

# The Only Girl in the World

A MEMOIR

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BOOK EXTRACT



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## INTRODUCTION

In 1936, Louis Didier was thirty-four and financially well-off. A man from humble origins, he had risen remarkably quickly through the ranks of French society and he now ran a company in Lille. Initiated into an esoteric lodge of Freemasonry, he adhered to an extremely dark spiritual vision of a fallen world governed by grim forces.

That year he met a man, a miner from the town of Fives, who was struggling to feed his many children. Louis Didier suggested the miner 'entrust' to him his youngest child, a flaxen-haired six-year-old girl. 'Jeannine will never want for anything; she will have a brilliant education and enjoy a very comfortable life. My only condition is that you will no longer see her.'

It's unclear whether there was a financial transaction. The

miner agreed. Jeannine left to live under Louis Didier's protection and never saw her family again.

Louis Didier kept his promise. Jeannine was sent to boarding school and received an excellent education. When she reached the age of consent, she came back to live with her guardian. He had her study philosophy and Latin at university in Lille, and made sure she earned her degree.

I don't know when Louis Didier revealed his grand project to Jeannine. Did he talk about it when she was still a little girl who spent only holidays with him? Or did he wait until she'd grown up and become his wife? I think that deep down Jeannine 'always knew' what her mission was: to give him a daughter as blonde as she was, and then to take charge of the child's education.

Louis believed that the child Jeannine brought into the world would be, like her father, 'chosen'—and that later in life she would be called upon to 'raise up humanity'. Thanks to her mother's qualifications, this child would be raised away from the polluting influences of the outside world. Louis Didier would be responsible for training her physically and mentally to become a 'superior being', equipped to undertake the difficult and momentous task he had assigned her.

Twenty-two years after he took possession of Jeannine, Louis Didier decided the time had come for her to bring his daughter into the world and that the date of birth should be November 23rd, 1957.

On November 23rd, 1957, Jeannine gave birth to a very blonde little girl.

Three years later, aged fifty-nine, Louis Didier liquidated his

assets, bought a house near Cassel, between Lille and Dunkirk, and withdrew to live there with Jeannine in order to devote himself entirely to carrying out the project he had devised back in 1936: to make his child a superhuman being.

That child was me.

## Linda

When I first come to the house I'm not yet four. I'm wearing a red coat. I can still feel its texture against my fingers, thick and felted. I'm not holding anyone's hand and there's no one beside me. I can just feel my fists bunched in my pockets, gripping the fabric, clinging to it.

There's lots of brown gravel on the ground. I hate this place. The garden seems to go on forever; I feel like it's swallowing me up. And then there's that dark, disturbing structure: a huge house looming to my right.

I hear the heavy gate scraping along the gravel as it closes behind me. A screeching *creak-creak-creak* until the two sides of the gate clang together. Then comes the *click* of the lock, followed by a *clunk*: the gate is shut for good. I don't dare turn around. It feels like a lid has just been closed over me.

Whenever the two of us are alone, my mother tells me it's my fault we had to leave Lille and bury ourselves in this hole. That I'm not normal. I have to be hidden, otherwise I'd be locked up in Bailleul straightaway. Bailleul is the lunatic asylum. I went there once, when my parents took on one of their inmates as a maid. It's a terrifying place, filled with screams and commotion.

It's true, I'm not really normal. In Lille I had terrible tantrums during which I slammed my head against the walls. I was a bundle of indomitable will, full of joy and rage. It hurt when the uneven surface of the walls dug into my head, when my mother crushed my hand in hers and dragged me away by the arm. But I wasn't afraid. I felt brave, nothing could break me.

My father had the walls coated with a roughcast of an even coarser texture in order to 'tame' me. It didn't do any good. I still went and hit my head against those walls in fits of anger. I had to have my head stitched up so many times that my scalp is littered with scars. My mother, who would graze herself or tear her dresses against the walls as she walked past, was furious with me.

Since we've been in this house, I don't feel as strong. I'm alone. I don't go to nursery school anymore. My mother teaches me now, up on the second floor. I no longer go to my father's garage, where the workmen used to make me laugh. We hardly ever go out and we have very few visitors.

What I want is to go to school, proper school, where I can have a teacher and lots of friends. Even though I'm terrified of my father, I ask, 'Can I go back to school one day?' and my parents look at me as if I've just uttered something outrageous. My mother seems disgusted. My father's eyes bore into mine. 'Don't you realize,' he says, 'that it's for your sake I've put your

mother through all these years of studying? She had a hell of a time, believe me. She thought she'd never succeed. And I made her keep going. With the qualifications she has, she could teach a whole class. But you have her all to yourself until you take your *baccalauréat* at eighteen. You have such good fortune and still you complain?'

I don't know what demon prompts me with this ill-advised idea: 'If she can teach an entire class, couldn't we have a class with some other pupils?' An icy silence ensues. My limbs freeze. I know I won't dare broach the subject again. I won't be going to school.

Luckily for me there's Linda. She came to the house at about the same time as us. We grew up together. In my oldest memories of her, she's not yet fully grown. When she wags her tail it brushes my face. It tickles. It makes me laugh. I like the smell of her coat.

While she's a puppy she sleeps in the kitchen because the nights are cold in northern France. But she's not allowed into any of the other rooms. When we're in the dining room, I can hear her whining down the corridor. She's soon exiled to the unheated utility room.

My father can't wait to put her well and truly outside. He has a painted wooden kennel delivered and puts it in the garden behind the kitchen. That's where Linda has to sleep now. She's absolutely forbidden from coming into the house—until a serious cold snap comes along, which brings the poor, shivering creature back into the utility room, her hair matted with ice.

My father is annoyed. 'Dogs are for guarding the house,' he says. 'They belong outside.' The cold spell ends, and Linda spends more and more time tied to the railings on the outside steps. That's where I go to see her at every opportunity. She looks huge

to me. I take her by the collar and bury my face in her fur. My father, who bellows orders at her, terrifies her. My mother, whom Linda views with cool courtesy, is exasperated. 'That dog's mine,' she keeps telling me. 'But of course you have to own everything. You act as if she's yours. And you've managed to make the stupid animal believe it herself.'

I feel ashamed. I don't understand who belongs to whom. Linda couldn't care less, though. She continues to jump all over me in delight.

One day some builders come. My father tells me that Linda is going to have a palace. I'm ecstatic for her. When it's built, this 'palace' is a strange shape: the first part is high enough for an adult to stand upright, then there's a lower area insulated with glass wool 'to keep her nice and warm'. From now on Linda can stay outside no matter the weather.

Strangely, Linda refuses point blank to set foot in the back part of the kennel. My father tells me to go and sit at the far end so she'll get used to it, and Linda soon comes to join me. For several days we have fun sneaking into the little alcove and snuggling up together.

A week later, my father calls for me in the middle of the afternoon, and orders me to go to the kennel with the dog. Hurray! An unexpected break from lessons! Linda races over to me, thrilled, and we curl up together in our little refuge. I think that's when I hear the workmen come over. I don't know why my heart constricts. They come into the kennel carrying a heavy metal gate with black and white painted bars. They lift it up and—*clank*—they set it onto hinges.

'Maude, get out of there!' my father yells. I obey him. I have

no choice but to obey. I come out, leaving Linda behind the bars, her eyes full of sad incomprehension. 'You see,' my father says, looking me squarely in the eye, 'she trusted you and look where that got her. You must never trust anyone.'

From that day until the end of her life, Linda is locked in her kennel from eight in the morning until eight at night. She trusted me and I didn't see it coming. She is trapped because of me.

At first, Linda whines, scratches at the bars, and reaches out a paw when I walk by. I'm not allowed to stop. I look at her, wordlessly apologizing. As the weeks pass, she takes to sitting behind her gate in complete silence, the spark fading from her eyes, just wagging her tail when she sees me.

Then her character changes. She starts having aggressive outbursts and no one knows what triggers them. She growls and bares her teeth when she hears footsteps. After eight in the evening, when she's free to run in the garden, she even chases my mother. She's a big German shepherd and she can be very menacing when she wants. My mother defends herself by throwing buckets of water at her. Linda takes to shaking at the very sight of a bucket.

My father is satisfied. Linda has become quite a good guard dog. To fine-tune her training, he sometimes lets her out of her prison and tells her to guard his bicycle. She has to sit motionless next to it. He then makes me walk up to her, and as soon as she wags her tail he shouts. She immediately tucks her tail between her legs. Once she understands how to guard the bike, he pats her and rewards her with a couple of hours of freedom.

After a few months of this training, he decides to test her. When Linda is sitting stiff as a board, standing guard next to

the bike, my father tells me to run over, snatch the bike and take it away. I do as I'm told. Seeing me running towards her, Linda jumps to her feet, leaps at me and sinks her canines into the flesh of my thigh. I scream in surprise and pain. Linda immediately lets go and lies flat on the ground, gazing at me with desperate eyes. 'Absolutely anyone, no matter what stupid orders they're under, will attack you—even this dog who you think is so faithful to you,' my father says.

I still love Linda just as much; I'll never believe she bit me deliberately. It was just an accident. My father often returns to this episode. He wants me to understand that he's the only one who loves and protects me. That I should trust only him.

## Pitou

Every evening at eight o'clock, I go and release Linda from her prison. Before letting her out into the garden for the night, I quietly tell her stories, and she listens attentively. I don't want anyone to hear what I'm telling her, so I whisper in her ear. Sometimes it tickles her and she rubs her ear against my cheek. I often tell her about the ducks that live by the pond my father had dug at the bottom of the garden.

It's migration season, and wild ducks are flying overhead. Some of them occasionally land in the grounds of our house. My father worries because our animals might be 'polluted' by these outsiders. He takes out his shotgun and fires at the intruders. My mother drives them out by pumping a big brown bellows at them, making an unbearable trumpeting noise.

We have to stop our own birds from trying to escape, so we

clip one wing on each of them. I'm the one who has to catch them, because for some inexplicable reason, they readily come to me. It breaks my heart to see how quickly they come when I call. I hand them to my mother one at a time, and she toils away at removing their feathers with chunky scissors. Duck feathers are very tough. She crops them very short, sometimes so short she draws blood. All our ducks have a ridiculous waddle, their intact wing looking huge compared to the stump on the other side.

I tell Linda about the hideous crunch of the scissors on their feathers, the smell of the droppings they release out of fear. I feel like the ducks on the pond, with one wing that my parents want long and beautiful and the other cut to the quick.

Thankfully I also have some more cheerful stories to tell her. Like the one about Pitou, a Barbary duckling we managed to save from certain death. Pitou was quacking pitifully. The three of us ran over and spotted him, a pathetic tuft of feathers, pinioned under a big drake who kept driving the little one's head underwater with his beak. The drake must have been his own father, intent on drowning him.

My mother grabs a stick and hits at the big drake to get him to let go of Pitou. But he's tough; he dodges the blows without letting go. She doesn't either. She runs along the narrow pontoon across the pond. And splash, she falls in. I lean over to reach out my hand, and I fall in too. 'How the hell did I end up with such a pair of idiots!' my father shouts, exasperated. We splash about in the filthy, stinking water; my mother's chignon comes undone and her long blond hair trails through the sludge. Finally, she grabs me by the collar and lifts me onto the pontoon.

I'm covered in mud, but I can't abandon Pitou. He has

succeeded in escaping from his father but is struggling helplessly, about to drown. I lean forward again and manage to grab him. Then my foot slips and I end up back in the water. By clutching onto the pontoon I haul myself onto the bank at last, without letting go of Pitou.

The poor thing shivers in my hands, his wet feathers clinging to his sides. 'He's freezing!' I cry. 'He's going to die of cold!' My father, who was overcome by rage only moments earlier, suddenly softens. Does Pitou remind him of the rabbit he loved as a child and that his father, a heartless man, had served at the dinner table one evening? 'You'll just have to put him in the oven to warm up,' he grunts.

Overjoyed, I run to the kitchen. Once Pitou is dry, I keep him with me the rest of the day, and every day after that. My father definitely has a soft spot for him. He lets me take him everywhere, comfortably nestled in a box filled with cotton wool.

A few days later the honeymoon is over, and I have to take Pitou back to the duck pen. But his father is still just as hostile: as soon as he sees Pitou, he lunges at him, hitting him with his beak. I ask my father if Pitou can live outside the fence around the pond. 'If you like,' he says, 'but when Linda eats him, you'll only have yourself to blame.' Pitou shows absolutely no fear of Linda. He wanders freely around the garden except for the area by the pond, which he avoids like the plague. Despite my efforts to teach him to swim, he struggles like a thing possessed and makes pathetic noises as soon as I take him near water.

Pitou grows into a handsome black duck with a red head. Whenever he sees me, he comes waddling over. He stays right by my side while I'm working in the grounds of the property and

makes me laugh with his peals of exuberant quacking. He's lucky that he's a Barbary duck, which means he can't fly: he doesn't need to have his wing clipped like the others. But the thing that makes me really happy is that he gets on very well with Linda. When she's locked up during the day, he slips between the bars and joins her in the back of the kennel.

Linda and Pitou are my darlings, I'd do anything for them. My parents understand this. If they want me to do something, they need only say, 'Watch out! If you don't do it, Linda will be locked up for two extra hours a day for a month,' or 'We'll put Pitou in a wooden crate for three days with nothing to eat or drink' or, worse still, 'We'll put Pitou back where he belongs'—that is, the pond, where I know he wouldn't survive. So my minor rebellion instantly dissolves.

My father often mentions the story of Pitou when he's teaching me about human nature. 'If you go and live with other humans, they'll treat you the way the ducks in the pond treat Pitou. They won't think twice about making mincemeat of you for the stupidest reasons, or for no reason at all.'

## Lindbergh

My father doesn't like me doing nothing. When I was little, I was allowed to play in the garden once I'd finished studying. But now that I'm almost five, I have less free time. 'You mustn't waste your time,' my father says. 'Focus on your duties.'

In spite of everything, my mind sometimes wanders, and I sit there staring into space. Or when there's construction work to do on the grounds, I might stop to catch my breath. And then, without fail, this horrible silence descends on me. My heart starts pounding. I turn around slowly, and there he is behind me, standing bolt upright. 'What are you doing?' he roars. I'm helpless: I can't open my mouth, which makes me look guilty, I know. Overwhelmed with fear, I feverishly go back to work.

I don't know how he does it, but my father has a sixth sense when it comes to my weaknesses. The minute I relax, I know he's

there, right behind me, with his piercing eyes. Even when he's not there in the flesh, I can feel his eyes boring into the back of my head.

When my mother and I are clearing undergrowth on the grounds, I admire a marvellous tree out of the corner of my eye. It's not the biggest or the fullest, but it's the most beautiful. It has a big, low-hanging branch which sticks out horizontally from the trunk, then gracefully curves around before heading skyward. I dream of sitting in the crook of that curve, which looks as if it was made for a child to play in. One day, when my mother was some distance away, I sat in delight on that low branch. I don't remember how long I stayed there. But I clearly remember my father's hand violently pulling my hair from behind and throwing me to the ground so sharply that it knocked the breath out of me. I didn't hear him approach. Ever since then, I settle for gazing from afar at the tree of happiness.

I don't have much free time, anyway. Between schoolwork, music, my share of the housework, and serving my father, my days are very full. I can sometimes sneak into the big room which looks out onto the street. I watch passers-by for a few minutes. I try to go there in the mornings, at about eight o'clock, before lessons with my mother. That's when the workmen head to the Cathelain factory, just on the other side of the grounds. They walk briskly past the house, carrying their lunch in pails. Occasionally I manage to see them in the evenings too, around six o'clock. They look tired as they head home, but I can tell they're happy. Occasionally I see a woman waiting for them along the way, or a child running to greet them. I look at those faces. At night, in bed, I picture myself later in life, married to a factory

worker who sets off in the mornings with a pail filled with a meal I've made for him.

In the mornings I also see children on their way to school, in groups or pairs. It seems extraordinary to me, this heading off to school. I dream of having to do that. Of course, my 'school' is on the second floor. I summon all my courage and bring it up with my mother: I suggest that I could go out of the gate on the grounds, as if I too were heading off to school, then come back along the fence to the front door. My mother listens without a word.

A little later I'm summoned to the dining room. My parents look very serious, as usual. My father starts talking about the famous American aviator Charles Lindbergh, whom he met when he was young. He is one of the few living people he respects. They have a lot in common. To start with, they were both born in 1902. Like Lindbergh, my father was an aviator and, like him, he is a very high-ranking Freemason. Charles Lindbergh had a son, a baby who was kidnapped and killed. This was the 'crime of the century' and it had a profound effect on my father. Does he make it clear to me that this happened a long time ago, before the war? Regardless, his solemn tone makes such an impression that I think the tragedy has only just happened. My heart aches for this poor Charles Lindbergh.

Now my mother chimes in. 'The Peugeots' son was also kidnapped,' she says. I don't know exactly when this happened, but imagine it's very recent as well. Luckily, the child was saved, but he'd nevertheless faced terrible danger. My father has connections with the Peugeots too, because for a long time he owned the largest Peugeot car dealership in Lille.

‘You’re in danger, too,’ he says, looking at me intently. ‘People will try to abduct you. That’s why you mustn’t go out. It would only take one car—like the black 403 that snatched little Eric Peugeot—to drive past you, and you’d vanish with your kidnappers.’

He reminds me of another safety measure I already know well: the lights must never be switched on when the shutters are open, because this would make us easy targets for a potential sniper hiding on the other side of the road. First the shutters have to be rolled down using the crank handle, and only then can the lights go on.

I’m given to understand that there’s a ‘wave of child kidnappings’ going on at the moment. After the Lindbergh baby and the Peugeot boy, I’m third on the list. I must look very frightened because my father takes the trouble to reassure me. He tells me I’m lucky to have scars ‘marking both sides of my body’ so I don’t run the risk of becoming a victim of the ‘white slave trade’. And these scars would certainly help my father recognize me in any circumstances. My trust in him should never waver.

My mother endorses this: ‘Monsieur Didier can do everything and see everything.’ I don’t know whether I feel reassured or terrified.

My father reiterates the fact that everything he does is for me. That he devotes his entire life to me, to training me, shaping me, sculpting me into the superior being I’m destined to become. He tells me he has loved me since long before I was born. He has always wanted to have a daughter he would call Maude. Maude with an ‘e’, like the wife of Robin Hood’s sidekick, Will Scarlet. An exceptional woman, a warrior, an Amazon, faithful to her love

until she dies. He tells me he dreamed of me even when he was very young. And as soon as he could, he did what needed to be done in order to bring me into the world. It was a lengthy undertaking. First he had to find the woman who would give birth to me. He found my mother, who was only five or six when he chose her. She was the youngest child of a northern mining family and he was already a very rich man, so he had no trouble convincing her parents to entrust her to him. He kept her away from her family to protect her from outside influences. He threw himself heart and soul into bringing her up and giving her the best education possible, and then when the time came, she gave birth to me.

I need to understand just how much my very existence is a result of my father's plans. I know I must prove worthy of the tasks he will set for me later. But I'm afraid I won't measure up to his vision. I feel too feeble, too clumsy, too stupid. And I'm so frightened of him. The sheer heft of him, his big head, his long thin hands and his steely eyes—I'm so terrified my legs give way when I come close to him.

I'm all the more horrified because I'm alone against this titan. I can expect no comfort or protection from my mother. 'Monsieur Didier' is a demigod to her, one she both adores and loathes, but would never dare to oppose. I have no other choice but to close my eyes and, shaking with fear, put myself under my creator's wing.

My father is convinced that the mind can achieve anything. Absolutely anything: it can overcome every danger and conquer every obstacle. But to do this requires long, rigorous training away from the impurities of this dirty world. He's always saying, 'Man is profoundly evil, the world is profoundly dangerous. The

earth is full of weak, cowardly people driven to treachery by their weakness and cowardice.' My father has been disappointed by the world; he has often been betrayed. 'You don't know how lucky you are to be spared from being polluted by other people,' he tells me. That's what the house is for, to keep the miasma of the outside world at arm's length.

He sometimes tells me that I should never leave the house, even after he's dead. His memory will live on here, and if I watch over it, I'll be safe. Other times he informs me that later, I'll be able to do whatever I want, that I could be President of France, master of the world. But when I leave the house, it won't be to live a pointless life as 'Mrs Nobody'. It will be to conquer the world and 'achieve greatness'. I'll have to come back from time to time to recharge myself 'at home base': in other words, in this house, which absorbs more and more of my father's power every day.

There is also a third possible scenario: for me to stay at the house to put into practice the lessons in discipline he has been drilling into me since childhood. And to prepare myself for the day when I'm called upon to 'raise up humanity'. I ask him how I'll know when it's time to raise up humanity. 'I'll let you know, even if I'm no longer here.'

When I think of my secret dreams of a factory-worker husband and his lunch pail, I feel ashamed.

To avoid disappointing him too much I wage war on my many faults. But there's one I just can't control: I have a habit of twitching my nose and mouth and screwing up my eyes. 'Stop making faces,' my mother often says. My father hates it. Since I was little he has made me sit facing him 'without moving a muscle'.

At first I had to stay still for a few minutes. Then a quarter of

an hour. Once I turn five, he adds what he calls ‘the impassivity tests’ to my daily schedule, between eight and eight-fifteen in the evening. Then the sessions become even longer and are held at any time of day, sometimes lasting several hours and delaying my lessons and homework, which then all have to be caught up. And now my mother has to do them too—when we’re alone she’s quick to tell me how much she resents me for this.

‘You mustn’t reveal anything with your face or your body,’ my father says in his deep voice, ‘otherwise you’ll be eaten alive. Only weak people have facial expressions. You need to learn to control yourself if you want to be a great poker player.’

Do I want to be a great poker player? I don’t know, I’ve never played poker. But I have to be ready in case I ever need to later. At various difficult times in his life, my father pulled through thanks to his skill at poker. He was able to appear perfectly neutral while reading his adversaries’ body language and facial expressions like a book.

The hardest part of these impassivity tests is the itching. It’s there right from the start, tickling in every direction. It stops after a while. Then it starts up again even worse and becomes pure torment. The one who really can’t cope is my mother. There always comes a point when one of her arms or legs shoots up as if on a spring. It takes enormous effort not to burst out laughing. ‘Your mother has St Vitus’s Dance,’ my father spits with utter contempt, still scrutinizing the mirror in front of me to check I haven’t moved so much as an eyelash. He views ‘St Vitus’s Dance’ as a hallmark of the weak and inept.

I’m afraid I’m weak and inept too. Playing chess with my father is torture. I have to sit very upright on the edge of my

chair and respect the rules of impassivity while I consider my next move. I can feel myself dissolving under his stare. When I move a pawn he asks sarcastically, 'Have you really thought about what you're doing?' I panic and want to move the pawn back. He doesn't allow it: 'You've touched the piece, now you have to follow through. Think before you act. Think.'