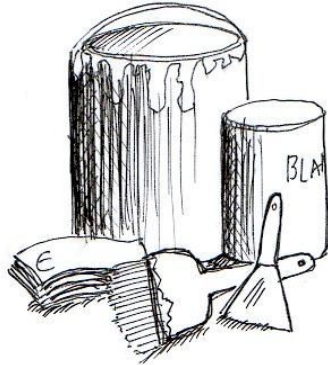


STAYING OUT OF THE MIDDAY SUN

CHAPTER 1

Chemin des Mimosas mid-January 2004



The crack zigzagged floor to ceiling and was alarmingly wide in parts.

Holly put down the scraper: "Shhhiiittt!"

Peter came over, pulling on a paint-spattered jumper: "What?"

"I just pulled off a piece of the wallpaper, it came off really easily revealing . . . this."

"Is that bad?" She looked at him to see if he was joking. Peter was looking unconcerned. "Like the agent said: 'Iz old, ziz ouse' . . . though maybe we should have got some sort of survey done."

"Bit late now," said Holly. "I suppose it's why the place is covered in this vile vinyl substance — it hides everything."

"So the phrase 'à rafraîchir' was a complete lie," suggested Peter. "Total renovation?"

"God, I hope not, the electrics seem to be holding up so far." The lights flickered and the wallpaper stripper sputtered and died. "Did the agent say anything about the electricity?" asked Peter apprehensively.

"He said it was 'la norme', I think meaning it'll meet standards required."

"Maybe in 1833 . . . do you think we should try and find a builder? I did warn you that my DIY skills are limited to pushing a trolley around Sainsbury's Homebase."

"You did, and mine aren't much better."

"I'm going to ask Madame Santou if she knows of a good chimney sweep — we obviously can't rely on electric fires."

Holly glanced at her son, occupied in building a city out of discarded gluey wallpaper. His dark curly hair was spattered with dust and wallpaper fragments, his trousers dark with grime.

"Take Gabriel," she suggested. "They always love to see him, and I think he needs a break from this pit."

Peter removed the sticky boy, washed him and they walked along the road to Madame Santou's, a prim white house with rows of orderly pot plants. He knocked and she appeared, duster in hand: "Peter, quel plaisir de vous voir, entrez." He ducked through the low door and ushered Gabriel into the front room. The elderly lady fussed around him and produced a sweet jar.

They had all been in the house before and given the tour. It was something Peter had found strange; he couldn't imagine the same thing in happening in England. They had been proudly shown the spotless sitting room, the three bedrooms, the cupboards, even the loo. Everything was decorated in dark brown or dark blue, natural light kept at bay with the shutters firmly closed. The ex-Londoners' impulse had been to throw open the shutters and let as much light in as possible after years of living with limited sunshine, much to the amusement of the locals who wisely regulated their own shutters according to the elements. Boiling hot — windows and shutters open at 6 am, shut by 8 am — cooler house.

Peter explained haltingly about the chimney. Madame went out into the back garden and shouted at Monsieur Santou who was planting something, as usual. "C'est quoi le nom du ramoneur Cyril?" *Ramoneur=chimney sweep*: Peter logged it in the 'new word' section of his brain. Madame decided Peter needed help and phoned the sweep.

At 3pm a battered blue van arrived. Holly went to greet the driver, a short and wiry man with a mat of dark hair. He shook her hand and plunged into fast melodic speech; she was lost, but invited him in and offered coffee.

He looked at the fireplace, muttered and gestured at the chimney breast, pursing his lips and shaking his head; then went out to the van and returned with the brushes, a very large hammer and Monsieur Santou in tow.

This was something that Holly and Peter were getting accustomed to. At the slightest suggestion of a job to be done, or information required, Monsieur Santou, one of the other neighbours, or possibly all of them would be there.

The two rotund Frenchmen regarded the fireplace at length, argued in a friendly way for a while and then disappeared upstairs to the main bedroom, Peter and Holly following. The sweep pointed to a spot on the wall; Monsieur Santou suggested higher up. The sweep went with the first option and smashed a hole in the wall with the hammer.

Peter attempted to ask why: "Er pourquoi vous avez . . . er faired, no, fait un trou dans notre mur?" The sweep explained.

"What did he say?" asked Holly

"It's something to do with the draught," whispered Peter.

"Well there certainly will be one now."

Monsieur Santou pointed in the direction of northern France and gestured a rectangular shape.

"He says we have to buy something to put over the hole," said Peter mystified. "Looks like a trip to a DIY place with a dictionary."

"I'll go later today. I could do with a trip to Perpignan," said Holly. "Gabriel needs some clothes."

The sweep fetched his ladders and everyone got onto the roof to check the chimney.

"Il faut traverser comme ça," said the sweep. Peter got the idea; you had to step on two of the curved tiles at a time, to spread the weight. Holly sat at one end of the roof looking at the winter hills and, in the distance, the slither of silver sea. An immensely long goods train was leaving the sidings, its wheels occasionally emitting an eerie squeal that echoed down the silent valley.

Later in the day Holly and Gabriel returned with the chimney repair items and new clothing. Peter was out, a note on the table.

Just nipping out to the café — internet connection!

As she put the kettle on, he opened the front door.

"Good timing," smiled Holly. "Any news on the theatre company yet?"

"No, they're still looking at dates. I started looking up local builders, but they all seem to be big companies."

"I may have the solution," said Holly, passing him a piece of paper. "Look, I found this stuck under one of the windscreen wipers at the DIY place." Peter read it out loud.

'Bob Ferret: All building work, electricity, and plumbing. Twenty years of experience in France.'

"Bob . . . Ferret?" he questioned, eyebrow arched.

"He sounds worth a call," said Holly. "I know we want to immerse ourselves in the French language, but at this point, someone who could tell the difference between bank account-emptying subsidence or a harmless plaster crack, and could convey the information in English, would be useful."

Peter looked sad, his manliness crushed. "There's more to being a man than being able to put plasterboard up," said Holly, stroking his thigh meaningfully.

"Do you think we could actually get Gabriel to go to bed and stay in it?" said Peter, somewhat desperately, throwing a glance at his six year old son. "It would lovely to . . ."

"To what, Dad?"

Bob Ferret arrived two days later in a filthy ex-France Telecom van.

He was small, stocky and covered in a fine patina of plaster dust. A man of few words, he walked round the house swearing to himself: "Fuck, who the fuck put that up, oo, touch of beetle activity there, fuck, could be termites, shit. . ."

"What do you think needs doing?" asked Holly nervously, thinking of the last bank statement.

"Well . . ." said Mr Ferret with a nonchalant half smile, "everything really — when d'you want me to start?"

"Er, we hadn't really thought, I mean, we didn't know . . ."

"Tell you what," he interjected, "I can start today. You're in luck. I had this job cancelled in the Loire. The guy died. His wife's given up on the project, gone back to the UK. I'm going out for a fag — you discuss it."

"What do you think, Peter?" said Holly, as Bob shut the kitchen door.

"I really don't know . . . it would be good to get on with it."

"Let's ask him for a quote, at least we would have an idea then about funds."

Bob reappeared, crushing his cigarette on the front step: "So?"

"What sort of figure are we looking at?" asked Peter in a casual tone.

"Never give quotes," said Bob swiftly. "You can't with these old properties. I can give you a good day rate though — for cash."

Peter's wavering snapped into decision: "OK."

A strange expression passed over Bob's face. Holly was reminded of Alistair Sim's portrayal of Fagin. She had a fleeting sense of desperation — too late, but at least they could start being a bit organised: "Can you write up a list of things you will be doing, so we can see where we are?"

"Sure," said Bob. "I'll need some cash up front mind, for materials, usual practice here."

"How much?" asked Peter, feeling worried.

"A grand should do it, cash," he said carelessly. "Can you get it today? Then I can go and buy stuff first thing tomorrow."

"Er, alright, we'll do it this afternoon. Where will you . . . stay?"

"No problem, I kip in the van, got everything, stove, the lot." He turned and went outside for another fag.

Peter glanced at Holly: "Have we been stupid?"

"I honestly have no idea."

They returned late in the afternoon with a stash of money and sweating palms. Bob greeted them with a wave of a fag: "Got started already. Shit, you got problems." He drew cigarette smoke into plaster-encrusted lungs and coughed.

The kitchen was now mostly rubble and snarled electric cables; the wind whistled through several large holes in the walls. Their belongings had become part of the debris. "Fuck," squeaked Peter. "My violin!" as he rescued the case from under a mound of plaster.

"Yeah," said Mr Ferret lazily. "You might want to move stuff out for a while."

The next morning dawned cold and wet. The water was off due to Bob's activities and Holly stood in the dank mess, wondering where they had gone wrong.

"Let's go and have breakfast in the café," she said decisively. "I need strong coffee . . . if they'll let us in," she continued, staring at Peter who had just emerged from the makeshift bed, hair mad, two-day beard and dressed in an oversized pair of tights against the cold.

On the way to the café they passed the van. Bob was sitting in the back, eating a huge mound of pasta and drinking a glass of red wine. They greeted him.

"Hi, Bob, we're going out to the café," said Holly, gawping at the choice of breakfast. "Can we have a word later about your programme for the work? Also I was rather wondering if we can pay you partly by cheque after all — to keep track of the expenditure."

He looked slightly troubled, but answered through a mouthful. "OK we'll talk about it. How long are you going to be?"

"A couple of hours," said Peter. "We need to thaw out a bit, do some calculations — see you later then."

The 'Café de la Plage' was the only restaurant that stayed open during the winter along the small seafront. As a biting wind had started up, everyone was firmly inside. Peter opened the door and the locals turned to look at the out-of-season foreigners, a polite murmur of 'bonjour-monsieur-dame', softening their stares.

The incomers returned the salutation and took a table near the window. Gabriel immediately forgot their current bizarre situation, and started drawing. They ordered everything on the breakfast menu and revelled in warmth and food. "Aahh, that's better," sighed Holly, sitting back and looking at her son's wobbly rendition of a train. "I was beginning to worry that we'd made a stupid mistake."

"Me too," smiled Peter, "but I'm sure everything will be fine. Bob's obviously used to old properties — it's just the initial mess that looks so awful. Do you think we ought to try and find something to rent though, just for a while, until the plumbing is back on, and the electrics . . . and the holes filled in?"

"It's not something we budgeted for," frowned Holly, "but . . ."

There was a rustle of newspaper from the next table. Holly turned to see a fair-haired man looking at them over 'Le Monde'. "Excuse me," he said, "but are you our new residents? Holly, Peter . . . and?"

"Gabriel, yes," answered Peter, disconcerted.

The man laughed: "It's OK, I'm not from the secret police, it's just that you live next door to the town's public address system."

"You mean Madame Santou?"

"Yes, don't get me wrong, she's adorable, but your entire life histories will be common knowledge by now."

"Shit, she's probably seen me walking about in my tights."

"I shouldn't have been listening to your conversation," continued the man apologetically, "but . . . I was. It's unusual to hear English voices out of season. Tell me to mind my own business if you like, but I can offer you accommodation if you need it. It's not great weather to be living in a building site with a child."

Holly liked him, especially his accent. "Where are you from, Edinburgh?" she guessed.

"Yes, near there originally, but I've been here for years."

"Your rental place, is it near?"

"Yes, just a few doors along from here. It's a flat, next to mine. I could do you a very low rent, as it's quiet at the moment. Here's my number, or just knock on the door — I'll be in most of the day."

"Thanks," said Peter. "We'll go back and think about it. It might be good to take it for a couple of weeks, until the dust has cleared, literally."

The man stood up to leave: "Maybe see you later — my name's Cameron by the way. Oh, a word of advice, the builder you have — if you are paying him cash, he's probably not registered. Should the neighbours ask about him, I'd say he's a family member, or a friend just helping out for a while. You could get into trouble for employing someone on the black."

They wandered back to the house. The rain had stopped revealing an eggshell blue sky. Peter hugged Holly as he looked around at the hills, already dotted with early blossom. "It's so beautiful here," he sighed. "I'm sure everything's going to be fine."

Gabriel returned from running along the low wall bordering the road. "The van man's gone," he said, frowning. They walked round the corner. There was a dry rectangle on the glistening tarmac where the van had been.

Holly felt cold. "Maybe he's gone to get some materials," she said, her voice quiet in the valley.

Peter shook his head: "No, I think he's just . . . gone."

The house was silent, water dripped from a disconnected pipe; the wind blew an eddy of plaster dust into the middle of the kitchen floor.

"The money . . ."

"Yep, a massive fee for a day's work, or day's destruction, you could say — bastard." Peter kicked a chair and it toppled on to a pile of plaster. Holly stood with tears running down her face.

"Why is Dad cross?" said Gabriel, looking anxious.

"Because the van man took our money and we were stupid." said Holly, drying her eyes and putting an arm around him.

"Come on, let's go and find Cameron," said Peter firmly. "We need baths, warmth and a plan."

A few minutes later Cameron opened his front door and beheld the straggly family on the doorstep.

"We'd like to take you up on your offer," said Holly, looking hopeful.

"Yes, come in. let's have a cup of tea and talk about it."

The flat was cosy, the embers of a fire glowing in the grate. "I'll get that going again," said Cameron. "You all look frozen — so what made up your minds?"

Peter grimaced: "The bastard builder did a flit, with our money."

"You gave him cash up front?"

"Yes," said Holly wearily. "He seemed very sure of himself and we were feeling, well . . . very unsure, to say the least."

"You bought the house without a survey," surmised Cameron.

"Yes, so bloody stupid," admitted Holly. "You would never do that in England. Well, you can't."

"You've only done what most people do here," said Cameron. "It might not be as bad as you think."

Peter looked at him desolately: "The builder implied it was a disaster zone."

"Did he also rub his hands and not quite manage to contain a slight smile?"

"Yes . . . and he was called Bob Ferret."

Cameron stifled a laugh: "I'm sorry, where did you find him?"

"From a dodgy looking advert stuck on our windscreen."

"I don't suppose you got his van registration?"

"No . . ."

"OK, how about this? You can stay in the flat for half the low season rate, and I'll come and see the house with a builder friend this afternoon. He's genuine and looking for work."

"Are you sure?" said Peter, frowning. "Doesn't this happen all the time to you? Hapless English twerps appearing on your doorstep, wringing their hands with tales of builder woe?"

"Only once, and they were looking to build a golf course, so I didn't feel inclined to help them. Actually, you could do me a favour — I was told — by the same source, that you're a violinist. This weekend, someone's arriving . . . to live here. I'd like to give her a special welcome — would you play?"

"It would be an honour, sir," smiled Peter, picking up an imaginary violin and finishing a sonata with a flourish.

"So," said Holly anxiously, after the tour around the house. "Are we the town laughing stock — latest stupid English people, buying a worthless dump?"

"No," said Cameron. "It's certainly not what the agent implied, a quick whip round with a pot of white, but it's not too bad. You'll need some rewiring and plumbing. The floors are mostly fine, although the roof needs quite a lot of replacement tiles. The cracks aren't structural, but he's a bit worried about the retaining wall at the front. You might need some concrete pumping in underneath to stop subsidence."

"That's all?" said Peter dejectedly. "Any idea how long it might take, and a price?"

"He's going to do you a devis."

"A what?"

"A quote, then if you're happy, you sign it and the work goes ahead. It's very regulated like that, except you can pay part cash, then some of it will be cheaper."

"That's not very regulated," observed Holly.

"I know but it's common practice — everyone expects it, even the taxman."