

Prologue

The angels of death scratch at my door. Walking through the corridors, with my hollow eyes staring back from every tarnished glass, I can no longer believe the mirrors lie. These are the last days of my life. Schoolmasters say to children start at the beginning. When writing stories people say begin where it begins. François-Marie Arouet, who wrote as Voltaire, began his *Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of the Nations* by tracing human development from its earliest days. But how does anyone know where anything really begins? Did this story begin the day I met Virginie, the day I arrived at the military academy to be greeted by Jerome and Charlot, that day, years before, I first met Emile, or did it begin with the dung heap, when I sat in the sun eating beetles? Looking back on the days of my life, I can't think of any time I was happier. So let me say it began there, as good a place as any.

Jean-Marie d'Aumout

1790

1723
Dung-heap Meals

My earliest memory is sitting with my back to a dung heap in the summer sun crunching happily on a stag beetle and wiping its juice from my chin and licking my lips and wondering how long it would take me to find another.

Beetles taste of what they eat. Everything edible tastes of what it eats or takes from the soil, and the stag beetles that fed on the dung in my father's courtyard were sweet from the dung, which was sweet from the roadside grass. I had fed the horse the last of the hay and knew it was in a ramshackle stall behind me so the clip clop echoing in the courtyard's arch had to come from another.

I could stand and bow as I'd been taught. But the sun was hot that summer and my mother and father were still asleep in their room with the shutters closed and I'd been ordered not to disturb them so I stayed where I was.

Luck brought me another stag beetle as the stranger cleared the arch and I popped it into my mouth before he could demand that I share. The stranger swore and the two men with him trotted forward on either side.

‘He’ll poison himself.’ The stranger had a deep voice and a lined face and eyes shaded by the wide brim of a hat with a feather in it. He looked sterner than anyone I’d met. ‘Stop him, vicomte . . .’

The man addressed slid from his horse and knelt in front of me. ‘Spit it out,’ he ordered, holding out his hand.

I shook my head.

Irritation flickered across his face, although he kept his voice kind and crouched a little lower until we were almost level. He had blue eyes and smelt of wine, garlic and cheese. Just smelling him made my mouth water.

‘You’ll poison yourself.’

I chewed quickly and swallowed, spitting the beetle’s broken shell into my hand and dropping it beside the others. His eyes followed my movements and widened at the sight of a dozen little owl pellets that had to be mine.

‘Your Highness . . .’

Something in his voice made the stern man dismount to crouch opposite me, although he crouched less low and winced at a pain in his leg. He too looked at the scrunched beetle shells and their eyes met. Together they glanced at the door leading to my parents’ house.

‘A week,’ the man said. ‘Two?’

‘When was the letter written, Highness?’

The old man pulled folded paper from his pocket and skimmed its contents. ‘A month ago,’ he said, voice grim. He looked around and scowled at what he saw. To me it was home, the courtyard of a crumbling chateau, which I would later realise was a chateau in name only. A crumbling farmhouse then. On the slopes of a vine-clad hill that had been sold to a local merchant to raise money for my brother’s commission.

‘Go check,’ he said.

The vicomte scrambled to his feet.

It was now that the third man decided to dismount, and as he came close I realised he must be little more than a boy to them, though he looked a man to me. Whatever he was about to say died at a warning glance from the stern man. There was a family likeness between them. Father and son? Grandfather and grandson? Brothers if the gap hadn’t been too great. ‘Help the vicomte,’ the older man ordered.

‘Help him with what?’

‘You will address me properly.’ The voice was sharp.

‘My apologies, Highness. With what should your servant help your aide de camp?’

‘Philippe, you are my son . . .’

‘I’m your bastard.’ He shut the door into the house with a slam and silence fell, although it held a different quality, being the silence of people who were there, rather than the silence that comes with being alone. The sun was warm and the horse dung smelt sweet and a smaller beetle chose that moment to venture from a crack between the cobbles. My hand flicked out and was locked solid as the old man’s hand closed on mine. He was staring at me intently, eyes dark and hooded.

‘Mine,’ I said.

He shook his head.

‘We share?’ I offered. I didn’t believe he would. Grown-ups never shared but it was worth trying and he seemed to consider it. At least his grip lessened and he looked thoughtful and then sad.

‘It’s not very big,’ he said.

‘I’ll find you another.’

‘You like eating beetles?’

‘Black ones,’ I said, pointing to the line of chewed carcasses that had dried to sharp crackle in the summer sun. ‘Brown ones taste sour.’

‘Let it go,’ he ordered. His voice was so firm and certain of being obeyed I released the insect and watched it scurry away to hide beneath a broken cobble. It waited, perhaps feeling itself watched. After a while it ran for the safety of another dip in the cobbles, hesitated on the edge of stopping and kept going. We lost it in the shadows where the roof of the stables obscured the sun and put that corner of the courtyard into darkness.

A shutter was opened behind me. Without looking round I couldn’t see if it was the vicomte or the sulking youth, or both. The old man looked up and words must have been mouthed because he nodded grimly, then forced a smile when the time came to face me again. He didn’t say anything and the noise of crows filled where his words should be. Since I knew that grown-ups spoke and children listened I waited.

Crows kept quarrelling, a dog barked in the village, and behind me shutters clanged as the men inside opened every window they could find, and the old man and I squatted in the sun and waited patiently. A beetle shook itself free from the dung heap and my hand twitched to catch it but I didn’t and the old man nodded approvingly.

‘Are you hungry?’

I nodded.

‘Come with me,’ he ordered, climbing slowly to his feet.

Instead of mounting his horse, he gripped its bridle and led it under the arch with the other two horses following, as if they’d been trained to do so. We walked slowly, because my legs were short and his were bad and it

obviously hurt him to walk. He was a big man, dressed in a long red coat decorated with strips of gold, his hose were black and his shoes had red buckles. I decided he'd once been bigger because he didn't quite fill the clothes he wore. There were food stains on one sleeve and his nails were dirty. I could see lice in the folds of his long wig. You can eat lice. I didn't know that then but you can. They are best fried and hidden by the taste of other ingredients.

As we walked under the arch and into the sun I discovered he'd brought an army with him. A dozen soldiers on horses stood silhouetted to one side. Directly in front of us were fifty more men, all with swords but lacking uniforms – unless frock coats and wide-brimmed hats with feathers counted. One kicked his horse forward and the old man raised a hand so abruptly his friend almost tripped his mount bringing it to a stop. A small man in a brown coat ran forward when summoned.

'Food,' the stern man ordered.

A wicker basket was bundled from the back of a pack horse and a carpet – a real carpet – rolled across the dirt of the track leading to our house. They used the track because the banks on either side were too steep. I recognised bread and cold chicken but the rest was simply unknown to me. The man in the brown coat, who had to be a servant but a very grand one, bowed low as he presented the spread to the old man.

'Not for me, fool. For him.'

I was pushed forward and stumbled, falling to my knees in front of the food, with my fingers landing on a cheese that squished stickily. Without thinking, I licked my fingers and froze at the taste of a sourness so perfect the world

stopped. A second later it restarted and I nibbled another fragment from my knuckle. The flesh of the cheese was white and the blue of the veining so deep it belonged to a jewel.

‘Roquefort,’ the old man said.

‘Roffort . . .’

He smiled as I stumbled over the word and tore me a piece of bread before his servant could do it. He wiped the bread up my fingers to clean away the cheese and seemed unsurprised when I reached for the scrap. The bread had a lightness I’d never met and went perfectly with the cheese. A second piece of roffort followed the first and then a third, until the loaf was half its size and the cheese was gone and my stomach hurt. A hundred courtiers, soldiers and servants watched me eat. A hundred peasants watched them from the vineyard slopes, too far away to see what was happening, but transfixed by the largest group of men on horseback the area had seen in years.

‘Highness . . .’ The man speaking was the one he’d called vicomte.

‘What did you find?’

The vicomte glanced at me and the stern man nodded, his face resigned. ‘Take the boy to clean his hands,’ he told the brown-coated servant. ‘And his face while you’re at it.’

‘Into the house, Majesty?’

‘No,’ the old man said sharply. ‘Not into the house. There’s a stream behind us. You can use that, and this . . .’ He held up a napkin.

The water was cold and fresh and I drank enough to take the richness from my throat and then let the grand servant clean my fingers in the stream and wash my face, rinsing

his cloth out between washes. Tiny fish danced below us and one came into my hand and wriggled inside my fingers. It was still wriggling when I swallowed it.

The servant looked at me.

‘Do you want one?’

He shook his head and wiped my face one last time, brushing crust from the corner of my eyes and snot from beneath my nose. When I returned to where the others waited they were more solemn than ever. The one called vicomte knelt in front of me, despite the dirt, to ask what had happened to the things in the house. ‘They were taken,’ I said.

‘By whom?’

‘The villagers.’

‘What did they say?’ He looked serious. So serious, I understood he wanted me to understand he was being serious.

‘That my father owed them money.’

‘They told you not to go inside?’

I nodded in answer. They’d told me my parents were sleeping. Since my father had already told me I was not to go in because he and my mother would be sleeping this had been no surprise. That the villagers had gone in and returned carrying my parents’ few possessions had been strange. But most things I asked about came down to ‘That is how it is’, and I imagined this was the same.

‘Where did you sleep?’

‘In the stable if it rained. In the yard if it was fine.’

He thought back and maybe it hadn’t rained in his last few days but it had rained on at least two of mine and I’d been grateful for the shelter the stable offered. Its roof leaked, because every roof in the house leaked, but the horse slept

in the corner that got most of the wet and I liked the company. Before the vicomte climbed to his feet, he said, 'He is le Régent. Call him Highness.' He was looking at the old man who stood supporting himself on the neck of his horse, watching us in silence while everyone else stayed back.

'And bow,' the vicomte said.

I bowed as ordered, the best bow I'd been taught and the old man smiled sadly and nodded his head a fraction in reply. 'Well?' he said.

'Stolen by peasants,' the vicomte answered.

'Do we know their names?'

The vicomte knelt again and asked me the same question – despite the fact I'd already heard it. So I told him who'd come to the house and the old man nodded the answers towards the brown-coated servant to say he should pay attention. The servant spoke to one of the soldiers who rode away with three others following after.

'Your name?' the sullen young man asked me.

'Philippe,' le Régent said.

'We should know his name.' The young man's voice was as sulky as his face. 'He could be anybody. You don't know who he is.'

The old man sighed. 'Tell me your name.'

'Jean-Marie,' I replied.

He waited and then smiled indulgently and I realised he was waiting for more. I knew my name and I knew most of my letters, I could count to twenty and sometimes to fifty without getting any of them wrong.

'Jean-Marie Charles d'Aumout, Highness.'

He looked at the vicomte at the last and the vicomte shrugged. I could see that the old man was pleased and that the vicome was pleased with me. The boy called Philippe

just looked furious but that was all he'd looked since I'd first seen him so I ignored it.

Le Régent said, 'Put him on the baggage cart.'

'We're taking him with us?' the vicomte asked.

'Until we reach Limoges. There must be an orphanage there.'

The vicomte leant forward and spoke too quietly for me to catch the words but the old man looked thoughtful and then nodded. 'You're right,' he said. 'He can go to St Luce. Tell the mayor to sell the manor and the horse. He can remit the money direct to the school. Make sure they know my interest in the child.'

Bowing low, the vicomte sent a soldier for the mayor.

The soldier and the mayor returned but – before they did – the other four soldiers who'd been sent into the village earlier came back with the first three of the men I'd named as taking things from the house. They were hanging from trees before the mayor even appeared at the bottom of the road. I tried not to look at them kick and when the vicomte realised I was watching he sent me to sit in a cart and stare in a different direction.

I couldn't see them with my back to the trees.

Their protests were loud enough for me to hear though; and their begging, when they realised protests were not enough. Finally they cursed the world and its unfairness and insisted my father owed them all money. This was not in doubt, apparently. It was the taking of what had not been declared theirs that was the crime. Besides, my father was noble and the law distinguished between those who were and those who were not.

The not, hanging from the trees, had better clothes than me. In one case the man kicking his heels had leather shoes

instead of the wooden sabots peasants usually wore. But he was still a peasant, bound to his land and owing duties to his lord. The villagers could be taxed and beaten and thrown off their fields and tried with the most perfunctory of trials. Those things could not be done to me. Nor could I work, of course. Unless it was my own land, and I had no land. I understood now that my parents were dead.

Tears would have been right, perhaps sobbing . . . But my father was a sullen and silent man who whipped me without thought, and my mother had been the shadow at his side, no more effective in protecting me than a real shadow.

Even now I would like to miss them more than I do.

All I could think about, as the cart trundled away from the manor that was soon to be sold, was the miraculous taste of the blue cheese I'd been allowed earlier. And the only thing I mourned was leaving my father's horse behind. It was old and lame and fly ridden, with a moulting mane and a ragged tail, and was believed by everyone else to have a foul temper, but it had been my friend from the day I first toddled unsteadily through the open door of its stall and plonked myself in the straw at its feet.

'Don't look back,' the vicomte said.

From his tone I knew they were still hanging villagers. A line of kicking shapes throwing shadows on the dusty road. Shadows that stilled in order, like a slow rolling wave on the irrigation ditches when the water is released.

The vicomte was Louis, vicomte d'Anvers, aide to the stern-faced man, His Highness the duc d'Orléans, known to everyone as le Régent. Until February that year he'd been guardian to the young Louis XV. Although he looked impossibly old to me he was forty-nine, more than twenty

years younger than I am now. He would die that December, in the year of our Lord 1723, worn out by responsibility, childhood illness and the disappointment of having his power removed.

As for my parents. My father was a fool and my mother starved to death rather than steal apples from a neighbour's orchard and disgrace the name of the family into which she'd married so proudly. There are two ways to lose your nobility in this absurd country of ours . . . Well, two ways before self-elected committees began issuing edicts banning titles and taking away our lands.

Once these mattered but soon they will become so obscure as to be forgotten. *Déchéance* – failing in your feudal duties. And *dérogeance* – practising forbidden occupations, roughly, engaging in trade or working another's land rather than your own. My father had few duties, no skills to speak of and had sold what little land he inherited for enough coin to buy my brother a commission in the cavalry. Dying in his first battle, my brother wasted the sacrifice and was buried next to some mud-filled ditch in the Lowlands, and promptly forgotten. He was dead before I was alive.

1724 School

My next real memory is a year later. What happened between leaving my parents' house and joining St Luce was too predictable to make firm memories. The sun rose and the sun set and an old woman who lived in the school's gatehouse fed me twice a day in between, once in the early morning and once before dusk, and in return I fed her chickens and took care of myself during the day. The meals were poorly cooked and monotonous but filling and frequent enough to keep me fed and my body growing. Tossed corn brought the cockerel and chickens running. The cockerel was old and vicious and soon for the pot. The hens were safe so long as they kept laying and I lied occasionally, saying I'd tripped and dropped this one's egg or forgotten to put out the previous night's food, which was why that one had not laid. Maybe the old woman even believed me.

When eggs were plentiful I took the occasional one and let the richness of its yolk run down my chin before wiping the yellow away with my hand and licking my fingers. Winter yolks tasted sourer than summer ones. Autumn yolks were

rich with burnt earth and sunshine. Spring yolks tasted different again. They tasted of spring. Everything caught and killed or plucked from the ground or picked in spring tastes of spring. You can't say that for the other seasons.

She called me her strange one, barely slapped me when she found me stealing food. What tastes the old woman's cooking didn't provide I found for myself. The crab apples growing up the side of the gatehouse were sour, the grubs that bored through them sourer still. The beetles in her yard were less sweet, the cheese in her shabby kitchen hard and waxy, without the imperial blue veins of roffort or its rottenly glorious smell. In my days at the St Luce gatehouse I tasted whatever I had not tasted before: cobwebs and earwigs (dusty, and spit), spiders (unripe apple), dung, the chickens' and my own (bitter, and surprisingly tasteless). I ate new laid sparrow's eggs and tadpoles from the brook. Their taste was less interesting than their texture. Both were slimy in different ways. The old woman helped look after the boys at St Luce and had the task of fielding me until I was old enough to go myself, which moment soon arrived.

There were men who liked small boys more than they should, she warned me. And boys could be cruel to boys in that way and others. I would have to stand up for myself. She could look out for me but I would have to be brave. There had been discussion about making me wait until I was seven. But almost seven was fine the headmaster said. I should call him sir. I should call everyone bigger than me sir, except the servants; they should call me sir. 'You understand?'

She had wiped my face and washed my clothes and forced me to eat a bowl of porridge. It was only when I saw the bundle with my other clothes, a slightly smarter jacket, a

different pair of breeches, that I realised this was my last morning feeding chickens. Tonight they would have to wait until she could feed them herself.

‘Courage,’ she said. ‘You’ll be fine.’

Her face wobbled as she looked at me and she paused as if she might kiss or hug me goodbye. She spoke well and knew her letters, but was poor enough to need to work and the gatehouse was small for all it was clean. And the food . . . Perhaps she didn’t care for food; the same dishes again and again, the same tastes. She looked at me and I looked at her and eventually I understood I was to walk to the school on my own.

Picking up my bundle, I headed down the drive and found it was further to the school than I’d thought. After a few minutes I turned to discover she was still standing in the gates at the top of the road, so I waved and she waved back and then I turned my face to the school and kept walking, with my bundle swinging at my side.

The wind was warm for early autumn and the track dry and the grass slightly yellowing. The cow parsley was bare, waiting to be made into whistles or blowpipes, both of which I’d discovered for myself. The chestnuts on both sides of the drive were rich with conkers and I took the largest I could see and polished its gleaming swirls before dropping it in my pocket. Another and another fat conker lay on the road in front of me and I took those as well, stuffing my pockets until they were bulging.

The boy who came towards me had his hand out. ‘Give,’ he demanded sharply.

Such was my greeting to a school where I knew no one; after a year in a gatehouse with a woman who was neither family, friend, servant nor mistress. I was to learn later that

the drive was out of bounds and a dozen pupils had watched me approach, dressed in clothes that I didn't know represented their school uniform, and wondered where I'd come from and how severely I'd be punished for going beyond the courtyard. For now there was the outstretched hand.

'I'll hit you.'

Silence, while I looked at him.

He was my species but the only boys I'd seen were at a distance. I played by myself from necessity, and sat alone when I couldn't be bothered to play. The woman in the gatehouse hadn't suggested I find friends and I'd felt no need of them. The idea I might want to share my conkers with him was absurd.

'I warned you.' Watched by his friends, he made good his promise and I rocked back, hands to my already bleeding nose as someone started laughing.

'You want the conkers?'

'Uuu wan da conkers . . . ?' His voice mocked the pain in my nose, my split lip, the trouble I had speaking.

'Have the conkers.'

Closing my fingers round a handful, I threw them as hard as I could straight into his face and then punched him hard while his eyes were still shut. He rocked back as I'd done and I punched again, harder, splitting my knuckles. The boy was some inches bigger and obviously older but he sat down hard on his bottom and cowered back to stop me hitting him again.

St Luce had rusting wrought-iron gates to the forecourt, with an arch through the main building that led to a courtyard beyond. 'You, boy, your name . . . ?' I turned to see an old man shambling from a door that had been shut seconds earlier. 'Well?'

‘Jean-Marie.’

A boy laughed, a different boy from before, falling into silence when the old man glared at him. ‘He’s young. He doesn’t know our ways. You will give him two weeks’ grace. You understand me?’

‘Yes, headmaster.’

‘Your family name?’ He said kindly.

‘D’Aumout, sir . . . Jean-Marie Charles d’Aumout.’

He was asking so the others would learn it, I realised many years later. Dr Morel was the old headmaster and the new headmaster’s father. In his seventies, and looking impossibly old to me then, he put an arm around my shoulders and steered me under the arch through the school and into a dark courtyard overlooked by rooms on all sides. A smaller arch led through to whatever was at the back of the building. ‘You’d better come too,’ he said over his shoulder to my attacker, who followed after us like an unwilling shadow. ‘Duras,’ said the boy, sticking out his hand.

I stared at it.

‘You have to shake.’

‘You hit me.’

‘You still have to. That’s the rules.’

I took his offered hand and he nodded. ‘Emile Duras,’ he said. ‘I’m in the second class.’ The old man chose that moment to turn and smiled to see us shaking.

‘Don’t be late,’ he told Emile. ‘But first show him to class.’

‘Which one, sir?’

‘You can read?’ the man asked me.

‘Yes, sir.’ The old woman had taught me the rest of my letters.

‘What’s fifty minus twenty?’

‘Thirty, sir.’

The old man looked thoughtful, then decided. 'You can be in my class. I'm putting you in Emile's care. His punishment for what happened.'

'Sir . . .' Emile protested.

'You expect me to believe he punched you first?'

'What you believe and what can be proved are different.'

Dr Morel sighed. 'Leave the law at home, Duras. Leave it to men like your father.' Taking the other boy's face in his hands he turned it sharply until they met each other's eyes. 'Now, the truth. Did you hit him?' The boy's face narrow and watchful, his curls dark and his nails clean. I was surprised by that. I hadn't met anybody whose nails were clean. He seemed to be considering what it would cost him to admit this.

'Yes, sir,' he said.

So I first met Emile Duras, son of a lawyer and here because his father paid for him to come here to be educated. He went home at the weekends, which made him an outsider. His father was a rich lawyer and as St Luce was for the sons of destitute nobles, of whom there were enough to fill five classes of forty boys each, that also made him an outsider. But the biggest thing that set him apart, the thing that sent him out to punch me when other boys told him that was what he must do, was his name. Had he been de Duras, should such a family exist, his life would have been easier. The lack of the *particule*, the *de* in his name, set him apart from the others and from me, although I was too young to realise it.

My first day was simple. I trailed behind Emile and sat quietly at the desk I was given and answered the three questions the old headmaster asked me. Luckily I knew the answers to those, because there were others to which I did

not. When Emile dipped his head for silent reading I did the same, looking over to see which page he read and fumbling to find my place. I read the page three times – and, though it made little sense, when asked to read a line I did in as clear a voice as I could manage. ‘The glory of great men should always be measured by the means they have used to acquire it . . .’

Emile’s sentence came from further down the list of quotations because he sat two desks away. In the weeks to come we managed to sit side by side, when it became obvious our brief fight had made us friends. Emile’s sentence read, ‘Before we set our hearts too much upon anything, let us consider how happy those are who already possess it.’

Later I learnt the name Rochefoucauld, later still who he was and why his maxims were famous. His name reminded me of the cheese I’d eaten with le Régent and Emile brought me a sliver from home, wrapped in paper. It tasted as I remembered, of mould and horses’ hooves clipping on brick and dung beetles and sun.

I learnt a lot from Emile in my first two weeks at St Luce, which boys and which masters to avoid and which could be trusted, and at the end of that I discovered what two weeks’ grace meant and that Emile had truly become my friend. A boy – older and bigger, because all the boys were older and bigger, since I was the youngest and smallest in the school – walked up to me and tried to take my work book, having had his own stolen, the loss of which was punishable by beating. And instead of letting it happen, Emile stepped up beside me and together we saw off the would-be thief.

It was a friendship that was to last for years and only be

broken by something bigger than friendship and fiercer than shared bonds. That was so far into the future we could barely imagine it from a world of small boys where days stretched for ever and our memories hungrily swallowed every detail of the world around us.

‘You can be good at sport, you can be good at learning, you can be good with your fists . . .’ Emile grinned ruefully and touched the yellowing fringes of the black eye I’d given him a few weeks earlier. Out of friendship I touched my lip, although the scab was mostly off and the swelling long gone. The written rules were on a board in the main hall. They were few and easy to understand. The unwritten rules more numerous and more complex. In the school as in the later world I was to find: but like the rules of the later world they could be simplified and reduced to those that really mattered. That was what Emile was doing, while standing with his legs apart and his hands behind his back as his father might do in court. ‘You should punch, but you should also read to yourself.’

I looked at him.

‘The masters will leave you alone.’

He seemed to be saying that Dr Pascal and the other masters should see me read books and the boys above should see me punch people. I checked, and that was exactly what he meant. I was six and he was nearly eight, older and worldly wise. I did my best to obey his suggestion. The result was the masters liked me, and my friends grew in number. Those I hit wanted to be friends so I didn’t hit them again, and their friends wanted to be my friends so I didn’t hit them to start with. Inside a year I stopped having to hit people and stopped worrying about being their friends. They were still friendly to me but got little in return. Emile was the exception.

We played together and he got permission from his father to bring me home for a weekend. I arrived in near rags and left wearing Emile's old clothes. More to the point, I left fed and with my pockets filled with slivers of five different cheeses. Emile's mother thought my passion for Roquefort funny and asked who'd given it to me.

'Monsieur le Régent.'

She looked at her husband, who looked at Emile, who shrugged slightly to say he didn't know if it was true but it was possible. And so I came to tell them about the day the duc d'Orléans rode into my father's courtyard and left a row of kicking villagers strung from the trees behind him. I left out eating beetles.

Emile told me later what she said. Sometimes life is kinder than one thinks. Sometimes it is even kind to those in desperate need of kindness. I adored her and she became the mother mine had never bothered to be. This amused Emile as his possessiveness of me extended to expecting his mother to like me also. An only child, in his home he was as spoilt and cosseted as a dauphin. Even the prickly Maître Duras approved of my friendship with his son.

A small man with expensively tailored clothes and a jewelled ring on one finger, his coat was buttoned tight to the neck and his nails always clean. Occasionally I would find him staring from me to his son as if considering the difference. Emile was cleaner and still taller, although I was catching up. My appetite was bigger and I ate everything put in front of me, which endeared me to Madame Duras, a large woman fond of her gold bracelets, her supper parties and her garden. Maître Duras acted for the school, and for baron de Bellvit, which was how Emile came to be at the school and why the school agreed when Maître Duras

suggested I might come to his for a few days over the holiday since I had nowhere else to go.

I was noble and instinctively polite and treated his son as an equal because no one had suggested I shouldn't. Later, other boys became my friends. Some of them in the first few terms suggested Emile was too common to be friends with people like us. And I looked at them and I looked at myself and I looked at Emile and wondered what the difference was. We wore the same uniform and went to the same school, we ate the same food and attended the same classes. The only difference was that Emile looked a little cleaner and had clothes that were a little neater and slept at home rather than in the dorms. To me that made him luckier than us not worse. All of us knew we were different from the peasantry.

That sullen indistinguishable mass who stared at us with flat eyes from the fields on the two occasions a year we were allowed to leave the school grounds: once to visit the fair at Mabonne and again to be fed by the baron de Bellvit, our local landowner and titular master, under its founding articles, of our school. The peasants dressed in rags and dirt and lived in hovels – it was hard beneath the mud and sweat and stink to tell the men from the women. And though we might see a wide-eyed boy only a little younger than we were, or a girl pretty enough to make us notice her, we knew what they would become. It had always been this way and we believed it always would. More to the point, they believed it and so it was.