

The Baby of Belleville

Anne Marsella

Portobello
BOOKS

Chapter I

On how Jane de La Rochefoucault née Maraconi spent her first weeks with the baby Honoré fortifying herself with Prince Rupert's vitamins and coping with the heatwave while her husband, Charles de La Rochefoucault, freestyled through pestilent waters etc.

‘**W**hy is this place still such a mess? Just look at all these boxes! And all this laundry...didn't I fold it last week? Didn't I wash it? And what have we here? Dirty troubadour socks? Oh for Christ's sake, Charles, don't just sit there, do something! Pick 'em up!’

Normally, Charles de La Rochefoucault, my husband, will do anything for the sake of the Lord, but now he just looks up at me with glazed eyes, his forelock dangling limply over his brow. He is sitting on a low stool, his favoured troubadour socks with their woolly ekphrasis of trumpeting medieval musicians, lie at the foot of the boxes filled with our books and musical scores, our winter clothes and bric-a-bracs.

‘Sit down, dear,’ he offers, pointing to a rather large carton. When on automatic pilot he is always polite. Charles has been trained in the glorious tradition of chivalry and consulted the fine print of *The Order of the Garter*. He is my knight, my good husband, a man of noble birth who, with quixotic integrity, averted his eyes to my humble Italian-American background and my family’s shady affiliations the time it took to tie the knot. There are moments, however, like when I was giving birth and grabbed the trainee midwife by the smock to rough her up – she refused me pain relief after all – that Charles fears mymorganatic claim to the de La Rochefoucault name is being usurped by some bullying Comorra claimant.

Putain merde! I can’t sit down, Charles! *J’ai les fesses en chou-fleur!* And this damn whoopee cushion... it just won’t work!’ Tears well in my eyes. My poor bottom really does feel like a cauliflower and could use some assistance. The whoopee cushion in truth is an inflatable rubber ring which is supposed to allow me to sit on a chair without agony, but flatulently releases its air after a mere five-minute sit. Most of the time I am forced to nurse Honoré standing up.

‘Do something about it, Charles. I must have another one.’

‘Where would I find such a thing, Jane?’

‘God knows – ask your mother! She’s the one who brought it over. Or call La Leche League’s new mothers’ hotline. They seem to know everything. And here, take Honoré for a moment.’ I hand him Honoré, milk drunk and ephemerally content; by the time I get back from the loo, he will be fussing again. It is ten thirty at night and sleep is still hours off – if sleep we are to get, for the past six weeks have turned us into owls, nocturnal predators not of mice but of slumber, that priceless, unattainable prey. Our once wise and widened eyes have

narrowed, our feathers are ruffled and annoyed from the deprivation and heat. Only Honoré gets some shut-eye, a morning and afternoon nap which occur on condition I carry him in a baby sling up and down the Canal St Martin and the Canal de l'Ourq until I attain a kind of transcendental state that coats me in salubrious indifference. I become impervious to the fatigue, to the hopscotch of avoiding dog shit, to Honoré's fussy awakenings if I attempt to rest on a bench, to the stifling, sticky heat. How I would prefer to take a nap alongside my babe with a rotating fan at my back, but he will not have it. Newborns, of course, have the last word; their life depends on it.

I do believe he finds contentment in having his forelock gently bounce against his smooth, calendula cream-smelling brow like Charles and Charles's father, the late Count Hubert de La Rochefoucault, both of whom had (or rather have – in Charles's case, *ma foi!*) a prominent kiss curl that requires taming with Dippidy Do hair gel. Perhaps Honoré already has an intuition that as with Samson and rock stars and even Jesus Our Lord Himself, hair will be the source of his strength. As for my own, it is falling out in packets. My lustrous long ropes, my dark-as-dawn Maraconi locks snake along the bathroom and kitchen floors beneath the broom. I've never swept or shed so assiduously. Charles, for themoment, is pretending not to notice my capillary crisis; it really would be too much for him, I believe. He holds my hair in the highest esteem, has bought me ribbons and clips and sequined barrettes to adorn it, props for our favourite game *A Knight Caught in Her Tresses*, the rules and objectives of which, for the sake of modesty, I shall not reveal in these pages.

What I can say about this game is that it is invariably played to one of Charles's musical compositions that aired on Radio France three

years ago to mixed acclaim, Ode to G.S. in F Minor. The ode in question pays tribute to what the de La Rochefoucaults call the Great Sensibility. I should explain that if one were to climb the branches of the de La Rochefoucaults' distinguished family tree to where the tippytop branches brush against the heavens, one would discover that a common congenital weakness for the flights of Poesy and the Holy Spirit united the tribe, a weakness fortified by a capitalized moniker: the Great Sensibility. For the Arts and L'Amour there is no better ally, but in matters of housekeeping even a broken broom would make a better friend.

'Charles? Can't we do something about these boxes, dear? It's impossible to find anything! And where on earth are the Prince Rupert's?' I implore upon return from the WC, a bit frazzled from having just pushed the fire-breathing switch of our electric toilet. We are hoping one day to afford an electrician and a plumber, for with each flush the switch spits out a flash of lightening and makes attending to our basic needs most distressing. The phone rings, before Charles can answer my query. It's my mother, calling at last! From Ranger Roger's station at Pine Flats, no less. Ever since she left my father to become a full-time shepherdess, she's been taking her herd of sheep up the mountain in the summer for good grazing. She spends three months in the High Country on a horse named Pinesol, leading her sheep from one grassy pasture to the next. And while her flock chews the day away, she paints water-colour landscapes, bakes sourdough bread in the ground, fly fishes, gathers wood and filters giardia out of the water to make lemonade; she tirelessly labours on the mountain and easily forgets our encumbered world below.

'I've had my baby, Mom.'

'You have? Well that was quick, darling!'

‘Six weeks ago, Mom. I’ve been trying to reach you...’

‘You know I’m not reachable up here, dear.’

‘But you were supposed to be at Wawona Hot Springs by the first of August, weren’t you?’

‘We got detained. Six of our pack llamas caught the flu and we were stranded at Bull Trout Meadows for ten days. Manuela and Carlotta were too scared to go off on their own and scout out for help. You can’t blame them; it’s so different from the Pyrenees here, what with the grizzlies. So we had to wait it out.’

Manuela and Carlotta, I should explain, are two Basque girls my mother imported from Spain to help her with the herd. They are orphans from Pamplona, have never set foot in the Pyrenees, and are symmetrically pierced on the face – Manuela on the right side of her nose, mouth and chin; Carlotta on the left – so that when positioned next to one another and viewed at a certain angle, their features perform an optical illusion, making their eyes, noses and mouths converge. Two girls: one face. Which I believe is why Mother often addresses them as Mani-Carla in one breath. In truth, I think she sees them less as individuals than as ideas to be perfected. Manuela and Carlotta know virtually nothing about herding and are dying to get to California, but Mother is obsessed with them both and has become dependent on their incessant mistakes, which she corrects with a giddy patience.

‘You know, Mom, you really should take someone experienced with you. Someone who knows the business and the mountain; you are running great risks! Charles and I worry about you!’

‘I want these young women to learn Self-Reliance, one of our great American values. When they return to Europe one day – if they ever do – they will do so as New Women, Daughters of Emerson...’

Now, I might rightly protest against my mother propounding these high ideals, which she must have picked up from a cursory reading of the Emerson fellow for the benefit of Mani-Carla, as these very principles were clearly away vacationing in Massachusetts during my upbringing. If I learned to cook (paramount for Self-Reliance) it was thanks to Grandma Maraconi; if I learned how to write out a cheque, balance a budget and hem gym shorts it was thanks to my dear Home Economics teacher Miss Maybelle; and if I have acquired a degree of self-confidence in performing the actions this life and its job markets require of us, it is thanks to Charles who believes in me one hundred per cent. Indeed, perhaps the only transmission I can credit my mother with is a passing down of her talent for elaborate make-believe. She has always lived in a fantasy of her own invention, a reality painstakingly created, sometimes from things as banal as Tupperware bowls, as when she became a Tupperware party consultant for mobile-home parks, or inspired by paintings or books she loved. I remember well her Picasso blue period when she persuaded us that she was truly blue inside and produced pee of this hue to prove it. In the end the unruly, whim-spun narrative has been her gift to me and I make of it what I can as a playwright. When I was giving birth I remember saying to Charles, ‘Go now and rest. In the morning our babe will be born,’ which was in fact a line from my historical rock opera, *Away in a Manger*, based on Marie Antoinette’s acting out of the Virgin Mary’s accouchement in the barn.

The production ran for four nights at one of New York’s more confidential off-off-off Broadway venues a few years back and would have continued on three more nights had not the leading actress developed a hay allergy that made her neck swell to twice its normal circumference. Such are the hazards of making one’s heroine a

guillotined queen, I suppose. The literary rock opera genre has yet to come to the fore, but when it does, and I am certain it will, *Away in a Manger* will be a major contribution to the form. How grateful I am to Mother! But let us go back to the here and now where our telephonic conversation is nearing *fini*.

‘Would you like to talk to Honoré, Mom?’

‘Oh, is that his name? Is it after Balzac?’

‘Not exactly. It’s Charles’s great-great-grandfather’s name. But he was a poet and a friend of Balzac’s; they drank pots and pots of coffee together and then raced to see who could get to the WC the quickest.’

‘He must have been a remarkable man. Say, Janie, how’s motherhood treating you?’

‘Just grand. I haven’t slept in six weeks, my bottom’s on fire, Honoré’s too hot, we’re all too hot! I think I would feel like I was falling in love again if only I could remember what it’s like to fall in love, but my memory’s shot. And I keep forgetting to take my vitamins. I don’t know if I’m going to make it, Mom.’

‘Sounds good, Janie. Just like it should be. Hang in there. Remember, I hung in there for you. Embrasse Honoré de ma part,’ she added in French before our connection was cut, probably by some squirrel gnawing the makeshift line set up by Ranger Rogers.

So now Mother knows the news. I’m certain she would have expressed a desire to see us, to hold little Honoré in her arms, if only we hadn’t been so rudely disconnected by a rodent. In a month she will be back at her ranch and more easily reachable; I think we will invite her to come for a stay. A Christmas trip perhaps? Unfortunately, right now we are not equipped for overnight houseguests. We’ve only been in this flat for three weeks, having moved from a tiny studio we had been

renting on the rue Mouffard. Our new abode is a three room affair that belongs to my mother-in-law Mathilde, or, rather, it belongs to her Association under the Law of 1901, Catholics For Communism, of which there are now but two remaining members of the original five, Mathilde herself and an ancient Armenian résistant she calls Komrad Kerkorian. While I make no claims to possess the qualities required of real-estate agents – a friendly, optimistic disposition even in the face of collapsing porches, an ability to micro-manage nit-pickers, a wardrobe of power suits and Latex gloves, a knack for picking locks, a diviner's rod – I would like to give you a brief tour of our lodgings if you would so agree to follow me. Shall we begin?

To arrive *chez nous* you must get off at the Colonel Fabien métro station and walk towards the Communist Party Headquarters. Then turn left when you reach its gates and are nearly face to face with the great and mysterious white egg dome that sits upon its rolling lawn, a dome modelled, judging from the size, upon the eggs once laid by Soviet hens on steroids. Next cross the street, continue on past Le Café des Dames and Le Longchamps, onto the rue de Meaux. Half a block down, stop at the shiny red door (there is only one of this glycerol hue), type in the code AB 1970, push the door and hit the light button on the left, for if you do not, you will feel like a blind man at a Chinese restaurant. This pitch black closet of a foyer is steeped in the chow meins and curries stirred up in Madame Li's restaurant to the left; her kitchen ventilation pipes, which run through our entrance, are full of little holes patched with band-aids. Once the lights are on, however, you will find this narrow entryway strangely charming. The lights in question emanate from a Venetian chandelier, which once illuminated the boudoir of a certain Mademoiselle Mimi at a minor château in the

Touraine. It was given to Mathilde and Hubert, Charles's parents, as a wedding present by a member of the de Jouveny family but was never hung in their home for reasons unclear to me. I believe that Mathilde's hanging it at the rue de Meaux was at heart a Communist gesture, an individual attempt (she is excluded from communal efforts for reasons you will learn soon enough) to spread the wealth, to provide the nation's proletariat with the light of a lustre. But her generosity did not stop here: the walls of this chamber are covered in wainscot and royal blue velour wall paper with a crown-bearing lion motif, a Pierre Frey covering left over from an interior decorator friend of Mathilde's who had just finished refurbishing Madame de Pompadour's cabinets at the Petit Trianon Château. The effect of the chandelier's lights upon this luxurious wall covering, the way it sets the golden lions a-twinkling against the deep azure velvet, is redolent of certain depictions of Our Lady, and this in turn inspired the Dos Santos family on the second floor to affix upon the wall facing the mailboxes a statuette of Our Lady of Fatima, dressed in a Plaster of Paris gown and cape with finger and toe nails polished in pink. Madame Li, joining in this spirit of donation, contributed a lovely Miss Taiwan calendar and two red New Year's lanterns which hang from the ceiling, their yellow tassels teasing the heads of those tall enough for the tickle. Charles is six foot four and gets tassel-tickled every time he walks through because he has his head in his symphonies and forgets to duck. For those of you who are tall, you've been forewarned.

Continue on now up the staircase to the right, and do take it easy because you have six flights ahead of you. The former headquarters for CFC (Catholics for Communism) is on the fifth floor, which when converted to US weights and measures, becomes the sixth floor. The

wooden banister and stairs are cleaned with savonette and waxed once a week by Dolores Dos Santos (of the second floor, as already mentioned) who unfairly complains about the hygiene of the Chinese (Wang, Li and Tseu families: of the first, third and fourth floors respectively), an unsavory prejudice that dates back several centuries to Vasco de Gama and his shipload of sinks which he tried to trade in the Far Orient for precious metals. How presumptuous of him to think those porcelain potties were worth their weight in gold! The Asians sniggered and poked fun at Mr Vasco's sanitary wares and his retinue of Jesuits who demonstrated their use, but in the end it was Mr Vasco who had the last laugh. History is a ruthless story indeed. I do wish that Dolores would review the sins and follies of her forefathers and quit ranting about the duck meat and dried fish hanging in Madame Wang's window; if it is her pleasure to cure her proteins in the Parisian air, then so be it.

But let's continue on up the stairwell, which smells of savonette on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, of nothing in particular on Thursdays, of fried cod on Fridays, and of muttony olive stew on Saturdays and Sundays. You'll notice that the doors are all painted fire engine red and that the walls are covered half way up with 1960s style Portuguese tiles. Their purple and brown abstract motif was common it seems during the Salazar period when the Dos Santoses made their exit with a truckload of ceramics, and, if I am to believe what I heard from Mathilde who heard it straight from her decorator friend of Trianon fame, the fashion is now making a comeback in some of Paris' most influential kitchens. Imagine yourself then, if this facilitates your ascension to the fifth floor, as Catherine Deneuve's personal chef (on Fridays this does help to sublimate the smells) preparing fritters for

Yves Saint Laurent (alas! He has passed!) and the Grande Dame herself while listening at the door for kiss-and-tell secrets. With a bit of luck and depending upon your taste for the flights of travesty, this jejune exercise should painlessly bring you up to the fifth floor (US 6th) where the three of us now reside.

Our flat is a recently whitewashed two-bedroom apartment, which on the western side looks out over the city's tiled rooftops to the breasty, Byzantine domes of Sacré Coeur on the mount of Montmartre. It was this view, I believe, together with the remarkable proximity to the Communist Party Headquarters that convinced Mathilde to purchase the flat some twenty years ago for the purposes of her unorthodox organization. She saw it as a kind of holy coop annexed to the majestic roost down the street and believed it would be a shoo-in, a way to get her sneakers through the doors of the great communal Hen House. In a sense, this worked, she did manage, her arm pretzeled through the card-carrying Komrad Kerkorian's, to reach the reception desk, but she never did get further than that. The choice was made explicit to her: she must either renounce her nobiliary lineage and Catholic affiliations or her Marxist aspirations. Since neither option was conceivable, Mathilde became, by dint of personal necessity, a self appointed Communist dabbling in Liberation Theology and an odd variety of mystic materialism, including the practice of babysitting Jesus (more on this later). But, excuse me, please, I must interrupt this visit briefly to take my Prince Rupert's vitamins and I am still waiting for Charles's answer to my earlier question as to their whereabouts. Let us hear what he has to say; perhaps he knows something we do not.

Charles: 'I believe I saw them somewhere... let me see... yes, it

seems... could it have been... in the kitchen? Perhaps by the sink? Do have a look...'

Clearly Charles is preoccupied with some musical equation far more interesting than the sum of my daily nutritional requirements. I am to take two of these foul tasting liquid nursing vitamin vials a day, morning and evening, upon the advice of Mathilde's holistic councilor, Dr Delamancha. I believe they have cod liver oil in them and live algae too, plus sweet tasting pollen, which only adds insult to the gustatory injury. Imagine eating sugared fish livers! I must clothespin my nose to take this dreaded dope.

Jane: 'But Charles, we don't have a kitchen!'

It is simply inadmissible that Charles will not admit we have no kitchen! As you will see once you have quickly admired the view of Sacré Coeur and made your way through the maze of boxes embarrassing our impressionable living room, that there is an adjoining room of about 9m² which contains a mini-bar topped with a single hot-plate. Next to this is a gold-leaf tap topped by an oxidized copper partridge (a Trianon left-over) jutting from the wall. Below it, on the floor, there is a blue plastic basin whose purpose is to catch the water cascading from the golden spout. The fact that Charles calls such a transient set-up a kitchen is only proof of his dedication to music, of his ability to live almost exclusively in the sonorous, snaking cavity of his ears. Forget cupboards, sinks, man-sized refrigerators, ovens and four-burner stoves; to Charles, a kitchen is not the sum of its Whirlpool appliances but an idea. An idea from which springs by way of an almost associative magic an assortment of dishes he delights in eating. Needless to say, it is Jane Maraconi who mans the hot plate, who not magically but by the sweat of her brow cooks up the one-burner

Neapolitan dishes, the *spaghetti con le vongole* and the *pesce all'acqua pazza*, and even, if Honoré generously allots her an hour's respite (very rarely, indeed, almost never), chicken diavola, Charles's favourite dish.

It is difficult to say when we will acquire a proper kitchen or at least a sink (perhaps the Dos Santos could be of help?) though when Charles finishes his job at the car wash and the pay-check comes in we might be able to manage it. I emphasize might. I mean, how much can one expect to make soaping up Renaults? But perhaps you are wondering what a composer is doing with his hands in the suds. Let me explain, bluntly if I may. Our finances have been rough of late, ever since Charles's royalty statements began dwindling after his *Suite #2 for the Holy Spirit and Three Harps* was panned by a Le Monde critic. He was thus compelled to take the first job he found, which happened to be a two-week stint at a highly confidential 'car show' washing Vegans.

Vegans, I should explain, are revolutionary vehicles, hopefully soon to be manufactured by Renault. As their name suggests, they are vegetarians of a sort, running on methane biofuel made from farmyard manure rather than the standard mixture of hydrocarbons and dinosaur bones. The prototype, both sleek and unfathomably lightweight, was designed by a team of France's most prestigious engineers, all graduates of the Ecole Polytechnique with a specialization in Automotive Esthetics. Charles had to undergo a background check before being hired, for the event is so wrapped in security and secretiveness – the car being truly maverick and not yet marketed – that the employees serving it had to be given clearance before gaining entry.

Perhaps we should be proud, in light of our freshly founded parenthood, to participate in this ushering in of an ecologically sane car, even if only by way of soap and sponges. It pains Charles to spend

all those hours away from his compositions, but there is a very good chance that the rhythms of washing will inspire a new oeuvre, as they once did for the Blaxploitation film *Car Wash*; perhaps even a hit will come of it? This is what I tell Charles to encourage him on as he dutifully leaves the house at 7.30 a.m. for work, though I needn't. He brandishes the bubbles quite bravely indeed from 8:30 to 5:30; it is only when he returns home that the Great Sensibility makes its forceful comeback and melancholia, that misfit of the soul, manages his motions. This explains why he is now sitting amongst our haphazard boxes, despondent: I believe he would like to find *Suite #2 for the Holy Spirit and Three Harps* but has no idea where it might be; none of our boxes are labelled or numbered.

But now Honoré is colicky, fussing, we are all sweltering and must get out of the house and take a walk. The sun has gone down but Madame Mercury is still up painting the town red. I have just found the Prince Rupert's buried in a package of diapers but can't find the clothespeg. The very thought of taking this pollinated fish liver concoction with live seaweed in the heat makes me seasick.

'Charles, the clothespeg!' I call out to my captain. Honoré is now wailing; his aihn-gee, aihn-gee plaint reminds us of Mick Jagger's 'Angie', a song which gave its singer the key to the City of Angies. He accommodated an average of 1.5 Angies a day while the song remained in the charts. We are not at all sure this augurs well.

'How come I can never find that damn clothespeg when I need it?'

'Here, chérie, I'll hold your nose if you like.'

'Please do, Charles. I hope I can get it down. It's dreadful stuff. I'm beginning to wonder if the taste of it isn't getting into the milk. Maybe that's what's making Honoré so fussy.'

‘Nonsense!’ says Charles, who holds Dr Delamancha’s prescriptions in highest esteem ever since he cured him of a ringing in the ears with belladonna drops. I squelch my suspicions therefore and down the contents of the vial whilst Charles pinches my nose. Honoré, who we sat in his baby chair to perform the operation, has turned up the volume on his jagers. I sputter, nearly gag but do manage to get the stuff down.

‘Look, Charles!’ I point to Honoré, having shuddered off the vile vitamin flavour. Our babe’s disposition has undergone a radical transformation. The storm of jagers was merely a flash flood, over and done with in a jiffy. He is now wiggling quietly in his chair, smiling at us both. Very drooly and sweet. ‘Maybe you’re right about the Prince Rupert’s after all. Why, he’s so calm all of a sudden.’

‘As Dr Delamancha always says, to treat the child, one must first treat the mother.’

‘Yes, perhaps he has a point, Charles. I’ve noticed that when Mathilde does her birch tree syrup cures, you seem to get rejuvenated too. Or at least more regular.’ I bend down to pick up Honoré, who needs changing now, and sing him the little diaper song: Wet, wet, wet, now don’t you get upset. Let’s get you dry, dry, dry, before you start to cry. How he loves to be changed! To look up into the adoring face of his parents as they clean and dry him, medicate his rashes and re-diaper him. And sometimes he does surprise us with a little spurt of fountain, making the event somehow festive and gay. I change the diaper and dress him in a clean onesie. It’s too hot to add any layers; he will take this walk in his underwear. How lucky he is, little Honoré. Charles and I would like to go out in our skivvies too, but we are much too modest. Already, with our clothes very much on, we do make an odd couple, a

bit like Jack Sprat and his wife, though I am by no means fat, just short and with fifteen extra pregnancy pounds saddling me about the hips. Next to my five-foot-one, pear-shaped frame, Charles's totem-like stature, his lean verticality makes for a marked contrast, which does not go unnoticed. If Charles never pays attention to the rather rude comments that sideswipe us in some of Paris' rougher arrondissements, it is because he does not hear them; I on the contrary do, and I fail to appreciate the crude allusions to our supposedly awkward lovemaking. How wrong they are to assume such a thing! How culotté! The only clumsiness, if one can so call it, that might disrupt our embraces would have to be hair related and nothing a thick-toothed comb cannot correct. In short, this unfortunate situation hardly encourages us to strip down. Though others do so without so much of a blink of an eye.

Such as Mr Li and his cronies who are seated in their underwear along the banks of the Canal de l'Ourq drinking Tsingtao beer. We spot them from across the canal and wave. Charles is carrying Honoré in the baby sling and I am walking alongside in black, stretch-waist pants and a spaghetti strap floral print mini dress, trying to hold my belly in and failing. But how can I possibly win that battle; it is effort enough just to filter in the oxygen from the mucky, heat infested air. Honoré is crying again; he is baking in the sling. I take him out and hold him up in the air so that he's facing outward toward the stinking, sluggish waters of the canal and the huddled groups having a midnight happy hour along its banks.

'Look, Honoré, that's Mr Li.' I point Honoré Mr Li-ward just as the gentleman arises, showing off his red and blue striped briefs. He poses for a moment as his friends clap and cheer. Honoré kicks his wee legs with joy. How quickly he gets into the spirit of things, a regular reveler.

Though most likely he doesn't see these men in briefs on a bender. What he senses from his maternal post across the canal is their merriment. Babes are emotional barometers; their telepathy traverses rivers and streams, great lakes and oceans. In this case, a putrid canal, a narrow, microbe-infested reservoir of urban wastes but with amusements on both sides. Honoré is picking up on the Chinese merrymaking. I turn us around to look for Charles who seemed to have receded towards a game of boule being played behind us. Then I hear a splash.

'*Ce n'est pas vrai!* Charles has moved up next to me again and is pointing to the water where Mr Li is now dog-paddling about in the liquid filth.

'Oh, Charles, do you think he will die? All those diseases in there...'

'Not if he goes and gets shots.'

'But I'm sure he won't. We must tell him. He doesn't know the customs here.'

'We'll tell Madame Li when we get back. She seems to be a sensible woman.'

'You know she really is, Charles. She's the brain behind their all-you-can-eat lunch buffet and the three euro supplement on shrimp and crab dishes. We really should eat there sometime. Once the paycheck comes in that is. Oh my God, Charles! Look! Mr Li seems to be drowning!' Indeed, our neighbour's dip has taken a turn for the worst; he is now flailing his arms and sputtering, his head bobbing in the lurid waters.

'Oh, Charles! We must do something!'

An Algerian family camped nearby around a tabbouleh salad has moved to the edge of the quai, shouting out in a shrill mixture of

Berber and French; they've twisted their tablecloth into a rope and have tossed it out to Mr Li. But Mr Li is unable to reach it and now it has become a soggy, sinking thing. Honoré has got the jagers again, unstoppable ones; he has just telepathed in the drowning-man's angst. Oh my poor dear! He's too wee for such woes! I hear yet another splash, this time right below us. It is Charles and now he is freestyling his way to Mr Li. And ma foi, he's got his head in that filthy water! Oh but he is fearless like those leper-licking saints! I try to pray his way to safety, but Honoré's jaggering has filled my head and its little chapels. I can't supplicate from within so yell out: Holy Shit! Help! Un Noyé! Au Secours! My call gathers the petanque-playing hipsters to the canal's edge; the twenty-somethings look curiously across the waterway towards the opposite bank where none of the picnickers knows how to swim. They are foreigners, from countries where municipal pools and natation instructors are far and few between. The banks of the canal, you see, are distinctly divided in their populations. If your back is to Place de La Bastille, and you venture up the left bank toward La Villette, you'll encounter The World. If you take the right bank, you'll meet The Scene. We usually begin our walk up Scene side and end it down World side though I'm sure the opposite trajectory is equally pleasant and I do wish we had taken it this evening; saving Mr Li directly from the left bank would have precluded this hazardous swim through the mire.

'Look there! That's my husband!' I shout proudly to a girl next to me as I point to Charles and try hard not to think of the slime he's swimming through. She turns her ruby pierced belly-button his way.

'Is he going to make it?' she enquires. The ruby is twinkling in the light of a *lampadaire*.

‘Well I should think so!’ I appropriately respond. Initially, my faith in Charles does not fail me. True, his crawl has considerably slowed down, but he is nearly there. Just a few feet away...four more strokes...

Suddenly faith grabs a little air: ‘Call the fire department! Call the firemen!’

I’m screaming at the top of my lungs while faith holds her hands up and fear’s readying to throw some lead. Chalk it up to my centuries-old Maraconi survival instinct evolved from mobstering at the foot of a live volcano. Like any self-respecting capo, like my Uncle Al, one of Boise, Idaho’s best, I’ve got a gut that gets it right. My gem of a neighbour is quick to it, on her cellphone dialling for good-doers, those fellows superbly versed in the saving arts and calisthenics, men who express their love on ladders, their helpfulness with hoses. Here we call them pompiers because they are always perfectly pumped up. Not only do they save lives daily and for free, but they keep themselves shipshape. How often Honoré and I encounter them in the Buttes Chaumont park whilst they calisthenicize, generously exhibiting their tax-funded goods, their brilliant buns shinning through tight rayon shorts or tattle tales as we used to call them in St Mercy High gym class. Just thinking of them usually makes me sigh a bit, I admit, though not in such a dire moment as this. Charles is trying to get an arm wrapped around Mr Li, but is having trouble. Mr Li is pulling at him madly, grabbing for dear life, which is what drowning men do to the detriment of all concerned and why it’s best to knock them out cold as any self-respecting life-guard knows.

‘Good God, Charles. Put him out! Giv’im the old one-two!’ But he can’t hear me over the jiggers, my voice won’t carry that far anyway.

The firetrucks too, drown out my coaching.

‘They’re here,’ informs my neighbour as the siren suddenly stops. ‘I hope they reach him in time,’ she says nonchalantly.

I want to give this doubting Thomasina a slap.

‘That “him” is my husband! And they sure as hell are going to get him in time!’ Her ruby flickers as she turns away from me frowning. Luckily for us the fire station is but a block away; the men file out of the truck in record speed, decked out in tattle-tales and wet suits. Four wet-suited saviours jump in and begin wrestling with Mr Lee, disentangling him from Charles though it is hard to narrate this intervention from across the way. I can only see the outlines, not the fine lines. I do believe however, that they prick Mr Li with a tranquilizer, for he goes limp all of a sudden and is carried away in the hefty arms of a pompier.

Waterlogged, Charles too is taxied to the ladder at the canal’s edge, then lifted out of the canal by the boys on the banks. Honoré and I wave to him energetically but he doesn’t see us. His clothes are drenched and dripping, clinging to his thin frame for dear life; he looks like a man-on-stilts emerging from the sewers with a rat on his head. But it is not a rat really, just the forelock stiffened and gobbled up with canal slime and god-knows-what. The bell-bottomed pants are now stuck to the peg legs. His trick is up. The World sees that tonight’s hero is merely a long-legged man attempting to reach beyond his height. And thank goodness he did; if it hadn’t been for Charles, Mr Li would have gone down to join the sludge sucking carp before the firemen arrived, that is for certain. All heroes reach beyond their height of course, some succeed in making the stretch, others fail; Charles did a bit of both.

‘Darling, I’m coming!’ I shout across the water, but Charles is being taken into the fire truck. He turns around and waves to us, letting us know that he will return when he can, once he has been washed and

given his shots. I head back home jogging to keep Honoré bouncing and happy. He giggles and seems to have put the aquatic drama behind him. He also senses my relief.

‘Let’s try to sleep tonight, Honoré. That way Dad will come home all the more quickly. What do you think?’ I should add here that since Honoré’s birth, indeed, perhaps even prior to that momentous event, I’ve noticed that my son is quite of a different mind than me, that in fact our ways of being and thinking have precious little in common. The most telling example of this is bedtime, of my needing sleep at night and his not. There is also my need to be alone with my thoughts and my body at least occasionally, and his constant need to be in my mind and arms. There are mothers who love to nurse as much as their babe loves to suck, mothers who perceive their wee one as an extension of themselves, as adorable, adoring mirrors of their own emotional and nutritional requirements. Honoré has not allowed me the comforts of such an illusion.

Which makes it all the more astonishing that he seems to have seen the wisdom of my suggestion for sleep. Why this is I’m at pains to say, perhaps his father’s bravery has wiped away night’s anxieties, frightened away its Caspars and other hapless ghosts. Be what it may, Honoré and I sleep with our three-speed fan on high from 1 a.m. to 6 a.m., that is to say a salutary five-hour stretch of slumber so deep and opaque that there was nothing to remember of it but its abysmal deliciousness. Oh thank you, my boy! Thank you, my little love, for letting us sleep through the night – or at least a part of it – I say to him. I’ll be a better mother for it, you’ll see!