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Opening extract from

Meeting Cezanne

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I don't remember why my mother had to go into hospital. I'm not sure she ever told me. She did explain that after the operation she would be needing a month of complete rest. This was why she had had to arrange for me to go and stay with Aunt Mathilde, my mother's older sister, in her house down in the south, in Provence.

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I'd never been to Provence, but I had met my Aunt Mathilde a few times when she'd come to see us in our little apartment in Paris. I remembered her being big and bustling, filling the place with her bulk and forever hugging and kissing me, which I never much cared for. She'd pinch my cheek and tell me I was a "beautiful little man". But she'd always bring us lots of crystallized fruits, so I could forgive her everything else.

I was ten years old and had never been parted from my mother. I'd only been out of Paris once for a holiday by the sea in Brittany. I told her

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I didn't want to be sent away. I told her time and again, but it was no use.

"You'll be fine, Yannick," she insisted. "You like Aunt Mathilde, don't you? And Uncle Bruno is very funny. He has a moustache that prickles like a hedgehog. And you've never even met your

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cousin Amandine. You'll have a lovely time. Spring in Provence. It'll be a paradise for you, I promise. Crystallized fruit every day!"

She did all she could to convince me. More than once she read me Jean Giono's story "The Man Who Planted Trees", the story of an old shepherd set in the high hills of Provence. She showed me a book of paintings by Paul Cézanne, paintings, she told me, of the countryside outside Aix-en-Provence, very close to Aunt Mathilde's home. "Isn't it beautiful, Yannick?" she breathed as she turned the pages. "Cézanne loved it there, and he's the greatest painter in the world. Remember that."

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