relief. I know you're both weary and wary by now. I know, too, that you're expecting some sort of deliverance from your visit.

Yes, you need the freedom to breathe. And your mind needs to be as free as your breath. I share these needs, but I think I've just about stopped breathing altogether. I must be subsisting on the barest minimum of oxygen necessary to a fully-formed middle-aged female. I smile as I remember how adamant you were a good while ago, as you tried to convince me that I was not middle-aged. My argument still stands. I have no reason to think I'm likely to live to be a hundred years old. Heaven forbid! So my age, at the moment, puts me somewhat past the 'middle' of the life expectancy I have set for myself.

And my own feelings are mixed: happy and full of dreams like when I was a child before Christmas and I used to sneak around sticking a finger against the wrapped presents my parents had hidden away. But you see, I never had the courage to open one to look inside. I'm not sure whether I didn't because my parents had trusted me not to or because I knew, even then, that an early peek would've spoiled my surprise.

I'm also in a state of paralysing fear. I feel like one of the rabbits I occasionally catch in the blinding glare of my headlights while driving back from my parents' place in the country.

I did try to break free, mostly to save myself and to, somehow, protect Sophie. You might suggest that, maybe, I could also have thought about you, about your feelings. Alex, the truth is that I'm constantly thinking about you. Which is why I can't breathe. The weekend in Honfleur turned out to be fine, weather-wise, which is never to be taken for granted in Normandy, but the dreaded confrontation did take place, to some extent. Let me tell you about it.

There we were, all four of us, sipping our Courvoisier, lost in our thoughts, looking at the flames in the fire the owner had lit for us, when I heard Eli ask, 'Has either one of you heard anything from Alex, lately? I mean, it's strange she hasn't called or written since her 'thanks for your warm welcome' card.'

Silence. I could hear only my heartbeat and the logs crackling. Then, next to me, I sensed Sophie shift in her armchair.

'If they had,' Isa finally answered for us, 'they'd have mentioned it. I'm sure Alex is very busy with her family and whatever it was she expected she would find in the south. I'm sure she's not giving us much thought ... well, for now at least.'

I held my breath, watching her sip from her balloon glass, 'She'll get in touch with us when she's ready.'

Eli answered, 'I don't see it that way at all. Really, if she's sightseeing all over the South of France, then, she certainly would have time to send us a couple of postcards. What about it, Addy, *hein*? Don't you think so?'

Cornered.

'Well, it depends. I mean—' I tried to explain, but Eli was already revving and she cut me off. 'You mean she might be too embarrassed about ... Well, I don't know but there's got to be a reason for the fact that she seems to have crossed us off her address book.'

And Sophie asked, 'And what could Alex possibly be embarrassed about, Eli?'

With my heart in my mouth, I sat there, hoping Eli would find a way to stop what she had begun.

'Ah well, that's a question you should really ask –'

'Elisabette! *Chérie* ...' Isa had come to my rescue. Or maybe she just wanted to spare Sophie. '... we should really go up to our room. Look it's almost 1.00 a.m., already. And tomorrow morning, you promised you'd help me find the lake the inn-keeper was telling us about. So, it'll be an early start, 'cause once there I'd like to get some fishing done. *Allez, viens.*'

Before Eli had the chance to add anything, Isa was already pulling her off her seat.

'Yeah, right. Sleep well, you two ... I guess we'll catch up with you around lunch, then,' she said, blowing a kiss but clearly only in Sophie's direction.

Now, Alex, can you believe that after we were finally tucked inside a large and comfortable farm-style bed, it's I who re-started that conversation? Well, I couldn't. I couldn't believe it was actually my voice, me, asking Sophie what she thought Eli had meant. It served me right when she replied that of the four of us, I'd be the one most likely to know that answer. Now, I could've dropped the conversation then and there, right? But I didn't. I asked why she had said that.

She replied, 'Because you're the one who's been writing to her and who is on the phone, talking to whom I wonder, after ten p.m.'

Feeling as foolish as a schoolgirl caught lying, I was terribly thankful for the darkness that had flooded the bedroom as soon as we'd turned off the light. Couldn't even see my hand in front of my face. Pitch black. And I imagined her dialling my number for whatever reason and yes, she'd have found my line engaged, still, and again. And yet the next day, day after day, when she and I were together, I never volunteered any information on any of these 'mystery' nighttime phone conversations. She never asked I never volunteered.

As I lay stiff as a board under the eiderdown, in that very dark room, besides wondering how I'd ever find the bathroom without having to turn on the light, I understood the repeated mistakes I'd made. And I grasped how far back Sophie must have seen through the amateurish camouflage that I had thought so well constructed.

You see, the thing is that I'd have told her about any of these conversations if I'd been on the phone with anyone, be they friends, relatives, colleagues, partners or staff. I would've told her about any of them even if they had been simple nuisance calls. That's the kind of relationship we had.

And then, Alex, to make her point even clearer, from the far side of that large bed, she had added with that hoarse, bruised voice of hers that still gets to me, even after all these years, 'Adrienne, *ne t' fous pas d' moi!* Don't you dare play me the fool. I don't think I deserve that.'

That conversation ended there in an awkward silence. I feel sick in my stomach but for what it's worth, I now know that she knows about you. I mean about my on-going contact with you. Is it why I feel sick? Or is it because I've been found out? The other thing that throws me is how calm she sounds each time she delivers one of her truths. At times I really believe she sees through me. Ah, but she does. I'm so transparent!

Later, as I lay unable to fall asleep, I remembered the day I'd found your first letter in my mailbox. Sophie was with me. As usual, she had glanced over my shoulder to see if there was anything interesting in the pile. Some of our friends would as easily write to her at my address as at hers.

I thought I'd been quick enough, dextrous enough, to keep the envelope that I just knew was yours, covered by another. But I remembered how, at the time, she had glanced at me ... in a strange way. And I had tripped, as I often seem to do lately, on the grate as we got inside the lift.

Anyway, on another front, we're losing papa. We know he's trying to hold on until Easter, for my mother's sake. So that she won't be crying on that special day. You see, both of them are very religious. In a way, I think that might help her when the time comes to say goodbye to him. He's always been a good man ... so ... you know ... he'll probably shoot straight past Saint Peter, through the Pearly Gates, and claim his spot in Paradise. I do dread the moment though.

You, you're off skiing. As agreed, over the phone, I won't try and get in touch with you. I'll practise controlling my heartbeats, as I walk up to the mailbox, knowing there shouldn't be anything from you there. You warned me; you won't be writing from Les Orres. But ... maybe ... just maybe, you might.

You did say you'd call, though, as soon as you were back at sea level. By then, it'd only be a few short days before you hop on the plane to come here, to me. So maybe I can already practise not writing to you and save everything for you ... face-to-face ... for when we're sitting on this bench.

You'll come back to me, still tanned, healthy and fit, while I've never felt so grey, so tired, so empty. You might actually walk right past me and not see me. I'm counting on your presence by my side to bring oxygen back to my lungs.

Adrienne

Les Orres, Hautes Alpes

Framed by the half-open windows, a life-size gnome was looking at me. His little red bonnet sat comfortably, pulled down as far as it went, wedged between two cauliflower ears. His round tummy hung slightly over the wide leather belt that was holding up a pair of frayed and patched but bright green trousers. I raised my still foggy head off the lavender scented pillow, puzzled by this most unexpected vision only to bring into focus another six little dwarves, plaster pick and shovel at the ready on their shoulders. Frozen in time they seemed about to whistle off to work, or were they, in fact, on their way back home towards the warmth of Snow White's hearth? Will she have already eaten the poison apple when they find her?

I pushed aside the warmth of the hand-quilted eiderdown, now eager to bounce out of this strange but comfortable bed, eager to discover what the night had hidden from view as Marie-France had driven us up here, myself and her two daughters in tow. This hamlet, behind Les Orres ski resort, already lay under the high moon, tucked into the darkness of the mountain face.

Who would have thought it possible that once again, you have readied yourself for my visit? You now expect to find me, in a few days' time, seated on our little green bench facing the pond in the parc Monceau. But I will not be there. You will not see me as you wait impatiently for the traffic to let you through. As you pass the wide wrought-iron gates of the park, your heart wild in your chest, your eyes will zero in on our bench.

You will find it empty. Or maybe there will be a mother sitting there, keeping an eye on her children as they lean closer to the little ducks. You will look again, disbelieving. Your eyebrows will knot themselves perplexed, afraid, uncomprehending like every other molecule in your body. So sure were you that I would be there. Dutifully waiting for you, after all this time. After all the false starts, false hopes, and cancellations. Small deaths each time. Tiny rebirth at the very end. Just when I thought all life had departed.

You will cast your eyes around refusing to yield to the taste of incipient panic that would be rising to your throat. You know that if you did, your judgement would no longer be clear, no longer rational. You know that impulsive decisions do not work well for you. You need to stay calm and think rationally.

You will cast your eyes a little further away towards the kiosk. There they will find me. I will be there for your eyes to find me. I will be there to see the drop of your shoulders as you release the breath that you have kept locked under your ribcage. I will see you release the constricted muscles of your shoulders. As you surrender to the reality, to the fact that I have made it to our rendezvous. That I am here, only a few metres away from the pond, from our bench, from you. You will convince yourself that, for this once, for now, all is well. That we have four days in which to get reacquainted, to better separate.

So your eyes will find me waiting by the waffle kiosk, leaning against it for support. Waiting for you with the same doubts, the same emotion, the same relief, the same release of tension accumulated in my own hunched shoulders, as I would have been waiting and doubting ... and dreading but not yet succumbing to my own panic. And there you would be, only a few meters away from me. Smiling, quickening your step.

I will have positioned myself in that way so as to give me maximum time to settle my heart as I would see you on the other side of the avenue, as you came down from your office. And to have the earliest confirmation possible that you were indeed on your way to our rendezvous. I will be standing up by the kiosk to spare my heart by shortening an otherwise blind wait by a good five minutes. You see, I will be able to see you further away if I wait standing up and back from our green bench.

And so, probably as one contemplates an apparition, I will watch you, your impatience as you wait for a break in the traffic, before crossing, before you pass through the heavy, wrought iron gate that opens onto the park. Ah, this first contact in the park frightens me.

In the meantime I want to gallop, every day as I did today, through this fairytale mountainside. It makes me yearn for the imagined comfort of knowing that, when I finally find my way home, nose and cheeks red from the cold air, exhausted from the effort of walking through freshly fallen snow, I would find warmth inside my lover's arms and a shared tumbler of *vin chaud*, or *migeot* as my grandmother used to call it.

Happy and contented, tomorrow we would walk here, or on another trail, hand in hand, away from the ant-like colony of skiers, black and tiny in the distance, as they rush down the slope while others cling to their wire on an uphill slide. For a short while, we would be trapped by the shadows of tall pines thrown across our path by the setting sun.

You and I, Adrienne, we would play, we would love, we would be made giddy by our cocktail of love, crisp mountain air, high altitude, the moist angel-kiss caresses of snowflakes, the silence of the mountain. Yes, here, together, we could again learn how to breathe, how to shed the clinging greyness of the past months, how to tell whether we were in lust or in love. Never mind. I will shed my grey skin and come to you rejuvenated. Ready to share a new radiance, a new equilibrium with you. Yes. I will bring you oxygen and sunshine. If only for a few days.

A little shiver reminds me I had better get going on that snowy trail, and weave my way down, back to the village, back to Marie-France and the girls who will be waiting for me come sunset.

By the time I get there, the fire will be roaring in the hearth. The smell of burning logs will already be permeating the living room. Little Emmanuelle will probably be warm and limp on the sofa, fine blonde hair glowing shiny copper as the flames cavort upward to better lick the dark and secret recess below the mantelpiece. My aunt will be reading. Joceline will be writing postcards to her multitudinous horde of friends and colleagues as per her pre-dinner habit since we have arrived here.

This time around, on this trip, though a skier myself, I really have no gumption to rush and line up at the ski lift, or at the gondolas. Anyway, I was saying that I still feel no urge whatever to hurtle downhill, ducking snow-boarders and other assorted, out of control, madmen. And *men* they certainly are. So while the two of them do just that, I do what I have never done before. I feel the snow. I commune with nature. There! I've said it. Sounds real corny, though. Like so formal. So spiritual-like.

Marie-France and her daughters do ski. Their day begins with a three-hour lesson somewhere on the green slopes that offer an intermediate level of challenge; that goes for my aunt and Joceline. The little one goes to her own ski class that doubles up as kindergarten till 4.00 p.m. Emmanuelle just loves it. She brings back countless anecdotes about all the new friends she has made during the day, be they instructors or little mates her own age. Some of these little guys, apparently, get up to some pretty funny capers. But I am not big on children.

I suspect that a close contact with this little girl is good for me. It reminds me that children are truly little people in their own right, with already formed, full-on personalities, and a life of their own. I cannot remember that far back, so tell me, did we, as children have a life of our own too, or is that the privilege of modern children?

From what I gather from Emmanuelle's bubbling accounts, their interaction with each other is driven by the same essential needs that grown-ups have. First comes the need to be recognised as an individual, then, to be appreciated for something or other. And then kicks in the need for that special friend, like the one with whom Emmanuelle shares her afternoon *goûter*, the same one who, yesterday, went home with our little one's jacket on her back while Emmanuelle came home with her friend's. Sylvie is that other little girl's name. There are times when listening to my little cousin's stories makes me a little sad. Or does it make me sad in little ways?

The few moments I remember of my own early childhood around other children are all made of shy self-conscious moments of ... unease. I would have hated being made to socialise all day with other children. Socialising has always been an effort in a way that one-on-one friendships have never been. I just know I would have been the most miserable child there, the introverted little thing with a dark frown on her face and a defiant tilt to the chin as if to defy anyone to make her enjoy herself. Odd expression that of enjoying oneself. Is it truly myself that I did not enjoy? I had always assumed, already then, that I was simply socially indifferent. A little recluse who preferred her own company to the complications that never failed to arise when others got involved. But did I really?

Too late to get an objective answer to that question. Yes, well, I know I would have been utterly miserable in a claustrophobic sort of way. The same way I still feel when I know that for whatever reason it is expected of me that I should socialise; get to meet new people at a party or workplace and approach others, perhaps more familiar ones with whom I should *consolidate*. Ah, yes, networking. I do not like networking. But, back in those days, I would not have cried, that I know. I would have tried to hang around the edges, trying to remain inconspicuous, dreading to be called in to join, hating to be left on my own. Anyway, I am quite enjoying my evenings at the chalet with Marie-France and the girls.

I remember you telling me that, too often, I tended to analyse, to intellectualise everything. That might be so, but as things stand now, I do not feel any further sexual pulsation towards you, not since that nightmarish phone conversation. I remember the snail trails left on my cheeks by silent tears. I remember listening to you, eyes wide-open though sightless. I remember the other justifications you had sent my way in the form of a short note: 'Ever since Provins, I've not been able to go through my days without relating everything, big or small, however tiny, back to you. Until then, I'd been happy with Sophie, definitely content. So, yes, besides protecting myself from that irrational pull towards you, and from an eventual hurtful or disappointing encounter, I do want to preserve something of what still remains between Sophie and me. If it's not too late. Only time will tell.'

I probably only think I love you. I can add that I am, most assuredly, in love with you. Do you agree with a differentiation in terminology, or is it intellectualising too much? In any case, because I am in love, I am open, not only to introspection, but to the giddy world of roller-coaster emotions, emotions that make me feel raw, vulnerable, but also alive. I feel more like a part of the real world. I have been forced out of my natural rhythm. Out of my natural remoteness.

Do I say that because I still remember the tenderness of your lips, half open to desire, half-closed out of timidity, and the urgency your restrained desire awoke in me? I remember too, having shared with you what, at the time, had been a heartfelt wish; that of walking with you in the fields and forests of Burgundy, the birthplace you love so much.

You fascinate me, in a way, because you understand the meaning of 'roots', you feel strongly tied to the soil on which you learnt to walk, on which you learnt the first lesson of love from your parents. I do not have any roots, at least, none of the strong and tangible type. So, I wished to know more of yours. I wished to hear twigs crackle underfoot, to have you teach my ears to read sounds, deep inside the thick shrubs. I wished for you to teach me the patience necessary to glimpse a flock of quails tucked inside the grooves cut by the plough, or the games squirrels play when they think they are alone. What I wanted was to learn about you as your heart beat along with mine, as we strolled and played through your countryside. Wanting to discover all this through you, because I know it is there, is what has made me fall in love with you, I who had managed to walk through life, in a happy-go-lucky sort of way, though deaf and blind.

Once again, I have found the large dune-like mound of iridescent snow that I discovered yesterday, the one that should carry our initials to the summit and beyond. Only birds flying overhead would have been able to decipher the message of interlocking curves of the double 'A's of our initials entwined in the snow. I like this spot and the narrow, winding trail that leads to it. Every night it erases my footsteps, just so I can rediscover it, uncharted, under a sparkling white layer of snow.

During the long walks of these first few days, I have come to agree that since the evening spent at Le Chicago, you and I have been dreaming desires that tear us up. Exhausted, we fall asleep in each other's arms, in beds separated by nine hundred kilometres of inaccessible land.

And then you tell me, 'You know, Alex, a story like ours is indeed worth its weight in tears.' Bittersweet humour rules.

Far, far away, the stars blink as they drown in a sea of China ink. A solitary figure, much taller than my little army of garden gnomes, I wait, turned towards them. Why won't these little guys tell me what I am truly waiting for? Ostensibly, I am only waiting for Marie-France and the two girls to step out, ready for a short walk back to the village. Though my muscles still ache from the day treks, Fondue Night with the three of them will do me good.

Marie-France's oldest daughter, Joceline, is quite lovely really. As with many young women of her generation, she is considerably taller than her mother. Quite tall and thin. She wears her hair in the fashionable short shag of the moment, the type that feathers and brushes against her forehead and delineates her cheekbones. She has her father's brown eyes, Marie-France's first husband, the one who used to beat her up with clockwork regularity every Friday night. Begging for forgiveness with flowers and tears every Saturday morning until she left him, her daughter who was only six at the time tucked under one arm, a couple of suitcases under the other, to find refuge at my grand-parents'.

Anyway, Joceline is already twenty-three and quite a liberated twenty-three at that. She has taken time off work from the advertising firm where she is employed as an assistant to someone-or-other, and she is taking time off, too, from Sébastien, her boyfriend. They live together and, though she is obviously very fond of him, she still can- not fully accept his arrested maturity. It is apparently something quite beyond boyishness. He seems to suffer from a strange mix of utter slovenliness when left to his own devices for more than eight consecutive hours. And that, according to Joceline, is in turn, compounded by already advanced signs of the 'Peter Pan' complex. Sébastien, though he does not look it, is somewhat older than Joceline; he is already in his thirties.

Of course I have met him a few times, a handsome man all right, but I was not, then, in a position to pass judgement on his bathroom habits or on his need to surround himself, every weekend, with old university buddies. And he did not stay long enough to show the first signs of basketball-bouncing withdrawal though he had already turned his cap backwards by the time he said his goodbyes. Joceline is fun to have around and is clearly enjoying her break away from it all, including Sébastien and work. Marie-France dotes on her and so does Emamnuelle who simply adores her.

Joceline is obviously keen on getting to know me better. Sweet, of course, but something tells me that her interest in me lies partly in figuring out the type of person I am attracted to. And I do not think she wants to know about hair colour and height or about a penchant for such-and-such Zodiac sign or even to which enneagram type I relate to more easily knowing that I am a Type 6 personality.

Anyway, call me paranoid, but I am sure Joceline is trying to get me to open up enough to admit I am a lesbian. Mind you, I am sure Marie-France must have her own thoughts on the matter, but she has never asked. Now of course, my father knows. He knows because Mayanne told him all about it, at the time of the business with Tashinka's husband. She was, it seems, at her wits' end with worry, thinking that I was henceforth doomed to fall in love with married women and have their husbands chase me across town.

She was already imagining them hounding me, a lust for vengeance sharp on their cuckolds' horns, outing me wherever I would be working and so on. My father, not one to get emotional, had very stoically replied that as I was no longer a minor I should be considered free to do with my body as I wished. His view on the matter was that my deviation was, indeed, unfortunate; that when he would come across these lesbians covered in tattoos and astride motorcycles, he would remember his only daughter had chosen to become one of them. But, he had added dryly, I would always remain his daughter, his only child. The one with the gigantic flaw. The one you can neither return nor exchange. Though one you have the option to ignore. In those days, the Sydney Mardi Gras and the Dykes on Bikes contingents were not even beamed across to Europe. They are now: the closing, good fun segment of France's national news hour.

I resented his false acceptance. And I resented his detachment from the situation. Particularly easy for him to close his eyes on the matter since the other choice I had made, besides that of my sexuality, had been to exercise my sexual 'deviation' thousands of miles away from him. I guess I would have liked him to be more supportive of Mayanne's genuine fear and more helpful by defusing it. Anyway, I figure that if the topic unsettles him so, he would not have talked to my aunt about it and young Joceline is not going to hear it from me either. Not tonight. Not on this trip.

The first time I discovered that dune of zircons, I touched it, shyly. At first, it was hard against my naked palm. Its coldness crept upwards, along my wrist, until all feeling had gone. I patted its flank. A fan-shaped trail of frosty snow followed the caress, and settled in between my fingers. And I stood there blinded by the sparkle, by these gems, left there, just for me.

As an edelweiss pushes its delicate crown of white petals through the crusty snow, frail but at the same time sturdy, a tiny ray of well-being warms me up from within. The late afternoon sun is gentle on my sunburnt face. A soft breeze nurses the furry, dark green *mélèze* branches to help them shed the excess of snow weighing on their tips. Silent sprays of crystals glisten as they plummet downwards, silver shooting stars, quick, magical and ephemeral.

As a make-believe tracker I watch out for signs of nocturnal drama, imprints left behind by the little animals that come to life as we suspend ours, comfortably snug in our beds. Four little indentations per paw: a squirrel danced at the base of this tree. Four, round, larger pads imprinted deeper in the snow: a fox came this way looking for food. I deviate from my path, not wishing to come across the flurry of tracks caught in a demonic death dance, sprinkled with carmine droplets, that undoubtedly lie ahead.

Soon, now, as the temperature drops quickly towards night, the ice will once again tighten its hold on the trail and keep it encased inside a slippery, glistening crust, until the morning sun begins its warm ascent, across the spotlessly blue sky, high above the clouds. It is time to head back towards the early flickering lights of the village.

I lose myself inside the tendrils of violent orange, swirls of red, and tongues of translucent blue that warm my feet; the tranquil healing power of fire, tamed inside a fireplace, as it skims over and inside the black, glowing logs. From the comfortable depth of the grandfather chair where I found refuge to soothe the aching muscles of my legs, I take pleasure in unfolding the memories of the day against the red glow of the hearth.

This morning, I discovered that walking with snowshoes is not as easy as it looks when done by Eskimo trekkers on an Imax screen. I played a little game of trust with the snow but it was not a fair game. I tried to convince the crust of snow, lying just under the fluffy layer that had fallen during the night, that, in fact, I was not as heavy as I seemed.

For a few seconds, it did what it could, it seemed to believe me. It gave me the benefit of the doubt. It supported my weight, heavy on its back. But then it gave up. With a muffled cracking sound, it caved in under the snowshoes. It lowered me, gently but firmly, inside two, knee-deep, oblong holes, leaving me to extricate one shoe at time, lifting each knee high up, able to plant it down again, but only a few centimetres in front of the other.

After some time and relatively little progress made, every muscle along my legs and back, taut and burning, screamed inside its sheath. My breath caught inside my ribcage, laboured upwards along a parched throat. I rubbed a fistful of snow over my face, burnished by the high sun always hovering above, during these long, solitary walks along the mountainside. I closed my eyes, unaware then that, at that precise moment, I had stopped thinking about you.

But there was still a connection to you. You have asked me to tell you more about my early childhood memories and last night this is exactly what Marie-France and I ended up talking about

while Joceline prepared dinner for us, and while Emmanuelle lay curled up on the sofa, exhausted from her day in the snow. She has her own jacket back and what makes her happiest this evening is the feel of her little friend's borrowed ear muffs against her cheek.

You see, these days away from the city are providing us with the first opportunity to actually talk to each other, in a way that we cannot do across the table where the family is united for a cheerful dinner or a celebration of sorts. Or when my father is around. Of course, Marie-France and I could have met somewhere for a coffee and a little privacy, but we clearly had not felt moved to do so any earlier. She, too, has asked about my first contact with my stepfather and Africa. She would have been in her early twenties when Mayanne came back to fetch me.

I am afraid you might be left unsatisfied with my recollection, as I believe my memories of that momentous occasion would be somewhat inaccurate, the tangled composite of a seven-year old's hopes, fears and kaleidoscopic impressions. I just do not know how it went. But I will tell you what I do remember.

So, at first Mayanne took me to her hotel, right. I have no idea what happened that first night away from my grandparents. I do not know if I cried. I do not know if I was subdued or awed by something or other. Don't remember where I slept or if I slept. I do not even remember Mayanne's snow-white poodle cavorting around the suite. Did he sleep with me? Did I sleep with Mayanne? Did I sleep alone? I cannot honestly say.

My next real memory is on board a little plane that, I was later told, was a DC8, where I am fastened in my seat, the little dog is on my lap and Mayanne next to me in a startling white suit trimmed with a thin navy blue strip all around the collar and lapels.

I remember her saying something like, '*Allez, chérie*, repeat after me. One more time: I am very happy to meet you. *T'es prête?* Ready?'

I nod hesitantly and gulp for air before launching into what was clearly expected of me. 'Aye amm ... vereee ...apee too ... tooo meet ... tooo – “

'To meet you, Alexandra, meet ... you. You see? Stretch and round your lips like that. *Regarde bien*. Yoouu.' I can still see my mother rounding and stretching her lips, urging me then, as now, to shape myself around her expectations. 'Only to help you better yourself, Alexandra,' she would say.

"Meeet ... meeet ... yooo." I mimicked, docile.

My very first sentence in English. Cute, don't you think?

And so it went, I imagine, until the engines roared and the plane began to shudder and vibrate as it hit and bounced off the tarmac only to be jerked back in a heart-stopping lurch. A sudden stop at full revs. That, I definitely remember. How the unrestrained little poodle fared through all this, no idea. I do, however, remember being totally shaken by all the quaking, rattling and shrieking sounds that came out of that aeroplane.

Then, I guess, I would have met my American stepfather, John. I know he was there, at this little field airport somewhere between Pointe Noire and Brazzaville, dressed in the standard white-man's, khaki-green safari gear. He had come to take us home. Home was somewhere in the Congo.

Did John get to hear those lines Mayanne had been so intent on teaching me for that purpose? She says he did. He says he did. I do not remember delivering them but I guess I must have. The thing is that I do not remember any of these first moments of my new life and not much at all of the ensuing year and a half in Africa. I did manage to find some memories though. I found them glued inside the many pages of Mayanne's photo album. They were in the section a calligraphy pen had boldly emblazoned: Alexandra in the Congo.

Marie-France thinks that it is not 'normal' to not remember anything of that transition period. After all, she says, for a seven-year-old to go live in Africa, to discover a stepfather and, to all intents and purposes, her own mother, that should rate at least a couple of memories. Being separated, somewhat brusquely from the ones who had looked after her during the toilet-training years, surely that, too, should leave ... something in any little girl's mind. That is what she says. She is convinced that our little Emma's head is already full of the stuff that, in time, will become her memories. What do you think?

Droplets of molten ice ran slowly inside the creases that held them, shut tight against the glare. I even felt one lone droplet as it separated itself from the others, leaving a feathery, ticklish trail along the arch of the eyebrows, along the ridge of the nose, as it gathered momentum. From there, as in slow motion, it dropped on to the tip of my waiting tongue, warm and salty. Inside the palm of my hand, another handful of cold, sharp, little crystals lost their tiny teeth as they melted along my wrist, no longer cool. I was regaining the ability to exist, to feel something else, something that was not related to you. You were no longer, at least for this moment of reprieve, at the centre of my consciousness.

To the left, a tiny, glassy tinkle caught my attention, my eyes alert for the sound my ear had heard. One lone stalactite came into focus. It made its crystalline music as it gave back its tears, drop by drop, to an earth which had no need for them. Kneeling to reach under the little ledge from where the stalactite hung, I drank from its tip. I drank diminutive stars, tiny suns and minuscule rainbows as they glistened and shimmered inside each drop. Their cool tingle was a surprise, a delight to my parched tongue.

As I rounded yet another bend, nearing the end of the field, civilisation came up to me: three mounds of dog droppings, dissolving in soiled snow, an empty packet, torn, gaping and red. A little further, as I reached the bank of trees that lined the road, a half-eaten sandwich and a broken bottle, thrown there by careless hands.

I turned around, to catch sight of the corridor of virgin sunlight I had just left, but already, like the collapsible décor on a grand stage, it had disappeared, swallowed by the bend. A sigh escaped from my lips. Off came the snowshoes and resolutely I anchored my weary body and sunburnt soul onto the cracked bitumen that led through dingy patches of snow to the south side of the village. Warily I searched for a deck-chair, somewhere, at the terrace of a café, there to sit and sip a sunlit pastis, cool and strong.

The fire still burns strongly in the hearth. I feel contentment for the second time today. The radiated warmth of the flames has ungnarled my guts and unknotted my aching muscles. The state of anxiety I thought permanently tattooed on my solar plexus has once again dissolved. I must have *lost* it somewhere in the valley today, as one might lose a stalker glued to one's own footsteps.

Maybe it was the enchanting, enchanted tinkle of the stalactite that had charmed it away, though it did return later that afternoon as I sat on the terrace by the edge of a slope. But I was able to keep it away from the nascent feeling of tranquillity.

In a few days I will have left 'my valley'; a few days later I will be sitting on a dark green bench facing the duck pond of the parc Monceau. Exactly four and a half days after that though, I will be back to the reality of whatever my new day-to-day routine will be, back in Nice, finally severed from you. Daunting but good. And I will dress up to make an entrance as a newcomer to the real world of Real Estate. Scary but cool.

In the midst of these adjustments, I assume there will be moments when I will be grieving. Mourning what had never been mine, mourning because of the still empty space in my bed. Grieving being severed from the ever so fragile little cord that had linked us during the past months. A kite cut loose.

As the time nears, any thought of our reunion releases a wave of anxiety that washes through me. A fire from hell it is too, a flame that laps my psyche, cool in tones of blue, red as it glowers and burns through its orange tongues. A fire from hell that smothers it into a cracked, crusty, and charred matter from which it feeds, before rising again, red-hot and refreshed, ready to pull me back each time I try to convalesce from you. The sun-deck is empty, most people are still on the slopes. Marie-France and Joceline might well be among them.

Though on its mid-afternoon descent, the mountain sun is strong enough to bore orange holes through my closed eyelids. Head back against the rough log wall of the chalet, I let the heat rise inside me and weave torpor-inducing, shimmering heat waves that keep me pinned back against the striped chaise-lounge. Fields of cotton-crisp white land are unfurled just beyond my feet. Only the occasional dragging sounds of loosened ski boots on the deck below keep me connected to the present.

I am thinking of you, I am thinking of us, I am thinking of Sophie, I am thinking of you and Sophie. At the moment, I imagine you thoughtful at your desk, your warm brown eyes downcast onto a printed page, showcased by the simple elegance of your reading glasses. Ah, if only the lines, the words you are reading could look back, could look up at you. If they could, they would for me who cannot see you. I imagine your dismayed clerk, as he looks surreptitiously into these eyes that do not see him, now wondering if the sunshine, he had seen in them a few weeks earlier will ever return.

Do your thoughts occasionally break loose from the lines aligned on that open page to roam a mountainside, somewhere in the Hautes Alpes, searching for me?

Though the sun has already left the valley below, here, away from the slanted shadow of the furry-tipped *mélèzes* trees, the glare still rages, trapped behind my closed eyelids, projecting a fiery orange backdrop, now and then, pierced by fountains of blue, each trimmed by a fringe of gold. Like molten plastic, the crimson screen curls up under the heat of the sun, revealing a flickering gauze of vibrant aqua blue. And the sun-induced torpor draws me back to you and to the little park bench where we will soon be sitting side by side.

Thoughts of the park, cold in winter as it is fixed in my memory, of us sharing a warm waffle, icing sugar on our cold fingertips, of your body kept warm by the deep folds of your electric green coat. Thoughts, too, of the impossibility of ever being together. All these thoughts play leap-frog, behind my sunburnt eyelids. And a quick poem forms behind them.

*Sucre glacé, mains glacées, ciel glacé
Mon coeur nage dans un océan de douleur.
La moire de la mare brille de froid.
Tout comme les petits canards
Qui s'y enfoncent
Pour trouver la tiédeur en profondeur.*

So you see, I go back to the ducklings of the Monceau pond and how they would dive deep inside the freezing water to find warmth. And I go back to the pain in my heart and to the pale ice of a wintry sky and to the powdery pale ice of the sugar on my waffle, still warm from the nearby kiosk.

*Mon âme s'insinue à travers les fibres
De tes vêtements pour y trouver
Ton frémissement.
Elle t'étreint pendant que moi,
Je ne peux que te regarder.
Tes yeux s'assombrissent de désir.
And yes, of course. I have to get back to that expression of desire.
Je voudrais te découvrir
Et tout découvrir avec toi.
Je n'en ai pas le droit.
Tu es mon Fruit Défendu.
Oh! La méchante ironie de notre sort.*

Yes, desire and the need to discover you and all ... through you, knowing all along, of course, that Evil Irony herself has picked up our scent and will never let us be. Okay, so this little titbit is totally off the cuff. If it stays with me long enough to be written down once back at the chalet, well, I guess I will show it to you as we sit on our bench. I will not need to mail it to you.

More thoughts crowd in. In a few days, we will be able to fall asleep in your bed, no, not in your bed. In the sofa bed of your living room. We will be tightly wrapped around each other, my head tucked inside the hollow of your shoulder, my lips brushing the roundness of your breast.

Flares of desire fuse around my belly. Suddenly startled, I open my eyes, sitting upright, away from the cradling stretch of canvas deck chair. Equally startled, my heart pounds against my ribcage, with the resonance of a battle drum aboard a galleon, readying the crew for the *éperonnage*, the ramming. Though wide awake now, I can feel myself drowning, my hands flat and cool on either side of your face.

That strange sensation remains, even as I force myself to break away from it, away from the crisp, white snow, away from the sylvan surroundings of the snowfields at my feet. Your eyes draw me back to you, trance-like. You answer the mute question, not yet formed by my lips.

‘And what about Sophie?’

You answer it by tightening your embrace around my body, as it presses against yours. And with your breath lightly teasing the whorl of my ear, you whisper,

‘Listen ... we, too, are entitled to tiny slivers of joy. Surrender with me, Alex. Come ... feel my desire.’

Your lips follow the fold of soft flesh, and the tip of your tongue, soft and warm, awakes a new wave of desire that ripples and peaks, forcing a sigh of imaginary contentment through the smile on my own lips.

The fingers of one hand intertwined with mine, your legs encircling my belly, your breast pressed against my shoulder, you continue softly, ‘Having you here, right here, is what happiness is about.’

Your breath against my cheek pauses for thought.

‘Even if tonight, we should simply fall asleep.’ Your fingertips are tracing a tantalising web of delight across my ribs. You continue, ‘I know that, should I wake up in the middle of the night and feel your body against mine, I’ll know I’m not dreaming.’

I turn to look into your eyes. I see them fill with tears, as you add, ‘Let’s make ... the most of these very few, very precious days. Alex – ‘

My lips reach for yours to silence the words I know you are about to shape.

The moment passes. ‘Look ... *chérie*,’ you say, your thoughts having changed direction, ‘Sophie can’t be hurting at the moment.’ And, to reassure yourself, you add wryly, ‘She’s miles away. She’ll never even know you were here.’

You pull a little away from me, adding gently, ‘Later, when she’s back and you’re gone again, I’ll punish myself. I’ll deny my pain. I’ll take little ant steps towards her. I’ll be gentle, tender.... I’ll be empty but I’ll be by her side.’

Whoa, there! Too much, far too much sun for one day. Too real, that scene, as it unfolded against the crimson screen of light boring through eyelids tightly shut again against the glare of the mountain sun.
