

A summer in M.

Robin Corminboeuf

Novel

French



A fiery and tender novel of late adolescence set in the drought-stricken landscape of the Swiss countryside (Fribourg). Coming of age in a changing society, the narrator discovers the troubling sensuality of male bodies and his father's struggles to keep the family farm afloat.

"I liked the presence of these workers in the house—the French', as we called them. The oldest were students and went to 'uni'. The others were in their last year at school. It was a relentless cycle. All summer long, the house would swarm with adolescents, to whom I would grow attached, only to see them swept away again one day in early autumn."

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Born into a family of farmers, Robin Corminboeuf undertook an apprenticeship in interior design and studied sociology in Lausanne and London (London School of Economics) before becoming the editor-in-chief of the LGBTQ+ magazine 360°. Un été à M. is his first novel.

Photo: Christiane Nill

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Excerpt translated by Imogen Taylor

I left M. when I was eighteen and went to live in Lausanne—the city the young people were heading to when they stopped at the petrol station where I worked nights, heating up frozen pizzas for them. For a long time I thought my secret would lead me to certain death. Going away saved me.

Despite the move, I stayed in touch with my family and school friends. But I hadn't heard anything about K. for fifteen years. I'd almost forgotten he existed.

Every Sunday, my father and mother invite us—my brother, my sister, their respective families and me—to have supper with them in M. My mother spends all day preparing the meal: meat with peas-and-carrots and mashed potatoes. On special occasions there's fillet of beef or roast beef from the butcher in Pourènes. My mother says the meat there is cheaper and better quality than in the supermarkets. In summer we have roast chicken—one of the ones my father keeps in a pen in the garden.

Once a year he buys a clutch of chicks and feeds them up on leftovers, seed and water. A few weeks later, when they've grown into nice plump chickens, he takes them to the top of the farm, up by the horse paddock behind the apple tree, pins them to a tree stump and cuts off their heads. Then he plucks the carcasses. Down in the house, meanwhile, in the kitchen, my mother gets ready the see-through plastic bags for storing the meat. Once everything is nicely bagged up, she takes it to the freezer in the laundry room. This huge white chest contains vast supplies of food, though it's only the two of them left on the farm now.

Since my father retired, he's bought a lot of chicks. He takes great care of them, giving them plenty of time to grow. 'It's not like factory farming, I keep them thirty or forty days. The meat has flavour; it isn't full of water. You know they haven't been fed junk or pumped full of antibiotics. And they've been out in the sunshine.' He likes to feed his children and grandchildren with these birds—to share with us the fruits of his labour.

The train to Pourènes from Lausanne leaves once an hour from platform 70—a strange choice of name for a station that has only twelve platforms. It's tucked away at the side of the station, hard to get to, hard to find. The line isn't a through line; it stops short at the main building, a cul-de-sac.

A steady jolting shakes the passengers. We're travelling alongside the lake. Below us, the slopes running down to the water are covered in vines and in the distance the mountains rise, tall and stately. I take the train to M. once a week, but the landscape never fails to hypnotise me. Ten minutes—then a tunnel and everything vanishes. Deep in my pocket, my phone buzzes. 'Give my love to everyone, I'll see them next Sunday. Just arriving at my mum's, talk tonight. I love you.' My fingers skim the screen. 'Have a lovely afternoon with your mum. I love you too.' A second later, the bubble around my message is topped with a red heart.

Without paying too much attention, I look at the content my friends have recently posted online. A cluster of messages addressed to K. jump out at me. They're messages of condolence posted on his profile. I send a frantic text to my mother, asking her to look through the newspaper. Then I return to the words of grief interspersed with tear emojis, stars, hands joined in prayer. K. was my first lover, the man who helped me grow towards greater freedom. All this time, the summer I spent with him has been buried at the bottom of my memory; now it comes back to me with breath-taking clarity. A notification pops up on my screen: a slightly blurred photo of the death notice in the paper. 'He chose to leave us.' My skull pounds my temples, my throat throbs, my cheeks are about to explode. K.'s killed himself... A flood of memories sweeps over me. I'm seventeen again.