

# From **The Secret Lives of Eleanor Jenkinson**

## *Chapter 1. Memoirs of a Prudish Housewife*

In mid-August 1990, Eleanor Jenkinson and her husband, David, drive in their old sepiá Volvo through Normandy on their way to somewhere in the south-cast of France. It is a vaporous, slightly frantic morning. Rain clouds bustle in the sky like the swollen bellies of the Caen boats, now emptying themselves nauseously on to the ribbon-like roads. Determined holidaymakers, fatigued from their rakish night of travelling, perform a metallic jostle through the different, respectful order of the battlefields. the lines of gravestones are whiter, calmer than the sky. Inside the tourist cars, querulous conversations about misplaced directions and crushed sandwiches ought to pale into insignificance beside the roadside signs describing this as the location of more important contentions - but do not.

Looking sideways through the open window, Eleanor Jenkinson is struck by the image of an old man loading a bucket of potatoes into his car. A slow rhythm. Impossible to tell if it's the pain of arthritis or simply rural languor. She stretches her legs under the dashboard, feeling cramped from a night in the tiny cabin on the boat. 'All right, darling?' David Jenkinson's sensitivity to Eleanor's changes of mood and position is part of his definition of a holiday. In other words, it's not what normally happens back home in Sussex.

'Yes, fine.' She would have said that anyway. Ahead, two spires dance against the sky; they have holes in them like a garlic jar. 'What's that?'

'Alençon cathedral. Or Sées. No, Sées, we haven't got as far as Alençon yet.' David has the map carefully positioned between them, with the roads they will take highlighted in yellow. 'I thought we'd stop at Château-du-Loir for lunch. There's a two-star there. Speciality: truite de mer à la crème d'ail.' His accent is irreproachable: Francophile French...

As they pause at some traffic lights, David takes one hand off the steering wheel, and pats Eleanor's knee. 'Let's celebrate today, my love. Our first holiday tous les deux for - how long? That's worth celebrating, isn't it, whatever else happens?'

Eleanor thinks, excavating the layers of remembered biological, social, domestic time. 'Before Heidi. We went to Tuscany, camping.'

They both recall the camp site, effluent clusters of blue and orange tents planted under the trees, with the river almost stationary in the crisp gold light. But the two of them remember different things. David Jenkinson sees himself with a stomach as straight as a plank and hair luxuriant as the Tuscan foliage - an altogether younger and more virile person, manning their little canvas home as Eleanor, for whom he felt such a suitable but intense passion, stands there like a pubescent elf in her pink bikini, amidst the cooking pots. She was both right and different, all he would ever have hoped for, had he been the least bit conscious of the hopes he had. 'It was the seven hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Magna Carta,' he says, being a historian.

"Nullus liber homo capiatur..." I remember there was a thanksgiving service at Saint Paul's the day we left England.'

Eleanor Jenkinson, elflike then and now, also sees the two of them beneath the trees, but, while she remembers the tyranny of the cooking pots and David's passion, she can see something else in the dark orange interior of the tent - her notebooks, looking at her casually from a focused pool of light. 'My Novel,' she murmurs. 'I started it there.' 'So you did.'

'It had a different title, then.'

'Didn't we all?' he jokes.

'I'm not sure that's funny.'

He looks at her for a change. 'I'm sorry.'

She says nothing. But in the coolness of the air-conditioned car steadily pursuing the yellow-highlighted route, allows herself to wander back, directionless, through the years of half-remembered and differently lived time.

How had she been, then? More than half her life ago. Had she been happy? What did she want? She and David - how had they been together? Strange to think that people's bodies stay more or less the same through decades of experience, though of course they don't, as their cells must form and reform countless times, and for women there are the sieges of childbearing, like ice ages eroding the contours of the body's physical continent. Eleanor Jenkinson then and Eleanor Jenkinson now; if you put them side by side, one would wrinkle and droop and carry a pretend wisdom in her eyes and more filled and unfilled cavities in her teeth, but she'd only be a version of the innocent upright dentally intact Eleanor Jenkinson. Had marrying David been the right thing to have done? What about her writing? The notebooks reappear, brighter now in the midday sun. Eleanor has always written in the same sort of notebook, a perfectly ordinary stationers' brand, that says 'Student Notebook Ref. 141. Punched for filing' in a white strip at the bottom of the glossy orange-red cover. And much of her writing, certainly there in Tuscany at the beginning, has been about this woman called Esther Gray.

Esther Gray is strong and brave. Esther Gray is beautiful and together. And as she has materialized over the years, Esther Gray has even spoken to Eleanor of Eleanor's own predicament. Esther has become a commentator, an analyst, Eleanor's harshest critic and best friend rolled into one. A kind of alter ego.

Extract from:

Esther's Virtue, by Eleanor Jenkinson

Looking back, Esther could see how the whole of her life had been a mistake. Dick had never loved her, she had never been happy with him. There had been no free will, they had only been ciphers in someone else's code. It's wrong to suppose one has a choice. For the construction of one's destiny as a matter over which there is control is the problem at the heart of it all; the responsibility that has to be taken for what happens, but yet is not there to take, as it exists only in the imagination. She would never, of course, have attempted to say this to him. Dick would not have understood what she was trying to say, he would only have felt it as rejection. He couldn't see what she could - that time and place had thrown them together, had given them the superficial appearance of a happy couple, while underneath, at heart, each remained both solitary and different. It was almost as though it wasn't about love at all. The

embraces of their marriage were no more about love than the habits of those who walk with their hands in their pockets, or touch wood whenever they say something that frightens them...

The farmer and his wife are waiting to show them around: the gravelled lap in front of the house, with a view over grazing amber charantais cows; the field of cornflowers to the right stretching to a line of brilliant green trees behind which, imagines Eleanor, there is a dankly oozing river; inside, and most proudly, the old Quercy kitchen with the blackened, disused range in the cavernous fireplace now supplanted by the bottled gas, and the cooker, lacking, as usual, a grill. There is a small fridge. A wire poking out of the wall is not to be touched. The Dupannes repeat this, several times. Madame Dupanne is proud of the washing line and directs Eleanor's attention to the cold water tap in the field. Eleanor, too tired to ask its purpose, is then taken by Madame Dupanne for a manual test of the deep mattress on the double bed, which descends when pressed and only slowly recovers, like punched oedematous flesh...

In the morning David says he's going into the town to buy some food, and a supply of maps and train timetables and tourist brochures with which to occupy himself while Eleanor, as usual, writes. But first he must set her up a table in the garden where she will be able to sit with her notebooks, not too much in the shade, nor too unshielded from the sun, being careful of the thorns and prickles in the grass - 'Better keep your shoes on, dear.' He fetches a chair and a blanket to drape on it, and a parasol and a thermos of coffee. Is this the view she would like? Or that one? Finally he goes, and she is alone. Deliberately, she moves the table from where he put it, so that her eyes may find a path through the trees which is not the one he chose for her. She sits, puts her feet on the crumbling stone wall, being careful to avoid crushing the ivy growing among the stones. Cows graze before her eyes. Corn bends to a wind from the east. The wind is warm and refreshing, fanning both her face and her memory.