

The Silent Tutsi

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It was only natural that Linda should be apprehensive when she met Laurent and Pauline Duquesne for the first time at the airport. What had she let herself in for?

It was a necessary part of her university degree, of course: a summer in France spent with a French family where she'd have to speak French all the time. She wasn't sure whether it was the fact she'd have to rely on her knowledge of the *belle langue* or her anxieties about submitting herself to the kindness of these strangers that troubled her most, but her first impressions were positive.

Linda's worries slipped away as Laurent drove them through the Picardy landscape, past the quaint cafés and rows of trees. She was gradually acclimatising to the French language, although she struggled to express herself with quite the fluency she hoped to eventually master. The couple was as fascinated about life in rural Suffolk as she was about life in small-town France. Although everything was still foreign to her, she looked forward to being as much at home here as she was to the thatched cottages and village greens of East Anglia.

The couple had two young children at home waiting for them who, as soon as they saw Linda, rushed about her and plied her with questions about English roast beef and English pop music. She was overwhelmed by the whirlwind of attention that contrasted so much with the relative solitariness of her short flight from Luton Airport. There was a lot that was new and much of this Linda only knew about from the French films she'd watched. And every now and then, one of the parents or, even more so, the children used a vernacular expression Linda wasn't sure she really understood.

She unpacked and organised her possessions in the small bedroom she was

given and already thought of as her own. Then she joined Laurent and Pauline, and the two children, for the evening meal. She knew food was an important ritual in French life and looked forward to the new routine. It would be so different from watching television with a tray on her lap.

The family sat down together while Pauline placed the dishes on the table to appreciative grunts from her husband and children. A bottle of red wine was uncorked and Linda had a glass in front of her, as did the two children. There was a sixth glass and plate laid out and Linda wondered who this could be for. Was there a third child in the family?

She was rather surprised when this sixth person appeared. She was only a couple of years younger than Linda and young enough to be one of Pauline's children. But clearly, she was not. Her skin was black and her curly hair was cut very short. She walked into the room and was greeted with "Bonjour, Gabrielle," by the family. Without responding with even a smile she sat down in the vacant seat.

The meal was delicious. Pauline was a very good cook and had obviously made an extra effort for her new *au pair*. She'd remembered that Linda didn't like broccoli and so none was placed on her plate although everyone else was offered some. Throughout the meal, Laurent and Pauline chatted to Linda, with the occasional polite interjection from Dominique and Pierre, the two children, and Linda became steadily more confident in her grasp of the French language. But during the whole meal, Gabrielle didn't say a single word nor was it apparent that one was expected of her.

When the family had finished the gateau and very strong coffee that made up

the dessert, Gabrielle stood up without a word and walked out of the room as silently as she came in despite the kind words of “Au revoir” that accompanied her departure.

Linda looked at Laurent. “Is Gabrielle very shy?” she asked, hoping that the word she chose had the same meaning in French as in English.

“Shy?” replied Laurent. “Not shy so much. She’s severely traumatized. She hasn’t said a word in all the years since we first chose to adopt her when she was a much younger girl.”

“Is that because she doesn’t speak French?”

“Well, she certainly understands French. She reads enough books. But it isn’t just French she won’t speak. She won’t say a word even in her own Tutsi language.”

“Tutsi?” wondered Linda, who was reminded of a Hollywood film with a similar sounding name.

“Yes. She comes from Rwanda. In Africa. There are two tribes there: the Tutsi and the Hutu. You might be too young to remember, but a few years ago there was a horrendous massacre. Something like a million Tutsi were slaughtered by the Hutu. Many of them were neighbours who’d lived next door to them all their lives.”

“I’ve heard of that, I think,” said Linda.

“Gabrielle was one of those who survived. It’s a wonder she wasn’t mutilated with a machete like so many others. Her parents were killed and all her family and friends. There’s even medical evidence she was raped, which, considering how very young she was, must have been trauma enough in itself. A lot of Tutsi children came up for adoption and, although we had no pressing need to adopt a daughter, we volunteered to do so. But ever since her ordeal, she’s not said a word. Of course, we

don't know what she was like before then. No one alive knows her from before that time or even knows her real name, but the doctors believe that it's because of her traumatic experience she never speaks."

"Oh dear!" said Linda in English. She wasn't at all sure what else she should say. There was a silence around the table. Even Dominique and Pierre looked uncomfortable.

"Anyway," said Pauline, breaking the silence, "we hope very much that you and Gabrielle get to know each other a lot better. It's to help Gabrielle that we really wanted you to stay here. She's a good girl, but because of her muteness she's mostly had to be taught at home. A home tutor normally looks after her education, but that's during term-time. We thought that you could perhaps teach her English and anything else that you'd like just to keep up her education. There are a few other *au pair* duties, but they're fairly light."

"You want me to teach Gabrielle?" asked Linda who'd never thought of teaching as a career when she completed her degree. Her ambitions were to work as a translator, perhaps for the European Parliament.

"It's more to keep her company than anything else, *ma petite*. She's very bright: at least a year in advance of her actual age. It's quite possible that when she gets her baccalauréat, she'll be able to go to university. Maybe even in Paris. I hope you don't mind, *ma chérie*?"

Linda shook her head. "I'd be pleased to," she replied, already regretting that she'd brought so few English books with her.

Fortunately, Laurent and Pauline had anticipated this and had bought some

English language text books, all with plenty of pictures of strangely gauche English people with names like Mary, John, Malcolm and Diane. As she was studying a foreign language herself, Linda was sure she knew what she ought to do, though she groaned at some of the rather odd cultural references in the books. Why was everyone so keen on the Beatles? And what was this obsession with English meal-times? And why did everyone have to speak in such a stilted, awkward manner?

Gabrielle's room was totally unlike that of any teenage girl's bedroom Linda had ever seen before. There were no posters on the wall—just a framed French landscape by Corot. The room was mostly bare of anything but books, and those were the peculiar paperbacks the French liked, with boring line drawings on the cover. There were no CDs, no DVDs, no stereo system, and only a hardly-used desktop PC. Gabrielle sat stiff and expressionless on a hard chair wearing a white blouse and blue jeans, the former contrasting dramatically with the darkness of her skin.

Linda drew in her breath as Pauline closed the door behind her. This was going to be more of an ordeal than she expected. How do you teach someone who won't say a word to you? Even her smile was curiously lacking in meaning. It just flashed into life for the shortest time before vanishing behind an expression of intimidating seriousness.

“My name is Linda. I come from Dumbleford, a small village in Suffolk, er, England,” said Linda nervously in French. “I am here to teach you English and I shall speak to you in English rather than French.”

Gabrielle nodded.

Linda squeezed her eyes shut. Shit! This wasn't going to be easy at all.

She opened the first page of the English text book.

“*This is Mary*” Linda said in English, reading from the book and pointing at a line drawing of a girl dressed in a tartan skirt and polo-neck jumper. “*She lives in London. She is a student.*”

Gabrielle said nothing, but nodded her head.

“*Mary speaks English,*” continued Linda, not sure whether she was understood. “*She comes from England.*”

Gabrielle nodded again, with an earnest face and no apparent evidence of having understood. Linda sighed, but she persisted. She continued to read out phrases from the English language text book while Gabrielle watched and nodded with no discernible facial expression. Her eyes were the liveliest part of her, perhaps because their whiteness contrasted so much with the blackness of her skin. She looked at the pictures, read the text and returned her gaze to Linda’s face. Her novice teacher, however, was not feeling that a great career in pedagogy was opening up in front of her. It was very hard work to teach, or to try to teach, with such a blank response.

It was a very warm summer, seemingly warmer than in England. Linda was feeling the heat acutely, especially so as a result of her frustrations in teaching. She was wearing little enough as it was, just a tee-shirt and a pair of shorts, and she envied Gabrielle who didn’t seem to feel the heat at all. Perspiration dripped down her skin making her tee-shirt damp and cling to her skin. She pulled it forward from her chest to let some air through and, as she did so, she noticed that Gabrielle’s eyes were closely watching her and seemed to peek down at her nipples that were unprotected by a bra. The tee-shirt snapped back on Linda’s bosom and she was aware that her

nipples were clearly visible through the cotton fabric. She blushed, but then reminded herself that she was in France. They didn't worry so much about such modesty here, did they?

Although there had been so little response while Linda spoke, she was very gratified to see that when Gabrielle did the written exercise afterwards she got every single answer absolutely right. Maybe Gabrielle already knew a bit of English, although Laurent had said that she'd not been taught it formally. Linda left the text books with Gabrielle and said she'd continue with more lessons in the afternoon.

This same pattern was repeated in the following lessons and, indeed, in all those that came after in the next few days. Linda conducted her lesson by reading aloud from the set text book and when she finished each section, Gabrielle would do the written exercises and each time she would do so faultlessly. It was frustrating, however, that there were no spoken exercises she could do, and Linda knew she couldn't expect Gabrielle to do these, even though they were clearly marked out in the text she was following. So, even these exercises were done by Gabrielle writing down the answers to Linda's spoken prompts.

When Linda wasn't reading aloud from the book—a task she was beginning to feel was fairly superfluous since Gabrielle had no difficulty in reading—she had plenty of opportunity to study her student. The black girl leaned forward heavily on the desk and pushed the pen hard against the paper. It was a good thing she used a rollerball pen, as a nib on an ink pen would soon have broken under the pressure. As she wrote, her brow furrowed with concentration and she occasionally licked her lips with her tongue.

Linda tried to while away the time when Gabrielle was writing by looking around her room, but soon she had seen everything in Gabrielle's room and returned her gaze to her student. Gabrielle had a long smooth neck that was displayed to good advantage when she leant forward. The knobbled spine followed her neck like a sinuous serpent dipping beneath the white collar of her blouse. Her arms were bare to the shoulder and Linda noticed a scar on her left arm that was long and deep. She wondered at first whether it was caused by a bicycle accident or the like, before reminding herself that it was more than likely a machete wound. As was, no doubt, another scar on her left leg that was longer but less deep.

Gabrielle must have also noticed the summer heat, because she took to wearing a skirt rather than jeans, but it reached to below her knees and was made of quite heavy linen, so it was probably not much cooler. It showed legs that were long and slim and led to a pair of flat-soled feet tucked into her espadrilles.

Every now and then, Gabrielle looked up at Linda with her penetrating white eyes and they seemed to rest on her rather longer than was absolutely necessary. They followed Linda from her face and her long hair over her tee-shirt, each one of which celebrated a different commercial product or holiday destination, past her bare navel to her legs and ankles. Linda wasn't sure what she should think confronted with such a long steady stare, but she reasoned that the cultural differences between France and England must be nothing compared to those between England and Rwanda, and there was probably no meaning attached to such long and intense gazes. She did think it strange that Gabrielle's eyes so often focused on her bosom, but it didn't bother her enough that she should put on a bra.

“*Mary walks into the Bakery,*” Linda read aloud, thinking that in real life this Mary was far more likely to drive to the supermarket. “*She wants to buy some bread and rolls. What does she say?*”

Gabrielle scribbled on her note book and handed it over to Linda to read. The black girl’s writing was very precise and small, but totally legible. The letters were as reticent as the rest of her, with no unnecessary flourishes and no identifiable idiosyncrasies.

“*Please may I have some bread and rolls, madam,*” Linda read aloud. “Well, we probably wouldn’t say ‘madam’, though. The English aren’t as polite as the French. No ‘messieurs-dames’ in English.”

Gabrielle nodded, as she usually did, but Linda she wasn’t at all sure she understood what she’d said. Linda wondered whether she could broach, in English, the concern that was uppermost in her mind.

“If you went to England, Gabrielle,” she asked, “would you communicate by handing people notes like you do with me?”

Gabrielle became suddenly flustered and alarmed. Perhaps she already understood more than Linda credited her. She looked at her hands and held the pen impotently in her fingers, letting it hover over the notebook. She looked back at Linda with a startled expression on her face and then back at the notebook, and then she stared at a point in space that Linda identified as being somewhere between her and the wall.

Linda sighed. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean... Shall we continue?”

Gabrielle returned her gaze to Linda and nodded.

“*Mary then walks to the Butcher’s,*” continued Linda. “*She wants to buy some sausages and roast beef. What does she ask the butcher?*”

Naturally, Gabrielle’s written answer was totally correct. Linda’s mind wandered away from the task at hand, though she hoped it wasn’t too obvious. How much did Gabrielle suffer from her condition and how could she realistically survive in the world if she couldn’t speak to anyone?

When it was not spent with Gabrielle, Linda’s time was far more like a holiday than a job. The *au pair* duties she was given were basically trivial and usually just meant accompanying Pauline to the shops and help her carry her bags to the car. Disappointingly, Pauline spent very little time in boulangeries or boucheries, any more than the fictitious Mary would, and instead went to a vast supermarket, Hypermarché Carrefour.

“We’re very pleased with your progress with Gabrielle,” said Pauline, as she weighed some asparagus spears in a plastic bag. “She seems happier, I think. I do believe she smiled for more than two seconds when I greeted her this morning.”

“Is that unusual?” wondered Linda, who’d also noticed that Gabrielle was smiling more, but still returning all too soon to her expressionless natural state of repose.

“I think so,” said Pauline. “The psychiatrist has said that it is very difficult for her to engage with other people. It’s not that she doesn’t want to—she somehow just can’t do it physically. You seem to have somehow awoken something in her where Laurent and I have been rather less successful.”

Linda wondered about this when she was next teaching Gabrielle. The young

black girl seemed genuinely pleased to see her, even though her smile lasted only a couple of seconds, and she pulled out her notebook as if to say she was ready to start the lesson.

As always, it was very hot in Gabrielle's room, even though the window was wide open onto the Duquesne's very pretty garden with its cherry trees and roses. Linda's perspiration again caused her tee-shirt to cling to the contours of her bosom. Gabrielle's eyes hovered rather too long on the outlines of Linda's nipples protruding under the cotton and she caught sight of Linda's eyes watching her. She smiled very briefly, clearly embarrassed, and turned her gaze away. Linda smiled at Gabrielle encouragingly, but not at all sure what it was she was supposed to be encouraging.

When Linda returned to her bedroom, which was right next to Gabrielle's and separated by only a party wall, she considered what Pauline had said about her ward, but she wondered also about Gabrielle's errant gaze and that peculiar smile on her face. What did it signify? Although it was so brief and fleeting, Linda carried a memory of it and its wealth of potential meaning that made those couple of seconds seem to have lasted much longer.

There was a mirror on the wardrobe in her bedroom positioned between the open window to the garden and an armchair. Linda stood in front of it and studied her reflection. The girl she saw was just over a year out of secondary school with a bush of frizzy brown hair that never did what she wanted it to, however much it was brushed and combed. She was a girl already blessed with a bosom growing disproportionately large that might one day become as monstrous as her mother's. Certainly, it was a bosom ill-concealed by the Coldplay tee-shirt she was wearing.

Despite the attention her breasts attracted, particularly from men, was she an attractive girl?

Sometimes Linda was sure the answer was yes. At other times, she was convinced it was no. She was below average height and, although not fat or plump, not exactly thin. There was always a slight, but not obvious, overhang over her shorts from the flesh of her bared midriff. Her face was pretty, she was certain of that, even though her eyebrows were bushy and her nose a little broad. At least the freckles that covered her face were rather less prominent now.

And Gabrielle? What about her? Was she pretty?

Linda shook her head with alarm. That was not a question she should ask herself, though she knew the answer was very much in the affirmative. The more she saw of the black girl, the more she appreciated her beauty. And she knew it was more, much more, than just her exotic allure. Gabrielle was a very pretty girl and one who would have the pick of partners if only... if only...

Linda didn't like the direction her thoughts were taking her and was pleased when her reverie was broken by the ringing of the bell that signalled it was time for dinner. This was the only occasion when she sat with Gabrielle and never felt she had to say anything to her. Nevertheless, her eyes wandered towards her student to meet Gabrielle's steady gaze from a serious face that might be appraising her or might just have been looking in her vague direction.

Gabrielle appeared to be fascinated by Linda's tee-shirts and not just by what was underneath. On those occasions when Gabrielle's gaze rested on her chest, which seemed to be more frequent now, they lingered over the printed words. Sometimes

they were simply declamatory like ‘Glastonbury Festival’ or ‘University of East Anglia’. Sometimes they had text that described a product or carried a humorous message. Linda had acquired her tee-shirts from many different sources. Most often she was given them, but sometimes she bought one at a concert or on holiday. There was no consistent theme amongst them, unless it was the fact she preferred ones that revealed a fair amount of midriff.

It was a particularly hot day when Gabrielle pulled at the seam of the tee-shirt Linda was wearing and stroked a finger over it. She gazed up at her teacher, who wasn’t sure she knew what to do, and her face expressed the promise of an inquisitive smile.

“Do you want to borrow one of my tee-shirts?” asked Linda, thinking this was probably the safest question to ask.

Astonishingly, Gabrielle nodded with a smile that wasn’t exactly broad but lasted an uncharacteristically long time.

Linda was sure she shouldn’t just take off her tee-shirt and give it to Gabrielle. After all, she had nothing underneath. But her bedroom was just next door.

“Come on,” she said. “Come and choose a couple to borrow.”

Gabrielle was escorted into Linda’s bedroom for the first time. Linda pulled out her collection of tee-shirts from a drawer and laid them on the bed.

“Take whichever ones you fancy.”

Gabrielle spent a long time standing by the bed looking at the tee-shirts. She didn’t touch them. She didn’t lean forward. She just stood there in her blouse and skirt, with her hands clasped in front of her. Then, with no warning, she undid her

blouse and slipped it off to reveal that she also wore no bra under her top, although so thick was the linen it upheld her modesty rather better than did Linda's tee-shirts.

The time it took for Gabrielle to pick up one of Linda's tee-shirts—one celebrating Dumbleford's Annual May Fair—and to slip it on over her shoulders was probably rather less than a minute, but it etched itself into Linda's memory as much longer. Gabrielle was very slender and the scar on her left arm was accompanied by a similar scar on the left side of her chest below her ribs. And the bared breasts, which Linda later studied over and over again in her memory, were full—not so much spherical but tipped by broad puffy areolae a lighter colour than the rest of her skin. The tee-shirt hid her breasts, but not her slender waist and slightly protruding navel.

The truncated tee-shirt looked rather odd in contrast to the prim skirt. It didn't quite match. "Do you want to borrow one of my pairs of shorts?" asked Linda, who wasn't absolutely sure that her English lessons had yet covered this item of clothing and tweaked her own to indicate what she meant.

Gabrielle nodded and with no ceremony undid her skirt and stepped out of it. And here was a surprise that Linda most definitely didn't expect. The girl was wearing no knickers under her skirt. Not wearing a bra was one thing. Linda wasn't wearing one either. But no knickers! Then she stood with her hands over her crotch while Linda with a blush pulled some shorts out of a drawer. Gabrielle chose a blue pair and while she picked them up and pulled them on, Linda with embarrassment studied her slender thighs and the dark bush of black curly hair that obscured her vulva.

It was this memory and of Gabrielle's breasts that Linda rehearsed in her mind and to which she found herself masturbating in bed that night. It was a guilty

masturbation, even more so than usual. She didn't want to make a noise that might alert the Duquesne family to what she was doing and she also hoped that no one might guess what it was that excited her.

However, someone else in the house was rather less careful than she in hiding her nocturnal habits. The sounds of the rustle of sheets, a rhythmic pumping of the bedstead against the wall and what sounded like small gasps were coming from Gabrielle's room. This astonished Linda, not only because it was the first time she'd heard any utterance from Gabrielle's mouth, but also because it told her two things she'd never really considered before. One was that the young black girl was also someone who might have sexual urges. And the other was that the short ceremony of changing clothes might have aroused her as much as it had Linda—though clearly not so much from what she saw but from what she exhibited.

Laurent and Pauline Duquesne were also very surprised when Gabrielle appeared at the dinner table in Linda's clothes, though they made no comment while she sat there. After Gabrielle left, Pauline smiled at Linda.

"We're happy to see Gabrielle coming out of her shell," she said in French. "However, I don't think your clothes are a very good fit for her. The tee-shirt and shorts are rather loose. Next time I'm in the shops I must get some clothes that are more her size."

Linda nodded. She knew there was a difference in their sizes, which meant that Gabrielle looked almost ridiculous in a tee-shirt that was somewhat baggy and shorts that only stayed up because she pulled her belt tight, but even so slipped down enough for Linda to see the crack of Gabrielle's buttocks whenever she leaned forward. But if

Gabrielle felt embarrassed by the poor fit, she didn't show it. Although she let a smile pass her face more often than before, she still had a very earnest expression in repose that was somewhat at odds with a tee-shirt celebrating Theakston's Special Bitter and a pair of shorts that showed off most of her hips.

The tutorials Linda conducted with Gabrielle now had a very peculiar flavour to them. How long could this tangible state of tension last? When Linda leaned forward to show her student the illustrations in the English language books that accompanied the text, Gabrielle leaned forward too, so that their bare arms pressed against each other. When Gabrielle scribbled her written answers to the exercises, Linda sat back and studied the black girl's legs, thighs, shoulders and, most of all, the arch of her bent-over neck. She both hoped that Gabrielle didn't notice the intensity of her gaze and also that she did and understood, perhaps better than Linda did herself, what her scrutiny signified. And when Linda read aloud from the text about Malcolm's adventures in London, Kevin's shopping expeditions or Susan's interest in cooking, she was now sure that Gabrielle's gaze wasn't really inscrutable at all.

And after these lessons, there was an awkwardness about closing the proceedings that were not at all helped by Gabrielle's silence, filled in with rather too many words by Linda's account of what the lesson was meant to achieve and what the next one would be about. And each night Linda found it difficult to get to sleep as her mind whirred with thoughts of Gabrielle, while she could hear the bed sheets rustle and the mattress shudder in the adjacent bedroom.

It was fortunate indeed that Laurent, Pauline and their two children were more often out of the house than indoors when the tension finally broke. The way it

happened wasn't totally an accident, of course, but neither Gabrielle nor Linda knew how else the barrier could be broken without some semblance of happenchance.

Linda was sitting next to Gabrielle, their thighs touching, and Gabrielle now wearing one of the tee-shirts Pauline had bought her that fit rather better than any of Linda's although it showed rather less of her midriff. Although she had a choice of new shorts as well, she had decided to wear one of Linda's that slipped provocatively down over her hips.

Linda glanced at the shorts that had fallen low enough for her to see the upper reaches of Gabrielle's pubic hairs emerging from under the waistband.

"You really must tighten the belt more," said Linda, putting her hands around Gabrielle's waist to pull the belt together. Gabrielle stood up to let Linda do the task with more ease and as she did so, she deliberately undid the belt so that the oversize shorts dropped down to her ankles. As Linda suspected was usual for her, she wore no knickers underneath.

For a moment, the two girls were frozen as if in a tableau. Gabrielle standing with just a tee-shirt celebrating a Picardy summer fete and a pair of shorts bunched about her ankles. Linda crouched beside her with her arms around the girl's totally bare hips and felt the black girl's flesh burning on her fingers. She was reluctant to break the impasse, but eventually did so, frightened that the moment would pass forever, by kissing Gabrielle tenderly on her taut stomach.

And that brief moment of physical contact became rather longer and more intense as Gabrielle impulsively tugged off her tee-shirt so that she was totally naked and pulled Linda up so that they were face-to-face. For a few seconds, the two girls

faced one another, one black and naked, the other white and not naked. And then with a strangled gasp they pushed their faces, mouths and bodies together in a passionate, carnal embrace. And this embrace became more urgent and more physical, as Linda divested herself of her clothes as rapidly as she could. Their two bodies staggered backwards and clumsily, like an uncoordinated quadruped, and collapsed lengthwise, both now naked, onto Gabrielle's bed that, in all these weeks, had been there unnoticed, not considered, but at last inviting and inevitable.

Linda was not totally innocent, but her fumbings in the past had always been with boys and beyond a cursory probing of the genitals had not really lingered long in the more intimate territory she would later be intent on exploring to the full with Gabrielle. There was so much to explore. The long thin fingers. The slightly small ears. The long arching neck. Those beautiful breasts that were so unlike her own which, in turn, so evidently fascinated Gabrielle. Although their mutual groping was intimate, passionate and sensual, there was a further degree of sexual license that Linda was reluctant to initiate. As so too was Gabrielle—although she nibbled and licked her nipples with such ferocity and desire that Linda wasn't certain that they might not exercise some appeal other than the obviously sexual.

There was so much else to get to know without venturing into the region between the legs that she was content to alternate her kisses and cuddles from the mouth to the body and back again. It was when the two met mouth to mouth that she could be most certain that Gabrielle's passion and desire equalled her own. This in itself was a novel experience and not one she'd experienced during her previous gropings at university or school. On those occasions she was uncertain whether the

boys' lust focused on Linda as a person or just as the nearest available woman.

The passion that was so furious to start with began to ease, and the two girls stretched out languidly on the bed together as they took stock of their abruptly changed relationship. They were panting heavily, perhaps less with exhaustion than with excitement. Linda gazed lovingly at Gabrielle and was delighted to see that her lover's face had not settled into a state of serious impassivity. Instead, like Linda's, it was flushed with excitement and pasted with perspiration. Most of all, she sported a huge smile that did not vanish after only the briefest glimpse.

"Oh, I love you!" said Linda with fondness, her voice somehow catching in her throat. "I love you, Gabrielle." Then, to ensure that the message was not lost in translation, she said: "Je t'aime. Je t'aime."

Words didn't seem enough, but clearly their lovemaking demanded something more. Linda had seen a few pornographic images on the internet and was sure she had a vague idea of what should happen next. However, she had on hand none of the kit of sexual aids that lesbian porn stars always had available however much they appeared to be taken by surprise, but she knew the general area where she should go.

Linda slid down to Gabrielle's thighs, lifted them up and gazed at her huge white eyes questioningly.

"Shall I?" she asked.

Gabrielle nodded.

Linda then parted the black bush of pubic hair that obscured Gabrielle's vulva, hunched forward and pushed her tongue onto the long, thankfully uncircumcised, clitoris. She knew what a vagina looked like. After all, she'd explored her own often

enough. But it was curious how different Gabrielle's was to any she'd seen before. And even more peculiar still, she discovered when she parted it slightly to reveal the strangely pink interior.

It was while she was engrossed in the business of chewing and munching Gabrielle's crotch that Linda heard a voice. At first she thought it was Gabrielle's grunts and pants, which were occasionally articulated in her passion but they would have no diction or syntax. Then she realised that these were words. An entire phrase.

Linda lifted up her head and body by her shoulders and looked directly into Gabrielle's face. She was smiling. And more than that, not just smiling, she was saying something. The first words since her horrific trauma in Rwanda all those years ago.

And what were these words?

They were exactly what Linda most wanted to hear.

“Je t'aime. Je t'aime.”