

Short Story



With Taste and Courage: Lisette's Story

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PROLOGUE

The following short story is an effort to portray some of the psychological, social, and physical dimensions of the life of an older woman farmer in present-day Brittany, the Celtic-speaking western region of present-day France. Born in 1909, the central character, Lisette, is a real person, with whom I have lived and worked while carrying out linguistic research on the Breton language. (Her name, and all others in the story, have been altered to privacy.) The events described in the story are based on fact, though the structure of the narrative required changing or compressing the chronology of incidents.

Facing incredible odds against success in running single-handedly a small, anachronistic dairy farm and bearing up under the suspicion and occasional hostility some local people vent against her due to her perceived marginality and eccentricity as an aging *célibataire* (*spinster*), Lisette repeatedly demonstrates her ability to cope under extremely arduous conditions. Her life story is in large measure an account of facing and overcoming adversity in sundry forms, from inclement weather that ruins the harvest to unfaithful lovers who leave her broken-hearted. While many would have crumbled, physically or emotionally, Lisette, often through sheer willpower, has struggled on and, somehow, survived. Proud, cynical, and outspoken, yet vulnerable, affectionate and tender-hearted, Lisette is a case study in the strength, courage, and resilience of working-class women.

Note on language use in the story. Lisette and many of her interlocutors are bilingual in French and Breton (a Celtic language whose closest living relative is Welsh). Like most of her generation, born before World War II, Breton was her first language, the language of the family. French was learned at school, and because it was already the dominant language of the wider society, it became a necessary tool of social interaction. The generation fol-

lowing Lisette's was typically raised bilingually, but with French dominating more and more. The children of the latter generation, born during the 1940s-1950s, do not, in general, speak Breton, yet while growing up they heard enough of the language spoken by their parents and grandparents to be able to understand it fairly well. The intergenerational differences in language use are seen here and there in the story. It is important to point out, too, that Breton was very much stigmatized by the French government, which, for two centuries has been trying to eliminate it. In spite of the many direct assaults on it, Breton (like Lisette) has survived, although it is definitely in a threatened state at this time, since it is now being transmitted as a mother tongue by only a relative handful of dedicated language activists.

Because Lisette is thoroughly bilingual, as is her milieu, both languages are used on a daily basis. I have tried to capture the flavour of this in the dialogues, which show some alternation between French and Breton, between sentences and between speakers. This is authentic usage, reflecting the way the languages are heard in this part of Brittany. For readers not familiar with Breton or French, translations are provided in the footnotes. (For more information on the language situation in Brittany, see Timm, 1973, 1980, 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1986.)

Lisette woke up for good at 5:30 A.M. after a restless night of tossing and turning. There was no point in trying to go back to sleep; her mind was obsessed with the discovery yesterday that she had been *cheated*—and that was really the only word for it—*cheated* out of half her weekly milk earnings. Who had done that to her, and why? The possibilities narrowed, to be sure, as she dwelled on it. The truck driver was the least likely candidate; he seemed to have nothing against her, and she had always been careful to offer him a *coup* now and again, that bit of social lubricant that seemed to keep things rolling smoothly between farmers and representatives of the commercial

world. They had chatted amiably on several occasions; he would not have done such a thing to her. Who, then, *who* had tampered with the book so that instead of the 80 litres of milk she knew she had turned over to the driver, she had been credited with only 40 litres. Damnation! It must have been one of the workers at the dairy—but which one?

Still focused on this question, she pulled herself up to a sitting position in bed and placed her legs on the floor. It was dark out, and cold. She reached, by habit, for the box of wooden matches next to the propane burners sitting within reach of her bed, struck one, and watched a flame come to life. Placing a panful of water on the burner, she was thinking how people would not have dared to take advantage of her in this way if André were still alive. Oh, how she missed him: he had been hard-working, cheerful, and he didn't drink or womanize as much as most of the men she had known. Before his death in 1974, they had lived together for nearly a decade in their late middle-age, after he had sold his own farm and moved into the bourg.

Lisette was standing now by the edge of her narrow fold-away bed that she slept on in the winter time, in the kitchen, which was better protected from the cold drafts and blasts of wind that made the other rooms of the decaying and unkempt house well-nigh uninhabitable during five months of the year. She suddenly shuddered from the cold, which snapped her out of her reverie. Looking out the one small window of the cheerless kitchen, she was greeted by a grey November dawn; in all likelihood it would rain today. "Gast!" she intoned. This meant she would not be able to fetch the two cows pastured at Touldu; but she could at least try to harvest the remaining maize at Locmaria before it got drenched again.² That job couldn't be done alone; she'd ring up Jean-Daniel to see if he could be persuaded to help her with his tractor and trailer. She knew if she held out the prospect of a good meal at the end he would probably say yes. Though frustrated by his compulsion to eat, Lisette had to admit that Jean-Daniel possessed some good points: after André had died, he had been a real comfort, helping her with the farm chores, keeping her company at supper time and occasionally giving her some sex. That wasn't much in itself—she remembered well how he would usually begin snoring almost before completing the act; but he had been warm flesh and blood next to her on cold nights, and there was plenty of flesh there to warm her. Sex was over between them now; he no longer seemed interested. She had decided that he was probably too fat; and at eighty he seemed to find beyond his endurance any exercise more vigorous than an outing on his tractor or a trip to the table. Yes, the promise of food would surely lure him to her; she would phone him later in the morning.

The water in the saucepan came sputtering to a boil. Lisette reached swiftly for the burner's knob, snapping it off. Fetching her coffee bowl from the dish strainer she began preparing her morning meal—her own version of café-au-lait, made of crackers, powdered coffee, sugar, milk, and hot water.

While stirring this gruel, Lisette reminded herself of the need to call Jean-Daniel later on. He surely would not be awake at this hour, that sluggard—he was barely seen up and about before 10 A.M., a fact of his daily routine for about 15 years, ever since he had been forced definitively into retirement after a work-related accident.

Her thoughts soon returned to the question of who had stolen her milk earnings. If only she could find tease more information out of that one friendly truck driver about who had been responsible for certifying the weights of the milk on delivery day. On Saturday she would invite him into the house for a quick *coup*...

Her planning was cut short by the telephone's warbling in the entry hall. Glancing at the alarm clock perched on the window sill she saw that it was 6:45 A.M. Who could be calling at this hour? Lisette quickly covered the few paces separating the kitchen from the telephone perched on a diminutive table in the hall. It was her neighbor, Josephine, asking if Lisette would be able to drive her to the local hospital at Carhaix to see her mother, whose condition appeared to be deteriorating; hospital officials had called her early this morning with that information.

Lisette was very fond of the ailing woman, who had been an aunt-like figure to her in her youth and had been on excellent terms with her own mother; since childhood she had addressed her with the respectful term "Mamm-gozh."³ The tie was further strengthened by the fact that Josephine had been one of Lisette's few kind neighbors over the years. Most of the others were, as she put it, *méchante*,⁴ watching her every move with suspicion. An unmarried woman running her own farm was an easy target for local gossip and sarcasm, and sometimes outright bigotry.

It was agreed that Lisette would pick Josephine up at 11 A.M. Concerned though she was about Mamm-gozh's health, she was irritated at having her day disrupted by this trip. Now she would never get out to Locmaria to harvest the maize, even with Jean-Daniel's help; but he could still be of use at La Mine in feeding the two cows there and in shifting around their moveable enclosure.

Lisette pulled on her long cotton support hose, fastening them to the garter belt that in her exhaustion the night before she had not bothered to remove before retiring. Then she pulled a heavy woolen skirt over her head. She shivered; it was going to be a day of penetrating cold. At the entry hall she slipped on a pair of heavy socks before stepping into her wooden clogs.

She stepped down from her front yard to the paved road that curved around her house—the road came much too close for comfort in fact, but the communal authorities had never bothered to consult with her when designing this new road that connected the bourg with its rural hinterland to the west. Lisette's house and sheds were just one-half mile from the centre of the bourg, occupying a gently sloping piece of land that looks west over rolling, fertile fields. It was a pretty site, especially in fine weather toward sunset, though Lisette rarely had the time to enjoy the view. Her life, summer and winter, spring and fall, consisted of a continual round of farm activities, interrupted only by important religious holidays such as Christmas, All Saints' Day, or Easter, funerals, or emergencies, such as today's of driving her neighbor to the hospital.

Lisette clip-clopped down the road to her barnyard. Frantic whining could be heard from behind the heavy-hinged door of the barn, which was structurally part of the house, subterranean with openings to the south. She pushed open the door and a small brown dog impetuously jumped forcefully so hard to the end of her staked chain that she fell backwards, gasping. "Fidèle!" Lisette shouted in Breton, "Chom trankil!"⁵ restating in French "Sois sage!" The dog paid no attention to her mistress's commands in either language, jumping up and down in high excitement at the sound of Lisette's voice. Lisette released Fidèle's chain, and the liberated canine raced outside for a romp. "Elle manque de discipline," Lisette said to herself, adding in Breton, "Dav eo din deskin anezhi."⁶ Her thoughts had turned to Fidèle's mother, who had died from eating poisoned meat. Lisette was certain that the butcher's wife had enticed the poor beast to eat the tainted meat, an act of revenge for Lisette's success in selling a heifer at a better price to a butcher from a nearby community than the price the woman's husband had offered to her. Lisette suspected the same woman of poisoning one of her cats. She was so vengeful that one, typical of the *méchantes* of the bourg.

The other portion of the barn housed the six dairy cows. They stood stoically in place in their dark quarters, lowing softly at the sound of Lisette's voice. Undoubtedly they

were hungry, for they had been closely tethered to the manger for 12 hours. She examined their udders: there was hardly enough there to warrant milking them this morning; she would wait until this afternoon after her return from town. For now, giving them some silage and hay would suffice.

Lisette groaned inwardly at the thought of collecting the silage: heaped the preceding fall on the rise behind the barn, it was now so tightly packed that it required considerable effort to loosen and load it on the wheelbarrow. The task would not have daunted her two years ago, but ever since she had been attacked by that vicious woman, Soaz K., her back and right shoulder had never been the same: the actions of stooping and hauling required to transport the cows' feed from the silage to their mangers at times provoked excruciating pain.

There was, of course, no alternative—the cows had to be fed. Lisette started up the path to the shed where she stored the wheelbarrow and other farm tools and equipment. She was remembering the day of the incident with Soaz...that damned woman, everyone knew she was hot-tempered, but who would have expected her to attack someone out of the blue, and to attack a person 30 years her senior at that. Fury flashed in Lisette's eyes as she recalled the outrage and humiliation at being thrown to the ground and then pounded mercilessly by this screaming hellion. Had it not been for Bernard, Lisette's day labourer whom she had brought along with her to the pasture, the assailant would surely have killed her.

Sighing, Lisette came back to the task at hand: grabbing the wheelbarrow she maneuvered the thing in position in back of the silage and began scooping it up a bucketful at a time. One load would feed two cows, which meant three trips up and down the slippery path. The job took an hour; by the time she had finished, a light rain was falling, and she heard the sound of a car engine being turned off and the slamming of a door. "Ah, le vieux bouc arrive,"⁷ she said to herself, wondering what could have prompted Jean-Daniel to sally forth so early from the comforts of his modern house with its electric heaters. She went on with her chores, knowing it would take him, with all his bulk, several minutes to traverse the distance between his usual parking place on the side-road in front of her house to the stable, where she was now mucking out the cows.

Bent over her work, Lisette continued to muse over Jean-Daniel's early arrival; it was usually his custom to show up in the very late morning, so as to be assured of an invitation to lunch. Her back was turned when he

appeared, panting slightly, at the stable door. She looked up at him in mock surprise:

“C’est toi, alors!...Bon. Qu’est-ce que tu as?”

“Eh, bah,” he began, then repeated, “Eh, bah...seulement que je peux t’aider aujourd’hui avec les poteaux.”⁸

He was referring to the task of redistributing the stakes on the moveable enclosure surrounding two heifers being pastured at La Mine, the very task that she had been planning to call him about later in the morning. She had asked him a good week ago to help her with that, but she had hardly seen him since then. She wondered what his ulterior motive might be today for this magnanimous gesture. Facing him, her eyes squinted in suspicion. Did she detect a trace of deception in those watery blue eyes? It was hard to tell; but at least he was wearing his overalls, a sign that he was prepared to work.

“D’accord, d’accord,”⁹ Lisette replied airily, knowing that this was not the moment to ascertain his purpose, which she would surely learn, or divine, later on. She outlined to him the added complication of the day due to the impending trip to the hospital. He told her that that was not a problem, as he could go out to La Mine on his tractor while she was away, and then she could join him there after returning home. His cooperative spirit further piqued Lisette’s curiosity about his motives; but she continued cleaning out the cows’ area while Jean-Daniel looked on silently. At length she asked him for the time. It was nearly ten-thirty A.M.

“Hopala!”¹⁰ Lisette exclaimed. It took at least 20 minutes to drive to the hospital, and she had to change clothes and tidy her hair before picking up her neighbor. She handed Jean-Daniel the pitchfork, telling him to put it back in the shed, and then she hurried up the road to the house.

After wiping her face with a damp washcloth, Lisette brushed out her nearly waist-length, salt-and-pepper hair, fixing it in a knot at the back of her neck. A glance at the clock on the window-sill told her she would really have to hurry. Sweeping up her leather bag in one hand and her overcoat in the other, she ran out of the house. Calling out to Jean-Daniel, Lisette told him to make sure the cows at La Mine had grain and plenty of water, to keep his eye on Fidèle, and to lock the front door before he left.

“Ya, ya,”¹¹ he replied mechanically in Breton, as Lisette, not listening, tried to bring the motor of her dila-

pidated Deux Chevaux to life. It sputtered weakly at first but finally responded to her imprecations by jolting dangerously backward out of its shed; Lisette braked just before hitting the road. She backed down the slope and then lurched forward up the slope in the direction of Josephine’s house, shouting out one last, incomprehensible, order to Jean-Daniel before disappearing around the curve. Jean-Daniel shook his head, and then began his slow, waddling ascent up the road to Lisette’s front door. There he called out unenthusiastically for the dog, who, if she heard him at all, paid utterly no attention. Shaking his head again, Jean-Daniel went inside to the kitchen, helped himself to some orange soda and plunked his corpulent body down on one of the kitchen chairs that creaked uneasily under his weight. Within minutes his double chin dropped to his chest, as slumber temporarily relieved him of further responsibilities.

Undoubtedly Josephine had heard the backfires of Lisette’s approaching car, for she was outside waiting when her ride arrived. She climbed in, brushing aside Lisette’s apologies for being late:

“Ah, ça ne fait rien, sois tranquille,”¹² she assured her companion. French was used in this initial encounter—a politeness ritual—but the two women soon began conversing in Breton, their mother tongue, as Lisette headed toward the main road to Carhaix and the hospital. There was discussion of the health of Mamm-gozh: her heart was very weak, and it was cardiac failure that the doctors were sure would soon kill her.

Josephine and her “husband,” Jacques, had, through hard work, thrift, and a handsome widow’s pension to Josephine from her deceased legal husband, managed to buy an attractive new house, equipped with all the latest electrical and plumbing amenities. This pension was the chief reason for their not marrying her current mate, for it would have been cut off following her remarriage; so the two chose to live in comfortable “sin.” Their house was spotless, and between the two of them they maintained an impeccable and productive vegetable and flower garden in lieu of a lawn in front of the house. They had the easy life, all right, thought Lisette: no animals to mind, no fields to cultivate, and they were a couple...it’s so different when there are two of you! Money, she thought bitterly, and a man, are what a woman must have to be respectable.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Josephine’s question:

“Klevet ‘p eus ar c’heloù eus Jean-Daniel?”

“Jean-Daniel? Nann, ‘m eus ket.”

Josephine filled her in (continuing in Breton):

“Lavaret eo din e timezo adarre—gant unan hag a zo ur bansion vat ganti.”¹³

At this utterance Lisette felt her stomach muscles contract involuntarily. So that was it, that’s why he had come so early today and had been so agreeable: he was going to break the news to her. She knew she must look flushed, but responded drily in French:

“Je ne savais pas; ça sera quand, alors?”

“Je ne sais pas; mais tu sais, â son age il ne vaut pas la peine d’attendre longtemps!”¹⁴

Lisette snorted, and they both laughed. But her eyes narrowed as she drove. She wondered what her neighbor knew of her relationship with Jean-Daniel. Surely she had seen him coming and going through the years; and surely she knew how much Lisette depended on the minimal help he gave her. What had been her motive in telling her about it now? Just to test her reaction? Or was she just unwittingly passing on the local gossip, without considering the implications for Lisette? Whatever the motive, she had certainly succeeded in rattling her nerves.

The hospital came into view, forcing Lisette’s attention to parking and then making their way to Mamm-gozh’s room, which she shared with another patient.

The 90-year old woman looked fragile and spent. Her thin hair lay lankily on the pillow, and her skin was exceedingly pale, almost translucent. Her blue eyes brightened visibly when Lisette and her daughter walked in. Josephine did most of the talking, for her mother was too weak to expend additional energy in speaking. The conversation was wholly in Breton, since Mamm-gozh never learned French. Her generation, born in the 1890s, was the last to remain *monolingual* in Breton, and they were fast disappearing.

The other patient in the room, a woman in her 30s, joined in the conversation occasionally, speaking French, the only language she could speak fluently; but, like many of *her* generation, she had sufficient passive knowledge of Breton to follow a conversation. She reported that Mamm-gozh had had a great deal of trouble getting to sleep, for fear of falling out of bed if she did. Lisette knitted her brows, remembering that her own mother had been tor-

mented by the same fear shortly before her death. After hearing Mamm-gozh’s feeble whisperings and scrutinizing her pallid features more closely, she wondered if she would see her alive again.

Within fifteen minutes the old woman was so exhausted from the visit that she had to close her eyes and rest. The visitors withdrew on tiptoe, waved out cheerily by the young French-speaking roommate.

As they approached the bourg, Josephine, who had seemed quite cheerful during most of the trip back, suddenly began dabbing at her eyes, as she said under her breath, “Paour-kaezh mammig”; then, more audibly in French, “Comme elle a souffert, la pauvre.”¹⁵ Lisette was at a loss for words. She stopped the car in front of Josephine’s house, politely refusing the invitation to come in for an appetitif before lunch. It was already one o’clock, the cows had not been milked, and Jean-Daniel would be waiting for her. Jean-Daniel! Somehow she had put Josephine’s news of his impending marriage out of her mind—until now.

“Le crétin!,”¹⁶ she sputtered, furious at the thought of his coming around to lap up her food while he was chasing after another woman.

“Merc’heder!,”¹⁷ she added in Breton, punctuating the word with repeated applications of the brake as she drew near the car shed; the old engine shuddered several times after Lisette yanked the key from the ignition. She ran up the road toward her front entrance, calling for Fidèle as she went. Once inside the kitchen the traces of a meal greeted her—a dirty plate and cup and a pile of bread crumbs; Jean-Daniel had evidently helped himself before going out to La Mine.

“Pemoc’h!,”¹⁸ she muttered, clenching her teeth and carrying the plate and glass over to the already formidable pile of dishes stacked in and around the sink. Lisette glanced at the clock: 1:10 P.M. Well, she had to eat dinner before doing anything else. She peeled and cut up potatoes and placed them in a heavy skillet with a little water, then covered the pan with a high-domed glass lid. She was very fond of this skillet: André had found it for her in an open market in a nearby town years ago; she had never seen one like it since. He had had a good eye for bargains, and had been genuinely interested in household purchases. That man had also been a worker; between the two of them they had had this farm running lile clockwork...until his illness.

Lisette sniffed, remembering Josephine's words about her mother's suffering. Well, Mamm-gozh wasn't the only one to have suffered, thought Lisette, closing her eyes briefly. Her mind began forming images of her three lovers before André; she had been officially engaged to each of them in turn. And each, in turn, had proven himself weak and contemptible; each had, in his own way, tricked or deceived her and in the end abandoned her. The beautiful trousseau that she had lovingly assembled during her first engagement still lay in a box upstairs, deep in decades of dust. For that engagement she had also spent weeks of her time in the evenings and nights, after finishing sewing clothes for customers (she had been a licensed seamstress), in decorating the room upstairs which she and Yann were to rent from her parents after the wedding. But at the eleventh hour, he abruptly broke off the affair, with no explanation; in fact, he never faced her directly, just informed her father that he would not marry her. A few months later she heard through a mutual acquaintance that he had married a schoolteacher from another part of Brittany.

"Du goût et du courage, pour aboutir à absolument rien!"¹⁹ Lisette said out loud in disgust, summing up her wasted efforts at matrimony. She walked over to the skillet and began turning over the potatoes, already half-cooked. Still caught up in her memories, she was now thinking about François and Yves, who had been even crueler to her. François, her second fiancé, had demonstrated to the world, before saying a word to her, his intent to break the engagement by appearing with another woman at a community dance, completely ignoring Lisette in front of everyone. The humiliation she felt had been excruciating, though she had put on a brave front by dancing and laughing gaily throughout the evening; later that night, alone, she was in a paroxysm of grief and tears. In time she fell in love again; but Yves, the third fiancé proved no more reliable than the others, callously informing her shortly before the wedding day that he already had a wife and two children in Morocco. Deserted by his wife, he came knocking a few years later at Lisette's door, blandly assuming that Lisette would be perfectly ready to pick up where they had left off. At first enraged, Lisette nevertheless mourned their abortive relationship and pitied him, for he had become an alcoholic and had lost an arm while working with some heavy equipment while under the influence. The memory of this tragic scene overwhelmed her.

"J'ai souffert, *comme* j'ai souffert!"²⁰ she half-whispered, half-sobbed to herself while unwrapping a piece of meat to fry in the small skillet. She ate slowly, methodi-

cally chewing each mouthful before swallowing; although hungry, her mind was not focused on the food before her but moved from Jean-Daniel to André, to Mamm-gozh, to the dairy affair, to her assailant: if only she had enough money to press the charges against that awful woman. But that was impossible, since she could hardly afford a day labourer, let alone a lawyer. Milking the cows only once a day further reduced their mediocre production and her income, but what else could she do? The demands on a person running a farm alone were enormous. That's why Jean-Daniel had been useful: he could be coaxed into offering the services of his tractor for cultivating a field, hauling grain and water, or harvesting maize if he were sure of a warm meal at the end—which on some days meant at 11 P.M. or midnight. She had to admit that he was quite patient, and usually didn't complain about the hour at which she fed him. Soon, of course, he would have another woman to supply his meals, so there would no longer be any enticement for him to come to assist her.

At that thought tears welled up in her eyes. Left alone again, the story of her life. She pounded her left fist on the table, the fork still in it, resenting not only Jean-Daniel but also her own pigheadedness of some years ago when, in her pride and cynicism after so many failed engagements, she had refused André's offer of marriage. What a fool she had been! She would have been able to live decently now as his widow, combining his pension with her own; and the difference in her respectability would have been considerable. How excruciating it had been at the time of his death: she could not receive his relatives or friends in mourning, for she was technically an outsider. She had struggled with the issue of how to sign the obituary and bereavement notice in the local newspaper, finally settling on a hypocritical "*une amie*."²¹ How absurd a goodbye, to the man she had been living with for 10 years. At this remembrance, her brimming eyes finally overflowed; she reached for her crumpled handkerchief, mopped the tears and blew her nose. She examined the food left on her plate; her appetite was gone.

Clearing the table quickly, Lisette changed back into work clothes. She packed a few scraps of stale bread in one of her pockets to take to Fidèle. Where was that dog, by the way? She went to the front door and whistled. There was no response. Lisette was worried, but not yet alarmed; she's out chasing rabbits, she assured herself as she headed down to the cows' stable to begin milking. The electric milking equipment that she began to hook up was her pride and joy, and one of her few technologically-advanced indulgences. She had bought the equipment used, but even so it had been expensive by her standards,

requiring at least two years of savings plus the sale of a heifer. Lisette listened to the motor's hum with satisfaction as the milk from each cow in turn was pumped into a clear plastic receptacle, from which it would be dispersed into milk cans and refrigerated until tomorrow's pick-up by the dairy truck. She judged the volume by sight—11-12 litres, a less than mediocre amount. Lisette reproached herself about not milking the cows twice a day. Yet that was not the only problem: fresh pasture was another, and that meant driving them two kilometers down the road to her nearest piece of pasture land. It was impossible to do that regularly.

Lisette hauled the milk can out of the stable to the refrigerated box outside. Although far from full, its weight nevertheless taxed her weakened back, and she grunted as she lifted and pushed the can to its place on the shelf.

"Gast, me 'zo gozh!,"²² she muttered, and, putting a hand at the back of her waist, she straightened up slowly. Looking around as she did so, she suddenly remembered that Fidèle had never shown up. Her sharp beckoning calls pierced the air, but her beloved pet did not appear. Now she *was* alarmed, and could not quell that same sense of dread and foreboding that had come over her when Fidèle's mother had similarly disappeared suddenly, only to be found dead from poisoning several days later, the victim of the butcher's wife's foul deed.

Her mind was following this train of thought when she heard the approach of Jean-Daniel's tractor. "La Mine!" she exclaimed aloud. She was supposed to meet him there hours ago. It was now 4 o'clock, and he was undoubtedly returning to find out what had happened to her. The tractor slowed down in making the turn from the road into Lisette's barnyard.

On seeing her mistress, Fidèle jumped down from the trailer behind and ran eagerly to Lisette's side. So, she had been with Jean-Daniel all the time! A wave of relief swept over her, and she caressed her ecstatic pet. But, that Jean-Daniel, she had some accounts to settle with him! Her eyes were narrow and hard as she interrogated him about how he could have taken Fidèle like that without leaving a note. He knew, she insisted, how attached she was to the dog and he also knew about the fate of the other two dogs.

"Eh, bah," he began indeterminately, "c'était comme ça...elle a voulu venir avec moi. Je ne suis pas méchant!"

"Toi!" Lisette rejoined, "C'est pas une question d'être méchant...c'est, c'est que tu ne penses pas, toi!"²³

Lisette wheeled around and started walking toward the house. There's no use in being angry with him she thought.

"C'est quatre heures," she announced. "Poent eo da zibi un dra benneket."²⁴ Jean-Daniel licked his lips in anticipation as he turned off the tractor's ignition and began his awkward descent to the ground. By the time he had made it into her kitchen Lisette had set the table with two bowls and spoons, cut several slices of bread, and was spooning Nescafé into the bowls. While doing these things she had been thinking of the tactic she would take with him regarding his "news"; she decided not to take the offensive.

"Assoi-toi,"²⁵ she told him, redundantly, as he was clearly in the process of settling into his usual kitchen chair facing the window.

"Alors, qu'est-ce que tu as fait a La Mine?," she inquired neutrally.

"Bah, je t'attendais, tu sais," he replied with a measure of irritation in his voice. "Qu'est-ce que c'est arrivé, alors?,"²⁶ he in turn asked her. Lisette recited the activities that had kept her occupied all day, taking care not to acknowledge the fact that she had, for a time, forgotten about their rendezvous at La Mine. She ended her account with:

"Et qu'est-ce que tu veux que je fasse quand je suis toute seule, avec autant de travail de m'occuper ici?"²⁷

Her voice rose in a quavering tone toward the end. She had intended being somewhat dramatic, but she realized that her emotions were heavily involved in what she had just said. As she poured boiling water into their bowls, she continued:

"Quand on est seule, quand on est vieille, quand on est, surtout, une vieille femme, c'est pas facile..."²⁸ Her voice trailed off. Jean-Daniel did not look at her; he added cold milk to his coffee bowl, dropped in four sugar cubes, and cleared his throat noisily.

"Moi, je n'ai pas eu de la chance," Lisette declared in a clear, oratorical delivery. "*Jamais* dans la vie je n'ai pas eu de la chance!,"²⁹ she repeated, shaking her head to emphasize her misfortune. Then she gestured at Jean-Daniel to take a slice of bread; he complied, spreading it thickly with butter. Lisette watched him carefully as he chewed, wondering when he would say something. She could feel the tension mounting inside of her. Jean-Daniel

slurped down half the bowl's contents and wiped his moustache and lips with the back of his large, ruddy hand. He lifted his eyes to look out the window, then turned to Lisette's expectant face:

"Il y a des brebis dans la rue,"³⁰ he announced. Lisette stared at him uncomprehendingly for an instant. Then, instinctively, she jumped up and ran out the door and across the road, chasing and yelling at the five errant ewes, who bounded away in as many different directions; it was only when she began coaxing them with a bucket of grain that they saw reason and returned to their enclosure. Lisette cursed herself as she walked the fence looking for tell-tale signs of wool where the sheep had pushed their way through or under the rusted fencing. She found a couple of likely spots and made some hasty repairs with bits of wire and string that she always carried in her work-clothes pockets.

Lisette hurried back into the house; Jean-Daniel had finished eating and was sitting, somnulent, at the table. Lisette's coffee was stone cold.

"Alors!"³¹ she said aggressively, banging her spoon noisily on the table. She realized that her previous, indirect strategy had failed, so now she would just have to confront him.

"Alors!" she repeated. His eyelids raised slowly.

"Petra 'p eus da lavarout din? Peseurt keloù 'p eus?"

"Peseurt keloù?"³² he echoed, his voice registering puzzlement.

Lisette switched to French:

"A propos de ton mariage," she said, articulating each word clearly and distinctly. Jean-Daniel's watery blue eyes widened.

"Mon mariage?" he again echoed. Lisette was nearly beside herself; why was he playing this cat-and-mouse game with her?

"Tu m'entends bien," she answered curtly.³³

Jean-Daniel, on the defensive, protested, in Breton, that he did not know what she was talking about. She countered that he had lied to her before and so was surely lying now. But he held his ground, stoutly denying that he was

about to marry anyone, and that she had been deceived by gossiping tongues.

This was not what Lisette had been anticipating; she fell silent for a moment, trying to assess his credibility. In the past she had usually been able to elicit "confessions" from him very quickly. That he was holding out so well this time certainly gave her pause. On the other hand, she did not have any reason to suspect the veracity of her neighbor Josephine. What was going on? Lisette looked blankly out of the window, lost in her thoughts.

Jean-Daniel shuffled his feet; in truth, he could think of a number of people who might have perpetrated this story just to get her riled up. But, of course, the story reflected on him, too, and *that* aroused his curiosity.

Lisette turned her head from the window; she caught and locked Jean-Daniel's eyes in an intensive confrontation:

"Et bien, c'est pas vrai?" her voice was flat, almost detached.

"Je t'ai dit déjà," he remonstrated, "tout cela, c'est des conneries?"³⁴

He looked away; the thought suddenly had come to him that perhaps he had a female admirer who was spreading this rumour in order to attract his attention. He felt a warm glow mounting in his chest. He leaned against the back of his chair, imagining he was being approached by the statuesque brunette he had seen two or three times at the Wednesday market; she was smiling at him...His idyll was ruptured by the sharp crack of splintering wood as the chair back at last yielded to Jean-Daniel's mass. Chair and man clattered noisily to the floor.

Lisette's contempt at this sight was tempered only slightly by her concern for his welfare:

"Toi!, vieux cochon!,"³⁵ she bleated as she struggled with his arm trying to pull him up to a sitting position. It was of no use; he was flat on his back, his four limbs flailing like a crab, the wind knocked out of him. Finally she decided to push him from behind, and succeeded at length in forcing his torso into a vertical position; he panted heavily from the exertion. For a few minutes he remained slouched over, recovering on the floor, while Lisette bewailed his clumsiness and reminded him of how many times she had told him that he was too fat. He

couldn't even bend over to cut his own toenails, a service that she had been rendering to him for several years.

She positioned the two remaining kitchen chairs on either side of him. Using these as props he was able to hoist himself up. He stood uncertainly, holding onto one of the chairs, waiting for his lightheadedness to pass. Then he sat down again. Lisette bit her tongue, trying hard not to reprimand him further. In a few minutes he pointed at the clock, which indicated 5:05 P.M. and remarked that they should be getting back to La Mine before dark.

Lisette was surprised; he was rarely the one to initiate projects that didn't involve eating. She glanced outside; it would be dark within the hour, but with two of them working there would be just about enough time.

"Gwir eo. Mont a reomp."³⁶ Lisette decided.

She cleared away the coffee bowls, wiped the oilcloth and reached in the cupboard for two small flashlights to take with them. They went in her car, since they had no need now of the tractor, covering the few kilometers to La Mine in a matter of minutes. Silence reigned between them. Lisette parked the car near a long stone house that they had to pass in front of in order to get to her pasture. She looked for a light inside, but saw none. The owner was evidently not at home. That was good, she thought; on the way back she would be able to help herself to some of the apples that lay on the ground under the trees in this untended orchard.

Marianne, a retired schoolteacher, lived alone in this old farmhouse which she had inherited from relatives. She had no interest in farming, yet was loathe to rent or lease her orchard; she allowed Lisette to draw water from her well for her cows in the adjacent pasture for a small annual fee. This relationship over the years had hardly developed into what could be called friendship, but into a sort of cordial familiarity. Marianne would often come out of the house when she heard Lisette's car pull up, and engage her in some conversation. They still used the polite forms of "you" to one another in French and never spoke Breton together, for Marianne had once remarked about how impoverished and pidginized the Breton of the area was; she spoke only the "pure" Breton of the northern region, she had averred. While Lisette had not understood what she meant by "pidginized," she knew that Marianne had had a great deal of education and so surely had her reasons for criticizing local Breton. It didn't matter to her particularly, since she found she was speaking French more and more over the years anyway, as the older generation, like

Josephine's mother, began dying off. Still, she had thought to herself, some things are better put in Breton than in French, but she didn't feel she could argue this point successfully with the more sophisticated Marianne, who had also lectured her once or twice on the subjects of druidism and astrology that left Lisette thoroughly perplexed. There was something a little odd about that woman, in Lisette's opinion, and was not unhappy that their relationship had remained superficial. Lisette reached the gate of the fence that enclosed her pasture. She turned to wait for Jean-Daniel, who was shouldering a maul and a sackful of wooden stakes.

"Tu viens?" she shouted at him.

"Oui, oui,"³⁷ came the distant reply. At last he showed up, puffing as usual. Daylight was fast fading, but they could still see well enough to walk to the back of the property where two cows were standing, watching their approach, behind a low electrical wire fence. Under Lisette's directions, Jean-Daniel began pulling out stakes and removing them several yards to the north, in fresh pasture. He moved with uncharacteristic speed, for it was twilight and growing cold.

Following his line of pulled stakes, Lisette repounded each one into the soft earth with the maul. She worked quickly even while talking, so that in 30 minutes the job was done. It was dark now; a nearly full moon put in a brief appearance between rapidly travelling dark clouds overhead.

As they walked back toward the gate, the beam of a flashlight cut through the darkness, and a voice called out, "Lisette, c'est bien vous là-bas?" it was Marianne, walking in their direction. "Oui, oui, c'est moi, avec Jean-Daniel"³⁸ Lisette called back. Marianne was dressed in attire so dark that it was hard to see her at all, but she talked as she approached. She was complaining about the orchard, how hard it was to maintain and to get workers to come and pick the apples, and what a pity it was that so many were going to waste on the ground.

Wondering if Marianne had seen her picking up apples on her way back, Lisette simply agreed weakly that it was a problem finding good workers. But Marianne took no apparent notice of Lisette's bulging pockets and invited both of them to take as many apples as they would like. Surprised and pleased at this show of largess, Lisette quickly began filling a sack; then the three of them walked back to Marianne's house. The flame of a candle could be seen flickering on the kitchen table, and the strains of

Celtic music heard emanating from a radio or record player in a back room. Ah, so that's why the house looked dark, Lisette thought. As if reading her thoughts, Marianne stated that when suffering from a headache, she found sitting in the dark with music very soothing. Having reached her doorway, she quickly said goodbye to Lisette and Jean-Daniel, and slipped inside. Her abruptness took them somewhat aback, and they exchanged glances.

As they walked down the path toward the car, Lisette asked:

"Qu'est-ce que tu penses de cette histoire-là?"

"Peut-être elle attend son amant!,"³⁹ he guffawed. This was the first attempt at a witticism in a long time on his part. Lisette did not appreciate it.

"Toi! Et qu'est-ce que tu sais de l'amour?,"⁴⁰ she retorted, finding his statement in glaringly poor taste, considering what she had just been through with him an hour or two earlier.

It was understood that Jean-Daniel would stay for supper—a simple affair of bread, soup and cold cuts. What little talk they engaged in revolved around farm work that lay ahead. She tried to extract a commitment from him to return in two days to help her harvest the maize. He muttered "oui, oui" in that resigned, but noncommittal tone of his. *Perhaps* he would show up, she thought.

Having finished his third bowl of soup, Jean-Daniel looked at the clock; it was 8:30 P.M. He would go home now, he said, and got up, shakily, from his chair. The fall earlier in the afternoon had taken a lot out of him; he looked tired. His eyes ran over the broken chair setting now in the corner, and he told Lisette that he could repair it for her.

She thanked him without much enthusiasm, realizing all of a sudden how exhausted she was, and how much her back hurt from the exertion of pounding in those stakes. She felt as if she could fall asleep right there at the table.

Jean-Daniel shuffled off, bidding her goodnight as he went. She stood at the doorway and watched his broad, slightly-stooped back disappear in the darkness. She was thinking of the nights years ago when she had stood at the same spot watching André go off—to drink with the other woman. He had always returned, either late at night or early in the morning, but it had been a cross to bear. No,

André had not been perfect either, but somehow the work and the problems had seemed less when they were together. Now there was only Jean-Daniel, who had become so sluggish and apathetic with age. If only we had met in our twenties, thought Lisette, I could have made a real man out of him! Well, anyway, he was someone to talk to. She looked around at her dark, cluttered kitchen and sighed deeply.

"Non, vraiment, je n'ai pas eu de la chance,"⁴¹ she said aloud.

Then she put on her coat and clogs to go check on the cows. As she headed down to the stable she began wondering if Marianne could have been the one to have started the rumour about Jean-Daniel's "marriage"; perhaps they were seeing one another. Could that have been the reason for his little joke about her lover? Then, again, maybe Josephine had decided to turn on her; maybe she, too, had become jealous of Lisette's independence. What she knew with certainty was that she could trust no one. By the time she was in the stable moving from cow to cow, patting and addressing each one by name, her mind was churning once again with the question of who had cheated her out of her milk earnings.

NOTES

1. "Damnation!"
2. Like many small farmers in western France, her 5 hectares of land were divided among several small parcels located at several kilometres distance from the parcel containing the house and sheds.
3. Breton for "Grandmother."
4. "spiteful, mean."
5. "Be still!"
6. "She lacks discipline." "I must teach her."
7. "Ah, the old billy-goat is arriving."
8. "It's you then!...Good. What's up?" "Uh, well,...Uh, well...only that I can help you today with the stakes."
9. "That's fine, that's fine."
10. An interjection indicating, variably, surprise, excitement, approval, somewhat equivalent to American English "Ayayay!"
11. "Yes, yes."
12. "Oh, that doesn't matter, don't worry."
13. "Have you heard the news about Jean-Daniel?"—"Jean-Daniel? No, I haven't."—"I'm told that he's going to get married again—to someone who has a good pension."
14. "I didn't know; so when will it be?"—"I don't know; but, you know, at his age, he can hardly afford to wait for long!"
15. "Poor Mama." "How she has suffered."
16. "The jerk/bastard!"
17. "Womanizer!"
18. "Pig!"
19. "With taste and courage, that led to absolutely nothing!"
20. "I have suffered, how I have suffered!"
21. "A friend."
22. "Damnation, I'm old!"
23. "Uh, well, it was just like that...she wanted to come with me. I'm not mean!"—"You! it's not a question of being mean...it's, it's that you don't think!"

24. "It's 4 o'clock. It's time to eat a little something."
25. "Sit down."
26. "So, what did you do at La Mine?" — "Well, I waited for you, you know. So what happened?"
27. "And what do you want me to do when I am all alone, with so much work to do here?"
28. "When one is alone, when one is old, when one is, above all, an old woman, it isn't easy..."
29. "As for me, I've never had any luck." "Never in my life have I had any luck!"
30. "There are some ewes in the street."
31. "So!"
32. "So!" — "What do you have to tell me? What new do you have?" — "What news?"
33. "About your marriage." — "My marriage?" — "You understand me very well."
34. "Well then, it isn't true?" — "I've told you already, all of that is a bunch of nonsense!"
35. "You old pig!"
36. "It's true. Let's go."
37. "Are you coming?" — "Yes, yes."

38. "Lisette is that you there?..." "Yes, yes it's me, with Jean-Daniel."
39. "What do you think of that business?" — "Maybe she's waiting for her lover?"
40. "You! And what do you know about love?"
41. "No, truly, I have not had any luck."

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