

## 1.

Pat Redfern regarded herself in the mirror, adjusted her reading glasses so that they balanced perfectly at the end of her nose, and began her speech in very rehearsed, slightly stilted, and extremely slow French. It wasn't pretty but normally understandable.

'Bonjour Monsieur et Madame. C'est une grande plaisir pour moi... to open the annual Villambois fete for charity. I was asked from the *Mairie* to open the event after following the very successful art exhibition that I and my colleagues organised in the spring time. I know and understand that an Englishwoman is no longer a surprise to see in our village and so I must thank my friends who have helped me to put on this day today.'

Pat paused and adjusted her glasses in the mirror. 'Mmm, parfait,' she said to herself. She rehearsed the last line again 'Et maintenant, Voila!' she said with a flourish of her pretend scissors. She smiled at herself, re-adjusted her glasses for a third time, and tried the opening few lines for the fifth time in as many minutes.

The doorbell rang, breaking Pat's concentration and causing her glasses to slip marginally out of place.

'Come in, Valerie. C'est Ouvert!' Pat trilled, putting her script and glasses down on the sideboard and walking quickly across her beautifully-laid marble-tiled floor to the kitchen. 'Bonjour, Valerie, ca va?'

'Oh, Pat!' cried out Val. She'd spotted the fresh display of red and yellow roses. 'You have been busy. Oh, they're beautiful. They look even nicer in your vase than they did on the bush.'

'Aren't they gorgeous? I told you these would grow better if you put the ashes from the woodburner on them. I'm very pleased.'

The roses were indeed beautiful, freshly cut blooms, arranged magnificently in Pat's earthenware pot she'd found at the local Brocante. Pat was a perfectionist and no flower could make it into her home unless it had a pedigree as long as a Crufts winner.

'Come on then,' said Pat. 'We're late and I want the window seat today as the sun is definitely about to burst through.'

'Righty ho. Do I look ok, Pat? I don't want to overdo it.'

'You like great, Val. Now get a move on,' she said as she hurried her friend out the front door and towards the car.

It was a 20-minute ride to Pat's favourite restaurant in nearby La Conquete. 'Lou Marmitou' was owned by a local man called Francois and his wife Isobel. Off the beaten track for the majority of tourists, it was a rural, blue-collar-worker's heaven for huge lunches at a knock-down price. Pat rejoiced in introducing her friends to the place, although it had recently dawned on her that there were frequently more Brits there now than locals. It was clearly either

time to stop taking new people there or to find somewhere else as-yet undiscovered by the Brits so she could once again lead the way.

'Bonjour, Madame Redfern. How are you today?' Francois politely shook Pat's hand. 'Follow me, please.'

'May we have the window table, please, Francois? I think it's going to be sunny over lunch.'

'Mais oui madame, bien sur.' Francois led them to a table in the corner by the large French doors overlooking the patio which in turn overlooked the back fields that led to the River L'Isle. 'C'est magnifique, n'est-ce pas?'

Pat drank in the view, sighed loudly and admitted wholeheartedly, 'Oui, Francois. It most certainly is.'

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Patricia Gracie Redfern, nee Roberts, was forty-two years old and had been living the dream for five years. The daughter of Michael, a miner from Sheffield, and Margaret, a kitchen worker from nearby Worksop, Pat was an only child who had neither been blessed with strikingly good looks nor academic talent. A straight-forward, middle-of-the-road lass from the North, she grew up in a straight-talking, minimum-frills household that knew the value of good, hard work. She had a happy and balanced childhood with plenty of love, plenty of friends and two strong role models for parents. In her teens, Pat discovered she had a gift for making things; she excelled in her home economics class and became passionate about needlework, craft skills and gardening. By the time she was fifteen she had turned the family garden, despite the fact that it was no bigger than a postage stamp, into a beautifully ornate masterpiece with a kaleidoscope of colour. Completely Pat's own design and labour, she would spend hours at her various craft skills, enjoying her own company and, in the thoughts of her parents, keeping firmly out of mischief.

In fact, Pat was probably a dream teenager. Never late home, never gave a cause for worry and always completed her homework on time. A grafter, she liked to think. A bit dull was an alternative and not entirely inaccurate view.

In 1982, aged thirty-nine, Pat's mum, Margaret, died of cancer. Complaining of a stomach ache one week, the diagnosis was swift and the decline even faster. Within three months from diagnosis, Pat found herself reading a lesson at her Mum's funeral. Pat's father, Michael, was in disarray, completely at a loss as to who to turn to for the practical things of life. Pat stepped up to the mark, possibly to hide her own devastation at her loss, taking on the role of mother and housekeeper to her father and her younger brother, Tom. She cooked, she cleaned, she organised and she saw them through their darkest hours. In amongst her grief she maintained her garden, maintained her hobbies, and developed a strength of character that was to become

her hallmark. She put her family first and was universally acknowledged to have done a great job. Tom, two years her junior, maintained his studies, did well in his exams and left home to start a college course in Birmingham. A bright and ambitious young man, he had no interest in following his father down the mines so left to seek his own challenges. Pat kept in touch with her brother but they remained good friends rather than close relatives.

Pat married Paul when she was twenty-two and, once married, they lived in a two-bedroomed semi in the suburbs of Doncaster. They'd met at the local club in the mid 80s, gone out for about two years, then sort of shuffled into marriage as the next obvious step in their relationship. Pat wasn't that interested in romance and if truth be known was far more impressed by Paul's business skills. He was an extremely accomplished builder and, together with his partner, they established a very good reputation in the local area. Their new home became their passion and although it wasn't very large and the garden wasn't much bigger than her childhood one, it became a sort of show home for the local street. Every hour spare was spent working on their house and for Pat in particular it was time well spent. She worked in the local council offices as an administrator during the day and then came alive during the evenings and at weekends when she baked, sewed and gardened. At about age thirty, a local friend asked Pat if she would like to bake a cake to sell at a local fete as part of the Women's Institute stand. The rest, as the well worn cliché goes, is history. Within an instant she became a fully-paid-up member of the local WI and was a woman in her element.

Pat was a born organiser. There was nothing she enjoyed more than orchestrating people and activities. Some called her bossy but in her heart she knew she was the force behind every successful event the WI had organised in the last five years. She was a meticulous planner, had the foresight to see problems coming round the corner, and the presence of mind to deal with difficult people as well as difficult things. She was a wise woman whose opinion was sought on the vast majority of subjects. There was nothing on which she could not be consulted, and would happily offer an opinion and take charge of everyone and everything. Indeed, there was only one subject on which she was inexperienced: children.

Pat had always taken the view that if children were meant to happen then they would have come along at some point in their lives. The fact that they hadn't was just the way it was, and so neither Pat nor Paul had worried too much about it. There were moments, such as at family parties and weddings, where the subject was mentioned, normally by wannabe grandparents, but the subject was quickly changed. Actually, on reflection by many in their families who had children, it was considered that they had a lifestyle to be envied. They were in their mid-thirties, they had money, a lovely home, ran two cars, and engaged with an eclectic and diverse group of friends. They took at least one holiday a year to somewhere exotic, and frequently went down to London to take in a show, see the sights, and enjoy a good dinner. On

top of that, Paul had his successful business and was a season-ticket holder for Doncaster Town, his local football team. Without doubt, and certainly in the eyes of many, life for the Redferns was undeniably good.

At about age thirty-five it came as a surprise therefore to Pat to find that there was a growing dissatisfaction inside her. It was a sort of deep down uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach that all was not well, a sense of feeling unfulfilled and slightly out of control but try as she might she just could not identify what it was. To make matters worse it wasn't a constant thought, but would suddenly materialise at the most inappropriate times: dinner with friends, watching a movie at the cinema, or walking around the supermarket. Suddenly an almost-guilty feeling would materialise inside and she would become slightly uneasy, disconsolate and worried. It was never enough to arouse suspicion or for friends to even notice, but it was there nonetheless. Practical as always, she dismissed it as an irrelevance; for sure, it was nothing that she was going to bother Paul about. She was a Yorkshire lass; any sort of unease was dismissed and she just got on with whatever event she was immersed in next.

It was just before the turn of the year that her life suddenly came into focus. Her 'eureka' moment was an innocuous gift from her father just before she went on holiday. The book was about a man and wife who'd left England and gone to live in the south of France. Selling their modest English home on the outskirts of London, they'd purchased a chateau in a rural part of the Languedoc region of France and set about turning it into a bed-and-breakfast hotel. The book was inspiring: full of wonderful anecdotes about renovating the old chateau, working with the idiosyncratic locals whose reliability at turning up on time was always questioned but whose quality of work never was, fabulous tales of food, wine and easy living. But, most importantly, there were tales of gardening, craftwork, and being part of the local community. It was as if she'd just been fitted with the missing piece of her own jigsaw puzzle. Her mind was racing, and the more she read the more her excitement grew. Fetes, dances, market stalls, recipes and sewing. Pat was the undisputed leader of the WI sewing circle in Doncaster and she could see herself now, a pillar in the local community, the leader of whatever the French equivalent is of 'Stitch and Bitch', taking charge of her small rural commune and bringing a renewed sense of community to all around.

She didn't dare share these views with Paul during that holiday; this was far too important a decision to rush. Instead, upon their return she researched the by reading more accounts of people who'd made the transition abroad. There seemed to be almost a new magazine a month specialising in living in France and very quickly Pat realised that although the South of France was alluring, it was the Department of the Dordogne she wanted to live in. It was far enough south to get good weather, had beautiful green countryside, and a mass of towns and villages with markets, *brocantes* and *vide greniers*.

She made up her mind to approach her husband but it wasn't going to be easy; Paul didn't like cheese, drank only Yorkshire-made bitter, was completely uninterested in anything foreign let alone learning a foreign language, and of course he had his own very-successful business in the local area. On top of that, his passion was football which, although the French played with equal if not more fervour, Pat couldn't see him developing the same passion for Perigueux, the capital of the Dordogne, as he had for Doncaster Town.

Her moment came when she remembered a conversation they'd had a couple of years earlier. They'd talked then about the potential of the two of them building their own home somewhere near Doncaster. Pat was careful to excite his enthusiasm for this project before moving onto the idea of perhaps building somewhere slightly further away. Paul took the bait surprisingly easily and, once convinced that building their own place was achievable, Pat broached the idea of France. It took time and plenty of persuasion but finally Pat convinced Paul that moving to France to start a new life was definitely the way forward for the two of them. As she consistently pointed out to him, the cost of housing was so cheap, he could do whatever work was required himself, and just look what they could buy: a house with a barn, outbuildings and land. They could afford a chateaux or an old mill house with acres of garden and river. They could have chickens, ducks, even a goat if they so wished. 'Think of it,' she would say. 'The two of us with our own little patch of France: growing, rearing and living the good life.'

Pat's enthusiasm was infectious and, despite Paul's contentment with life in general in England, it breathed a new life into their marriage. They both became absorbed with the idea of moving to France and living the dream. A few months after the initial seed was sown, and after three trips to the region to look for properties, they bought their dream home. Not exactly a dream at the time of buying, it was an old cottage with a large barn attached, two smaller barns in the courtyard area, and about two acres of land including a stream, a small apple orchard, a wealth of mature conifers, and one huge, fabulous 70-foot oak tree. To Pat in particular, it was heaven. Quiet, secluded and part of the hamlet called La Branchie. The house was small but the barn was huge and there was the 'p' word in abundance: potential. They moved into their house in La Branchie early the following year and started work.

They shared their paradise with seven other houses in La Branchie and the hamlet in turn belonged to the local commune of Villambois. There were another six hamlets belonging to Villambois and given the number in the village itself, the commune amounted to about 200 people. Financially secure, they'd bought the house outright by selling their England home and had sufficient money to have a large budget for the renovation work as well enough to invest and provide them with a small but adequate income, run a car, and live a lifestyle that suited them both.

The language proved tricky for Paul, less so for Pat. Pat's mother had always been passionate about all things French and had actively encouraged her child to speak French from an early age. As a result, Pat became a good speaker, not anywhere near fluent and with a very stilted 'English' accent, but perfectly able to hold her own in an everyday normal conversation. One thing however became immediately apparent; Paul was never going to learn a foreign language. If this adventure was to be successful then somebody had to take on the role of translator and that somebody was Pat. Pat didn't mind, she was in her element and as far as she was concerned, this was all part of the dream.

The dream was surprisingly hard work at first and it had taken about a-year-and-a-half to complete the work in the house and barn. It was almost like being newly-married again, 18 months where they spent every day together working towards a common goal. To Pat, Paul was incredible; there was nothing he couldn't do and when a job was too big for him, he enlisted the support of one of their new French friends and they did it together, communication being largely conducted with a variety of noises, hand gestures and facial expressions. After nearly two years they stood back and admired their work. The house was perfect and everything she'd hoped for and, now completed, where there once stood a barn, now stood a huge four-bedroomed house with two bathrooms, a study, massive kitchen-dining-room and a warm and friendly lounge, complete with wood burner, French-oak flooring and sumptuous furniture.

Every day, the house and garden developed further until finally, after another 18 months of nature growing what had been planted, Pat set about maintaining their paradise, turning the dozens of raw ingredients that were in her garden into fabulous dinners, lunches, and of course a multitude of jams, chutneys, cakes, pies, and anything else that took her fancy. She was in heaven, her dream a reality, and she had only just turned forty.

It was probably at this point that Paul's dream started to fade.

Paul Redfern was a decent and honest, hard-working Yorkshire man who craved the simple things in life. Brought up by a single mum after his father died when he was just seven, he was the eldest of three brothers and had taken on the responsibility of looking after his mum and younger siblings as soon as he could. Not remotely gifted at school he was a very good footballer and an exceptional craftsman. He was very similar to Pat; he'd excelled at school in craft studies, particularly woodwork, and decided that a career with his hands was what he was destined to do. Leaving school at sixteen he was fortunate to get an apprenticeship with a local firm whilst undertaking a day-release course at college in building studies. He emerged after four years as a very competent and capable builder, able to turn his hand to most tasks and with a growing reputation for reliability and quality. Aged twenty, he met Pat at the local nightclub. He didn't have a romantic bone in his body, was very inexperienced in love but with Pat he found a great friend and someone he knew he could trust. Not long after meeting Pat he

decided to set up his business partnership with one of his colleagues from his apprenticeship. Working seven days a week, initially to get the work and start building his reputation, after two years or so he was firmly established in the local area. Aged twenty-five he decided it was time to take the next logical step in his relationship with Pat. On a wet Sunday afternoon after returning home from seeing his beloved Doncaster Town win the local league and, with a few pints of Yorkshire's finest courage in his system, he proposed. Pat looked past the alcohol-breath and the slightly-slurred voice and said yes. It is fair to say that Paul had absolutely no idea what he was letting himself in for but he quickly realised when he stood back and watched while Pat took charge, not just of the wedding, but of the subsequent house purchase, renovation work, social circle and, in fact, everything else in life. At first he had no problem at all with this; he enjoyed the equal partnership and tolerated his friends' teasing. After a while, however, it started to grate a bit, and then it started to grate a lot.

Paul wanted children. They'd discussed having kids at various points during their marriage and Paul felt that he'd dropped enough hints to Pat about wanting to hear the patter of a tiny football team, a son or two he could take to the park for a kick-about and to watch Doncaster Town win the local cup. They'd made a first-rate job of their home and his business with his partner was blossoming so now was surely the time for a family. Trouble was, he just didn't know how to tell Pat. So he dropped hints. Whether they were too subtle or Pat simply chose to ignore them Paul couldn't guess, but the end result was frustration for Paul and a slight cooling in the marriage. As time drifted by, the subject was discussed less frequently. Whilst it annoyed Paul, it never quite caused him to want to confront Pat so instead he concentrated on his business. When Pat discovered the Women's Institute they spent less time together. She was a whirling dervish of activity, her weekends spent in a haze of organising and showing. Suddenly, there were committees of women around his house all clamouring to take charge of various events and activities. He became progressively more dissatisfied with life and booked a holiday just before Christmas where he resolved to tackle the issue with Pat and give her an ultimatum: it was either children or the end of the road.

But he couldn't do it. He was a non-confrontational man, preferring the quiet life, and he just didn't know what to say, so instead he said nothing. Early in the New Year Pat became obsessed with the idea of building a house from scratch. It had been something they'd talked about off-and-on a while ago and he was still amenable to the idea. Then she suggested they could build in France. 'Think of it,' she'd said, showing him a magazine of French property. 'Just look what we could afford.' He was surprised with himself at just how quickly he became convinced.

Paul wasn't a greedy man but when he saw what was available for the money they had he was hooked. In private moments he also figured that once settled in France Paul would

definitely have a stronger case for having a family. As Pat wouldn't be working it would be a perfect opportunity. He opened his mind fully to the idea and embraced Pat's dream as his own.

And now, here he was nearly four years later: bored, bored, bored. He done what they'd agreed they do. He'd made his house, landscaped the garden, learned about chickens, ducks, streams, and built a garage out of an old outbuilding. He'd drunk red wine, white wine, and champagne. He'd eaten foie gras, crepes, oysters, and tried horse meat, goat's cheese and wild boar. But now, after a few months of easy living, it was time for fresh challenges.

He was forty-two years old and used to grafting ten-hour days, sometimes six days a week. He didn't want four-hour lunches everyday, was fed up of organic food the whole time, and craved a decent Chinese takeaway, a night watching the football with his mates, and, above all else, a decent pint of beer. They had Sky TV, of course, so he still got to watch his beloved football, but it wasn't the same as cheering on the stands of Doncaster Town. It was all getting very samey.

The master-plan regarding the family had failed miserably. Pat's obsession with the house, his own working routines, and, increasingly, the Villambois community work, meant that their sex life had died away to almost nothing. The spark, it seemed, had gone and this time he was worried maybe it was gone for good.

In their fourth year Paul had to return to the UK to attend his grandmother's funeral, which in itself was sad, but gave him the chance to catch up with all his mates. Pat had necessarily stayed in France; someone had to feed the 'bloody menagerie' as Paul had called their collection of animals. Paul thoroughly enjoyed himself, quickly settling back into the routines he used to love: enjoying his pint while watching the football, drinking far too much, and gorging himself on Chinese takeaway. Of course, to his mates he was definitely living the dream. 'Can't beat it,' was his first standard phrase. His second was probably slightly more accurate: 'Trouble with France,' he'd say, laughing, 'is it's full of the bloody French!'

Driving back to the Dordogne, Paul made up his mind that he would definitely talk to Pat about the family issue. He was now forty-two, she just forty, and whilst he was no expert he was pretty convinced that time was running out. Besides, if he didn't have a son now then when his kid was playing football for the first team, his mates would assume Paul was his granddad. Paul was resolute and full of confidence as he turned into his driveway, not knowing then that he never would have the discussion with Pat. As it turned out, his life was about to change forever.