
Opening Extract from...

Je t'aime à La Folie

Written by Michael Wright

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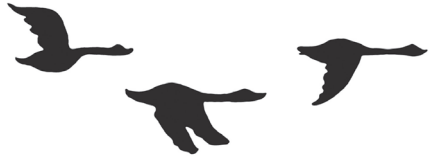

One man's quest to fulfil a life-long dream

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I

This is a true story. And if any of the people upon whom my characters are based should wish to thump their fist on a table and declare: 'But it was not like that at all,' then that is their right. A questionable authority on anyone's life but my own, I shall happily hold up my hands and agree.

II

Jolibois is the name I have given to the nearest town to La Folie. Though you will not see it on any map, it is not hard to find. And perhaps you will not feel the urge to try. For there are many other incarnations of Jolibois, waiting to be explored and appreciated, all over France.

‘Flying is done largely with one’s imagination.’

Stick and Rudder: An Explanation of the Art of Flying,
Wolfgang Langewiesche

Part One

PRELUDE

THE MAGIC ALLIGATOR

I am six years old, snow is falling on Surrey and my girlfriend is called Miss Dembinska. Miss Dembinska wears black leather gloves, like Alvin Stardust, and I think she is quite old. I wear itchy grey shorts and a maroon blazer, with the motto of my first prep school, Greywalls, embroidered on the breast pocket: *Quaerite et invenietis*.

At breaktime, when she is on duty, Miss Dembinska and I hold hands and stroll through the icy playground together. This is my favourite time of day, apart from watching *Blue Peter* and *Captain Pugwash*. Hand in hand, we crunch a path through the frozen leaves, while the other boys play football with an empty Coke can, or practise walking-the-dog with their Butterfly yo-yos. Compared with them, I know that I am different in some way. My legs tingle with the cold, but I do not mind, because Miss Dembinska's hand feels like warmed velvet in mine.

My heart is full of sky. When I grow up, I am going to be a train-driver or a Spitfire pilot and we will get married. For Spitfires are my favourite thing in the world. In fact, I love Spitfires almost as much as I love Miss Dembinska. But I have not told her about any of this yet. Mostly we talk about

the Mallard, which is my favourite steam train, and Queen Victoria, who is my favourite ruler, apart from Mary, Queen of Scots and Princess Anne. The year is 1972.

One day, the headmaster comes into our classroom and whispers something to Miss Dembinska, who is in the middle of drawing a jet aircraft on the blackboard. She says that an aircraft is the fastest way of travelling to a place called Abroad. But when I have a Spitfire, I think I shall just fly it over the white cliffs of Dover.

The headmaster's bald head is shiny. I can see the strip-lights glinting off it as he leans forward to talk to her, resting one hand on her shoulder like an eagle clutching an egg. Then he points at me, and everything changes.

'You're being moved up,' Miss Dembinska whispers, after the headmaster has left. 'You'll have a new teacher now.'

'But I want to stay with you,' I reply. One of the boys sitting behind me blows his nose, and the others laugh. Beside me, my friend Davenport nudges me in the ribs.

In my new class, the other boys are much older than me, and we have to learn a new subject called French, which is a foreign language from Abroad. In French, everything is either masculine or feminine. Bread is a him, whereas jam is a her. Even Mr Thompson, who has been to France three times and has a hedgehog moustache, does not know why this should be.

At breaktime, Miss Dembinska says it's best if we don't hold hands any more, because I'm too grown up for all that now. But I'm still six years old. And I feel hollow inside.

Three years later, my parents climb into a jet aircraft and move to Bogotá, which is Abroad, and very far away.

A boarding school is my home now. Windlesham is good, because there are girls as well as boys in my class. This reminds me of when my dad brought home the colour television to replace our old black-and-white one. The programmes are the same, but everything suddenly looks

more glorious, especially on cold, dark winter evenings, when we all sit together – boys next to girls, masculine beside feminine – in our brightly lit classroom, doing our Latin prep with the light spilling out into the black Sussex countryside.

French is now my favourite subject, because in French I sit next to Clara Delaville, who is the prettiest girl I have ever seen. She has shiny auburn hair, cut almost as short as a boy's, and laughing brown eyes that seem to sparkle when she talks to you. I never manage to reply. Clara is ten, and I am nine. Yet the beautiful, athletic Clara shines so far above me that she might as well be a princess and I a peasant.

In dorm, after the speakers playing us Greek myths and Chopin ballades have been switched off, I go to sleep thinking about Spitfires or Clara Delaville; I wake up thinking about her, too, wondering if I will be on the same table as her at breakfast. I yearn for our next French lesson, when we will pore over our shared copy of *Tricolore* and the elbows of our knitted sweaters may perhaps, fleetingly, touch.

I would never dare venture across the glass corridor to the forbidden territory of the Girls' Wing, where Clara sleeps. But one of the senior boys went there once, for a dare. He says the girls have carpets, and thick mattresses, and dressing-tables with flowers painted on them. In our boys' dorm, we have splintered wooden floorboards, and bunk beds with saggy mattresses, and a boy who lights his own farts with a box of Swan Vestas. We tell jokes, too.

'Knock knock.'

'Who's there?'

'Corn Flakes.'

'Corn Flakes who?'

'Wait till next week, it's a cereal.'

My best friend in dorm is called Toby Melbury. Like me, Toby lives Abroad. Lots of children at our school do: Miles in Brunei, Lilibet in the Virgin Islands, Joanna in Peru. Toby

lives in Malaysia, where his dad has been posted from Islington, like an airmail letter. This explains why he has a stuffed tarantula and a snake pickled in a jar of formalin in his tuck-box, whereas all I have is a Corgi Spitfire and Stuka, a Butterfly yo-yo, a pot of Slime and a pile of free stickers from Goodyear, Ferodo and Billy Graham. Toby has useful gadgets, too. One day, he produces two army pouches from the tuck-box, and over the next few weeks we both assemble survival kits, in case the Russians drop a bomb on Storrington.

Each survival kit contains an army tin-opener; a bundle of matches waterproofed with nail varnish and wrapped in wire for fishing or making snares; a small brown bottle of potassium permanganate crystals for disinfecting wounds and purifying water; and a shiny gold space blanket which I bought at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, on the way back from Bogotá. We also have salt tablets and some beef Oxo cubes, although my Oxo supply is dwindling, because I often feel obliged to check that they haven't gone off.

Having a survival kit will be useful if we have to sleep in the woods. I shall light a fire for Clara Delaville, and then she will love me.

One day, during the summer holidays, I spot a stuffed baby alligator in a shop run by a wizened old Inca lady in Bogotá, and immediately want it for Toby. Standing a foot tall on its hind legs, the reptile carries an umbrella in one claw and a miniature briefcase in the other. Wearing a big smile, with all its razor teeth on show, it somehow speaks to me. My mother isn't so sure. She says it's cruel to treat an animal like that. Whereas I just think it is the coolest thing I have ever seen.

'What did the shopkeeper say?' I ask my mother as we are leaving the shop with my precious alligator wrapped up in brown paper. All I know in Spanish is *sandwich combinado por favor* and *muchas gracias*.

'She said it's a magic alligator.'

'It does tricks?' This is getting better and better.

'No,' replies my mother, eyeing the parcel in my hands. 'She said it would help you to find something you have lost.' She is silent for moment, vanished in her own thoughts. And then she laughs. 'Silly, really, isn't it?'

But I don't think it's silly at all.

On the first day of term, I give the alligator to Toby.

'That is so cool,' he says, examining it closely. I never see the alligator again. Probably Toby has managed to swap it for something more desirable, like a pot of Slime or some Bennett Pro trucks for his skateboard.

'Knock knock,' says Toby, when we are washing our faces at the long line of basins outside the dormitory that night.

'Who's there?' I reply.

'Cabbage.' Toby is already laughing, so I can tell this is going to be a really funny one. I like 'knock-knock' jokes.

'Cabbage who?'

'Cabbage Jones.' Toby falls on the floor and bangs his head on a pipe, he is laughing so much. I am laughing, too. I just don't seem to be able to stop myself.

'Why is that funny?' I ask.

'It isn't.' Toby rubs his head. His shoulders are still shaking with the giggles, his cheeks wet with tears. 'My little sister made it up. It's her first joke. But everything she says is hilarious.'

Lying in bed, I consider this for a while. Toby has invited me to join him on a day out to Brighton at the weekend, because his mother is over from Malaysia with his sister, who is coming to Windlesham next term. I feel intrigued to meet this little girl who is already making up her own jokes. And so I doze off, my head filled with thoughts of Clara Delaville and Cabbage Jones. I am twelve years old, and – when I am not thinking about aeroplanes – I seem to think about girls all the time.

1

SEPTEMBER

I am thirty-eight years old, alone in France, and I seem to think about women all the time. As I drive down a sunlit road towards an aerodrome in the heart of nowhere, there are three things I want to achieve while I am still young enough to appreciate them. I want to cook and eat a potato grown by myself. I want to fly a Spitfire. And I want to meet someone wonderful with whom to share the rest of my life. Unfortunately, on a September afternoon in darkest France, as the poplars flash past me like years on a calendar, all three of these ambitions feel about as unlikely as each other. Even the potatoes.

It is four o'clock, and the slate-grey runway at St Juste shimmers in the sun as I park my battered Espace, with its whiff of dead dog, behind one of the hangars. Today is Sunday, so the clubhouse is shuttered, and the chimneys of the paper factory opposite are like a pair of snuffed candles, waiting to be relit. There is a hint of garlic, rather than sulphur, in the air.

If this were England, the aerodrome would be buzzing with Cessnas and microlights; with anoraks with binoculars, and windswept wives wondering how much longer the

waiting is going to last. But this is rural France, so the only things aloft are a pair of buzzards, wheeling over the distant hills. And the only plane-spotters are a handful of sheep, gazing at me across the perimeter fence. Everyone else is still having lunch, and will be for the foreseeable future.

The hangar doors rumble like coal trucks on rails as I heave them apart. It is cool in here, and I stand for a moment amid the aircraft packed inside, allowing my sun-dazzled eyes to adjust to the darkness.

There she is.

I still find it hard to believe that I have now lived in France for two whole years, striving to toughen myself up with heroic adventures, doing my best to learn about things that matter, and failing to plant any spuds. As I haul the yellow Luscombe Silvaire out of the shadows, I find it even harder to believe that this jaunty cocksparrow of a two-seater aircraft, with its leather-lined cockpit and curves in all the right places, is *mine*. I first dreamed of learning to fly a Spitfire when I was six years old. And now here I am, aged thirty-eight, readying a vintage plane for flight. The Luscombe is no Spitfire. But it was built in the 1940s, and that is about as close as I am likely to get.

The air is beginning to cool, but the tarmac still feels warm to the touch as I lean down to chock the wheels and inspect the brakes. Above me, the sky burns deep blue, and a hint of a breeze flirts with the uninterested windsock. Perfect flying weather. No wonder the place is deserted. And no matter: after my two years as a trainee peasant in darkest France, I have grown used to being alone.

Seconds later, footsteps crunch upon asphalt, and my heart sinks as I recognize the hunched silhouette of Marcel, the aeroclub grouch, coming to bait me. As usual, the butt of an unlit cigarillo is glued to his sneering lips, like a comma in the middle of a death-threat. I think he has been sucking upon this same grey cheroot ever since I first visited St Juste,

almost three years ago. It looks far too damp and shrivelled still to be combustible.

'Big car for one person,' growls Marcel, in French. He must have seen my bashed-up Espace, parked behind the clubhouse.

'Sometimes I carry a few sheep in the back of it,' I reply.

'So you still haven't found *une copine* to warm your bed on these cold nights?' he chuckles. Marcel is never happy unless he's being downright miserable.

I shake my head, and unclip the engine cowling to check the oil.

'*Froid*,' he repeats, with an emphatic shiver.

'Who needs a girlfriend,' I reply, wondering if we can have been experiencing the same weather, 'when they have a cat and an aeroplane for company?'

Marcel snorts. 'I do,' he snarls, with a scowl, beginning to slope away. 'Life is wretched when you get to my age and you're all alone.'

'You should get yourself a dog.'

'I can't stand dogs.'

'Nor can I,' I reply. And we both stand for a moment, in awe of the fact that we appear to have something in common after all.

'You'll find someone, Marcel,' I add, at last. 'It's never too late.'

'Ah, but it is,' he says, over his shoulder. 'You'll see for yourself, if you haven't crashed this thing before then.'

'Thanks for the encouragement,' I call, as he slopes away. Cussed as he is, I like Marcel. The old boy has walked away from more plane crashes than anyone else I know. His footsteps stop in the shadows, and I hear the *click-click-click* as he tries to light his wet cigarillo – until a muttered expletive tells me that he has given up in disgust, yet again.

Wheels chocked, brakes on, stick tied back. Fuel on, switches off. 'Sucking in,' I mutter to myself under my

breath, and swing the prop through eight blades. Two shots of prime. Another six blades. 'Throttle set, CONTACT!' I give the propeller a hefty swing, and the engine splutters into life first time – an occasional miracle – huffing and puffing and straining and clattering before gradually settling into a familiar *pocketa-pocketa-pocketa* rhythm, like a quartet of cyclists cresting a hill.

The niggle of fear I often feel just before I go flying almost melts away in the prop-blast as I drag away the chocks and climb up into the cockpit, where the needles of the instruments are vibrating in the din. Almost, but not quite. Perhaps seeing Marcel has unsettled me. With the stick held back between my knees, I grab my headset from the empty seat beside me, release the brakes, and taxi out to the holding-point on the runway threshold, testing the brakes as we go.

And then we're off and up, the fields and trees falling away like forgotten troubles as the Luscombe climbs inexorably towards the one wispy cloud in the sky. Up here, I can forget about sick chickens, about encroaching brambles and my ongoing failure to master the subjunctive in French. If only Miss Dembinska could see me now. Flying my own little aircraft, and over France, of all places. Abroad. Alone.

Flying is not brave. Yet I do find it bracing to think, each time I take off, that the ancient 65-horsepower engine clattering in front of me could stop at any time. As the pilots' cliché has it: it's much better to be down there, wishing you were up here, than up here, wishing you were down there. And though I fancy my chances in a fair fight with an open field, I also know that a forced landing in inhospitable terrain could coffin my French adventure sooner than planned. Behind my seat, in my flight bag, I have tucked one of the shiny gold space blankets I bought at the Kennedy Space Center all those years ago, for me and Toby Melbury. I don't know what happened to my nail-varnished matches and the rest of my survival kit.

Today's flight is a celebration of sorts, since it marks the second anniversary of my solitary life in darkest France. In that time, I have struggled to learn how to turn myself from a soft townie into a rugged peasant, to learn about sheep and chickens and manly power-tools and, with rather more success, how *not* to weed my *potager* or woo a wonderful *copine*. So it feels appropriate that the Luscombe and I should have this big French sky all to ourselves, yet again.

With the needle of the oil-pressure gauge holding steady, and the sixty-year-old Continental engine clattering along like an angry sewing machine in front of me, I am as happy as any six-year-old in a thirty-eight-year-old's body can be. Above the racetrack, I set course for Jolibois, my local town, which lies just beyond that tree-lined ridge of low hills. The sky is as clear as vodka. Clearing the ridge, I can already see what look like three white golf-tees – the water towers of Jolibois – glowing in the evening sun, and the glinting slate roof of the church at the top of the hill. A drab medieval sprawl that was once one of the hubs of the French tanning industry, Jolibois is now most famous for its summer traffic jams. People get stuck here for hours or, in my case, several years.

'Why Jolibois,' the locals still ask me, 'when you could have chosen anywhere else in France?'

'Because it has a pipe-organ and a tennis club and a landing-strip,' I always used to reply. Yet the reasons change, with hindsight, the longer I am here. Now I simply admit that I like the place. Its rugged simplicity, and the feeling of living in the past, suits me. Especially after London, where I always seemed to be living with one eye on the future. It is living in the present that is so difficult to achieve.

'I only chose this place because I hadn't amassed enough points to choose anywhere better,' is what Jacques the flying schoolteacher once told me, over lunch at the house of Raphaël the priest. 'If you have maximum points, you can

choose a good school in the centre of Paris, or a cushy billet in Provence. If you have zero points, they send you to Jolibois.'

'But surely, Jacques,' I replied, 'by now you must have enough points to be able to move on?'

And, even now, I can picture the shy smile with which he conceded, 'Somehow, once I was here, I could never quite bring myself to leave.'

On the side of a scrubby hill, seven black dots stop chewing and gaze up into the sky, at the little yellow aeroplane flying low overhead. Strange to think that those sheep are *mine*; I, who used to go to the theatre four nights a week in London, and who lived in a terraced house in East Dulwich with a garden made of concrete and a talent for murdering shrubs.

Mine, too, that khaki hillside, with the ramshackle farmhouse that I began to renovate two years ago. And that tiny smudge of grey-and-white on the front step, which must be Cat, brought kicking and screaming from South London to share the adventure. One day, I hope she will forgive me.

On the ground, La Folie is an isolated wilderness, miles from civilization. '*Ah, c'est le bout du monde ici*,' say French visitors when they arrive. It is the house at the end of the world. But from up here, at two thousand feet, I can see that the place is not really isolated at all. The world is like one of those pictures made up of splodges or dots: it makes sense, and all connects up, only when you stand far enough away from it. There are other terracotta roofs dotted across the valley; other settlements whose inhabitants imagine that they are at the end of the world, because they have never flown high overhead and seen how connected they are. Even Jolibois itself is only a mile or two away.

Dipping the Luscombe's nose towards the church where I play the organ for Mass on Saturday nights, I bank in a slow arc over the peach clay courts of the tennis club where I

never win any matches, and over the Gothic stone bridge on which I have so often stood, gazing into the dark waters, wondering if I shall always be alone. And if not alone, then with whom?

When I was in my teens, I imagined I would get married in my twenties. By my late twenties, I assumed I would get married in my thirties. By the time I reached my mid-thirties, I really didn't think I would marry at all. Leaving aside the minor detail that nobody ever showed much sign of wanting to marry me, I suppose I had begun to feel that marriage was an ending rather than a beginning; something that other people did, after they stopped having fun.

Levelling the wings, I swoop low over Gilles's farm – where the same blue-grey laundry is hanging on the washing-line as has been hanging there ever since I first visited the house of my heroic neighbour and chief peasant mentor – and fly along the single-track railway line that runs past the bottom of the drive to La Folie. Four trains a day rattle along this line, clattering out a rhythm of *today-today-today* as they pass the level-crossing beside old Monsieur Giblin's cottage. A single steam train passes once a year, too, its pistons puffing *yesterday-yesterday-yesterday* as it hammers through the valley in a cloud of smoke and dreams. At last, I set course back to St Juste, climbing to clear the tree-lined ridge for a second time.

And then I swallow, hard. Because Houston, we have a problem. Really quite a big problem.

We are not going to clear the ridge.

I yank out the carburettor heat knob, bite my lip and stare at the rev counter. The drumming of the engine in my headset has roughened, as if the little 65-horsepower engine were straining even more than usual and, scanning the instruments, I notice that the needle of the oil-temperature gauge is reading hotter than normal. It's nothing. Yet my skin prickles, even so.

Why won't she climb?

I stare again at the needle, and the blurred pointer creeps another millimetre to the right.

These nerves jangling in my spine are just plain silly. I can't be about to crash and burn, can I? Not on this bright day, when I only came flying for the hell of it. Calm, calm. The aerodrome at St Juste is only twelve minutes' flying time away, on the far side of those tree-lined hills. If I need to turn back, the grass landing-strip at Jolibois is only five minutes behind me.

Squeezing the stick to the right, I start a gentle turn to give the labouring Luscombe a little more time to clear the ridge. There's nothing to worry about, I tell myself, as I listen to the engine grinding away, picturing push-rods splintering, cylinders disintegrating and the cam-shaft exploding in a shower of sparks. But when I scan the steep forests beneath me for a friendly field, I feel a silent surge of alarm well up inside me. Inside my little yellow tin box, I am sitting very, very still.

Two minutes later, I skim the top of the ridge, low enough to see a cow blink as I roar overhead, a few metres above her horns. Sorry, love.

Jolibois is a long way behind me and I still can't spot St Juste. I count my lucky stars that I am alone and have not put anyone else's life at risk. Mind you, I wouldn't mind having a fellow pilot with me right now; preferably an expert one, with several emergency landings under his belt. Not Marcel, then. No, my friend Jethro in England, who can fly anything with his eyes shut. Or Peter Viola, another pilot at St Juste, who is so confident of his own airmanship that sometimes he cuts the engine of his Thruster at a thousand feet, just so that he can feel the buzz of an emergency landing for real.

The vibrating needle of the oil-temperature gauge has already risen higher than I have ever seen it before: two

hundred degrees and climbing. Now I'm no mechanic, but even I can tell that this is not promising. My feet are getting hot, my heart is racing and I feel slightly sick. And then a thought strikes me, with the force of a sledgehammer thwacking the head of a fence-post: nobody knows I'm here, except perhaps that cow on top of the ridge.

I have spoken to no one on the radio. If the engine shakes itself to pieces and I fail to make a decent emergency landing in one of the non-existent fields beneath me, there will be no search party. With Marcel the only unreliable witness of my folly, it may be weeks before anyone even notices that I am missing. The post will build up outside the front door. Cat will grow thinner. My mother will leave a series of agitated messages on the answerphone. The organ will be silent during the Saturday-evening Mass. And, eventually, some grizzled *randonneur* will come upon a heap of twisted yellow wreckage on a tree-lined hillside, and there will be a small funeral for the cheerful English writer who lived alone, played tennis very badly, and never found love, poor fellow.

As gingerly as if I were defusing a bomb, I ease back the throttle-knob with my right hand and peer out across the lengthening shadows of the countryside, searching for a big, flat field. Just in case. But there's nothing, and nowhere: only trees and powerlines and fields almost too steep for sheep.

Nobody is expecting me home. Nobody will telephone tonight. I shiver in the cold air of the cockpit; twist shut one of the perspex air-vents that is blasting a hundred-mile-an-hour breeze up my sleeve.

Longing to hear a human voice, I flick on the radio and listen for other traffic. Silence. It seems nobody else is flying today: there isn't even the occasional rasp of static to let me know of other pilots transmitting in the far distance. I switch to the frequency for Limoges Approach, announce my call-sign into the silence, and feel a whoosh of relief when the controller finally responds.

'Go ahead, Golf-Zulu-Alpha,' crackles his voice in my headset, in English. 'Pass your message.'

So I tell him who I am, and where I am heading, hoping that he cannot hear the fear in my voice. This man cannot see me on his radar. I am too far away for his binoculars. He cannot help me in any practical way. Even so, it is good to know that he is there; that I am connected to the earth by the radio waves passing between us, carrying our voices through the darkening sky.

In the distance, St Juste appears at last. Still too far to glide. But I can see the dash-dot-dash smudge of hangar three with its doors still open, and the grey splodge of Carrefour just to the rear, where the beautiful lady behind the fish counter – a haughty Botticelli in white wellies, whom I secretly admire – will by now be packing away her monkfish tails and, unaware of my plight, scraping what is left of her crushed ice down the plug-hole. In another minute I will be close enough for a glide approach, even if the engine – whose laboured clattering now sounds to me like an angry armadillo trying to escape from a washing machine – packs up.

Second by second, the minute passes. After signing off from Limoges – '*Field in sight, merci bien, monsieur, Golf-Zulu-Alpha*,' I click the radio frequency-selector to St Juste and inform the uninhabited sky that I will be joining downwind for runway zero-seven. And then, as I turn on to base leg with a surge of relief, knowing that I have the runway made, I do something I have often considered, but have never in my life done before. If Peter Viola can do it, why shouldn't I? With steady fingers, I reach for the ignition key, hesitate for a second, and switch off the magnetos. I'd rather stop the engine now, when I am expecting it, than have it quit on me on the short final, when I am not.

It takes only a few seconds for the propeller to stop, and I feel a lurch of self-induced fear in the pit of my stomach; a

zing of adrenaline coursing through my shoulders and back. As I push the stick forward to maintain seventy mph on the airspeed indicator, the sudden silence of an aircraft that has been converted into a makeshift glider takes me by surprise. All I can hear through my headset is a distant hiss of wind, and my view is partially obscured by the black stripe of the propeller, stuck at ten to six. I would guess that my heart rate is now up around 150 beats per minute. Watch your speed and don't get low. Now you're too high. Pushing the stick to the left, and dabbing at the rudder pedal with my right foot, I side-slip to lose the extra altitude and then, fifty feet off the ground, straighten the nose.

My silent glider rapidly sinks in a down-draught, and then the white runway numbers – 07 – are flashing beneath me. I ease the stick back as gently as my tense left arm will allow, to catch the last whispers of lift before the Luscombe settles on to the earth in the sort of perfect three-point landing that I only ever manage once a year when nobody is watching. Behind me, I hear a sound I have never heard before: the roar of the tailwheel as it booms down the aluminium megaphone of the plane's hollow fuselage.

Creaking, clunking and rattling, the Luscombe slows as if it were coasting through treacle, and with the last of its ebbing momentum I manage to steer it off the runway and on to the grass.

I am home safe.

As I glance across at the hangars, instinctively looking out for the cheering crowds of well-wishers celebrating my safe return, I can see that the aerodrome is still deserted. Even old Marcel must have gone off to sulk at home. I am a spaceman, safely back on planet earth. Unbuckling my straps, I sit for a moment, listening to the hot motor still ticking as it cools in the silence. Another uneventful local flight. I am alive. Not just alive, but somehow more alive than I was before I took off. And I wish there were someone I could tell;

someone waiting at home with a glass of wine and something hearty bubbling on the hob.

My legs feel like blancmange as I stride across the apron to fetch my little two-wheeler trailer. This I hitch under the Luscombe's tailwheel and heave the aircraft backwards into the hangar. Later, I drive back to La Folie and sit with Cat on the terrace, sipping a glass of Pastis as we gaze out at the view across the valley and at the orange glow from Jolibois that lights up the brown sky, as we do every night.

My mum phones, and I tell her how happy I am in my unfinished, ramshackle farmhouse.

'All's well,' I say. 'I went flying today, and the Luscombe is going fine.'

'Oh, that's nice,' she replies. 'Is it really safe to go flying on your own?'

'Actually, I prefer it,' I lie. 'There's a kind of freedom in being alone.'

'Which you don't have enough of at La Folie?'

'That's different.' I pause, hearing the familiar cogs ticking and whirring in my mother's brain, the same cogs fitted into the brain of every mother with an unmarried son who shows no sign of settling down with a Nice Girl. 'And I've learned to enjoy being on my own.'

This is what I always tell myself these days. Yet today's flight has given me second thoughts. It is one thing to live by myself, in the house at the end of the world. It is quite another to come face to face with the fact that nobody would have noticed if I had killed myself in a crash tonight.

On top of this, the more time I spend alone, close to nature, the more beautiful the world somehow becomes. And the more beautiful the world becomes, the sadder it seems to have no one with whom to contemplate it. I cannot help but dream of finding someone with whom to share this beautiful landscape, instead of keeping these stars and this moon, the whirr of these crickets, all to myself.

Yet I am almost forty years old. If I were going to meet someone perfect for me, would I not already have met her by now, when our young lives were still ahead of us, and when I was still surrounded by all those charming, available young women who had not already been snapped up by young men far more eligible – or at least more willing to commit – than me?

The night is drawing in, and the air is cooling fast. Finishing up my drink, I head back inside, while Cat slinks into the undergrowth for another bout of hair-raising shrieks and hell-raising with the shrews.