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Chapter I

Childhood love

— I will be yours. You will be mine...
— You will be mine. I will be yours...

This promise would bind them.

The two young children embraced each other: Flore and Chris.

He kissed her delicately:

— It's good like milk and honey, he murmured.

They were only nine years old.

Flore was wearing a long, white, embroidered silk shirt that stretched down to her feet.

Chris had tenderly placed a wedding veil on her hair. He was wearing his first communion suit.

Both were silent, contemplative, savoring the moment that had united them. They had acted out this scene of happiness with all their hearts.

Chris could never have imagined how difficult it would be to confront the adult world. When revealing the intense depth of his feelings for Flore to his parents, he faced total incomprehension. They were systematic in their denial: "Childhood love doesn't exist!"

To spare Flore's feelings, he kept quiet and didn't tell her about his parents' reaction.

When they met at the beach, he stroked her hair and played with her blond curls. He bathed in the vision of her face. His dark eyes sought to read her every thought. They were childish thoughts of course, but also a woman's

thoughts. She was already so mature, so reasonable. She seemed to know everything.

And how did she feel? His presence delighted her, made her strong. She wasn't about to tell him, though! Not a chance! She found him handsome, mysterious, surprisingly bold and yet so gentle.

His whole body glistened in the sun, his young muscles bulging out under his golden skin and his eyes gleaming.

One day they would marry... for real.

The years passed... As adolescents, Flore and Chris still had the same feelings for each other. They saw each other when vacationing near "Le Touquet", near Hardelot.

One morning, he went to see her and offered her some flowers:

— They're for you.

His expression was so sweet, so vulnerable that she took his hands and tenderly placed them on her cheeks.

— Will you give me a kiss...? My love!

She drew her lips out to his. His eyes looking deep into hers, he pulled her to him and asked her:

— Do you want a real kiss?...And maybe more?...

— Yes! And she closed her eyes.

Meanwhile, he stretched his hand out towards her left breast.

Taken by surprise, flustered, she moved back..., but every day of the following week when she remembered the warmth of the hand that had gently brushed against her, her heart would start to pound with emotion.

She told herself: "Our hearts are really one and the same", as she had once read in a novel by Delly. "He loves me".

As for Chris, he was also thinking of her, "What color will her eyes be tomorrow? Blue, maybe". Dreamy, he added "Today they were a very soft green...".

There grew between them a love dominated by excess, each expecting the other to lead them further down the path towards the happiness of abandon. She shivered when he held her in his arms. The passion between them was such that she knew she would not stop him from going further... if he dared to try.

Although this love could have bloomed thanks to its purity and simplicity, everything collapsed...

Chris's father, Mr. de Saint-André, a bridge and road-works engineer, was sent to the United States to build a dam, and his family had to follow.

Chris left, promising:

— It won't be for long...

But he never returned.

Distraught, Flore waited a long time for him, but in vain. She would sometimes walk, her long hair blowing in the wind, along the banks of the Seine and across the Pont Neuf, where they had once gone together on one of his visits to Paris...

"His parents didn't let him come back... And he just gave in!", she thought.

"He's abandoned me!... And yet, he loves me!...".

Wasn't it he who had once said: "You are free only when you can answer for your actions".

She was submerged in a heavy and terrible sorrow.

At home, she did all she could to hide the sorrow and pain that so heavily weighed on her. She experienced a strange new sensation: anxiety. She felt herself slowly suffocating... She searched her soul, looking for answers that only the future could bring: Would Chris ever come back?

Flore, shriveled by her suffering, would have to settle for a life only seemingly her own...

We may even imagine her as a baby, hesitating to be born and only reluctantly entering into life, anticipating how difficult life would turn out to be.

Her lengthy and painful separation from Chris provoked outbreaks of an insidious affliction: a skin disease. Eczema covered her face and arms, held her prisoner in its grip, spoiling her life daily. This skin disease, through which the body self-destructs, gave her little respite. Sometimes the eczema would disappear then suddenly reappear. Everyone around her was baffled at the sudden appearance of this incurable ailment.

Nevertheless, when Flore managed to make the trip to school, she was a rather good student, but suffered from extreme shyness – a disposition which made recess a daily ordeal. The other children's boisterous and rambunctious activities were too noisy for her. What did these girls have to be so excited about, anyway?

As she was told she was an organized and studious child, she became so, so strong was her desire to please.

She began to live more and more intensely through her imagination, but hid this fact from her family, just as she hid her constant suffering. She remained sweet and kind, though barely able to cope with the constant itching caused by the rash; she scratched herself raw..., without understanding that Chris's absence was the subconscious cause of her suffering and without realizing how bad her ailment really was. She was blessed with a brother, Thomas, and a little sister, Barbara, to whom, of course, she never complained.

Her relationship with her father, the handsome Mr. de Breuil, was deeply affectionate. If he had been able to fulfill his role as father adequately, he would have helped her understand that the world is rife with hatred and war...

Having inherited a large fortune, he was a man of independent means, a situation which made Flore instinctively uncomfortable. It had seemed strange to her even as far back as her early childhood years: her friends' parents all worked. And yet, she loved her father deeply, just as much as her mother.

Flore was obedience incarnate! Her sole concern was how to secure her parents' affection. Wrapped up in her suffering, she grew up secretive and tormented.

Her parents worried about her, but didn't let it show openly... They wanted to take her mind off whatever was eating her inside, but they didn't know how. Every now and again she got better.

At eighteen she started going out. She still thought about Chris, but was happy to be able to hang out sometimes with a friendly, fun-loving group of friends.

Although a slow dance would send her heart racing, she also felt dancing freed her from her inhibitions. Eventually her pain became less sharp and her health improved.

She was growing into a lovely young lady with delicate facial features, an abundant head of blonde hair, a slim outline and ample breasts. She had an hourglass figure with irresistibly curvy hips. The boys couldn't stay away...

Luce, her tall and beautiful friend, got engaged... All her friends were talking about getting married... So it didn't seem strange to her, at the tender age of 20, to marry one of her girlfriends' brother, Raoul Magneville, one of the boys she sometimes danced with at parties.

Mr. de Breuil seemed satisfied with the idea: "Raoul comes from a good family lineage and works for the family business – a luxury hotel in Paris".

The young man was average height, with wide shoulders and a round stomach. He was neither handsome nor ugly, had an easy-going attitude and was rather nice. The idea of "marriage" was in fashion. He'd been thinking about it... That's how he came to tell Flore one evening, when she had been the center of attention, that he loved her and wanted to marry her. Raoul's look remained distant, rather cold, intimidated perhaps, while Flore's filled with emotion: love had been mentioned, and sincerely at that!

But most of all, she remembered that her father had at one point told her, “Raoul Magneville is in love with you. He’s a pleasant young man. You would make a good match...”

Through this simple statement she had felt an affectionate fatherly insistence.

Flore had a somewhat confused feeling that something about the marriage was artificial, but she also saw it as the only way to escape her family life, which bored her immensely: as if everything in their lives had been fixed from the outset.

Flying the nest, marrying someone who loves you and who you are prepared to love seemed to be a reasonable solution.

In an era when engagements were supposed to last for a while, it could seem surprising that theirs was so brief; not even enough time to get to know each other...

— I’d like to think about it, she’d told him. Give me a month to answer you.

That same week, she called him... for which he was grateful, and they immediately got engaged.

The wedding ceremony took place as if forced. Her parents’ apartment, with its beautiful floors reminiscent of Versailles, was sumptuously furnished and fully decked out, but the bride participated little; it was her family who carried the event.

She had lots of love to offer to young Magneville; innocent of the fact that she would receive none in return, for he only cared for his own kin.

He appreciated Flore’s beauty and kindness, she stayed simple and natural despite being surrounded by luxury.

All of twenty-four, he was totally taken with her. He also knew that the de Breuil family owned a chateau in the eastern Pyrenees.

His imagination awoke. He confused love with his own distorted desires. He didn’t ask himself any questions re-

garding Flore, she just seemed to be shy. That was probably due to the fact that she believed in speaking little, whether in public or private, and so, she hardly ever did.

In the family, nobody ever questioned the future of young Flore who had been so quickly married.

Soon, she would no longer be master of her own destiny.

Her only wish was to love and to be loved by those who, from the beginning, had envied her smile and charm: her mother-in-law, a widow and now “clan chieftain”; her sister-in-law, Zoe and her brother-in-law, Richard.

It didn't take them long to subjugate her.

Her mother-in-law and sister-in-law had the same low forehead and small, penetrating, beady black eyes. The difference between them was that Mrs. Magneville was heavy set, large even, whereas Zoe, who's prominent nose had a noticeable hook, was thin and tall and always badly done up. They often argued, but they had one thing in common: gluttony.

As far as Richard – Raoul's twin brother – was concerned, he was lanky and had the general air about him of a spoiled child; she saw nothing but emptiness in his eyes.

Flore's constant efforts and patience were met with hypocritical undermining on the part of her in-laws.

They were all afraid that Raoul's loyalty to the clan would dissolve, and so, they set out to domesticate Flore. She never had the right to speak out. She had only to obey: “Sit down! Get up! Lie down!”.

The bourgeois social circles of both families lived only for pomp and ceremony.

Flore's parents considered the fanfare and splendor of yesteryear with melancholy; ah! the gilded edges, the glory and honors...

“*Après moi, le déluge*”, uttered Mr. de Breuil upon witnessing the dwindling of his fortune, and yet he still

tried to keep his standing in all the different clubs he frequented.

Happy that his daughter had married well, he attempted to devise different ways of picking himself up, letting his imagination wander off to golf courts where he often had the Duke of Windsor as a partner, which of course only set him to further dreaming.

Flore's father ignored the fact that the twentieth century, with its two World Wars, would deteriorate the establishment of which he formed part. He was not able to maintain his position in the face of change, and his impressive fortune slowly melted, down to a precarious affluence.

Also, having distanced himself from his family in northern France by settling down in Paris, he never transmitted any real family values to his children; traditions all based on the values of duty and hard work and inherited from Dutch ancestors – whom everyone knows even managed to gain land from the sea. The Second World War with its atrocities erased everything...

At Christmas time, however, all gathered at Mrs. de Breuil's father's house, who was happy to receive one and all in the large house he'd built in Roubaix, where he owned a textile factory. He was a well known author and loved Bach. Everyone adored him.

Easter and summer vacations were no longer spent near Touquet, where Flore had met Chris, but rather in the eastern Pyrenees. Mr. de Breuil took his wife and kids to his old chateau out in the middle of nowhere, high up in the mountains, where one was free to dream...

This immense estate, delicately perfumed with wisteria, was surrounded by towers which dated to as far back as *Charles the Bald*. Sadly, three hundred hectares of vineyards, once attached to the property, had been stupidly sold off by an ancestor, through his grounds keeper. The present owner, the daughter of a certain Dr. Bobo, used