The Republic of Trees

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Extract

1

The Daydreamer

My name is Michael Vignal. Michael, not Michel. My mother was French and my father English. Not that it matters. Countries are countries and, as for my parents . . . well, their role in this story is crucial but brief: they gave life to my brother Louis and myself, and then they died.

My father was the first to go, back when we lived in England. I was still at nursery then, and can remember almost nothing about him. Not his voice, not his face – when I look at the photographs I see a stranger.

I do remember waving to him one morning from the sitting-room window. In the memory, he is in the front garden, though I can't actually see him; only my hand, and my faint reflection in the glass, and, in a blur beyond this, the edge of the porch and some sparkling grass and a low grey sky. I can sense, but not see, my mother standing behind me, encouraging me to keep waving.

It might have been any morning, I suppose – my father was probably on his way to work – but I can't help associating it with his death. He was killed on 1 April, the fool, when he accidentally ran his electric lawnmower over its cable.

I have only one other memory of our life in England. I remember staring at a distant patch of woodland, and the way it made me feel. I had no word for the feeling then, of course, but I suppose you might call it *longing*.

We lived in a suburban housing estate in the Midlands. Ours was a long street: two rows of detached modern houses with neatly trimmed grass verges laid out in front like placemats. Two hundred years earlier, it would have been part of a great forest, but now the only trees were

pruned dwarfs, planted at regular intervals next to the road – little slave-trees, kept to remind all those managers and accountants and salespeople of the vast green wilderness crushed beneath their patios.

From our bedroom, though, if you stood on a chair and leaned on the windowsill and put your cheek to the glass and looked as far sideways as you could, the end of Commercial Drive was just visible. There, beyond a barbed-wire fence and a muddy field, was a forest.

My memory is of staring at it one dusk: the sun was setting over the treetops, turning them silver and gold, and I had to keep rubbing my condensed breath from the window-pane so I could see it properly. I felt sad and excited at the same time, and a little afraid, though I don't know why.

A few weeks after my father died, we moved to France – to stay with our mum's elder sister, Aunt Céline.

This experience, too, is pretty much a blank. According to Louis, who was six at the time, we took the boat from Portsmouth and drove down through France, staying with various relatives en route, and reached St Argen in the late afternoon. He said Aunt Céline seemed different then – younger, kinder, less angry. He said the four of us went for a walk up the road to look at the Pyrenees, and then came back and ate dinner together. He said that our mother seemed happy. He said that was the night he and I made our pact always to speak English together when we were alone.

You can believe as much of that as you like. Personally, I give more credence to Aunt Céline's recollections: that she asked me to choose a bunny rabbit from the hutches by the side of the house, and that, when the one I pointed to was picked up by its ears and killed with a single slap to the head, I cried. Our mother comforted me, but Aunt Céline just rolled her eyes and said, 'He'll learn.'

Seven months later our mother died. I have no memory of that, either. According to Louis, we were kept behind at school later than usual while her body was removed from the house. She had cut her wrists in the bath that morning, and our aunt found her when she got back from work. I didn't discover that until much later, though; at the time, Aunt Céline told us she had died of a broken heart.

When I look at the photographs of her, I get flickers: half memories of her face hanging over mine, the softness of her voice and her skin. But I don't know how much of that I truly remember, and how much I have stitched together from other people's remarks. Everyone in St Argen remembers my mother. I have her eyes, they say.

Apparently, I was inconsolable when she died, though the only emotion I remember feeling in later childhood was annoyance. It seemed a careless way to go, breaking something as important as a heart.

Aunt Céline claimed I was a normal, happy, outgoing child until then; only afterwards did I become sullen and withdrawn. I am sure she's right – I did change at that age – but I'm not convinced it was because of our mother's death. I suspect it had more to do with the clocks.

I had seen clocks before, of course, but I probably imagined they were just funny ornaments. It was not until I went to school that I fell under the spell of their ticking – under the universal tyranny of time.

Before you go to school – before you believe the lies that clocks tell – time is liquid and mysterious. Yesterday. Tomorrow. Eleven o'clock. These are only names, their meanings unguessable. I have a vague memory of seeing Yesterday as a man's face, with a moustache and a hat, his features sharp and frowning. Tomorrow was a woman, turned half away, her eyes wide and agleam. Eleven o'clock was a jolly, mischievous little goat-boy in a green suit.

But when you go to school, time starts to freeze, to take

those false shapes you will later know and hate. At school, you learn to obey the numbers; you learn to see the bars of your cage. Of course they may be imaginary bars – the cage may be an illusion – but that does not mean you are not imprisoned by it. It is not what exists that matters, after all. It is what you believe exists.

And so, at some point during that purple-skied autumn when little Michael started school and little Michael's mother slit her wrists, the dead skin of the happy child was shed, and I emerged.

Aunt Céline even gave me a new name to go with my new personality. She called me The Stranger.

It is hard for me to recall The Stranger's first memories. They are all not so much blurred as superimposed, one upon the next, hundreds of days the same: the same actions, the same sights, the same moods repeated *ad nauseam* (literally, on certain occasions). The prevalent mood I suppose you would call melancholy, though that sounds more poetic than it felt at the time. How it felt, in retrospect, was deathlike. Or rather – and this really is a fate worse than death – the feeling of *never having lived*.

Luckily, I had a secret. I had found a way to escape this feeling, to escape between the bars of my cage and leave time behind . . .

I daydreamed pretty much all the time as a child, but if I had to choose a single memory to capture how it felt, it would be of sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the slices of boiled carrot that I had removed from my stew. Of staring at but not seeing the carrot slices. Of hearing but not listening to Aunt Céline's Gothic threats ('If you don't eat your vegetables your skin will turn yellow and you'll die').

Of being in the kitchen, with its brown and beige wall tiles, its dark-stained oak beams, its ever-burning wood stove, its ever-ticking wall-clock, and simultaneously of being in a

parallel wonderland. Of the saucepans not squatting drearily on the hob but floating through space.

Of myself not sitting silently at the table, a fork suspended halfway to my mouth, but flying secretly, invisibly, out of my body and through the window, across the yard, over the village, and away into the twilit woodland which I could see silhouetted beyond the reflection of the electric lamp in the glass.

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The Chateau

St Argen was not a picturesque place by any standards. Like most farm villages in this part of France, it was basic-looking and long past its peak. The old slate roofs had been replaced by cheap red tiles, and many of the outlying houses and barns were derelict – half-crumbled mudbrick walls, window frames empty, earth floors turned to pasture for cows. In spring the village stank of cow shit, and in summer it stank of the human kind – which was flushed, often unprocessed, into the roadside drainage ditches.

But the land . . . the way it rolled. The thought of it brings tears to my eyes. The valleys were all wheat and corn, meadows and narrow paths, while the hills were forested with oaks, beeches, chestnuts. The air was alive with sparrowhawks and swifts, and deer leapt through fields.

I don't know how much I noticed all this when I was little. Presumably I just thought that's how the world was. Then one day I had an experience which I can only describe as the birth of my conscious self. I opened my eyes and thought: this is me – I have a mind of my own – I can choose what I want to do.

That day I saw, with fresh eyes, how ugly our house was – a grey breezeblock box, two up, two down. Louis and I lived in one bedroom, Aunt Céline in the other; downstairs were the kitchen and the salon. At the back there was a roofless bathroom patched with plastic sheeting. In the yard were a couple of Elf oil barrels and a dusty old cement-mixer. It was surrounded by a low brick wall, and beyond the wall was, to the side, a concrete electricity pole; and in front of us, the main road that ran north–south from Arbeville to Beaufort. Before, all this had just been 'home'; now it looked dead and dismal, in contrast to the beauty of the surrounding land.

Perhaps my mind is merging together separate events here, but I think that was also the day I understood, for the first time, that our aunt did not love us. I suppose I must already have been vaguely aware of this, but now it seemed cruelly obvious. I watched as she vacuumed our room, banging the machine against skirting-boards, shouting over the noise, 'Are you sick or what? What the hell is wrong with you? You're not right in the head!' I heard the anger in her voice and realised it had nothing to do with the toys on the floor. She was angry with us because we had ruined her life.

She used to get drunk and talk to the cat. At night, from our bedroom, we could hear her through the floorboards. We were bleeding her dry, that's what she said. This house – it could have been so beautiful. Slurring her words, she enumerated all the luxury features she had imagined for it. By the time she got to the underfloor heating in the bathroom she was usually choking back sobs.

I can't blame Aunt Céline for the way she felt. She did her best – fed us, clothed us, kept us clean, taught us manners, took us to church. But . . . *love*? We were lucky she didn't batter us to death with the Hoover.

This makes us sound like a tragic pair, doesn't it? Louis and Michael, the brothers triste. Yet that's not how it felt, because we had each other.

At night we stayed up for hours, speaking English. Louis told me about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which he'd read three times. He said books were like doors; you opened them and entered and all the old rules disappeared. In books, anything could happen. Sometimes, like Huck, we plotted our escape. Down the river, over the mountains, into the forest, across the sea . . . Anywhere seemed better than here.

And then we heard the news – the most exciting news heard in St Argen for years.

You see, when I said that the village was not picturesque, I was omitting one important detail. At the far south-western edge, on a hill of its own, encircled by a tall iron fence and almost hidden behind overgrown gardens, was the place that the locals called *le château*: a vast, pale building with four towers, set in acres of land. Aunt Céline thought it vulgar, but I had always loved it, imagining myself riding horses in its grounds and shooting arrows at enemy soldiers from the third-floor windows. For years it had been empty. The news was that it had been sold – to an English family with two children.

In preparation for their arrival, a team of gardeners came from Toulouse. We could hear their chainsaws and diggers roar and whine all day. Even after dark, the men worked by torchlight. When Aunt Céline had put us to bed, Louis and I used to open the shutters and watch the lights move mysteriously around the hill. In the morning you could still smell the petrol and crushed vegetation in the air.

The garden was reduced to desert and replanted. The holes in the house were repaired, the roof and shutters replaced, the walls and doors repainted. By April the chateau was born again. It looked like something from a dream.

It was a Saturday, warm and bright, when they moved in. Louis and I cycled up to the hill behind the chateau and watched the arrival of *les étrangers* over a picnic of cold chicken and crisps. It was better than Christmas, that day, watching the big blue trucks arrive and all those huge cardboard boxes unloaded.

To start with, there were only the removal men and Mr Sillitoe, who was large, with angry eyes. He didn't carry anything, just pointed and shouted. The mother and children came later in the afternoon, as our blanket fell into shade. We were on the point of leaving, but when I saw the kids my heart leapt. They were our age, a boy and a girl.

The boy was round-faced and noisy. In his hands was a toy machine-gun, with which he sprayed imaginary bullets at the

removal men. The girl was tall and thin. She had long, curly, light brown hair and wore a plain white dress. She stared with wide eyes at her new home, then lay on the grass, stroking it with her palms. I remember thinking how unalike they looked. I couldn't believe they were really brother and sister.

We spent many happy afternoons that spring on the hill behind the chateau, watching the Sillitoes. Even after Alex and Isobel started at our school and became our friends, we still used to go there and watch them, hidden by bushes, as they played in the garden and a firm of workmen dug the swimming pool.

Then, one Sunday in May, we were invited to spend the afternoon there. It was the first truly hot day of the year. The pool was still being finished, and Mrs Sillitoe let us watch the workmen fit the blue liner. I remember thinking how magical it seemed, a swimming pool with no water. Whenever I went to the lido in Arbeville, I always dived to the bottom to feel the smoothness of the tiles and watch the kicking feet and bubbles of air drifting up past long, pink legs. Everything looked different from down there. But the air in my lungs pulled me up to the surface. If only I could hide on the floor of this empty pool, I thought, then maybe when the water crashed over me I would be pinned in place – and see the world always through the strange blue eyes of a dream.

That day was one of the best of my life. We played hide-and-seek in the garden and sprayed one another with water guns. Afterwards, dried and dressed, we ate chocolate cookies and ice-cream under the retractable awning, and I looked down at the concrete stumps and red roof of our aunt's house and wished I never had to go back.

'Where do you live, Michael?' Mrs Sillitoe asked, pleased that her children had found some friends who spoke English and could thus 'ease their passage' into French society. 'Can you see your house from here?'

I pointed out the grey blot on their view.

'Oh, really? That's nice.'

It was a clear day. We admired the Pyrenees, white and sharp against the blue horizon. Mrs Sillitoe asked me if I liked living near mountains.

'I don't mind,' I said.

'Isn't it lovely seeing them every morning when you open the shutters?'

'We can't see them from our house,' I said. 'There's a rise in the land.'

'Oh? Yes, I see. That's a shame. You pay for the view, I suppose.'

'Really? How much do you pay?'

'No, I didn't mean . . . Ah, would you like some more lemonade, Michael?'

I loved the softness of her voice.

It was homemade lemonade; I had never tasted it before. She poured it from a glass jug, not a bottle, and there were ice-cubes and slices of lime and lemon floating on top.

From that day, I began to dream that Mrs Sillitoe was my mother. She took over the role in my imagination from the big-eyed cartoon Englishwoman in the Disney video of *Peter Pan*; the one who says to Wendy and the boys, 'Don't judge your father too harshly, dears. After all, he really does love you *very* much . . .'

Like all adults, though, Mrs Sillitoe was quite weird. I remember when she got the chickens, a few weeks after our first visit to the chateau – five fat hens and a scrawny rooster, whom she named Freddie and cooed at like a baby. She commissioned a local artisan to build a large, elaborate shed for them inside one of the barns, and she would lock the door on them at night, whispering, '*Bonne nuit*' to the six dark chicken shapes.

To start with, she was in raptures about them. It wasn't just the daily miracle of fresh eggs, which Mr Sillitoe ate fried on toast, but the 'calming' effect they had on her. She liked the

way they waddled around the estate, pecking methodically for worms. It made her feel, she said, like she and her 'little family' had finally put down 'proper roots' here.

But then something unforeseen happened; unforeseen by Mrs Sillitoe, anyway. The chickens shat everywhere – on the terrace, on the lawn, near the pool, on sun-loungers and in flower beds. Their turds were large and soft; they stank and left black stains. Mrs Sillitoe took it personally.

One time she made the mistake of feeding them leftover pasta, and thereafter they would come begging at the door of the house. Any normal person would just have chased them off, but Mrs Sillitoe was frightened – their scaly toes made her 'skin crawl' – so she ended up barricaded inside her kitchen with the chickens squawking remorselessly outside, until her husband returned from the golf course and swung a five-iron at them. By the end of summer, Mrs Sillitoe hated the chickens so much she paid a farmer from up the road to come and kill them all.

We were there that day, banished to Isobel's room so we would not be able to witness the horror. But when we heard Mrs Sillitoe's car drive away, we sneaked down to the barn where the farmer had set up his roadcone with a hole in the end and his razor-sharp knife and his grey plastic bucket. We helped him catch them; it was great sport, running round the garden in the August heat, feathers sticking to our sweaty skin.

Each time we caught one, the farmer would take it from us, pin its wings back with one hand, and stuff its head through the hole in the roadcone. The chicken would squeal, then the razor would end its terror. The bodies were stuffed in a giant bin-liner; we could see the black plastic twitch for ages afterwards. The bucket caught all the blood. The farmer was, we all agreed, an artist. He soaked up our admiration in cool silence. Alex stared with fascination at the bucket of blood.

We all thought it was fun until Mrs Sillitoe came back. Her voice was trembling as she told the farmer to take the 'mess'

away with him. The farmer must have seen the look of disbelief on my face, because he dropped off two of the chickens at our aunt's house on his way back. She casseroled them – their flesh was too tough to roast, she said, because the Sillitoes had let them run around. Our aunt was contemptuous of such behaviour. She kept her chickens in little wire-fronted boxes and fed them grain through a drip. They did, I have to admit, taste delicious.

I do have other happy memories. I don't mean to suggest that the only bright moments of my childhood were spent in the Sillitoes' garden. But half those memories might belong to anyone: birthday parties, ski trips, days on the beach, nights at the fair. These are just experiences that you buy, and we had less money than most of our friends.

When I look at the photos the feeling I get is of a vague, guilty disappointment. I knew I was supposed to be having fun – that happiness was paid for – but somehow I kept letting everyone down. In the photos I look bewildered, secretly worried, as though happiness were a plastic token that had slipped through a hole in my pocket.

I was older now, but I didn't feel it. I was waiting, but I didn't know what for.