

One Deadly Summer

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Adapted by Gallic Books

Gallic Books
London

I said OK.

I usually agree to things. Anyway, I did with Elle. I slapped her once, and once I beat her. But apart from that, she usually got her own way. I don't even know what I'm saying any more. I find it hard talking to people, except my brothers, especially Michel. We call him Mickey. He carts wood around in an old Renault truck. He drives too fast. He's as thick as shit.

I once watched him drive down into the valley, on the road that follows the river. It's all twists and turns and sudden drops, and the road is hardly wide enough for one car. I watched him from high up, standing among the fir trees. I managed to follow him for several kilometres, a small yellow dot, disappearing and reappearing at every bend. I could even hear his engine, and the lumber bouncing up and down with every bump. He got me to paint his truck yellow when Eddy Merckx won the Tour de France for the fourth time. It was a bet. He can't even say hi, how are you, without talking about Eddy Merckx. I don't know who he gets his brains from.

Dad thought Fausto Coppi was the greatest. When Coppi died, he grew a moustache as a sign of mourning. For a whole day he never spoke, he just sat on an old acacia stump in the snow-covered yard, smoking his American cigarettes, which he rolled himself. He went around collecting butts, only American ones, mind you, and he rolled these incredible cigarettes. He was a character, our father. He's supposed to have come from southern Italy, on foot, pulling his pianola behind him. When he came to a village or town he'd stop in the square and get people dancing. He wanted to go to America. They all want to go to America, the

Ritals. In the end he stayed, because he didn't have the money for a ticket. He married our mother, who was called Desrameaux and came from Digne. She worked in a laundry and he did odd jobs on farms, but he earned practically nothing, and of course you can't go to America on foot.

Then they took in my mother's sister. She's been deaf since the bombing of Marseille, in May 1944, and she sleeps with her eyes open. In the evening, when she sits in her chair, we never know whether she's asleep or not. We all call her Cognata, which means sister-in-law, except our mother, who calls her Nine. She's sixty-eight, twelve years older than Mamma, but Mamma looks the older of the two. All she does is doze in her chair. She only gets up for funerals. She's buried her husband, her brother, her mother, her father, and our father, when he died in 1964. Mamma says she'll bury us all.

We've still got the pianola. It's in the barn. For years we left it out in the yard, and the rain blackened and blistered it. Now it's the dormice. I rubbed it with rat poison, but that didn't work. It's riddled with holes. At night, if a dormouse gets inside it, it makes a real racket. It still works. Unfortunately, there's only one roll left, 'Roses of Picardy'. Mamma says it wouldn't be able to play anything else anyway – it's got too used to that tune. She says Dad once dragged it all the way to the town to pawn it. They wouldn't take it. What's more, the road into town is downhill all the way, but the return journey . . . Dad was exhausted – he already had a weak heart. He had to pay a truck driver to bring the piano back. Yes, Father was a businessman, all right.

The day he died, Mamma said that when my other brother, Boo-Boo, was grown up, we'd show them. All three of us boys would set ourselves up with the piano, in front of the Crédit Muncimate, the bank in town, and play 'Roses of Picardy' all day. We'd drive everybody crazy. But we never did it. He's seventeen now, Boo-Boo, and last year he told me to put the piano in the barn. I'll be thirty-one in November.

When I was born Mamma wanted to call me Baptistin, after her brother, Baptistin Desrameaux, who drowned in a canal trying to save someone. She always says if we see anyone drowning we're to look the other way. When I became a volunteer fireman, she got so angry with me she kicked my helmet around the room. She kicked it so hard she hurt her foot. Anyway, Dad persuaded her to call me Fiorimondo, after *his* brother – at least he died in his own bed.

Fiorimondo Montecchiari – that's what's written in the town hall and on my papers. But it was just after the war, and Italy had been on the other side, and it didn't look right. So they called me Florimond. Anyway, my name's never done me any good. At school, in the army, anywhere. Mind you, Baptistin would have been worse. I'd like to have been called Robert. I often used to say I was called Robert. That's what I told Elle at first. Just to top it off, when I became a volunteer fireman they started calling me Ping-Pong – even my brothers. I got into a fight over it once – the only time in my life – and I got a name for being violent. I'm not a violent person at all. In fact, it was about something else.

It's true I don't know what I'm saying half the time, and I can only really talk to Mickey. I can talk to Boo-Boo, too, but it's not the same. He has fair hair – or light brown – and ours is dark. At school they used to call us macaroni. Mickey would go mad and start fights. I'm much stronger than him, but as I said, I only got into a fight once. At first, Mickey played football. He was a good football player – a right winger, I think, I'm not sure – his speciality was scoring with headers. He'd be in the middle of a crowd of players in the goal mouth, then suddenly his head would pop up, and send the ball into the goal. Then they'd all rush up and hug him, like on TV. All that hugging and kissing and lifting him up, it made me sick watching it from the stands. He was sent off three Sundays in a row. He'd get into a fight over anything – if someone grazed his shin or said something to him, anything – and he always fought with his head. He'd get hold of them by

the shirt and headbutt them. Next thing, they were laid out on the ground, and who do you think got sent off? Mickey, of course. He's as thick as shit. His hero is Marius Trésor. He says he's the greatest football player who ever lived. Eddy Merckx and Marius Trésor: if you let him get started on those two, you'll be there all night.

Then he dropped football and took up cycling. He's got a licence and everything. He even won a race at Digne this summer. I went to it with Elle and Boo-Boo, but that's another story. He's nearly twenty-six now. They say he could still go professional and make something of himself. Maybe he could – I don't know. He's never even learned to double-clutch. I don't know how that old Renault is still going, even if it is painted yellow. I have a look at the engine every couple of weeks – I wouldn't want him to lose his job. When I tell him to be careful and not to drive like an idiot, he looks all sorry for himself, but really he doesn't give a shit, just like when he swallowed some chewing gum for the first time. When he was a kid – he's five years younger than me – he was always swallowing chewing gum. Each time we thought he'd die. Still, at least I can talk to him. And I don't have to say much – we go back all the way, after all.

Boo-Boo started school while I was doing my military service. He had the same teacher as us, Mlle Dubard – she's retired now. Every day he took the same route to school as we had – three kilometres over the hill, and at times the path is practically vertical – only fifteen years later. He's the cleverest of the three of us. He passed his exams and he's now in the final year of sixth form. He wants to be a doctor. This year he's at school in town. Mickey drives him in every morning and brings him back at night. Next year he'll have to go to Nice or Marseille or somewhere. But in a way, he's already left us. He's usually very quiet. He just stands there stiffly, his hands stuck in his pockets, shoulders back. Mamma says he looks like a lamp post. His hair is long and he's got eyelashes like a girl – he's always being teased about it. But I've never seen him lose his temper. Except with Elle, once maybe.