

Sophie Hardach

The Registrar's Manual for Detecting Forced Marriages

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Sophie Hardach wrote *The Registrar's Manual for Detecting Forced Marriages* while working as a journalist for Reuters in Paris.

Originally inspired by the fragments of stories she was told while out on various reporting assignments, the novel follows the intertwining lives of a Kurdish boy struggling to build a life in Europe and a Registrar working at a Parisian town hall. As part of her research, Sophie travelled to the Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi border, a mountainous region that is the traditional homeland of the Kurds as well as other ethnic groups.

In telling the story of Selim, the Kurdish protagonist, Sophie was able to revisit the European countries where she has lived and worked as a rather more privileged migrant: the UK, Italy, France, as well as Germany, where she grew up. It also made her reflect on her experiences living in places where she stood out as a foreigner, such as Japan, Singapore and Colombia.

Sophie has always wanted to be a writer, encouraged by her early commercial success writing romances for school friends, with their favourite pop stars as the love interest. Sadly, moving from racy short stories to literary fiction was more difficult than she thought, but since persistence is a core characteristic of migrants as well as writers, her response was to keep writing.

Sophie is currently working on her next novel, which for a change is set in a single country, England. Like her other novel, it is written in English, a language that has become her literary home.

The Registrar's Manual

PART ONE

HAIR BY HAIR, YOU MAKE A BEARD

1

Selim's first view of Europe was a vast, thick carpet of shit. Layered on the waves before him, bobbing on the water, there loomed an impenetrable barricade made of tons and tons of excrement pumped out by the generous stomachs of southern Italy; as if the shores of Europe, fed up with thousands of washed-up refugees, had decided to surround themselves with a man-made security cordon of slime and stench. *Better turn around now*, said the slime. *And please don't come back*, said the stench.

But Selim, his ears full of saltwater, limbs struggling to keep his body afloat, sight blurred by a wig of seaweed, did not hear the message. The heat on the creaking boat had not stopped him, the watchful coastguards had not stopped him, his own fear and seasickness had not stopped him. A stinking mass of digested pasta would not stop him now.

And so, holding his head high like a splashing dog, leading a trail of men, women and a toddler strapped to her mother's back, Selim broke through the barrier before him, parted Europe's soft defences with his bony chest and hands, and swam right through to the other side.

Closer to the beach, the green water became warmer, the foul smell gave way to a nose-tingling mix of fresh air, surf and seaweed, and the brown suds turned into white foam that tickled his stiff neck.

Selim swam on and, when he could feel his legs brushing against the sand, collapsed then crawled on, his fingers clawing the moist grains, his elbows sinking into the ground. He dragged himself ashore, and, panting and sobbing, his left hand clutching a fistful of damp Puglian sand, curled up on his side.

He had arrived.

'Get up.' A hand grabbed his shoulder. 'GET UP. Quick quick quick.'

Selim sat up. The man had moved on to the next tired body, giving it a quick shake, rounding up the creatures that littered the beach like corpses. They rose to their feet, grouped in a wet tangle and shifted through the gentle light of dawn towards the waiting trucks.

The traffickers barked nervous orders. They ran up and down to steer their

flock, hurrying the slow ones, restraining the fast ones, looking even more afraid than their charges. Selim had been told they would be rowed ashore in the middle of the night, under the cover of darkness. Instead, the men on the boat had told them to jump, and here they were, dozens of Kurdish refugees brightly illuminated by the early morning sun like so many incriminating pieces of evidence.

The group stopped. Selim looked back at the beach. Two thin figures, a man and a woman, remained there, saltwater dripping from their hair and blackened clothes, their backs bent over something on the sand. Hurry up, people, Selim thought. Let's get going. A few of the traffickers detached themselves from the group and jogged down to the couple.

The man turned around to face them, and now Selim could make out the thing lying at his feet. The traffickers motioned towards the trucks, but the man shook his head. The traffickers motioned towards the trucks again.

'Just leave it,' one of the traffickers shouted. 'Come.'

The man shook his head again. And all of a sudden, the woman, who had been perfectly still, dropped to her knees and started digging a hole in the sand with her hands. Selim, shivering in his clammy jeans and jumper, walked away from the trucks and towards the beach, the fabric chafing against his thighs. He felt a hand on his shoulder, shook it off, broke into a trot.

Someone seized his arm.

'Come, quick, here, COME!'

But Selim, used to people trying to pull him this way and that, easily twisted his slippery twig of an arm out of the trafficker's big hand and ran to the mourning couple.

He knelt down next to the woman and pushed his fingers into the cold sand. The father and the traffickers had formed a circle around them. It did not have to be a big hole. A small hole was enough.

The mother took the limp toddler into her arms, tenderly, as if she had fallen asleep and needed to be carried to bed.

A sand-coated limb slipped loose, dangled, was tucked back in. The mother lowered her child into the hole. Her lips moved silently as they raked the sand back with their hands and smoothed it over the little body.

Officially, Selim's truck was loaded with crates of tomatoes: the Taste of Sunny Puglia, ripe, red and fragrant, destined for canning factories in foggy northern Italy, where they would be packaged and stacked into trucks rumbling through Switzerland all the way to Germany, unloaded in dark warehouses, sold to pizzerias, mixed with olive oil, herbs and rotten tomatoes from rusty tins, spread onto sickly pale dough, baked in the seventh circle of hell until all the germs were killed off, served to lip-licking German owners of holiday homes in southern Italy who would frown, take a bite, smile and sigh: 'Ah! The Taste of Sunny Puglia!'

Unofficially, secretly, illegally, Selim's truck was loaded with Selim and his

fellow sufferers: the Taste of Sunny Kurdistan.

They were exhausted, grey and smelt of shit. They would be unloaded, washed and dressed in dry rags somewhere in the north. Crammed into another truck. Waved past indifferent Italian border police. Better not check the trucks; not our problem anyway; *chi se ne frega*; good thing they're off to Germany. Bye!

As they rattled through Switzerland's winding roads, the man to Selim's left started to retch. A pool of vomit licked at his feet.

The mother had not spoken since they left behind the little mound of sand on the beach.

The father hid his face in his hands.

Back in the village, they were Selim's neighbours. He had a photo of the little girl, Evin. She was in the big group shot of his family and all the neighbours. It was his only photo of home, but he'd already decided to give it to Evin's parents. It was in his bag. He'd give it to them when he got his bag. Come to think of it, where was his bag?

It was dark now. The thin line of light along the top of the back doors had disappeared. The truck stopped. Selim held his breath and willed it to move again. Instead, the back doors swung open and a torch shone brutally inside. The Kurds cowered in the far corner like mice. Satisfied, the torch disappeared, the doors slammed shut, the truck roared on.

The Sunny Taste of Kurdistan spilled out of the truck, onto the concrete floors of a dark warehouse in Germany and was portioned out into manageable bites: Selim's neighbours into one vehicle, he into another.

'We'll find each other later,' Selim told the father, who briefly looked up from his hands and ruffled Selim's hair.

'You're a good boy. We'll find each other.'

The mother did not hear him. She climbed into the truck, a dead woman walking.

And then Selim was alone. He did not know any of the other men in his truck. The clothes he was wearing were not his clothes. His bag was somewhere between his village, the town of Cizre, Istanbul, an unnamed secret port, Puglia, Switzerland and Germany. He had three passports, none of them real. He did not possess any health records or a birth certificate. Since he swam through the putrid moat and entered the magic fortress, he had ceased to exist. You would have to travel all the way to the mountains of Kurdistan, to the wild and remote region where Turkey knocked against Iraq and Syria, all the way to Selim's village, and talk to his mother, his father, his neighbours, to find out the most basic details such as when he was born.

Even then, the question would prompt a lot of head-scratching and murmuring and: 'I think it was the night after *Newroz* and before Cevim's wedding . . .'

'No, it was long before that, after we bought the second goat but before we fixed the hole in the roof, no, not the new roof, the old roof.'

'No, it was the new roof.'

'No, it was the old roof.'

'The old roof didn't have a hole! I laid it with my own hands, these hands, look.'

Hands would be examined, calluses admired.

'I'm not saying it was a bad roof, but one day we noticed there was a hole in it and you climbed up there to fix it, *remember?*'

'That was the new roof, the one your brother put up when I was in prison.'

And so on.

And eventually, after many glasses of sugared tea and stories about happy days at weddings and terrible nights in Turkish prisons, a consensus would emerge on the year when Selim was born, and give or take a few days or weeks or months, that estimate would mean that when Selim swam through the sewage and crawled ashore and helped bury his neighbours' child, on that first day of his bright new life in Europe, he was about thirteen.

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I met Selim several years after he was smuggled into Germany, a skinny Kurd disguised as a plump tomato. By then, his estimated birthday, based on the purchase of goats, the death of an aunt, the jail terms of male relatives, had been converted into a neat number that was typed on forms and slid into folders and sorted into filing cabinets by manicured hands at a German immigration office.

Selim had entered Germany with three passports: Turkish, Italian, and for some reason, Bulgarian. The Italian one in particular had been a source of worry. The trafficker had handed it out soon after the beach, holding the passports before him like a card trick, opening them one by one and reciting the name inside, since few in the group could read. Selim eagerly lifted his hand when it was finally his turn. The trafficker, looking puzzled, repeated his name to confirm it. Selim nodded. It was not until after the trafficker had left that Selim opened the soft booklet and myopically peered at the black-and-white photo. It showed a woman.

In any case, the passports were soon discarded. And then the guesswork began. A dentist prised open Selim's mouth and a radiologist X-rayed his hands.

'Thirteen sounds about right.'

'Thirteen? Bones like a ten-year-old. That child wants feeding.' This from a matronly nurse, whose broad hips and quivering double chin made Selim feel strangely homesick.

'Not everyone has big bones. Thirteen's about right.'

A more detailed verdict was dictated to the receptionist and sent on to Selim's case worker. Dentist, radiologist and nurse (who felt vaguely offended but could not quite say why) washed their hands and went their separate ways.

Among the many numbers that came to dominate Selim's life, from his case number to his lawyer's phone number, his date of birth occupied a special place.

He did not immediately realise its significance. He was illiterate and alone. In offices steeped in coffee and disinfectant, he was asked strange questions in a strange language; and then, strange questions in a familiar language by a Kurdish interpreter.

At some point in the process, a series of numbers appeared on his forms, and he could not exactly say where it had come from or who had first mentioned it.

'It's your date of birth,' the interpreter told Selim in Kurdish, flicking his chin towards the grey form before them. 'The day you were born.'

'How do they know when I was born? I don't know when I was born.'

'You don't know when you were born? Man, those *villages*,' said the interpreter, who had been born in Cizre in south-eastern Turkey, which was surely very different from having been born in a *village* outside Cizre in south-eastern Turkey.

'I wasn't there, was I? Or rather, I was there, but not in a record-keeping role.'

'You sure you're thirteen? Smart-arse. Wonder if I should tell the potato over there that you sound more like an eighteen-year-old.'

Their eyes swivelled towards a placid German bureaucrat who was watching them from behind his desk.

Selim smiled at the bureaucrat. The interpreter smiled at the bureaucrat. The bureaucrat did not smile back. He had three hundred asylum-seeking minors to deal with, and he wished the one in front of him would get on with it.

'He's getting impatient,' the interpreter hissed. 'See the way he's worrying his pinkie with his thumb? If you don't sign the papers now he'll throw us out, and you see if you can get another appointment before they kick you back to Kurdistan.'

'I just want to know who said this is my date of birth. How can they know if even my parents don't know?' Selim sighed.

'They know everything,' the interpreter said with conviction and gave Selim a pen.

Selim signed as best he could. It was only a number, after all. At the time, it did not seem any more important than the question of where he would sleep, and what he would eat.

But by the time I met him, this short row of digits was so central to his life that it might as well have flashed from every form and every folder in bright, bright red.

Come to think of it, Selim's artificial date of birth, and the fact that it was only

a few weeks away from my own, more reliably recorded date of birth, was the only reason why we met, and why our lives became very tightly intertwined.

But more of that later.

For now, Selim was the latest arrival in the German borough of Neustadt, a jumble of medieval cottages, timbered houses and modern council flats that also happened to be my hometown. *Willkommen!*

His memories of that time were hazy, blurred by a heavy tiredness. He recalled a series of camps and disused barracks. Days passed by. Weeks.

'So what was it like when you first got here?' I asked him.

He took a long deep drag from his cigarette and said thoughtfully: *'Hmm. Es war Scheisse.'*

He remembered sitting in a Volkswagen van, hurtling along narrow country lanes, past bright yellow fields and neat farmhouses, squashed between the windowpane and another Kurd, on his way to yet another camp, and he remembered thinking, Why don't they just attach a handle to my back? That would make it easier. And he giggled and considered telling the joke to the Kurd next to him, but, as he turned to face the older man and his serious, set face, a face that looked like a mountainscape, all sunburnt ridges and ravines, as he looked at this battered old fighter next to him, Selim swallowed his joke and turned back to the windowpane.

They entered a forest of conifers. Selim pressed his forehead against the vibrating glass, and through the trees caught a glimpse of a clearing in the forest, where broken washing machines and a fridge were piled up like offerings. This time he really did need to tell the other Kurd because this was too strange to be ignored; but when he turned, oh, the van had already whizzed past and trees obscured the vision.

They drove up to a metal gate that hummed open to reveal a cluster of rusty containers. Before them was a bleak military compound with high walls, its entrance strewn with scattered junk and rolls of barbed wire ready to be fitted around the fence.

'We can't get out here,' Selim whispered to his neighbour. 'It's a prison.'

'Don't worry,' the older Kurd said. *'We çêtir be.* This is where we're going to live.'

Linoleum floors and a sour dampness. In a cramped communal kitchen, Selim glimpsed a battered Kurdish teapot before the social worker hurried him on. He was shown his bunk bed. He sniffed at the mattress. It smelt of dirty hair.

'I need to find my relatives,' Selim told the older man, who was inspecting the bunk next to his, testing the springs with his hand.

'They'll find you.' The Kurd unzipped his bag, took out a tattered red, yellow and green flag and, with a serious nod, gave it to Selim. 'It might take a while. They'll need to prove that they're your family. Because, you see . . . well, sometimes people come in to pick up children, and then it turns out they're not their family at all.'

Selim pinned the flag above his bunk. He had been given a bottle of apple-scented shampoo and a pile of second-hand clothes, and he stored them carefully in his metal locker, leaving the shampoo bottle open in the hope the apple scent would waft out and settle on the musty socks and T-shirts.

A black man kneeling on the top bunk turned around, looked down at Selim, flashed a big white grin.

'Johnson.' He pointed at a poster he was tacking up above the bed, a picture of a blue-eyed man with long blond hair and girly hands that encircled a flaming heart. 'Jesus.'

'Selim,' Selim responded and pointed at himself, then at the poster. 'Isa.' They nodded to each other, then Johnson in the top bunk went back to pinning up Jesus.

At night, Selim could not sleep. He had not slept since he helped his neighbours bury their daughter in the sand. Sometimes, just before dawn, his tiredness knocked him out and left him unconscious until the alarm clock shook him back to something closely resembling life. That did not count as sleep, did it?

He imagined the gentle snoring of sleeping babies around him, the giggles of his little sister Aynur, the bleating shuffles of the sheep.

Instead, above him, below him, there were hundreds of men and boys who lived, ate, slept in this gigantic waiting room on the edge of town.

There were nameless Liberians who were really Nigerians, and stateless Palestinians who were really Egyptians. Every now and then, the men were summoned into dark corridors and dusty offices where they were asked lots of questions and no one believed the answers.

'So you say you are Palestinian, from the Gaza Strip.'

'Yes.'

'Right. So if you're from the Gaza Strip, how come you can't accurately name a single village or landmark or neighbourhood or even a road in that area?'

'Forgot.'

On day two, Johnson stopped talking. Selim greeted him in the morning, and he merely smiled back in silence.

Selim pointed at Jesus and said 'Isa' in a small attempt to make conversation.

Johnson stayed silent.

The Liberians were Nigerians, the Palestinians were Egyptians, the Kurds were just Kurds. But since Kurdistan did not, as such, exist; since it was an imaginary land, stretching over scraggy mountains and deep valleys in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria; since they were as landless as the Palestinians and as nameless as the Liberians, the Kurds didn't really exist either, and so, officially, they were Turks.

Selim could describe every single tree, every single village around Cizre, even the villages that remained only as blackened stumps along a potholed road. He could draw the shepherds' paths that criss-crossed the mountains with the

certainty of someone who had followed them at night, blindly. But in his case, none of this mattered very much.

Back at the immigration office, he watched his interpreter talk to his new caseworker, who was as blond and blue-eyed as the man on Johnson's poster. The caseworker nodded, nodded, nodded and then curtly shook his head.

'So he says you've just turned thirteen and you're claiming to be a political refugee, and according to your story you started your political activities when you were ...' The interpreter paused. 'Eight.'

'Yes.'

'He says that's obviously not possible. Either you're a child or you're a political activist.'

'Eh, you know what it's like back home,' Selim suggested. '*Here, bêje wî*. Go on, tell him.'

'Listen, I haven't been back in ages, and I'm not going to get involved. I mean, I'm here as your interpreter, right, but this job gets paid by the hour and frankly there's only so much I can do. *Afû*. It's not like I'm an expert.'

The interpreter was Kurdish, but he looked completely different from the men in Selim's village. His skin was smooth. His grey suit fitted well. When he laughed, he laughed like a young man in a TV advert, and all his teeth were straight and white. He told Selim he was born in Cizre, went to school and college in Istanbul, and was now studying at a German university.

What a nice life, Selim thought. Nice teeth.

He sighed.

'So what now?'

'Just tell him exactly what happened. It's your case, just give him the facts.'

Selim did. He looked at the inscrutable German behind the desk and told him the whole story. At the end of his statement, the German's expression had softened, maybe out of sympathy, or maybe pity because he knew Selim's case was hopeless.

I thought of Selim one morning long after I had left Germany, when I received an unsettling visitor in my office, and an unsettling book in the post.

Back home, I was quite rebellious, a teenager with green hair, pierced eyebrows and radical ideas. By the time I finished my degree at Panthéon-Sorbonne and started looking for a job in Paris, my hair was brown and my views more pragmatic. Having heard that the Paris town hall was looking to recruit staff with a 'migrant background', as they put it, I re-wrote my CV with an emphasis on cultural outreach (a stint as head of the Franco-German

friendship society came in handy) and turned up for the interview wearing a black polyester jacket and a navy skirt. That was my idea of 'professional'. That day, my interviewer from human resources, a kindly Senegal-born man with round glasses, nodded patiently through my rehearsed answers, and just as the conversation drew to a natural close, he smiled at me and asked: 'Would you like to see the wedding hall?'

He took me up the main staircase, a flight of red-carpeted marble steps that split into two and swerved up, up to the wedding hall: an oval, wood-panelled room with views over the city, one wall entirely covered by a nineteenth-century oil painting of a wedding party, all straw hats and bustles. On the opposite wall was a picture of cattle traders haggling over cows, the animals bowing their heads in harnessed submission. In the centre of the room, under a high ceiling painted with an image of a bare-chested man wielding a knife over a bull, stood a kind of secular wooden altar.

I assumed man and bull were part of an allegory or myth – about Zeus, maybe – and, forgetting for an instant that this was an interview and I was supposed to show myself at my most knowledgeable, I asked my companion about their significance.

'It's the old abattoir down by the meat market,' he said cheerfully.

'Oh.' I glanced back at the painting, noticing now that the knife-wielder was wearing a butcher's apron. 'I thought it was an allegory.'

'It's symbolic, like all the paintings in this hall.'

'I see. So what does it symbolise?'

'An abattoir.'

Despite the slaughterhouse fresco, the room was one of the most impressive I had ever seen, and I knew there and then that this was where I wanted to work.

'It must be wonderful to take weddings for a living,' I said. 'All that happiness.'

My interviewer shrugged.

'Some like it, some don't. Either way, it's the Deputy Mayor who conducts the ceremony, and Monsieur Dubois, the registrar, just helps. He's about to retire, so you will fill his shoes.'

I tried to picture myself standing next to the Deputy Mayor.

'I wonder if my accent will be a problem. It's quite strong. And German.'

He smiled at me.

'Nothing they can do about that. If they don't like us, they can go to Las Vegas.'

I smiled back.

He called the following week to offer me the job in earnest tones, like an old abbot taking in a novice, and right at the end he said he had an important piece of advice for me. I actually took out my pen, thinking he would share some town hall secrets.

'The thing is,' he said, 'you need to improve your posture, or you will get

problems with your lower back. You will be sitting a lot. I noticed that you sit straight for a bit, then you sag and hunch, then you suddenly remember your posture and straighten up again like a rod. Then you sag again.'

'Er, thanks,' I said, putting away my pen. 'I was often told to sit up straight as a child. But maybe not often enough.'

Weddings remained my favourite type of ceremony. There was the romance, the suspense, and just the tiniest risk that one of the two protagonists would have a change of heart.

After a wedding, I usually went back to my keyboard-tapping routine, but occasionally my thoughts lingered on the couple that had just walked down the marble steps, imagining how their life was going to play out.

I was in that kind of mood this morning, grinding some coffee beans for the second cup of the day, when the door was flung open. In came a man, followed by Sandra, our secretary. He muscled into the room the way most men here do, a blast of testosterone, and I instinctively drew back when he leaned across my desk to shake my hand. He sat down, reached between his thighs to grab the front of the seat and dragged it closer to my desk.

'I'm here for the papers,' he said, stating his name. He shared Selim's surname; not unusual in a part of the world where the villages were small and the families large.

Sandra gave a helpless shrug and withdrew. I reluctantly abandoned the coffee grinder and sat down, pushing the lever on my swivel chair to raise the seat a little.

'Well, congratulations!' I smiled at him. 'You're the lucky groom?'

'His cousin.'

'Oh. I see.' I shifted some books so that they were in front of me, like a barrier. 'I'm really sorry, but you know, you can't actually do that for them. They'll have to complete the papers themselves. Don't worry, it won't take all that long.'

'Yeah, so, I'll pick them up and give them to my cousin, they fill them in, return them.' He drummed his fingers on the armrest of his chair.

'It's one of those new rules . . .' I raised my hands as if to say it can't be helped.

'My cousin's busy.'

He was sizing me up like a boxer now. I rubbed my eyebrow, a tic I had tried and failed to shake off. It went back to those rebellious days. The green hair dye grew out quickly enough, but the telltale holes remained for years after the rings had been removed. Sometimes my fingers would still find their way to my face, twisting phantom rings.

'I'm afraid it's just the way it is. The prospective—'

'You the one who's doing the weddings now? There was a guy here who did all the weddings and he knew exactly what he was doing. So, if you ask him how it works with the papers, he'll tell you. We pick them up blank, return them filled in. Everybody's happy.'

We were not off to a good start: I could see it as soon as I uttered the words

new rules.

He straightened up and pushed out his chest, eyeing me defiantly. New rules for whom, he seemed to be saying. Those *new rules* are what you people make up to aggravate people like me.

He shared Selim's surname, but looked nothing like him. They didn't even seem to be made from the same raw material. My visitor could have been hewn out of a rock by an angry giant, from the block that formed his head and neck through his triangular torso to his bulging thighs, all barely restrained by a white ribbed T-shirt and jeans. Selim, on the other hand, most resembled a folding chair, just waiting to be doubled up and put away.

My visitor sighed, as if being forced to explain something painfully simple and obvious.

'You know they're already married, right? We already did the religious wedding *lâ-bas*, before Ramadan.'

'But this is the town hall!' I said, suddenly feeling rather indignant. 'It's an important ceremony, it's the only wedding that counts here. I've looked at the papers, and as I understand it, the groom came over from Turkey, from Cizre, right, and the bride is a French citizen. So by law, I need to make sure they understand what this is all about.'

'You know Cizre?'

'I know the name. There are lots of Kurdish families in this neighbourhood.'

He laughed, surprised.

'How do you know we're Kurdish?'

'I'm a registrar. And I live here, too.' I immediately regretted that second sentence, then told myself not to be so paranoid.

'Right. OK. You win. I'll bring my cousin over tomorrow and we'll fill the papers in together, OK, me and you and him.' He shifted his weight to one side, extracted a mobile phone from his back pocket and started texting.

I waited for him to finish his message and put the phone away, which he eventually did with a grin.

'Look,' I tried once more, 'you've probably been told that this is the way it's usually done, that you can just fetch the papers and get the couple to sign them. But things have changed.'

He clenched his fist around his mobile, and for a moment I thought he was going to hurl it across the room. His face, which had briefly relaxed into an expression not unlike friendliness, snapped shut. He glared at me.

'I'm sorry,' I repeated. 'But the girl will have to come.'

Our *mairie* was perched atop a hill, overlooking what used to be a village but was now one of the poorer areas of Paris. A park with a duck pond stretched out in front, divided by a stream that ran all the way to a set of staggered tower blocks; a lot of our weddings ended with a raucous picnic on the grass. A few streets down, by the canal, illegal immigrants had pitched tents in a playground, suspending blue-plastic sheeting between the slide and the swings. The town hall itself looked as if it was hijacked from a much wealthier place, all turrets and pillars, and an imposing carved portal crowned by a fluttering French flag. The rooms inside were far less glamorous – archives, cubicles, corridors – except, of course, for the ceremonial wedding hall.

Ceremonies were important to me. In that, I agreed with the French. Maybe I even learned it from them. I used to loathe their pomp and protocol, but now I found it reassuring, soothing almost.

About a year ago, we celebrated a Republican baptism, a ceremony invented in 1790, during the Revolution. Behind the walls of the *mairie*, I had feared a blue, white and red orgy of Frenchness, the kind that made outsiders like me feel uncomfortable at times. Instead, when the white-swaddled baby howled its outrage at the vaulted ceiling, drowning out my boss's eulogy to solidarity and mutual acceptance, I found myself strangely moved.

'*Citoyenne, Citoyen*, do you want to place your child under the protection of the Republican institutions?' asked my boss, the Deputy Mayor, looking festive with a blue, white and red sash draped across his pot belly.

The ceremony reminded me of the political rallies I organised as a teenager: the jargon, the conviction. And yet I was touched by my boss's seriousness, by this rotund man addressing the baby's parents as if they were fellow revolutionaries storming the Bastille.

Not everyone felt that way. The man who had just stormed out of my office, for example, couldn't have cared less about our ceremonies.

Once he had left, I finished grinding the beans and made myself an espresso. Then I turned to the booklet I had found in the post amongst the usual letters and pamphlets. I took a swig of coffee, letting it slosh around in my mouth in an attempt to ward off that yearning for the first cigarette of the day, and looked at the cover. It showed a hand forcing a wedding ring made of barbed wire onto the finger of another hand.

FORCED MARRIAGES ARE ILLEGAL IN FRANCE, it said in big bold letters.

Of course I knew forced marriages were illegal in France. Everyone knew that. It's why parents here lured their daughters away on family holidays that involved a trip to the ancestral village and a visit to the matchmaker. Then they

came back to France for the civil ceremony, and at that point there wasn't much we could do about it.

The other day, Sandra showed me a magazine article about terrified brides who had fled their families; there was a quote from the Justice Minister saying a campaign was needed to put teachers, social workers and registrars on higher alert.

'They want us to be *des superflics*,' Sandra said with contempt: supercops. 'As if we could tell whether a marriage was real. Sometimes I can't even tell whether my own is.'

I agreed with her. Since I took this job, I'd started making regular donations to a shelter for battered wives, and that was as far as my involvement went.

So I was about to shift the booklet to the to-be-dealt-with pile, the one that was never dealt with, when I saw the title: *The Registrar's Manual for Detecting Forced Marriages*.

I thought of Selim, and the time he came back from that journey to his Kurdish village, his first visit since he had left. We were both in our early twenties then, twenty-three, to be precise. I was already living in Paris, and I'd flown back to my hometown to see my family and sort out some problematic paperwork with my friend.

We sat on cushions on the floor, and he served me Kurdish white cheese and sweet tea and told me about the trip. There had been a wedding in the village. He showed me the pictures of the celebrations: old men in sagging suits, boys drowning in their fathers' oversized jackets. They were leaning on their rifles and frowning through black moustaches or grey beards, except for Selim, whose shadow of upper-lip fluff in the photos suggested a last-minute attempt to grow a moustache.

Selim placed the photos on the low table. He tapped on the pictures of the old men and boys and labelled them: cousin, uncle, uncle, cousin, uncle.

'See, the suit and the big moustache, that's Kurdish.'

I noticed something odd about the photos, something vaguely disconcerting. It took me a while to figure out what it was: there were hardly any young men in the pictures.

'Where are the men?' I asked. 'I mean, the ones in the middle, between the grandfathers and the boys.'

'Prison,' Selim replied with a smile. 'Or in the mountains. Or gone, like me.' His lips trembled a little. They often did.

He sat hunched over the table, propping up his right hand, his smoking hand, with his elbow, nervously flicking the ash off a cigarette. He smoked roll-ups when we first met, then later proper cigarettes from a pack that he would offer around; it was a point of pride, I think, pulling out that little cardboard box rather than a packet of tobacco.

Always nervous, always smoking. Sometimes I thought that, if he let go of his fag, he would simply crumple to the ground. That was all that was holding him up, a Marlboro Light.

With his high cheekbones, sleepy eyes and slightly trembling lips he looked at once very old and very young, and very afraid. His round glasses and long nose gave him the squirrel-like appearance of a young academic, and the chain-smoking and nervousness compounded that effect: he could have passed for one of those underground masterminds, the brains behind the battle. So what if he couldn't read or write. An illiterate intellectual: the world was full of them.

'And the women?' I asked.

'In the house,' he said and slid his finger from the photo to the napkin. 'But not all of them. Some are in the mountains, fighting. Some of our women are very strong.'

I went on perusing the photos. A wedding celebration made up of teenagers, children and the aged.

'So which of the boys is your little brother? The one who was born after you left?'

Selim pointed at a boy in a suit jacket that almost came down to his knees, standing wedged between two gnarled and crooked men and staring defiantly into the lens.

'It was the first time I met him. My own little brother. He said I sounded like Satan. They're all very religious there, they sit on rugs like this' – he squatted down – 'and everything is *Allah, Allah*, and I don't talk like that. My little brother, he told me killing an American gives you a free ticket to heaven, *automatisch*.'

'Hey, I thought the Kurds were supposed to love the Americans! You know, the Kurds in northern Iraq and all that.'

'Yes. But not my little brother.' Selim nervously rubbed his cheek. 'He's very interested in chemistry. He likes it more than all other subjects. When I was there, he was always busy with little experiments, he had some bottles and things.'

And then, like every time there was a new piece of vaguely disturbing news from Selim's village, we looked at each other and laughed.

'But I think, maybe he simply likes chemistry, maybe he's playing. Anyway I don't know so much about chemistry, so I didn't ask,' he added cautiously.

When Selim laughed, he cupped his mouth with the hand that held the cigarette, his long, jittery fingers sprinkling bits of ash over the tabletop. The plucky boy who had led a group of refugees ashore had turned into an observer, watching life from the sidelines, from the corner of a room, from the protective shadow of a doorway; like a man on the run.

And yet, when he arrived in Germany in 1992, at the beginning of that lukewarm decade between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the attacks on the World Trade Center, he was as quick and astute as any boy guerrilla east of Istanbul.

I picked up the photo of Selim's little brother in his oversized jacket.

'Little Al-Qaeda, hmm?' I said, shaking my head.

'Yes.' He sighed. 'Little Al-Qaeda, yes.'

I let the memories settle back into the crevices of my brain and opened the manual.

Serious signs that you may be dealing with a forced marriage include the following, I read. When a middleman fills in the required documents ahead of the wedding. When the future bride is not visible, does not appear at the town hall at any point before the wedding day. When there is a big age difference between the man and the woman.

I got up from my swivel chair and went to the office next door, where Sandra did her best to impose order on my files and folders. Most of the room was still taken up by the archives of my predecessor, Monsieur Dubois, who ruled over this corner of the town hall for decades. He had retired by the time I arrived, but his methodical spirit continued to pervade the older filing cabinets. I sometimes imagined him sitting there, forever labelling his brown-cardboard folders with a black pen and a stencil, until his skin began to resemble the soft, yellowing paper that held our most ancient records. (During my first week at the town hall, I spotted a note scrawled on the margins of one of his papers, his tidy handwriting distorted by haste or rage: *Putain!* I laughed out loud.)

Despite the unruliness of my own papers, it did not take me long to find what I was looking for: only a few sheets for now. The man was twenty-eight, roughly the same age as his cousin looked, a couple of years younger than me. The woman was eighteen. Not necessarily a big age difference, some might say.

This morning's aggressive errand boy could, of course, be called a middleman. But maybe the bride herself preferred to organise things that way; maybe she was shy, maybe she was illiterate, maybe she simply liked bossing her future husband's cousin around.

And even if I had the couple here, right here before me, how could I begin to guess their true feelings? How often did we look at a couple and think, What can possibly keep these two together, surely this won't last, surely they must be on the verge of a break-up? For all we knew they went on for years, decades, outlasting the ones we judged to be perfectly matched.

Even on the big day, you can look for signs at the wedding ceremony, right there, at the town hall!!! the booklet continued, the double exclamation marks adding an incongruous note of jollity like a smiley face in an e-mail.

In which case should you be suspicious? If, for example, the bride is behaving abnormally. If there are tears.

Most brides cried at their wedding. Old brides, young brides, thin brides, fat brides. I liked to think of it as tears of happiness, but sometimes I wondered.

After all, everyone got nervous at the bit with the signature. The forty-something bride with her noisy trail of children, entering the third round; the thirty-something with the relieved look in her eyes; the twenty-something who truly believed this would last for ever.

They all hesitated that fraction of a second after they picked up the pen, before they placed the nib on the paper. I was sure no one else noticed it. They

probably didn't even notice it themselves. But I, I noticed it always.

I'd look at them, and think, But are you sure? Are you really sure?

Moments later, they would put down the pen, exhale and laugh, and turn to beam at the groom, glowing with joy and relief; and that single heartbeat of doubt (and, why not say it like it is, fear) would never be remembered again.

The men, of course, exuded nothing but panic.

As Selim would say: for a man, a wedding day is never a good day.

None of these signs should be taken as evidence individually, my inquisitive little manual said. But together, they may be enough to arouse suspicion.

There was a subtle menace in those words. Suspicion: well, everyone knew that feeling. My young visitor earlier this morning had probably suspected me of harbouring unfair prejudices against his family. I had, at one point, suspected Selim of not being entirely truthful with me, even of manipulating me. And yes, maybe I had my suspicions about the young Kurdish bride-to-be.

The law allows suspicious officials to hold pre-wedding interviews with the couple, either together or separately, to try and determine whether they both consent to be married.

That passage gave me a bit of a tingle. But it was the last sentence of the introduction, written in the tone of an earnest older registrar lecturing an inexperienced newcomer like me, that made me get up and go back to my filing cabinet: *If you have good reason to suspect that the marriage is not consensual, you should stop the ceremony.*