

THE SECOND NOVEL IN THE
BESTSELLING CHOCOLAT SERIES



JOANNE
HARRIS

The
Lollipop
Shoes

'A delicious
urban fairytale'
Daily Mail

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Joanne Harris is the internationally renowned and award-winning author of over twenty novels. Her Whitbread-shortlisted novel *Chocolat* was adapted to the screen, starring Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp. She is the author of several other bestsellers, including *The Lollipop Shoes*, *Peaches for Monsieur Le Curé* and *The Strawberry Thief*. She has also written acclaimed novels in such diverse genres as fantasy based on Norse myth (*Runemarks*, *Runelight*, *The Gospel of Loki*), and the Malbry cycle of dark psychological thrillers (*Gentlemen & Players*, *Blueeyedboy*, *Different Class*).

Born in Barnsley, of an English father and a French mother, she spent fifteen years as a teacher before (somewhat reluctantly) becoming a full-time writer. In 2013, she was awarded an MBE, and in 2022 an OBE. She lives in Yorkshire, plays bass and flute in a band first formed when she was sixteen, and works in a shed in her garden. She is an honorary Fellow of St Catharine's College, Cambridge, and served for four years as Chair of the Society of Authors. She also has a form of synaesthesia which enables her to smell colours. Red, she says, smells of chocolate.

For more information about Joanne Harris and her books see her website at Joanne-Harris.co.uk

By Joanne Harris

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Peaches for Monsieur Le Curé
The Strawberry Thief

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The
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TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
Penguin Random House, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by Doubleday
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Black Swan edition published 2008
Penguin paperback edition published 2024

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN
9780552773157

Typeset in 11/14pt Giovanni Book by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

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To A. F. H.

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PART ONE

Death

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1



Wednesday, 31st October
Día de los Muertos

IT IS A RELATIVELY LITTLE-KNOWN FACT THAT, OVER THE COURSE OF a single year, about twenty million letters are delivered to the dead. People forget to stop the mail – those grieving widows and prospective heirs – and so magazine subscriptions remain uncanceled; distant friends unnotified; library fines unpaid. That's twenty million circulars, bank statements, credit cards, love letters, junk mail, greetings, gossip and bills, dropping daily on to doormats or parquet floors, thrust casually through railings, wedged into letter-boxes, accumulating in stairwells, left unwanted on porches and steps, never to reach their addressee. The dead don't care. More importantly, neither do the living. The living just follow their petty concerns, quite unaware that very close by, a miracle is taking place. The dead are coming back to life.

It doesn't take much to raise the dead. A couple of bills; a name; a postcode; nothing that can't be found in any

old domestic bin-bag, torn apart (perhaps by foxes) and left on the doorstep like a gift. You can learn a lot from abandoned mail: names, bank details, passwords, e-mail addresses, security codes. With the right combination of personal details you can open up a bank account; hire a car; even apply for a new passport. The dead don't need such things any more. A gift, as I said, just waiting for collection.

Sometimes Fate even delivers in person, and it always pays to be alert. *Carpe diem*, and devil take the hindmost. Which is why I always read the obituaries, sometimes managing to acquire the identity even before the funeral has taken place. And which is why, when I saw the sign, and beneath it the post-box with its packet of letters, I accepted the gift with a gracious smile.

Of course, it wasn't my post-box. The postal service here is better than most, and letters are rarely misdelivered. It's one more reason I prefer Paris; that and the food, the wine, the theatres, the shops and the virtually unlimited opportunities. But Paris costs – the overheads are extraordinary – and besides, I'd been itching for some time to reinvent myself again. I'd been playing it safe for nearly two months, teaching in a lycée in the 11th arrondissement, but in the wake of the recent troubles there I'd decided at last to make a clean break (taking with me twenty-five thousand euros' worth of departmental funds, to be delivered into an account opened in the name of an ex-colleague and to be removed discreetly, over a couple of weeks), and had a look at apartments to rent.

First, I tried the Left Bank. The properties there were out of my league; but the girl from the agency didn't know that. So, with an English accent and going by the name of

Emma Windsor, with my Mulberry handbag tucked negligently into the crook of my arm and the delicious whisper of Prada around my silk-stockinged calves, I was able to spend a pleasant morning window-shopping.

I'd asked to view only empty properties. There were several along the Left Bank: deep-roomed apartments overlooking the river; mansion flats with roof gardens; penthouses with parquet floors.

With some regret, I rejected them all, though I couldn't resist picking up a couple of useful items on the way. A magazine, still in its wrapper, containing the customer number of its intended recipient; several circulars; and at one place, gold: a banker's card in the name of Amélie Deauxville, which needs nothing but a phone call for me to activate.

I left the girl my mobile number. The phone account belongs to Noëlle Marcelin, whose identity I acquired some months ago. Her payments are quite up to date – the poor woman died last year, aged ninety-four – but it means that anyone tracing my calls will have some difficulty finding me. My internet account, too, is in her name, and remains fully paid-up. Noëlle is too precious for me to lose. But she will never be my main identity. For a start, I don't want to be ninety-four. And I'm tired of getting all those advertisements for stair-lifts.

My last public persona was Françoise Lavery, a teacher of English at the Lycée Rousseau in the 11th. Age thirty-two; born in Nantes; married and widowed in the same year to Raoul Lavery, killed in a car crash on the eve of the anniversary – a rather romantic touch, I thought, that explained her faint air of melancholy. A strict vegetarian, rather shy, diligent, but not talented enough to be a threat.

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All in all, a nice girl – which just goes to show you should never judge by appearances.

Today, however, I'm someone else. Twenty-five thousand euros is no small sum, and there's always the chance that someone will begin to suspect the truth. Most people don't – most people wouldn't notice a crime if it was going on right in front of them – but I haven't got this far by taking risks, and I've found that it's safer to stay on the move.

So I travel light – a battered leather case and a Sony laptop containing the makings of over a hundred possible identities – and I can be packed, cleaned out, all traces gone in rather less than an afternoon.

That's how Françoise disappeared. I burnt her papers, correspondence, bank details, notes. I closed all accounts in her name. Books, clothes, furniture and the rest, I gave to the Croix Rouge. It never pays to gather moss.

After that I needed to find myself anew. I booked into a cheap hotel, paid on Amélie's credit card, changed out of Emma's clothes and went shopping.

Françoise was a dowdy type; sensible heels and neat chignons. My new persona, however, has a different style. Zozie de l'Alba is her name – she is vaguely foreign, though you might be hard pressed to tell her country of origin. She's as flamboyant as Françoise was not – wears costume jewellery in her hair; loves bright colours and frivolous shapes; favours bazaars and vintage shops, and would never be seen dead in sensible shoes.

The change was neatly executed. I entered a shop as Françoise Lavery, in a grey twinset and a string of fake pearls. Ten minutes later, I left as someone else.

The problem remains, where to go? The Left Bank,

though tempting, is out of the question, though I believe Amélie Deauxville may be good for a few thousand more before I have to ditch her. I have other sources, too, of course, not including my most recent – Madame Beauchamp, the secretary in charge of departmental finances at my erstwhile place of work.

It's so easy to open a credit account. A couple of spent utility bills; even an old driving licence can be enough. And with the rise of online purchasing, the possibilities are expanding on a daily basis.

But my needs extend to far, far more than a source of income. Boredom appals me. I need more. Scope for my abilities, adventure, a challenge, a change.

A life.

And that's what Fate delivered to me, as if by accident this windy late-October morning in Montmartre, as I glanced into a shop window and saw the neat little sign taped to the door:

Fermé pour cause de décès.

It's been some time since I last came here. I'd forgotten how much I enjoyed it. Montmartre is the last village in Paris, they say, and this part of the Butte is almost a parody of rural France, with its cafés and little *crêperies*; its houses painted pink or pistachio, fake shutters at the windows, and geraniums on every window-ledge; all very consciously picturesque, a movie-set miniature of counterfeit charm that barely hides its heart of stone.

Perhaps that's why I like it so much. It's a perfect setting for Zoïe de l'Alba. And I found myself there almost by chance; stopped in a square behind the Sacré-Coeur;

bought a *café-croissant* at a bar called Le P'tit Pinson and sat down at a table on the street.

A blue tin plate high up on the corner gave the name of the square as Place des Faux-Monnayeurs. A tight little square like a neatly made bed. A café, a *crêperie*, a couple of shops. Nothing more. Not even a tree to soften those edges. But then for some reason, a shop caught my eye – some kind of a chichi *confiserie*, I thought, though the sign above the door was blank. The blind was half-drawn, but from where I was sitting I could just see the display in the window, and the bright-blue door like a panel of sky. A small, repetitive sound crossed the square; a bundle of wind-chimes hanging above the door, sending out little random notes like signals in the air.

Why did it draw me? I couldn't say. There are so many of these little shops along the warren of streets leading up the Butte de Montmartre, slouching on the cobbled corners like weary penitents. Narrow-fronted and crook-backed, they are often damp at street level, cost a fortune to rent and rely mainly on the stupidity of tourists for their continued existence.

The rooms above them are rarely any better. Small, sparse and inconvenient; noisy at night, when the city below comes to life; cold in winter, and most likely unbearable in summer, when the sun presses down on the heavy stone slates and the only window, a skylight not eight inches wide, lets in nothing but the stifling heat.

And yet – *something* there had caught my interest. Perhaps the letters, poking out from the metal jaws of the post-box like a sly tongue. Perhaps the fugitive scent of nutmeg and vanilla (or was that just the damp?) that filtered from beneath the sky-blue door. Perhaps the

wind, flirting with the hem of my skirt, teasing the chimes above the door. Or perhaps the notice – neat, hand-lettered – with its unspoken, tantalizing potential.

Closed due to bereavement.

I'd finished my coffee and croissant by then. I paid, stood up and went in for a closer look. The shop was a *chocolaterie*; the tiny display window crammed with boxes and tins, and behind them in the semi-darkness I could see trays and pyramids of chocolates, each one under a round glass cloche like wedding bouquets from a century ago.

Behind me, at the bar of Le P'tit Pinson, two old men were eating boiled eggs and long slices of buttered bread while the aproned *patron* held forth at some volume about someone called Paupaul, who owed him money.

Beyond that the square was still almost deserted, but for a woman sweeping the pavement and a couple of artists with easels under their arms, on their way to the Place du Tertre.

One of them, a young man, caught my eye. 'Hey! It's you!'

The hunting call of the portrait artist. I know it well – I've been there myself – and I know that look of pleased recognition, implying that he has found his muse; that his search has taken many years; and that however much he charges me for the extortionate result, the price can in no way do justice to the perfection of his *oeuvre*.

'No, it's not,' I told him drily. 'Find someone else to immortalize.'

He gave me a shrug, pulled a face, then slouched

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off to rejoin his friend. The *chocolaterie* was all mine.

I glanced at the letters, still poking impudently from the letter-box. There was no real reason to take the risk. But the simple fact was, the little shop drew me, like a shining something glimpsed between the cobbles, that might turn out to be a coin, a ring or just a piece of tinfoil as it catches the light. And there was a whisper of promise in the air, and besides, it was Hallowe'en, the *Día de los Muertos*, always a lucky day for me, a day of endings and beginnings, of ill winds and sly favours and fires that burn at night. A time of secrets; of wonders – and, of course, the dead.

I took a last quick glance around. No one was watching. I was sure no one saw as, with a swift movement, I pocketed the letters.

The autumn wind was gusting hard, dancing the dust around the square. It smelt of smoke – not Paris smoke, but the smoke of my childhood, not often remembered – a scent of incense and frangipani and fallen leaves. There are no trees on the Butte de Montmartre. It's just a rock, its wedding-cake icing barely concealing its essential lack of flavour. But the sky was a brittle, eggshell colour, marked with a complex pattern of vapour-trails, like mystic symbols on the blue.

Among them I saw the Ear of Maize, the sign of the Flayed One – an offering, a gift.

I smiled. Could it be a coincidence?

Death, and a gift – all in one day?

Once, when I was very young, my mother took me to Mexico City, to see the Aztec ruins and to celebrate the Day of the Dead. I loved the drama of it all: the flowers

and the *pan de muerto* and the singing and the sugar skulls. But my favourite was the *piñata*, a painted papier-mâché animal figure, hung all over with firecrackers and filled with sweets, coins and small, wrapped presents.

The object of the game was to hang up the *piñata* over a doorway and to throw sticks and stones at it until it split open, releasing the presents inside.

Death, and a gift – all in one.

It couldn't be a coincidence. This day, this shop, this sign in the sky – it was as if Mictecacihuatl herself had put them in my path. My very own *piñata*—

I turned away, smiling, and noticed someone watching me. There was a child standing very still about a dozen feet away: a girl aged eleven or twelve, in a bright red coat, with slightly scuffed brown school shoes and flossy black hair like that of a Byzantine icon. She looked at me without expression, head cocked slightly to one side.

For a moment I wondered if she'd seen me take the letters. Impossible to know for sure how long she'd been standing there; so I just gave her my most appealing smile and pushed the bundle of letters deeper into my coat pocket.

'Hello,' I said. 'What's your name?'

'Annie,' said the girl, without smiling back. Her eyes were a curious blue-green-grey; her mouth so red it looked painted. Striking in the cool morning light; and as I watched, her eyes seemed to brighten still further, to take on the shades of the autumn sky.

'You're not from here, are you, Annie?'

She blinked at that; puzzled, perhaps, at how I knew. Paris children never talk to strangers; suspicion is hard-wired into their circuitry. This girl was different – wary,

perhaps, but not unwilling – and far from impervious to charm.

‘How do you know?’ she said at last.

Strike one. I grinned. ‘I can tell from your voice. What is it? The Midi?’

‘Not quite,’ she said. But now she was smiling.

You can learn a lot from talking to children. Names, professions, the small details that give an impersonation that invaluable authentic touch. Most internet passwords consist of some child’s name, a spouse’s, even a pet’s.

‘Annie, shouldn’t you be at school?’

‘Not today. It’s a holiday. Besides . . .’ She looked at the door with its hand-lettered notice.

‘Closed due to bereavement,’ I said.

She nodded.

‘Who died?’ That bright-red coat seemed less than funereal, and there was nothing in her face that suggested grief.

Annie said nothing for a moment, but I caught the gleam in her blue-grey eyes, their expression slightly haughty now, as if debating whether my question might be impertinent or genuinely sympathetic.

I let her stare. I’m used to being stared at. It happens, sometimes, even in Paris, where beautiful women are more than plentiful. I say beautiful – but that’s an illusion, the very simplest of glammers, barely magic at all. A tilt of the head, a certain walk, clothes befitting the moment, and anyone can do the same.

Well, *almost* anyone.

I fixed the girl with my brightest smile, sweet and cocky and slightly rueful, becoming for a second the tousled elder sister she has never had, the glamorous rebel, Gauoise in hand, who wears tight skirts and neon colours

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and in whose impractical shoes I know she secretly longs to be.

'Don't you want to tell me?' I said.

She looked at me for a second more. An elder child, if I ever saw one; tired, so tired of having to be good, and perilously close to the age of revolt. Her colours were unusually clear; in them I read some wilfulness, some sadness, a touch of anger and a bright thread of something that I could not quite identify.

'Come on, Annie. Tell me. Who died?'

'My mother,' she said. 'Vianne Rocher.'

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Wednesday, 31st October

VIANNE ROCHER. IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE I WORE *THAT* NAME. Like a coat, well-loved but long since put away, I'd almost forgotten how good it felt, how very warm and comfortable. I've changed my name so many times – *both* our names, changing from village to village as we followed the wind – that I should have outgrown this wish by now. Vianne Rocher is long dead. And yet—

And yet I *enjoyed* being Vianne Rocher. I liked the shape of the word in their mouths. *Vianne*, like a smile. Like a word of welcome.

I have a new name now, of course, not so different from the old. I have a life; a better life, some might say. But it's not the same. Because of Rosette; because of Anouk; because of everything we left behind in Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, that Easter when the wind changed.

That wind. I see it's blowing now. Furtive but commanding, it has dictated every move we've ever made. My mother felt it, and so do I – even here, even now – as it

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sweeps us like leaves into this backstreet corner, dancing us to shreds against the stones.

V'la l'bon vent, v'la l'joli vent

I thought we'd silenced it for good. But the smallest thing can wake the wind: a word, a sign, even a death. There's no such thing as a trivial thing. Everything costs; it all adds up until finally the balance shifts and we're gone again, back on the road, telling ourselves – *well maybe next time*—

Well this time, there will be no next time. This time, I'm not running away. I don't want to have to start anew, as we have done so many times, before and since Lansquenet. This time, we stay. Whatever it takes. Whatever it costs us, we stay.

We stopped in the first village that didn't have a church. We stayed six weeks, and then moved on. Three months, then a week, a month, another week, changing our names as we went, until the baby began to show.

Anouk was nearly seven by then. Excited at the thought of a baby sister; but I was so tired, so tired of those interminable villages with the river and the little houses and the geraniums in the window-boxes and the way people looked at us – at her especially – and asked their questions, always the same.

Have you come far? Will you be staying with relatives here? Will Monsieur Rocher be joining you?

And when we answered, there'd be that look, that measuring look, taking in our worn clothes and our single case and that fugitive ~~and that speaks of too~~ many railway

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stations and passing-places and hotel-rooms left neat and bare.

And oh – how I longed to be free at last. Free as we had never been; free to stay in a single spot; to feel the wind and ignore its call.

But however hard we tried, rumour followed us. Some kind of scandal, the whispers said. Some priest was involved, so someone had heard. And the woman? A gypsy; in with the river people; claimed to be a healer; dabbled in herbs. And someone had died, the rumours said – poisoned, perhaps, or simply unlucky.

In any case, it didn't matter. The rumours spread like dogwort in summer, tumbling us, harrying us, snapping at our heels; and slowly, I began to understand.

Something had happened along our road. Something that had altered us. Perhaps we'd stayed a day – a week – too long in one of those villages. Something was different. The shadows had lengthened. We were running.

Running from what? I didn't know then, but I could already see it in my reflection; in hotel-room mirrors and shiny shop-fronts. I'd always worn red shoes; Indian skirts with bells on the hems; second-hand coats with daisies on the pockets, jeans embroidered with flowers and leaves. Now I tried to blend with the crowd. Black coats, black shoes, black beret on my black hair.

Anouk didn't understand. 'Why couldn't we have stayed this time?'

The perpetual refrain of those early days. I began to dread even the name of that place; the memories that clung like burrs to our travelling clothes. Day by day we moved with the wind. And at night we'd lie side-by-side in some room above a cafe, or make hot chocolate over a

camping-stove, or light candles and make shadow-bunnies on the wall and tell fabulous stories of magic and witches and gingerbread houses, and dark men who turned into wolves, and sometimes, never turned back again.

But by then, stories were all they were. The *real* magic – the magic we'd lived with all our lives, my mother's magic of charms and cantrips, of salt by the door and a red silk sachet to placate the little gods – had turned sour on us that summer, somehow, like a spider that turns from good luck to bad at the stroke of midnight, spinning its web to catch our dreams. And for every little spell or charm, for every card dealt and every rune cast and every sign scratched against a doorway to divert the path of malchance, the wind just blew a little harder, tugging at our clothes, sniffing at us like a hungry dog, moving us here and moving us there.

Still we ran ahead of it: picking cherries in season and apples in season and working for the rest of the time in cafés and restaurants, saving our money, changing our names in every town. We grew careful. We had to. We hid ourselves, like grouse in a field. We did not fly; we did not sing.

And little by little the Tarot cards were put aside, and the herbs went unused, and the special days went unmarked, and the waxing moons came and went, and the signs inked into our palms for luck faded and were washed away.

That was a time of relative peace. We stayed in the city; I found us a place to stay; I checked out schools and hospitals. I bought a cheap wedding ring from the *marché aux puces* and gave my name as Madame Rocher.

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And then, in December, Rosette was born, in hospital on the outskirts of Rennes. We had found a place to stay for a while – Les Laveuses, a village on the Loire. We rented a flat above a *crêperie*. We liked it there. We could have stayed—

But the December wind had other ideas.

V'là l'bon vent, v'là l'joli vent

V'là l'bon vent, ma mie m'appelle—

My mother taught me that lullaby. It's an old song, a love song, a charm, and I sang it then to calm the wind; to make it leave us behind this time; to lull the mewling thing that I had brought back from the hospital. The tiny thing that neither fed nor slept, but cried like a cat night after night, while around us the wind shrieked and tossed like an angry woman, and every night I sang it to sleep, calling it *good wind, pretty wind*, in the words of my song, as simple folk once named the Furies, addressing them as *Good Ladies* and *Kindly Ones*, in the hope of escaping their revenge.

Do the Kindly Ones pursue the dead?

They found us again by the side of the Loire, and once again, we had to flee. To Paris, this time – Paris, my mother's city and the place of my birth, the one place where I'd sworn we'd never go back. But a city confers a kind of invisibility on those who seek it. No longer parakeets among the sparrows, we now wear the colours of the native birds – too ordinary, too drab for a second glance or even a first. My mother had fled to New York to die; I fled to Paris to be reborn. Sick or well? Happy or sad? Rich or poor? The city doesn't care. The city has other

business to attend to. Unquestioning, it passes by; it goes its way without a shrug.

All the same, that year was hard. It was cold; the baby cried; we stayed in a little upstairs room off the Boulevard de la Chapelle and at night the neon signs flashed red and green till it was enough to drive you mad. I could have fixed it – I know a cantrip that would have done it just as easily as switching off a light – but I had promised us *no more magic*, and so we slept in little slices between the red and green, and Rosette went on crying until Epiphany (or so it seemed), and for the first time our *galette des rois* was not home-made, but from a shop, and no one felt much like celebrating anyway.

I hated Paris so much that year. I hated the cold and the grime and the smells; the rudeness of the Parisians; the noise from the railway; the violence; the hostility. I soon learnt that Paris is not a city. It's just a mass of Russian dolls boxed one inside the other, each with its customs and prejudices, each with its church, mosque, synagogue; all of them rife with bigots, gossips, insiders, scapegoats, losers, lovers, leaders, and objects of derision.

Some people were kind: like the Indian family who looked after Rosette while Anouk and I went to the market, or the grocer who gave us the damaged fruit and vegetables from his stall. Others were not. The bearded men who averted their gaze when I walked with Anouk past the mosque in Rue Myrrha; the women outside the Eglise St Bernard who looked at me as if I were dirt.

Things have changed a lot since then. We have found our place at last. Not half an hour's walk from Boulevard de la Chapelle, Place des Faux-Monnayeurs is another world.

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THE LOLLIPOP SHOES

Montmartre is a village, so my mother used to say; an island rising out of the Paris fog. It's not like Lansquenet, of course, but even so, it's a good place, with a little flat above the shop and a kitchen at back, and a room for Rosette and one for Anouk, under the eaves with the birds' nests.

Our *chocolaterie* was once a tiny café, run by a lady called Marie-Louise Poussin, who lived up on the first floor. Madame had lived here for twenty years; had seen the death of her husband and son, and, now in her sixties, and in failing health, still stubbornly refused to retire. She needed help; I needed a job. I agreed to run her business for a small salary and the use of the rooms on the second floor, and as Madame grew less able to cope, we changed the shop to a *chocolaterie*.

I ordered stock, managed accounts, organized deliveries, handled sales. I dealt with repairs and building work. Our arrangement has lasted for over three years, and we have become accustomed to it. We don't have a garden, or very much space, but we can see the Sacré-Coeur from our window, rising above the streets like an airship. Anouk has started secondary school – the Lycée Jules Renard, just off the Boulevard des Batignolles – and she's bright, and works hard; I'm proud of her.

Rosette is almost four years old, although, of course, she does not go to school. Instead she stays in the shop with me, making patterns on the floor with buttons and sweets, arranging them in rows according to colour and shape, or filling page after page in her drawing-books with little pictures of animals. She is learning sign language, and is fast acquiring vocabulary, including the signs for *good, more, come here, see, good, yum, picture, again, monkey,*

ducks and most recently – and to Anouk’s delight – *bullshit*.

And when we close the shop for lunch, we go to the Parc de la Turlure, where Rosette likes to feed the birds, or a little further to Montmartre cemetery, which Anouk loves for its gloomy magnificence and its many cats. Or I talk to the other shop owners in the *quartier*: to Laurent Pinson, who runs the grubby little *café-bar* across the square; to his customers, regulars for the most part, who come for breakfast and stay till noon; to Madame Pinot, who sells postcards and religious bric-a-brac on the corner; to the artists who camp out on the Place du Tertre hoping to attract the tourists there.

There is a clear distinction here between the inhabitants of the Butte and the rest of Montmartre. The Butte is superior in every respect – at least, to my neighbours of the Place des Faux-Monnayeurs – a last outpost of Parisian authenticity in a city now overrun with foreigners.

These people never buy chocolates. The rules are strict, though unwritten. Some places are for outsiders only; like the *boulangerie-pâtisserie* on the Place de la Galette, with its art deco mirrors and coloured glass and baroque piles of macaroons. Locals go to Rue des Trois Frères, to the cheaper, plainer *boulangerie*, where the bread is better and the croissants are baked fresh every day. In the same way, locals eat at Le P’tit Pinson, all vinyl-topped tables and *plat du jour*, whereas outsiders like ourselves secretly prefer La Bohème, or even worse, La Maison Rose, which no true son or daughter of the Butte would ever frequent, any more than they would pose for an artist at the terrace of a café on the Place du Tertre, or go to Mass at the Sacré-Coeur.

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THE LOLLIPOP SHOES

No, our customers are mostly from elsewhere. We do have our regulars; Madame Luzeron, who drops by every Thursday on her way to the cemetery and always buys the same thing – three rum truffles, no more, no less, in a gift box with a ribbon around it. The tiny blonde girl with the bitten fingernails, who comes in to test her self-control. And Nico from the Italian restaurant on the Rue Caulaincourt, who visits almost every day, and whose exuberant passion for chocolates – and for everything – reminds me of someone I once knew.

And then there are the occasionals. Those people who just drop by for a look, or for a present, or an everyday indulgence: a twist of barley; a box of violets; a block of marchpane or a *pain d'épices*; rose creams or a candied pineapple, steeped in rum and studded with cloves.

I know all their favourites. I know what they want, although I'd never tell. That would be too dangerous. Anouk is eleven now, and on some days I can almost feel it, that terrible knowledge, trembling inside her like an animal in a cage. Anouk, my summer child, who in the old days could no more have lied to me than she could have forgotten how to smile. Anouk, who used to lick my face and bugle – *I love you!* – in public places. Anouk, my little stranger, now grown stranger still, with her moods and her strange silences and her extravagant tales, and the way she sometimes looks at me, eyes narrowed, as if trying to see something half-forgotten in the air behind my head.

I've had to change her name, of course. Nowadays I am Yanne Charbonneau, and she is Annie – though she'll always be Anouk to me. It's not the actual names that trouble me. We've changed them so many times before.

But something else has slipped away. I don't know what, but I know I miss it.

She's growing up, I tell myself. Receding, dwindling like a child glimpsed in a hall of mirrors – Anouk at nine, still more sunshine than shadow, Anouk at seven, Anouk at six, waddling duck-footed in her yellow wellingtons, Anouk with Pantoufle bounding blurrily behind her, Anouk with a plume of candyfloss in one small pink fist – all gone now, of course, slipping away and into line behind the ranks of future Anouks. Anouk at thirteen, discovering boys, Anouk at fourteen, Anouk, impossibly, at twenty, marching faster and faster towards a new horizon—

I wonder how much she still remembers. Four years is a long time to a child of her age, and she no longer mentions Lansquenet, or magic, or worse still, Les Laveuses, although occasionally she lets something slip – a name, a memory – that tells me more than she suspects.

But seven and eleven are continents apart. I have done my work well enough, I hope. Enough, I hope, to keep the animal in its cage, and the wind becalmed, and that village on the Loire nothing more than a faded postcard from an island of dreams.

And so I keep my guard on the truth, and the world goes on as always, with its good and bad, and we keep our glammers to ourselves, and never interfere, not even for a friend, not even so much as a rune-sign sketched across the lid of a box for luck.

It's a small enough price to pay, I know, for nearly four years of being left alone. But I sometimes wonder quite how much we have already paid for that, and how much more there is to come

THE LOLLIPOP SHOES

There's an old story my mother used to tell, about a boy who sold his shadow to a peddler on the road in exchange for the gift of eternal life. He got his wish, and went off pleased at the bargain he had struck – for what use is a shadow, thought the boy, and why should he not be rid of it?

But as months passed, then years, the boy began to understand. Walking abroad, he cast no shadow; no mirror showed him back his face; no pool, however still, gave him the slightest reflection. He began to wonder if he was invisible; stayed in on sunny days; avoided moonlit nights; had every mirror in his house smashed and every window fitted with shutters on the inside – and yet he was not satisfied. His sweetheart left him, his friends grew old and died. And still he lived on in perpetual dusk, until the day when, in despair, he went to the priest and confessed what he had done.

And the priest, who had been young when the boy made his deal, but who now was yellow and brittle as old bones, shook his head and said to the boy: 'That was no peddler you met on the road. That was the Devil you bargained with, son, and a deal with the Devil usually ends in someone or other losing their soul.'

'But it was only a *shadow*,' protested the boy.

Once more, the old priest shook his head. 'A man who casts no shadow isn't really a man at all,' he said, and turned his back and would say no more.

And so at last the boy went home. And they found him next day, hanged from a tree, with the morning sun on his face and his long, thin shadow in the grass at his feet.

It's only a story. I know that. But it keeps coming back to me, late at night when I can't sleep and the

DEATH

wind-chimes jangle their alarm and I sit up in bed and lift up my arms to check my shadow against the wall.

More often now, I find myself checking Anouk's, as well.

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Wednesday, 31st October

OH, BOY. VIANNE ROCHER. OF ALL THE STUPID THINGS TO SAY. WHY do I say these stupid things? Sometimes I really just don't know. Because she was listening, I suppose, and because I was angry. These days I feel angry a lot of the time.

And maybe too it was because of the shoes. Those fabulous, luminous high-heeled shoes in lipstick, candy-cane, lollipop red, gleaming like treasure on the bare cobbled street. You just don't see shoes like that in Paris. Not on regular people, anyway. And we *are* regular people – at least Maman says so – though you wouldn't know it, sometimes, the way she goes on.

Those shoes—

Tak-tak-tak went the lollipop shoes, and stopped right in front of the *chocolaterie* while their owner looked inside.

From the back, at first I thought I knew her. The bright-red coat that matched her shoes. Coffee-cream hair tied back with a scarf. And were there bells on her print dress, and a jingling charm bracelet around her wrist? And what

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was that – that faintest gleam in the wake of her, like something in a heat-haze?

The shop was shut for the funeral. In a moment, she would be gone. But I really wanted her to stay, and so I did something I shouldn't, something Maman thinks I've forgotten about, something I haven't done for a very long time. I forked my fingers behind her back and made a little sign in the air.

A breeze, vanilla-scented, nutmeg milk, dark roast of cocoa beans over a slow fire.

It isn't magic. Really it isn't. It's just a trick, a game I play. There's no such thing as real magic – and yet it works. Sometimes, it works.

Can you hear me? I said. Not in my voice, but a shadow-voice, very light, like dappled leaves.

She felt it then. I know she did. Turning, she stiffened; I made the door shine a little, ever so slightly, the colour of the sky. Played with it, pretty, like a mirror in the sun, shining it on and off her face.

Scent of woodsmoke in a cup; a dash of cream, sprinkle of sugar. Bitter orange, your favourite, 70 per cent darkest chocolate over thick-cut oranges from Seville. Try me. Taste me. Test me.

She turned around. I knew she would. Seemed surprised to see me, but smiled all the same. I saw her face – blue eyes, big smile, little bridge of freckles across the nose – and I liked her so much right away, the way I liked Roux when we first met—

And then she asked me who had died.

I couldn't help it. Maybe it was because of the shoes; maybe that I knew Maman was standing behind the door. Either way it just came out, like the light on the door and the scent of smoke.

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THE LOLLIPOP SHOES

I said, 'Vianne Rocher,' a little too loud, and just as I'd said it, Maman came out. Maman in her black coat with Rosette in her arms and that look on her face, that look she gets when I misbehave, or when Rosette has one of her Accidents.

'Annie!'

The lady with the red shoes looked from her to me, and back to my mother again.

'Madame – Rocher?'

She recovered fast. 'That was my – maiden name,' she said. 'Now it's Madame Charbonneau. Yanne Charbonneau.' She gave me that look again. 'I'm afraid my daughter's a bit of a joker,' she told the lady. 'I hope she hasn't been annoying you?'

The lady laughed right down to the soles of her red shoes. 'Not at all,' she said. 'I was just admiring your beautiful shop.'

'Not mine,' said Maman. 'I just work here.'

The lady laughed again. 'I wish I did! I'm supposed to be looking for a job, and here I am, ogling chocolates.'

Maman relaxed a little at that, and put Rosette down to lock the door. Rosette looked solemnly at the red-shoe lady. The lady smiled, but Rosette didn't smile back. She rarely does for strangers. In a way, I was pleased. I found her, I thought. I kept her here. For a while, at least, she belongs to me.

'A job?' said Maman.

The lady nodded. 'My flatmate moved out last month, and there's no way I can pay for the whole flat on nothing but a waitress's salary. My name's Zozie – Zozie de l'Alba – and by the way, I *love* chocolate.'

You couldn't help liking her, I thought. Her eyes were so

blue, her smile like a slice of summer watermelon. It dropped a little as she looked at the door.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'It's a bad time. I hope it wasn't a relative?'

Maman picked up Rosette again. 'Madame Poussin. She lived here. I suppose she would have said she ran the place, although to be honest, she didn't do much.'

I thought of Madame Poussin, with her marshmallow face and her blue-checked pinafores. Rose creams were her favourites, and she ate far more of them than she ought to have done, though Maman never said anything.

It was a stroke, Maman said, which sounds quite nice, like a stroke of luck, or someone smoothing down the bedclothes over a sleeping child. But it came to me then that we would never see Madame Poussin, *ever again*, and I felt a kind of dizziness, like looking down and seeing a big sudden hole right at your feet.

I said, 'Yes, she did,' and began to cry. And before I knew it her arms were around me, and she smelt of lavender and delicious silk, and her voice in my ear was whispering something – a cantrip, I thought, with a twist of surprise, a cantrip, just like the days in Lansquenet – and then I looked up and it wasn't Maman there at all. It was Zozie, her long hair touching my face and her red coat shining in the sun.

Behind her, Maman, in her funeral coat and her eyes dark as midnight, so dark that no one can ever, ever tell what she's thinking. She took a step – still carrying Rosette – and I knew that if I stayed she would put her arms around us both, and I wouldn't be able to stop crying, though I couldn't possibly tell her why, not now, not ever, and especially not in front of the lady with the lollipop shoes.

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THE LOLLIPOP SHOES

So instead I turned and ran down the bare white alleyway so that for a moment I was one of them, free as the sky. It's good to run: you take giant strides; you can be a kite with your arms outstretched; you can taste the wind; you can feel the sun racing ahead; and sometimes you can almost outrun them, the wind and the sun and your shadow at your heels.

My shadow has a name, you know. His name is Pantoufle. I used to have a rabbit called Pantoufle, so Maman says, although I can't quite remember now whether he was real or simply a toy. *Your imaginary friend*, she sometimes calls him, but I'm almost sure he was really there, a soft grey shadow at my heels, or curled up in my bed at night. I like to think of him sometimes still, keeping watch over me as I sleep, or running with me to beat the wind. Sometimes I feel him. Sometimes I see him even now, though Maman says that's just my imagination, and doesn't like me talking about it, even as a joke.

Nowadays Maman hardly ever jokes, or laughs the way she used to do. Perhaps she's still worried about Rosette. I know she worries about me. I don't take life seriously enough, she says. I don't have the right kind of attitude.

Does Zoie take life seriously? Oh, boy. I'll bet she doesn't. No one could wearing those shoes. I'm sure that's why I liked her at once. Those red shoes, and the way she stopped at the window to look, and the way I was sure she could see Pantoufle – not just a shadow – at my heels.

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Wednesday, 31st October

WELL, I LIKE TO THINK I HAVE A WAY WITH CHILDREN. PARENTS, too; it's part of my charm. You can't be in business without a certain charm, you know, and in my particular line of business, when the prize is something far more personal than mere possessions, it's essential to *touch* the life you take.

Not that I was particularly interested in this woman's life. Not then, at least – although I will admit I was already intrigued. Not so much by the deceased. Nor even by the shop itself – pretty enough, but far too small, and limiting, to someone of my ambitions. But the woman intrigued me, and the girl—

Do you believe in love at first sight?

I thought not. Neither do I. And yet—

That flare of colours through the half-open door. That tantalizing hint of things half-seen and half-experienced. The sound of the wind-chimes over the threshold. These things had awakened first my curiosity, and second my spirit of acquisition.

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I'm not a thief, you understand. First and foremost I'm a *collector*. I have been since I was eight years old, collecting charms for my bracelet, but now I collect individuals; their names, their secrets, their stories, their lives. Oh, some of it's for profit, of course. But most of all I enjoy the chase; the thrill of pursuit; the seduction; the fray. And the moment at which the *piñata* splits—

That's what I love best of all.

'Kids,' I smiled.

Yanne sighed. 'They grow so fast. A blink, and they're gone.' Way down the alley, the girl was still running. 'Don't go far!' Yanne called.

'She won't.'

Yanne looks like a tamer version of her daughter. Black bobbed hair, brows straight, eyes like bitter chocolate. The same crimson, stubborn, generous mouth, lifting a little at the corners. The same obscurely foreign, exotic look, though beyond that first glimpse of colours through the half-open door, I could see nothing to justify the impression. She has no accent; wears well-worn clothes from La Redoute; plain brown beret at a slight angle, sensible shoes.

You can tell a lot from a person by looking at their shoes. These were carefully without extravagance: black and round-toed and relentlessly uniform, like the ones her daughter wears for school. The ensemble slightly down-at-heel, a shade too drab; no jewellery but for a plain gold ring; just enough make-up to avoid making a statement.

The child in her arms may be three at most. The same watchful eyes as her mother, though her hair is the colour of fresh pumpkin and her tiny face, no bigger than a goose

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egg, is a blur of apricot freckles. An unremarkable little family, at least on the surface; and yet I couldn't rid myself of the idea that there was something more that I couldn't quite see, some subtle illumination not unlike my own—

Now *that*, I thought, would be worth collecting.

She looked at her watch. 'Annie!' she called.

At the end of the street Annie waved her arms in what might have been exuberance or revolt. In her wake, a gleam of butterfly-blue confirms my impression of something to hide. The little one, too, has more than a hint of illumination, and as for the mother—

'You're married?' I said.

'I'm a widow,' she said. 'Three years ago. Before I moved here.'

'Really,' I said.

I don't think so. It takes more than a black coat and a wedding ring to make a widow, and Yanne Charbonneau (if that's her name) doesn't look like a widow to me. To others, perhaps, but I can see more.

So why the lie? This is Paris, for pity's sake – here, no one is judged on the absence of a wedding band. So what little secret is she hiding? And is it worth my finding out?

'It must be hard, running a shop. Here, of all places.' Montmartre, that strange little stone island with its tourists and artists and open drains, and beggars and strip-clubs under the linden trees, and nightly stabbings down among the pretty streets.

She gave a smile. 'It's not so bad.'

'Really?' I said. 'But now that Madame Poussin's gone—'

She looked away. 'The landlord's a friend. He won't throw us out.' I thought I saw her flush a little.

'Good business here?'

'It could be worse.'

Tourists, ever on the lookout for overpriced tat.

'Oh, it's never going to make us a fortune—'

As I thought. Barely worthwhile. She's putting a brave face on it, but I can see the cheap skirt; the frayed hem on the child's good coat; the faded, illegible wooden sign above the *chocolaterie* door.

And yet there is something oddly attractive about the crowded shop window with its piles of boxes and tins, and its Hallowe'en witches in darkest chocolate and coloured straw, and plump marzipan pumpkins and maple-candy skulls just glimpsed beneath the half-closed shutter.

There was a scent, too – a smoky scent of apples and burnt sugar, vanilla and rum and cardamom and chocolate. I don't even really *like* chocolate; and yet I could feel my mouth watering.

Try me. Taste me.

With my fingers I made the sign of the Smoking Mirror – known as the Eye of Black Tezcatlipoca – and the window seemed to glow briefly.

Uneasy, the woman seemed to sense the flare, and the child in her arms gave a silent mew of laughter and held out her hand—

Curious, I thought.

'Do you make all the chocolates yourself?'

'I used to, once. But not any more.'

'It can't be easy.'

'I manage,' she said.

Hm. Interesting.

But *does* she manage? Will she continue to manage now

the old woman's dead? Somehow I doubt it. Oh, she looks capable enough, with her stubborn mouth and her steady gaze. But there's a weakness inside her, in spite of all that. A weakness – or perhaps a strength.

You have to be strong to live as she does; to bring up two children alone in Paris; to work all hours in a business that brings in, if she's lucky, just enough to cover the rent. But the weakness – that's another matter. That child, for a start. She fears for her. Fears for them both, clings to them as if the wind might blow them away.

I know what you're thinking. Why should I care?

Well, call me curious if you like. I trade in secrets, after all. Secrets, small treacheries, acquisition, inquisition, thefts both petty and grandiose, lies, damn lies, prevarications, hidden depths, still waters, cloaks and daggers, secret doors, clandestine meetings, holes and corners, covert operations and misappropriation of property, information and more.

Is that so wrong?

I suppose it is.

But Yanne Charbonneau (or Vianne Rocher) is hiding something from the world. I can smell the scent of secrets on her, like firecrackers on a *piñata*. A well-placed stone will set them free, and then we'll see if they are secrets that someone such as I can use.

I'm curious to know, that's all – a common enough characteristic of those fortunate enough to be born under the sign of One Jaguar.

Besides, she's lying, isn't she? And if there's anything we Jaguars hate more than weakness, it's a liar.

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Thursday, 1st November
All Saints

ANOUK WAS RESTLESS AGAIN TODAY. PERHAPS THE AFTERMATH OF yesterday's funeral – or perhaps just the wind. It takes her like that sometimes, cantering her about like a wild pony, making her wilful and thoughtless and tearful and strange. My little stranger.

I used to call her that, you know, when she was small and there were just the two of us. Little stranger, as if she were on loan from somewhere or other, and one day they'd be coming to take her back. She always had that about her, that look of *otherness*, of eyes that see things much too far, and of thoughts that wander off the edge of the world.

A *gifted* child, her new teacher says. *Such extraordinary powers of imagination, such vocabulary for her age* – but already, there's a look in her eye, a measuring look, as if such imagination is in itself suspect, a sign, perhaps, of a more sinister truth.

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It's my fault. I know that now. To bring her up in my mother's beliefs seemed so natural at the time. It gave us a plan; a tradition of our own; a magic circle into which the world could not enter. But where the world cannot enter, we cannot leave. Trapped inside a cocoon of our own making, we live apart, eternal strangers, from the rest.

Or we did, until four years ago.

Since then, we have lived a comforting lie.

Don't look so surprised, please. Show me a mother, and I'll show you a liar. We tell them how the world *should* be: that there are no such things as monsters or ghosts; that if you do good, then people will do good to you; that Mother will always be there to protect you. Of course we never *call* them lies – we mean so well, it's all for the best – but that's what they are, nevertheless.

After Les Laveuses, I had no choice. Any mother would have done the same.

'What was it?' she said again and again. 'Did we make it happen, Maman?'

'No, it was an accident.'

'But the wind – you said—'

'Just go to sleep.'

'Couldn't we magic it better, somehow?'

'No, we can't. It's just a game. There's no such thing as magic, Nanou.'

She stared at me with solemn eyes. 'There is,' she said. 'Pantoufle says so.'

'Sweetheart, Pantoufle isn't real, either.'

It's not easy being the daughter of a witch. Harder still being the mother of one. And after what happened at Les Laveuses I was faced with a choice. To tell the truth and condemn my child to the kind of life I'd always had:

moving constantly from place to place; never stable; never secure; living out of suitcases; always running to beat the wind—

Or to lie, and to be like everyone else.

And so I lied. I lied to Anouk. I told her none of it was real. There was no magic, except in stories; no powers to be tapped and tested; no household gods, no witches, no runes, no chants, no totems, no circles in the sand. Anything unexplained became an Accident – with a capital letter – sudden strokes of luck, close calls, gifts from the gods. And Pantoufle – demoted to the rank of ‘imaginary friend’ and now ignored, even though I can still sometimes see him, if only from the corner of my eye.

Nowadays, I turn away. I close my eyes till the colours have gone.

After Les Laveuses, I put all of those things away, knowing that she might resent me – hate me, a little, perhaps, for a while – hoping one day she would understand.

‘You have to grow up someday, Anouk. You have to learn to tell the difference between what’s real and what isn’t.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s better this way,’ I told her. ‘Those things, Anouk – they set us apart. They make us different. Do you *like* being different? Wouldn’t you like to be included, just for once? To have friends, to—’

‘I *did* have friends. Paul and Framboise—’

‘We couldn’t stay there. Not after that.’

‘And Zézette and Blanche—’

‘Travellers, Nanou. River people. You can’t live on a boat for ever, not if you want to go to school—’

‘And Pantoufle—’

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'Imaginary friends don't count, Nanou.'

'And Roux, Maman. Roux was our friend.'

Silence.

'Why couldn't we stay with Roux, Maman? Why didn't you tell him where we were?'

I sighed. 'It's complicated.'

'I miss him.'

'I know.'

With Roux, of course, everything's simple. Do what you want. Take what you want. Travel wherever the wind takes you. It works for Roux. It makes him happy. But I know you can't have everything. I've been down that road. I know where it leads. And it gets so hard, Nanou. So very hard.

Roux would have said: *you care too much*. Roux with his defiant red hair and reluctant smile and his beloved boat under the drifting stars. *You care too much*. It may be true; in spite of everything I care too much. I care that Anouk has no friends in her new school. I care that Rosette is nearly four years old, so alert, and yet without speech, like the victim of some evil spell, some princess stricken dumb for fear of what she might reveal.

How to explain this to Roux, who fears nothing and cares for no one? To be a mother is to live in fear. Fear of death, of sickness, of loss, of accidents, of strangers, of the Black Man, or simply those small everyday things that somehow manage to hurt us most: the look of impatience, the angry word, the missed bedtime story, the forgotten kiss, the terrible moment when a mother ceases to be the centre of her daughter's world and becomes just another satellite orbiting some less significant sun.

It has not happened—at least, not yet. But I see it in the

other children; in the teenage girls with their sullen mouths and their mobile phones and their look of contempt at the world in general. I have disappointed her, I know that. I am not the mother she wants me to be. And at eleven, though bright, she is still too young to understand what I have sacrificed, and why.

You care too much.

If only things could be that simple.

They are, replies his voice in my heart.

Once, maybe, Roux. Not any more.

I wonder if he has changed at all. As for myself – I doubt he'd know me. He writes to me from time to time – he got my address from Blanche and Zézette – briefly, at Christmas, and on Anouk's birthday. I write to him at the post office in Lansquenet, knowing that he sometimes passes by. I have not mentioned Rosette in any of my letters. Nor have I mentioned Thierry at all; my landlord Thierry who has been so kind and so very generous, and whose patience I admire more than words can say.

Thierry le Tresset, fifty-one; divorced, one son, a church-goer, a man of rock.

Don't laugh. I like him very much.

I wonder what he sees in me.

I look in the mirror nowadays and there's no reflection looking back; just a flat portrait of a woman in her thirties. No one special; just a woman of no exceptional beauty or character. A woman like all the rest, which is precisely what I mean to be, and yet today the thought depresses me. Perhaps because of the funeral: the sad, under-lit chapel-of-rest with the flowers left over from the previous client; the empty room; the absurdly enormous wreath from Thierry; the indifferent clergyman with the runny

nose; the piped music (Elgar's *Nimrod*) from the crackling speakers.

Death is banal, as my mother used to say, weeks before her own death on a crowded street in mid-town New York. Life is extraordinary. *We* are extraordinary. To embrace the extraordinary is to celebrate life.

Well, Mother. How things change. In the old days (not so old, I remind myself) there would have been a celebration last night. All Hallows' Eve: a magical time; a time of secrets and of mysteries; of sachets to be sewn in red silk and hung around the house to ward off evil; of scattered salt and spiced wine and honey-cakes left on the sill; of pumpkin, apples, firecrackers and the scent of pine and woodsmoke as autumn turns and old winter takes the stage. There would have been songs and dancing round the bonfire; Anouk in greasepaint and black feathers, flitting from door to door with Pantoufle at her heels, and Rosette with her lantern and her own totem – with orange fur to match her hair – prancing and preening in her wake.

No more – it hurts to think of those days. But it isn't safe. My mother knew – she fled the Black Man for twenty years, and though for a while I thought I'd beaten him, fought for my place and won the fight, I soon realized that my victory was just an illusion. The Black Man has many faces, many followers, and he does not always wear a clerical collar.

I used to think I feared their God. Years later, I know it's their *kindness* I fear. Their well-meaning concern. Their pity. I have felt them on our trail these past four years, sniffing and sneaking in our wake. And since Les Laveuses they have come so much closer. They mean so well, the Kindly Ones; they want nothing but the best for my

beautiful children. And they will not relent till they have torn us apart; until they have torn us all to pieces.

Perhaps that's why I have never confided in Thierry. Kind, dependable, solid Thierry, my good friend, with his slow smile and his cheery voice and his touching belief in the cure-all properties of money. He wants to help – has already helped us so much this year. A word from me, and he would again. All our troubles could be over. I wonder why I hesitate. I wonder why I find it so hard to trust someone; to finally admit that I need help.

Now, close to midnight, I find my thoughts straying, as they often do at such times, to my mother, the cards, and the Kindly Ones. Anouk and Rosette are already asleep. The wind has dropped abruptly. Below us, Paris simmers like a fog. But above the streets the Butte de Montmartre seems to float like some magical city of smoke and starlight. Anouk thinks I have burnt the cards; I have not read them for over three years. But I have them still, my mother's cards, scented with chocolate and shuffled to a gloss.

The box is hidden beneath my bed. It smells of lost time and the season of mists. I open it, and there are the cards, the ancient images, woodcut as they were centuries ago in Marseille: Death; the Lovers; the Tower; the Fool; the Magus; the Hanged Man; Change.

It is not a true reading, I tell myself. I pick the cards at random, without any idea of the consequences. And yet I cannot rid myself of the thought that something is trying to reveal itself; that some message lies within the cards.

I put them away. It was a mistake. In the old days I would have banished my night demons with a cantrip – *tsk-tsk, begone!* and a healing brew, some incense and a

DEATH

scatter of salt on the threshold. Today I am civilized; I brew nothing stronger than camomile tea. It helps me sleep – eventually.

But during the night, and for the first time in months I dream of the Kindly Ones, snuffling and slinking and sneaking through the back streets of old Montmartre, and in my dream I wish I had left just a pinch of salt on the step – or a medicine bag above the door – for without them the night can enter unchecked, drawn in by the scent of chocolate.

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PART TWO

One Jaguar

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Monday, 5th November

I CAUGHT THE BUS TO SCHOOL, AS USUAL. YOU WOULDN'T THINK there was a school here but for the plaque that marks the entrance. The rest is hidden behind high walls that might belong to offices or a private park or something different altogether. The Lycée Jules Renard; not so large by Paris standards, but to me it's practically a city.

My school in Lansquenet had forty pupils. This has eight hundred boys and girls; plus satchels, iPods, mobile phones, tubes of underarm deodorant, schoolbooks, lip salves, computer games, secrets, gossip and lies. I have just one friend there – well, *almost* a friend – Suzanne Prudhomme, who lives on the cemetery side of Rue Ganneron and who sometimes calls in at the *chocolaterie*.

Suzanne – who likes to be called *Suze*, like the drink – has red hair, which she hates, and a round, pink face, and she is always about to begin a diet. I actually rather like her hair, which reminds me of my friend Roux, and I don't think she's fat at all, but she complains about these things

all the time. She and I used to be really good friends, but she can be moody nowadays, and sometimes says quite nasty things for no reason, or says she won't talk to me any more if I don't do exactly what she wants me to.

Today, she wasn't talking to me again. That's because I wouldn't come to the pictures last night. But the cinema's expensive enough already, and then there's popcorn and Coke to buy – and if I don't buy any, Suzanne notices and makes jokes at school about my never having any money – and besides, I knew that Chantal would be there too, and Suzanne's different when Chantal's around.

Chantal is Suzanne's new best friend. She always has money to go to the cinema, and her hair is always perfectly neat. She wears a Tiffany diamond cross, and once, at school, when the teacher told her to take it off, Chantal's father wrote a letter to the newspapers saying that it was a disgrace that his daughter should be victimized for wearing the symbol of her Catholic faith when Muslim girls were allowed to get away with those headscarves. It caused quite a fuss, actually; and afterwards both crosses and headscarves were banned from school. Chantal still wears hers, though. I know because I've seen her with it on in gym. The teacher pretends not to notice. Chantal's father has that effect on people.

Just ignore them, Maman says. You can make other friends.

Don't think I haven't tried; but it seems that whenever I do find someone new, Suze finds a way to get to them. It's happened before. It's nothing you could put your finger on, but it's there all the same, like a perfume in the air. And suddenly the people you thought were your friends start avoiding you and being with her; and before you know it, they're *Copyrighted Material* not yours, and you're alone.

So all today Suze wouldn't talk, and sat with Chantal in all her lessons, and put her bag on the seat next to her so that I couldn't sit there, and every time I looked at them they seemed to be laughing at me.

I don't care. Who wants to be like those two?

But then I see them with their heads together, and I can tell from the way they're not looking at me that they're laughing at me again. Why? What *is* it about me? In the old days at least I *knew* what made me different. But now—

Is it my hair? Is it my clothes? Is it because we've never bought anything at the Galeries Lafayette? Is it because we never go skiing to Val d'Isère, or to Cannes for the summer? Is it some kind of a label on me, like on a cheap pair of trainers, that warns them that I'm second-rate?

Maman has tried so hard to help. There's nothing unusual about me; nothing to suggest we haven't got money. I wear the same clothes as everyone else. My schoolbag is the same as theirs. I see the right films, read the right books, listen to the right music. I ought to fit in. But somehow I still don't.

The problem is me. I just don't match. I'm the wrong shape, somehow, the wrong colour. I like the wrong books. I watch the wrong films in secret. I'm different, whether they like it or not, and I don't see why I should pretend otherwise.

But it's hard when everyone else has friends. And it's hard when people only ever really like you when you're being someone else.

When I came in this morning the others were playing with a tennis ball in the classroom. Suze was bouncing it to Chantal, who was bouncing it to Lucie, then across to

Sandrine, and around the class to Sophie. No one said anything as I came in. They all just kept playing with the ball, but I noticed that no one ever passed it to me, and when I called out – *over here!* – no one seemed to understand. It was as if the game had changed; without anyone actually saying so, now it was about keeping the ball away from me, yelling *Annie's It*, making me jump, spinning it wide.

I know it's stupid. It's only a game. But it's like that every day at school. In a class of twenty-three, I'm the odd number; the one who has to sit on her own; the one who has to share the computers with two other pupils (usually Chantal and Suze) instead of one; who spends Break alone, in the library or just sitting on a bench while the others go around in groups, laughing and talking and playing games. I wouldn't mind if someone else was it sometimes. But they never are. It's always me.

It's not that I'm shy. I *like* people. I get on with them. I like to talk, or play tag in the playground; I'm not like Claude, who's too shy to say a word to anyone and who stutters whenever a teacher asks him a question. I'm not touchy like Suze, or snobby like Chantal. I'm always here to listen if someone's upset – if Suze gets into a quarrel with Lucie or Danielle, then it's me, not Chantal, she comes to first – but just when I think we're getting somewhere, she goes and starts some new thing, like taking pictures of me in the changing room with her mobile phone and showing them to everyone. And when I say, *Suze, don't do that*, she just gives me that look and says *it's only a joke*, and so I have to laugh, even when I don't want to, because I don't want to be the one with no sense of humour. But it really doesn't feel funny to me.