

# **Laughing as They Chased Us**

Sarah Jackman

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# 1

## *wake up*

Cecillie carries a bowl of coffee, her first cigarette of the day, the lighter and her comb out to the balcony. She places the bowl carefully on the floor, then sits down beside it, shivering at the cold stone on her bare skin as she dangles her legs through the iron railings.

The ashy scent of the coffee wafting up from beside her is tantalizing but it's still too hot to drink. Cecillie's been in France for nearly six weeks now and it's one of the smells she associates with her life here. It drifts out from the cafés and bars into the streets and of course, it's the most important part of her morning ritual. She loves setting the battered enamel coffee pot to bubble away on the stove while she showers. Still wearing her towel, she adds milk and heaps brown sugar into the bowl, whipping up thick foam with the tiny metal whisk she discovered in a drawer in her kitchenette.

The first week in the apartment was full of such discoveries: the wooden contraption which hooks over the balcony rails for drying clothes, the long pillow that's like a huge draught excluder (she's bought a new pillow case and drawn a smiling face on

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each end with a green felt pen), the metal square on the wall which pulls down to reveal a rather misty but ornate mirror and which snaps back into place once the catch is released. She's fond of these treasures, knowing that these things would never be found in rented rooms anywhere else on the planet but France.

Below, cars are beginning to move up and down the street. She can hear the revvings and grindings and stop-startings: their exhaust fumes are already filtering into the warm air. This is her favourite time to watch the city; as it heaves itself into the business of the day, while she comes to at a more leisurely pace. Cecillie rests her face against the railings, slowly blowing smoke back at the cars.

Through her open French windows, Cecillie can hear the house is waking up too. The water pipes are clattering, old Monsieur Pasquet from over the landing is having his morning cough and her neighbour, Max, is singing along to some schmaltzy French music.

Briefly, Cecillie joins in – la-la-ing along – her voice high and rather tuneless, until she hears the heavy front door bang. She looks down on the brown, bald head streaked with meagre strands of black hair which belongs to the waddling body of her landlord, Monsieur Bayard, on his morning outing to buy bread.

When he crosses the road, he glances up at her balcony and waves. She waves back and laughs. She always laughs when she sees him, she can't help it.

A minute later, the waiter from the café a few doors down passes by. She waves to him, too. He's sweet, always picking out the biggest *pain au chocolat* for her whenever she goes in.

Every day Cecillie waves to lots of people from up on her lookout, but what gives her the biggest kick is when the buzzer goes in her apartment, and she runs out to shout hello, come on up. It's only been Bryony so far, and once Blythe from downstairs when he forgot his key. But she imagines new friends, a lover, loads of people, calling for her and she'll look down on them like Juliet and say: Hi, come on in.

As Monsieur Bayard goes into the *boulangerie*, she sees his dumpy profile for a moment in the doorway. In the evenings he sits with Claude at the back of the baker's, both plumped heavily in their chairs, talking earnestly; table-pounding, world politics stuff. She's seen them there, really getting stuck in with a bottle of Ricard to keep them company. But in the mornings, because Claude's wife is serving – the dragon, Monsieur Bayard calls her – he reappears quickly, with his bread tucked under one armpit and his free hand busy keeping his hair in place. Then – this is the best bit – when he's underneath her balcony, he checks his bread is secure, raises the other arm and performs an elaborate bow. Cecillie, like a queen acknowledging her people, inclines her head and doesn't raise it until she hears the bang of the closing door.

After that, her day can go anywhere. Now that she's finished her afternoons at the college, she has nothing to do the whole day. She thought she'd get bored but she hasn't yet; the weather's been sunny most days and hours slip by without her noticing when she's on the beach. Sometimes, at lunchtime, Cecillie meets Bryony and the boys she au-pairs for, and accompanies them on a walk, other times she explores the city.

This morning, though, is different. She has important matters to attend to. First she must get the bus to the Post Office for

her money, then go and buy the moped; her perfect, yellow moped. Soon she'll be able to ride around the city, stopping whenever the mood grabs her. It'll be great. Nothing will be out of her reach.

In the time that Cecillie's been here, she's taken possession of her apartment, of her street, even her landlord. By possession, what she means, quite simply, is that she feels she's made a difference by being here. She's the girl in a bikini on the balcony, she's the new tenant, she's the English neighbour and Bryony's friend. She's all of these things and more.

Now she's ready to take on the city.

Everywhere she goes people are laughing, kissing, shouting. There's an excitement from which she's excluded. She feels it on her skin as she brushes through the crowds; she hears the whispering inside the houses and offices and catches the scent of it mingling with the wafts of coffee and fresh baking. The city's hiding its secrets from her and she so very much wants to uncover them. When she goes out in the day, she watches, when she goes out at night, she waits. She's tense with the anticipation that something is around the corner, that something *big* is going to happen.

She's made one discovery and holds it as her measure for what's to come. She's found out where the best beaches are; the ones that locals flood to in their cars, distancing themselves from the tourists. She plans to lie back and be surrounded by French, not English voices. When she looks up she'll see tanned, serious French skin; not the red, peeling backs of holiday-happy British. Her moped is going to take her there.

Cecillie stubs out her cigarette on the stone, finishes her coffee and combs her hair quickly. As it falls onto her shoulders

it looks very blonde against her tan. She admires the deepening colour on her long legs, her flat stomach where the brownest skin forms a narrow circle around her belly button. She spreads her fingers out and looks at the white v's between each one, she raises her feet so she can see the same whiteness between her toes.

She's grateful that the old Cecillie of England is disappearing so quickly, but just as she's thinking that, she remembers that she's been meaning to write to her grandmother. She quickly composes a note in her head. She'll buy a postcard later.

*Dear Gran. Today I bought a moped – bright yellow!! From a very fat man who doesn't want it because he fell off – too fat! I've got two English friends here, but I promise I'm still practising my French. I can say lots of words now! You'd be impressed! It's been sunny here for ages and I'm getting very brown!! Will write soon. Miss you. Lots of Love Cecillie XXX.*

She stands up and collects everything together. Next door, Max's windows open and his yellowy-white poodle noses its way out. Its claws make a tacking sound on the stone.

'Hello, Dog,' Cecillie calls, but it ignores her and quickly squats down, depositing a small turd on the floor before scampering inside. She gets a whiff of it before she makes it into her apartment. As she's locking the windows, she watches Max come out, glance briefly at the street below before flicking the dog shit over the edge with a rolled-up newspaper.

She checks in her bag for her purse and map and adds her lighter and the packet of cigarettes. She puts on shorts and a T-shirt over her bikini, and trainers without any socks. In the

kitchen she washes everything up and leaves it to dry on the metal drainer before taking a last look around the apartment to check that it's all tidy.

She runs down all the stairs and almost into her landlord who's standing in the front hallway.

'Goodbye, dear girl,' he calls after her.

'See you later, Monsieur Bayard,' she shouts from the open door, and waves.

Frédérique's mobile is frantically ringing in her handbag on the passenger seat. She fishes it out. It's the gallery's number.

'I've just had Hervé on the phone,' Fernand tells her without preamble when she answers. 'Giving me hell about you being late.'

'What?'

'He's been expecting you since nine.'

Frédérique is positive that she doesn't have any appointments for this morning but her boss pre-empts the question. 'It's in the diary, I'm looking at it now,' he tells her.

'I'm on my way,' she says, flustered, glancing in the mirrors to assess her chance of doing a u-turn. 'I'll ring him immediately.'

Frédérique bangs the palm of her hand against the steering wheel and resists the urge to swear. She must have forgotten to transpose the day's information into her personal organizer again.

'Be warned. He's not in a good mood – he bit my head off.'

'Hang on,' Frédéric tells Fernand as she noses her car into the next lane so that she can take the first left. She turns sharply into a side street and shoots through a couple of back roads until she's heading in the opposite direction.

‘Sweeten him up,’ Fernand is saying, as she presses the phone against her ear. ‘I get the impression that he’s feeling a bit neglected.’

Frédérique notes the gentle criticism and flushes. She’s guilty as charged. She believes Hervé’s painting has become stale, but she’s been avoiding him instead of confronting the issue; for who’s to say that it isn’t her own flagging interest which is to blame?

When she gets through to Hervé, she apologizes for the delay and quickly checks the clock, weighing up what is a realistic time to arrive, against what will sound acceptable.

‘I’ll be there in twenty minutes.’ She senses the irritation on the other end of the line. ‘Probably less,’ she puts in quickly. ‘I’m bringing the prints,’ she tells Hervé, remembering suddenly that she has with her the postcard set of his paintings which arrived from the printers earlier this week. ‘And I think you’re going to be really pleased,’ she adds, knowing this will hook his interest and buy his patience.

The traffic is kind to her until she hits the streets near Fernand’s studio where there’s double parking everywhere. On the main street, Frédérique joins a queue at the traffic lights. She taps the wheel in irritation.

Ahead, the lights go green and as she drives forward, a car pulls out from the kerb straight in front of her so that she has to slam the brakes on, missing its bumper by centimetres. Her body’s flung back against the seat and she sits there, heart pumping, the engine stalled.

A car horn sounds behind her, a few short beeps, then a longer blast when she fails to get moving straight away. Several cars join in the hooter protest, forcing her into action. As she

pulls off she notices the space left by the offending car and swerves in, ignoring the gesticulations from the driver behind her as he passes.

She straightens the car up and, exhaling slowly, lets her good luck sink in. She's virtually outside Hervé's place and when she looks at the time, finds that only ten minutes have elapsed since they spoke.

She opens her briefcase and takes out her personal organizer, flicking quickly to today's date. She stares at the appointment written in red, puzzling over her failure to have noticed it; particularly as the rest of the page is blank.

An adrenaline rush from the near miss gives her a sudden high and she comforts herself: So? Nobody's perfect! She's been going through a bad patch but she'll make it up to Fernand, she decides, starting from when she gets back.

'Yes,' she says out loud, firmly.

On the back of her optimism, she finds a pen and begins to note down everything she has to do. She pauses to prioritize the tasks and her elation evaporates as she contemplates the long list with despair. Where to start?

It seems – as always – an impossible mountain to climb. For months now, she's felt as if she's drowning at work. She swallows hard as the familiar panic begins to rise. It's not only her job which she's messing up. Last week she sent her mother a birthday card, not remembering that she'd already posted one. When she went over for a meal with them, she'd endured her father's weak jokes about her forgetfulness throughout the evening and, even worse, her mother's soft-spoken concern.

Frédérique bites on the end of her pen. She tries to pinpoint when it had started to go wrong and settles on the occasion of

her thirty-seventh birthday four months ago, which she spent alone, from choice, in her flat, with the answer phone switched on. She had simply wanted the world to pause long enough for her to catch up.

It seems to be a concrete moment, but deceptive. Her breath catches with the force of the revelation but she knows immediately that this was not the first but only another sign of what she persistently refuses to label with the unsatisfactory word 'depression'.

She is closing the organizer when it dawns on her that she hadn't checked her day's schedule over breakfast as she normally would because she'd been at Jacques's place. If she needed further evidence of what a mistake it had been to spend the night with him, this was it. She could kick herself for being so weak.

Before she went round yesterday evening, she had made the decision not to stay unless they had established where their relationship was heading. At several points in the evening, she'd been convinced that such a discussion was imminent but as it transpired – once again – neither of them had broached the subject.

But she hadn't gone home, after all.

Frédérique pulls down the car mirror and looks at her reflection.

Who's she kidding?

She'd been as guilty of forestalling the discussion last night as Jacques had of ignoring it; he'd seemed relaxed and at ease with her company and she'd let herself go along with the mood of the evening. And this morning she's relieved she did, because, if she's honest, she's nowhere near having her head straight about what she wants from Jacques.

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If he were to ring this minute, Frédérique thinks, glancing at her mobile, and ask for her opinion on the matter, she would struggle to formulate one. It's not that she's having trouble pinning down her emotions; it's that she can't make herself feel anything at all. If only he would tell her what he thinks, she's sure that would trigger a reaction in her.

She hurriedly switches off the phone, wryly acknowledging her superstition that such thoughts could conjure up a call from him.

Her apathy, she thinks, is appalling.

She locks the car and sets off. Frédérique is aware of the noises accompanying her – the click of her briefcase, the clunk, bleep of her central locking, the tapping of her heels. They mingle with the other sounds in the street; somewhere there's the sound of a machine, whining, stopping, whining, on and on.

She continues walking, stops, turns round and retraces her steps. The wall inside the brasserie she's just passed is always hung with paintings and today something's caught her eye. She peers through the window. In the centre of the wall is a large painting with a blue background. On the left-hand side is a dense patch of vividly coloured figures; on the right two large faces.

She goes in. Two men are settled at one table with coffee and pastries, a mass of papers between them.

Standing in front of the painting, Frédérique wants to laugh. The colours are remarkable; the azure sky, the pollution-grey squares of buildings and the vivacious figures. Street sellers, she can see now – cooking, jostling, singing, laughing, drinking. And then the two faces, almost wooden in contrast. One young and sorrowful, the other old and tired, smiling shyly.

It's definitely by the same artist. She can spot his style even though some of the older paintings are very basic, slapdashed on odd things like flattened oil cans or wood from orange boxes, made into a panel. This is the first time she's seen this artist's work round here, though. Up until now it's only been on street stalls, among tourist tat along the quayside or in the markets. She's been asking around for a name, but nobody wants to say. Their faces shut down. Places where these paintings are, are places where people are reluctant to divulge that sort of information. She hands over her business cards, but she pictures them sliding forgotten into pockets, or dropped to the ground and trampled under foot as soon as she's gone.

A while ago, she bought one of the large pictures which she's hung in her apartment. It's a busy scene like this one, but dominated by a sinister cityscape. The evening sky is aubergine-purple with silvery lights and there are shadowy groups of people down by the docks. In the centre, a man's white, wide face stands out as if he's popped up in front of a camera, or is walking towards you, threatening: 'Here, you! What's going on?'

The better paintings are thematic, like this one. And very simple. It's the simplicity which makes even the rougher, less skilled paintings, effective.

Her greeting of 'Messieurs Dames' as she'd stepped into the brasserie had elicited muttered responses from the men at the table, but no one had appeared from the back. She calls out, 'Bonjour,' in the direction of the kitchen. 'Bonjour.'

A woman dawdles out, wiping her hands. 'Madame,' she says warmly, hurrying once she sees Frédérique's polished leather briefcase propped on the counter. She senses Frédérique means business. 'How can I help?'

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Frédérique points. ‘I’m interested in the blue painting over there.’

The woman glances briefly. She’s a model of efficiency now. ‘Number eighteen? Did you want to buy it?’

‘How much is it?’

Sometimes the prices in this place are sky high. The artists try it on with the tourists who get carried away with the atmosphere of the quarter, buying up everything in sight as mementos to take back home. It’s become worse since the area became more popular – you won’t be able to move around here in high season, in a couple of months’ time. Sometimes Frédérique is forced to go direct to the artist to negotiate. In fact, she thinks as she waits for the woman to reply, it’s hard to get a real find over here these days, not solely because there’s a lot of bad work riding on the back of the quarter’s reputation, but because the place is always swarming with gallery scouts.

‘That one’s . . .?’ The woman tuts and clucks as she consults a tattered piece of paper pinned on the wall behind the counter, covered with crossing outs and scribbles. She locates it and reads out a surprisingly modest figure.

Frédérique doesn’t hesitate.

‘I’ll take it now.’

Frédérique watches as the woman wraps the painting in brown paper, hunts through some drawers under the counter for some tape and then seals the four corners. Frédérique’s hand is shaking so much that she makes a mess of her signature on the cheque.

‘Can you tell me the artist’s name?’ she asks as she hands it over. She holds herself tight, hardly daring to hope. The woman consults the list again. It seems to be a long time before she

returns to the counter. She speaks confidentially. 'Monsieur Luc Vanier. No address.'

Frédérique leans forward, complicit with this woman who possesses the precious morsels of information about this man, her artist. Luc. Luc Vanier.

'That's all I know, Madame,' the woman tells her, shaking her head. 'Not many of them give an address. They come in, collect any money, spend most of it on drinks and a meal, which, in my opinion, they look like they're in desperate need of, and leave another painting. Come and go. I don't remember this one.'

She seems to notice Frédérique's disappointment because she quickly adds, 'He'll be back soon, Madame, of course, to see if he's sold anything. Don't worry about that.'

'Has anyone else asked about him?' Frédérique asks, suddenly worried that another gallery may have got in first.

'I don't think so.'

'When he does come back,' Frédérique says quickly, 'I wonder, could you give him this, please?' She takes a business card out of her briefcase. 'I'm really interested in this artist. Can you tell him that and ask him to ring me.' She writes 'Frédérique' across the card. 'As soon as possible.'

The woman takes the card, turns it over, once, twice.

Frédérique shuts her case up. 'Please tell him that it's important.'

'Of course, Madame.'

Frédérique watches her pin the card to the list. She says goodbye and walks quickly back to the car to put in the package.

She's taken longer than she said to Hervé, but she knows she can handle any consequences. There's something about the

way the painting is lying in her car, waiting for her to get it home, there's something about the way her white, clean card is pinned to the scruffy list next to his name which has given her hope. Luc, she thinks, Luc. She already feels closer to him, feels that finally she's made the breakthrough.

Luc arrives at the graveyard at the back of Sainte Catherine early, as dawn is breaking. He's there to catch the light, to see the sun appear from behind the church and start its long climb up over the city. This week the sunrises have been beautiful. A deep orangey-pink. He's mixed the colour exactly right and it's sitting in his painting room, in a glass jar with the colour ratios written on a piece of card, taped to the top. He thinks happily of it as he makes his way to the front of the church which he plans on sketching.

His bag, slung over one shoulder, pulls a little at the muscles. Inside is a sketchbook, pencils, a flask of coffee prepared the night before, which he imagines, wrongly, he can smell, and a fresh ham baguette which he definitely can until he passes into the short alley formed from one side of the church and a dense line of chestnut trees. Here his nostrils are assailed by the stink of sour piss and alcohol. He holds his breath and walks softly past the heaps of old coats and newspapers that hide the men that sleep under the trees at night. He tries not to disturb them. It's early and they're never in good shape first thing in the morning.

The front steps are covered in rubbish like giant bits of confetti. Coke cans, cartons, paper bags, bits of sandwiches. A woman will clear it all up before the tourists arrive. She'll wake the men too, and get them to move. They always emerge out

onto this terrace, swearing, clustered together, shaking and spitting, dragging out bottles and cans from underneath their coats, before setting off on their own particular, special route round the city; returning during the afternoon when the coachloads of tourists are brought in. Rich pickings. Luc's heard that the tourist information bureaux are giving out warnings not to visit Sainte Catherine on foot.

Luc sits on a bench on the terrace facing the church. The sun creeps up. A bold, orange sphere. As it rises above the spire, it bathes everything in a warm glow, tinting the white flowers apricot in the flower bed beside him, making the stone look like pimply, pink flesh. He breathes it in. He can almost taste the sweetness of the peach light.

He pours himself a coffee, stuffs some bread into his mouth and works steadily for several hours until Nou-Nou staggers out from the alley and stands swaying, before spotting Luc.

Nou-Nou hawks deep down in his throat, turning his head away, then spits on the paving, centimetres in front of Luc's feet. Luc resists the urge to move them. It's the kind of reaction Nou-Nou delights in.

'Haven't you finished yet?' Nou-Nou asks, peering over Luc's shoulder. Hot fusty breath drifts past.

'Not yet.'

'I thought you guys basically painted it straight off. All at once. Not this sketching here and little fuckin' paintings there. Or is that only fuckin' geniuses?' He cackles, scratching hard at his crotch.

Luc shrugs but says nothing. He hears the phlegm gathering in Nou-Nou's throat and it makes him want to clear his own.

'Got a fag?' Nou-Nou asks.

Luc lights two, and hands one over, putting the packet into his pocket before Nou-Nou gets his hands on it. Nou-Nou, unpredictable at best, can turn nasty. Luc tries to keep two steps ahead of him, but doesn't always succeed. He let Luc sketch him for smokes and vodka more than a couple of months ago and Luc's still paying for it. He regrets the relationship of giver and receiver that has stuck ever since, especially as, if he's honest, he doesn't actually like Nou-Nou.

'Tomorrow,' says Nou-Nou loudly, moving to stand in front of Luc. He inflates his chest in preparation for a grand announcement. 'Tomorrow I'm leaving. I'm leaving this shit-hole behind.' The last word ends in a flurry of coughing, but Luc knows what he said. It's what they all say, all the time.

Luc nods. 'Good for you.'

He can understand that the men would want to get away, but he could never leave. If, or when, this church is left to rot along with the rest of the quarter, he wants to be here, to see it and to paint it so that others will know what's been lost.

Nou-Nou's asking him for some money, pulling at his arm. He hasn't been listening.

'Fuck you,' he says, flicking away his cigarette butt. 'You know I haven't got any.'

Nou-Nou tries to grab at his sketchbook but Luc's too quick for him. He pushes him away.

'Piss off,' he tells him and Nou-Nou does, with a stream of abuse which he carries across the terrace back into the alley where he sets off shouting from the others.

The caretaker's here. She emerges from inside with a broom and plastic bag. Luc flicks back to the sketch he was working on. He looks at it, but his concentration has gone. He packs

up his belongings and walks over to the church. The woman nods to him as he climbs the steps.

He hears the thump-thud as the heavy doors swing closed behind him. The church is divided in two by the light. Around Luc it's dark and his skin prickles with cold, but ahead above the altar, the east windows throw the new day's light to the floor as far as the pulpit. He walks down the aisle. His trainers squeak on the stone floor, the sound piercing the hollow silence.

At the altar, among the lumps of cold, molten wax, are two stumps of candles, their flames still flickering, almost invisible in the light. He puts a coin in the box and takes a candle out. He lights it from one of the candles and, placing it with the others, he thanks the city for his life.

Luc pities the tourists who never experience the quietness of the vast space without the whispers, the footsteps, the breathing of others around them, without the sensation of knowing that there's no one else here. But he wouldn't give up these moments for anything. He likes to keep them for himself.

He hears the rustle of the rubbish bag as the caretaker comes in and turns to leave. He calls to the woman, 'Merci, Madame.'

He stands on the top step and looks around. In the few minutes he's been inside, the day has really arrived. He smiles, stretches and adjusts the bag on his shoulder. He looks up. No clouds. He'll go into the city centre before the heat gets a real grip, check out his sales and pick up the paint he needs. Then he'll head down to the blue café where there'll be a breeze, coming off the river.

Blythe, lying in shorts on top of his bed, feels his eyes finally close in a sleep that threatens to be deep. 'Not now,' he moans,

trying to drag himself out, lurching from unconscious to conscious. Not fucking now he thinks, when I've got to be awake. He finished late at the bar and thought he'd grab a few hours' sleep before Bryony arrived but he's been dreaming vividly, and the twitching of his hands as he mixed dream cocktails and juggled dream bottles kept waking him up. Sleep pours into his brain.

He wakes momentarily, when his body spasms to a sensation of falling, before drifting off again. The muffled sounds of the building sift through his struggling brain. Someone running down the stairs, music playing – Cecillie's, he guesses – and a rhythmic thumping, irritatingly off beat with the music, which he realizes as he forces himself to sit up, is his own heart pounding.

His bed in the corner is never touched by the sun, but the air in the room is stuffy and he's sweating even half-naked. He'll get dressed, he decides, before Bryony arrives and they'll go out, straight away; go and sit outside a bar or even go down to the beach, if it's hot enough. It's a crime to stay indoors; they should chill out in the sun, get pissed. Great.

He gets up, splashes his face with freezing water over the sink, grimaces into the small mirror above it, sniffs at his armpits and splashes under them, too. As he's drying himself, he looks out of the window. He opens it wide and shoves a rolled-up magazine in the gap to stop it banging closed.

Another fuck-off hot day. It's only June but it seems to have been like this for weeks. This thought fills him with a sharp happiness as it always does when he thinks how lucky he is to have escaped rainy, miserable England. Bryony laughs at him whenever he says that, telling him he's got his feelings about

England out of proportion. One day she even turned up with a newspaper showing the weather from capital cities around the world. It said London sunny, 27 degrees.

‘See,’ she’d argued. ‘There’s good weather there too.’

He’d had to agree just to be nice but in his heart he knows it’s different. It was only one fucking day, for a start off, but it goes deeper than that. People there have a different agenda, it’s like they don’t want to enjoy themselves, it’s like they can never be really happy. He can’t believe how long it took him before he realized that he didn’t have to be the same. Sometimes he can’t understand why everybody else hasn’t come to the same conclusion. By rights there should be hardly anyone left over there except maybe old people. Why places like this aren’t teeming with Brits, he doesn’t know.

What he really struggles to believe is that Bryony wants to go back. She’s been here for ten months and still seems to consider it a temporary arrangement. Of all the luck, he sometimes jokes, he finally escaped the UK only to meet an English girl who actually misses the bloody place.

Bryony hasn’t said it straight out, but it’s there under everything she does; the phone calls to her parents, the long letters to her friends. She loves the kids she looks after but life back in England is pulling her, stronger and stronger. She’s due to return at the end of September, to university. Four months, she says, but he can hear the sigh in her voice. Four whole months.

And what’s he supposed to do for these four months? He’d never intended to stay this long in the first place. He ended up here with some of the others after the skiing season had finished but they’re all long gone now. He’s meant to be travelling, for

god's sake, not settling down. Although it is kind of cool here, he admits. The great weather helps big time, of course.

Bryony isn't worried. 'It'll work out,' she always says when he tries to talk. And he presumes that somehow it will, though he can't imagine how.

Blythe looks longingly at his bed. Bryony won't be happy if she finds him asleep when she arrives. It's her day off and she won't understand why he's so tired. She doesn't know what it's like not to be able to sleep for hours and hours, sometimes days and then for it to suddenly come on you like an invasion. How can she understand when she falls asleep anywhere, any time, curled up with her arm over her eyes? When she sees sleeping as easy, a comfort. He envies her that. Sleep for him is a battle that he rarely feels he's won.

He's getting an erection from picturing Bryony on his bed. Jesus, surely she's late. He looks at his watch again. Any time now. Blythe's eyes water from a yawn which stretches his mouth wide. He rubs his jaw which is aching.

The front door bangs closed and he listens out for the sound of Bryony coming up to the door. Then he hears her voice. For Christ's sake, she's been caught by Monsieur Bayard. Irritation rushes through him. He's here like a jerk with a huge stiffy while she's having a nice little chinwag with Monsieur B. He's about to get his arse across the room and call her in when there's a quick tap-tapping and Bryony appears.

'Hi!' she says.

'Hi,' he replies, and he feels as he always does when she comes into his room – shy, stupid, as if they don't really know each other. It always surprises him that she never notices.

He watches her now, so casual, so unaware. She puts her bag

down on the floor, unties her hair, shakes it so that it swooshes in the air; then bunches it in one hand. One, two, three quick movements and it's a little knot, with sprouting ends, at the back of her head.

His prick twitches as she comes up to him and gives him a kiss. Only a little kiss on his cheek, but with her so close, he feels the pulsing warmth of her body, as if she's brought the heat of the day inside with her. She moves away but he grabs her to him and kisses her properly, quite hard. He picks her up and lays her down on the bed and starts to take off her clothes.