

MERCREDI

I

Aurélien Renard was standing on the west side of the small square. She struck a match against the wall, lit her fourth cigarette of the morning and tucked the dead stick back into the box. It was the tail end of the rush hour, and a stream of people rose from the exit of the Métro station and walked past her on their way to jobs in the streets beyond. On the other side of the square, intermittently visible through the passing bodies, sat a thick-bearded old man, wrapped in a heavy and ancient brown coat as he played a hurdy-gurdy. She enjoyed the rattle and drone they made together, and remembered it well. He wore a Russian hat, and it was because of this that Aurélien had always thought of him as *The Russian*. She really had no idea where he was from, or what his instrument was called. To her it was just *that Russian instrument*, and she didn't want to risk spoiling its magic by finding out too much about it.

The previous evening she had taken off her blindfold, walked over to the map of Paris that she had pinned to her wall and been pleased to see that the dart had landed somewhere familiar. The summer before last, when she was nineteen and had just arrived in the city, she had found a job in a kitchen shop a few streets away, selling expensive pots and pans to people who seemed to have no idea that they lived in splendour. This had been the nearest Métro station to her work, and for a while she had walked across the square almost every day. She liked the idea that she had once been a part of this same flow of people. She pictured herself as she would have been back then; bleary-eyed and walking fast, almost running, as she tried to get to the shop on time after a muddled start to the day. Now, though, she stood still, cigarette in hand, as she waited for the right moment to begin.

The Russian had been there every morning, and he had always worn his coat and hat, even at the height of the summer, when any clothes at all felt like a hindrance. Just looking at him on such days had made Aurélie feel a dull throb of heat exhaustion. Today, there was a real chill in the air, and this was the first day this autumn when his clothes would have seemed appropriate. Aurélie could even see her breath, and some of the people walking by were wearing thick jackets, even winter coats and gloves. Others, the ones the weather had caught by surprise, were trying not to look uncomfortable as they hurried along faster than usual on their way to work.

Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to the hurdy-gurdy man. Most of them would have walked past him several days a week, just as she had done, and they had long since stopped noticing him. She had never known

anyone to stop and listen, or throw him a coin, and she had even wondered whether he was really busking; maybe he had a landlady whose nerves couldn't stand the noise, and who sent him out of the house to practise. Though his case was open, it was on the bench beside him rather than in the traditional buskers' spot, on the ground by his feet. These ambiguities had stopped her from ever giving him a euro or two, and even now she felt half bad about it. It seemed a strange way to try and make money though, playing for the same horde of hurrying, inscrutable commuters every day.

She considered her own clothes for a moment. She had given a lot of thought to what she was going to wear. First impressions were going to be crucial, and she had wanted to look like an artist in a way that was plausible without being overbearing. She was confident that she had done a good job. Almost everybody walking by was wearing ordinary clothes for a working day, just as she had whenever she had walked through the square, but today she stood out, wearing black work boots that were spotted with various colours from her recent failed experiment with oil paint, black jeans and a brand new red quilted jacket, a last minute addition thanks to the temperature. Her hair, after years of changes, had finally returned to its natural colour, a colour which in her early teenage years she had condemned as *mousy* before attacking it with bleach and dye, but which she had lately come to think of as a pleasing dirty blonde. She had yet to decide whether to grow it out properly, but for now it was just long enough to tie back, which was what she had done. She knew she looked right. The first impression was going to be a good one.

She smoked her cigarette as far as it would go, then ground it out on the wall and put the stub in the matchbox. The time had come. A new batch of passers-by was spilling from the Métro, and they were augmented by the passengers of a bus that had just pulled up. She switched on her video camera, and rested it on her shoulder. It was quite heavy, an old-style one that used VHS tape, and she hoped its antiquity would help towards the *mixed-media* aspect of her assessment. She took the stone from her pocket.

She had chosen it carefully. It was a smooth pebble about the size of a small grape, and so dark grey that it might as well have been black. She had decided that a dark one would be ideal for the task, because it wouldn't be lost against the backdrop of light stone apartment buildings. She had taken it from the collection of interesting stones she had built up as a young girl, most of them found on beaches on family trips to the seaside. She couldn't remember which beach this one had come from, but it must have been the combination of its smoothness and darkness that had marked it out from its neighbours and inspired her to pick it up and take it home.

She had spent the preceding Sunday afternoon practising in the Bois de Boulogne. When she was growing up, her father had often told her he wasn't prepared to raise a daughter who couldn't throw, and over the years she had developed a good right arm. The problem was going to be capturing the stone on film. She had begun with horse chestnuts, throwing them as high as she could and trying to locate them in the viewfinder at the same time, following their trajectory as they rose and fell. Once she had practised enough with horse chestnuts she had moved on to stones. She had been so lost in her task

that by the time she gave up, her arm aching so much she could no longer throw, the park was growing dark, and unusually beautiful silhouettes had begun to appear along the roadside.

It was a clear morning. Yesterday's rain and clouds had gone, leaving only a few puddles. The sky was blue, and the light was good. She held the stone as she pressed the *record* button, closed her eyes, counted slowly to fifteen, pulled back her right arm and threw.

She knew before it had left her hand that the throw was a good one, high and true. She opened her eyes and immediately caught the small black dot in the viewfinder, just as she had practised. It rose to its apex, and seemed for a split second to hover, completely still, before beginning its descent. It was at this moment that her doubts set in: she went from a state of absolute confidence in her plan to a feeling of wretched stupidity. *This is art*, she had thought, exhilarated as the stone had left her hand. But she no longer felt that way, and she had no idea what it was, apart from a ridiculous and ill-thought-out thing to do.

She had intended to stay silent, but she couldn't. Even so, she had no idea that she had spoken. It was only much later, when she played the tape back, that she heard, above the music of the hurdy-gurdy, the words she had uttered as she saw where the black dot was heading.

Oh God. Oh shit . . .

She realised with horror that the stone – smooth and black and the size of a small grape – was about to land, hard, on a baby's face.

II

It had been a long day for Professor Papavoine, the one he dreaded more than any other in the academic calendar. The students had been given free rein to come up with a personal project, and it was his job to listen to their ideas and either sanction them or not. As always on this day of the year he was running late, but at last he had almost made it through. He had only a handful of ten-minute tutorials left in a day that had been full of ten-minute tutorials. The door opened, and his latest student walked in. His heart thumped as if she had pulled a gun on him, and he stopped breathing.

He coughed as air rushed back into his lungs, and tried his best to pull himself together. ‘Sit down,’ he invited, his tone welcoming, just as it had been for all the other students. He looked at his schedule. ‘Aurélie Renard?’

‘Yes.’

‘Aurélie Renard. Aurélie . . .’ He left a deliberate gap, smiled and rolled the *r* for as long as his tongue would allow. ‘. . . Renard.’ This double repetition had become traditional, and he did it without thinking. It was a friendly touch that was designed, successfully, to put the student at ease and give the misleading impression that he was going to be fully engaged in the conversation that was to follow, listening very carefully to every word of their proposal. This time, though, he added a third repetition which, it struck him halfway through, was for his own benefit, to imprint her name in his memory. ‘Aurélie Renard,’ he mumbled, his eyes glazed. It was a repetition too far, and his intonation left its meaning unclear.

She looked confused. ‘Er . . . yes?’

He shuddered as if waking from a trance, which, he supposed, was just what was happening. He knew he had to turn this situation around. ‘Hello, Aurélie Renard!’ he cried. He realised too late that this was over-friendly. He had even raised his hand in a cheery wave, as if she had been a small child and he a dental surgeon about to perform an appalling procedure upon her. He cleared his throat, and for a moment he allowed himself to just look at her. She was quite short, three or four centimetres below average height he guessed, and slim, with breasts that were palpable, yet unobtrusive. She was very pretty, in a no-make-up kind of way. She was what his colleague Professor Boucher would have called a *compact blonde*.

Professor Boucher took pride in putting all the female students into chauvinistic categories, and whenever a *compact blonde* was in the vicinity he took the opportunity to pull faces, wink and bug his eyes out, implying that she would be Professor Papavoine’s *type*. Sometimes

his grey chain smoker's tongue would even dart out of his mouth and moisten the lips that lurked below his unruly beard. Professor Papavoine was always exasperated by these displays, and what exasperated him more than anything was that Professor Boucher was right; he supposed the compact blonde *was* his type, insofar as he had one.

'So,' he said, taking care now to sound at least a little bit professorial, 'you have an idea for your project?'

'Yes.' Aurélie swallowed hard, and began. Until a few minutes earlier she had been determined to stick to her original plan of spending the coming weeks producing a series of line drawings. Drawing had been her first love; it was what had led to her being singled out by her art teacher as an exceptional student, and it had won her prizes at school. It was her love of drawing that had driven her to apply to art college, to leave the industrial town she had grown up in and come to Paris to learn about materials and technique, and to become as accomplished as she possibly could at the only thing she had ever been really good at, apart from making mashed potato.

Her idea for the project had been to wander around her neighbourhood and draw people, animals and objects: anything she saw that she thought would make a good subject. She'd had a feeling, though, that telling the professor she wanted to draw a series of pictures would not be enough, that he was going to be looking for an *angle*. She had one ready. It was bold, perhaps even audacious: she was going to look him in the eye and tell him that she planned to make these line drawings really, really good. She would leave it at that.

As she had waited for her name to be called, she had

joined her fellow students outside the professor's office, and her confidence began to drain away. Sitting in a circle of much criticised plastic chairs, she had listened quietly as they talked at length about their own proposals. They seemed to come from a different planet from hers. Their talk was of *recontextualising found objects*, of *blurring the boundary between art and the everyday*, and of *provoking extreme reactions*. One of the students, Sébastien, was saying something about *subverting the zeitgeist*.

She watched him as he took his turn to hold court. On the last day of college before the summer break everyone had gone out for drinks, and she had ended up inviting him back to her apartment, and they had spent the night together. He had left first thing in the morning, and hadn't called her once over the summer. He was tall, and had good bones, and she had liked him from the moment she had set eyes on him. She had spent more time than she should have done wondering whether he had lost her number, or whether she had written it down incorrectly as he hurried to gather his things and go.

When she saw him again at the start of the current term, as scores of students milled around waiting to be allowed into a lecture hall, she had sought him out, gone up to him and said hello. He had given her only a cursory greeting before returning to the intense conversation he had been having with a fellow student about something she didn't understand, and had no particular interest in understanding. He was acting as if nothing had ever happened between them, as if she was just another slight acquaintance from his course, as if she had never slept in his arms, and as if he had not lightly pinched her chin as he told her that her eyes were just the right shade of

blue. He hadn't even asked her how her summer had been.

She had stood there for a minute or two, and when she realised he wasn't going to acknowledge her further she had gone away and leaned against a wall by herself. He hadn't been her first, but he had been her third, and she had hoped it would be a case of third time lucky. He was with another girl now, a sculptor with waist-length black hair, who never smiled. She had seen them around together.

On visits home, Aurélie had endured several identical conversations with various aunts, uncles and neighbours about the apparent horrors of a monstrous thing called *modern art*.

—*So you're at art college?*

'Yes.'

—*What kind of work do you do? It's not modern art, is it?*

'I mainly do line drawings, but I'm starting to work with oil paint too.'

—*So, it's not modern?*

'Er . . . not particularly.'

—*Thank God for that.*

Every time this happened she felt like grabbing the aunt, uncle or neighbour and shaking them. She didn't like the idea that what she did was automatically considered to be better than everything that they lumped together under the banner of *modern art*. She was also frustrated by the implication that because she chose to work in a conventional way, then what she produced must be old-fashioned and unoriginal. By their standards, being old-fashioned and unoriginal were virtues, and they didn't

even feel the need to see any of her work before declaring her superiority, purely because of her perceived refusal to embrace anything that might be considered to be in some way progressive.

She was very impressed with a lot of the work her fellow students were producing, and some of this work would doubtless be considered *modern art* by these aunts, uncles and neighbours. She knew how much care and thought went into it, and though some of it ended up plain, ugly or nowhere near as original as the artist thought it was, a lot of it worked incredibly well, and it dismayed her to see it all dismissed by people who would never be open-minded enough to give it a chance. She was always looking for different ways to approach her work, and she had ideas for new perspectives and techniques, and had plans to seek out unusual subjects, all of which would amount to something that would be seen as undeniably *modern* to her supporters.

She also had plenty of aunts, uncles and neighbours who were more open-minded about art, but listening to Sébastien, who was still going on, she knew he would stretch even their patience. He was saying something about *mapping territory beyond the beyond*. He wasn't doing himself, or anyone else, any favours at all.

She had never been able to work out what this kind of talk had to do with anything. It seemed designed only for the artists to elevate themselves into positions of intellectual unassailability before they had even taken the time to put brush to canvas, or smash the bricks, or saw the hooves off the freeze-dried donkey. She couldn't see what it could ever do but alienate people, and turn them away from all art, good and bad, and it was this that had driven

her to keep her proposal as straightforward as possible, as uncluttered with explanations and justifications.

She supposed the simplicity of her proposal had, at least partly, been a kind of protest against the sort of thing she had been listening to, as well as the excruciating artists' statements she often read on exhibition programmes, words that turned her against the work before she had even seen it. But whatever her intentions, her plan to announce that she was going to simply draw some pictures no longer seemed bold and combative; it just seemed very small, as if she hadn't given it any thought at all. She worried that she would be laughed out of the professor's office, or castigated for having a lack of ambition or for being unable to articulate her ideas. Her courage evaporating, she did what she always did at times like this: she asked herself what her friend Sylvie would do.

Sylvie was always breezing into difficult situations, and she had a knack for escaping them. Aurélie began to consider feigning a fainting fit to get out of the appointment, but she decided that Sylvie would have come up with something more creative and far less transparently fraudulent than this. Then, as if from nowhere, a plan came into her mind. She knew at once that she had found a way to present the professor with the kind of proposal he would be looking for. She had no idea whether or not it was any good, but at least it was something other than saying she was going to draw some pictures.

Sébastien's soliloquy was still going on. By now he was furiously bemoaning the blindness of the public, how unable they are to even *see* brilliance, let alone comprehend it. By this, she knew he meant that they were unable to see or comprehend *his* brilliance. She had seen his latest

piece, and it had looked like something torn from a children's colouring book; if it had any worth she was blind to it as well. She was annoyed with herself for having let him make her so unhappy, and even more annoyed that she still found him so attractive, that she still wished he had called, and that it had been her, and not the unsmiling sculptor, by his side. She made a mental note to have a word with herself about him, to write a list of everything that was wrong with him and stick it to her fridge door with a magnet.

She left him to his monologue and continued to pull her plan into shape. She even started to feel quite pleased with it. It had still been forming in her mind when the professor's secretary called her through to his office.

Every year Professor Papavoine began this day with the intention of listening hard to what his students were saying, but it had never happened. In the opening seconds of his first appointment it would strike him that there was really no point, and unable to get away from this truth his concentration lost focus and only odds and ends of the students' ideas ever registered with him. These sessions barely counted as tutorials; being only symbolic, they were a way of acknowledging that the students had made it through to the second year of study and were now ready to have their projects approved by an authentic professor. The faculty's primary aim in this was for news of these encounters to reach the parents, who would, they hoped, be satisfied that their offspring were receiving an acceptable standard of education. Whatever the students' proposals for their personal projects, Professor Papavoine waved them through, wished them all the best and sent

them on their way. He didn't see what else he could do.

The only time he had ever come close to vetoing a suggestion was when a student had proposed a project in which he would publicly collect, categorise and display everything that came out of his body over a twelve-week period. A big glass vat would contain his urine, another would house his excrement, and smaller demijohns and specimen jars would hold snot, earwax, semen and sweat. He had planned on presenting this as an exhibition called, simply, *Life*, during which he would be on display himself twenty-four hours a day, naked and publicly topping up the exhibits as the weeks went by, while microphones picked up the sound of his bodily functions and a series of speakers amplified them around the room in near-deafening surround sound.

Professor Papavoine had pulled a slightly quizzical face and said he wasn't quite sure about this idea, at which the student had turned white with rage and stormed out, vowing to leave the college, turn his back on Paris and make his name in London, which he had promptly done with this very concept. In interviews he had derided the conservatism of his forsaken home city, and announced that he had embraced the English way of art, which he confirmed by selling the completed work to an oligarch for three quarters of a million pounds and gaining membership of a number of private drinking clubs.

He had gone on to present *Life* in San Francisco, Tokyo and São Paulo, and with each new staging its popularity had increased. It had become acknowledged as a sensation of the international art world, and it was due to open in Paris any day now: the return of the Prodigal Son. Everybody was talking about it. Since his meeting with

Professor Papavoine he had shaved off all his hair, even his eyebrows, and changed his name to *Le Machine*. There were posters all over the city of the artist naked among the empty receptacles, his genitalia only just obscured by a carefully positioned specimen jar. Bold letters across the top said, simply: *Le Machine: Life*. Were it not for the booking information at the foot of these posters, they could almost be mistaken for advertisements for a gentlemen's fragrance. Professor Papavoine spoke to nobody about his encounter with the star of the event.

In every case other than *Le Machine's*, though, Professor Papavoine had expressed neither doubt nor discomfort, and he made a point of offering no praise. He would think no more of the ideas he heard until weeks later, when the time came time for him to sit on the assessment panel.

Aurélie carried on. Professor Papavoine really wanted to hear what she had to say, and he worked hard at concentrating. She told him her plans to blindly throw a dart into a map, and how the nearest suitable public space to where it landed would become the starting point of the project. Then she started saying something about small stones, and strangers, and random selection, but he lost the thread. As he looked at her, he was only just able to stop himself from sighing. She was so pretty. Her shortish hair was tied back, and he noticed that one of her ears stuck out a bit more than the other, and her teeth were a little uneven. He guessed she would have been offered braces when she was a teenager, but refused to have them fitted. *Oh, petulant child*, thought Professor Papavoine.

She wasn't quite beautiful, but she was really, really

close. To him, her extreme prettiness combined with her rough edges to make her even more incredible to look at than if had she been the conventionally beautiful, airbrushed type.

He realised he was no longer listening, and tuned back in. He heard the phrase *mixed media*, and immediately tuned back out. He was mesmerised. He wanted to . . . he wanted to do all sorts of things with her.

Professor Boucher would have made fun of the feelings he was experiencing for Aurélie Renard. ‘When are we going to get a decent midlife crisis out of you?’ he had asked Professor Papavoine with depressing frequency. ‘You’re in danger of leaving it too late – what are you? Fifty-what?’ He was fifty-seven. Professor Boucher habitually mocked him for never having taken a mistress. There had never even been a fleeting clandestine romance, or a tortuous, humiliating episode of unrequited obsession. ‘And you are *definitely* French?’

‘There are rumours in my family that I had an English great-grandfather.’

‘Maybe that explains it. But even so, could you not just fuck a student every once in a while? For the faculty’s sake? This is an art college, after all – we have our reputation to consider.’

Professor Papavoine liked to think he had a high threshold when it came to vulgarity, but he often found his colleague to be almost unbearable, and sometimes he wondered how they had ever become such close friends. His working days would have passed so much more serenely if Professor Boucher had been a personal and professional adversary.

He was pleased to see that Aurélie Renard seemed

to be looking a little unsure about the words she was saying, avoiding eye contact as she spoke about *making a statement*, and *the importance of social documentary*, and how she aimed to *capture the essence of somebody's time, because, er, I suppose, er, everybody lives in their own time*. As with all the ideas he had half-listened to that day, it didn't seem to make much sense, and, as with all of them, it could go either way. It would be good, bad or, as was almost always the case, somewhere in between. He had heard plans to *appropriate the now*, to *create tension between the artist and the work*, and one desperate case had even risen to his feet as he announced his plan to *subvert the zeitgeist*.

More often than not, he felt sorry for the students as they made their proposals. It was as if they really believed that their work wouldn't count as art unless it had a paragraph of awful words behind it. He longed for one of them to tell him that they were going to paint a picture, and work really hard to make it a good picture, and leave it at that. This never seemed to happen.

At least Aurélie Renard's proposal seemed, if he had understood any of the fragments to which he had paid attention, to be about something. So many of the concepts he heard were so abstract as to be unintelligible. It struck him that she had stopped talking. It was his turn.

He said what he had said to the others: 'That sounds fine. I wish you all the best with it. I look forward to seeing the result.'

'Me too,' she said. 'I hope it'll be interesting.' Relieved at having made it through, her guard came down, and she smiled. 'I suppose I just want to make something beautiful.' As soon as the words came out she felt she had

made a mistake. That would have been the last thing the professor wanted to hear.

She rose to leave, but Professor Papavoine gestured for her to sit back down. He opened a desk drawer, and pulled out a card. It carried the university's crest. He shook his head, put the card back and pulled out another one. 'I would like to hear how things are going. Any time you would like to talk about it, just call me.' Knowing he was crossing a line, and trying not to tremble, he handed it to her.

She took it, and looked at it. It was a personal card, with the professor's home address and phone number on it, along with a personal email address. She had a pretty good idea that this was unusual, and wondered whether or not she should start to become suspicious of his motives. She put it in her pocket. 'Thank you, professor,' she said.

He paused, looked straight into her eyes, and said, 'Any time.' He looked down at his hands, which were clutching the edge of the desk. 'Day or night.'

'Yes,' she said, quietly. She looked sadly at the dull gold band on his ring finger. 'Of course.'

He watched her go, and when the door had shut behind her he picked up the framed photograph that faced him throughout his every working day. It was a picture of his wife. He smiled. She would have been about the same age as this Aurélie Renard when it was taken. She too was a little below average height, and slim, and very pretty, in a no-make-up kind of way. She was what Professor Boucher would have called a *compact blonde*.

At last, he allowed himself a sigh.

III

Weeks later, when she watched the footage, Aurélie Renard calculated that when the stone smashed into the baby's face it would have been travelling at somewhere between sixty-five and seventy kilometres per hour. The impact made little sound, just a dull smack that had been buried by the sound of the traffic and the hurdy-gurdy before it could reach the built-in microphone. She found it strange that something so terrible had made so little noise.

People were still making their way through the square. Some of them glanced her way, having caught an unexpected flash of movement and noticed her video camera. Uninterested, and just wanting to get out of the cold, they walked on. To her, they might as well have not been there. She saw only the baby, reclining in his buggy. There was a terrible stillness. Perhaps she had killed him.

She put her hand to her heart with relief when his little hands rose and clenched into fists. She hoped that this meant he was fine. She hadn't spent a great deal of time with babies, and had no idea that this moment of calm was usual when they are hurt, that it takes a while for the shock to subside and the pain to register. Three seconds after the event, the child's face crumpled in confusion and despair, and tears spilled from his eyes. His mouth opened wide, but there was still no sound. Then, on the seventh second, it came, a bottomless howl.

Aurélié lowered the video camera from her shoulder. She put a hand to her mouth as she shook with worry. The possibility of such an outcome had not crossed her mind, and she realised just how stupid she had been. She had no idea what to do next, and it was only then that it occurred to her that the baby had not been making his own way across the square. He came as part of a package with a mother, and she was leaning over him, dabbing his face with a cloth. Only when this was done did the mother turn away from the inconsolable child and give Aurélié a look of disgust that she would never forget.

She knew she deserved it. She wanted to turn and run, to get out of there as quickly as she could, and try to convince herself that this had never happened. She couldn't, though. She had to say sorry, to the howling child and to his mother. Burning with shame, she made her way over to the scene she had created.

She stood silently, cringing as the mother made a point of ignoring her, choosing instead to lean over the buggy and apply a folded baby wipe as a compress to the child's face. It wasn't until minutes later, when the baby had at last stopped crying, that she turned to Aurélié, gave her an

ice-cold smile and said, softly, ‘You did a good job. Look . . .’ She lifted the makeshift compress, and pointed to a red blotch on his face. ‘That’ll bruise nicely. Very nicely, indeed. Another centimetre in this direction,’ she pointed, ‘and you’d have put his eye out. Just imagine that! And I don’t mean that as a figure of speech – I want you to *really* imagine it.’

Aurélie pictured a shattered eyeball, and it was awful. She couldn’t think of anything to say. She and the baby’s mother were around the same age. She liked the way she was dressed; perhaps under different circumstances they would have become friends. She had been on the lookout for a new scarf, and she could have asked her where she had bought hers. She liked it a lot, and thought the turquoise complemented her colouring. She could have gone to the same shop and bought herself one, but in a different colour so it wouldn’t be copying. An image flashed before her of the two of them in their scarves, drinking coffee and laughing as the baby looked on from his buggy. But instead she stood there feeling like a child as she accepted her scolding. She wondered whether this was the right moment to explain herself and apologise.

The woman hadn’t finished. ‘Better luck next time.’ Her eyes narrowed. Her sarcasm exhausted, she exploded in anger. ‘You make me sick.’

Aurélie nodded. She made herself sick too.

‘What did you think when you got out of bed this morning? *I know – I’ve got a brilliant idea: I’ll go out into the street and throw a stone at a baby.* You’re a genius. Round of applause!’ She clapped and clapped, and Aurélie stood still, looking at the ground as she accepted this

bitter ovation. ‘Bravo!’ cried the baby’s mother. ‘Bravo!’ Just when it seemed this would never end, she pulled her phone from her pocket. ‘And when the police come, what will you tell them? I can’t wait to hear . . . One moment.’ The stone had fallen nearby, and she took out her handkerchief and gently picked it up between gloved fingers. ‘Fingerprints. In case you make a run for it.’

Aurélié nodded. She wasn’t going to make a run for it.

The baby’s mother seemed to be examining her. Then, in a single motion, she reached out and yanked a stray hair from Aurélié’s head. She held it up, and said, ‘DNA.’ She placed the hair next to the stone on the handkerchief, which she folded and put in her coat pocket.

‘So what will you tell them? Why did you do it?’

Aurélié rubbed the spot on her head where the hair had been plucked. She knew she owed her a full and honest explanation. She looked at the ground. ‘It’s an art project,’ she said. ‘I’m at art college.’

‘Art!? Painting a picture, that’s art. Carving a statue, that’s art too. There’s a guy coming to town who thinks that shitting into a bottle is art. Maybe it is, I don’t know. But this is the first time I’ve ever heard that attacking a baby can be a work of art. You know what? I think it might even catch on. You’ll get full marks for your project. You’ll be rich. You’ll be just like Monet, only instead of painting lily ponds you’ll be hurting children. Here comes one now – quick, go and kick her in the face.’

The square was no longer busy with commuters, and a toddler was nearby, holding her father’s hand. She looked as if she had only just learned to walk – her legs were stiff and wide apart, her steps faltering. She was a picture of delight as she put her new-found skills to work. The

last thing Aurélie wanted to do was kick her in the face.

‘I didn’t know I was going to hit a baby,’ she said. ‘I could have hit anyone.’

‘Oh, that makes it better. That makes it fine.’

‘I thought it would just land in front of someone, and they would stop and look at it. Or maybe it would bounce off their shoulder or their back without hurting them. People are wearing quite thick clothes at the moment.’

‘And you gave no thought to it hitting someone’s head?’

She had done. She had worked out that it would be very unlikely, and had supposed that if it did hit someone on the head it would only give them a surprise and maybe sting a bit, but nothing more. It was a small stone, after all, and she hadn’t thought for a moment that any of the people going past would be looking to the sky, like the baby.

‘And what was next? Once you had blinded a random passer-by, or given them brain damage? What was next for your art project?’

‘I was going to rush over to them and explain my idea.’

‘I’m sure they would have been dying to hear about it. In fact, why am I standing in the way of your assignment? Here he is. Here’s your random passer-by. Introduce yourself, and tell him all about it.’ She pointed at the baby, who had calmed down and was sitting in his buggy looking melancholy. ‘Go on.’

Aurélie hesitated for a moment, then crouched to his level. She felt she owed him at least this much. ‘Hello,’ she said. ‘I’m Aurélie. Aurélie Renard. I’m the one who threw the stone at you. I’m really sorry about that.’ She reached out and tentatively touched the baby’s shoulder.

‘Don’t touch him.’

Aurélié withdrew her hand and lowered her eyes. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Of course not.’ She addressed the baby again. ‘As I said, I’m sorry. With hindsight I can see it was a mistake – I should have used a different random selection process. What I was supposed to do was make you my subject for one week. I was hoping you would grant me permission to follow you around and take photos of you, and make short films and draw pictures of you. That sort of thing. It was going to be a depiction of everyday life. *Your* everyday life. The randomness of throwing a stone into a crowd was going to stop it from being a premeditated selection, and retain the purity of the . . .’ She couldn’t go on. She sounded so stupid. There was nothing good about this idea. She looked at the mark on the baby’s face, and fought tears as she thought of how sad her dad would be if he ever found out what she had done.

The child’s mother looked sidelong at Aurélié. Then she looked at the baby. She seemed to be thinking hard. ‘One week, you say?’ Her manner had softened.

‘Yes.’

‘Wait here.’ She walked over to a secluded part of the square, and pulled out her phone. She made a call. Aurélié couldn’t hear what she was saying, but the conversation seemed to be making her happy. She hung up, and walked back to where they were.

‘Let me look at you.’ She gestured for Aurélié to stand up. She obeyed, and they stood nose to nose. The child’s mother turned a finger and thumb into a clamp, and gripped Aurélié by the chin. Aurélié noticed how soft her gloves were. She liked them too. The mother moved her face left and right, then up and down and round and

round, examining her from a number of angles. ‘You have a kind face,’ she said. She flicked one of her ears. ‘This ear sticks out a bit more than the other one, but I can’t see that being too much of a problem. And you do seem to be genuinely sorry.’

‘I am. I’m really, really sorry.’

‘I think you might even mean it . . .’ She moved Aurélie’s head around a little more. ‘Yes. Yes, you do mean it. You are sorry. It was a stupid thing to have done, really stupid, but anybody can make a mistake. It wouldn’t be right for me to judge you too harshly.’

Aurélie had never been more relieved. She had been convinced that she would be kicked out of college and sent to jail. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘Thank you so much.’

‘You’re not from Paris, are you? I can tell from your accent.’

‘No. I’ve been here about a year and a half.’

‘So would it be safe to say that you’re a simple country girl with honest country ways?’

‘I, er . . .’ Aurélie had no idea what to say to this. She had never lived in the countryside, but the child’s mother was making her sound as if she had just stepped out of a Raymond Depardon documentary; she felt she ought to be holding a shepherd’s crook, her cheeks ruddy after a lifetime in the wind. Her home town was certainly small compared to Paris, though, and she told herself she was only lying a little bit when she said, ‘I hope so.’

The mother gave her a sideways stare, as she continued to size her up.

‘If there’s anything I can do to make it up to you and the baby,’ said Aurélie, ‘just tell me.’

‘Anything? Really?’

Aurélié nodded, in so far as she was able with somebody else’s hand clamped to her chin. She truly wanted to make amends.

The woman stared at her for while. She seemed to be weighing up a big decision. At last, she let go of Aurélié’s face. ‘Do you know how one of these things works?’ she asked, pointing.

‘The buggy? No, not really. I think I could push it along, but I wouldn’t know how to fold it, or get it down steps, or anything like that.’

‘I’m not talking about the buggy. I mean what’s in it. The thing you just threw the stone at: the baby.’

Aurélié shook her head. She had no idea how babies worked. She had occasionally had a small child lowered on to her lap for a photograph, then lifted off as soon as it had been taken, but beyond that she had never held one. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Not really.’

‘Never mind,’ said the mother. ‘They’re quite straightforward. Now, I want to show you something.’ She gestured for Aurélié to join her at the back of the buggy. There was a big bag hanging off the back, in coordinated red fabric. ‘In here is everything he needs to get through the day. It goes everywhere with him whenever he leaves the house. You need to be prepared for all eventualities.’

Aurélié nodded, wondering where this was going.

The mother continued. ‘It’ll be easy. I changed him about twenty minutes ago. All you have to do is keep him alive. Sterilise his bottle, don’t let him roll off the bed, all that kind of thing. Just use your common sense and rustic intuition. Just imagine he’s one of your sheep.’

Aurélié had never so much as touched a sheep.

The mother went on. ‘He’s a good child. He won’t give you any trouble.’ She thought for a while. ‘Well, he has his moments, but I doubt he’ll give you *much* trouble. No more throwing stones at him, and I’ll see you back here exactly one week from now.’ She looked at her watch. ‘At nine twenty-two next Wednesday.’

The woman crouched, and said a brief goodbye to the boy, telling him that the nice lady who had given him the bruise was going to be his mummy for a week. She didn’t kiss him, or even touch him. She stood up, and turned to leave.

‘But . . .’ Aurélie was dazed. She felt herself lose her balance, and she held on to the buggy for support.

The mother turned back, her eyes cold and narrow. ‘But what? Suddenly you don’t want to do your project? What happened to the you of a moment ago, the you who was such a dedicated artist? Don’t tell me you’ve given up? Would you rather I called the police? Is that how you want your project to end, before a judge, being handed a conviction for assaulting an infant? Would that be art? Would it?’ She took her phone from her pocket.

Aurélie had no idea whether or not it would be art, but she pictured herself in jail and was desperate not to end up behind bars. ‘No, I mean . . . But . . . what’s he called?’

‘His name is Herbert.’

‘Herbert?’ Aurélie pronounced it the French way, with no *H* at the beginning and no *t* at the end: *Air-bear*.

‘No,’ snapped the mother. ‘Not *Air-bear*. *Herbert*. Repeat after me – *Herbert*.’

‘*Air-bear*.’

The mother closed her eyes, pinched the top of her nose and shook her head. She reached into her shoulder bag

and pulled out a compact mirror. She held it in front of Aurélie's mouth and made the *H* sound.

Aurélie did as she was instructed, and made the sound.

'See, there's mist on the mirror. Now say his name.'

'H-H-Hair-bear'

'Herbert. T-t-t.'

'T-t-t.'

'After me: Herbert.'

Aurélie closed her eyes in concentration as she tried to get her tongue around these unfamiliar sounds. 'Herbert,' she said.

'Close. Again, though.'

'Her-bert. Her-bert. Herbert.'

'Almost perfect. You're a fast learner, I'll give you that.'

'Is he English?'

'Does he look English to you?'

Aurélie scrutinised the child. She couldn't tell.

'Now don't do anything stupid. I've got your DNA, remember?' She patted the pocket where she had put the stone and the hair. 'I'll see you back here in one week. Right there.' She pointed at the bench where The Russian had been playing his hurdy-gurdy. Aurélie hadn't noticed until that point that he had packed up and gone. The mother walked away.

As she watched her go, Aurélie realised that all she knew about the baby was his name. She needed to know a little bit more about him. She called after her, 'How old is he?'

Without looking back, she replied, 'He's Aquarius.'

She called again. 'One last thing . . .'

Herbert's mother stopped, turned and glared at her. 'What?'

Aurélie's head swam with questions. After what seemed

like an age, one of them rose to the surface. The woman was some way away, and she had to shout. ‘Where did you get your scarf?’

‘La Foularderie. It’s one of those shops in Le Marais. You’ll find it.’

‘I really like it.’

‘Thank you. Me too.’

And with that she was gone.

The square was empty now, and quiet. Aurélie stood beside the buggy, and looked at the baby. His battered face was peeping out from under his hat. ‘Hello *Air-bear*,’ she said. She corrected herself. ‘I’m sorry. I mean hello . . . *Her-bert*. *Herbert*. *Herbert*.’ She had to get his name right. She owed him at least this. She knelt over him. ‘So . . . *Herbert*,’ she said. At last she felt able to rest her hand on his shoulder. She gave it a squeeze. ‘Do you think we can be friends?’

He looked at her, then did something she hadn’t expected: he smiled. It was amazing. He seemed to smile with his whole face, and even his arms and legs joined in, flapping up and down and side to side. He made a sound as well, a kind of squelchy giggle. She took that for a *yes*. She knew this ought to be a cue for her to grab her digital camera and take a photo, but she didn’t. She just looked at him and smiled back. There would be plenty of time for photos.

She tried to work out what to do next. She took stock of the situation. It was a nice buggy, a sleek, bright red three-wheeler with a black frame. It looked expensive. She was pleased to see that the buggy and the baby’s bag matched her new coat. She needed to cling to something,

and she told herself that this colour coordination was a clear sign that this unexpected turn of events was meant to be. As she crouched beside her new friend she lit her fifth cigarette of the morning, in the hope that it would help her think things over.

She put her used match back in the box, and made a point of blowing the smoke away from Herbert's face. She had responsibilities now.