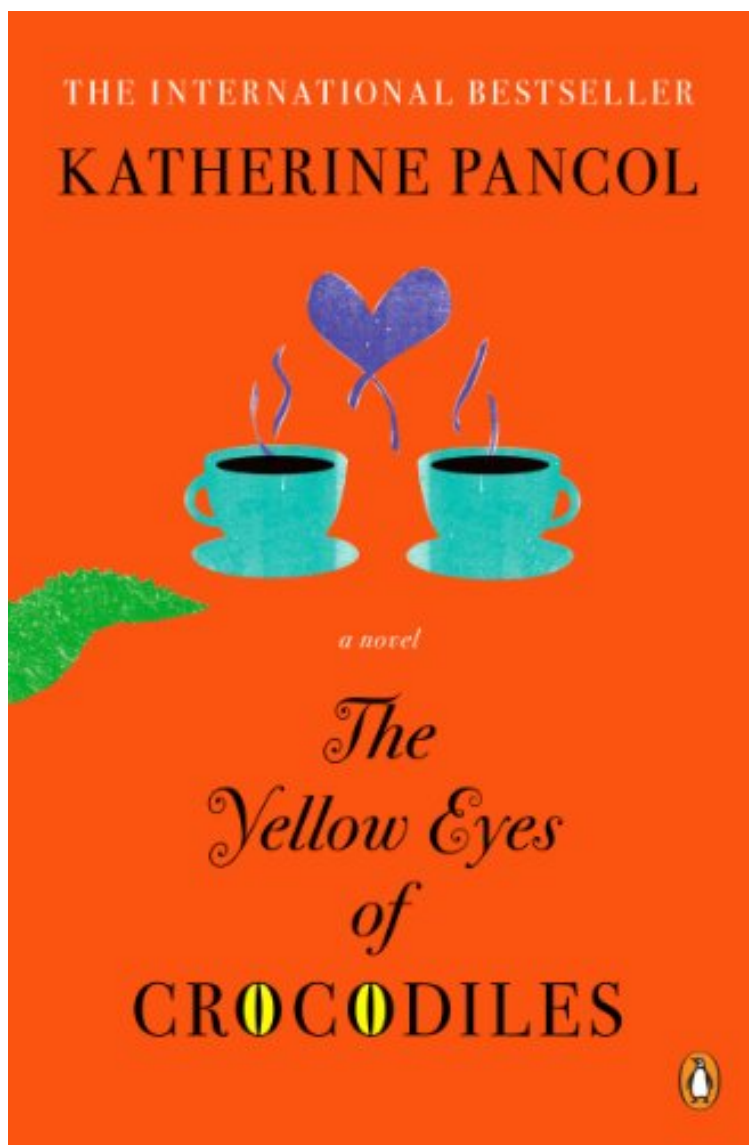


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The Yellow Eyes of Crocodiles: A Novel



Par Katherine Pancol
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurLe Divorce meets The Elegance of the Hedgehog in this hilariously entertaining mega-bestseller from France When her chronically unemployed husband runs off to start a crocodile farm in Kenya with his mistress, Josphine Corts is left in an unhappy state of affairs. The mother of twoconfident, beautiful teenage Hortense and shy, babyish Zois forced to maintain a stable family life while making ends meet on her meager salary as a medieval history scholar. Meanwhile, Josphines charismatic sister Iris seems to have it alla wealthy husband, gorgeous looks, and a trs chic Paris addressbut she dreams of bringing meaning back into her life.When Iris charms a famous publisher into offering her a lucrative deal for a twelfth-century romance, she offers her sister a deal of her own: Josphine will write the novel and pocket all the proceeds, but the book will be published under Iriss name. All is wellthat is, until the book becomes the

literary sensation of the season. Extrait***This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof.***Copyright 2006 by Editions Albin Michel - Paris Translation copyright 2013 by William Rodarmor and Helen Dickinson

Katherine Pancol is one of France's best known contemporary authors. *The Yellow Eyes of Crocodiles* was a huge success in France, where it won the prix de Maison de la presse for best novel of the year. To date, it has sold some 2.4 million copies in thirty languages. Katherine was born in Morocco, grew up in France, taught school in Switzerland, and worked as a journalist at Paris-Match. She lived in New York City from 1980 to 1990 and has published two sequels to *The Yellow Eyes of Crocodiles*: *La Valse lente des tortues* (2008) and *Les cureuils de Central Park sont tristes le lundi* (2010).

Chapter 1 Josphine gasped and dropped the vegetable peeler. The blade had slipped on the potato and cut a long gash into her wrist. There was blood everywhere. She looked at her blue veins, the red streak, the white sink, the yellow plastic colander where the peeled white potatoes lay glistening. Leaning against the sink, she began to cry. I need to cry, Josphine thought. I don't know why. There are plenty of reasons, and this one is as good as any. She grabbed a dishcloth and pressed it on the cut. I'm going to turn into a fountain of tears, a fountain of blood, a fountain of sighs. I'm going to let myself die. That was one solution. Just die, without a word. Fade away, like a lamp slowly dimming. I'll die standing here at the sink, she thought, then corrected herself. No one dies standing up. You die lying down, or with your head in the oven, or in the bathtub. She'd read in some newspaper that the most common form of suicide for women was jumping out the window. For men it was hanging. Jump out the window? She could never do that. But to weep as she bled to death, unable to tell whether the liquid streaming out of her was red or white? To fall slowly asleep . . . Josphine took a deep breath, adjusted the dish towel on her wrist, choked back her tears, and stared at her reflection in the window. Get on with it, she told herself, peel those potatoes. You can think about all that other stuff later. It was a late May morning, and the thermometer read 82 degrees in the shade. Out on their fifth-floor balcony, Josphine's husband was playing chess against himself. Antoine worked hard to make it realistic, switching sides and picking up his pipe as he went. He hunched over the chessboard, blew out some smoke, lifted a piece, sucked on the pipe, put the piece back, exhaled again, picked up the piece again and moved it, shaking his head as he put the pipe down and went to sit in the other chair. He was of average height, with brown hair and eyes. The crease of his trousers was razor sharp, and his shoes looked as if they had just come out of the box. His rolled-up shirtsleeves revealed slim forearms and wrists, and his nails had the luster of a professional manicure. He looked nicely groomed, the type of man you'd put in a furniture catalog to inspire confidence in the merchandise's quality. Suddenly Antoine moved a piece, and a smile lit up his face. Checkmate! he announced to his imaginary partner. Poor guy, you're screwed. Never saw it coming! He got up, stretched, and decided to make himself a little drink, even though it wasn't quite that time yet. He usually had a cocktail around six, while watching his favorite TV quiz show, *Questions pour un champion*. It had become a daily ritual, and he looked forward to it. Missing the show put him in a foul mood. Every evening he would tell himself that he should try out for the show himself, but things never went any further than that. He knew that he'd have to get past the elimination rounds, and something about the words elimination rounds chagrined him. He lifted the lid of the ice bucket, carefully dropped a couple of cubes into a glass, and poured himself a Martini Bianco. Antoine followed the exact same routine every day. Up with the kids at seven, breakfast of whole-wheat toast, apricot jam with salted butter, and freshly squeezed orange juice. Next came a thirty-minute workout: back, stomach, abs, quads. Then the newspapers, which his daughters took turns bringing him before they left for school. This was followed by a careful perusal of the help-wanted ads and mailing his résumé when he saw something interesting. Then a shower and shave, selecting his clothes for the day, and finally, a game of chess. Choosing what to wear was his morning's most challenging moment. He had lost a sense of how to dress. Relaxed weekend style, or a suit and tie? One day he had thrown on some sweatpants, and his older daughter wasn't pleased when he picked her up at school. Arent you working, Dad? asked Hortense. Are you still on vacation? I like it when you're all handsome in an elegant jacket, a nice shirt and tie. Don't ever pick me up from school in sweats again, okay? Seeing Antoine's face fall, she softened her tone. I'm saying this for your own good, so you'll always be the world's most handsome dad. Hortense was right. People looked at him differently when he was well dressed. The game of chess over, Antoine watered the plants along the edge of the balcony, picked off dead leaves, pruned the older branches, spritzed the new buds with water, turned the soil with a spoon, and added fertilizer. He was quite concerned about the white camellia. He spoke to it, took extra time caring for it, lovingly wiping each leaf. It had been the same thing every morning for the past year. On this particular morning, however, he'd fallen behind schedule. The chess game had been unusually tough, and he had to be careful not to lose track

of time. Watch it, Tonio, dont let yourself go, he said aloud. Get your act together. Hed gotten used to talking to himself, and he frowned at the self-admonition. He decided to let the plants go for the day. He passed the kitchen where Josphine was peeling potatoes. Seeing her from behind, he again noted that she was putting on weight. When they first moved to this suburban apartment building just outside Paris, she was tall and slim. Their daughters were so little, barely reached the edge of the sink. Those were the days. He would lift up her sweater, put his hands on her breasts, and whisper things in her ear until she gave in. Jo would bend down over the bed, smoothing the bedspread all the while so it wouldnt get rumpled. Sundays, she would cook. Pots would be steaming on the stove, dishcloths drying on the oven door handle. Chocolate for a mousse would be melting in a double boiler. The kids shelled nuts or gave themselves mustaches with chocolate-covered fingers, then licked them off with the tips of their tongues. Tenderly, Antoine and Josphine had watched the girls grow up. Every couple of months they would measure them, penciling their heights on the wall, which was soon laddered with little lines followed by dates and the girls names, Hortense and Zo. Every time Antoine leaned against the kitchen door frame, he felt overwhelmed by sadness and loss, remembering a time when life had seemed to smile on him. This never happened in the bedroom or the living room; always in the kitchen, which had once held all his joy. A book by the medievalist Georges Duby lay open on the kitchen table. Antoine bent down to read the title: The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest. Josphine had been working in the kitchen. What used to be a hobby was now paying the bills. She was a historian specializing in twelfth-century women at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, the famed CNRS. Antoine used to make fun of her work, saying, with a laugh, My wife is passionate about history, but only the twelfth century. Now the twelfth century was putting food on the table. Antoine cleared his throat to attract Josphines attention. Her hair was piled on top of her head, held in place with a pencil. Im going for a walk, he said. Are you coming back for lunch? I dont know. Dont wait for me. Why didnt you tell me earlier? Antoine hated confrontation. He probably should have simply left, shouting, Im going out, be back in a bit. That would have been all. Hed be in the stairway and shed be in the kitchen with her questions stuck in her throat. Hed find some excuse when he came back. Because he always came back. Did you read the help-wanted ads? Yeah. Nothing interesting today. Theres always work for someone who wants to work. Work, sure, but Im not about to take just any old job, he thought. I know what youre going to say, Jo. You know it, but you dont do a thing to make it happen. You could take whatever job you can, to help make ends meet. He could have continued the conversation on his own. He knew it by heart: lifeguard, groundskeeper at a tennis club, night watchman, gas station attendant. But all he could think was that the phrase making ends meet had a funny ring. Thats right, smile! she spat, glaring at him. I must sound like a broken record, always talking about money. Monsieur doesnt want to tire himself out for just any old job. Monsieur wants respect! And right now, all monsieur wants to do is run off to his manicurist! What are you talking about, Josphine? You know exactly what Im talking about! Now Josphine was facing him, shoulders back, the dishcloth around her wrist. She was daring him. If you mean Mylne . . . Yes, I mean Mylne. Jo, stop! This is going to end badly. Who could have told her? They didnt know many people in the building, but when theres gossip to be had, friends appear out of nowhere. Someone must have seen him going into Mylnes place, two streets away. Josphine was still facing him. Youre going to have lunch together. Shell have made you a quiche and a green salada light meal because, afterward, she at least has to go back to work. Josphine ground her teeth as she said she. Then youll have a little nap. Shell draw the curtains, take off her clothes, and drop them on the floor. Then shell climb under the white cotton lace bedspread with you. Antonio listened to her in shock. Mylne did have a white lace bedspread. How could Josphine know that? Have you been to her apartment? Josphine laughed harshly and tightened the dishcloth with her free hand. So I was right. White lace goes with everything! Jo, stop it! Stop what? Stop imagining things that arent true. Are you saying she doesnt have a lace bedspread? You really should be writing novels. Youve got the imagination for it. He was suddenly furious. He couldnt stand his wife anymore. He couldnt stand her schoolmarm tone, her slouch, her shapeless, colorless clothes, her bad skin, her limp brown hair. Everything about her reeked of effort and thrift. Im leaving before this conversation gets out of hand. So you are going to see her? At least have the courage to tell the truth, since you dont have enough balls to look for work, you lazy bastard! That last word did it. He felt anger pounding at his temples. He spit out his words so that he wouldnt have to take them back: Okay, fine! I meet her at her place every day at twelve thirty. She heats up a pizza and we eat it in her bed under the white lace bedspread. After brushing away the crumbs, I take off her bra, which is also white lace, and I kiss her all over. Happy now? I warned you not to push me. If you go to her now, dont bother coming back. Pack your bags. Itll be no great loss. He stumbled to their bedroom like a sleepwalker.

He pulled a big suitcase out from under the bed, lifted it onto the quilt, and piled his T-shirts, socks, and underwear in it. The red wheeled suitcase was from his days at Gunman Co., the American hunting gun manufacturer. He had been their director of European sales for ten years, taking wealthy clients on hunting trips to Africa, Asia, and South America to the bush, the savannah, or the pampas. In those days he was the white man with the year-round tan who had drinks with his clients, some of the wealthiest people on earth. That was when he started calling himself Tonio. Tonio Cortes. It was more masculine, more accomplished-sounding, than Antoine. He had to be those mens equal. He was proud of being able to hang out with these people without really being one of them. He earned a big salary and got a generous year-end bonus, a good retirement plan, and plenty of vacation days. He used to love coming home to Courbevoie. His apartment building had been built in the 1990s for young professionals like himself who couldn't yet afford to live in Paris proper. They lurked just on the other side of the Seine, waiting for their chance to move to the elegant neighborhoods of the capital whose lights they could see at night, glittering like a neon birthday cake.

Antoine never said when he was coming back from a trip. He would just push open the front door and wait a second in the entry before whistling briefly to announce his arrival. Josphine was always absorbed in her books. The two little girls would be in their bathrobes, one in pink, the other in blue. Hortense, the pretty, sassy one, had him wrapped around her little finger. And then there was soft, chubby Zo, who loved to eat. He'd sweep them up in his arms, repeating, My darlings, my little darlings. That was the ritual. Sometimes he'd feel a pang of guilt, recalling the sex he'd had just the night before. Antoine would hug them all the tighter, and the images of the other women faded. Then he'd launch into his hero act. He made up stories about hunting expeditions, including one about a wounded lion he finished off with a knife, an antelope he caught with a lasso, and a crocodile he knocked unconscious. Then a year ago Gunman Co. was bought out, and he was fired. That's the way it is with Americans, he explained to Josphine. One day you're the head of sales with a three-window office, the next you're filing for unemployment. For a while, his generous severance package allowed him to keep up the house payments, pay for school fees, language-immersion trips, the upkeep of the car, and ski vacations. Antoine had been philosophical about it all. He was fine. He wasn't the first person this had happened to, and he wasn't just anybody: he would soon find work. But after going through his savings, he felt his self-confidence wavering. Especially at night. He would wake at three in the morning, quietly get up, pour himself a whiskey in the living room, and turn on the TV. In the past, he had always felt very strong and insightful. When he first heard about the buyout and possible layoffs, he told himself that his ten years at Gunman Co. would certainly count for something. He was the first person to be laid off. Antoine sat on the bed and stared at the tips of his shoes. Looking for work was so depressing. He was just another number on a form. He sometimes thought about this while he was in Mylne's arms. He told her what he would do the day he became his own boss. With my experience, you know what I'd do? he would ask her, and Mylne listened. She believed in him. She had some money that her parents had left her, but he hadn't accepted any yet. He hoped to find a more impressive partner to join him on his next adventure.

Antoine first met Mylne Corbier when he took Hortense to the hairdresser on her twelfth birthday. Mylne was so impressed with the girl's composure that she gave her a free manicure. Hortense held out her hands as if she were granting a special privilege. Ever since that day, whenever she had time, Mylne polished Hortense's nails, and the girl would leave the salon admiring her reflection in her shiny nails. Mylne made Antoine feel good. She was petite, blond, vivacious, and had deliciously creamy skin. Her slight reserve and shyness made him feel at ease and confident. The red suitcase was soon packed. Yet Antoine dawdled, pretending to look for a pair of cufflinks and cursing loudly in the hope that Josphine would hear him and come into the bedroom and beg him to stay. He went into the hallway and stopped at the kitchen door. He waited, still hoping that she would take that step toward him, would try to piece together a reconciliation. But she didn't budge. Well, that's it, he said. I'm leaving. Fine. You can keep your keys. You'll probably have forgotten things and you'll need to come back for them. Warn me so I can plan to be out. It's better that way. Good idea. I'll keep them. What will you tell the girls? I don't know. I haven't thought about it. I'd rather be here when you speak with them. She turned off the faucet and leaned against the sink. I'll tell them the truth, if you don't mind. I don't feel like lying. But what will you tell them? The truth. That Daddy doesn't have a job anymore. That Daddy isn't feeling well and needs some time to himself, so he left. Time to himself?

Antoine repeated the phrase, comforted by it. That's good, it's not too final. It's good. Leaning against the door frame was a mistake. He was suddenly overcome by a wave of nostalgia. Just go, Antoine. There's nothing left to say. Please go! Josphine was staring at the floor. He followed her gaze to the suitcase at his feet. He'd completely forgotten about it. Okay then. Good-bye. If you need to reach me . . . You can call. Or I'll leave a

message for you at Mylnes salon. She'll always know where to find you, won't she? What about the plants? The plants? Who gives a damn about them? Fuck the plants! Jo, please! Don't get so worked up. I can stay if you want. She gave him a withering look. He shrugged, picked up his bag, and headed for the door. And then he was gone. Gripping the edge of the sink, Josphine began to sob so hard that her body shook. First she cried about the void Antoine would be leaving in her life after sixteen years of living together, the first man she ever slept with, the father of her two children. Then she cried thinking about the girls. Never again would they feel completely secure, knowing that they had a mother and a father who loved each other. And finally, there was the fear of being alone. Antoine had always been in charge of the finances, the taxes, and the mortgage. He chose their cars, and he unclogged the sink. She could always count on him. She just looked after the house and the girls schooling. The phone rang, jolting her out of her despair. Jo, is that you, darling? It was Iris, her older sister, whose upbeat, seductive voice got to Josphine every time. Iris Dupin was a tall, slim forty-four-year-old with long black hair that flowed over her shoulders like a wedding veil. She was named for her intense blue eyes. In her twenties, Iris had been the kind of woman who set trends while seducing every man she met. Iris didn't live or breathe like other mortals: she reigned. After college, she left for New York and enrolled in the film program at Columbia University. At the end of each year, the two best graduating students were given the funding to make a thirty-minute short feature. Iris had been one of the two. The other student was her boyfriend, Gabor Minar, a tall, shaggy Hungarian. They kissed backstage at the awards ceremony. Iris's future in movies was as plain to see as the Hollywood sign. And then out of the blue, she gave it all up. She was thirty years old, had just come back from the Sundance Festival, where she'd won some prize. She was planning a full-length feature that was already getting buzz. She even had a verbal commitment from a producer. And without any explanation Iris never explained anything she flew back to France and got married. It was incredibly traditional: the white veil, the church, and the priest. The place was packed, and everyone was holding their breath, half expecting Iris to whip off her dress and, stark naked, shout, Just kidding! Like in a movie. Nothing of the sort happened. The groom was a certain Philippe Dupin, who looked quite handsome in his morning suit. Iris said they had met on a flight to Paris, and that it had been love at first sight. Philippe was an uptight corporate lawyer full of his own convictions. He'd started an international business practice and formed alliances with big law firms in Paris, Milan, New York, and London. He was successful and couldn't understand why everyone else wasn't as well. Where there's a will there's a way, he liked to say. At the wedding, he looked at his wife's assembled friends with nonchalance mixed with disdain. His mother and father wore a slightly superior look that suggested they thought their son was marrying beneath him. The wedding guests left in disgust. Iris was no fun anymore. She was no longer the stuff of dreams. She had become horribly normal, and in Iris, this was in very poor taste. Some of her friends disappeared forever. She was off her pedestal, her crown rolling away. In time, Iris wound up embracing the same verities Philippe held so dear: a child behaved and did well in school; a husband made money and provided for his family; a wife took care of the household and made her husband proud. Iris didn't work. There are women who suffer an embarrassment of leisure and those who master it, she said. Doing nothing is an art. I must live on another planet, Josphine thought, listening as her sister's semiautomatic chatter was now coming around to the topic of Antoine's unemployment. Tell me, has your husband found anything yet? was Iris's favorite line, to which Josphine would always say no. Really? So he still hasn't worked that out? How can he afford to be picky, with such modest talent? Everything about my sister is phony, Josphine thought, wedging the phone against her shoulder. Is anything wrong? asked Iris. You sound odd. I have a cold. Poor thing. Don't forget, we're having dinner with Mother tomorrow night. Tomorrow night? She had completely forgotten. Every other Tuesday, Iris had Henriette over for dinner. Antoine tried, with some success, to avoid those dinners. He couldn't stand Philippe, who seemed to need to give Antoine footnotes when he spoke to him. He didn't like Iris either. When she talked to him, she made him feel like a wad of chewing gum stuck to the sole of her stilettos. Yes, darling, Iris said. Are you bringing Antoine, or is he vanishing into thin air again? Josphine smiled sadly. That was one way of putting it. He's not coming. We'll have to make up another excuse for him. You know Mother doesn't like his not being there. To be honest, I really don't care. You let Antoine get away with way too much. I would have thrown him out ages ago. Anyway, you're never going to change, poor darling. For as long as she could remember, Josphine had been the brainy one, the one who spent hours in the library doing research papers along with the other losers and misfits. She aced exams but couldn't be trusted with eyeliner. She twisted her ankle going down the stairs because her nose was in a book by Montesquieu. She even plugged in the toaster under running water because she was listening to France Culture on the radio. Jo stayed up till all hours studying while her

seductive older sister went out and conquered the world. When Josphine passed a prestigious teaching exam, Henriette asked about her plans. Where is that going to get you, dear? To be target practice for high school kids out in the slums? When she finished her dissertation on Economic and Social Development in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries and got her doctorate, her mother had again reacted with cynicism. Poor darling, you'd do far better writing about Richard the Lionheart's sex life. That at least would interest people. A film could be made out of it, or a TV series. You could pay me back for all those years I slaved to pay for your studies. Henriette had been hard on Josphine from the very beginning. Josphine's father used to say, affably and even lovingly, The stork must have picked the wrong house. This feeble joke earned him so many cold looks from his wife that he eventually stopped saying it. One evening, the night before Bastille Day, he put his hand to his chest, said, It's a little too soon to set off the fireworks, and died. Josphine and Iris were ten and fourteen. The funeral was magnificent. Looking tragic and majestic, Henriette orchestrated the whole thing, down to the smallest detail: the big sprays of white flowers strewn on the coffin, the funeral march. She copied Jackie Kennedy's black veil and had the girls kiss the casket before it was lowered into the ground. How could I have spent nine months in the womb of that woman people claim is my mother? Josphine wondered. The day Josphine was hired by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, she raced to the phone to tell her mother and sister. Neither understood what there was to be excited about. Recruited by a research center? Why would she want to work in that black hole? Josphine had to face facts: she just didn't interest her family. Marrying Antoine had been the only thing they understood. For once they had reacted positively. She had stopped being a mystery to them and become an ordinary woman, a wife, a mother. But Henriette and Iris were soon disappointed: Antoine wasn't going to cut it. His hair was too neat (no charm), his socks too short (no style), his paycheck too small (and paid by Americans!), and he sold hunting gunshows degrading! Worst of all, he had a sweating problem. Antoine's in-laws intimidated him, and when he was with them and only them he would perspire profusely. Jo suddenly felt a wave of pity for Antoine. Forgetting that she had resolved not to talk about him, she blurted: I just kicked him out, Iris. I kicked him out? For good? You don't know what it's been like to live with an unemployed husband. I feel so guilty about my job. I've been hiding my work behind pots and pans and potato peelings. Josphine looked at the kitchen table. I should clear it off before the girls get home from school for lunch. She'd done the math: eating at home was cheaper than in the cafeteria. After a year, I would think you'd have gotten used to it, said Iris. That's a shitty thing to say! I'm sorry, darling. But you seemed to be coping. So what are you going to do now? I'll keep working, of course, but I need to find something else, too. Give French lessons, grammar, spelling, whatever. You know, there's a need for that. There are so many dunces out there these days! Starting with your nephew Alexandre. He came home from school yesterday with a 38 in dictation. A 38! You should have seen Philippe. I thought he was going to have a stroke! Jo couldn't help but smile: the highly accomplished Philippe Dupin, father of a dunce. Alex was ten, the same age as Zo. At family gatherings the two would hide under the table and talk, looking serious and concentrated, or go off to build models together. Do the girls know? Not yet. How will you explain it to them? Josphine didn't answer. She picked at the edge of the Formica table with her nail until she'd accumulated a little black ball of grease, then flicked it across the kitchen. Jo, darling, I'm here. Iris's voice had turned soothing, and it made Josphine feel like crying again. You know I'm always here for you, and I'll never let you down. I love you as much as I love myself, and that's saying something! Jo laughed. The doorbell rang. That must be the girls. I have to go, but please, not a word about this tomorrow night. I really don't want to be the main topic of the evening! All right, Jo, I promise. And don't forget: Cric and Croc clobbered the big Cruc creeping up to crunch them. It was the old tongue twister they used to recite as kids. Josphine laughed again and hung up. She wiped her hands, took off her apron, pulled the pencil out of her hair, and ran to the door. Hortense breezed in without looking at her mother. Is Dad here? I got a terrific grade in creative writing! And I got it from that bitch Madame Ruffon. Hortense, please! That's your French teacher you're talking about. Well, she is a bitch. Hortense put down her backpack and took off her coat with the studied grace of a debutante removing her wrap before the ball. Don't I get a kiss? asked Josphine, annoyed at sounding needy. Hortense offered her soft, peachy cheek, pulling a mass of copper-colored hair away from her neck. I can't believe how hot it is! Positively tropical, as Dad would say. Hortense went to the stove and lifted the lid off one of the pots. At fourteen, she already had the look and manners of a woman. Her pale complexion contrasted with her coppery hair and her large green eyes. Just then, ten-year-old Zo burst into the kitchen and wrapped her arms around Josphine's legs. Mommy! Guess what? Max Barthillet invited me over to watch Peter Pan at his place! His dad gave him the DVD. Can I go after school? I don't have any homework for tomorrow. Okay,

Mommy? Can I? Zo looked at her mother, her face full of trust and love. Of course you can, sweetie. Max Barthillet? scoffed Hortense. You're letting her go to his house? He's my age and he's still in Zo's class! He keeps being held back. He's probably going to end up being a butcher or a plumber. There's no shame in being a butcher or a plumber, Hortense. Whatever. There's just something weird about him, with his pants two sizes too large, his studded belts, and his long hair. I don't think we should be seen with him. I don't care if he is a plumber, cried Zo. I think Max is handsome. You'll let me go, right, Mommy? What's for lunch? I'm starving! Scrambled eggs and potatoes. Yum! Can I break the yolk? I can squoosh it all together and add tons of ketchup. Zo still had her babyish looks: round cheeks, chubby arms, freckles, and deep dimples in her cheeks. She loved to give people loud kisses, and hug them tight. Max is only inviting you over because he wants to get to me, Hortense declared as she nibbled a French fry with her perfect white teeth. That's not true. He invited me! Nobody else! So there! Little brat! Max Barthillet. Let him dream. He doesn't stand a chance. I want a big strong man, like Marlon Brando. Who's Marion Brando, Mommy? A famous American actor, sweetie. Marlon Brando! He's so handsome. He was in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Dad took me to see it. He says it's a masterpiece. Yum! The fries are great, Mommy. Isn't Dad here? Did he have a meeting?

Hortense wiped her mouth. This was the moment Josphine was dreading. She met her elder daughter's inquisitive gaze, then looked at Zo, who was absorbed in dipping her fries in her egg yolk, which was splattered with ketchup. Antoine had never wanted to speak about money troubles or worries about the future in front of the girls. Hortense's unconditional love for him was all that remained of his past glory. She used to help him unpack when he got back from a trip. She admired his suits, felt the quality of his shirts, smoothed his ties. Josphine sometimes felt they had their own private world, that their family was divided into two castes: Antoine and Hortense were the nobility, and she and Zo were the vassals. Hortense was looking at Josphine, her question hanging in the air. He left. When is he coming back? He's not. I mean not here. Zo raised her head. He left for good? she asked, her mouth open in shock. Yes. He won't be my dad anymore? Of course he will. He just won't be living here with us. Josphine was terrified. She wished she could turn back the clock to her first days of motherhood, the first vacations the four of them took together, the first fight, the first making-up, the first awkward silence that became more and more silence. When did the charming man she'd married become Tonio Cortes, her tired, irritable, unemployed husband? Zo started to cry. Josphine hugged her, burying her face in Zo's soft curls. Above all, she knew she couldn't cry. She had to show them that she wasn't afraid. She told them all the things the psychology books suggest parents say to kids in the event of a separation. Daddy loves Mommy. Mommy loves Daddy. Daddy and Mommy love Hortense and Zo, but they can't live together anymore, so Daddy and Mommy are separating. But Daddy will always love Hortense and Zo, always be there for them, always. Josphine felt she was talking about people she'd never met. I have a hunch he didn't go very far, Hortense declared in a tight voice. He'll come back, right, Mommy? Zo asked. Don't say such stupid things, Zo. Daddy left, and he's not coming back. What I don't understand is, why her? Why that bimbo? She spat the word out with disgust, and Josphine realized that Hortense knew about Mylne had probably known long before she had. Problem is, now we're going to be really poor. I hope he'll give us a little money. He has to, doesn't he? Listen, Hortense . . . Josphine stopped, realizing that Zo shouldn't hear the rest. Go blow your nose and wash your face, sweetie, she said, gently pushing her younger daughter out of the kitchen. Zo sniffled as she trudged off. When she was out of earshot, Jo turned to Hortense. How come you know about . . . that woman? Get with it, Mom. The whole neighborhood knows. I was embarrassed for you. I wondered how you could possibly not know. Actually, I did know about it. I just turned a blind eye. That wasn't true. Josphine had only learned about Mylne the night before. Shirley, her neighbor and friend across the hall, told her. How did you find out? Jo asked Hortense. Her daughter stared at her coldly. Open your eyes, Mom! Look at how you dress. What your hair looks like! You've let yourself go. It's no surprise he went looking elsewhere! You need to leave the Middle Ages and come live in this century. Hortense was using the same amused disdain as Antoine. Josphine closed her eyes, covered her ears with her hands, and started to yell. Hortense! I forbid you to speak to me with that tone! We've been scraping by because of me, and because of the Middle Ages! Whether you like it or not. Don't you ever look at me like that! I'm, I'm your mother, and I . . . you have to . . . respect me! She was babbling, she felt ridiculous. And now a new fear gripped her: she would never be able to bring up her two daughters. She didn't have any authority, she was in way over her head. Josphine opened her eyes, and found Hortense looking at her oddly. She felt ashamed at having lost her temper. I can't get everything mixed up, she thought. They have only me to look to now, and I have to set an example. *Revue de presse*"A satisfying read."The Washington Post Bonjour, book lovers. Get ready for best-selling French author

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