

As the peeled potato fell into the pan of water, it made a loud *plop* which rebounded off the kitchen walls like a tennis ball. Holding the peeler still in her hand, Éliette paused to savour the moment; this – she was certain – was pure happiness.

Buffeted and battered by a year of uncontainable sobs, her heart had at last steadied itself like the green bubble in a spirit level. There was no particular reason for this newfound calm, or rather, there were a thousand: it was May, the rain was beating against the windows, there was baroque music playing on France Musique; she was making her first vegetable jardinière of the season (fresh peas, lettuce hearts, carrots, potatoes, turnips, spring onions, and not forgetting the lardons!); the Colette biography she had picked up the day before at Meysse library was propped open at page 48 on the living-room table; she wasn't expecting anyone, and no one was expecting her.

All these little things along with countless others meant that for the first time since Charles's death she did not feel lonely in the house by herself, but one and indivisible.

The France Musique presenter introduced the next programme in a voice which called to mind a priest with a pickled liver. Éliette opened her eyes and set to work on the last potato, challenging herself to peel it in one continuous

length. Then she cut the carrots and turnips into perfectly evenly sized pieces, gave the lettuce a shake and plunged her hands into the colander of peas with a sigh of pleasure. The sensation of the little green marbles rolling between her fingers was as enjoyable now as it had been in childhood, when she helped Mémé Alice shell peas. It was the reward for her hard work.

Her grandmother's kitchen was like a women-only hammam. The windows were clouded by aromatic steam. Mémé Alice's gnarled arthritic fingers resembled moving tree roots as they sliced vegetables, trussed chickens and kneaded dough as soft and white as the flesh of her arms. There was no talking in Alice's kitchen, only singing. Edged with a thick layer of grey fluff, her upper lip quivered as she hummed 'Les Roses blanches', 'La Butte rouge' or 'Mon vieux Pataud'.

With her sizeable girth straining against the front pocket of a huge black apron, Mémé Alice strongly resembled the cast-iron stove which seemed to blaze constantly. Indeed, such was the affinity between the two that you almost wondered in whose belly her dishes had been baked, stewed or roasted as she brought them to the table, huffing and puffing like an old steam engine.

Despite the fact she now had three grandchildren of her own, Éliette would never be a Mémé Alice. The children called her Mamie – probably because she was not old or fat enough to be a Mémé, her hair not long enough to pin up in a taut bun like a cartoon elderly aunt. These days, old age was regarded as an insult, an ugly omen from which children

should be shielded. It brought to mind visions of prolapse, support stockings and many other repulsive things besides, as hideous a prospect as death itself. Éliette was sixty-four.

She was one of those people who had always been and would remain attractive in a wholesome, obvious sort of way. She had never needed to give nature a helping hand. Just a touch of lipstick now and then when she and Charles went out of an evening, purely for the raspberry-flavoured kisses. Even the few wrinkles gathered around her eyes brought a new charm to her face. It was as though time had polished her with beeswax. Only Charles's passing had slightly dulled the sparkle in her eyes, and placed her smile in permanent parentheses.

The two of them had shared forty years of untarnished love before Charles was suddenly carried off by cancer two months before he was due to retire. They had already started packing for their move from the Parisian suburbs to this house in the Ardèche, where life was supposed to be a never-ending holiday.

They had bought the former silk farm thirty years earlier. Year after year, they had spent every spare moment doing it up to turn it into the haven of peace that sadly she alone now enjoyed. After Charles's death, Sylvie and Marc had tried to put her off going through with the move.

'It's madness, Maman. What are you going to do with yourself, stuck down there in the back of beyond? It's a nice place to go on holiday, but living there full-time is another story.'

'But I won't be on my own. The Jauberts are here!'