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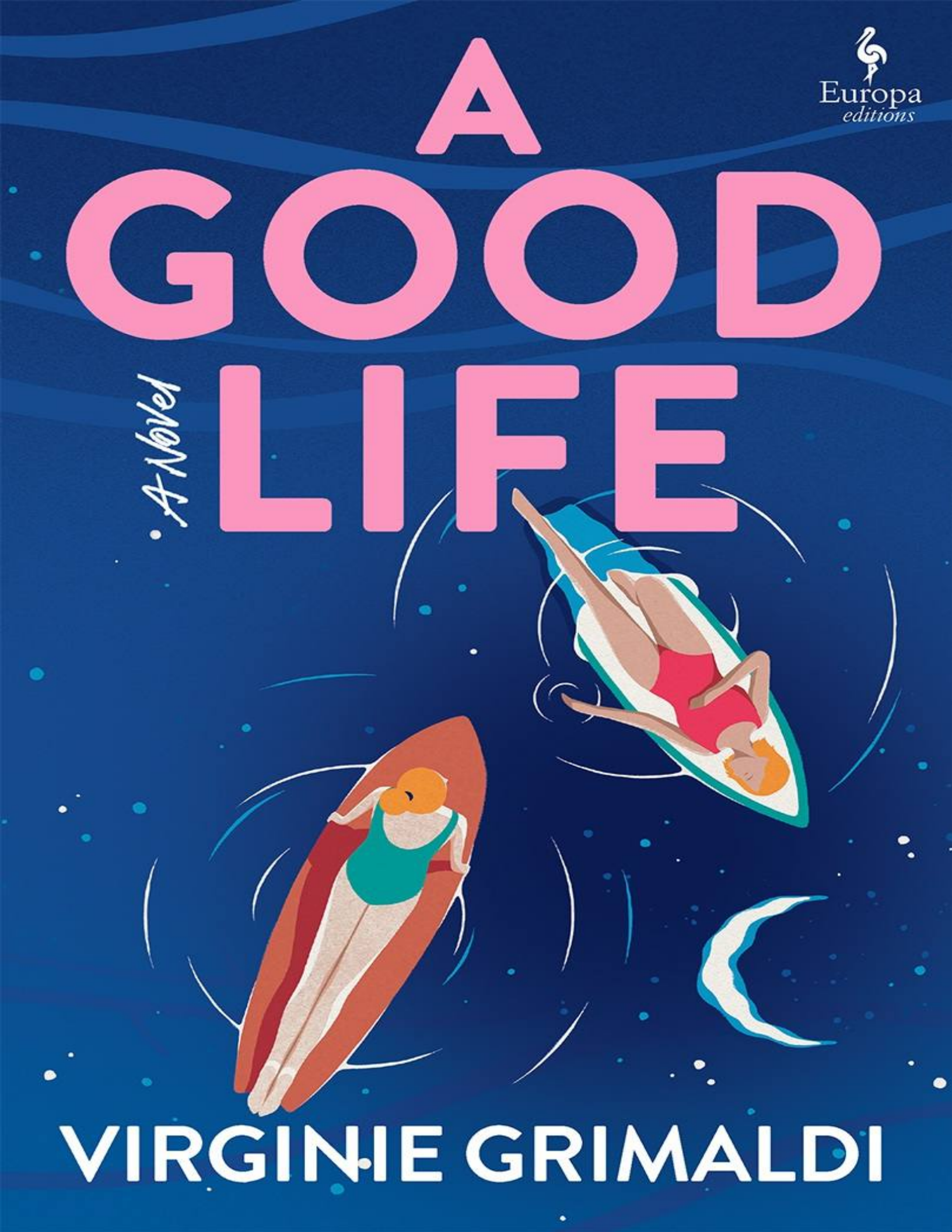
A GOOD LIFE

A Novel



VIRGINIE GRIMALDI

Virginie Grimaldi was born in 1977 in Bordeaux, where she still lives. She is the author of nine novels and was France's most read author for three consecutive years between 2019 and 2021. Her novels have been bestsellers in Europe and have been translated into more than twenty languages.

For Europa Editions, **Hildegarde Serle** has translated acclaimed novels by Christelle Dabos (*A Winter's Promise*) and Valérie Perrin (*Fresh Water for Flowers*). She lives in London.

Dear reader,

I'm entrusting Emma and Agathe to you, over one summer in the Basque Country.

I wish you a good read (and a good life).

Yours,

Virginie Grimaldi

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This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously.

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Virginie Grimaldi

A GOOD LIFE

Translated from the French
by Hildegarde Serle

A GOOD LIFE

"It's like an invisible chain
Had linked our wrists
On the day we were born
So if you sink, I sink, too
And I'm far too fond of life
For that to be allowed."
—CLARA LUCIANI, "My Sister"

For my sister.

YESTERDAY
APRIL 1985
EMMA—5 YEARS OLD

My sister was born this morning. She's ugly.
She's all red and all streaky.
Daddy asks if I'm pleased, I say no. I'm not pleased. I don't want her. I hope they're going to leave her at the hospital.

I won't lend her my toys.

But I do like her teddy.

TODAY
AUGUST 5
EMMA

2:32 P.M.

The gate's not bolted. It creaks as I push it open, as if reproaching me for not having come for a long time. The white paint has flaked off in places, revealing the original black. After Mima was burgled, I insisted she get an alarm installed, as well as a padlock and several motion-sensor spotlights around the house. She tried every excuse: "The cat will set off the alarm;" "I won't be able to open my windows;" "Monsieur Malois was burgled and the alarm didn't work;" "It's too expensive;" "Anyway, I've nothing worth stealing;" "Leave me in peace, Emma, you're as obstinate as your father."

I'm the first to arrive. The shutters are closed, weeds have crept up between the flagstones of the terrace, the tomato plants are weighed down with fruit. Mima planted them on my birthday. She phoned me just after, cursing the soil lodged under her nails that refused to wash away. "I planted some beefsteak tomatoes, I know you like them," she told me. "I'll make you a fine salad when you come."

Right beside the beefsteaks, there's a cherry-tomato plant, Agathe's favorite. I pick one, wipe it on my shirt, and sink my teeth into it. The skin breaks, the flesh bursts out and spills over my lips, the sharp juice leaving seeds on my tongue, and it's childhood memories that come knocking.

"You're already here?"

Agathe's voice makes me jump. I didn't hear her arrive. She clasps me in her arms, while mine remain dangling. In the family, we're pretty stingy with displays of affection. But not my sister. She's fluent in hugging and wears her heart on her sleeve.

"I'm happy to see you!" she says, relaxing her grip. "After all this time . . . "

She breaks off, stares at me, and I get emotional when her eyes meet mine.

"I was amazed when I got your message," she continues. "Great idea you had. I'm livid about Mima's house being sold, but it's no surprise coming from our dear uncle. The guy's still asking me for the twenty centimes he lent me when I was eight, I'm sure he was a parking meter in another life."

"It would explain his square head."

"Yeah. If you press on his nose, he shits a parking ticket. Right, shall we open up the house?"

I follow her to the door. Sunlight splashes her hair, and some long white strands show up in her blond mop. My heart contracts at this evidence of time passing. When I saw her every day, my little sister didn't age. We're five years older since the last time, and suddenly Agathe has become an adult.

"Don't know where I shoved the key."

She empties her bag out onto the doormat, the long bronze key lies there, in the middle of the packs of chewing gum and cigarettes.

"There it is!"

I'd have liked it not to be there. For us to leave, unable to enter, forced to give up. I'd have liked never to have suggested to my sister that we come to spend our last vacation here, like when we were little, before the house belongs to others. I'd have liked never to know the feeling of this door opening without our grandmother's voice asking us to take off our shoes.

YESTERDAY
SEPTEMBER 1986
EMMA—6 YEARS OLD

Agathe's pooped in the bath again. Her turds are bobbing all around me. Mommy takes her out of the water, shrieking. She often shrieks, since Agathe.

When Daddy gets home from work, Mommy tells him. He laughs, so she laughs, too. I give them a cuddle.

Tomorrow, I'm starting at primary school. I hope I'll be in Cécile's class, but not in Margaux's. She shows off too much about her long hair, and also, she told me I was dumb because I couldn't ride a bike without stabilizers.

I want long hair, too, but Mommy won't let me. She says it's too much of a pain to wash because of my curls. She cuts it short with the big orange scissors. When I'm big, I'll have long hair like Margaux.

TODAY
AUGUST 5
AGATHE

2:35 P.M.

Before I've even set foot in the house, the alarm starts wailing. At least it puts paid to any tears. Emma jumps like popcorn, before sticking her fingers in her ears. Note for later: if I plan on doing a burglary, don't ask my sister to join me.

I tap out the code on the keypad. Mima had shared it with me when she was in hospital, so I could come and feed the cat.

8085.

The years her two granddaughters were born.

I open the downstairs shutters, Emma deals with those upstairs. I join her in Mima's bedroom, and find her rooted to the spot in front of the chest of drawers. The jewelry box lies open, empty. She shakes her head:

"Clearly, the parking meter remembered he had a mother."

"I'd pay a lot to see his face when he discovers that most of the jewelry's fake."

"Does he know we're here?"

"No. I've not spoken to him since the funeral."

Silence descends. I said the taboo word. Emma didn't come to Mima's funeral. Supposedly, a school trip she couldn't cancel. Can't imagine a destination that could take priority over saying farewell to our grandmother, but I wasn't in a position to interfere.

We go back down to the sitting room. On the waxed cloth over the little wooden table, the TV program lies open at Friday May 27. In the basket, the apples are shriveled.

"Take the cheese and fruit home with you," Mima told me, on one of my hospital visits. "I could be here for a while, they'll go off."

I refused to do so, out of superstition. She was recovering a little each day, the doctors were confident.

"I'm not going to eat your rotten cheese," I said. "An entire town could be wiped out just by opening your fridge. Don't know why they bother to build nuclear bombs when there's camembert."

She laughed, so I went on:

"Why d'you think you've lost all your teeth? It's not age, Mima, it's the stink."

The nurse's aide brought in supper, Mima smiled on seeing the slice of bland cheese wrapped in cellophane. I kissed her forehead and promised I'd be back tomorrow. At 4:56 in the morning, a stroke more severe than the previous one took away all our tomorrows.

Emma opens the fridge:

"We need to go shopping."

“We can do it tomorrow, no? I’d rather go to the beach. The weather’s fantastic, let’s make the most of it, never lasts long here.”

She doesn’t need to insist, her eyes give me the message. She sits at the table and starts writing a list. The honeymoon has lasted barely a few minutes, and it’s back to the old routine, as if we’d left it behind just yesterday.

“What d’you have for breakfast?”

“Coffee,” I reply, trying to hide my disappointment.

She writes it down. Her hair’s very short, in profile she could be our mother. I’d never noticed how like her she is. Apparently, I got my looks entirely from my father, particularly his nose. Not sure I’m grateful for that, even considered having it surgically tweaked, but in the end, I kept it as it is—could come in handy. If I’m on a boat one day and the tiller stops working, for example.

“We could have veal tonight?” Emma suggests.

“I’m vegetarian.”

“Since when?”

“Two or three years.”

“Right. You do eat chicken, though?”

“No, but you can get some for yourself.”

“Oh, no, never mind. We’ll eat fish.”

“I don’t eat seafood either.”

“But what do you feed yourself on? Seeds?”

“Only seeds, yes. In fact, I’ll have to watch out because I’ve noticed something weird. Look.”

I move closer to her and lift up the sleeve of my T-shirt.

“Can’t see anything,” she says.

“Yes, there, look closer. You can’t see it?”

“No.”

“I’m starting to sprout feathers. And the other day, I laid an egg.”

She rolls her eyes and returns to her list, but I can clearly see her mouth struggling not to laugh.

YESTERDAY
NOVEMBER 1986
AGATHE—1½ YEARS OLD

No.

TODAY
AUGUST 5
EMMA

3:10 P.M.

The supermarket is almost deserted. Just a few older folks have come to enjoy the cool of the frozen-food aisle. Everyone's at the beach. I can picture the serried ranks of towels, the kids' feet sending sand flying into eyes, the calls of concerned parents, the laughter of others, the exhausting heat. I no longer find any charm in those waves I spent my childhood in, or the hot sand trampled in adolescence. I used to count the days keeping me from the ocean, which always seemed more beautiful than when last I'd left it, but I can now envisage the rest of my life without it. I don't hate it, it's worse: it's become dispensable.

"I'm going to look for the TP," Agathe announces, moving off.

I cross toilet paper off the list. I'd divided my list into aisles, dry goods first, then fresh produce, then, finally, frozen food.

My sister returns with her arms full of items, and none resemble toilet paper.

"I found brioche with chocolate chips! D'you remember Mima's?"

"Agathe, we wrote a list."

"*You* wrote a list," she retorts. "And *you* insisted that we plan for every meal of the week."

I don't respond. We've been together barely a few hours, and must remain so for seven days. There'll be no shortage of occasions for sparks to fly.

She opens the pack and tears off some brioche.

"Want some?"

She expects me to say no. I grab it and stuff it into my mouth. Don't want her, too, thinking I'm tight-assed.

It's Alex's favorite weapon, the reproach he pulls out when I go on about his lack of initiative: "You check everything after I've filled the dishwasher, you always find fault when I make a meal, you never approve of my suggestions for outings. Nothing I do is ever right, so I daren't do anything anymore."

Unanswerable. And, if I must be honest, not entirely wrong.

I've long loved his way of being in the world, of observing life with his quiet strength, his capacity for letting himself be carried along by it, adapting to whatever he found in it. He was the serenity I lacked; if I didn't feel it, I could live with it. I clung to him so he'd drag me away from childhood. I buried my anxieties inside his solid frame, his big arms totally enfolded me, I sheltered within them.

But time distorts other people's qualities and makes them seem like defects.

Agathe reseals the pack of brioche and throws me a cheeky smile:

"I'm off to find some chips, guess you didn't put them on your list."

I let her head off to the appropriate aisle, carefully avoiding warning her that she has a chocolate moustache.

YESTERDAY
DECEMBER 1987
EMMA—7 YEARS OLD

We spent Christmas at Mima and Papi's. Uncle Jean-Yves and our cousins, Laurent and Jérôme, were all there. The four of us slept in the downstairs room, it was good fun, Agathe was snoring because she had a cold, sounded like Daddy's electric clippers. When we got up, we didn't even pee, just went straight to the tree to see if Father Christmas had left anything under it.

At school, Margaux told me he doesn't exist, I said he did, but the teacher said Margaux was right. I cried all through recess. In the evening, Daddy told me that was just nonsense, but then I didn't know who was telling the truth anymore, so I cried again. Daddy told me to stay in my room, that he'd prove to me that Father Christmas exists, but I must promise not to open the door. I promised, and wiped my nose on my sleeve.

Soon after, Daddy spoke to me through the door to my room. He was with Father Christmas, but I wasn't allowed to see him, I could only hear him. I got butterflies in my tummy. A booming voice said: "Ho, ho, ho, Emma, I am Father Christmas, I've come to tell you that I do exist, and will soon be coming to deliver presents for you and your little sister. Have you been a good girl this year?" I answered yes, even if I did steal a fry from Agathe's plate once. Apparently, he sees everything, but they were just too yummy.

He didn't stay long, but it doesn't matter, now I know he exists. I promised him I wouldn't tell anyone about it at school, but I still told Cécile, and Margaux a bit, and Olivier, Coumba, Natacha, and Vincent, because he's my boyfriend.

The presents were under the tree, but Papi and our parents were still sleeping. Only Mima was awake, and we had to wait for the others to get up. She gave us hot milk and chocolate-chip brioche.

I got a Popples cuddly toy, and best of all, a Speak & Spell. I played with it all day, so much that the batteries had to be changed! It proves that Father Christmas exists because it's exactly what I wrote in my letter that Mommy sent him. Margaux's a big fat liar.

Agathe got a Tiny Tears doll that pees (gross), and a firefly. It's like a cuddly toy, but its head lights up when she presses its tummy. Maybe we won't need to sleep with the corridor light on anymore, because I've had enough of it. I know that otherwise she gets anxious, but it stops me from sleeping, and I don't make a great fuss about that. She's sometimes cute, my sister, but all the same, it was easier before she turned up. I did write that in my letter to Father Christmas, too, but he obviously didn't understand the message.

YESTERDAY
DECEMBER 1987
AGATHE—2½ YEARS OLD

No want bye-byes.

TODAY
AUGUST 5
AGATHE

4:01 P.M.

The heat charges into the mall as the automatic doors open. The cart is full, the items sorted by category into reusable bags. I suspect she considered doing so alphabetically.

"Now we've done your favorite activity, can we move on to mine?"

"Which one?"

"*La playa*!"

Emma rolls her eyes. She knows I won't give up, my special talent being getting what I want by wearing people down. That's how I got my job, how I got my apartment. And how I made Mathieu bolt, too. The jerk. When, for once, I was envisaging things being long-term, the guy cleared off before his trial period was over.

"Mind awfully giving me a hand?"

Emma has filled the car's trunk and it looks like a Tetris game. I grab the cart and head off to the storage area, wondering whether this week together was such a good idea after all.

I can't say I don't love my sister. She's even, undoubtedly, the person most at home in my heart since Mima left us in the lurch. But I'm convinced, because I feel it deeply, that one can both love someone and be unable to stomach them. Onions have the same effect on me.

I sometimes think that, if we weren't tied by blood, I wouldn't be able to put up with her. That all we share, these days, are our memories.

"Alright," she says, turning on the ignition. "As long as we go to the Chambre d'Amour beach."

I'd have preferred the Plage des Cavaliers, less known to tourists, but whatever. A concession each, satisfaction for each. Emma drives with eyes fixed on the horizon. Her frown gives way to a broad smile when she realizes I'm watching her. I, in turn, smile. I hope that, behind our grown-up getup, behind our very different lives, the Delorme sisters are still there.

4:20 P.M.

A reception committee awaits us at Mima's house. Our dear Uncle Jean-Yves, aka the parking meter, is seated at the table with his wife Geneviève.

They watch us walk in, our arms loaded, without saying a word.

In the family, manners are no joke, and good manners dictate that it's the younger person that must greet the older one. It's the kind of training you swallow whole, and apply conscientiously throughout your life without ever questioning it.

"Hello uncle," I go, bending down to kiss him.

"Hi girls. Emma, it's been a long time."

My sister gives him a peck, while babbling: