

Rose

Letters of love to life

Cécile Masson

Rose

I don't believe in ageing. I believe in forever altering one's aspect to the sun.

Virginia Woolf

ROSE

Dedication

Pour mes enfants Anna Zoé et Jan Samuel

ROSE

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New beginnings

It was a still winter's day when this wonderful lady passed away. I had the great privilege to know her in the last years of her life when wisdom had softened her ways and given her inner calm. Many people gathered at her funeral dressed in full colour, only a few turned up in traditional black. They did not know her that well it seemed.

She had not always been even-tempered and gentle. From what I understood her disposition had sometimes showed a shadowy side. Yet the same inner stamina had also saved many people's livelihood. That evened out the stormy passages of her time. And at her funeral the music, the food and the company were excellent and simple as usual, just the way she liked it.

What I loved about her were her serenity and humour, her weathered pragmatism and perceptiveness. Even at a great age she had an unforgettable elegance despite swollen joints. She stayed sharp till her last breath and looked her own expiring straight in the eyes. That day the fire was burning in her room; the doctor had been sent home. Next to her family only Lizy, Melissa and Susan were present. As they had gathered around her bed she smiled and nodded kindly at each of them before closing her eyes.

The family and her friends asked me to assemble the available material in a logical manner to tell her story. Apparently, they thought that I had had the right attitude and patience, as I knew some of the material well. So, the pages you hold in your hand are not my interpretation of her life. More a fusion of her letters, some conversations and the effect she had on me.

Let me first name Rose's family and friends to make it easier for you and show you some of her letters before I continue.

Christopher: ex-Lover

Ice-cube: her mother-in-law

Charles: her late husband

Jane: her daughter

Robert: her son

Peter: her late son

Isabel: Robert's wife

Melina: Rose's mother

Rosy: daughter of Robert and Isabel

Mel: daughter of Jane

Vincent: husband of Mel

John: manager, beekeeper and friend

Lizy: soul sister and maid

Melissa: Businesswoman, friend and beloved partner of John

Susan: Pharmacist and friend

Thomas: the postman

Betty: household help

Ed: head gardener

Fanny: garden help

François: family friend

Dear Chris,

Thank you for your kind letter. It is nice to touch a carefully chosen piece of paper, I feel almost guilty loving the quality of its slightly rough structure now trees are so precious. You have always been attentive in choosing the right form, the right colour. I appreciate it.

I love the picture of the lime tree you sent too. Where does it stand? It is a beautiful specimen.

When I look out of my window, I see the trees on the hillside on the other side of the valley. I am sure you remember. We have roughly 600 acres of them. Your lime tree makes me think of my childhood though, when I used to go to the mountains with my parents spending innumerable weekends playing under an old lime where we children of the hamlet had our wonderful hut to play in. It was an old chicken shed, I am sure I told you about it, in the form of a miniature chalet, colourfully fitted with curtains and a carpet, painted in bright colours. In the summer we even hung out the geraniums. Imagination ran wild and we could explore it under the watchful eyes of the whole neighbourhood. Some wise people lived there. But tell me, how are you? It has been such a long time! Wonderful memories. We have lost touch for too long. Hope you are well.

Love, Rose

You answered quickly. Thank you for that. You must have a wonderful view from your office. It smells nice, does it not, in the late spring when in blossom and its fresh green is a delight to the eye. Where do you live, tell me, in the country like me or in town? A P.O. Box does not tell much.

Here things have changed. Robert and his wife Isabel are running the estate now. I am officially retired and happy to be more at ease. I do not live in the house anymore, but I can see it from the garden. You might remember the cottage, just down the valley on the right when you look out of my old bedroom. I always liked it, for its proportions, for its beauty. It is in walking distance so I can still go up to the house by foot when I feel like a chat.

Have to keep it short today, must do some exercise to get the old bones going. Cannot let the physiotherapist wait for me. He is kind enough to come all the way.
How is the writing going?

I am so sorry; I did not realise when I wrote to you. You should have told me in your first letter. How do you do it? Is the nurse taking her time? Where does she find it? Today care seems to be the most expensive service there is. I remember your hands well, sometimes I dream of them. I hope you do not mind me telling you. But then, we are of an age when everything, which has not been said yet, should be said, don't you think? Are you in pain?

This morning I surprised myself being impatient for the postman to arrive. When he finally opened the gate to the garden, I rushed down the few steps as fast as my old body would allow and opened the door. Normally I couldn't be bothered, the only letters dropping are bills. I offered him a cup of coffee. I had just made one for myself, the only one of the day, at 10 a.m. sharp. It is a kick-off with plenty of sugar; the smell of Italy, just for some time warming the house. He accepted. We sat outside in the garden looking over the grounds. It was a beautiful sunny day and under the blankets it is nice to sit for a moment in the fresh air.

I love the view towards the house, and I am happy not to live there anymore! This cottage suits me just fine. If I want to see people, I will invite myself over for dinner and otherwise *qu' ils me fiche la paix!* to say it in proper French. Robert and Isabel are sweet though. I am not complaining at all. I know they think of me as being rather odd.

The postman seemed to enjoy it too. His name is Thomas. He thought it funny to sit under crocheted blankets at first; young as he is, he was worried about me catching a cold. But once he made sure that I was fine he settled as well. Asked me questions about my life. He knew a lot already of what had kept me busy in my time, funny how people know things. Close to where we sat, I had pinned down some apples in the ground and hung plenty of food for the birds on the apple tree that you might remember. Close to the high pear-tree. You know the sweet ones, perfect for a crumble. Now he hardly carries fruit anymore and I will soon have to ask for him to be felled. Just now the brittle branches are still perfect to hang out all the nuts and grease and such like. We just sat there in silence and looked at the birds together. The great tit, the blue tit, long tailed tit which appear in a small group to disappear as fast, a robin or two, and the common sparrows that do storm in like a youth gang, sitting there in a row on a twig very sure of themselves till the slightest noise makes them take off again in a hurry. We did not see any wren, but I do know that they are around, as I feed them all winter. So small, so delicate, not more than nine grams in weight a true miracle of life.

It was quite nice actually, to be together with somebody who seems genuinely interested. I have asked Thomas if he could post a letter for me from time to time. Saves me a trip you see, and it is a reason for him to call. He promised to come every two days at least. I understand your choice of handwriting and savour the fact of reading your letters coming by post. After all, you taught me that everything that is worth living for should be enjoyed slowly. I will slowly write to you trying to recover my handwriting that I have been trained to cure as a young girl but that has lost its poise over the years by lack of practice. Let us slow down a little and get personal again.

I am sorry to read about your hands, I keep thinking of them. I am still all right even though I cannot always open the jam pots. The wrist you see. I can still type and write and walk and read and talk. They asked me to lecture again. Since Robert has taken over the estate, I have been asked by many to talk about my way of working. I began to give small talks here and there. I am not sure if I'll accept again. All the fuss, but then I do not want to get world shy

just yet. I know that if I do not force myself to have a purpose, I will get boring and only talk about my twinges and pains like many younger than me do. Why are people so scared of age? Can you tell me?

Sitting outside in the cold with Thomas the other day made me think of my childhood again. One winter I was invited to join the men of the hamlet for a tour in the wintery forest.

“Looking at a tree, whatever tree, big or small, from whatever venture point you look you will never see the tree in its entirety. One-third at the most even if you could fly right above the canopy like the wild birds would.”

I can still hear the deep voice of the old farmer. He was sitting next to me in the triangle-shaped horse-pulled sledge while I was looking at the backside of the horse, which made me think, with deep respect, of the hips of my wonderful grandmother. She too pulled the family through, her four surviving children and their children. My mother was her third child and only girl, after her came another boy and a miscarriage. Melina, my grandmother, lived to be nearly one hundred years of age. Odd really. Ever since your first letter I keep thinking of it. I remember looking up into the forest's roof and winter sky. Every single pine was a snow-covered Christmas tree sparkling in the sunrays that found their way through their crowns. Jacob was his name, a sensible man, who knew the rhythms of the season up in the low mountains. He knew from experience that he had to stay up all night to help a cow deliver. He knew that once in a while the fields needed rest, just like the skin of a woman after birthing, to recover before carrying the next crop or child. He understood the secret relationships between the hidden world of the soil and the impatient will of men. He was humble before the lord when the harvest was not as pleasing as expected, but down to earth enough to take his hay into the barn on a Sunday before the striking thunderstorm could ruin the much-turned bounty of the winter-feed. He had a gentle sense of realism born from the harmony of a passionate heart.

As the only girl I was allowed to sit with him under the thick woollen blankets while my brothers and his sons made chains of sledges to race in one row down the icy road of the mountain hills. Hooked into each other either by their feet or holding hands, it was their quest

to gain speed. The longer the row, the faster they went, red cheeked, with teary eyes, lying on their bellies or their backs to improve the aerodynamics. A well-deserved race after many hours walking through the knee-deep snow, to finally get the kick of an exhilaratingly fast decent. I on the other hand, had the luxury to be comforted by the smell of the horse, the presence of this kind man, the slow balancing of the sledge, which was heart-warming at minus 20 C. Back at home, we sang the Christmas carols around the tiled oven with some steamed apples, a crumble of hazelnuts and vanilla sauce to warm us up.

Sweet isn't it. But true. That's how I remember my early childhood. I sometimes wonder if children today still enjoy nature as I did then. I hope they do. I really do, you know. How can they otherwise appreciate the beauty of this paradise we are about to lose? Through toilet sprays, for sure, the sweet odour of pineapples, the soothing perfume of lavender. What a sacrilege! What a waste!

Of course, like you I remember the summers too! How could one forget the summers of innocence? They were spent outside rolling in the hay, climbing trees, picking blueberries. The strong smell of sticky resin sinuously creamed down the bark of the giant evergreen fir tree showing me the way to its roots. There was the realm of fairies that nurtured me with their tales and the capacity to vision spheres that are not visible to most, yet so real it made me happy and hungry for more.

“Looking at a tree, you'll never see the tree in its entirety,” helped me to face many situations with humour and appropriate humility.

This tree, this home to many, was my universe as a child. I lay on my back observing the nestling birds, the squirrel, the larvae and mice. Together they were my guides to a lifelong love for the earth. Once, only once, I poked a twig into an ant's nest under its roots and was punished appropriately for it by the hard-working red occupants that stormed onto me with their poison. Why be scared? Once you have felt the earth, the woodland grounds with your naked body, how could you ever be scared again?

Not surprising that the colours I associate with this time of my life are the deep colours of the soil, the evergreen of the pine tree's needles, the smell of sunbathed moss. I could just drop off, the impressions on my senses overwhelming me. It felt like home this forest floor as if I had known it forever. At the age of four a day is like eternity, the ground you tread on, sacred.

How is your God by the way? Still hiding?

Thank you for getting in touch again.

You tell me about your God. How strange that with all we have shared, with all your life experience and the wonders you discovered he is still hiding. Has it to do with naming him, with simple nomenclature? As you know my God is neither a man nor a woman, does not sit on a throne. I am not even sure it is one. By *is one* I mean that I am not sure that God has a name but the one inventing itself in the moment being lost just as quickly as it came. Should I try and give God a name like many religions have done? I would lose the essence. I cannot and will not talk in his/her/its name, as the name I could attribute could not match with the name you give even though we might experience the same presence.

My granddaughter Rosy and I went for a walk the other day and we also talked about God. She calls that synchronicity. With a branch she made a drawing on the forest ground copying an African erudite she had met on one of her many travels. It was a circle with a dot in the middle and many lines going all directions like a wheel. "In the middle is God and he can be reached in many ways. No point arguing which one is better than the other. It only spoils the field of creation," she said. She has become wise; that too gives me hope.

You look for God in the sacred traditions written by many wise men. I sense Godliness in the very fabric of life, am guided by it, breathing in and out as it comes to me. "*Sicut in caelo et in terra*, as in heaven so on earth," you whispered in my ear, remember? I want to make the most of my short stay on this beautiful planet, in this body. Keeps me young just now, to recall, to sense it all.

I am blessed with this beautiful estate to live on. I am blessed by the stillness surrounding me. The older I grow the more I realise that silent comes where silent goes, in the breath of our own and our beloved forests.

Some say that I can afford to be the way I am because of it, that I do live on earth as in heaven. But as I told you, I discovered sacredness due to memories not quite forgotten, which found their way back in my early childhood drawings where home was a richly decorated tent. Only at the age of kindergarten, copying others, walking down the streets on the hand of my mother I became aware that a house in this place was big, with stairs and lifts, and private gardens. Secured by fences, gates, needing a key to unlock, made of stone and glass, cold metal. Far away from the foldable tent placed in the garden of gardens for all.

I still remember taking my first conscious decision: from that day onwards my drawings of houses would have two windows, one door in the middle, four windows on the upper floor with some flowered curtains tucked in the corner by a ribbon, a chimney and some roses against the wall. As of that day my houses were like the houses of my schoolmates, formatted, square, recognizable to others as home. Because you see: "All there is, is relationship," the timeless wind and wise people whisper. And my only answer to this is, "that's right".

I wanted to relate to my schoolmates, wanted to be part of the group, be in relationship with them. So, I have done my utter best to conform, have done that ever since to be considered good. Oh, I have been so good, such a good girl. Yet in that very relationship to all, I later discovered laid also the greatest danger to experience loneliness. I was lonely nursing Charles. I was lonely without you, till I realised that loneliness does not exist at all.

For you, loneliness does exist, you write, that you have felt it daily all your life with exceptions of some very rare moments when you felt one with all there is, one with the woman you loved. I recognise that you have felt it, and so have I, year after year, after year. But then life taught me to recognise the very illusions of it all.

I don't know how you feel when reading this or are being read to. You yourself through your work, through the way you loved me unconditionally have taught me. That just like the stones, the plants, the animals surrounding us, we are nothing else but relationship and do nothing else than be in relation to ourselves, to others, the world around us, consciously or not. I can still see you arguing with colleagues who did not want to understand the point you were making, that all there is, is connected. We possibly start to realise that we are one big bundle of relationship only when it truly hurts, like Charles had to experience. He was in such pain. When his organs did not perform the dance, they ought to dance. When elementary particles like the photons and electrons were not relating in the way they should. When hormones giggled and grinned and blood dissolved into lifeless liquid.

You have a daughter too, don't you? Have you ever taken the time to look at your child laying in her crib friskily being in awe of the movement of her own hands, wondering where they go to when out of sight? Obsessed about this nice tasting big toe, which just does not want to stay in the mouth when suckled like the thumb would do? If you did, I am certain you realised that for this little being the thumb, just like the toe, has its proper life cut off from the part that loves the taste of its own flesh. Only when awakening to consciousness of being, a sense of that ever-related dynamic might occur later in a human trajectory. The relationship of our organs with each other so that our body can be what a human body should be, the relationship between the billions of cells that make up the organs.

And all these most intriguing relationships may even speak to the uninformed when they have a stomach-ache after a long night out. We may discover galaxies in our brains, and hidden stars down in our feet. We may be in awe at the dance between one centre of gravity and another. Like the baby is in wonderment before the dust in the air being caught in a sunray, listening to the sound of a familiar voice or the song of a bird, I am in awe of the complexity of life. In other words: I am grateful that my grandmother has known the joy of sensual pleasure, that on her hips my mother rested her hips so that I could carry my daughter to this life. I am grateful to him who shared Melina's bed till death, making her happy as a woman. I am happy that they celebrated, singing in unison as my mother would relate when she was just passed eighty holding the hand of her lover, amorously.

As I am writing this, I realise that I come from a healthy stock. And if I tried to keep up a tradition, in the sacred sense of the word, it is to live life fully. If we cannot experience joy in

and around our own home, our own body the only true home we have here on earth, how could we celebrate joy through a song, visualising what some might call God? We have been given senses to feel what our brain on its own cannot conceive. It is in the relationship of our brain to our heart and gut that a hint of the quality some might call God might be experienced, that a suggestion of an answer might come our way.

I have nursed my husband when he was on his deathbed, like many women have done before and after me. Together we have lost a child or two in the midst of a battle for a soul to find a nurturing space to incarnate, which in that case I could not provide for reasons unknown. Don't you remember me telling you when we first met? I will never forget the blood running down my legs, the unexpected cramping up of my body. Like many through those losses, within that emptiness left behind, I have learned to be fully alive while living, refusing to be scared. Life is a miracle, and nobody can tell me otherwise. And the ground we tread on is sacred.

Thomas came with another letter this morning. He is such a pleasant man, fine in his manners. He met Betsy folding the washing and we all had coffee together. Well, Betsy actually had her tea. Carefully prepared by first pouring milk in her very personal mug, with the dog rose hip decoration, then adding the hot tea. She proudly tells me how she makes jam of rose hips with nearly every teacup we share. "It's very healthy, you know, full of vitamin C," she affirms.

She comes at least twice a week to take care of my house. Betsy is one of Liz's youngest nieces. She is most meticulous. Everything should stay as it is, all the time. Done in the same sequence, with a proper routine. In the beginning she was quite upset when I had put a vase on a different table or put it away altogether. She could not bear seeing it out of place. Or her biscuit for that matter that should be put to the right of the cup for her to take it with her right hand.

Routine, same thing at the same time in the same place, in the same sequence, that is the whole point why Liz thought that Betsy might be of help. I need to get some structure in my old days to find my things back again but cannot be bothered to do it just for myself. Having

the responsibility or the feeling that I need to justify myself towards Betsy, somehow helps me to get more disciplined. Liz knows me well. I wonder how she does it. Yet one thing I cannot help Betsy with, is the endless flow of dust settling down on the furniture.

One day I found her handkerchief in fist sitting at the small mahogany table in my bedroom, sobbing as if the world was about to collapse.

“What's wrong?” I asked her.

She pointed to the table and started crying even harder. To my eyes the table was perfectly clean, and I did not understand her frustration, sadness or anger that made her be in a state of total disarray.

“It's the dust. Don't you see it?” she asked pointing into the air where in the sunlight the dust particles were beautifully floating in clouds of shimmer. “It is everywhere!” she sighed.

“Everywhere! It is never ending. But I do not want to disappoint you!”

“You never will,” I said as a matter of fact, smiling and taking her hand in mine. “You never will, for the simple reason that I am happy to see you back!” I said. “All these floating lights here are the multiplicity of a potential tale through which we might grow wise.” She looked up not sure she had understood me properly.

“The way I see it,” I said giving it a more pragmatic twist “is very simple. This dust makes sure that you come and see me. I could never catch it all on my own. I need you to help me. Imagine, if you wouldn't come here, how things would get grimy.”

I pointed at objects around the house distracting her from her misery and my own. If she would not be around a couple of hours a week, I might indeed get dusty in my head, letting things just be the way they had settled in the backyard of my mind and my house. Betsy's nature challenged that. Her world was formatted in such an opposite, ordered, structured manner, it could only be reframed in time and with much patience. She helped me to keep things simple, focusing me on the job at hand. The folding of some napkins or sitting with her, polishing the silver in the winter months listening to her unassuming chatter about the neighbourhood. These simple yet rewarding occupations have a direct result on my

wellbeing. No better recipe against the wondering off of my thoughts into other worlds to be kept busy for hours on the proper lustre of a spoon or teapot.

Cleaning silver is just as fulfilling as cleaning our mind of all self-absorbed thoughts, which can be black when left to wander, don't you think? She has left now, and I have the house to myself again. In front of me I have the lovely blue vase you gave me when travelling in Veneto. You know, the one made of turquoise glass, which looks like feathers with golden fringes. I use it whenever I can. Now with late winter, early spring in the air I have put some white tulips, and a branch of Magnolia Stellata in it.

I sit at my dear desk overlooking the valley to the house. Do you remember that view? To think that this view has been made by men, it is outrageous really, but much appreciated. Outrageous that one man could just clip with his fingers and all others would break their backs for him. But what a vision, what an achievement! The sheep are out, grazing in the last winter sun. At the house Robert and Isabel have guests. I hoped to be invited to join them for dinner last night, not having seen a living soul except Liz and Betsy for a whole week. Liz is such a dear friend! I am tempted to write: God bless her. But they did not call, too busy to think of me. I am privileged to live here. Never could have dreamed of such a place when growing up in the mountains. I suppose Charles was sent abroad to find a bride to refresh the bloodline. It certainly got some oxygen with my family line. Not much bred purity but certainly the colours of human evolution. And yes, I am thankful for it.

Trees

The first time I set eyes on the walls surrounding the estate in search for Rose I did not quite register what I saw. Only later I noted that the few enduring parts around the gate were still at their full height and properly reconditioned. The rest of the many hundred yards had not been kept up or restored after numerous storms had battered the region in the last century. Some fallen trees left deep craters behind. These small natural ponds spurred rich wildlife activities that interrupted the line of the wall. Especially the storm of the late 80s furthered the crumbling of the protective structure that let some in and kept most out. The owners simply let the wall be as it was, as a fine laced line respecting history, nothing more than a fading trace in the woods.

At the time I did not realise it, simply because I was used to being inside the walls of a secure and protective environment that had strict codes of honour and rules to play by. I never dared to step out of line, far too scared to end up in hell forever. I was used to following my superiors, not to question their authority and had, from a very early age, learned to suppress all instinctive signals my body was giving me. I was a perfect example of a well-formed young man that knew the manner of interactions with the people but never thought possible to actually be part of their lively community. I had been told to hold the truth and only the truth and our kind was not expected to intermingle with them. We had the books, we had seen the light, and we knew how to think and what to think. Simply entering through the gates had no particular effect on me. I had not known to do otherwise so, I thought.

Yet with time, entering the grounds through the richly decorated gilded gates flanked by a couple of yards of well-kept walls became a conscious act of rebellion, a choice that opened a dialogue with the unknown that was, to say the least, upsetting.

Past the gates the visitor was given several choices. Either to follow the main drive to the front of the house, to follow that road and turn right to reach the servants entrances or to simply take a stroll into the woods to the newly established pub, that had developed from the simple shelter for the many employees and volunteers, into a pleasant and welcoming venue. All possibilities were well indicated with lovely carved and painted signposts to make sure one could not get lost. Most did not.

You have not written for days. How come? It has only been some weeks now that we are back in touch and I got used to it. Now it is hurting like it used to in the old days when I had to leave you. Have you known pain that paralyses thought? You must have known it too. Through your letters I again know that you think of me. That alone makes me long for your presence, your energy and your contemplations.

I should not complain. I have been blessed with your presence in my life, with love. Even Charles in the first years of our marriage was such a gentle, attentive spoiling presence. I got exposed to society, this estate, London, the opera. The world was reflected in that city full of spices and perfumes that I would never have discovered without him. I later realised that I

was simply one extra flavour to the palette. How different my life could have been had I stayed in my hometown. How very different. Christopher, tell me what made you contact me?

Behind my cottage at the rim of the woods there is a shelter. They have restored it recently. Now it is safe to muse under the copper-covered roof again. Already it has turned green all blending perfectly into the landscape. I asked my men to make a bench for me so that I could sit comfortably when it is raining. I know that in the summer I will sit there to read your letters and if it rains the smell of the wet earth will make me daydream. I love the classical architecture within that setting. Some two years ago Robert and Isabel talked about making a modern item of it and a sweet designer came to visit the grounds.

I saw him from a distance inspecting the place with Isabel. He wore a light straw hat to protect his nearly baldhead from the sun but regularly took it off to spin it around on one finger as if his mind was whirling on itching fingertips. His linen jacket fitted his slender figure well. The result of that one encounter was a beautifully designed lacy architecture made of fiberglass, concrete and glass. I loved it because of the flower pattern and the ferns but when discussing the proposition Isabel justly pointed out that she was not certain it would blend in well with the flint used on the estate. More importantly she could not get any assurance on the sustainability of the material. We went for good old iron and copper with stone. Isabel preferred investing in ephemeral material for smaller sculptures she sometimes showed around the gardens in temporary exhibits.

Sitting on that bench I have a perfect view over the valley to the house on my left and see the gardens from a distance. I value its flowing design with the grasses, the roses, the curved long border that leads up to the chapel that is hidden behind the house. Robert only just recently put back the bell. It keeps reminding us again of time passing, striking the hours and ringing three times a day. It is a soothing kind of rhythm structuring the days and weeks, inviting all in for Sunday contemplations. You know, I love this estate.

I sat there the other day after my prescribed daily stroll up the hill to keep me fit. Several times in my life I have been called a dreamer, not quite in tune with reality as it presents itself. Yet I do perceive the reality many do not want to see, not want to talk about that is in the space between matter. It is a space that makes me stay in touch with you, that keeps me

faithful. Faithful to my soul, to that spirit that asked of me to manifest myself in this form, in this life as a woman, and by God I have enjoyed this body! Yes, I stayed true to my core, could not do otherwise as I would have fallen seriously ill. Yet matter will resolve back into fundamentals as it is written in the Gospel, you must know.

Charles was educated to fit expectations. I left them behind, moving abroad. No, that is not quite true as the feelings, frustration, longing of my family for my presence kept haunting me in my dreams. How many nightmares did I have of expectations I could not possibly fulfil? Till well, till I met you, and you taught me to think on my own, to let go of conventions, to love the body I was given, to love life fully despite all ill that happened around us, in war and in peace. To be true to my own calling, whatever that was. You opened that gate that made me realise how it is to feel centred in myself and not on myself. Since that time, I have always pledged that we should be living as close to our heart as possible.

Charles could not leave expectations behind. He could not afford to let go of the family estate. He had to stay put and this pressure was a burden to him. I am not saying that this was the reason he fell ill. Nobody can prove that, and it would be useless to spend precious time trying to understand, what is not ours to comprehend. Life despite all this suffering is beautiful but not always fair.

Sitting there on the bench, looking at my old, wrinkled hands, I had to smile. I never pretended to be beautiful. You know I have always thought of being loved for my soul, my mind and my heart not so much for my body. Now that this body is weakening, just like yours, I start to realise that this dance of molecules, which happened to be me, is soon going to stop. What will stay is its memory in the next body, the memory of your touch, you who loved me deeply.

What will stay is the memory of my husband's suffering. Hellish demons gobbling him up like a pudding. He has seen the bottom of human endurance. His might hit a wall, which no love could melt. There was no way back. I still hear him scream again and again asking for mercy. There the dance was mad, the nerves lost. Yet after such moments of despair, he was lucid like never before. Sharp. Honestly asking me forgiveness for having left me with the children out of jealousy. Yes, he has admitted being jealous of his son being fed at my breast. Jealous of the boy he himself desired, his heir.

How is your wife? May I ask: have you got a picture of her, I could see?

I am sorry to read about your wife's death, she was young still. When alive and kicking we forget that life is framed by death, don't we? I realise that you have been without her for most of your life. I am truly sorry. It must not have been easy to educate your daughter on your own. What is she doing? The life of a single parent is tough. Did you never think of remarrying?

You tell me that you got back in touch because you wanted to know how I spent my days. I do not mind telling you.

It is strange. Possibly because we are back in touch, I start to think about times past, about this place. How I had to take over the running of the estate when Charles got ill.

In the beginning he helped me. That is, once he had grown over his bad tempers and frustration about the illness. Once he had accepted his fate, he became another person and recognised my role in helping him to save his inheritance, so that the children could have something to be proud of. I was quite different from his ancestors in my approach. Possibly because I don't have any preconceptions or formal education that could have prepared me for the job, I acted on intuition. In the beginning I was petrified yet I just got on with it. The responsibility for all the tenants that for generations were dependent on this estate made me doubt many times about my place in the community.

For instance, just the gardens the arboretum. More than three generations of the same family were caring for it, not just father and son but also uncles and nephews. It had become their 'raison d'être', their creation and their family history. Their ancestors had travelled in time visualising the trees so we could enjoy them in our lifetime. They had, together with the landscape architect, created this paradise, telling him where he could expect to have problems with the ground, the water, the clay, where he might hit the rock underneath not leaving enough ground for the trees to root. Through their intimate contact over centuries with the field, the trees, the animals, the estate is theirs, not mine. It belongs to the community and I

have known from the start that I would just be passing. I realised that even if I would settle here my whole life, which I have, I would, once the task-accomplished, fold up my tent and travel to the next spot where my presence was needed.

There are individuals who stay bound to a place you see, and those who are nomads. The souls who stay, shape the landscape together with the field. Some nomads, like me, seem to carry a staff to lean on to keep watch. They make sure that restless short-sighted drifters are not allowed to take root. Especially the ones, who want to create the work of many a generation in one lifetime to gain destructive supremacy, need to be checked. These rushed souls are not at peace with themselves and too often use force and myopic control to put their stamp on a place. Just now there are many of them, hurtling mechanically all over the world, leaving barren earth behind. We are too few to keep watch and maintain the carefully built balance between humankind and the natural environment.

When I took over the estate, I had to fight them with all my might and make sure the balance of what was, and what would be, was going to be right. I knew from my gut that if I would not get fully into my role as the lady of the house, the ones who wanted to make a quick profit would, in no time, take over this beautiful heritage. I knew instinctively that I could not save the world, but I could at least try to make a difference here and possibly in the estates overseas.

A man cannot create a tree, nor can a tree create a landscape. It is a generation long dialogue between men and plant that makes a place unique. It is the cutting of the right branches at the right time, the trimming and feeding that creates a bonding. Like with children really. What a fight it was! Thankfully I was not on my own. John, Lizy and many others were of much needed support and found their mission too in the sustaining of the estate.

You understand what I mean, as usual. It makes me happy when you write that our intellect can indeed only grasp that much information at the time and therefore should only be used as a brilliant tool. It should not, because of its virtuosity, be mistaken for the absolute creator of reality that is much vaster and progressing in its own time and logic.

You refer to Leviticus 25:23 *The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me.*

How could I not agree! Most of our lives we think to be guided by our thought, yet our mind is conditioned by our senses. We as humankind think that we are in control but are outshone by life's dynamic, that some might want to call God, others mother nature, whether we want it or not.

Let me take the garden as an example again. Just to find the right head gardener was a struggle. When I took over, John and I agreed quite quickly that we needed to find another trustworthy man to rebuild the gardens. The old one was too enthusiastically using the new pesticides available on the market. He wanted a quick fix, and sprayed all the mosses, vegetables and flowers alike. John already had had several arguments about it with no change of behaviour. By chance one day I observed him, and his team spray the yearly swarming of the male ants. I was stunned and upset. I recall having observed this annual happening as a child many times. The ant's nests under my feet would come alive, boil over so to speak and cloud and I had watched in wonderment. Some few hours later the ground was black with their lifeless bodies. And most amazingly it happened simultaneously miles away from where I lived as well.

Sadly, my mother-in-law backed the old gardener's approach. She was single-minded. She just wanted to go out on her horse running wild, now and today, and was not aware of the long-term consequences of her mindless attitude.

"But it is so much easier, so cost effective!" the old gardener defended himself at one of the last work meetings we shared.

"Might be in the short run," John replied. "In the long run it will be a disaster."

"How do you know? All the research proves that this is excellent stuff," my mother-in-law hissed.

"Who has done the research? Who has funded it?" John insisted.

“Well, they have ... the government tells everybody that this is great stuff,” the old gardener said.

“They?” John asked mockingly.

“Yes, they,” Ice Cube snarled. “You know those who have studied the matter and know what they are talking about. Not like ...”

“Mother!” Charles interrupted her sharply. “Enough!”

She was rude to John. For some reason, I have still not quite figured out why, she hated John. He had always been of great help to the estate. Charles thankfully stepped in and said closing the conversation abruptly:

“I trust Rose and John to know what they are doing. Rose is in charge, as you know. You never bothered mother. So why pretend?”

She left turning on her heels, her head held high, and we did not see her for some days. Stunned, the old gardener watched her leave and sheepishly walked sideways after her. After that John made sure he got a good settlement and they separated without too much bad blood.

John, like myself, instinctively hated the smell of all the chemicals, the blue colour some left behind when used massively. But you do not replace an established head gardener just like that, nor the habits installed with some of his staff. It took months for them to collect all that poison left in the most unlikely corners of the estate, and to understand why John and I decided that this would not be used anymore.

We did see many applicants for the job in the next months. We gave some a chance. One had an excellent reputation for his design and free use of planting, which I liked. The other had a clear vision for a solid structure. Yet when observing them at work, the way they interacted with our people, the volunteers and staff generally, their behaviour was quite revealing and it did not resonate enough.

It took us quite some time to find the one. John filled in the post as well as he could, delegating elegantly as many tasks as possible. Then, eventually, our attention was drawn to Ed. The youngest son of the forest guard showed true interest in the gardens and was working securely in his job. He had spent much of his time outdoors with his elders, and simply knew things that cannot be learned through books. John appreciated him all his life and I had seen him engaged in his work many times. He was a familiar sight and his movements caring for

the estate. His big hand, his sturdy body were surprisingly elegant. Already back then he always wore loose cobalt blue trousers made of rough cotton or linen with the fitting jacket and in the summer, he protected his head with a straw-hat full of holes. What energy! He easily worked twelve hours a day, always with a grin on his face, happy to use all his strength in a constructive way.

Ed got John's attention when he said pragmatically:

“Of course, the sky is part of the landscape. It is a big part. Just look at the light. Without sky there is no contrast nor form.”

Apparently, he had said it with such conviction that John immediately knew that he had finally found his man, possibly because it also wove perfectly into the conversation we had had during the weekend.

We had celebrated Melissa's birthday in the rose garden with some friends. Sue the pharmacist was there, Liz, Charles, John of course and me. We had the most amazing very short exchange initiated by Charles leaning back in his wheelchair. Maybe I should rather call it ... a surprising lacing of voices.

Charles muttered gazing up into the evening sky:

“For the effect of a garden to be lifted, the sky is crucial. It brings it to a metaphysical level when reflected in a pond, a leaf or the eyes of a beloved one.”

We looked up, surprised by his sudden and uncharacteristic contemplation. Melissa seeing his absorbed expression answered kindly:

“Yes, like that you make it come alive, the garden and your lover ... if you manage to feel and sense it, that is.”

“Of course, if ... but that is what makes us embrace beauty and reach out for her day in day out, year after year, again and again, is it not?” John answered with a deep thoughtful sigh looking down into Melissa's eyes.

“To support what is left of its fierce wildness,” he added taking her hand to his lips, smiling, holding her tight. “That is true happiness.”

After which I recall we were all quiet for a while, listening to the rustle of the evening breeze in the roses and the trees behind.

Ed never disappointed us. When he worked with Fanny, a young girl John had taken under his wings, he could have been quite blunt with her but somehow her own untrimmed manners made him mild. One day he asked her to think of an original way of bringing alive a barren field just outside the kitchen gardens. His idea was that visiting children could experience scent and have fun at the same time.

She came back two or three days later with the design of a labyrinth made of grass, wild thyme and citrus thyme, camomile to walk on, bordered by rosemary and lavender. She also included the lovely scented geranium Mabel grey and some low growing Dianthus to add extra depth. It was a really lovely idea, but Ed unfortunately had to dismiss the thymes and the Dianthus because the flowers would attract bees. Not suitable in this place if they wanted smaller children to be able to run safely amongst the plants. However, they included more geranium sorts that just by touching them lightly with a leg would generate some delicious smells. Fanny’s labyrinth was used for some years bringing much laughter to the place. It was fun.

That is what a garden is really about: fun, games, memories of hide-and-seek, hanging out late under the trees, tastes and perfumes blending storytelling and tea, later scotch and wine, laying in a hammock. The children liked it too, especially with their friends. They love recalling those long evenings looking up at the lines of the branches, shapes, colours and shades filtering through, making the canvas come alive in the late afternoon, the delicious evenings in the rhythm of their music.

The fact that they now recall these moments despite all that happened makes me happy. The garden, like us, really becomes itself with time. Yes, its beauty is ephemeral; yet when seen the movement of butterfly wings can transform the ordinary ... Isabel, I suppose, would say ... the ordinary into art. Do you remember the big storm?

Rose