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Diving into Light

Natasha Farrant

London, 2005

Florence is dreaming.

In her dream, she rests her head against the window of the train, hoping for a better view. 'Not long now,' she thinks happily, and at that moment, as if to prove her right, the coast suddenly appears. Eyes half shut against the light, concentrating hard, she can just make out their beach on the far western tip of Ré, the lighthouse dominating the curving sweep of pale sand, waves rushing in from the Atlantic pounding the shore. The train accelerates around a bend and they are treated to a full, glorious view of the old harbour, its ancient towers standing proudly to attention, yachts and pleasure-boats sailing gaily in and out, people waving madly as they race past. The train screeches through the station, picking up speed, and Florence's mood swings from excitement to fear. In a dim recess of her mind she realizes that even the view is all wrong, that the sea and the harbour should be no more than a glimpse, the island invisible. And now they are racing towards the fortifications of the old town. There is no sound, except for a baby crying. No feeling, except for overwhelming sadness. A sense of loss, and a baby crying. A baby crying . . .

'Darling, you're going to have to feed her, you know. I can't do it for you.'

Florence wakes weeping, drenched in sweat. The large West Indian agency midwife, the one called Cassandra, is looking down at her kindly.

'I was dreaming . . .'

'Dream all you want, darling, but your baby's hungry.' Cassandra smiles, a broad flash of sunlight in the plain hospital room. 'I'll bring you tea. Then you and me can talk about your dream.'

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Since the baby's birth, Florence's normally creamy complexion has acquired the grey pallor of anaemia, and dark purple shadows underline her green eyes. Though she is still slim, there is no denying the post-partal sag of her formerly washboard stomach, nor the gravitational pull on her breasts, always heavy and now swollen with milk, barely supported by her soft maternity bra. But her thick mane of tawny hair is held back by a scrap of vivid scarlet silk, her dressing-gown is made of thick old-rose linen, her slippers are soft embroidered leather. She looks incongruously elegant, and her glamour is compounded by her solitude. None of the staff on this private ward can remember a new mother being so completely alone. Not one friend has visited, not a single relative, let alone a husband or boyfriend, and yet she does not seem to mind, even to notice. She fits no stereotype. Even her voice, soft and educated, defies classification with its occasional inflections, sometimes American, sometimes foreign. The hospital staff, whom she fascinates, have cast her as a widow and an orphan. Florence gossip is rife on the midwives' station, though she herself is utterly unaware of this.

The baby, Zélie, does not feed for long. Florence rubs her back gently. Zélie lets out a gentle burp, yawns delicately, and falls asleep again with the ease of a kitten. Florence waits a moment, then rises with difficulty and places her back in her transparent hospital cot, her fishtank. She gazes at her, her expression wistful.

'I wish you could talk,' she says. She kisses the fingertips of her own right hand, and carefully brushes the kiss on to the cheek of the sleeping child. Her baby is so new, hunched together like a bud still waiting to uncurl, tight fists, screwed-shut eyes, knees folded to her chest. They measured her in bits to check her length, all twenty-three centimetres of her. Florence still does not think that it is possible to be so small and live, yet the baby, even fast asleep, radiates life. The room seems to pulse with energy emanating from her, this minuscule child who does not move, who appears not even to breathe. Florence, despite her discomfort and her exhaustion, is beginning to understand what it could mean to be religious.

She is still sitting, watching her baby, when Cassandra returns to her room with two cups of tea. 'So quiet out there,' she beams. 'So different from the public wards. A nice break.' She settles comfortably in the armchair next to Florence's bed. 'I said to myself, I'll take my tea with that sweet girl. Then maybe she'll tell me why she cries so much when she dreams.' She drinks her tea, closes her eyes and sighs. ' That's better. Now darling. I'm listening.'

Florence is baffled by Cassandra. She would like to tell her to mind her own business and leave, but somehow that is impossible. Cassandra is too large, too determined. Too sure, really, that Florence will comply. And also . . . Florence wants to talk. She has managed to hold herself together so well, for so long, but over the last few weeks of her pregnancy she has felt herself coming apart, almost literally unravelling, seam by seam. Her nightmares have returned, different each night but all linked by this terrible, choking sense of loss and the memories she once hoped she had escaped. She takes a sip of tea, and begins.

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La Rochelle, 1995

She was not always alone.

When Florence was twelve years old, her mother gave birth to twin boys. Their conception had been an accident, but her parents rose to their new challenge with gusto. Not so, however, Florence who, try as she might – and she did try, a little – could not muster any enthusiasm for the new brothers who had robbed her of her single child status. Her role had been assigned to her prior to the birth: she was to be a Great Help, a Little Mother, a Big Sister – everything, it seemed, but herself. And as life with its challenges – superfluous siblings, puberty, secondary school – gradually ate away at her grasp on what exactly that self was, she grew grumpy and recalcitrant. A problem, sighed her mother, Catherine, viewing the end of term with trepidation. She had been looking forward to a restful summer at home in London, but soon realized that this would not be possible with a bored and angry Florence in the house. 'Send her to me,' declared Mimi, her own mother, from her airy home in La Rochelle, that medieval jewel of a town on the south-west coast of France. 'I'll look after her.'

And so it was that Florence – gangly legged, bushy haired and not yet remotely glamorous – arrived for lunch at the old family property of La Pommeraie one sunny August day, accompanied by her grandmother but missing the protection of her parents, to find her Great-Uncle Rémy, grey haired and bewhiskered, standing on the porch in a pink terry-cloth dressing-gown, brandishing a hunting rifle and shouting orders at his grandson across his extensive front lawn.

Three of his granddaughters, all blond and blue-eyed, were on the porch with him, the smallest on the floor with her arms tightly wrapped around a squirming cocker spaniel.

'Let me guess,' sighed Mimi. 'The coypu again.'

'Between the Canadian maple and the sycamore!' yelled Rémy. 'What's wrong with the boy? The maple and the sycamore, I say!'

'Tell him the sweet tree and the old swing,' suggested Marie-Jo, the youngest granddaughter, from the floor. 'Yuk, Oscar, stop licking me.'

'THE SWEET TREE AND THE OLD SWING!' bellowed Rémy. 'Ridiculous!' he added. He turned to Mimi, and his face lit up. 'You're here! Look, everybody, Mimi's here. With little Florence!'

Five pairs of eyes – three girls, one old man, one small dog – turned towards them.

'What's happening?' Tante France, Rémy's wife and Mimi's younger sister, walked towards them from the vegetable garden, a wooden gardening basket over her arm, her usual serene smile playing over her fine-boned face. 'I heard a gunshot. Mimi, chérie, you've arrived. And little Flo! Come and give

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me a kiss.' Florence embraced her obediently. 'Even prettier than your mother,' whispered Tante France, and winked.

'Never mind all that,' interrupted Mimi, who was as tall and thin as her sister, but rather more imperious. 'Why the hell is Rémy shooting coypu in the middle of the day?'

'What's a coypu?' asked Florence, only just off the plane from England and feeling rather lost.

'Paf saw one!' Everybody knew Rémy's six-year-old grandson by the acronym of his full name, Pierre-André- Frédéric, an impossible mouthful bestowed on him by over-enthusiastic parents delighted to finally produce a boy after an uninterrupted run of girls. 'I've been waiting up for it every night for a week, and blow me if it doesn't turn up bold as brass in the middle of the day while the boy's playing down by the river!' Rémy turned to Florence. 'A coypu is a semi-aquatic rodent, not dissimilar to a large rat, allegedly herbivorous, and allegedly crepuscular. Except for the ones in Pommeraie, which eat my chickens, and come out to sunbathe when they ought to be asleep. Alors?' he hollered at Paf, who was rooting around in the woodland bordering the river, aided by an enthusiastic chocolate Labrador. 'Have you found it yet?'

'Nothing!' called Paf in a small, reedy voice. 'Can I come back now?'

'Chéri, I don't understand why you're wearing my dressing-gown.'

'I was in the bath,' answered Rémy simply.

'Oh for God's sake!' said Mimi.

'You do look awfully odd,' smiled Tante France fondly. 'I think he looks gorgeous.' Another blond granddaughter, older than the others, slipped on to the terrace, wearing a very short tennis dress, trainers and a conker brown tan. 'You should wear it always, Papi,' she drawled.

'It was perfectly safe,' insisted Rémy, turning to Mimi. 'I knew where everyone was. I made sure of it, before I took my shot. There was nobody in the garden. Except you, my dear,' he added to his wife, 'but I knew that you were out of range.'

'Oh look,' said Mimi sarcastically. She pointed down the path past the vegetable garden, where a small slim woman was hurrying towards them. 'Here comes Agnès.'

Rémy turned pale. 'Merde!' he muttered. 'I'd forgotten about Agnès.'

Agnès, France and Rémy's daughter, was quite unharmed. She appeared not to have noticed the gunshot, and nobody chose to mention it to her. She was prone to twitter, and it was an unwritten law among her family to keep as much from her as possible.

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'Little Flo!' she exclaimed. Florence gritted her teeth, and tried to look older. 'Has everybody said hello? Lunch is ready. Amandine, do get changed, you can't possibly have lunch in a tennis dress.'

'I don't see why not,' said Amandine.

Agnès ignored her. 'We're having lunch at mine,' she said graciously. 'Are we waiting for Claire?'

Claire was Florence's aunt, Mimi's other daughter, due to arrive with her family that afternoon.

'They won't get here till later,' answered Mimi. 'They called from Tours to say they were stuck in traffic.'

'What about Gilles?' Gilles was Mimi and Hector's son.

'He's on the afternoon train, he said he'd come here from the station.'

'Then it's all ready. Papa, why on earth are you wearing maman's dressing-gown?'

Camille and Louise, her two middle daughters, seized her by the arm and marched her firmly away. The others followed in dribs and drabs, Florence keeping close to Mimi.

'I think you'll find,' whispered her grandmother, 'that it helps to think of them as individuals, rather than as a pack. Less overwhelming, somehow.'

'I'm not over . . .' But Mimi had already turned towards France, and engaged her in a detailed conversation about gardening which was to go on for most of lunch.

* * *

La Pommeraie was Mimi's childhood home. Here she had been born. Here she had grown up with her sister France and her brother Louis. And here she had lived until the end of the war, when she had left La Rochelle for Paris and met an Englishman called Hector who swept her off her feet, married her and took her off to live in Hove before returning ten years later to build the light modern house on the avenue Carnot where they still lived now. La Pommeraie in contrast was ancient and a little gloomy, built in 1826, all pale grey pierre de taille and slanting blue slate roofs, casement windows and tall white shutters, wide stone steps leading up to a vine-clad terrace and the glass panels of the front door. Its kitchen dated back almost to the last war, and the smell of nearly two centuries of wood fires burned in the marble fireplaces lingered throughout the entire house. Inside, a creaking wooden staircase led upstairs to a maze of interconnecting rooms and antediluvian bathrooms. Outside, in the acres of parkland, dark oak woods once dotted with manicured clearings were now thickly carpeted with

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ivy. The grounds boasted a fish-pond full of frogs, two disused gardener's cottages, a stagnant river, a bursting vegetable garden, two dogs, three cats, and innumerable geese, ducks and hens.

Ten years previously, when Agnès and her husband Christophe's reproductive zeal showed no sign of abating, Tante France had realized that even her large and rambling house could not accommodate her tribe of grandchildren comfortably every summer. She had offered them the old stable block instead, which they had converted into a pretty, low-lying summer house, with their bedroom in the old grain store under the eaves, and the children in two long dormitory-style rooms below. Agnès referred to it as her Petit Trianon, but the rest of the family knew it as the Warren.

'Because,' explained Matt, Auntie Claire's eldest son, who had first coined the name, 'they breed like rabbits.'

Lunch was served in the grassy courtyard in front of the house, in the overlapping shade of a walnut and a fig tree. Even out of the sun, the air temperature was in the low thirties. People, animals and plants wilted. With an unspoken but complete conversational ban on the great coypu hunt, the children retreated into silence, solidly working their way through their potato omelette with glazed expressions, with the exception of Amandine, who ate nothing but left the table periodically, returning a few minutes later trailing a scent of cigarette smoke and perfume. Of all the sisters, only she was at all intimidating when considered outside her pack. Still in her tennis dress but now barefoot, with her lithe figure and sheet of white-blond hair, she exuded eighteen-year-old cool and sexiness and confidence. The others were dressed like miniature versions of their parents, Paf in Bermuda shorts and polo shirt, the girls in traditional summer dresses. Nine-year-old Marie-Jo looked sweet enough in her cap-sleeved flowery print, but it was a strange choice for Louise and Camille, aged thirteen and fourteen respectively, both sporting budding curves and long legs and eyeing Florence's denim cut-offs with envy. Mimi's advice worked, thought Florence as she started to relax. Taken one by one, the cousins weren't scary at all.

'Dear, how are the twins?' Agnès brought her back to earth. Florence, lost in thought, choked guiltily on a piece of potato, and coughed loudly.

'OK,' she hiccuped eventually. 'Sort of . . . twinnish, really.' Camille and Louise giggled.

'Do you hate them?' asked Marie-Jo. 'I really hated Paf when he was born.'

The cousins perked up.

'You were awful to him,' said Camille.

'A terror,' agreed Louise.

'She tried to drown me,' confided Paf.

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'In the bathtub,' confirmed Marie-Jo.

'We felt so sorry for you, when we heard they were born,' added Camille.

'We thought how tragic it was, after being an only child for so long,' sighed Louise. 'We all long to be an only child.'

'They're not that bad,' said Florence, surprised at her own new-found loyalty. She turned to Agnès, who sat with one elbow on the table, her hand gently massaging her temple. 'I mean, when they're asleep and everything.'

Agnès smiled faintly. 'I bought some apple tarts for dessert,' she said. 'Why don't you all go and eat them in the garden?'

They took their cakes into the woods, and ate them sitting on the low branches of an old holm oak.

'You are so lucky not to have to wear stupid dresses,' said Camille.

'Maman still buys all our clothes, except for Amandine who's got a job and can buy her own,' grumbled Louise. 'I swear she just goes into a shop and buys the same thing in all our sizes. That's if we're lucky and don't wear handme- downs. It's hell being in a big family. I mean look at us.'

'I think your dresses are pretty,' lied Florence.

Marie-Jo snorted. 'They're babyish.'

'I can't wait for Matt to get here,' said Camille dreamily. 'You are so lucky that he's your first cousin, and you get to share a house with him and everything. He's so gorgeous.'

'Not that lucky,' said Louise. 'You can't snog your first cousin. Ooh, talk of the devil . . .'

Through the trees, they made out a battered Mercedes estate driving up to the house. It stopped, the back door opened, and a small girl shot out, followed at a more leisurely pace by two teenage boys.

'They're here!' yelled the cousins. They slid out of the tree in one lithe, coordinated movement, and ran towards the car.

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