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CHAPTER 1

LUCIE BERNARD

ALL HER LIFE, Lucie Aubrac was a storyteller, and her first and most enduring stories were spun around her childhood. At first, it was merely the place and people she was determined to leave behind. Later, she reimagined it as a springboard and a support, and finally, when she talked of it in her old age, it was a receding background against which a few recollections still flared like matches struck in the dark: the places and people which had marked her, and the signposts she had followed. Some of these remained constant in the narratives she created around herself. Ambition was one, and rebellion, and the fierce determination to seek and seize happiness. So were love, friendship and the compulsion to name and fight injustice. All of these coloured the way in which she lived, moulded and told her life.

It began on 29 June 1912, when Lucie Bernard was born in the small and undistinguished commune of Châtenay-sur-Seine, on the flat lands south-east of Paris. She was the first child of a young couple who had left peasant families in Burgundy, a fertile region of rolling hills, sunflower fields, vineyards and wide rivers, where generations of their ancestors had lived lives tied to the soil. Her parents, Louis and Louise Bernard, were the first to break away, moving to the capital where they

ambitiously set themselves up in business just after their daughter was born. Baby Lucie's first months were lived in the scent of stewing beef and cheap wine, for the Bernards briefly ran a sold-by-the-glass bistro in the working-class arrondissement of Montparnasse on the left bank of the Seine. It did not last long. When Lucie was two her father contracted typhoid, the disease of the poor, and the family gave up their business and moved into lodgings.

A retrospective rosy light would shine on Montparnasse as the picturesquely poverty-stricken haunt of artists and intellectuals. In fact, it was an area of slums where working people lived in the meanest of conditions. Poverty, said the celebrated artist, writer and one-time resident Jean Cocteau, was a luxury in Montparnasse. Louise Bernard, feeding baby Lucie and supporting an ill husband, spent hard hours washing other people's linen throughout her second pregnancy. When little Jeanne was born in September 1913 the family left Paris altogether for the healthier employ of a countess in the department of Eure, to the north of the capital, where a recovering Louis worked as a gardener and Louise milked cows and sewed soldiers' uniforms when her work in the dairy was done. The improvement in their situation was brief. When Lucie was two and her little sister, Jeanne, not quite one, their father went away to war. They did not see him again for three years.

One and a half million French soldiers died in the First World War, and more than four million were wounded. Lucie was five when Louis Bernard came home in 1917, a traumatized and partly deaf stranger. By then they were back in Burgundy, where Lucie and Jeanne had spent the war years sometimes with their mother and sometimes with grandparents when their mother's series of employers preferred their dairymaid or washerwoman childless. The reunited Bernard family moved briefly to the employ of another of France's countless countesses,

this time on an estate outside the coal-mining town of Montceau-les-Mines, still in Burgundy. Louis, recovering from the horrors of war as he had previously recovered from the horrors of typhoid, again took gardening work and Louise returned to the dairy. This, too, did not last long. After some altercation with an employer who treated her wounded gardener and his tireless wife with contempt, they abruptly left to rent a house in the little canal-side town of Blanzay, with the help of a parent and the war pension which was eventually paid. In Blanzay, life became a little easier. The couple rented a plot of land where Louis grew flowers and vegetables for Louise to sell at market, the two girls attended the local primary school, and the family found some security and permanence.

Lucie's infancy was thus characterized by movement and absence, hunger and hard work. But it was not unhappy: there were grandparents to step in, a mother who loved them, and a little sister she adored and for whom she would always feel responsible. And Lucie was blessed with curiosity and detachment from the earliest age she could recall. Her grandmother wanted her to kiss the statue of the Virgin. She refused: why should she kiss this piece of wood? When she caught a fugitive parrot and presented it to the countess whose cows her mother milked, that lady withheld the promised reward after the bird bit the little girl and she bled onto a precious carpet. How dare she! This was dishonesty. This was *unfairness*. Among the most vivid of these childhood markers was her first experience of racism. A large community of Polish workers lived in Montceau-les-Mines and one day Lucie saw 'a Polish woman, wife of a miner, carrying the body of her child who had drowned in the canal. Overwhelmed by sorrow, but upright and dignified. And a voice raised: "so heartless, those women!" A stupid, racist reaction which mistook this mother's dignity for coldness. That day, I understood what racism was.'¹

Lucie would always remember the terrible deprivation of the