

ROSE TREMAIN, THE AMERICAN LOVER AND  
OTHER STORIES (2014)

*Lucy and Gaston*

*Southwold Beach, Suffolk, England, June 1976*

When the others decide to go swimming, Lucy stays in her deckchair. She watches them run towards the ocean – husband, daughter, friends. They're the dearest people in the world to her.

The day is hot and Lucy's head is sweating under her straw hat. Lucy's daughter, Hannah, tries to persuade her to come with them to the water, 'just as far as the edge, Mum, just to paddle and cool off'. So she gets up from her deckchair, wondering whether, this time, in this affectionate company, she'll be able to bear it and not shrink from it any more: the chill of the sea. But then, she raises her head and sees it complete, the vast and heartless, shining bay, and she sits down again and says to Hannah, 'No, sorry, darling. I'm not ready.'

Hannah, who is an almost-beautiful young woman of thirty-two, takes Lucy's hand in hers. As the others begin a little joyful race towards the breaking waves, she says gently, 'Do you think you ever will be ready?'

'I don't know,' says Lucy. 'I keep thinking something will happen, and then I won't feel it any more and I'll be OK.'

But that day doesn't seem to come. I'm fifty-six and it still hasn't come. I know it's pathetic. I really am sorry.'

Hannah kisses the hand she was holding and returns it tenderly to her mother's side. 'You don't need to be sorry. Nobody minds. It's just you we're thinking about.'

'I know. And on a day like this, in this heat, it's ridiculous, but there we are.'

Lucy tries to light a cigarette. Her hand holding the lighter shakes. The lighter flame is snuffed out by the breeze. Hannah calmly takes everything, lights the cigarette and gives it to Lucy and when Lucy has inhaled a long draught of it, she says: 'I had a dream about him last night.'

'About Dad?'

'That dream I have sometimes. Mermaids, or young women like mermaids, swim down to him. He's lying there on the seabed. Absolutely just as beautiful as he was. And the women, or mermaids or whatever they are, start chattering to each other, saying, "Hey, look at this man. So sweet in his uniform. Isn't he a darling?"'

'And they cluster round Dad. They stroke him. They don't kiss him. It's not erotic, really. They just stroke him till all the creases in his uniform are gone and his hair – you remember his blond hair in the photographs? – is all smoothed down and tidy. Then, one of them says, "we'd better go. He's not ours." And they swim away.'

'I think that's quite a lovely dream, Mum,' says Hannah. 'And they were right: he wasn't theirs. He was yours.'

'Well, yes, just for the briefest time. Just long enough to give me you.'

The two women are quiet. Lucy smokes. Hannah looks to where her stepfather, Ray, and his friends, Peter and

Monica, are now making their way through the low breakers, jumping like children. Along the beach comes a man on an old bicycle, selling iced Coca-Cola from a little cart drawn after the bike.

'Darling,' says Lucy, 'that would be lovely. A Coke. Wouldn't it?'

*The farm of La Charité, south of Caen, France, June 1976*

Gaston eats his lunch in the shade of a holm-oak plantation. His thirty-year-old son, Paul, is with him. They drink from a stone bottle of cider and feel contented with the fine summer day and with the world. Gaston looks up at Paul, to where sunlight catches the smooth, tanned skin of his cheek, and says: 'You know you've got your grandfather's good looks. Lucky for you. They skipped a generation with me, but you got them.'

Paul says nothing to this. He's heard it many times before and he doesn't need his father to tell him he's handsome. Girls tell him without saying a word. He bets he's already had far more girls than Gaston ever dreamed of. Girls feast on Paul, as though he were made of honey. He changes the subject. He says, 'Have you thought any more about my suggestion for the drainage of the wet-meadow, Papa? You know we should plant the trees before the autumn rains.'

But Gaston is still preoccupied with the resemblance of his son to his own father, killed on the road not far from where they sit in the beautiful oak shade. He chews his sandwich and says with his mouth full, 'Sometimes he'd look at me, your grandfather, your dear Pappi, Antoine, whom you

never knew. He'd stare at me with that amused look he had, and say: "You've got a funny old mug, Gaston. But never mind. With boys, it's the heart that counts and you've got a good heart. Lucky you're not a girl, eh?" He used to say that from time to time: "Lucky you're not a girl!"

Paul smiles. This, too, he's heard before.

'I've calculated,' Paul says, 'that we could plant thirty willows, leaving plenty of space in between for growth to full maturity. Thirty willows would drink that meadow dry and all the autumn flood problems would be solved.'

'He talked about it once: about willow trees. Pappi talked about it. Never did it, though. Killed on the road to Caen before he could buy the saplings . . .'

Paul looks over to Gaston. Sometimes – and now is one of those times – he seems much older than his fifty years. He appears to Paul like an old man, choking up with half-remembered things, as though there were a great struggle going on inside him to find, in among all that was half-remembered, those moments which had been absolute and true.

And nobody helps him do this by encouraging him to say what is on his mind. Paul's mother, Solange, lives her life in the corners of rooms, furtive in her gestures, stepping from hearth to table so silently, it's as if she were wearing cloth shoes. Before Gaston met and married her, she'd wanted to be a nun. Perhaps she's never stopped wanting to be a nun? Perhaps silence was what she longed for, and still longs for, in the world? But she took pity on Gaston – so alone in 1944, so terrified to find himself an orphan at nineteen. He had clung to Solange and couldn't bear to let her go. In the nights, they'd both screamed, like children in pain.

Pity for Gaston's memory-cluttered mind suddenly chokes Paul, and he says: 'Talk to me some more about Pappi. Was he still handsome when he died?'

'Oh yes,' says Gaston. 'That's for sure. He was my age, or older. But I can see him walking home up the lane, muddy from his day in the fields, tired too, I reckon, but he didn't let that show. He was a fine man. I worshipped him. I used to say to myself, I'd do anything to get his love. I'd imagine all kinds of madcap things, like becoming a war hero, to make him proud of me. I used to think there wasn't anything I wouldn't do, if he asked me. Not a single thing on earth. I was ready to commit a crime. *Anything*. And I did.'

'You did what?'

'No, I mean I *was*. I was ready to do anything for Pappi. I went on and on thinking, or believing, that what I did, I did *for his sake*. To make him proud. You see?'

'He'd be proud of how you've kept the farm going. Proud of everything at La Charité.'

'You think so?'

'Yes. It's ship-shape. It pays a good living . . .'

'Good enough for you and me. But you'll never be rich.'

Gaston lapses into silence, finishes his lunch and then lights a Gitane. The flattish cigarette still adheres miraculously to his lips as he says suddenly, 'I'm not keen on this idea you've got for planting willows.'

'Why not?'

'Too expensive, son.'

'We could do it over two seasons.'

'No. It's not worth the labour. What's a bit of flood water

in October? I like that meadow as it is, as it's always been. Let's leave it alone.'

*RAF Base, Tangmere, Sussex, England, May 1944*

Everybody knew that the D-Day landings in Normandy were going to come soon and that the RAF pilots would then be in combat over France.

Lucy's friend Patricia had said to her: 'The thing I think is going to be most important for them is that when they come back from a sortie . . . from facing German flak and all that awfulness . . . I think it's going to be really important that we look beautiful for them. Don't you agree, Lucy?'

Lucy went and stared at herself in the mirror. She had no idea whether she was beautiful or not. She had blue eyes and mousy hair. Her mother had never said she was pretty. But then, when she'd met Geoffrey, one of the most handsome men she'd ever laid eyes on, he'd told her she was lovely. That was the word he'd used: *lovely*. *My lovely Lucy*.

With wartime restrictions, they couldn't have what Lucy's mother termed 'a proper wedding'. But they had made their vows in church and Lucy had worn a little white velvet hat and carried a posy of lily of the valley, and Geoffrey had looked a dish in his RAF uniform, and Lucy had believed she was the most fortunate young woman in the world. Later, in the cool March night, when they were making love, Lucy thought, Now he must never leave me. Now, he is inside me for ever, part of my being. I shall never let him go.

They talked, in a sweet, companionable way, about their future. They wanted children and a house of their own with

a garden, where these children could play. They agreed about everything. Their dreams were identical. And when, in May 1944, Lucy told Geoffrey she was pregnant, he did a little dance of happiness.

'Darling,' he said, 'that is pure heaven! We're going to have a great life.'

Of course, they had to talk about the war and what was going to happen after the Normandy Landings. Geoffrey was flying Typhoons. He said, 'The Typhoons are incredibly strong and impressive, but actually, I loved my old Spitfire. I could stand on the ground and reach up and pat the cockpit, like you pat a horse, but the Typhoon dwarfs me. Climbing into it is a feat of mountaineering. You can get to feel that your plane doesn't think much of you.'

'Oh darling,' said Lucy, 'let me go and talk to your silly old plane, then. I'll tell it you're the best pilot in England!'

So even that – that talking about the war and the battle to come, leavened as it was by little jokes and expressions of tenderness – was never as painful as it might have been. Nothing, thought Lucy, will ever be really painful again, as long as Geoffrey and I are together, as long as he loves me.

Yet now, her face in the mirror, touched up by a tiny dab of rouge, because the pregnancy made her pale, reflected back at Lucy something she didn't want to see; it reflected fear.

*The farm of La Charité, south of Caen, France, May 1944*

At eighteen, Gaston shared the burden of all the farm work with his father, Antoine.

It was just the two of them, now. Gaston's mother had



been shot while visiting a relative in Caen on the day the Germans marched into the city. Her body was carried back to La Charité on a hay cart.

Though Gaston mourned his mother, the thing which terrified him most was the idea that he could lose his father. For he saw that his father was an exceptional man: strong, handsome, hard-working and kind. He is, thought Gaston, the rock on which my life rests. If anything or anyone takes him away, I'm going to be helpless.

He began to watch over him.

Instead of getting up at five thirty to start the milking, he rose at five o'clock, so that Antoine wouldn't have to sit so long on the hard milking stool. He took down his mother's old recipe book and taught himself how to make nourishing *daubes*, *cassoulets* and *crêpes*, to make sure his father had a good diet. Instead of letting Antoine go alone to sell their surplus produce at the market, he insisted on accompanying him – just in case 'something bad' happened on the road. In this occupied land, it was impossible to predict how things might change from week to week, or even from hour to hour.

Word had reached La Charité that there was going to be an invasion soon, from across La Manche. The news went round that it was going to be massive and that the Germans would be driven out of France in a matter of weeks.

Gaston and Antoine talked about the 'liberators' who were going to come: de Gaulle's brave army, of course, but also British, American, Canadian, Australian and who knew what other nationalities. They tried to imagine this vast army massing in England somewhere, but it was difficult to see it, difficult to believe that it would actually arrive. And what would the Germans do, when or if it did arrive? Would they

burn the farms? Would they kill everyone and everything in their pathway as they retreated?

'What we have to do,' said Antoine, 'is to stay alert. There may be fighting all around us. We have to be careful and hold our nerve, so that we're not caught in a trap, like fools. And dust off your rosary, Gaston. God can't be on the German side any more.'

*RAF Base, Tangmere, Sussex, England, June 1944*

Lucy had been taken to see the Typhoons. She had touched the fuselage of one with her small, white hand. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, she said to Geoffrey, 'Is it going to get very terrible now, darling?'

'No, no. You mustn't worry. The guns will barely catch our shirt-tails!' Geoffrey reassured her. 'We're just going to give those ill-mannered panzers a lesson they'll never forget.'

Lucy went to find her friend and said: 'I'm so frightened, Patricia. I want to be strong for Geoffrey. I don't want to feel terrified like this. I want to be like Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine. Is there a knack to it?'

'Yes,' said Patricia. 'I think there is. What I do, whenever Simon goes out on a mission, I imagine he's gone to the bookies.'

'The bookies?'

'Yes. You try it, Lucy. Imagine Geoffrey's just popped out to put a little bet on the two-thirty at Newbury. Try to see him there, at the bookies' window, with all the fug round him that's in those places, and those old geezers you see there,

keeping their trousers up with string and laying their last ha'pennies on the gee-gees.'

'Gosh,' said Lucy. 'Does that work?'

'Yup. If your imagination's good enough. You have to be able to truly *imagine* things. I mean, I can actually see Simon walking out of the bookies' shop and sauntering home, cool and calm, with nothing to worry about except, will his horse win at Newbury? If he's late and it gets dark, then you've got to pretend he's gone into a pub and had a pint and then another pint or a whisky or something. But he's quite safe, OK? Simon's safe. Geoffrey's safe. They won't be hurt. They won't die. And soon enough, they'll come walking in the door.'

The next time Geoffrey flew, Lucy wrote to her mother: *I'm trying to imagine Geoffrey's gone to the bookies. My friend, Patricia says this should be easy. You just have to picture it. The trouble is I'm not sure I've ever been in a bookies' shop. So I can't quite decide what it would be like. What I think I'm going to have to do is to believe Geoffrey's at his club in London (where I haven't ever been, either, but I can somehow imagine it better, with palms in pots and waiters in tailcoats et cetera) and then he's going to get a train home and walk in the door, clutching some potted meat he's bought at Fortnum's.*

She paused here in her letter because she knew something was troubling her, and then she realised what it was: evening was coming on and Geoffrey hadn't returned.

She patted her hair, drew herself up taller in the chair, because she knew that Queen Eleanor had been tall – tall and strong and never giving up or giving in.

She resumed her letter. *The thing is, Mummy, she wrote, whatever trick stops me from being afraid I'm going to use.*

*I've told myself that if I never give in to fear, then no harm will come to Geoffrey.*

*The farm of La Charité, south of Caen, France, June 1976*

The weather was so fine and warm now that it was difficult to believe summer would ever end and autumn arrive, with its winds and floods. But arrive it would. The previous year, the floods had crept almost to the house, and so Paul was determined to have one last try at persuading Gaston to start planting willows in the back meadow that bordered the stream.

One hot afternoon, while Gaston was taking his siesta, Paul fetched a pick and a shovel from the barn and walked to the back meadow and began to dig. What he wanted to show his father was that, even now, when no rain had fallen for two or three weeks, this land was boggy and the water-table still so high that, when the river broke its bank, it was unable to absorb much water at all, putting the house at risk from flood damage. The statistics on drainage by willow plantation were very good; the trees would certainly solve the problem. Paul just couldn't understand why Gaston was being so obstinate about this.

The ground was hard at first. Paul had to cut away the layer of thick summer grass, then smash into the earth with the heavy pick. But no more than a half a metre down, the soil darkened and softened. Paul decided to widen the hole, so that he could stand in it and keep shovelling out the earth. He reasoned that when Gaston saw how relatively easy it was to dig in this meadow, he would relent and order the trees. Paul worked out he would be able to plant four

or five saplings a day. In a week, the whole task could be completed.

Bringing the pick hard down again, to make the hole bigger, Paul suddenly felt a jarring pain in his arm. The pick had hit a stone.

He nursed his arm for a moment and took a drink of water, and wiped the sweat from his neck. Then, he took the shovel and began to scrape carefully across and round the stone, to see how large it was.

The sun was still high, and as Paul stood up to rest, he saw it glinting on the stone. Except that the stone was not a stone. It was something that looked as though it were made of some kind of glass or Perspex. He couldn't think what this could be, unless, long ago, there had been a greenhouse or cold frames out here, which had been allowed to fall down and lie buried in the earth, but he could never remember any such structure and Gaston was not a man to let anything fall to ruin.

Paul tapped at the glass gently with the pick. He expected it to crack, but it didn't. Scraping away more soil, he unearthed a rusty metal bar, holding the glass structure in place and at the end of the bar was a handle. Paul stared at this. Clearing debris and stones from it, he put his hand into it and pulled upwards, but nothing moved. Whatever it was he'd found was clamped shut by time and weather.

He sat down beside it and smoked a cigarette. The sun went in and when he looked again at the strange structure, he seemed to see it afresh and formed a new idea of what it might be: it was the canopy that covered the cockpit of a plane.

*RAF Base, Tangmere, Sussex, England, June 1944*

Lucy sat very still, listening to the eight o'clock news.

She'd tried to eat some supper: a slice of tinned ham and a baked potato. But it had been impossible to eat. She tipped the food away.

The BBC newsreader told her that fighting in Northern France was still very heavy. German resistance was proving 'stronger than expected' and Allied progress was slow. 'Hopes,' said the newsreader, 'of liberating the beleaguered city of Caen have been temporarily deferred.'

Lucy switched off the wireless and went and lay down on her bed and put her hand on her belly, where the baby lay safe and nourished inside her. There was still plenty of light in the sky – enough, Lucy thought, to allow the pilots to find their way home. Geoffrey would still have fuel left. There was no need to worry about him yet . . .

She set herself to imagining Geoffrey in his club, sitting in an over-stuffed leather chair, comfortable and happy, smoking a cheroot, listening to the musical ticking of a mantelpiece clock, letting just a little more time go by until he got up and said goodnight to the people he knew there and walked out into the darkness and then home through her front door.

But now, with a swoon of terror, she knew he wasn't going to come home. He was never going to come home. On this day, the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 1944, he had died.

Lucy got up and ran to Patricia's house and beat on the door. Simon opened it and Lucy fell into Simon's arms. 'He's gone!' she cried out. 'I know it! I feel it! Geoffrey's gone, Simon!'



She broke down and sobbed and Patricia came and put her arms round her and round Simon. They let her cry for a long time, then they sat her down on a sofa and Simon gave her a glass of brandy. He kneeled by her and said: 'We were going to come and see you, but we didn't because there's still hope, Lucy. We've seen this before: planes limping home . . . after we'd almost given up. And Geoffrey's a brilliant flyer. We know he was still alive at nineteen hundred hours. He was in the Caen-Falaise area. He'd been hit in the tail but he radioed in that he still had buoyancy and had a good chance of making it across the Channel . . .'

Lucy stared at her friends.

*Still alive at nineteen hundred hours.*

Now, it was nearly nine o'clock and she could see it all as clearly as though she had been watching a motion picture: the burning Typhoon goes into the sea. It sinks down the fathoms, turning over and over, and Geoffrey's body falls out of the open cockpit and begins its own slow descent, with his arms outstretched.

How deep was the sea? How many minutes did it take for the body to reach the ocean floor and lie still, among the starfish?

*The farm of La Charité, south of Caen, France, June 1944*

Hoing peas in the field which bordered the Caen road, Gaston heard the plane and looked up.

The sight of the Typhoon in the distance thrilled him. They'd been seen in the skies for ten days now. The pilots, British and American, flying low, would wave at the French

farmers in the fields. The waves said: *It's all right. We're on your side. You've got nothing to fear from us. The liberation of France is coming!*

This one was still quite far away. It banked and turned and at the top of the turn, the engine seemed to stutter for a moment, but then down it came again and began to approach the boundary of La Charité, and Gaston could now see anti-aircraft shells exploding in the sky. The Boche were firing at the plane.

Gaston leaned on his hoe and stared up. He wanted to wave at the beleaguered plane – *I'm on your side!* – but he knew he was too far away, as yet, to be seen by the pilot. He took off his cap.

Then, at the corner of his vision, he saw something coming towards him down the Caen road, and he didn't recognise at first what this was, because the heat in the air made far-off things shimmer and break apart. Then, he recognised it as the pony-cart Antoine had driven out in earlier, to take tomatoes and marrows to their neighbour, poor Madame Marzan, who could no longer care for her own vegetable plot.

Gaston raised his cap, to wave to his father in the pony-cart, to wave to the British pilot. Though the roar of the Typhoon's engine afflicted him, he thought optimistically of the time that was coming, when the war would be over, when the Germans would be gone and all would return to a sweet quiet at La Charité, leaving him and his father alone to work and prosper. And he longed for this – for the skies to be empty, for his heart to be still.

Again, he heard gunfire. The plane seemed to bounce and shudder, as though the pilot might have lost control of it.



More shells exploded in the air. Gaston threw down his hoe, jumped the shallow ditch and stepped onto the road. The plane dropped lower and began to follow the line of the road. Then, from under its wings, bright flashes appeared. The plane was firing its guns.

Gaston gaped. The attack on the Typhoon was clearly being mounted from behind it but now, the pilot was strafing the road ahead. Fountains of earth and stones burst upwards as the shells hit. With no thought for his own safety, Gaston bolted towards his father in the pony-cart. He could hear the horse whinnying in terror. Then, he saw Antoine climb out of the cart and try to run towards the ditch, but he didn't reach the ditch. Bits of the road rose up and danced, momentarily, around Antoine and flung him on his face.

As Gaston stumbled on towards his father, the plane banked again and turned and flew westwards, heading for the sea.

*Southwold Beach, Suffolk, England, June 1976*

The light drains from the sky and the sea appears grey and flat, but the air is still warm.

Lucy and Ray's friends, Peter and Monica, own a beach hut and are preparing a simple supper for them and for Hannah, who sit on the hut's little veranda and sip white wine.

Ray says to Lucy, 'You know, I've never known the sea so warm here. Today would have been an ideal day for you to try it.'

'I'm sure it would,' says Lucy.

'I mean,' says Ray, 'it honestly barely felt cold for a moment. I know you always think it's going to be freezing, but today it wasn't.'

'Perhaps I'll try it next time,' says Lucy.

'Yeah, but you *won't*,' insists Ray. 'There'll always be some reason why you can't get near it. And it's a bit mad . . . after all this time.'

'It doesn't matter, Ray,' says Hannah. 'It doesn't matter if Mum never goes into the sea again in her whole life.'

'Well, it doesn't *matter*, in any significant sense of the word. It just strikes me as a bit bizarre, because I think Mum could conquer this, if she tried.'

'She does try.'

'She doesn't. She just sits there. She could put a toe in the water, just a toe, to see what it felt like, but she won't even do that.'

'No,' says Lucy. 'Ray's right. I don't try. I'm still waiting.'

'Waiting?' says Ray. 'Waiting for what?'

'Just waiting.'

'I don't know what you mean. Waiting for Geoffrey to come back from the dead, or what?'

'That's a horrible thing to say,' says Hannah.

'Yes, it is,' says Ray. 'I'm sorry I just get . . . annoyed with it all sometimes. Things should be *over* when they're over, but I've lived with this for twenty years.'

Silence falls on the little veranda and there are only the sounds of Peter and Monica making the supper, talking quietly to each other. Lucy lights a cigarette and says: 'I know I've said this before, but I do sometimes think that something will come, that something will happen . . . I mean, you hear

about this, about people being cured of their phobias and fears, don't you? I've read about it: people who are afraid of things for years and years and then a day comes and they realise, they're not terrified any more. They can face it, whatever it is.'

'I expect it's because they've spent some time with a psychiatrist, who has helped them to conquer stuff. And I don't know why you've always refused to do this.'

'What can a psychiatrist tell me, Ray? I'm afraid of the sea – repelled by it – because Geoffrey's plane went down into it and his body has lain there, unburied, for thirty-two years, and I know that if I went swimming, I'd feel as though I was treading on Geoffrey's face. How can anything a psychiatrist says alter that simple fact?'

Ray turns away. Lucy sips her wine. The sighing of the sea suddenly seems louder than before. After a moment, Peter comes through with a dish of crudités, sliced salami and olives.

'Fodder,' he says. 'More coming. All rather simple. Pretend you're in France.'

*The farm of La Charité, south of Caen, France, June 1976*

By the time Gaston wakes from his siesta and goes looking for his son, Paul has unearthed the entire canopy of the plane's cockpit.

Sweating in the afternoon sun, he crouches down and touches the glass, then tries to wipe it clear of the earth that clings to it. Below the glass, he can now see a lumpen shape, and he thinks that this is the shape of the dead pilot, bone

and dust now, but somehow held together by his helmet and his flying jacket.

What he feels is a mingling of shock and thrill.

He looks up and sees Gaston coming towards him. He watches his father's face. Gaston says nothing and Paul says nothing. Gaston comes and stands near his son, looking down at the plane in the earth. Then, he buries his face in his hands. 'No!' he cries. 'No!'

Paul leads him away. They sit down in the kitchen. Paul finds a bottle of Calvados and pours a shot for Gaston. He waits in silence a long while. Gaston drinks the Calvados and stares out at the room, as though the room might be a place he'd never visited before.

Eventually, he begins to talk. His voice is choked and quiet.

'That day in June,' he says, 'the day Pappi died on the road, I carried Pappi's body home in my arms. I laid him out here, on the table, and he was still warm and blood was still leaking from his wounds. I could do nothing. All I did was kiss his face. His face hadn't been touched. The wounds were to his spine.'

'I stroked his hair. I howled like a fox.'

'Later, when the sun was beginning to go down, around eight o'clock, I left him and went out to get a breath of air, and to try to think what I could do. But I couldn't think of anything to do. I was alone now. And I was all muddled and conflicted in my head, because Pappi had been killed, not by the Germans, but by a Typhoon – by a British pilot, who was meant to be on our side. And I thought, The world is finished for me now.'

Gaston holds out his glass and Paul refills it with Calvados.

Tears begin to roll down Gaston's cheeks as he says: 'I've kept the damn thing a secret for all this time, because of that. Because of my anger. Because, after that day, I've never been happy and calm in my mind again. I know it was wrong of me. That pilot should have had a proper burial, with honours. He was as brave as the next man, and I knew that. With the flak coming at him, he was confused, that's all. He mistook Pappi's cart for a German jeep, or some damn enemy truck. But I couldn't forgive him. I've never forgiven him. I did what I did and that's the end of it.'

Gaston weeps. Paul lays his hand on his father's bowed head.

'Tell me what happened next, Papa,' he says gently.

Gaston fumbles for a handkerchief, blows his nose and says: 'It was when I went out to get that breath of air, around eight, that I heard the plane again – the Typhoon. I looked up and there it was, that murdering plane, and it was coming towards La Charité again, but this time it was on fire.

'I cried out. It was coming lower and lower all the time and I thought it was going to take out the house and Pappi's body in the kitchen – everything.

'I shouted and screamed at it. I swore blue murder at the air. If I'd had a gun with me, I would have fired it, to make sure the pilot who'd killed Pappi paid with his life.

'But it didn't touch the house. It sailed over it, with flames streaming behind, like a comet's tail. Then it fell. It just plunged into the ground, in the middle of the water-meadow. It went into that muddy earth, and the impact was so great that the earth took it and seemed to swallow it up. The flames were snuffed out. Everything ended for it in that last fall – for the pilot and for the plane. There was a little smoke, not

much, some fragments of blackened metal. The field swallowed it all.'

Solange comes home from her visit to Caen and piles her shopping on the kitchen table. When she looks at the faces of her husband and son, her hand flies up to the silver crucifix she wears round her neck.

'What's happened?' she asks. Yet Solange's voice is so quiet that the question almost isn't there.

*Lucy and Ray's house, Westleton, Suffolk, June 1976*

Ray takes the call from the French Embassy in London. The Chargé d'Affaires is both formal and apologetic. In elegant terms, he outlines the strange circumstances: the rediscovery of the Typhoon, the dating of the crash, the identification of the pilot, the remorse of the farmer, in whose field the plane lay buried for so long. The French State, he says, wishes – in the near future – to hold some commemoration ceremony for a brave British serviceman.

Ray thanks him for his courtesy. He sits down and calls Lucy to his side and takes her hand and says: 'They think they've found Geoffrey. He didn't go down into the sea. He went down into a field south of Caen.'

Lucy is mute. Her brain feels as though somebody had thrown a black cloth over it. She stares at Ray.

'No,' she says, after a while. 'He told Control he was heading for the Channel.'

'Yes, heading for it,' says Ray, 'but he didn't make it. His plane fell into a field and apparently the impact was so great, the earth just closed up around it.'



Lucy reaches for a cigarette and Ray lights it for her.

'I don't know what to do . . .' she says.

'Well,' says Ray, 'the French are offering to pay for a funeral in Normandy – with full military honours. You may want to go to this. Hannah and I will be with you, of course. You can invite as many people as you like. Geoffrey's RAF friends? Simon and what-was-her-name? The French just need a little time to make the arrangements.'

Lucy smokes. She raises her head and looks out of the window at the fine summer afternoon and she thinks, It would have been an afternoon like this, with a clear sky and the birds singing in the hawthorn, and there he fell and rested, and the grass grew over him and the seasons came and went and the frost hardened the earth around him and sealed him in.

'How do they definitely know it's Geoffrey?' she asked.

Ray cleared his throat. 'Erm . . . his plane, Lucy. His flying jacket. Papers . . .'

'Yes,' she says. 'Yes, of course. Those things just . . . endure . . .'

'Do you think you can bear to go to Normandy, to see him buried – the remains, I mean? They say he'll lie alongside some of the RAF men he knew.'

'I want to see him buried,' says Lucy. 'I want him to have a proper coffin . . . and a flag draped on it. Geoffrey loved the flag. But there's one thing I don't understand, Ray. Didn't anybody see the plane go down? Why didn't someone dig Geoffrey out?'

Ray gets up and begins to pace around the room. He wishes Hannah were here to help him with this moment.

'One man knew,' he says quietly. 'His name is Gaston.'

Apparently Geoffrey's guns killed Gaston's father by mistake on the Caen road. So he let Geoffrey and the plane just lie there, swallowed up by the field. He thought nobody would ever find them. He feels remorse now, but none at the time. I suppose that's how it was in nineteen forty-four.'

*The British Cemetery at Bayeux, north-west of Caen,  
France, July 1976*

The short service is conducted by a French priest, assisted by an English rector from the Protestant church in Bayeux. The Mayor of Bayeux and Deputy Mayor attend, as do the Mayor of Caen and his wife. A small contingent from a French regimental band accompany the hymn-singing and then play an old English wartime song, hastily learned: 'We'll Meet Again'. A bright sun shines on the thousand white gravestones of Bayeux. A local photographer walks quietly around, taking pictures.

There are other French people there, some in Army uniform, and Lucy has no idea who they are or why they've joined the gathering, to bury a long-dead English pilot. She looks round the faces, but recognises no one aside from the few old friends who have come with her and Ray from England.

She has been handed a rose, to throw into the coffin, once it's been lowered into the ground. She and Hannah walk side by side to the grave's edge to throw in their flowers, then they cling together as they walk away. Lucy watches other people approach the grave and let the roses fall. It's done, in every case, with reverence and precision. Each mourner walks to



the grave, throws in his flower, inclines his head, and withdraws. The band begin their slow rendering of 'We'll Meet Again'.

Then, one man, aged sixty or so, Lucy guesses, and dressed in a Sunday suit, comes forward. He isn't carrying a rose, but a bouquet of wild meadow flowers. He is weeping. He stands, looking down into the grave. Then he kneels and reaches down and places his flowers on the coffin. And, at once, Lucy knows who this is.

When the ceremony is over, Lucy makes her way towards this man. She touches his arm. '*Vous êtes Gaston,*' she says. '*Je suis Lucy.*'

Gaston bows to her. Then he raises his hands in a gesture that says, *What has happened is inexpressible in words.*

Yet Lucy wants there to be some words. In her halting French, she tells Gaston that she is sorry, very, very sorry, that Gaston's father was killed by her husband. 'If he had known . . .' she stammers, 'he would not have fired the guns. I know he would not have fired.'

'I believe that, too,' says Gaston. 'I believe it now. But when I saw my father fall, in the middle of a summer afternoon . . .'

They stand, face to face. Gaston clutches Lucy's hand. Then, he says, 'I hope you can forgive me, Lucy. You lost your husband, the father of your daughter . . .'

This is brave of Gaston. Lucy sees that the man is still fighting back tears, and she reassures him that he is forgiven. She wants to say that the image of Geoffrey lying in the earth in Gaston's field is preferable to the one she has lived with for thirty-two years, of his drowned body decaying on the cold ocean bed, but she knows her French will tangle on this

complicated sentence, so she only says again: 'I understand why you did what you did. I understand it.'

They clasp each other's hands. The feel of Gaston's rough hand holding tight to hers is strangely comforting. There is something eternal in it. And at the edge of their vision, they are aware of Hannah and Paul standing quietly and talking together and Gaston looks over at them and says: 'We are fortunate, Lucy, that our young people are untouched. See how beautiful they are?'

'Yes,' says Lucy, 'they are.' But she knows the encounter must end now; Gaston wouldn't be able to bear another minute of it. She nods to Gaston and turns to leave, but as she turns, she says: 'Gaston, you said your father died "in the middle of the afternoon". Can you remember what time it was?'

Gaston shakes his head. 'All I know is, the sun was still very high. It made mirages on the road. I'd say it was about four o'clock - the time you have your English tea!'

'Thank you, Gaston,' says Lucy. 'Thank you.'

He bows. She walks away. She is holding the Union Jack that she has been given, neatly folded, that was draped over the coffin while it stood at the graveside. She can smell the earth in the rough fabric, earth and dust and sunlight.

Later, in the comfortable hotel that has been provided for the family, Lucy lies awake as Ray sleeps and snores.

In her mind, she writes a letter to a friend she hasn't seen for a long time.

Dear Patricia, says Lucy's letter. *I know that we muddle everything with time, but certain things remain absolutely clear, don't they? One of these things is Simon saying, on the*

*evening of the day Geoffrey died, He was still alive at nineteen hundred hours.*

*I've heard it in my mind all my life: He was still alive at nineteen hundred hours. And it must have been some time after that that he crashed in Gaston's field.*

*Patricia, Gaston says his father died 'in the middle of the afternoon', but Simon and Geoffrey didn't go out on that sortie until about five fifteen, did they? I remember that, for once, the Typhoons had been stood down at Tangmere all that morning. Geoffrey and I had been sunbathing on our porch.*

*But then the call came from Control. Renewed German tank activity reported near Caen. So they left the base at five fifteen, which is six fifteen French time. Then they had to form up over North Weald and sweep from there.*

*They couldn't have been in the area before five forty-five at the earliest, which is six forty-five, French time.*

*So you see my thinking? I may be wrong, but I don't think I am. Can you check to see whether Simon remembers exactly what time they went out? I'm glad I said nothing to Gaston, because this would have made everything worse for him, but, whoever killed his father on the Caen road, I think it wasn't Geoffrey. I think it's plain and simple: it was another British or American pilot, in another Typhoon, not him.*

*Southwold Beach, Suffolk, England, August 1976*

Here they are again, eating supper on Peter and Monica's beach-hut veranda.

During the hot afternoon, Lucy sat, as usual, in her deck-chair, while the others went swimming. She resisted Ray's

entreaties to join them. She told him she was perfectly happy just to enjoy the sun. She reminded him that summer would soon be at an end.

But now, as Monica makes coffee, Lucy gets up and walks in the dark to the sea. Nobody stops her or tries to follow her. She removes her clothes and makes a neat pile of them on the wet sand. A rising moon shines on her naked body.

She braves the breakers calmly, longing for the buoyancy of deep water, to lift her and let her feel, just for a moment, the gravity of the world drop away.

She swims strongly, with a feeling of wonder at her own strength and power. Then she hears Ray calling to her and she turns again towards the shore.