

THE HOUSE BY THE NEEDLE

Hélène Wilkinson

“Petronella dear, is that you?”

“Dad! How are you?”

Since Jasper Sterling had gone to live with his brother and sister-in-law in Hereford, he was overcoming his dislike of the telephone to keep in touch with his daughter who lived at Witchend, in the Shropshire hills. Although his calls were becoming more frequent, they were still always for a specific purpose.

“I am very well thank you, but I am calling with some rather surprising and sad news, I’m afraid.”

“Tell me quickly Dad.”

“It’s Yvette. I’m afraid she died last month. I have just received a letter from France explaining that she had passed away. Cancer was the cause apparently.”

“Oh...Oh no”. Petronella Morton, called Peter by most people except her father, didn’t quite know what to say.

“She wasn’t very old was she? But, Dad”, and here Peter hesitated, “I mean, you’re not too upset are you? It wasn’t like you really knew her, was it? Not properly...” She trailed off uncertainly.

“I feel a degree of sadness because of your mother, who as you know was a very close friend of hers.” her father replied in his usual precise manner.

Peter fell silent for a moment. She thought of Yvette, her mother’s French pen friend. She had been like an absent family member for as long as she could remember. She forgot how Yvette and her mother had first been introduced, although her father had explained it to her once. She remembered vaguely that a relative of Yvette’s had some kind of English connection. She knew that the two women had only ever met once, when Yvette came to England many years ago, with a man friend who was an artist. They had, however, kept up a regular and extensive correspondence, with fat letters regularly linking the Normandy coast to the Shropshire hills. Peter had been a tiny girl when her mother died, and her father had kept up the letter writing, albeit on a reduced basis.

And Peter, for as long as she could remember, had dutifully penned a few lines in Christmas cards, occasionally trying out her schoolgirl French. This was all done out of respect for her dead mother's friend. In that way, Yvette knew all about Peter and her father, and had followed the story of Peter growing from baby to schoolgirl, from schoolgirl to young woman. She had even sent a gift on hearing of the news of her engagement to David. Mr Sterling and Peter, for their part, had quite a vivid picture of a woman who lived alone without a family of her own, in a small town by the sea in Normandy. They knew that the artist friend had died not very long after Peter's mother. Yvette's letters were always vivacious in tone, and full of reports of little expeditions she had undertaken, interesting people she had met, and countless small events, all presented in such a way as to give the impression of a woman who was very kind as well as tremendous fun. Peter had often wistfully wondered how similar in character her mother had been to her friend. She had always found it rather difficult to talk about her mother to her father. He was and always had been an absolute darling, but she did not find it easy to open her heart to him about a subject he clearly still found deeply distressing, even after the nearly twenty years which had elapsed since his wife's death. And Peter had never wanted her Dad to feel that a father's love hadn't been enough.

Peter snapped out of her reverie, although, typically, her father had not interrupted her silent musing.

"Who was the letter from, Dad?"

"Well, that brings me to the rather surprising and somewhat happier part of my news, my dear. The letter came from a French notary. It appears that Yvette has left you something in her will."

"Left me something? But why? I know she had no family of her own, but..."

"I have no idea why she has done this and I may as well tell you straight away that I think it highly unlikely that it is anything of much value, so you mustn't entertain any hopes of great riches coming your way my dear."

Peter laughed. "Of course not Dad, but how extraordinary. What does the letter actually say?"

"I will forward it to you and you can read it for yourself. I would naturally not dream of opening your private correspondence, but this notary gentleman from France actually telephoned me directly. Thankfully, he speaks very good English, and the purpose of his call was to ask what you proposed to do. When I informed him that I had no idea what he was talking about, and that his letter had been addressed to your old Hatchholt address, rather than your present Witchend one, so that you had not actually read your letter yet, he gave me the gist of its content over the telephone. He could not, naturally, disclose the nature of the bequest. That would be most improper, of course. If I could make a suggestion, Petronella, this could be a splendid opportunity for you and David to take a well deserved holiday."

This was such a long speech for her father, that Peter took her time to reply.

"Do you mean to go to the funeral?"

"No, no, that has already taken place, so we are too late to pay our respects in that way. I am not saying that I would not have liked to have been advised of the date of the ceremony, however, be that as it may. No, I meant to visit this notary, as he suggests. I'm afraid I didn't quite catch his name. I have posted the letter to you already, and you and David can decide what is best to do."

Mr Sterling rang off and left Peter in a whirl of thoughts. Her father's news was so startling, and the possibility of a holiday in France such an exciting one. She dwelt on her mental images of Yvette, and of her mother.

Of course, there had been photos of her mother and of Yvette and even of the latter's home town, but photos only told part of the story. She knew for instance that Etretat was by the sea and something of a local tourist spot, but knew very little else about it. It might indeed be a good idea to spend a holiday there, especially as she had never travelled abroad, and she and David had only recently agreed that they must try and take a holiday as a break from

their busy working lives. She had taken over the management of the stables where she had worked for years, and she was definitely owed a holiday, and David was progressing rapidly in his law firm on his way to partnership, and had also been working hard. A change of air would do them good, sea air might be just the thing, and if this notary had invited them, then that could be a perfect excuse.

Three weeks later, Mr and Mrs Morton were sitting outside on the terrace of their small hotel in Etretat, enjoying an unseasonably warm autumn morning, sipping coffee and contentedly munching on their croissants. The holiday so far had been a tremendous success. There had been plenty of trips in their little car to delightful villages along the coast, which they had thoroughly enjoyed exploring, occasionally testing out their very rusty French with the locals, Peter managing better than her husband on that score. The only unpleasant thing that had happened during the holiday was that Peter had felt very seasick on the cross channel ferry trip, and David had teased her about not being a good sailor, because the sometimes treacherous Channel had actually been as flat as a mill pond when they crossed it.

Today, they had an appointment with Monsieur Hilaire and were looking forward to hearing about Yvette's mystery bequest. Peter wondered once again what it might be. She felt a bit sick again. Was it too many croissants, or a touch of nerves? She mentally took herself to task by telling herself there was absolutely nothing to feel nervous about. As it turned out, Monsieur Hilaire couldn't have been more charming, and spoke excellent English.

"Monsieur and Madame Morton, how delightful to welcome you to Etretat. Do you know, Madame, that I feel I already know you very well? Yvette Le Marchand often spoke so fondly of you, and before you, of your mother of course."

"Did she? How nice." Peter blushed a little, feeling slightly foolish, unused to the famous Gallic charm. David smiled encouragingly at her and looked enquiringly across at Monsieur Hilaire. The notary quickly took the hint and got down to the business in hand.

Now, let me see, here we are, here we are, here is the official testament. I will simplify our beautiful, but in this case, very legal language...

“Thank you Monsieur”, said David, “I’m a lawyer myself but I’m afraid my French is very poor, Peter’s really quite good at French, but as you say, with a legal document...”

“Ah, so you are a colleague of mine, Monsieur Morton. Well then, let me summarise the late Madame Le Marchand’s bequest; it is in fact very simple: she has left Madame Morton here her house.”

“She’s left me her *house*? gasped Peter before she could stop herself.

“Madame, I should explain. This may seem a very generous bequest on the face of it, and indeed of course, it is. But let me make plain to you that the monetary value of the property is very small. I hope you will forgive me for speaking so frankly, but the house you have been left is not in a particularly desirable area, it is in a poor state of repair, and it is also a very small house. This is not a professional opinion you understand, but I feel I must not, how do you say, build up your hopes too much.”

“Of course Monsieur Hilaire, we understand, but is it really mine, to do what I like with, I mean? I mean, are you sure there isn’t a mistake and she meant to leave it to someone else?”

“Absolutely, Madame, and there is no possibility of mistake: ‘I hereby bequeath my home and all its contents to Mademoiselle Petronella Sterling, shortly to become Madame David Morton, in loving memory of dear Irene Sterling, her late mother’. No possibility of mistaken identity, as you can see! It is yours with no conditions attached whatsoever, to dispose of as you wish, but I do emphasise that its monetary value is likely to be, well, very small. Again, you will need to get the property properly valued. But, I think you have an expression in English about, um, a white elephant, is that correct?”

They reassured him on the accuracy of the idiom and thanked him for being frank. David asked if they might visit the house.

“But of course, Monsieur, straight away if you wish. Madame, here is the key to your house”, and Monsieur Hilaire produced what was a most ordinary looking key with a properly dramatic flourish.

They found the place easily enough. It was set back slightly behind the church, not very far from the memorial. Peter couldn't begin to imagine what the notary could possibly have meant by saying that the location was less than perfect. True, it was impossible to gain access right up to the house by car and they had left theirs in the town centre. But the view from the house was surely compensation for whatever deficiencies the building itself presented: it was perched high enough to look straight out onto the famous Etretat archway and rock, known locally as the “needle”.

“Gosh, David it really is something isn't it? Look how the sea's eaten away at the cliff. It's quite stunning, isn't it?”

“Absolutely beautiful” agreed her husband. “Come on, Pete, let's get inside and look over your inheritance!”

The very first thing they saw when they came in was a letter clearly placed in evidence on the table of what seemed to be a room taking up the whole of the ground floor. Peter reached out for it with shaking hands, read it to herself in silence, and then out loud to David:

‘My dear Petronella,

I know that most people call you Peter, but I think the name that was chosen for you is so beautiful and unusual that I will adopt it for my own use.

You will already have heard that I am leaving you this house and all its contents in memory of your mother, who was a dear friend of mine. I have heard so much about you over the years that I feel I know you well. I know you will treasure this place as I have done.

Whatever you decide to do about it, I trust you will take the time to explore the house thoroughly. I have been very happy here for many years, and my dearest wish is for you to find the pleasure I have found in it and in its contents too. I leave it entirely up to you to decide what you do with this inheritance. I only ask this of you: please take great care when you decorate or renovate this house not to harm any of the beautiful things it contains. I dare say you will think me odd when you visit your house for the first time, but please bear it in mind.

In leaving you, may I add that I trust that you are finding married life as happy as you hoped it to be. I am sure you are, as your David sounds delightful.

Petronella, I know that you are your mother's daughter in many ways. Take care of her best friend's home and what it contains for her sake.

With loving best wishes

Yvette Le Marchand'

Peter was incredibly moved to see the familiar writing on this posthumous letter. It brought the reality of Yvette's death home to her. She wiped a tear away and turned to David saying: "Come on, then, she says explore, let's explore". It was quickly done. The house was in truth quite commonplace, and in need of extensive redecorating at the very least. It consisted of a single room downstairs, combining a lounge and dining area with a kitchen, with a large fire place which looked as though it could easily heat the entire house. Upstairs was a bedroom and a tiny bathroom, obviously squeezed out of the bedroom after the house was first built.

"I know it's a bit run down David, but I *love* this house", Peter said impetuously. "I don't suppose..." "But she knew before going any further what David would say, indeed what any reasonable person would say. "I mean, I know we couldn't possibly afford to do it up or

anything, Yvette needn't have worried about us doing any damaging renovations, but.... couldn't we at least keep it? It would make such a super holiday home."

"Maybe", David replied a little dubiously. "But it's not good to leave houses empty and not maintain them, Peter. Still, I don't know. This is quite an odd business isn't it? I don't mean any disrespect but Yvette was a bit enthusiastic about the house, considering the state it's in, wasn't she?"

Peter, she didn't quite know why, instantly felt on the defensive.

"If you've lived somewhere a long time, you don't necessarily see it as others do." David knew she was thinking of her childhood home of Hatchholt, so isolated and deprived of many modern conveniences. "And, I don't know, but well, she obviously wanted me to keep it". She looked at David with faintly troubled eyes. David was reading Yvette's letter again. He was reading it a third time when he said suddenly "Peter, tell me if I'm being childish and dreaming of our Lone Pine old adventures too much, but you don't think there may be a hidden message in this letter, do you?" He read the letter once more. "No, let it go, it's just wishful thinking, she probably just meant you to enjoy her house as a holiday home in a beauty spot. And very generous it is of her too", he added.

But Peter had caught his momentary excitement.

"David, look, read it again. Acksherly, as Dickie used to say, I think there is a something a little odd about Yvette's letter. Look at the emphasis on the contents of the house, the 'beautiful things' and the hint that you have to look for them."

But David had satisfied himself now that the letter contained nothing further than kind wishes from a very nice lady, although he he thought privately she might have been slightly eccentric.

"Come on, Peter, you're not seriously suggesting a treasure hunt are you? I mean, let's not look beyond the generosity of Madame Le Marchand's gesture in search of anything else."

"You're quite right David, of course. All the same, I've got a hunch about this place" and with this, Peter walked purposefully around the house. She spotted what she was looking for within five minutes.

“David, David, come here”, she called excitedly from the kitchen area of the ground floor, pointing out the wall opposite the chimney. “Look here, there’s definitely some panelling which has been added after the house was built.”

“There does seem to be panelling darling, it’s quite hollow, but there could be a thousand and one reasons for it. What are you thinking? Some kind of fantastic treasure? Come on, love, you know it can’t be true. Listen, let’s camp out here for the rest of the holiday anyway, and cancel the rest of our stay at the hotel. Look, it’s quite habitable, water and electricity seem to be working OK and if the plumbing’s all right, we’re in business. Come on, let’s get food in from a shop. This will be fun.”

They duly settled in, but it took Peter all her feminine wiles to persuade David to have a go at looking behind the panelling. The following morning, however, saw him attacking the panelling with some tools he had dug out from a lean to at the back of the house. He was in a good mood, the sound of the sea had sent him to sleep in a most agreeable way and it was great being on holiday with his lovely wife in a foreign country in what was, incredibly, and for all its defects, their own home.

Three hours later, and a few sore fingers later, he was in less of a good mood.

“Sorry Pete, but I can’t seem to shift it.”

But just as he spoke, David, at the cost of another painful blister, finally wrenched a section of flimsy panelling board off the wall. He staggered back in surprise and Peter cried out. They were staring straight at a beautiful oil painting of what seemed to be the view from outside the window. What was more, there seemed to be more than one picture.

“David, the wall might be covered with them! Quick, let’s get the rest of the panelling off!”

When they had, at the end of the morning, removed all the panelling, the entire wall was indeed covered floor to ceiling with twelve gorgeous paintings. There was also a folder propped against the wall, clearly full of further artwork. The paintings were signed, as far as they could be certain of the writing, by a man called René Dubois. They mostly represented

views and landscapes of the Etretat area, but also, of other places. Some obviously French, some from further afield: there was a Saharan looking scene, a view of what was clearly London, and then David suddenly spotted a picture which made him say,

“Peter, Peter, am I dreaming or is that the Long Mynd?”

“It can’t be, David! Hang on, it is, I’m sure it is! David, I’ve got it!” Peter caught her breath as realisation dawned on her. Yvette’s lover, he was a painter, remember? He must have painted these! It all fits in. He visited my mother with Yvette many many years ago.”

“But Peter, was he that good a painter do you know? I’m no expert but these look absolutely first class to me. Whoever painted these was surely famous, and Yvette’s painter wasn’t famous was he?”

“I don’t think so. I’m not sure. But, David, this is absolutely marvellous and look, I’ve found another letter from Yvette!”

The second letter was in the folder, which turned out to be full of marvellous pencil sketches and ink studies. It read:

‘My dear Petronella,

I am so thrilled you have found the pictures safely. I must admit, I was quietly confident you would, having heard about all these adventures you and David have been involved in over the years!

I am sorry about the secrecy but everyone put so much pressure on me to sell the pictures after René died. You see, art dealers and notaries and so on guessed that I must have some of his work. René was known to have come to paint here, and yet the paintings had apparently vanished into thin air. So they kept on and on at me. I held firm, managed to keep the pictures hidden, and eventually, everyone left me in peace.

I have no objection to sharing this beauty with others who are fortunate enough to acquire it, but I wanted to do it on my own terms. And my terms are for you to sell them.

Petronella, I only ask one thing: I would like our local museum to have first refusal. I should be happy if one picture of René's at least found a permanent home in Etretat. I know this might be difficult to achieve, as his pictures seem to have reached silly prices lately and the town might not be rich enough, but perhaps something could be arranged. It would seem right, as he loved this area so much. As you have probably guessed, he painted one of the pictures I am leaving you by setting up his easel just outside this very house. He had loved your Shropshire too, Petronella, as you will also see.

Petronella my dear, it is my heartfelt desire that you should enjoy the fruits of René's beautiful work. If you want to know why, just remember that the man I loved and my best friend died within weeks of each other. It felt right to somehow provide continuity where I could. Have a wonderful life.

With loving best wishes,

Yvette'

"David, we must contact Monsieur Hilaire. He must know something! He's bound to. He's local, and knew Yvette and everything. Let's go and find him straight away."

The Mortons had expected to find it difficult to be taken seriously by the notary. Peter made a rather a breathless account to a clerk of finding beautiful paintings in her hesitant French ("behind the wall" was the best she could manage). She and David were instantly whisked into Monsieur Hilaire's office by the clerk, who looked tremendously excited. Peter repeated her story, in English and more coherently this time, to the notary who leapt to his feet immediately.

“Mon Dieu! So she did have the pictures! We all knew she must have! Behind a panel you say? Twelve of them? Amazing, amazing. How did she manage to hide them for so long? And the council was proposing to knock the house down and build a car park by the memorial, if the house should find no buyer. Oh, I tremble just to think of it.”

“So they will be on the market I suppose, how wonderful, at long last. But you must forgive me, really, I must speak more calmly. But, still, I would love to see, that is, may I please ...?”

He sounded almost overcome and Peter invited him to see their wonderful discovery for himself straight away. Barely stopping to fling a coat on his shoulders, Monsieur Hilaire set off with them. The house was not quite within walking distance, so they piled into the notary's car. On the way, he explained that René Dubois was a highly sought after regional artist, whose paintings now fetched very high sums on the international art market. It had long been suspected that Yvette Le Marchand, his companion, must have possessed several of them, and despite many queries and offers, she had steadfastly refused to sell them or even to admit to the existence of such pictures.

“Of course, all this was before my time you understand, but I have heard my father speak of the affair so often...” René Dubois's fame is perhaps not international then, as you are clearly very surprised...”

“Well, we're no art experts”, admitted David quickly.

“I bet you Judith Wilson will have heard of him though”, Peter cut in. “And the Ballinger too, probably”, she added more soberly, “but no, I'm afraid I never realised that Yvette's painter friend was famous at all.”

“Famous! Ah Madame, if only you knew.”

When he saw the pictures, Monsieur Hilaire was rendered speechless and spent long minutes admiring them. Finally, he turned to them and said, “If there were one thing to regret on this tremendously happy day, it is that it is highly unlikely the town of Etretat will ever display any of these. Their value is likely to be much beyond the financial means of our small museum.”

“Actually, if I have anything to do with it, Monsieur Hilaire, the town of Etretat will have a René Dubois painting.”

“If you have anything to do with it? My dear lady, these paintings are yours. Madame Le Marchand’s will and the two letters you have from her attest most clearly to the fact that you own every single one of these magnificent pictures.”

And it was then that Peter realised that she had actually inherited a true treasure and a fortune with it.

It took a while to sink in. David and Peter spent the rest of their time in Normandy in a whirl of red tape and paperwork, before setting in motion the sale of ten of the twelve pictures, and the extension and renovation of the house. Peter offered one painting to the Etretat museum outright, and this generosity stirred the town council, with considerable help from the French State’s culture ministry, to carry out some frenetic fund raising efforts which secured the long term future of a further three pictures. Two paintings of the Etretat area, including Peter’s gift, were to be displayed in Etretat museum, which was to be drastically refurbished in order to house its new treasures. Two others were to be hung in an important museum in Paris. The sale of the remaining pictures was awarded, after much haggling, to Christies. Peter could hardly believe the sums that were being talked about. David concentrated on initiating the building works, and was busy finding a suitable contractor, who could supervise everything in their absence. They had never had a busier holiday. They had had to wheedle and plead with their employers to extend their leave because of the exceptional circumstances they found themselves in. “But you know love, if you don’t feel like going back to the stables...” Peter had looked quite shocked, but realised the truth of what he said. They ended up staying five weeks in Normandy, rather than the planned fortnight. They had of course telephoned the amazing news to their incredulous and delighted relatives and friends.

“You know, we’ve been involved in so many adventures, one way or another, but I can’t think of a holiday I’ve enjoyed more. It’s been jolly hard work, though, for a holiday! Mrs Morton, do you realise that you are officially an important heiress?”

“Yes, Yvette’s been wonderful to us. I so wish I had met her, now”

“I know, I feel that way too. Your mother must have been a special person, darling, to inspire such a friendship in a woman who met her only once. She left her lover’s treasure to her friend’s daughter, that’s really rather special, isn’t it?”

Peter reflected that one of the things she particularly loved about David was how he often said exactly the right thing. She smiled at him and turned to watch the sun dancing on the Channel outside the window.

“We are so lucky, David. And I think I’ve got a surprise for you which will make this holiday unforgettable for another reason... But, listen, you’ve got to swear not to be horrible to me again if I feel seasick again on the way home.”

“Come on, I wasn’t really horrible to you, was I?”

“No, but you’re going to have to get used to me being queasy for a while...”

“You don’t mean...”

“Yes David, I think we’re going to have a baby.”

A year later

“Monsieur and Madame Morton! And young Mademoiselle Morton too! This is truly delightful. Let me offer you both my sincerest congratulations.”

Monsieur Hilaire cooed over the pram and they all chatted for a while. Then the Mortons set off, up the coastal path, and on to their house by the needle.