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*falling in love*

Every Sunday we feed the toilet or, to be more exact, we make an offering via the toilet to the Good Bacteria which, we hope, inhabit our septic tank. The weekly offering looks remarkably like ready-mix concrete, comes in an unlabelled sachet from a firm unwilling to divulge the ingredients of the magic potion but confident that it will prevent the 'boue' or 'mud' from building up in your 'fosse septique'. Just to be on the safe side, I treat the toilet, and tank, to an occasional yoghurt, which I was advised must be 'live'. Have you ever scoured the supermarket shelves for live yoghurt, presumably as opposed to the dead variety? Isn't all yoghurt live? I settled on natural and cheap, deciding that the toilet did not deserve an offering of cherry, strawberry or even lemon. Thanks to the advice of the Welsh farming community I have left behind, I still have a few tricks up my sleeve in case we face the situation of one of those graphic French television advertisements; the scene is a jolly family birthday party outside under the trees, with a ten-year old blowing out the candles on his cake when – horror of horrors – each family member is overcome by the smell of their sadly neglected septic tank and the ten year old vomits on his birthday cake. Needless to say, it is an ad for magic potion and although we fell about laughing when we first watched it, when we became the proud owners of a septic tank and accompanying house, we quickly stocked up on gray substance.

We didn't wait until we moved to France to find out more about the little practicalities of life from our friends and neighbours. Our ex-home of Carmarthenshire, in the heart of South Wales, is a good place to seek advice on pretty well everything, but septic tanks arouse as much passion as anything else I've asked over the twenty-

five years I adopted Wales as home, not worrying too much about whether it had adopted me. It is essential to have the tank professionally emptied, a process involving a tanker and a presumably nose-dead human, with the reverse set of talents to those which enable the grand noses of France to create new blends of wines and perfumes. To use his - and it's inevitably a man - enormous suction pipe, the skilled workman needs to know where the tank is. If you've forgotten to find this out when you buy your house in the countryside, then you'll have to look for the clues; over your septic tank, the grass is greener, the smell (if you haven't been following advice) is stronger and if the aforementioned skilled workmen prods the ground, he will be able to detect the outline of the various stages of land inhabited by 'the product'.

If you need to kick off a sluggish tank with a bit of 'oomph', you can't beat a dead chicken, which you should insert directly into the tank as only a total moron would try and cram it down the toilet. The Good Bacteria provided by said dead chicken will get the whole brew stewing again, according to my friendly vet, who also promised me long surgical gloves as a leaving present, so that if I jam the air vent with too much oil from a roasting pan or such, I can stick my arm in, as deep as a cow's birth canal, and unjam the system. I do not hold it against him that he forgot; I would far rather not have to explain to the neighbours why we keep several packs of long surgical gloves and convince them that this is really not an aspect of standard, or even unusual, English sexual practices.

You're asking yourself how often the septic tank needs to be emptied? The advice on this is clear. Some people say every two years, some say five, some say ten, some say when it smells and some say never - if you 'look after it'. The advice is clear if you only listen to one person because each one is passionately convinced that he and, once again, it usually is a man, is right but there are always more questions than answers. Why, for instance, do you have to double the dose of magic potion for each week you are away on holiday, as well as for extra people staying with you? Surely if less people = happier tank, no people = ecstatic tank? Which brings us back to hedging all bets; to yoghurt (the vegetarian option on dead chicken) and magic potion; to a list of banned substances (bleach, bleach and bleach), and a soakaway outside for washing out paintbrushes and roasting pans. So far, so good.

Just when we've got the hang of all this and are feeling environmentally virtuous, there are vicious rumours that the local commune is complying with new laws and gradually extending its mains sewage so that it might even include us one day. We will then have a maison 'tout a l'égout', a phrase my sister Anne and I, both house hunting, in areas even further apart than we lived in Britain, both mistranslated as 'entirely to your taste' when we read it in brochures of houses for sale. Perhaps we were not so far wrong.

Apart from being toilet-day, the other defining characteristic of Sundays in October seems to be rain. However, even I can accept one rainy day a week, in Autumn, having been promised in every guide book that in Dieulefit we have 300 sunny days a year and that we have a microclimate. I now know that everywhere in France, according to local guidebooks, has 300 sunny days and a microclimate, from the Alps to the Côte d'Azur. My Welsh friends told me not to take the weather so personally but I can't help it; I have a deep inner conviction that I was not meant to be rained on for months at a time, summer and winter. Perhaps my migrant childhood, including three years in Hong Kong, following three years in Berlin, left an imprint of places where it doesn't rain all the time. In a doomed attempt to cheer me up, my Welsh fruit-and-veg man who called each week in his van told me that at least we didn't get that extreme weather like they do in France. It has only just dawned on me that incessant rain *is* extreme weather.

And speaking of dawn ... I have suffered many literary raptures about rosy-fingered dawn, and been disappointed at French singer Cabrel's lyrics settling for the old 'rosy dawn' cliché, but now I have seen the light for myself, everything is different. Of course there were occasional wintry mornings in Wales where the shepherd's warning streaked the skies over Christmas card scenes and, as for sunsets, we even had the 'sunset window' in the living room, where the setting sun was framed throughout May every year. That is, if the rising or setting sun could be seen, of course. And I will probably come to miss living in an elephant's stomach with the usual stew of gray mists all around, but at the moment I feel that I have been starved of light for twenty-five years and I am glutting on it, spinning dizzy with it. You can look at the world through the bottom of a kir, when the cassis will give you blackcurrant-coloured spectacles or you can discard your aperitif and just look, but the effect is the same.

Some of us are born searching for home; if we are lucky, through years of pleasurable - and not so - experiments, we become more sure of ourselves, of the right man, of the right way of life for us and of the place where we belong. As a rational idealist, I don't believe in signs - but of course that doesn't stop me from following them. When my friend and bridge partner suddenly recited a favourite French poem, of which I thought only I knew the grand opening by heart, it sparked a love affair that has lasted twenty years - so far. No reality checks could reverse my undoing, not the discovery that John had learnt it from a music-hall duo, that he understood not one word of the poem, nor even, most unforgivably, when he lost the translation that I carefully crafted for him (and which he didn't like at all). It is even possible that South Wales is full of attractive men, any one of whom would have recited 'El Desdichado' for me but they didn't, and as it was written in the stars (which I also do not believe in any way whatsoever), so it was - right man, sorted. My restlessness for the right place to be me was a longer homecoming but it has led us both here, to the village of Dieulefit in Drôme Provençale.

Is it in Provence? Dazzling light and blue skies - tick. Olives - tick. Lavender - double tick. Red soil and limestone buffs in woods full of holme oaks - tick. Truffles - tick - black ones of course. In fact, our French guide to the Drôme in autumn states that the best truffles are found in the Drôme, those known as 'Perigord' for 'purely geographical reasons.' The sneer is meant to be heard as far as the Dordogne. Our French estate agent was very apologetic when he told us about the surprise clause in our house contract; Monsieur Dubois, the owner before the previous owner, had retained the right to drive a small vehicle up our otherwise private drive, so he could water his truffle oaks. I had sniffed the word 'truffles' and was too busy wondering if a pair of Pyrenean Mountain dogs with no known talents could find their hidden potential, and some black gold, to worry about the legal aspects of a neighbour's right of way. So far, no sign of truffle-hunting genes and you really don't want to know what the dynamic duo do find worth sniffing in the woods, but there is evidence of truffles about, namely good agricultural land laid down to neatly spaced rows of oak trees - and the annual frenzy of truffle markets in November. What else Provençal? Tomatoes, garlic and wild herbs in the garrigue - oh, yes. The southern accent which makes our daily 'pain' a three-syllable word? Beh oui. Sunflowers -

tick- although, like the corn crop, it suffered disastrously from last year's 'canicule', the dogdays of a record-breaking heatwave.

So what is not Provençale? I would be willing to stick my neck out and say that Provence is not noted for fine wine but our local vineyards are the Côtes du Rhône Villages. We are thirty minutes north of the grand reds; Roaix, Sèguret, Rasteau, Gigondas and Châteauneuf-du-Pape; or, if you prefer, thirty minutes south of the equally celebrated Crozes-Hermitage. La Drôme does have a growing population of second-home buyers and even foreign settlers like ourselves but there are few Parisians and Brits; the majority are Dutch, Belgians and Germans who have made the Ardèche their part of France and who have explored across the Rhône Valley into la Drôme. If you draw a line smack across from Dieulefit to Montélimar, that's a rough guide to the imaginary northern boundary where Drôme Provençale turns into the Vallée de la Drôme, Diois territory. These distinctions are vital in a region claiming a Mediterranean south, by culture and weather, not by any connection with the sea. It also claims its north in the Alps. Get it wrong and you'd better swap your olives for eidelweiss, and goats for cows, quickly.

What about Dieulefit itself? According to that same unbiased French guide which assessed its truffles as the best in France, Dieulefit is a marvellous village, famous for its pottery, its fine air quality which has led to it being a centre of excellence in the study and cure of respiratory diseases (with enough old people's homes to encourage us to plan for a long future) and for being an intellectual centre surpassed only by Paris and Lyon. Shall I run that past you again? This village of 3,000 inhabitants, double that in summer with the campsites, hotels, and, yes, the Club Med, is supposed to be where it's at for the intelligentsia. There is historical evidence for the claim; in 1876 only Paris sent more delegates to an international Archaeological Congress. I would like to think how well we fit in but the truth is that, armed with this knowledge about average local intelligence, I am even more in awe of every workman I meet – apart from anything else, their French is so good. If I am to judge by the notices in the village square, there is a serious basis for the village claim as they can obviously get enough clients to support night classes in Latin and Ancient Greek, with an extra fifteen minutes after class for those particularly interested in grammar. Can you imagine the class being viable in a comparable Welsh – or English –

village nowadays? In the past, maybe. As recently as thirty years ago, the working men's clubs and the miners' education groups were offering – and being asked for – academic tuition. My ex-miner neighbour in Bancffosfelen could discuss Gerard Manley Hopkins as easily as growing rhubarb; I learnt about both from him.

So far I am too preoccupied with all that is new, and all that is falling down or exploding, to be tempted by the Classical classes. Every day there is a discovery. If you lie on the attic floor and look out of the tiny window designed to keep out heat and flies in summer, and keep in warmth in winter, you will see our best mountain, Mielandre, according to the map, 5,000 feet or 1,450 metres, depending on whether you've converted to new money or not. It is a bare and moody peak which plays the full gamut from snow-cap against azure skies, through misty wreaths to rocky reflections of relentless sun. The 'hills' we admired through the windows, without lying down, when we first inspected the house, have increasingly earned our respect. The long forested ridge of Grace Dieu has become higher since we trekked up it from Dieulefit, following the limestone path up ... and up. Part of one of France's grand footpaths, the Grande Randonnée Number 9, it is almost cobbled underfoot with immense stones, a rock garden created by Titans, which starts to wear on the ankles after an hour's stumbling along. However strong your boots and ergonomically designed your walking sticks, with hydraulic bounce, the uneven terrain and variation in pace is tiring and you remember that 3,000 feet is in fact as high as the Brecons, which we called mountains when we lived in Wales. We realise that all of our 'hills' are Welsh 'mountains' and their silhouettes against the night sky or glowing pink in a Provençal dawn are kin to those of Celtic myth, which made you either mad or a poet if you spent a night on their heights.

There are many ways of developing madness and poetry; I should have known that when John was talking of death, and looking like it, that he had a cold. Once the penny drops, and I realise that I am unwanted company between four-hourly doses of Lemsip, it seems a good idea to adventure out on my own. My head glowing with autumn, I decide to walk into the village but am tempted to explore first and head in the opposite direction. In Wales, it was normal to reach any given destination by so many different routes that one person could go north, the other south, and both arrive at the same time. The footpaths and lanes surrounding Dieulefit make it

perfectly possible to try a dozen different ways to potter off the beaten track but, unlike our Welsh valley, there is definitely one main road and the mountains impose their own discipline on human movements.

If you turn left at Cavet's Picodon crèmerie, a major producer of Dieulefit's a.o.c. goat cheese, you can ford the River Jabron with the promise of 'gué submersible', a flooded crossing, in wetter times, and meander along back lanes to enter Dieulefit near Super-U, the supermarket doorway currently crowded with chrysanthemums. The bank holiday of Toussaint, All Saints, marks an outburst of floral pompoms, yellow, tawny, maroon, white-tipped ... each perfect plant in its terracotta pot, marred only by the inevitable Halloween posters, with their ghost masks and cartoon shrieks 'OOOOOh'. The massive pumpkins have disappeared from a local garden where they sat like props for 'Cinderella' from July until now so it seems they might have been real after all, sisters to those brightening the supermarket racks.

Already, I am Frenchified enough to want to touch produce before I buy it; it would be a brave stall-holder in Welsh market who yelled 'Come and try my melons' and yet I don't think twice now about taking morsels of melon, cheese and sausage from an outstretched hand and savouring them as I shop. My most extravagant impulse buy since we moved has consisted of a mountain cheese that took my fancy (and cost so much that we expected to own a square of the mountain itself, to add a piece of Alps to the piece of Snowdon I seem to remember that we acquired as National Trust subscribers) Previous peccadilloes were mostly connected with an underwear website – there is something very dangerous about being able to shop while sitting comfortably with a glass or two of wine.

In the village I check the local events board and am intrigued by a talk at the local library with the title 'Je suis aussi un mouton'. Apparently it is to be given by a local historian. Somehow I can't imagine the title translating well in Wales, although I save the idea of 'I am a sheep too' for my future valleys-drugs-sex-unemployment novel, which will have a young male anti-hero and will undoubtedly be a best-seller. It has of course been written but then, what's new?

I call at the newsagent and browse the magazine rack. Although we've met French people who were keen on all things English, especially the language, the Francophilia of Brits is not reciprocal. You won't find magazines in Dieulefit called 'Living in England',

and a 'Teach Yourself English' book, if there is one, will have a discreet place on a shelf rather than compete with ever multier-media glossy products which promise to teach you French while you brush your teeth. There are however just as many magazines on the shelves of the local 'presse' as in any British newsagent's. Like the produce in the markets and supermarkets, the titles vary seasonally, with October a frenzy of 'Make the most of your mushroom-picking', edging 'the Firemen's Monthly' into a less prominent position. Can you imagine the impact of 'the Firemen's Monthly' in Smiths? Or which shelf it would be on? Make no mistake, firefighters have a sexy image in France too, with more volunteers than there are permanent pompiers, but the stories and photos play up the heroism more than the sex appeal. In our region, as everywhere in the south, fires are neither rare nor someone else's problem. Keeping our grounds clear of undergrowth is not just common sense, it is a legal responsibility, and when you see how quickly a few brambles can light up, you understand why. 'The Firemen's Monthly' offers a mixture of fire know-how-not, daring rescues and of course, photographs of the daring rescuers. I hover, hoping to glimpse the (other) customers who like pompiers but only tally two local newspapers being bought before I get bored.

As I buy my copy of '100 kitchens', I prepare a sad face for the newsagent himself, who seems to have been bereaved, to judge by the black-edged notice below his counter announcing that he is 'en deuil', 'in mourning'. I read on while he collects my change and remember that I am in a foreign country, where an increase in tobacco taxes can arouse personal fury and the solidarity of a day's strike; this is what the newsagent is 'en deuil' for. Apparently cigarettes are so expensive in France now that people are even buying them in Germany. Imagine - Germany! I ignore the petition which has already been signed by a dozen good Dieulefitois, protesting the government's interference - as if the Minister's expressed concerns about health had anything to do with it! So the French head all kinds of European leagues for smoking-related diseases? Personal choice! It is easy to see the contradictions in another culture and I am still amazed at the acceptability of cigarettes - and pets - in French cafes and even restaurants when the World Health Organisation has pronounced the French Health system 'the best in the world' (according to my French information, I admit) and when no-one challenges the reputation of French

cuisine. Although there are increasingly areas which are designated no-smoking, I think it will be a long time before we see workers standing outside their office-blocks, sneaking a drag, in the way that is now commonplace in Wales. As for the pets, the attractions of spending a night in a hotel room with two Pyreneans and two cats, or eating out with all of my extended furry family, have passed me by so far.

I back out of the newsagent's with apologetic foreign smiles and trace the old road out of town. The lizards want the last trace of summer sun but don't trust its October warmth enough to do more than poke a head out of a hole. As I walk past a wall, my shadow creates a reflex flicker from nearly every drainage hole, as lizard-heads disappear. When I was eleven and pestering my parents for pets of every kind from snakes to puppies, my father said I could have a lizard (my latest idea) if I made a grass noose, held it in front of a hole in a wall and lassoed one. He thought this extremely funny and I was old enough to know at least that it was meant to be. I wish that I could call him up and say I've found a wall where it would work – can I have one if I catch it? – but it is another one of those conversations that cannot happen. Each time you understand a moment of the past in the light of your new, older present – as a parent, even a grandparent – you realise what you have lost when you lost your parents, and why your children cannot share it all with you – yet.

Such reflections suit the cemetery en route, typically walled with family plots for the old names of the village. You sense the familial politics behind Marie being buried here when, according to the plaque, her husband Jacques was buried with his parents, in a different village graveyard. Who do you belong to when you die? What always surprises me is the old age so many lived to, 18th and 19th century octogenarians. Perhaps there are more of these matriarchs and patriarchs buried in style in their local cemeteries than there are loose-living, die-young migrants? Of course there are the tragic deaths, like the twenty-six year old who was married for 1 year and 7 months, and was buried with the baby she could not give live birth to; the war deaths and the touching tributes from old comrades at arms.

If you want to visit a graveyard to make your spirits soar - and break your heart - go to what must be the most beautiful cemetery in the world, at Saint Christophe aux Oisans. If you are not driving,

you might enjoy the view sheer down mountains as the road twists through the Alps up to a tiny village legendary for its great mountain guides, who led the rich nineteenth century adventurers, particularly from Britain and Switzerland, enabled them to conquer a peak and, more importantly, to return safely – usually. Giant among these characters is Père Gaspard, who was almost as fascinated by the 11,000ft heights of la Meije as were the foreigners who paid him, and who claimed first conquest of its peak. The Gaspard family plot is large and there are clearly six or seven other dynasties which flourished in a village so high that supplies often had to reach it by cables in weather too severe for the donkeys. It seems that all the villagers were mountaineers by necessity – not the place to suffer from vertigo, this eyrie, level with the permanent snows of the peaks' dark faces. The headstones tell of men, including old Father Gaspard himself, wise enough in snow and ice to survive into their eighties, and then be buried with their ice-picks crossed above the lilies at the grave head, silhouetted against the mountains. Other graves tell sadder stories of the young foreigners who earned the right to be buried in St Christophe, the twenty-year olds who didn't make it back down, their ice picks still glinting in the Alpine sun.