

# A walk in the Dark



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# Chapter 1

Instant adrenalin.

The text was so unexpected. Eyes on stalks, leaping out at me.

‘I found your belt outside my sister’s house.’

Like an unannounced gift, if first interpretations could be trusted, the letters burned a warming sensation. Or was this jumping to conclusions? Victim of my own devious imaginings? Welcome or destructive repercussions?

I read it again, trying to remain casual and detached. Nothing to be bothered about. A quiet voice insisting it didn’t mean much.

But running true to form, it was difficult not to think about her. Isn’t this how it always went? Ignore the subtle but persistent background murmurs that cajoled and persuaded perniciously, relentless and cunning, following a foreseeable pattern. How many more times would this deceptive predictability catch me unawares? The possibilities of new horizons, improved existence or mere self-delusion? What failed to be grasped for sure, the lesson never learnt regardless, was the importance of not becoming obsessed.

Whatever the temptation, remain aloof and indifferent at all times.

‘I found your belt outside my sister’s house.’

Surely, anyone with a brain not on autopilot, would demand answers and solutions? Reliable instructions to follow with certainty, eliminating trial and the tribulation of error. A guide. A reassuring companion to comfort and negate all forms of doubt. To substitute doubt with positive confidence. To boldly go where no man has trod. But now I’m going over the top.

For a long time, music had been a poor substitute for such an indispensable companion. A half decent alternative, neither totally fulfilling nor impossibly hopeless. Some sort of crutch, nonetheless. A helping hand to encourage a trembling foot towards a tentative step onto the lowest tread of a discouragingly insurmountable stile.

So, what the fuck is he talking about?

Relationships.

You can’t live with them and yet they’re impossible to live without. The perfect paradox. The unsolvable problem.

It would be hard to know where to begin. It *is* hard to know where to begin. At the beginning of course. Wherever that might be.

‘I don’t want to live with you anymore.’

What simple words containing such a depth of meaning, belying immeasurable consequences? I’ve lost track of how long ago they were said to me. And it wasn’t the first time either. But this is not intended to be a life study so all the previous relationships can be placed firmly on their respective shelves. Concentrate firstly on Daphne. She was the true love of my life, my soul mate and constant helper and companion. But so were all the others. It might be more realistic, if classification is required, to call her my final attempt.

We were a proper family: our own two children, plus Zoe from a previous marriage bonding into a closely knit unit. Daphne and I were never married. The move to France was designed to improve our lifestyle, enable a more fulfilling existence, create a sound base on which to build our relationships, and to raise well-balanced, confident children more than capable of reaching their full potential.

That saga is a whole other story, though, which in this instant, doesn’t bare consideration.

Before ten calamitous years of bitter suffering and resentful recriminations had twisted sharpened knives deeply into personal happiness, Zoe had returned to live with her father in England, Rosie had followed her stepsister soon

after to live with an aunt, and Robert was diagnosed as having chronic melancholia. Daphne was living with a work colleague in provided accommodation and I lived virtually alone in the onetime family residence. It shouldn't therefore have come as a surprise when one innocent day, trees in full bud, flowers bursting into bloom, a rare riverside picnic and Daphne made her gobsmacking announcement. 'I no longer want to live with you.' Not that she was by then, anyway.

In an attempt at true positive thinking, I tried to see it not so much as an end but more of an opportunity for a fresh start, a new beginning. Anything was possible. The World was my oyster.

Unfortunately, along with frog's legs, escargots and garlic, oysters can be listed as one of the delicacies I can certainly do without.

I promptly found an estate agent who valued the house and put it up for sale. On learning of the suggested market price, Daphne flatly refused to sell, saying she wanted at least twice this sum. In my usual over reactive manner, I told her I was washing my hands of the whole sordid business and she alone could be responsible for selling the bloody place. Then proceeded to cancel the estate agent. Of course, it didn't sell. She found another tame agent who tried asking the exorbitant amount she required. Regrettably, the house now fully paid



for, was in both our joint names with equal ownership rights. Eventually she moved away, found a rich sugar daddy living in Barbados and soon forgot about our house in France. I soldiered on living with sepia recollections and ever invading rats. Naturally no one was prepared to pay Daphne's ridiculous price and as years ticked by I became attuned to existing alone in a house full of fading memories and deteriorating structure, falsely secure in its tomblike comfort. But before becoming completely immersed in the sloth of self-pity, we'll hurry forward, blurring through those intervening years to a time when the situation has become, by habit if nothing else, less disagreeable, marginally more acceptable and, would you believe, almost calmly pleasant.

But living on your own in a house having long outgrown its desirability, in a remote French hill village whose population was dying off at an alarming rate, posed almost overwhelming limitations. Like the language for a start. A sort of indecipherable gobble-de-gook: a mixture of localised accents and a lexicon of words never ever to be found in any school textbook spoken with tongue twisting contortions and much gesticulating. It seemed impossible to break through a cruelly imposed barrier, overcoming the stigma, real or imagined, of being that fucking foreigner whose partner went off and left him. I mean, I never would

have moved to France if it wasn't for her. She was the bloody Francophile. It was her who spoke fluent French. I didn't really like the country and as for the language.

But human nature, if sufficiently exposed, can become used to any amount of hardships, an outward protection developing as thick as rhinoceros's hide. The house was never going to sell. She refused to agree on a realistic price. Why should she, living the dream in Barbados? Trapped as I felt, certain efforts were made to alleviate my predicament. Bars at nearest market towns were frequented in the vague hope of eventually forming some sort of lifeline with the outside world. Drink enough and it's almost possible to speak the lingo. I bought a small sailing boat and because it was moored more than two and a half hour's drive away, spent happy, if lonesome times, staying aboard.

One day strolling half drunkenly round the restrictive streets of the nearest market town I recoiled as a stranger approached me. What did he want? I don't know. Bloody French. Why don't they all speak English? It was some moments before realising he actually was speaking English. Or at least, an approximation of this noble language. It seemed, following some misunderstandings and a few second takes, that he was an English teacher at the school

Daphne had worked at. No wonder the French can't speak our language.

'You play zee drums, no?'

How the fuck did he know that? I'd almost forgotten myself. Turns out, at some stage, Daphne had inadvertently presented me as a possible candidate for the new band he was forming. It was the beginning of a rediscovered musical phase entering into my French life story. Also, an insight into what sort of music the French *troisième* age like to listen to, a chasm away from my own tastes. But it was a step in the right direction, a foot in the right door. With hardly a single rehearsal, we were soon playing at a surprisingly frequent amount of tea dances or *repast dansant* for an enthusiastic, if far from discerning, audience of mostly old age pensioners. Not only an opportunity to sample French cuisine and alcohol but we were paid as well. At increasingly regular intervals, far flung village halls could be heard echoing to the strains of teetering tangos, breathless boleros or wavering waltzes as rejuvenated oldies puffed and wheezed on polished parquet floors, between endless courses of gourmet cuisine. It was clear that French pensioners certainly knew how to enjoy themselves and fortunate that following such a marathon of eating and drinking, they were mostly oblivious to the intermittent screech of feedback emitted from our

equally aged sound system. Before the founding member of this upcoming trio finally gave up his musical ambitions, abandoning his erstwhile accordion in exchange for a wooden casket with brass bound trimmings, I had become an established member of the frail circle of local musical artists in this sparsely populated vicinity. The results were twofold. Fame was spreading like moss on our garage roof.

‘D’you want to play in a fanfare?’

Or, in its true Gallic form: ‘Aye oh Daniel. Tu veux jouer dans une fanfare?’ Amidst accompanying arm actions and facial distortions, and without fully understanding what I was agreeing to, a realisation dawned on me that I was committed. The first rehearsal was next Friday. Perhaps I might learn more of what playing in a *fanfare* involved.

‘Non, non, non. Pas comme ça ! Tu es fou au quoi ? But eet ees zo ease. Yo murst listern.’

The band leader, (there were plenty of other names I could have called him,) was of the old school teaching method. All shouting and insults. Learning instilled by fear. But the gigs sometimes made up for rehearsals, with plenty of beer and wine spilling freely and sometimes, even, a nugget of satisfaction from appreciative audiences. To me, the sight of people dancing was sufficient payment in itself, which was

fortunate as no other remunerations were evident. It has subsequently been pointed out to me that the president always drives an expensive new car. At least there was some sort of feeling of belonging with each performance even if being constantly introduced to other people as: ‘Ca cest Daniel. Il est Anglaise, mais comme même.’ Bastards.

For those unfamiliar with the French *fanfare*, perhaps a brief explanation is in order.

It’s a street band. A band that plays in the road. Usually with about twenty musicians on brass and percussion. Don’t think of the Household Cavalry or The Scots Royal Guards. Nothing would be further from the truth. The only similarity being, both bands play whilst moving about in public places. In contrast to the precise lines of perfectly in tune musicians marching smartly in spotless uniforms, the French *fanfares* amble drunkenly about the streets stridently waving their instruments in the air as if wafting away unpleasant odours while dressed in colourful, though not necessarily pristine, uniforms which more than anything, reflect the raucous style of their playing. Fortunately for the Brits, their popularity remains restricted to the south, an imaginary line drawn vaguely between Toulouse and Marseille.

And then a guitarist called Jean Pole contacted me. He’d found my number from the remaining live member of the

now defunct Trio D'Oc. Although pronounced Pole, being French, it is of course spelt Paul. Pole, – I mean, Paul, Jean-Paul, was looking for a drummer to join his newly initiated group.

How could I refuse? More my style than the Banda Beau Temps.

Besides Jean-Paul, there was Jean-Marc the bass player, who when not strumming his second-hand Fender, was tending to the demands of a herd of over a hundred goats, Jean-Claude, who played a mean baritone sax and Khalida the girl singer. It was worth committing myself for the latter member alone, regardless of any other considerations.

To me it seems odd, when considering the English tendency of abbreviating names to their bare bones, that the French express a desire to lengthen them to their highest common denominator. In England, for example, Donald becomes Don. David is shortened to Dave. Yet in France, not satisfied with a simple John, the French have to complicate matters by adding another name. John becomes Jean-Marie, Jean-Paul or Jean-Pierre. With girls, Plain Marie is far from adequate. Marie-Thérèse, Marie-Anne or Marie-Bernard. You get the picture? It could suggest an innate feeling of inferiority dictating the need to reinforce identity to a maximum degree but is more likely an inheritance from a

long standing Catholic tradition. At any rate, it's more than bloody confusing. At least the singer had only one name, even if it was a name I'd never heard of.

Khalida. And she was stunning.

Let the story begin.

Our first gig. It's actually in the village. In St Stephen de Cucelles.

She had one of those voices that can send shivers down your backbone and quivers in your underpants. Shaking all over.

Here, it's difficult not to race ahead, becoming completely besotted and thoroughly obsessed.

Take note.

So, we're in our own village. It's the village fête. I say 'our', but really it's only me who lives here. The others don't. Lucky them. But they're not too far away. I should explain, though, before you get the wrong idea and make associations with John Lennon beginning his musical career at a village fête near Liverpool. Village fêtes in the south of France are nothing like those in England. No vicars in cassocks and W.I. cake stalls. The venue is a dusty open air square shaded by ancient plane trees, thronged at present with all walks of village life by now fairly well oiled on homemade punch,

Pastis and endless supplies of beer and wine. And that's just the teenagers. The dull click of boules accompanies a strong smell of French fries and merguez sausages. Those not still elbowing each other amidst the throngs around the bar, have taken loaded plastic trays of food and drink to devour in the relative comfort of trestle tables and hard wooden benches. Noise level is already around volume eight.

Khalida is standing directly in front of me. She's wearing a short black dress with delicate shoulder straps as I watch her scratch at a mosquito bite on her left leg. She turns and looks at me smiling enigmatically.

'Not nervous are you?'

'Just a bit maybe.'

Yes! She speaks English! Learnt during the year she and her husband spent working in Australia. All right. Nothing's perfect. Could have done without the husband, but still, she does speak English.

Jean-Paul holds up his hand. Looks around. 'Nous sommes prêts?'

I see Jean-Claude, over behind a speaker, and Jean-Marc right beside me nod.

'A one, two. One two three four.' Sod counting in French, and Khalida comes in spot on cue with the opening 'Wow,' of James Brown's classic 'I Feel Good.'



And we're away.

Finally. This was it. After a lifetime of playing in crap bands, of being totally bored or humiliatingly embarrassed, at last I was knocking out my style of music in the best band ever to come my way. As the boule players gradually relinquished their games and the sausage eaters slowly put down their plastic knives and forks more and more people began to dance. Soon Khalida was announcing Amy Winehouse's 'Rehab.' She had their attention now. Inhibitions were floating skywards; hesitant limbs were loosening up and it was downhill from then on. Any awkwardness, nervous tension, reluctant concentration slipped easily away into a smooth melding of music and movement and all too soon the final bars of 'Jailhouse Rock' were repeating in my head as with an overwhelming feeling of exhilaration we began packing away the gear.

Sometime later, still high on that sense of accomplishment earned after a successful gig, Khalida was helping me stack the drums into my waiting Land Rover. Eventually, the rear door slammed shut with its reassuring clang hardly audible now. A deejay had replaced us, his decks spinning louder with each disc. I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of a sticky hand and without thinking touched Khalida

lightly on the shoulder, at the same time aware of my wrist brushing subtly over her soft dark curls.

‘D’you fancy a dance then?’

We rehearsed once a week on a Wednesday. Being a retired businessman not lacking in finance, Jean-Claude had fitted out his cellar as a music studio complete with its own drum kit. He had the further advantage of living in an isolated hamlet with virtually no immediate neighbours. No fear of complaints. I looked forward to Wednesdays. Didn’t even have to bother taking my drums.

We are all sat around in our respective places under the low vaulted stone ceiling. Sax down the far end. Bass and guitar opposite each other in the middle and me and Khalida near the entrance facing inward. I could sense her presence, her close proximity. Eyes kept facing front. Taking in Jean-Claude and his enormous saxophone. I daren’t let her catch me staring.

But this is where the narrative could become complicated. Possibly one of the reasons never before attempted. You see, how can you recount a story when half the dialogue takes place in a foreign language and, despite having been exposed to this language for far too many years, only a relatively small proportion is ever fully understood? A true

conundrum. Living in France, for me, remains similar to being partially deaf. God, why do I torture myself?

‘So, that was great.’ Jean-Claud speaking. Obviously not his actual words. I understand sufficiently to get the gist and it’s too tedious to translate literally. Is this the best way forward?

Let’s hope so.

‘Are we all right for next week then?’ It’s Jean-Paul. Self-styled leader and probably best musician. Four of us nod and turn towards Khalida who looks slightly ill at ease. ‘Er,’ she hesitates, shaking the tight curls that flounce out over her bare bronzed shoulders. ‘I won’t be here.’ She looks suitably crestfallen. ‘We’re going on holiday.’

Jean-Claude is the father figure. It’s his cellar, his equipment; the drums, the amps the microphones and speakers. ‘Anywhere nice?’ he tries to disguise disappointment. ‘The week after, maybe.’

Khalida blushes apologetically, looks coy for an instant. ‘We’re going to the Ile de la Réunion. It’s not worth going for less than two weeks.’ Her smile hides embarrassment.

‘Wow.’ Since a few weeks previously, since first getting to know her, I feel a certain affinity with Khalida. She’s Moroccan. Her parents coming from a small seaside village near Fez where once Daphne and I spent what might

otherwise have been a romantic holiday for two. Ignoring the diarrhoea and possible food poisoning, having to walk stark bollock naked through the teeming streets of the Kasbah because some thieving bastard Moroccan kids had stolen our clothes while skinny dipping, was enough in itself to put me right off foreign travel.

‘But that’s marvellous.’ I say, trying to ingratiate myself whilst inwardly cursing. ‘So, when do you get back?’

‘What about the sixth? It’s a Wednesday?’ Jean-Claude has not even waited to see when she gets back.

‘I’ve got to insulate the goathouse that week.’ Jean-Marc and his bloody goats.

‘Have you been before?’ Where do they get the money\_I wonder to myself?

Jean-Paul is fiddling with a broken G string. Khalida accidentally knocks her microphone stand while searching a cluttered leather handbag for her phone. The noise reverberates round the enclosed quarters. Jean-Marc is already packing his Fender into its battered case. Honestly, if less time were spent discussing when the next rehearsal could take place we might become suitably more proficient. Finally, a date is agreed upon.

Khalida has found her phone and is tapping in the rendezvous with agile thumbs. Someone begins a

conversation, but about what, I remain clueless. Am too concerned about trying to fathom the complexities of registering the future fixture into my own phone. Khalida sees me struggling. 'Here, Dan.' She slides off her high stool, dodging round microphone stand and approaches. 'Let me.'

I offer up my phone willingly as she bends in nearer. Her hair is brushing my face. I can feel the electric touch of her fingers as they close round my *portable*. Feel her warm breath on my cheek. Sense her close proximity. Nervous excitement. Disbelief. 'There. All done.'

'Show me again how you do that?'

She takes the phone once more, leaning closer, bare arm touching mine; hair once again tickling my cheek. It's as if she's enveloping me. Her fingers wrap round the back of my hand as mine clutch at the phone's black plastic casing. We are entwined in some sort of embrace with the Galaxy as intermediary. It's taken mere seconds but seems to have outlasted the whole afternoon. An afternoon that will linger into days, passing on to months, to years.

Shortly afterwards, as tradition had it, we adjourned to the upstairs living room for drinks.

'I can't stop long, you know,' Khalida says while sinking into a comfy armchair. The room is spacious with suitably large terracotta floor tiles and a central modern chimney

piece. There is a drinks bar near the door and opposite, magnificent views through plate glass windows over the surrounding mountainous countryside. ‘I have to pick up Salem.’

I throw an inquisitive glance.

‘She’s my daughter.’

‘Do you want beer or coffee?’ Jean-Claude asks.

‘You don’t have orange juice I suppose?’

‘Course. Sorry. You don’t drink do you.’

‘So?’ I turn to her. ‘You’ve just finished Ramadan?’ I’d never met a practising Muslim. More interesting by the minute. Why do I fall for the unusual? ‘How long does it go on for?’ I hoped I wasn’t making it sound like a boring theatre play or even perhaps some sort of extended party. The answer would have to wait. Jean-Marc was putting his now empty beer bottle noisily on the bar top. ‘If you’ll excuse me,’ he mumbled. ‘I’d better be going. Have to be up at five for the goats.’

The gathering broke up. Nobody seemed to want to linger. Nobody except me, that is. We shuffled out not far behind Jean-Marc, Jean-Claude descending the stone steps to see us all off.

Consciously, though hopefully not obviously, I trailed closely behind Khalida. Close enough to smell her perfume.

God, I wanted to run fingers through those curls. At the cars there was the usual hand shaking French style. *Fais la bise* cheek to cheek with Khalida. Welcome any excuse.

‘Come on Dan,’ Jean-Paul was saying. He’d given me a lift in his metallic silver Dacia. I hesitated, treading the ground beside her large family estate. Lunging forwards. Arms wrapping clumsily round her. Faces so close she seemed to be devouring me. ‘Have a good holiday.’ She was smiling happily. Lip gloss accentuating a generous mouth, even white teeth, warm brown eyes and soft complexion. ‘Send some photos when you’re in Reunion won’t you?’

‘Yeah, sure.’ And the car door slammed shut between us.

Jean-Paul held his car door open impatiently. ‘Viens.’

The mountainous skyline opposite was silhouetted against fading daylight.

We jumped into the Dacia following Khalida’s rear lights as they wound briskly downhill. One of her stop lights wasn’t working. I wanted to keep her in sight, stay close, but after two more bends she was no longer visible.