No and Me

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Extract

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'Miss Bertignac, I don't see your name on the list of presentations.'

Mr Marin is looking at me from a distance with one eyebrow raised, his hands on his desk. I'd reckoned without his long-range radar. I'd been hoping to get away with it, but I'm caught red-handed. Twenty-five pairs of eyes turn round, waiting for my answer. 'Brains' has been caught out. Axelle Vernoux and Léa Germain stifle laughter behind their hands, and a dozen bracelets jingle in delight on their wrists. If only I could disappear a hundred miles under the earth, right down to the lithosphere, that would be convenient. I loathe presentations. I loathe talking in front of the class. I feel like a huge crack has opened beneath my feet, but nothing's moved, everything is stuck in slow motion, nothing's falling in. I wish I could faint right here and now. Just be struck down. Drop dead. There I'd lie, spreadeagled in my Converse Allstars,

and Mr Marin would take his chalk and write on the blackboard: 'Here lies Lou Bertignac, top of the class, but silent and a loner'.

'. . . I was going to put my name down.'

'Good. What's your topic?'

'The homeless.'

'That's rather general. Can you be a bit more specific?'

Lucas is smiling at me. His eyes are huge. I could drown in them, or disappear, or let the silence swallow up Mr Marin and the whole class. I could take my Eastpak and leave without a word, the way Lucas does. I could apologise and say that I haven't a clue, I just said the first thing that came into my head. I'll go and see Mr Marin at the end of the lesson and explain that I can't do it, a presentation in front of the whole class is simply beyond me. I'm sorry, but I'll get a doctor's note if I have to: 'constitutionally unfit for any sort of presentation', all stamped and everything, and I'll be let off. But Lucas is looking at me, and I can tell that he's waiting for me to get myself out of this, that he's rooting for me, he's thinking that a girl like me can't make a fool of herself in front of twenty-five students. He's got his fist clenched. Any higher and he'd be brandishing it in the air, like football supporters encouraging their team. But suddenly the silence feels heavy, like we're in church.

'I'm going to follow the journey of a homeless girl, her

life, erm . . . her story. I mean . . . how she ended up on the streets.'

A buzz goes through the rows. There's whispering.

'Very good. That's an excellent subject. Figures show that every year more and more women run away, and at a younger and younger age. What documentary sources are you planning to use, Miss Bertignac?'

I've nothing to lose. Or else so much that you couldn't count it on the fingers of one hand, or even ten, there is so much.

'Erm . . . interviews. I'm going to interview a young homeless woman. I met her yesterday and she's agreed.'

Thoughtful silence.

On a pink sheet of paper, Mr Marin notes my name and the subject of my presentation. 'I'll put you down for 10th December. That will give you time to do some background research.' He goes over the basic rules: don't take more than an hour, provide a socio-economic analysis, give examples . . . His voice tails off. Lucas's hand unclenches. I've got transparent wings, I'm flying above the tables. I close my eyes, I am a tiny speck of dust, an invisible particle, weightless as a sigh. The bell rings. Mr Marin dismisses us, and as I'm putting away my things and getting my jacket on, he calls me over.

'Miss Bertignac, a word, if I may.'

There goes my break. He's done this to me before – a word by his reckoning equals a thousand for the rest of

us. The others are hanging back, keen to hear. I wait and look down at my feet. My lace is undone as usual. How the hell can I have an IQ of 160 and not be able to tie my shoelaces?

'You should be careful. With your interviews, I mean. Don't meet unsuitable people. Perhaps your mother or father should go along with you.'

'Don't worry. It's all sorted.'

My mother hasn't been out of the flat in years and my father cries secretly in the bathroom. That's what I should have told him.

Then, with a single stroke of his pen, Mr Marin would have crossed me off his list.

I often go to Austerlitz railway station on Tuesdays or Fridays, when I get out of school early. I go to watch the trains leaving. There is so much emotion. I really like that, watching people's emotions. That's why I never miss football matches on TV. I love it when they kiss after they score, and run around with their arms in the air and hug each other. I also like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* You should see the girls when they get the answer right. They throw their heads back and scream and everything, their eyes brimming with tears. In railway stations, though, it's different – you've got to work out what people are feeling from their expressions, from their gestures and movements. There are lovers who're about to part, grannies going home, ladies with big coats who are leaving men with upturned collars, or vice versa. I watch these people who are leaving, without knowing where they're going, or why or for how long,

saying goodbye through the window, with a little wave, or trying to shout even when they can't be heard any more. If you're lucky you get to see a proper separation, I mean one that's going to last a long time, or seems like it will (which comes to the same thing). Then the emotion is really heavy, like the air's thicker, as if they're alone, with no one else around. It's the same with arrivals. I pick a spot at the end of the platform and watch people waiting, their faces all tense and impatient, their eyes scanning the platform, and then suddenly they're smiling, their arms go up, hands waving, and along the platform they go and into each other's arms. That's what I like best – when they really show their feelings.

So that's why I was in Austerlitz station. I was waiting for the 16.44 from Clermont-Ferrand. That's my favourite, because you get all sorts of people on it – young, old, well-dressed, fat, thin, scruffy. The lot. I was concentrating so hard that it took me a while to realise that someone was tapping me on the shoulder. A mammoth could trample over my feet at times like these and I wouldn't even notice. I turned round.

'You got a smoke?'

She was wearing dirty khaki trousers, an old jacket with holes in the elbows and a Benetton scarf like the one my mother's got at the bottom of the wardrobe as a souvenir of her youth.

'No, sorry. I don't smoke. I've got some gum, though.'

She made a face, then held out her hand, and I gave her the packet, which she stuck in her bag.

'Hi, I'm No. What's your name?'

'No?'

'Yes.'

'I'm Lou . . . Lou Bertignac.' (Usually that gets a bit of a reaction, because people think I'm related to Louis Bertignac, the famous singer, maybe his daughter. Once, when I was at junior school, I pretended that I was, but things got complicated, because people asked for details and autographs. I ended up admitting I'd made it up.)

She didn't seem impressed. I reckoned that maybe she wasn't into that kind of music. She went up to a man who was standing reading his paper nearby. He rolled his eyes and sighed, but he took a cigarette from his packet, which she took without looking at him and then came back over.

'I've seen you here a few times before. What are you doing?'

'Watching people.'

'Isn't there anyone to watch at home?'

'Yes, but that's different.'

'How old are you?'

'Thirteen.'

'You got a couple of euros? I've not had anything to eat since last night.'

I fished in the pocket of my jeans. I had a few coins left and I gave them to her without looking at them. She counted them before she closed her hand.

'What class you in?'

'Year Eleven.'

'That's unusual for someone your age.'

'Erm, yes. I moved up two years.'

'How come?'

'I skipped two classes.'

'Yeah, I worked that out. But how come you skipped two classes, Lou?'

I thought she was talking to me in a strange way. I wondered if she was making fun of me, but she looked very serious and also very worried.

'I dunno. I learned to read in nursery school, so I didn't go into reception. And then I skipped year four. I was getting so bored I'd twist my hair round my finger and tug on it all day. So after a few weeks I had a bald patch. By the time I had three of them, they moved me up a class.'

I wanted to ask her some questions, but I was too shy. She smoked her cigarette and looked me up and down, as if she was trying to find something else I could give her. There was a silence (or at least we were silent – there was still the deafening recorded voice of the tannoy), so I felt obliged to add that it was better now.

'What, your hair or the boredom?'

'Well . . . both.'

She laughed. And I saw that she had a tooth missing. It only took a split second to find the right word: a premolar.

All my life I've felt on the outside wherever I am – out of the picture, the conversation, at one remove, as though I were the only one able to hear the sounds or words that others can't, and deaf to the words that they hear. As if I'm outside the frame, on the other side of a huge, invisible window.

But yesterday, when I was there with No, you could have drawn a circle round us, a circle that didn't exclude me, which enclosed us and for a few minutes protected us from the world.

I couldn't stay; my father was expecting me. I didn't know how to say goodbye, whether I should call her 'madame' or 'mademoiselle' or if I should just call her No since I knew her first name. I solved the problem by simply saying 'bye', and told myself that she wasn't the sort of person to get hung up about good manners or all the stuff that you're supposed to pay attention to. I turned to wave and she was still there, watching me go, and I felt bad because you could tell from her eyes, the blank way they looked, that there was no one expecting her, no home, no computer, maybe nowhere for her to go at all.

* * *

That evening at dinner I asked my mother how come young girls ended up on the streets, and she sighed and said that's how life was: unfair. This once I let it go, though I've known for ages that first answers usually just fob you off.

I thought about No's pale skin, her eyes that looked bigger because she was hungry, the colour of her hair, her pink scarf. I imagined a secret hidden beneath the three jackets she'd been wearing, a secret stuck in her heart like a thorn, something she's never told anyone. I wanted to be near her. With her. Later, in bed, I wished I'd asked her how old she was. That bothered me. She looked so young.

At the same time it seemed to me that she already knew all about life. Or maybe that she knew something frightening about life.

Lucas is sitting in the back row, his usual place. From my seat I can see his profile. He looks ready for a fight. I can see his open shirt, his baggy jeans, his bare feet in his trainers. He's leaning back in his chair, his arms folded, as if he's observing, like someone who's landed there by mistake because of a signalling error or some administrative mix-up. His bag beneath the table looks empty. I'm looking at him furtively, remembering how he was on the first day of term.

I didn't know anyone and I felt scared. I'd gone to sit at the back. Mr Marin was handing out forms and Lucas turned to me and smiled. The forms were green. The colour changed each year, but the boxes were always the same: surname, first name, parents' professions and then a ton of things to fill in that were nobody's business. Lucas didn't have a pen so I lent him one. I reached over as far as I could from the other side of the central aisle

between the desks.

'Mr Muller, I see that you've started the year with the right attitude. Did you leave your writing equipment on the beach?'

Lucas didn't reply. He glanced over at me. I was afraid for him. But Mr Marin began giving out our timetables. When I got to the 'brothers and sisters' box on my form I wrote out 'zero' in full.

Using a number to express the absence of something isn't self-evident. I read that in my science encyclopedia. The absence of an object or a subject is better expressed by the phrase 'there are none' (or 'none any more'). Numerals are abstract and zero can't express absence or sorrow.

I looked up and saw that Lucas was looking at me. Because I'm left-handed and write with my wrist curled round, people are always surprised to see the complicated way I hold my pen. He was looking at me as though he was wondering how such a little scrap of a thing had landed up here. Mr Marin took the register and then started the first lesson. In the attentive silence I reckoned that Lucas Muller was the kind of person who isn't scared of life. He was still leaning back in his seat, not taking any notes.

Today I know the names of everybody in the class, all their habits, friendships and rivalries, Léa Germain's

laugh, Axelle's whisper, Lucas's never-ending legs sticking out in the aisle, Lucille's flashing pencil case, Corinne's long plait, Gauthier's glasses. In the class photo taken a few days after the start of term, I'm at the front, where they put the smallest ones. Above me, up at the top, is Lucas, looking sullen. If you allow that a single straight line can be drawn between any two points, one day I'm going to draw a line from him to me or me to him.