

*The Secret Papers  
of Madame Olivetti*

*Annie Vanderbilt*



## Prologue

*He comes to her in the evenings, after work. They make love and then talk, she in English, he in French, while beyond the open windows and doors of her bedroom the sky turns a lively pink, not unlike the color that flushes her cheeks.*

*“What will your mother be making you for dessert tonight? Chocolate pots de crème?” she wonders. “Or something less sweet . . . Perhaps a tart of quince and sour lemons?”*

*He grins, uncomprehending, a simple man who asks for nothing more than the generosity of her body and the lazy postcoital murmur of her voice speaking to him in a language he does not understand.*

*“I am feeding you my life,” she tells him. “In heaping spoonfuls.”*

*He groans, aroused and hungry, as if her words are a feast of exotic dishes she has set before him.*

*Below them, in the village, in a neat stone house that overlooks the sea, his mother is preparing dinner. She suspects that Yves is up the hill with the American widow, but she cares only enough to punish him in small ways: a bitter smile when he compliments her on the tarte au poire she has made for his dessert; a hostile arm’s length between them when she kisses the air, not his cheeks, to wish him good night.*

*It is seven p.m. when Yves turns his truck up the rutted gold-dust road to Lily’s house. It is eight thirty when he rumbles past the news vendor’s shop, headed for home. The villagers watch but say nothing, for Yves is one of their own. So, too, is Lily, and it is no one else’s business. This is nothing new. There have been plenty of sexual goings-on in La Pierre Rouge, the house of the red stone, over the past century.*

*“You’ll be late,” Lily warns, this time in French.*

*"I don't care."*

*She reminds him gently, "She is your mother. You live in her house. You must think of her dignity."*

*"I think of this." He caresses her breast and the smooth inward slope of her thigh. Sex for them is a healing unguent, liberally applied but short term and, thus, light on the soul.*

*"Quickly then . . .," she says.*

*Twenty minutes later, rattling through town in his old Deux Chevaux truck, Yves waves at the news vendor's wife. Frowning, she points at her watch. It is almost nine o'clock. For the first time in years he will be late for dinner. The thought flits through Yves's mind: the grumpiness of Madame Bibot must sour the flavor of her husband's dinner. He toots his horn to try to cheer her up, but he is thinking of Lily. He is wondering what is the story of her life, unaware that he has heard every word of it.*

*She has fed it to him, in English, in heaping spoonfuls.*

## One

Lily Crisp was aware of the whispers that heralded her arrival in the village, the eyes peeping out from behind half-closed shutters and starched lace curtains. She trusted that the whispers carried only kind feelings toward her and her family, although, as she drove through the center of town, she noticed the news vendor and his scowling wife locking up their shop for the evening. Now there was a woman who shunned goodwill, Lily thought. Madame Bibot was probably remarking that Madame Crisp looked unreasonably vibrant and healthy for a widow. Monsieur Bibot, who had a wandering eye, though he tended toward women more buxom and Germanic than Lily, would doubtlessly have said something to enflame his wife, some nonsense about Lily's skin glistening with the sheen of sorrow, which adds luster to a woman's complexion. Or how Lily and her husband had made a fine couple and, with their two children, such a happy family. The fairy tale of familial happiness no longer charmed Madame Bibot. In fact, glancing in the rearview mirror, Lily saw that the news vendor's wife was glaring at her husband. Monsieur Bibot was gesturing boldly, perhaps attempting to calm the waters by suggesting that grief had certainly aged Lily Crisp. She must be . . . what? On the near side of fifty?

"On the far side," Madame would be replying tartly, and Lily smiled because she knew that Madame's assessment of Lily's age, and Lily's assessment of Madame's response, were both on target.

Lily had visited the village most summers over the past twenty years. At first she had come with her husband, Paul, and her son, Pierre. Paul had seldom stayed more than a week—he was busy with his cows, gainful employment of which the villagers approved. This was something they could understand: livestock, hard work, and commitments. His concern for his herd of cows in a land called Idaho, reportedly filled with snakes and dried bushes, balanced the polite awe in which they had always held him, for he was a wealthy man, had inherited money, unlike his mother, who had been born in the village, not a penny to her name; but with that saucy beauty, who needed a fortune? She had married one.

Lily remembered those early visits, spending a month at the house that Paul had inherited, reading to Pierre under a plane tree or walking down the hill to the beach with his hand clasped in hers, building sand castles, splashing in the sea, setting up an umbrella to protect her son's fair skin from the burning rays, then dragging their weary, salt-sticky bodies back up the hill to shower in a dribble of rust-colored water. Pierre had been in his teens when Lily had presented him with a baby sister. The next summer there had been no shortage of raised eyebrows and knowing smiles—sixteen years and Paul Crisp, still busy between the sheets, and potent!—when this beautiful child, with her startling blue eyes and corn-silk hair, had turned up in the village.

Was it only two years ago, Lily mused, when the four of them had been sitting on the beach in folding chairs and Justine, aged seven then, had asked her father, “What’s the name of the water out there, Daddy? What do you call it?”

“Lily’s Lily Pond,” he had told her.

“Lily’s Lily Pond,” she had chimed in with him, and, crawling onto his lap, had squirmed into position with her back against his chest, straddling his knees. He had wrapped her up in his arms and set his chin on the top of her silky blond head, and the

two of them—one dark-haired, one light—had gazed at the sea, limpid and pale, bleached to the blue of the faded blue sky.

Justine had asked, “Is that because Mom floats her dreams on it?”

“Absolutely. On blow-up hippos and walruses.”

“And dragons?”

“And elephants.”

“Do the dreams ever fall off—like little girls?” she had said, in a hushed voice.

“Never ever,” her father had assured her.

Lily had put down the book she was reading, smiled over at them, and asked, “Shall we run down to the sea and float with my dreams?”

“Oh, yes, Daddy, can we?” Justine had cried, and he had scooped her up and carried her, squealing with delight, across the sand, to where he sailed her back and forth, belly down and arms extended, over the water. Justine had whooped and yelled for her brother, Pierre, to come and see her, she was flying, she was flying like an angel. . . .

Squinting through the windshield, Lily returned her thoughts to her driving and swore softly as her rental car, its engine grinding, lurched up the gold-dust road to her house. Midway up the hill, the car stopped with a judder, then charged ahead in a great jump and shuddered. “Don’t die on me,” she threatened, calling down the wrath of the gods on this cursed Peugeot the color of a turnip. It jolted forward, up and over a ledge that scraped the oil pan. “Think light,” she urged as the vehicle swerved into the driveway and halted abruptly. She cut the engine.

Relief washed over her, and, in the silence that followed, she could almost hear the ebb and swirl of the profound exhaustion that engulfed her limbs. Here at last she could sleep. Here at last she could sort through her memories and write them down, let in air and light and tidy the clutter of a scattered life.

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Somewhere nearby a dog was barking. She glanced around her. It was growing late, the sky's mauve glow having faded into blackness. Yet, the sun's warmth lingered. Heat enfolded her body as if she had been wrapped up in moist leaves and shunted into an oven. The air trembled, garnering each whiff of moisture that trailed up from the resting sea. She fanned her skin, cooling the sweat that had rolled down her thighs, her shoulders, and dampened her armpits. Not surprisingly, her temples throbbed. She had drunk a full bottle of wine with dinner; it had gone down like water, in great cooling gulps that, afterward, had made her head spin and her mouth grow sticky.

Nighttime was when the sadness assailed her. The pall of loss spread over her then, like a cloth dipped in ashes and smoothed across her skin. She had felt smothered at first, as though if she struggled the sorrow might do greater damage than slow the beating of her heart or interrupt her dreams. But drinking with grief as one's sole companion was not a pastime she intended to pursue; although it blunted the sadness, it brought down an early curtain on the evenings, and there would be thirty-eight evenings until her children's visit. Self-imposed, she might add. *Her* choice to come here, to the south of France, to La Pierre Rouge, the old stone house on a hill above the sea that would be her refuge.

For one moment, before hefting her luggage from the back-seat of the car and carrying it to the house, Lily closed her eyes, thought about Paul, and let the fragrant air of the Côte d'Azur drift through her.

All night long the dog barked, fretful barks followed by a precarious silence in which she heard the wind, its soft breath hot as a lover's kiss on the plane tree leaves beyond her window. Hours after midnight, when she opened her eyes and the darkness that embraced her was more sensuous even than the weight of sleep, she remembered creeping into the shelter of Paul's arms.

She had never had far to creep, for he had liked to feel her near him. Their bed was a narrow double, and Paul's leg, thrust out to the side, often pinned her ankles. She would nudge his thigh, and, at her touch, he would sigh as if a forest maiden had entered his dreams and laid a hand where he most wished she would. His body would sometimes respond with a quick, hard thrust into the mattress and she would laugh aloud. She laughed now at the memory, so alive and tactile that she could almost feel the mattress jiggle and the cozy, bearish heat of him.

Paul had died in Idaho, quickly, and with their son, Pierre, unhurt beside him. Lily pictured the two men sitting quietly in Paul's truck, tired, driving back to the ranch in the cold November rain and listening to the radio. Men at ease in each other's company. Men with dark, curling, unkempt hair and thick black eyebrows that met in the middle over strong French noses. There were five ducks in the cooler behind the seat, "three greenheads and a couple of teal," she remembered the officer had said. They had shot five ducks, only five, and were driving home to shower, shave, and meet her for lunch. They were to celebrate her fifty-first birthday.

Justine, almost eight then, was perched on the countertop beside her in the kitchen. She was cutting out cookie-dough figures, punching silver balls into the turkeys' eyes and the pilgrims' bellies. Lily was opening the letter that had been lying on the kitchen table since the mail had been delivered earlier that morning. She had been saving it—savoring the opening, the reading, the learning about Monsieur Dupré's wonderful stay in the old stone house on the French Riviera. Another glorious September, she supposed. Another glamorous, unknown, unmentioned companion whose dark perfume would linger in the sheets, and whose black silk panties would lie forgotten under the red couch or in a clump of lavender, leading her to speculate, once again, about their renter. What books had he read this past September,

and which one would she find—had he left for her—on the long wooden table? Which wines—red or white? from Burgundy? Bordeaux?—had he drunk with his meals, and how many bottles would there be—his gift—when she peeked next summer into the stone-dark *cave*? Six, no doubt. Punctilious and dependable, he always left six. Just as every July for the past eight years he had sent a check in advance of his stay. Just as every November he had written a thank-you note couched in superlatives.

Monsieur Dupré was their only renter.

She had just extracted his letter from the envelope when the doorbell rang. “I’ll go, Mom,” Justine had said brightly as she jumped down from the counter, where her gamin’s legs, in shorts in November, had been swinging. The announcement of death had come just that swiftly: Justine’s legs swinging and her swinging blond hair as she hurried to the door, opened it, and was asked by the officer, who would later mention the ducks in the cooler, if her mother was in.

“Just a minute,” Justine had replied, her smile widening. “She’s right behind me, and Daddy’ll be home soon. Did you come for Mom’s birthday party?”

The policeman had taken off his hat and held it awkwardly in both hands. “No, I didn’t,” he’d said.

Lily had come up behind her daughter and run her hand over Justine’s silky hair, so pale it appeared white in an unexpected shaft of sunlight that lanced through the open door. “Can I help you?” she’d said, and then reading the discomfort in the man’s eyes, had put her hands softly on her daughter’s shoulders and urged her around. “Why don’t you run upstairs to my bedroom and bring me my shawl?” she said. “It’s getting chilly.”

But Justine had crumpled, with the shake of a muffled sob, against Lily’s stomach, and Lily, who had begun to shiver, looked into the policeman’s eyes and mouthed Paul’s name over Justine’s head. The man nodded.

“My son?” she said out loud.

“He’s fine.”

She had bitten into her lower lip to stop its trembling and held her daughter close, and her face had turned into a steely mask and her eyes had seemed sheeted in some black throbbing substance that slowly closed out the light. Something between a groan and a wail tore through her body, ripping her heart to pieces without making a sound. She had stared at the officer and Justine had snuffled, “Mom, what’s wrong? When’s Daddy coming home?” And Lily had lifted her daughter’s delicate chin, tilted it upward, and looked down into her sparkling blue, tear-filled eyes. “Everything’s going to be all right,” she’d said. “Everything’s going to be all right, Justine. Everything’s going to be all right.”

Lily crushed her knees against her chest and held on tight. This was pointless, all this suffering. Why revisit that moment? This was not why she had come here. This was not the story she intended to write, how her husband of twenty-six years had died after a modestly successful duck hunt, died instantly, at least she had that, and in peace beside their son. Or how Pierre had grabbed the wheel, grabbed it too late, and Paul, whose heart had already stopped beating, had died a second death, his neck broken, the truck smashed on the lava while the ducks in the cooler, dead as Paul, had sustained no injury. As if dying once were enough.

Impatient for sleep, for the night to end and the day to begin, Lily closed her eyes. As always he was there, behind her eyelids, a smudge of recollection more heat and shimmer than an actual man. She breathed in his chin, his mouth, his nose—*le nez*—Paul’s heroic, proud, improbable, quintessentially French proboscis, and she smiled.

As she fell into sleep, the dog barked again.

## Two

Seated at her desk, Lily shoved back the old portable Olivetti typewriter she had brought with her from Idaho. A few days had passed since the dog had kept her awake with its barking. Where was it now? Muzzled? Banished to the garage? Locked in a closet? Or—as she preferred to believe—tucked cozily under its owners’ duvet?

Her writing had gone smoothly. The sea was her confidante. It smiled as the dawn raised a blush to its skin, a glass-calm surface that suddenly, between the moment Lily looked down at the page where she had been working and then up, sported a series of wrinkles. How quickly the wind came up in the mornings, as if pulled on a leash by the sun.

With more ease than she had expected, a routine was emerging. She wrote for an hour before it grew light, drank a small cup of coffee, then jogged down the hill through the village and along the beach, until she turned back to swim. There were few people about so early in the morning: an old man sweeping the streets; a merchant, yawning, bringing in boxes of peaches and courgettes; lights glowing in the baker’s window; birds chitchatting above the sidewalks, before the tourists and the heat drove them into the oak woods and the oleander hedges. This was her favorite time of day; she fetched warm croissants and a baguette as she swung back through town, then trudged up the hill, ate a leisurely breakfast, and continued to write.

From time to time she lost her concentration. The sea changed its moods and coloration as often as a French coquette: now the

sun slapped its cheeks with a brassy, gold-flecked rouge; now scudding clouds lay melancholy bands across its forehead. The ravishing sight of water and sky, so vibrant a blue against orange tiled roofs and dusky green hillsides, offered her solace, pushed her to forget. She was easily distracted, enthralled by the view.

“Madame!” A man’s voice bellowing up at Lily startled her out of her reverie. “Madame—”

“*Je suis ici.*” I’m here, she called out. “Up here. I’m coming right down.” She glanced quickly in the mirror, trying to pat her billows of red hair into shape—had she even bothered to comb it that morning? When the writing and memories took hold of her, she forgot to drink and eat, or brush her teeth. The day before she had bundled her hair on top of her head and jabbed a chopstick through it. That had worked nicely—but now she saw that she had dribbled coffee down the front of her shirt. What an image of middle-aged disarray and neglect she presented!

Hurrying onto the porch and leaning over the railing, she caught sight of a large, rough-looking man wearing bright blue work pants and a blue jacket. He smiled up at her from the terrace. “Madame Crisp?” he said.

“You must be Yves Lebrun. You have come to fix the roof over the kitchen,” she replied in French, for she had been forewarned that beyond the standard classroom phrases—good morning, good-bye, and what is your name?—he had mastered no English. Moderating her pace to appear less harried, she descended the staircase. “*Monsieur Lebrun . . . Enchantée de faire votre connaissance.*” Delighted to make your acquaintance, she said, extending her hand.

Yves shook it. “*Enchanté, Madame.*” Then, when he had let go of her hand, he asked, “You are called Lily Crisp?”

“Yes, that is true.”

“Crisp. This is a name I have not heard before. It is different, isn’t it?”

“It’s British. My husband’s great-grandfather came from England. It’s an old name.”

“Then you must have much history,” he said.

Oh, yes, Lily thought, I have too much history. That is precisely the problem. That is why I have come here. But she said to Yves, “Don’t we all have history . . . ?”

He gave a small laugh, shrugged, and indicated the roof. “It is time to begin my work,” he admitted, “before your kitchen floats down to the sea when it rains. *If* it rains. I wonder . . . the dryness, it is not good for the trees and the hills. And now”—he pointed at a distant hillside thick with its dusky canopy of cork oaks—“they will build a golf course on the mountainside. Over there. Can you believe it? How will they keep the golf balls from rolling into the sea? And where will they find enough water for the grass?” Shaking his head and muttering to himself, he turned and walked briskly—not in the comfortable shamle Lily had expected from so hefty and loquacious a handyman—to his truck to fetch his tools and a ladder.

She called out, “I’ll be upstairs in my room, writing, if you have any questions.” She saw him raise his hand—he had heard her; and so she climbed back up the stairs, smiling inwardly as she seated herself at the old chestnut table with cabriole legs that she used as her desk. She reviewed their conversation. What was it Yves had said? “Crisp—it is different, isn’t it?”

Lily chuckled, recalling Esther, her outspoken older sister. “For God’s sake, Lil, why did you marry Paul without telling anybody? You barely know him! And why change your name? Lily Fern is a great name. Lily Crisp sounds like the star of a pornographic movie. Or a cookie.”

Lily’s neighbors were in residence. This she knew from the music that wafted up from the pink house with the lime green shutters. She enjoyed the Telemann and the Mozart in the morn-

ings when she wrote, although not late at night when she had gone to bed and the Belgian couple had just sat down to dinner. The house was young and enchanting, as were its owners. From her hillside perch, she could peer down upon them: the woman listened to Debussy while reading in her garden; the man grew tomatoes and aubergines, and had planted lemon, plum, and fig trees on the sun-drenched slope between Lily's house and his. . . . Lily's house. *La Pierre Rouge*. *Her* house. Not Paul's. Not his mother's or his grandfather's, but Lily's. By a twist of fate, which the villagers doubtlessly found amusing, this house that was French down to the cold stone core of its bones now belonged to an American, to a Midwesterner.

*La Pierre Rouge* was set high on a hillside, quite alone, up a steep and narrow, winding dirt road that was deeply rutted. During his lifetime Paul's grandfather must have kept the road open manually with a pickax and shovel, filling the potholes and ruts with gravel and chipping away at the crystalline bedrock that projected into the broken track. Around the final bend, from the forest of cork oaks and pines, the house rose up squarely, age-scarred and handsome, built of rough-chiseled blocks of local stone quarried from the hillsides. Shiny, black-painted shutters flanked windows and doors that opened wide to let in the heady fragrance of early-summer blooms and the delicate southern light. Inside, the patina of dark wood set against the brilliant colors of patterned cloth warmed the cold stone-walled interior. There were huge wooden beams overhead, red tiled floors with threadbare Persian carpets, and a crush of comfortably upholstered peasant furniture, some of which, like the house itself, was over a century old.

According to family legend, Georges Lafond had brought his young Italian wife in a wooden cart, pulled by a plump and frisky pony, to this rocky plot of ground, where he had built her a house. She had carried with her in the cart a massive, squared-

off chunk of red limestone from the village in the Dolomites where she had been born and had lived until reaching puberty. A bride of two weeks, she was fourteen years old and still sore between her legs. Her husband, smitten with the ripeness of her young buttocks and peach-scented breasts, had vowed to set the block of red stone plumb over the center of the main doorway, but she had said no, and had refused as well its symmetrical placement over or under a window, or midway across the rugged, golden gray wall that faced the sea. "No marriage is perfect, nor do I seek perfection," she had told him, remembering the muscular but by no means satisfying tussle in their conjugal bed the first night of their union. The red stone must be mortared willy-nilly into the wall so as not to show pride before the eyes of God. Georges had obeyed her wish, and in the course of a long and satisfactory marriage she had borne him nine children, five of whom had survived into adulthood. The oldest, Gérard, a stonemason like his father, when he died at the age of ninety-one, had bequeathed the house of the red stone—La Pierre Rouge—to Justine Lafond, his surviving child and only daughter.

Upon Justine's death, the house had passed to her son, Paul.

And now it was Lily's, and as the dawn grew brighter and Hayden's trumpets tooted a fanfare of joyous greeting—*bonjour* to the birds and the cork oaks and the flotilla of clouds draped softly, like jellyfish trailing streamers, and to Lily arrested in her writing and reflecting on the proud-nosed clan who had built this house—she blessed her deceased mother-in-law, who had never coveted jewels or fancy clothes but had believed in land. The summer after her father died, Justine Lafond had returned to France, having sailed away over forty years earlier. She had ordered new plumbing, tile baths, a washing machine, double-wide French doors opening onto the terrace, fans for the upstairs ceilings, and a new firm mattress in the master bedroom.

(The old one, which had folded together in the middle like a fallen soufflé, she had given to the woman who beat the Persian carpets and swept the floor.) She had also bought up the entire hillside above, on either side of, and below La Pierre Rouge, down to the narrow strip of rocky earth where the Belgian couple would later plant their orchard. It was this buffer of land that now provided Lily with the solitude and the setting, if not the consummate silence, she required for her writing.

## A CONVERSATION WITH ANNIE VANDERBILT

*Q. This is your first novel. What inspired it in particular and why did you wait to write your first novel in, let us say, the second half of your life rather than the first?*

A. Actually, I wrote my first novel twenty-five years ago. In 1983, just after I finished it (or thought I had finished it—in retrospect, it was a first draft and needed many rewrites or a quick trip to the shredder), I fell off a cliff. That accident stopped my writing life cold; all my creative energies went toward healing my foot and being able to walk again. Unfortunately (or fortunately), the only copy of the manuscript burned up along with our house in 2005, so I won't be doing any of those revisions.

I then wrote a book, as yet unpublished, about bicycling through Japan with my husband, Bill, interweaving our adventures on wheels with the tale of my fall from the cliff, my survival and recovery. A good friend and freelance editor worked with me on this book and it was through her critical eye and heart-stopping honesty (she never hesitated to write *Yuck, Trite, You can do better, or This makes me swoon*) that I honed my skills. When I was fifty-one (one year younger

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than Lily), I finished the Japan book and immediately began writing *The Secret Papers of Madame Olivetti*.

It took ten years. I was leading a three-part life at the time and trying to achieve some sort of balance. I was writing a novel because Lily Crisp just popped out on the page one day, and then Paul and Victor and finally Yves and all the others, and it gave me such pleasure to tell their story and spend time with them. During those same years my sister and I were caregiving an elderly aunt and my parents and seeing them, one after the other, into death. And finally, I was trying to keep some fun and spice in my marriage by joining my husband, Bill, on some of the backcountry and overseas adventures we have always enjoyed together. So I would be partway through a draft of the book and then there would be a health-care crisis with my mother or a monthlong expedition to some mountain in Bolivia or jungle river in Honduras. By the time I returned I would pick up the thread of plot and characters and find that I had changed, that I had new insights from my adventures or caregiving, so the book changed, too. It was never a smooth, clean reentry; I moved backward before I could move forward again. All this took time, none of which I regret, because when you write a novel in your fifties, you have more perspective on life (you hope) and can let the voluptuous side of living and loving take center stage.

*Q. What did you hope to achieve in writing The Secret Papers of Madame Olivetti?*

*A. When I began working on this book, I wanted to take the readers' senses and immerse them in the landscapes in which*

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the story takes place: lakeside Wisconsin; a French village on the Côte d'Azur; the rain forest in Chiapas, Mexico; the stark Idaho hills. I saw the scenes, smelled them, and felt them, and then tried to paint those sensations in words. Within this framework I envisaged a plot that was densely layered, moving fluidly between past and present, so that a delicious soup of intrigue, lushness, passion, disaster, humor, and quirkiness would enhance the background flavors of my settings. Long-term married love, romantic love, sexual love, parental and sibling love, the loss of a loved one—all these interest me and went into the mix. I created Lily Crisp, a strong and yet vulnerable woman who would wind her way through this often messy labyrinth of love and death and emerge, in her own imperfect way, with a clearer understanding of the fragility and resilience of human nature.

*Q. As you mentioned, the novel has several distinct settings. Are you as well traveled as your knowledge of all these places would suggest? Do you have a personal connection to any of these places?*

A. Bill and I started going on adventures from the day we were married. We began in the Peace Corps in India in 1968, then backpacked to Everest Base Camp in Nepal in 1972 and managed after that to sandwich wilderness and overseas adventures into our lives for the next thirty-five years.

I have a personal connection to all the places about which I write. I grew up in Wisconsin and spent my summers in a rustic two-room pine cabin that belonged to my aunt. Every day I swam across the lake towing the canoe behind me so no motorboats would run me down. And yes, our neighbor

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scattered her husband's ashes in the lake and my sister and I would snorkel the shoreline in a state of titillation and horror. I've lived in Idaho for the past twenty-five years and know the dry sagebrush hills and open-sky landscape from hiking and biking the trails and back roads and waking up every morning to that clear, high-altitude sunshine. As for France, my husband and I have bicycled across the south of France three times and, in 1980, lived for three months in an old stone house overlooking the sea. The village and the warm waters of the Mediterranean lay below us, through the cork oaks. Finally, Mexico. We spent two winters living and working in Chiapas, in San Cristóbal de las Casas. Every month or so we would drive to the rain forest and camp beside the hut of a Lacandón friend. Often we have walked to the *cascada*, slipped through the sheet of water, and stood with our backs against the cool rock wall where Victor and Lily exchange their first kiss. These are my experiences. But in *The Secret Papers of Madame Olivetti* most of the specifics and all of the characters and what happens in these locations are imaginary. I had great fodder for the mill and loved dragging aromas, landscapes, birdcalls—you name it, I dragged it—out of my memory.

*Q. The typewriter on which Lily writes her memoirs becomes a sort of character in the novel, and in fact the novel is titled after her. What inspired Madame Olivetti?*

A. When I wrote my first book (the one that burned up in the house fire), I typed part of it on an Olivetti Lettera 32 Portable that my mother sent to the house in France where I

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was writing at the time. It was laborious work, lots of thinking and clicking of the keys, lots of mistakes, lots of cut and paste. But I became quite attached not only to the slow process of creating on a typewriter but to the machine itself. It had character and tooth. I lost my Olivetti in the fire, but it was alive and well and sleeping in the closet all those years of working on this book.

*Q. Why is the cat Alonso in the story?*

A. Alonso mirrors Lily. Both are sensual creatures who enjoy their meals. Both fiercely guard their independence but love deeply. Both relish their solitude but welcome company on a selective basis. Both wander off and misbehave but have gentle, loyal hearts. Plus—any woman who can have a close and satisfying relationship with a cat and a typewriter is the kind of woman I would want to know and write about.

*Q. I found Lily Crisp to be a complex and fascinating woman—and one of the sexiest female protagonists I've come across in some time. She is very much a physical being, completely comfortable in her own skin. There are also times when she seems fearless—willing to commit herself wholeheartedly to relationships with men she loves, even when she hasn't known them for very long. What about her particularly interested you—or is she based on you?*

A. I certainly don't have Lily's bizarre way of dealing with loss through self-violence of one sort or another, nor do I see my life as a muddle. I would have told Paul the truth and risked losing him rather than hold it all inside. Lily keeps her

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secrets. I wear my heart on my sleeve. But both of us savor good food, believe in passion and romance in life, love to travel, and can laugh at ourselves.

I wanted to write about a woman who was comfortable with her sexuality, a naturally erotic but not neurotic being, who could love deeply and was a good mother and wife, sister and daughter, but who had a quirky, off-the-cuff, solitary side to her. I love the complexities and contradictions in people: hence, Lily's combination of fearlessness and vulnerability, her ability to jump into experience, sexual or otherwise, and then take responsibility for her misbehaviors and misjudgments. I was interested in a woman who is earthy and grounded but who makes mistakes and at times is her own worst enemy. Yet with her lusty sense of humor, her recognition of her own inadequacies without whining about them, and her ability to forgive both others and herself, she always manages to get back on keel and sail onward.

*Q. In her early fifties, two years after her husband's death, Lily is taking some time to reassess her life. In your experience, do most women go through a period of reassessment at some point in their lives?*

A. I think that most women, as well as most men, go through periods of reassessment in their lives. Many of us require time alone to do this, although most of us don't have the luxury of retiring to France with our typewriters (and a sexy, empathetic handyman) for five weeks. Especially in our fifties, when the future is still uphill but the downhill stretch is alarmingly visible—not over but on the horizon—many

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of my friends and I have felt the need to step back and gain perspective on our lives and priorities. Sometimes the only way we can chart where we're headed, or might choose to head, is to take a look at where we've been, as Lily does in typing out her memories and recounting them to Yves. It's so easy to zip along in life and suddenly, since time moves exponentially faster with age, you're not fifty but seventy and you haven't stopped once to ask, Who the hell am I, and is this what I want to be doing? Do I still want to drag out the same old whips and beat myself up because I made some mistake or misspoke? Do I still want to keep my pleaser tag lit up in neon and hanging around my neck? Do I still want to say no, no, instead of ripping off my clothes and diving naked into the water?

*Q. I'm curious about your reading habits. Do you find the time to read? Have you ever been part of a book club or reading group? Is there a list of books that you feel have particularly influenced your life or helped shape you as a writer?*

A. I have always read voraciously. For me, reading is one of life's great pleasures, along with fine dark chocolate devoured on a daily basis and walking on a beach or in the mountains or even down the street and back. I have been in the same book club, called Qui Legit, for the past fifteen years. We read books that "have stood the test of time," including classics as well as recent novels. We allow gossip with soup before the discussion begins but then try to keep to the book. Since we have no leader, we each try to read critically and guide the discussion into interesting channels. Over the years we have

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bonded in a very special way through discussing books. We now have a shared memory of 180 books we have read and talked about.

The books that have resonated for me are *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras, because of the lush, atmospheric landscape laced with the eroticism of the love affair; *The Leopard* by G. di Lampedusa, because of the painterly sensual quality of his writing; *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, because of the remarkable sense of place, both in the ruined villa and the desert, and the intensity and poignancy of the love stories; and *Kalimantaaan* by C. S. Godshalk, because of the humid, dripping, heated sensuous jungle atmosphere and the strange turnings of love.

Sound familiar?