

Anna Gavalda

THE CRACKS IN OUR ARMOR

*Translated from the French
by Alison Anderson*

 Europa
editions

HAPPY MEAL

I love this girl. I want to make her happy. I'd like to take her out to lunch. A big French brasserie with mirrors and proper tablecloths. So I can sit next to her, gaze at her profile, look at the people all around us and let everything get cold. I love her.

"Okay," she says, "but we're going to McDonald's."

She doesn't give me the time to protest.

"It's been ages," she adds, putting her book down by her side, "seems like forever . . ."

She's exaggerating. It was less than two months ago, I counted. I know how to count, but I'm resigned. The young lady likes her nuggets and barbecue sauce: what am I supposed to do? If we're together long enough, I'll teach her about other things.

About grand veneur sauce, Pommerol wines, and crêpes Suzette, for example. If we're together long enough, I'll teach her that waiters at the big brasseries are not allowed to touch our napkins, and that they slide them onto the table by raising their presentation napkin slightly. That ought to astonish her. There are so many things I want to show her. So, so many things. But I say nothing while I watch her buttoning up her pretty coat.

I know what girls are like when it comes to the future: they make promises, and that's it. I'd rather take her to that crap fast food place and make her happy one day at a time. The crêpes Suzette can wait.

In the street I compliment her on her shoes. She takes offense: "Don't tell me you never noticed them, I've had them since Christmas!"

I mumble something, she smiles at me, so I compliment her on her socks and she tells me I'm being dumb. As if I didn't already know.

We go through the door and I instantly feel nauseous. From one time to the next I forget how much I hate McDonald's. That smell . . . that smell of frying fat, ugliness, cruelty to animals, and vulgarity combined. Why do the female employees allow themselves to get so ugly? Why do they wear that point-less sun visor? Why do people stand in line so passively? Why do they play that elevator music? Where is the elevator? I stamp my feet with impatience. The customers ahead of us have no manners. The young women are vulgar and the young men have an empty stare. I have a hard enough time with humanity as it is: I shouldn't come to this sort of place.

I stand straight and stare at a point far ahead of me, as far away as possible: the price of the Maxi Best Of menus and the chemical composition of the Very Parfait posted above the counter. "Maxi Best Of." "Very Parfait." How can anyone make words sounds so ridiculous? I'm getting depressed. She can tell, she senses these things. She takes my hand and gives it a gentle squeeze. She doesn't look at me. I feel better. Her little finger is stroking my palm and my fortune line is overlapping my love line.

She changes her mind several times. For dessert she hesitates between a milkshake and a caramel sundae. She wrinkles her cute little nose and twirls a strand of hair with her finger. The waitress is tired and I feel emotional. I carry both our trays. She turns to me and says,

"I suppose you would rather sit all the way at the back?" I shrug.

"You would. You like it better there. I know you do."

She clears the way for me. People who are sitting in the way scrape their chairs as she goes by. Faces turn. She doesn't see them. The palpable disdain of the young lady who knows she is beautiful. She is looking for a little niche where the two of us will be comfortable. She finds a spot, smiles at me again, and I close my eyes in agreement. I put our pittance down on a table smeared with squirts of ketchup and streaks of grease. She slowly unwinds her scarf and wiggles her head three times before she reveals her graceful neck. I go on standing there like a big ninny.

"What are you waiting for?" she asks.

"I'm looking at you."

"You can look at me later. It's going to get cold."

"You're right."

"I'm always right."

"No, my love. Not always."

A little grimace.

I stretch my legs out into the aisle. I don't know where to begin. I already want to leave. There's nothing I like about these little parcels. A boy with a nose-ring is joined by two other loudmouths. I fold my legs under the table to let this strange herd go by.

I have a moment's doubt. What am I doing here? With my vast love and my tweed jacket? I feel a ridiculous urge to go and get a knife and fork.

She is worried:

"Is something wrong?"

"No, no. Everything's fine."

"Then eat!"

I do as she says. She delicately opens her box of nuggets as if it were a jewelry box. I look at her nails. A bluish polish.

Dragonfly wing polish. I'm telling you, I don't know anything about nail polish colors, but as it happens she also has two little dragonflies in her hair. Tiny barrettes that just barely hold a few blonde strands in place. I feel a surge of emotion. I know, I'm repeating myself, but I cannot help but wonder: was it for my sake, as she thought about our lunch together, that she painted her nails this morning?

I picture her in her bathroom, concentrating, and already dreaming of her caramel sundae. And of me at the same time.

Oh yes. Of me. Inevitably. She dips her pieces of defrosted chicken into their plastic sauce.

She's relishing it.

"You really like that?"

"I love it."

"But why?"

A triumphant smile.

"Because it's good!"

She's implying that I'm an old-fashioned killjoy, I can see it in her eyes. But at least she shows it tenderly.

Pray God it lasts, this tenderness. Pray God it lasts.

I join in. I chew and swallow, keeping time with her. She doesn't say a lot. I'm used to that. She never says much when I take her out to lunch. She's far too busy looking at the tables around her. People fascinate her. Even that weirdo at the next table wiping his mouth and blowing his nose in the same napkin is more interesting to her than I am.

And while she's looking at him, I take a moment to stare at her, undisturbed.

What do I like best about her?

Top of the list, I would say her eyebrows. She has lovely eyebrows. Very well drawn. The Great Architect must have

been inspired that day. He probably used a sable brush and his hand did not tremble. Number two, her earlobes. Perfect. Her ears are not pierced. I hope she will never succumb to that ludicrous temptation. I will stop her. Number three, something that is very tricky to describe. For number three, I love her nose or, more precisely, her nostrils. The soft little round backs of those two tiny shells. Those pale pink shells, almost white, like the ones we have been looking for every summer since we met and which the kids on the beach call cowries. As for number four . . .

But the spell has been broken already: she could tell I was looking at her, and she simpers as she nibbles on her drinking straw. I look away. I hunt for my phone, patting my pockets.

"You put it in my bag."

"Thank you."

"What would you do without me, huh?"

"Nothing."

I smile at her and reach for a handful of cold fries.

"I would do nothing," I continue, "but I wouldn't have to go to McDonald's on a Saturday afternoon."

She didn't hear me. She has started on her sundae. With the tip of her spoon she starts by eating the chopped peanuts, then proceeds conscientiously along each swirl of caramel.

Then she pushes her tray back.

"Aren't you going to finish it?"

"No. I don't actually like sundaes. I just like the peanut bits and the caramel. The ice cream makes me feel sick."

"You want me to ask them to put some more on?"

"Some more what?"

"Some more peanuts and caramel."

"They'll never do it."

"Why not?"

"I just know they won't. They won't want to."

"Let me try."

I get up, holding her little cup of ice cream, and head toward the cash registers. I wink at her. She looks at me, amused. My heart is in my boots. I'm a valiant knight who is carrying his princess's colors to a faraway, hostile land.

In hushed tones I ask the woman for another sundae. It's easier that way. I'm a valiant knight who has some experience.

Off she goes again, painstakingly picking at her dessert. I like her gourmandise. I like her manners.

So graceful.

How is this possible?

I think about what to do next. Where shall I take her? What am I going to do with her? Will she give me her hand when we're back out in the street? Will she pick up her charming chirruping where she left it when we came in? What was she talking about, anyway? I think it was about Easter weekend. Where were we going for Easter? Good lord, my dear, I don't even know myself. I can try to make you happy from one day to the next, but ask me what we'll be doing two months from now, that's going a bit far. I'll have to find another topic of conversation, in addition to a place to go for a walk.

Valiant, experienced, and inspired.

Maybe the booksellers . . . the booksellers are just a pretext for strolling along the Seine. She will let out a sigh. "Again? Those old books, *again?*" No, she won't sigh. She likes to please me, too. And besides, she will give me her hand, I know she will. She has always given me her hand.

She folds her napkin before wiping her mouth. As she gets up, she smooths her skirt and tugs on the sleeves of her cardigan. She picks up her bag and her glance indicates where I have to leave our trays.

I hold the door for her. The cold air is a shock. She ties her scarf again then with a confident gesture frees her hair from under her coat collar. She turns to thank me:

"That was delicious."

It was delicious.

We head down the rue Dauphine, the wind is blowing, I put my arm around her shoulder and hold her close.

How I love this girl. My little girl, my daughter. Her name is Adèle and she's not even six years old.

While working as a high-school French teacher, **Anna Gavalda** published her first work in 1999, the critically acclaimed collection of short stories *I Wish Someone Were Waiting for Me Somewhere*, which sold over half a million copies in her native France and was published in the US by Penguin in 2003. Gavalda has since published three novels, all of which have become best-sellers across Europe. Her first novel, *Someone I Loved*, was adapted to film in 2009 and her novel *Hunting and Gathering* was made into a film starring Audrey Tautou and Daniel Auteuil. Gavalda's novels and short stories have been translated into over forty languages. She lives in Paris.

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