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A Secret Kept

Written by Tatiana de Rosnay

Published by Pan Books

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Tatiana de Rosnay

A Secret Kept

PAN BOOKS



First published as *Boomerang* in France by Éditions Héloïse d'Ormesson

First published in the UK 2010 by Macmillan

This edition published 2011 by Pan Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-53377-5

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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

Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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This book is for
Cecilia and Alexis, my wonderful sister and brother,
and for Cedric and Caroline, their loved ones

In loving memory of Pierre-Emmanuel
(1989–2006)

Let my name be ever the household word
that it always was. Let it be spoken without
an effort, without the ghost of a shadow
upon it.

Henry Scott Holland

‘Manderley was no more.’

Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*

I AM SHOWN INTO a small, drab room, told to sit down and wait. Six empty brown plastic chairs face each other on tired linoleum. In a corner, a fake green plant, shiny leaves coated with dust. I do as I am told. I sit down. My thighs tremble. My palms feel clammy, my throat parched. My head throbs. I think, I should call our father now, I should call him before it gets too late. But my hand makes no effort to grab the phone in the pocket of my jeans. Call our father and tell him what? Tell him how?

The lighting is harsh, glaring strips of neon barring the ceiling. The walls are yellowish and cracked. I sit there, numb. Helpless. Lost. I long for a cigarette. I wonder if I am going to retch, bring up the bitter coffee and stale brioche I had a couple of hours ago.

I can still hear the screech of the wheels, feel the sudden lurch of the car as it veered sharply to the right, careering into the railing. And her scream. I can still hear her scream.

How many people have waited here? I think. How many people have sat where I am sitting now and waited for news of their loved ones? I cannot help imagining what these jaundiced walls have seen. What they know. What they remember. Tears, shouts or relief. Hope, pain or joy.

The minutes click by. I watch the round face of a grimy

clock above the door. There is nothing else for me to do but wait.

After half an hour or so, a nurse comes in. She has a long, horsey face, skinny white arms.

‘Monsieur Rey?’

‘Yes,’ I say, my heart in my mouth.

‘You need to fill out these papers. With her details.’

She hands me a couple of sheets and a pen.

‘Is she all right?’ I mumble.

My voice seems thin and strained.

She flickers watery, lashless eyes over me.

‘The doctor will tell you. The doctor will come.’

She leaves. She has a sad, flat arse.

I spread the sheets of paper over my knees with trembling fingers.

Name, birth date and place, marital status, address, social security number, health insurance number. My hand still shakes as I print out ‘*Mélanie Rey, born August 15, 1967, at Boulogne-Billancourt, single, 49 rue de la Roquette, Paris 75011*’.

I have no idea what my sister’s social security number is. Or her health insurance number for that matter. All that stuff must be in her bag. Where is her bag? I can’t remember anything about her bag. Just the way her body slumped forward when they hauled her out of the car. The way her limp arms hung down to the ground from the stretcher. And there I was, not a hair out of place, not a bruise on my skin, and I had been sitting right next to her. I flinch. I keep thinking I am going to wake up.

The nurse comes back with a glass of water. I gulp it down. It has a metallic, stale taste. I thank her. I tell her I don't have Mélanie's social security number. She nods, takes the sheets, and leaves.

The minutes inch by. The room is silent. It is a small hospital. A small town, I guess. In the suburbs of Nantes. I'm not quite sure where. I stink. No air-conditioning. I can smell the sweat trickling under my armpits, gathering around my groin. The sweaty, meaty smell of despair and panic. My head still throbs. I try breathing calmly. I manage to do this for a couple of minutes. Then the helpless, awful feeling takes over and swamps me.

Paris is more than three hours away. I wonder again if I should call my father. I tell myself I need to wait. I don't even know what the doctor has to say. I glance down at my watch. Ten thirty. Where would our father be now? I wonder. At some dinner party? Or watching cable TV in his study, with Régine in the next room, on the phone, painting her nails?

I decide to wait a little longer. I am tempted to call my ex-wife. Astrid's name is still the first one that pops up in times of stress or despair. But the thought of her with Serge, in Malakoff, in our old house, in our old bed, with him invariably answering the phone, even her mobile, for Christ's sake – 'Oh, hi, Antoine, what's up, man?' – is just too much. So I don't call Astrid, although I long to.

I stay in the small, stuffy room and try once more to remain calm. Try to stop the panic rising within me. I think of my kids. Arno in all his teenage glory and rebellion. Margaux, a creature of mystery at fourteen. Lucas, still a

baby at eleven, compared with the other two and their raging hormones. I simply cannot imagine myself telling them, 'Your aunt is dead. Mélanie is dead. My sister is dead.' The words make no sense. I push them away.

Another hour creeps by. I sit there, my head in my hands. I try to sort out the mess building up in my mind. I start thinking about the deadlines I need to keep. Tomorrow is Monday, and after this long weekend, there are many urgent things to be done – that unpleasant Rabagny and his god-awful day-care centre I should not have taken on; Florence, that hopeless assistant I know I have to fire. But how can I possibly think of this? I realize, appalled at myself. How can I think of my job now, at this precise moment when Mélanie is somewhere between life and death? I say to myself with a sinking heart, Why Mélanie? Why her? Why not me? This trip had been my idea. My present for her birthday. That fortieth birthday she was so upset about.

A woman of my age comes in at last. A green operating gown and one of those funny little paper hats surgeons wear. Shrewd hazel eyes, short chestnut hair touched with silver. She smiles. My heart leaps. I rush to my feet.

'That was a close call, Monsieur Rey,' she says.

I notice small brown stains on the front of her uniform. I wonder with dread whether those stains are Mélanie's blood.

'Your sister is going to be all right.'

To my horror, my face crumples up, tears spill out. My nose runs. I am acutely embarrassed to be crying in front of this woman, but I can't prevent it.

‘It’s okay,’ the doctor says. She grips my arm. She has small, square hands. She pushes me back down into the chair, sits beside me. I bawl the way I used to when I was a kid, deep sobs that come from the gut.

‘She was driving, right?’

I nod, try to tidy up my damp nostrils with the back of my hand. ‘We know she wasn’t drinking. We checked that. Can you tell me what happened?’

I manage to repeat what I told the police and the ambulance people earlier on. That my sister wanted to drive the rest of the way home. That she was a reliable driver. That I had never been nervous with her at the wheel.

‘Did she black out?’ asks the doctor. The name on her badge reads: DR BÉNÉDICTE BESSON.

‘No, she didn’t.’

And then it comes back to me. Something I had not told the ambulance people, because I only remember it just now.

I look down at the doctor’s small, tanned face. My own face is still twitching with the crying. I catch my breath.

‘My sister was in the middle of telling me something . . . She turned to me. And then it happened. The car drove off the road. It happened so fast.’

The doctor urges me on.

‘What was she telling you?’

Mélanie’s eyes. Her hands clasping the wheel. *Antoine, there’s something I need to say. I’ve kept it back all day. Last night, at the hotel, I remembered something. Something about . . .* Her eyes, troubled, worried. And then the car driving off the road.

SHE FELL ASLEEP as soon as they were able to make their way through the sluggish suburban gridlock that circled Paris. Antoine smiled as her head dropped back against the car window. Her mouth opened, and he thought he heard a tiny snore. She had been irritable that morning when he came to pick her up just after dawn. She hated surprises and always had. He knew that, didn't he? Why the hell was he organizing a surprise trip? Honestly! Wasn't it bad enough turning forty? Getting over an agonizing break-up? Never having been married, not having any kids, and people mentioning biological clocks every five minutes? 'If somebody utters that word one more time, I'll hit them,' she hissed between gritted teeth. But the idea of facing the long weekend alone was unbearable for her. He knew that. He knew she couldn't stand thinking about her hot, empty apartment above the noisy rue de la Roquette, and all her friends out of town leaving joyful messages on her voice mail: 'Hey, Mel, you're *forty*!' Forty. He glanced across at her. Mélanie, his little sister, was going to be forty. He couldn't quite believe it. Which made him forty-three. He couldn't quite believe that either.

Yet the crinkled eyes in the rear-view mirror were those of a man in early middle age. Thick salt-and-pepper

hair, a long, lean face. He noticed that Mélanie dyed her hair brown. Her roots were unmistakably grey. There was something touching about her dyeing her hair. Why? he mused. So many women dyed their hair. Maybe it was because she was his kid sister. He simply could not imagine her growing old. Her face was still lovely. Perhaps it was even lovelier than it had been in her twenties or thirties, because her bone structure had such class. He never tired of gazing at Mélanie. Everything about her was small, feminine, delicate. Everything about her – the dark green eyes, the beautiful curve of a nose, the startling white smile, the slim wrists and ankles – reminded him of their mother. She didn't like being told that she looked like Clarisse. She had never liked it. But to Antoine it was like their mother peeping out from Mélanie's eyes.

The Peugeot gathered speed, and Antoine guessed they'd probably be there in less than four hours. They had left early enough to beat the traffic. Despite her questions, he hadn't breathed a word about their destination. He had just grinned. 'Pack enough for a couple of days. We're going to celebrate your birthday in style.'

There had been a minor problem with Astrid, his ex-wife. A little smoothing-out to do. That long weekend was normally 'his'. The kids were supposed to be leaving Astrid's parents' place in the Dordogne to come to him. He had been firm on the phone. It was Mel's birthday, she was forty, he wanted to make it special for her, she still wasn't over Olivier, she was going through a bad patch. Astrid's

voice: ‘Oh, *merde*, Antoine. I’ve had the kids for the past two weeks. Serge and I really need some time for ourselves.’

Serge. Even the mere name made him cringe. A photographer in his early thirties. The muscular, rugged outdoor type. He specialized in food. *Natures mortes* for luxurious cookery books. He spent hours trying to get pasta to glisten, veal to look tasty, fruit to look luscious. Serge. Every time Antoine shook his hand when he came to pick up the children, he was confronted with the hideous recollection of Astrid’s digital camera and what he had discovered in its memory card while she was out shopping that fateful Saturday. At first, puzzled, he had seen only a pair of hairy buttocks clenching and unclenching. And then he had realized with horror that the buttocks were actually pumping a penis into what looked extraordinarily like Astrid’s body. That was how he had found out. He had confronted Astrid, laden with shopping bags, on that doomed Saturday afternoon, and she had burst into tears and admitted that she loved Serge, that the affair had been going on ever since that trip to Turkey with the kids, and that she felt so relieved that he now knew.

Antoine felt tempted to light a cigarette to ward off unpleasant memories. But he knew the smoke would wake his sister and she would make some cantankerous comment about his ‘filthy habit’. Instead, he concentrated on the road opening up before him.

Astrid still felt guilty about Serge – he felt it – about how he, Antoine, had found out about their affair. About the divorce. About the aftermath of it all. And she loved

Mélanie dearly. They had been friends for a long time, and they worked in the same field, publishing. She hadn't had the heart to say no. Astrid had sighed, 'Okay, then. The kids can come to you later. Give Mel a hell of a birthday.'

When Antoine stopped at a petrol station for a refill, Mélanie at last yawned and rolled the car window down.

'*Hé, Tonio,*' she drawled, 'where the hell are we?'

'You really have no idea?'

She shrugged.

'Nope.'

'You've been asleep for the past two hours.'

'Well, you did turn up at dawn, you bastard.'

After a quick coffee (for her) and a quick cigarette (for him), they got back into the car. She seemed less petulant, Antoine noticed. 'It's sweet of you to do this,' she said.

'Thanks.'

'You're a sweet brother.'

'I know.'

'You didn't have to. Maybe you had other plans?'

'No other plans.'

'Like a girlfriend?'

He sighed.

'No girlfriend.'

The thought of his recent affairs made him want to stop the car, get out, and weep. Since the divorce there had been a string of women. And a string of disillusion. Women he had met via the Internet on those infamous websites. Women of his age, married women, divorced women, younger women. He had thrown himself into the dating

process with gusto, determined to find it exhilarating. But after the first couple of sexually acrobatic stunts, coming back heavy-hearted and drained to his new empty apartment and his new empty bed, he found the truth staring him in the face. He had shied away from it long enough. He still loved Astrid. He had finally admitted that to himself. He still loved his ex-wife. He loved her so desperately it made him feel sick to his stomach.

Mélanie was saying, 'Probably had better, more exciting things to do than to take your spinster of a sister on a long weekend.'

'Don't be silly, Mel. This is what I want to do. I want to do this for you.'

She glanced at a signpost on the motorway.

'Hey, we're heading west!'

'Clever girl!'

'What's west?' she asked, ignoring the affectionate irony in his voice.

'Think,' he said.

'Um, Normandy? Brittany? Vendée?'

'You're on the right track.'

She said nothing, listening to the old Beatles CD Antoine had turned on. As they drove on, she uttered a little scream. 'I know! You're taking me to Noirmoutier!'

'Bingo,' he said.

But her face had sobered up. She looked down at her hands in her lap, her lips tightening.

'What's wrong?' he said, concerned. He had been ex-

pecting laughter, whoops, smiles, anything but her static face.

‘I haven’t been back there.’

‘So?’ he said. ‘Neither have I.’

‘It’s been’ – she paused to count on her slim fingers – ‘1973, right? It’s been thirty-four years. I won’t remember a thing! I was six years old.’

Antoine slowed the car.

‘It doesn’t matter. It’s just, you know, to celebrate your birthday. We did your sixth birthday there, remember?’

‘No,’ she said slowly. ‘I don’t remember a thing about Noirmoutier.’ She must have realized that she was acting like a spoiled child, because she swiftly put a hand on her brother’s arm.

‘Oh, but it doesn’t matter, Tonio. I’m happy. I am, really. And the weather is beautiful. It’s so nice to be alone with you and to get away from everything!’

By ‘everything’, Antoine knew she meant Olivier and the wreckage their break-up had left behind. And her fiercely competitive job as a publisher at one of France’s most famous publishing companies.

‘I booked us into the Hotel Saint-Pierre. You remember that, don’t you?’

‘Yes!’ she exclaimed. ‘Yes, I do! The old, lovely hotel in the woods! With Grand-père and Grand-mère . . . Oh, God, so long ago . . .’

The Beatles sang on. Mélanie hummed along. Antoine felt relieved, at peace. She liked his surprise. She was happy

to go back. But one little thing niggled at him. One little thing he hadn't taken into account when the idea of going back had occurred to him.

Noirmoutier 1973 had been their last summer with Clarisse.

WHY NOIRMOUTIER? he wondered as the car sped on and Mélanie hummed to 'Let It Be'. He had never considered himself a nostalgic person. He had never looked back. But since his divorce he had changed. Relentlessly he had found himself thinking more about the past than the present or the future. The weight of the past year, his first year alone, that dreary, solitary year, had sparked off pangs of regret, longing for his childhood, striving for happy memories. That was how the island had come back to him, timidly at first, then more powerfully and more precisely as the memories came tumbling in like letters gathering in a box.

His grandparents, regal and white-haired – Blanche with her parasol and Robert with his silver cigarette box that never left him – sitting on the shadowy hotel veranda and drinking their coffee. He would wave at them from the garden. His father's sister, Solange, plump and sunburned, reading fashion magazines in her deckchair. Mélanie, small and wiry, a floppy sunhat framing her cheeks. And Clarisse raising her heart-shaped face to the sun. And their father turning up at weekends smelling of cigar smoke and the city. And the cobbled submersible road that fascinated him as a child and still did. The Gois passage. You could only use it

at low tide. Before the bridge was built, in 1971, it was the only way to get onto the island.

He wanted to do something special for Mélanie's birthday. He had been thinking about it since April. Not just another surprise birthday party with giggling friends hiding in the bathroom and laden with bottles of champagne. No, something different. Something she would remember. He needed to shift her out of the rut she was stuck in, her job that was eating up her life, her obsession with her age, and, above all, her not getting over Olivier.

He had never liked Olivier. Stuck-up, pompous snob. He cooked superbly. Made his own sushi. Specialized in Oriental arts. Listened to Lully. Spoke four languages fluently. Knew how to waltz. And couldn't live up to commitment, even after six years with Mélanie. Olivier wasn't ready to settle down. Despite being forty-one. So he had left Mélanie only to promptly get a twenty-five-year-old manicurist pregnant. He was now the proud father of twins. Mélanie never forgave him.

Why Noirmoutier? Because they had spent unforgettable summers there. Because Noirmoutier was the symbol of the perfection of youth, of those happy-go-lucky days when the summer holidays seemed endless, when you felt you were nine years old forever. When there was nothing more promising than a perfect day on the beach with friends. When school was a century away. Why hadn't he ever taken Astrid and the children to the island? he wondered. Of course, he had told them all about it. But

Noirmoutier was his private past, he realized, his and Mélanie's, pure and untouched.

And he had wanted to spend time with his sister, just to be with her. On their own. They didn't see that much of each other in Paris, he reflected. She was always busy, lunching or dining with some author or on a book tour. He was often off visiting a building site out of town or taken up with a last-minute deadline for a job. Sometimes she came over for brunch on Sunday mornings when the children were there. She made the creamiest scrambled eggs. Yes, he found he needed to be with her, alone with her at this fragile, complicated moment of his life. His friends were important to him, he needed their mirth, their entertainment, but what he craved now was Mélanie's support, her presence, the fact that she was the only tie that linked him to his past.

He had forgotten what a long drive it was from Paris. He recalled the two cars – Robert, Blanche and Solange in the lethargic black DS Citroën with Clarisse and Mélanie, and the nervous Triumph, their father at the wheel smoking his cigar and Antoine sitting in the back feeling nauseous. It took six or seven hours, including the leisurely lunch at the little auberge near Nantes. Grand-père was particularly picky about food, wine and waiters.

Antoine wondered what Mélanie remembered of the endless drive. She was after all three years younger than he. She had said she didn't remember anything. He glanced across at her. She had stopped humming and was studying

her hands with that intent, stern expression that sometimes frightened him.

Was this a good idea? he pondered. Was she truly happy about coming back here all these years later, coming back to a place where forgotten childhood memories lingered, motionless for the moment, like the surface of untroubled water?

‘Do you remember all this?’ Antoine asked as the car climbed the broad curve of the bridge. On their right, along the mainland, rows of gigantic rotating silver windmills.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Just sitting in the car and waiting for the tide. And driving in along the Gois passage. It was fun. And our father getting so impatient because Grand-père got the tide schedule wrong again.’

He too remembered waiting for the tide. Waiting for hours for the Gois causeway to appear beneath the slowly receding waves. And there it was at last, cobbles glistening with seawater, a four-kilometre amphibian road dotted with high rescue poles with little platforms for unfortunate drivers and pedestrians stranded by the upcoming flood.

She put a quick hand on his knee.

‘Antoine, can we go back to the Gois? I really want to see it again.’

‘Of course!’

He felt elated that she had at last remembered something. And something as important and mysterious as the Passage du Gois. *Gois*. Even the word fascinated him. Pronounced like *Boa*. It was an old name for an old road.

Grand-père never took the new bridge. He grumbled

about the excessive toll and how the concrete structure's gigantic sweep scarred the landscape. So he stuck to the Gois passage despite his son's jeering at him and the long wait.

As they drove onto the island, Antoine realized that his memories of the Gois causeway were intact. He could play them back in his mind like a film. He wondered if Mélanie felt the same. The large austere cross at the beginning of the causeway came back to him. *To protect and cherish*, Clarisse used to whisper, holding his hand tight. He remembered sitting on the island shore and watching the waves dwindle into nothingness until the vast grey bank appeared like magic. Once the sea hissed away, the bank crowded over with shell searchers wielding shrimp nets. He recalled Mélanie's little legs rushing along the sand and Clarisse's plastic bucket soon overflowing with cockles, clams and periwinkles. He remembered the sharp, tangy smell of seaweed, the bite of salty wind. His grandparents looking on, benign and weathered, arm in arm. And Clarisse's long black hair aflutter. The cars would drone past along the causeway. Noirmoutier was no longer an island. He liked that idea. But the thought of the sea inching back up again, inexorable, was both thrilling and terrifying.

He had never tired of listening to gruesome Gois disaster stories. Back at the Hotel Saint-Pierre, the gardener, old *père* Benoît, layered on all the gory details. Antoine's favourite story was the one about the June 1968 accident when three people of the same family drowned. Their car got stuck as the tide came up. They didn't think of climbing

one of the nearby rescue poles. The tragedy triggered headlines. Antoine couldn't understand how a car could possibly be swept away by water and how people were unable to escape. So old *père* Benoît had taken him to watch the tide creeping in along the Gois passage.

For a long time, nothing had happened. Antoine had felt bored. Old *père* Benoît reeked of Gitanes and red wine. Then the boy noticed more and more people gathering around them. 'Look, boy,' the old man whispered. 'They've come to watch the Gois close over. Every day, at high tide, people come from far away to watch this.'

Antoine saw that there were no more cars making their way down the causeway. To his left, the immense bay filled slowly, in complete silence, like a huge transparent lake. The water seemed deeper and darker, trickling over the muddy ridges of sand. Towards the right, sudden swollen waves that had appeared from nowhere were already impatiently licking the causeway. The two separate fluxes of water came together in a strange and startling embrace that surprised him, casting a long ribbon of foam above the cobbled road. The Gois passage disappeared in a couple of seconds, engulfed by the tide. It was impossible to imagine a road had ever lain there. Now there was only the blue sea and nine rescue poles emerging from its swirling surface. Noirmoutier was an island once more. Triumphant seagulls shrieked and circled overhead. Antoine marvelled.

'You see, boy,' said *père* Benoît. 'That's how fast it goes. Some folk think they can make it inland before the tide,

only four little kilometres. But you saw that wave, didn't you? Never mess with the Gois. Remember that.'

Antoine was aware that every Noirmoutrin had a copy of the tide tables stuffed into a pocket or a glove compartment. He knew the people here never said 'When can you cross?' but 'When can you pass?' He knew they didn't measure the Gois metrically, but by its rescue poles: *The Parisian got stuck by the second rescue pole. His engine was swamped.* As a boy, he had hungrily read all the Gois books he could get his hands on.

Before this trip for Mélanie's birthday he had hunted those books down. It had taken him a while to remember that they were in a jumble of cardboard boxes in his cellar, boxes he'd never bothered to unpack since his recent divorce and move. His best-loved book was there: *The Extraordinary History of the Gois Passage.* He had opened it, smiling, remembering how he would spend hours poring over the old black-and-white photographs of wrecked cars poking their bumpers out of seawater under a rescue pole. He decided to take the book with him, and as he closed it, a white card came fluttering out. Intrigued, he picked it up.

*To Antoine, for his birthday,
so that the Gois passage no longer
holds any mysteries for you.*

*Your loving Maman
January 7, 1972*

He hadn't seen his mother's handwriting for a long time. Something pricked the back of his throat. He had quickly put the card away.

Mélanie's voice brought him back.

'Why didn't we drive in on the Gois?' she asked.

He smiled apologetically. 'Sorry. Forgot to check the tide schedule.'

The first thing they noticed was how Barbâtre had thrived. It was no longer the small village overlooking the beach that they remembered, but a bustling place boasting modern bungalows and a shopping centre. The island roads were thick with traffic, another nasty surprise. The summer season was at its peak for the long weekend of August 15, but when they reached the north end of the island, they saw to their relief that nothing much had changed. They entered the Bois de la Chaise, a green stretch of pine trees and holm oaks strewn with curiously different-styled houses that used to amuse Antoine so as a child: nineteenth-century Gothic villas, logwood summer chalets, Basque-like farms, English manors, all bearing names that came back to Antoine like old friends' faces: Le Gaillardin, Les Balises, La Maison du Pêcheur.

Mélanie suddenly exclaimed, 'I do remember this!' She swept her hand towards the windscreen. 'All this!'

Antoine could not make out whether she was happy or nervous. He felt a little anxious. They turned into the hotel gates, wheels crunching on white gravel. Strawberry bushes and mimosas lined the drive. It hadn't changed, he thought, slamming the car door. No, it hadn't changed at all,

but it looked a good deal smaller. The same thatch of ivy creeping up the façade. The same dark green door, the same blue-carpeted entrance, the stairs on the right.

They went to stand by the large bay window that looked out to the garden. The same hollyhocks, the same fruit trees, pomegranate trees, eucalypti and oleanders. It was shockingly familiar. Even the smell lingering in the entrance was familiar. A musty, humid odour enhanced with beeswax and lavender, with fresh, clean linen and vestiges of good, rich food. The particular smell that old, large houses by the sea carry year after year. Before Antoine could mention the wonderfully recognizable smell to his sister, they were greeted by a buxom young lady sitting behind the reception desk. Rooms 22 and 26. Second floor.

On their way up, they peeped into the dining room. It had been repainted. Neither of them recalled that lurid pink, but the rest was exactly the same. Faded sepia photographs of the Gois, watercolours of Noirmoutier castle, of the salt marshes, of the Bois de la Chaise regatta. Same wicker chairs, same square tables covered with starched white tablecloths. Nothing had changed.

Mélanie whispered, 'We used to come down the stairs for dinner. You had your hair plastered down with eau de cologne, and you wore a navy blue jacket and a yellow Lacoste shirt . . .'

'Yes!' He laughed and pointed to the largest table in the room, the one in the middle. 'We used to sit there. That was our table. And you wore pink and white smocked dresses

from that posh shop on the avenue Victor-Hugo and a matching ribbon in your hair.'

How proud and important he used to feel as he came down those blue-carpeted stairs in his blazer, his hair combed like a *petit monsieur*, and from their table Robert and Blanche looking on fondly, a martini for Blanche, a whisky on the rocks for Robert. Solange, sipping her champagne with her little finger in the air. And everybody used to look up from their dinner and admire the entrance of these beautifully groomed children, cheeks pink from the sun, hair smoothed back. Yes, they were the Rey family. The wealthy, respectable, impeccable, proper Rey family. They had the best table. Blanche gave the biggest tips. She had seemingly endless supplies of rolled-up ten-franc notes in her Hermès bag. The Rey table demanded constant, careful attention from the staff. Robert's glass always had to be half full. Blanche wanted no salt whatsoever because of her blood pressure. Solange's *sole meunière* had to be perfectly prepared, without the slightest, smallest fish bone, or she'd make a fuss.

Antoine wondered if anybody here remembered the Rey family. The girl at the reception desk was too young. Who recalled the patrician grandparents, the officious daughter, the gifted son who only came at weekends, the well-behaved children?

And the beautiful daughter-in-law.

All of a sudden, the precise memory of his mother coming down those stairs in a black strapless dress hit him in the chest like a blow. Her long black hair, still damp from

the shower, twisted up into a chignon, her tiny, slim feet in suede pumps. Everybody watching as she glided into the room with that dancer's step she had passed on to Mélanie. He could see her so clearly it hurt. The freckles on the bridge of her nose. The pearls in her earlobes.

‘What’s wrong?’ Mélanie asked. ‘You look peculiar.’

‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘Let’s go to the beach.’