

# The French Gardener

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## The yellow leaves of the weeping willow in autumn

Hartington House, Dorset  
October 2005

Gus crept up to his mother's study door and put his ear to the crack. He inhaled the familiar smell of Marlboro Lights and felt his frustration mount at the sound of her husky voice speaking down the telephone. He knew she was talking to his teacher, Mr Marlow. He assumed, correctly, that she wasn't on his side. Gus was a problem no one wanted to take the trouble to solve. 'I don't believe it!' she exclaimed. 'I'm so sorry, Mr Marlow. It won't happen again. It really won't. His father will be down tonight from London. I'll make sure he talks to him . . . You're right, it's absolutely not on to bite another child . . . I'll find him and send him straight back to school.' Then her tone softened and Gus heard her chair scrape across the wooden floorboards as she stood up. 'I know he *can* be a bit aggressive, but we only moved from London a couple of months ago. It's been difficult for him. He's left all his friends behind. He's only seven. He'll settle in. Just give him time, Mr Marlow? Please. He's a good boy really.'

Gus didn't hang around to hear more. He tiptoed back down the corridor and out of the garden door on to the terrace. The lawn was a rich, wet green, sparkling in the pale morning light. He took a deep breath and watched mist rise into the air. He shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and shivered. He'd left his coat at school. Swallowing his resentment, he wandered across the terrace and up the thyme walk lined with shaggy round topiary balls. His shoulders hunched, his feet kicking out in front of him, his eyes searched for some small creature upon which to vent his anger. At the end of the thyme walk was a field full of sheep belonging to their neighbour, Jeremy Fitzherbert. Among the

sheep was a disheveled old donkey called Charlie. Gus enjoyed nothing more than bullying the beast, chasing him around the field with a stick until his braying grew hoarse and desperate. He climbed the fence. Sensing danger, Charlie pricked his ears. He spotted the little boy jumping down and his eyes widened with fear. He stood frozen to the ground, nostrils flaring, heart turning over like a rusty engine. Gus felt a jolt of excitement. He forgot about biting Adam Hudson in the playground, about running out of the school gates and up the High Street, about his mother's angry voice and his own clawing sense of isolation. He forgot about everything except the sudden rush of blood as he set off in pursuit of the donkey.

'You a scaredy cat?' he hissed as he approached the terrified animal. 'Whoooa!' He lunged at him, delighting in the clumsy way the donkey stumbled back before cantering stiffly off towards the woods at the top of the field, braying in panic. What a shame he hadn't brought the stick. It was more fun when he hit him.

Bored of that game, Gus continued into the woods, leaving Charlie trembling in the corner of the field, surrounded by sheep. The ground was soggy, strewn with twigs and brown leaves amongst which a shiny pheasant scraped the earth for food. The sun shone weakly through the leaves, illuminating the spiders' webs that adorned the surrounding shrubbery with lace. Gus picked up a twig and began to swipe the webs, squashing the fleeing spiders under foot. The pleasure was fleeting, and he was left with the emptiness of believing, albeit subconsciously, that he was of no value to anyone.

Miranda Claybourne put down the telephone and remained at the window, staring out over the orchard. The ground was littered with apples and the last of the plums. She had sensed her son's presence at the door, but now he had gone. Of all the days Gus had to choose to play truant, he had chosen Deadline Day. She stubbed out her cigarette, reassuring herself that a lapse in her struggle to quit was absolutely okay; three puffs hardly counted. She didn't have time to go looking for him, and anyway, she wouldn't know where to start, the grounds were so large and, she observed with a sinking feeling, desperately overgrown and wet. The thought

of tramping about in gumboots was intolerable for a city girl used to Jimmy Choos and concrete. On top of everything she had her monthly column for *Red* to finish. So far, the only advantage of living in the country was not having to brush her hair and apply make-up for the school run. Gus and his five-year-old sister, Storm, cycled up the drive every morning, leaving their bikes by the gate to take the school bus that conveniently stopped for them at eight. In London she had had to get up early in order to make herself presentable to the other mums in four by fours and over-sized sunglasses who carried off a seemingly effortless glamour in Gucci, their smooth hair coloured and cut to perfection at Richard Ward. In Hartington she imagined that barely anyone would have heard of Gucci or Richard Ward, which had seemed charmingly quaint on arrival, but was now simply quaint. She complained wittily in her column, which chronicled her struggle to adapt to country life, and turned her resentment into hilarity. Along with the wet, dreary weather, somehow wetter and drearier in the countryside than in London, the quaintness of Hartington was almost intolerable. There was nothing to do but laugh.

Unlike her husband, Miranda hadn't wanted to move out of London. The very thought of being farther than a whiff of perfume from Harvey Nichols made her break into a cold sweat. Eating at the local pub rather than at the Ivy or le Caprice was almost enough to confine her permanently to her own kitchen table. How she missed her Pilates classes in Notting Hill, lunches at the Wolseley with her girlfriends, stopping in at Ralph Lauren for a little self-indulgence before returning home. But they had had no choice. Gus had been kicked out of school for being aggressive, and moving him to a quiet country school seemed the sensible option. He had a whole year to go before they could pack him off to boarding school where the problem of Gus would be taken out of their hands. For Miranda and David Claybourne, one year of Gus's bad behaviour was an incredibly long time.

*Oh God what am I going to do? I really don't have time for this*, she muttered to herself, throwing her cigarette into the waste-paper bin and covering it with a few scrunched up pieces of newspaper so she wouldn't be reminded of her lack

of will power. She wished she had hired another nanny instead of insisting she do it all single-handedly. That was the trouble with being a working mother: the guilt. It went in tandem with exhaustion, trying to be everything to everyone while retaining a little for oneself. David had suggested she hire a cook and a gardener, that way she'd have more time to write. Living in the country wasn't like London where one could order a home delivery of sushi or a Chinese take-away from Mr Wing; here she had to get in her car and go into town, which required planning. She didn't have time to plan meals. The only good thing was Mr Tit the milkman who arrived every morning with the papers and milk in his white van marked with the number-plate: COW1. He made her laugh during the bleakest hour of the day, when it was still dark and damp outside and she was struggling to get the children ready for school. As for the garden, it was a proper garden, not a patio with a few potted plants, but acres and acres of land. It wasn't so easy to find help in the country. London was full of foreigners begging for work; in Dorset there didn't seem to be any foreigners at all. It was all so alien and unnerving. She didn't belong. David had fallen in love with the house on sight because it appealed to his aspirations of grandeur. She had accepted it half-heartedly, longing for Notting Hill and asphalt, slightly guilty at not appreciating such a big house in so idyllic a setting. But what on earth was one to do in the countryside? As a freelance journalist she was always under pressure. They didn't need the money: David worked in the City and earned more than most people could spend in a lifetime, but writing was in her blood and she couldn't have stopped even if she had wanted to. She dreamed of one day writing a novel, a great big love story like *Anna Karenina* or *Gone with the Wind*. However, she had yet to come up with a good plot. Until she did, she was stuck with writing articles for magazines and newspapers, which at least fulfilled her need to express herself and gave her a vital foothold in London. Miranda busied herself at her computer so she didn't have to listen to the small voice of despair whispering inside her head. She put off her chores, hoping they'd go away, that David would admit it had all been a terrible mistake and take them back to where they belonged. After all, the countryside

hadn't changed Gus. But David's enjoyment of the country rested on the fact that he could return to the city on Sunday and swank about having spent the weekend at his country estate. She was stuck down here indefinitely. She considered her husband: handsome, debonair David Claybourne. Always in control, always strong and capable, cruising effortlessly through life as if he'd done it all before,

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loads of times. Now they had moved she rarely saw him. At first he had returned home on Thursdays, staying until Sunday night. Now he arrived late on Friday and left after lunch on Sunday. He was tired, wanting to spend the weekend sitting in front of the television watching the golf. If she didn't know him so well she would suspect he was having an affair – but David was much too concerned about what other people thought to stray.

She returned to her desk and dialled her husband's number at Goldman Sachs. Apart from wanting to share her anxiety about Gus, she just wanted to hear his voice. 'Darling, it's me,' she said when he picked up the telephone.

'Now, what's going on down there, sweetheart? Everything all right?' He sounded buoyant. She was immediately reassured. 'It's Gus, he's run off.'

David heaved an impatient sigh. 'Not again!' She suddenly felt bad for having ruined his day.

'You're going to have to give him a good talking to tonight,' she said. 'He'll listen to you.'

'A good hiding is what he deserves.'

'It's against the law. You can tell that kind of law was made by people with no children.'

'Did you speak to Mr Marlow?'

'Yes. He's not very happy. God forbid Gus gets kicked out of this school too!' She began to toy with a pencil.

'He won't. They're more tolerant in the country. Besides, he'll grow out of it. He's just adjusting to his new surroundings.'

'I hope you're right.'

'You sound down, darling.'

'I'm just really up against it. I've got to finish my column and I can't get to my desk I've got so many domestic chores to see to. Now Gus has run off, I won't have time to write.'

I'm tearing my hair out!'

'And such pretty hair!' he quipped. 'Look, if you took the trouble to hire help you'd have time for the important things.' He was baffled by his wife's uncharacteristic ineptitude. She had commanded the builders for eight months like a formidable colonel, but recently she had lost momentum. 'You should have listened to me and hired a nanny. Jayne might have come with us had we made her an offer she couldn't refuse. Your dreams of being the domestic goddess haven't quite materialised, have they? We were fools to let her go. She was the only one Gus responded to. You're the mistress of an estate now, Miranda. Get organised down there, for God's sake, before you drive us both mad.' David clearly believed their son's problems were his wife's responsibility. 'He'll come back when he's hungry,' she retorted casually, hurt that he was blaming her once again. 'Then I'll send him back to school.' She put down the telephone and returned to her desk, glancing bleakly at the ironic title of her column: 'My Bucolic Dream.'

Gus sat under a tree and felt his stomach rumble. He wanted to go home and sit by the fire in the playroom and watch *Lord of the Rings* on DVD. He longed for Jayne's cottage pie and apple crumble with custard. Slowly his anger ebbed away, cooled by the damp wind that now penetrated his bones. He rubbed his hands together and blew hot air into them. Even if he had had the vocabulary he wouldn't have been able to explain his actions, even to himself. He didn't know why he was poisoned with frustration and anger. He felt rejected. Lashing out made him feel better. Suddenly a large bubble expanded in his belly, rose up his windpipe and escaped his throat in a large, uncontrollable sob. His tears shocked and appalled him but he was unable to stop.

'You all right, lad?' Gus swivelled around, swallowing his weeping with a gulp. He hadn't heard the man approach. Beside him panted two black sheepdogs. 'You're David Claybourne's boy, aren't you?' said Jeremy Fitzherbert. Gus nodded. Jeremy introduced himself and his thin, weathered face creased into a smile. One of the dogs leaned against his brown corduroy trousers which were tucked into green Wellington boots. A tweed cap covered thinning brown hair.

His eyes were small and bright and very blue. He patted the dog's head with one gloved hand, a long stick in the other. The very stick Gus had used to torment the donkey. 'Shouldn't you be at school? Come on, let me take you home.'

Gus reluctantly got to his feet. One of the dogs made a rush for him. Gus recoiled. 'Oh, it's a wanting-to-jump-up dog!' said Jeremy with a chuckle. 'Don't worry, he doesn't bite. The thin one's Mr Ben, the fat one's Wolfgang.' Jeremy patted Mr Ben fondly. Gus wiped his face with his sleeve and followed Jeremy down the path.

The sheep were gathered into a tight formation, ready to be shepherded. Charlie the donkey remained in the far corner of the field, watching them warily. 'Charlie!' Jeremy called, delving into his pocket for a carrot. 'Come on, old boy!' Charlie didn't move. 'What's up with him?' Jeremy muttered to himself. Gus dropped his eyes and shoved his hands into his pockets. 'Donkeys,' Jeremy sighed, shaking his head. 'I'll go and take a look at him later. He's an old codger. You know he's over ninety?'

'Really,' Gus replied, looking up from beneath his dark fringe. Jeremy noticed something hard in those pale blue eyes and frowned. He didn't know how to talk to someone Gus's age, so he strode on across the field and up the thyme walk without uttering another word. Gus trudged silently behind him, wondering how he was going to get that stick back. Once at the garden door Gus slunk in, tossing Jeremy a hasty look, more of dismissal than of gratitude. 'Is your mother in? I'd like to see her,' said Jeremy, lingering on the terrace.

Gus hesitated and bit his lip. He seemed to gather himself before he was able to contemplate facing his mother. 'Mu-um!' he shouted at last.

Miranda's hands froze over the keys of her laptop at the sound of her son's voice. She felt a rush of relief. She hurried into the hall to find Gus, hands in pockets, feet shuffling, face grubby with mud and tears. Her heart buckled. 'Darling, I've been so worried. Where have you been?' She knelt to pull him into her arms but he stiffened. He was as cold as a corpse. 'You can't just run off like that. It's not safe.' Then

she noticed Jeremy hovering at the door. 'Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't see you,' she said, getting up.

'I'm Jeremy Fitzherbert, your neighbour.' He took off his glove to shake her hand. 'We've waved at each other from a distance but never been properly introduced.'

'Oh yes, you've met my husband, David.' His hand was rough and warm. He noticed her manicured nails and the large sapphire and diamond ring on the third finger of her left hand. She smelt of lime. 'I'm Miranda. Thank you for bringing him home. I've been doing my nut worrying about him.'

'He was in the woods,' said Jeremy. 'No harm can come to him there, I assure you. Unless he gets caught in a fox trap.'

'Fox trap?' Her eyes widened.

Jeremy shrugged. 'They eat my chickens. Even go for the odd sheep if they're feeling particularly adventurous. I think Gus is far too astute to wind up in one of those.' Miranda turned to her son, but he had disappeared.

'I'm used to London parks, not the countryside. This is all rather new to me,' she said, an edge to her voice. Jeremy took in the long brown hair tied into a pony-tail and the pale blue eyes, made of the same hard crystal as her son's. She was a beautiful woman with high, angular cheekbones and a strong jaw, though rather too thin for his taste. 'Do you have a wife, Mr Fitzherbert?'

'Jeremy, please,' he insisted with a grin. 'No, I'm a poor bachelor. In fact, I'm a charity case, Miranda. Every kindhearted female I know is intent on finding me a bride, but who wants to be a farmer's wife these days?' He smiled diffidently, his eyes twinkling with humour.

'Oh, I'm sure there's someone out there for you. You've got plenty of time. No biological clock to push *you* into marriage before you're ready.' She smiled. She didn't want to give him the impression that she was discontented. 'The reason I ask whether you have a wife is that I'm looking for a cook. Oh, and a gardener. It's the sort of thing a woman might know. You don't happen to know anyone, do you? Or how I might go about it? You see, I'm extremely busy, I'm a writer. I just can't go scouring the countryside



for help.'

Jeremy nodded knowingly. She'd probably had an army of Filippinos in London. 'The best thing to do is post a notice in Cate's Cake Shop in town. She's got a large clientèle. Why don't you offer someone that cottage by the river? It's empty, isn't it?'

'That pile of rubble! I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to live there. It's a ruin.'

Jeremy laughed. 'Oh, it has a certain charm. It wouldn't take too much to resurrect it. If you offer the cottage you're more likely to find someone to work on the estate. I don't know of anyone locally. You'll have to bring someone in. A cottage is a good incentive.'

'Perhaps you're right.'

'I'll ask around.'

'Thank you.' She looked at him standing outside in the

cold and rashly offered him a cup of coffee, regretting it even as she spoke.

'I've got to take a look at Charlie,' he said, declining her offer.

'Charlie?'

'The donkey. A friendly animal. He's cowering in the corner of the field. Not like him at all. Hope the lad's okay. Found him crying in the woods. I have a horse, Whisper, if he'd like a ride some time. Let me know. I'm in the book.'

'Thank you,' Miranda replied, closing the door behind him. She looked at her watch. What on earth was she going to give Gus for lunch?

She found her son sitting on the banquette in the kitchen, playing with his Game Boy. When she entered he glared at her sulkily. 'Now, darling,' she said, endeavouring to sound stern.

'What's all this about biting another little boy at school? How do you think you're going to make friends if you bite them?'

'Don't want any friends,' he replied, without taking his eyes off the game.

'Why did you bite him?'

'He started it.'

'I don't care who started it. You can't go around bullying people. Do you want to be kicked out and go to boarding school early?'

‘No,’ he replied hastily, looking up. He didn’t want to go to boarding school at all. ‘Are you going to make me go back to school today?’

‘No,’ she replied, reluctantly changing her mind. She didn’t have the heart to send him back. ‘I’ve got to go into town and post a notice in the cake shop. You can hang out here, if you like. I’ll put some fish cakes in the oven.’

‘Can I watch *Lord of the Rings*?’ Gus had discarded his sulk like a coat that was no longer necessary.

‘If you promise not to bully other children.’

‘I promise,’ he said lightly, climbing down from the bench. Miranda gave him a hug. ‘I love you,’ she gushed, repeating the three words that always made up for the lack of time she gave her son. Gus didn’t reply but hurried off to the playroom. Miranda went to telephone the school to inform them that Gus had been found but wouldn’t be returning on account of a stomach ache, and to arrange for an older child to look out for Storm on the school bus. She would send Gus to meet her at the end of the drive. It was the least he could do.

Jeremy whistled for his dogs and walked back to the field. Charlie was still standing in the corner. ‘Come on, old boy,’ he said, taking off his glove and pulling out the carrot. He liked to feel that velvet muzzle near to his skin. It took a few moments for the donkey to realise that Jeremy was alone. When he did he tossed his head and galloped across the field. He snorted at Jeremy and nuzzled his soft nose into his hand, taking the carrot carefully so as not to bite his master’s fingers. Jeremy rubbed the short fur between the animal’s eyes and smiled at him affectionately. ‘What’s the matter with you, Charlie? Why were you standing over there in the corner? It’s not like you to decline the offer of a carrot.’ Jeremy set off up the field towards the woods. Charlie followed. He wanted more than anything to go with him, to the safety of Manor Farm where he used to live with Whisper. But Jeremy simply patted him again and closed the gate behind him, leaving Charlie at the mercy of the horrid little boy who chased him with a stick.