

# **A Very Long Engagement Study Guide**

**A Very Long Engagement by Sebastien Japrisot**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">A Very Long Engagement Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Saturday Evening.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Bingo Crepuscule.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">The White Widow.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">The Good Old Days.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Queen Victoria's Tuppence.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">The Mahogany Box.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">The Woman on Loan.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">The Mimosas of Hosseger.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">The Terror of the Armies.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">The Other Side of No-Man's Land.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">The Lovers of Belle de Mai.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">The Sunflowers at the end of the World.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Lieutenant-General Byng at Twilight.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Monday Morning.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">41</a>



# Plot Summary

When Mathilde Donnay's fiancé is reported killed in action, she begins a quest to find him and four other soldiers who have been abandoned by their own army. Although Mathilde cannot walk, she can fend for herself, and she is intelligent and resourceful. Through interviews, letters, telegrams, and visits to important places Mathilde gathers information that leads her to discover the whereabouts of her lover, Manech. The reader must follow the clues as Mathilde does in order to find out what has happened between Saturday evening and Monday morning in January of 1917.

Mathilde's quest begins when she is contacted by a man (Daniel Esperanza) who is wasting away from the Spanish influenza in a hospital near her. He tells her that her fiancé was not killed in action as she has been told. He was one of five men who were convicted of self-mutilation, sent to the front, and pushed out into no-man's-land between trenches. It was at a place called Bingo Crepuscule. Her fiancé is the youngest. The others are a strong, quiet farmer, a trade union pacifist, a pimp, and a carpenter. Each had written a letter home, and Esperanza gives the letters to Mathilde. Using the names and letters that Esperanza provides her, Mathilde attempts to contact the loved ones of the four remaining soldiers. She also hires a lawyer and a private investigator and places an ad in the paper. The correspondence that follows provides her with insight into the events of January 6 to January 8 of 1917. Each letter from a widow or a fellow soldier, each visit to a cemetery or a battlefield, yields one more clue.

Mathilde's lawyer tries to convince her that she is wrong, that the soldiers were all pardoned and sent back to the fighting, that her fiancé was killed in battle, but Mathilde holds on to what she knows is true. She finds a stamp spoken of in one of the letters. If the stamp is real, the letter is true she reasons, and her lover was alive on Sunday morning. She receives a letter from a woman who has had an affair with her husband's best friend, another soldier and one of the condemned men. The letter to Mathilde helps her discover the whereabouts of a pair of German boots that have been traded several times among the soldiers at Bingo. Their final wearer is a man who assists Manech in no-man's-land, carrying him out on his back. Mathilde manages to crack the code of a letter from one of the condemned men to his wife, and with it she is able to find the one man who carries all the secrets that lead to Manech. Another woman will not answer Mathilde's questions until she has killed all the French officers who had a part in murdering her lover. When her work is complete, she is arrested and executed, but she tells Mathilde all she knows, and Mathilde's quest is almost over.

Former soldiers remember pardons that never got delivered and a man arriving at a hospital with one red glove, a gift to her fiancé from a compassionate soldier. While Mathilde lives out her other lives--painting, teaching, building a new house--she keeps her life with Manech and all the letters in a mahogany box, afraid she might not find him but stubbornly hopeful that she will. With each new revelation, the reader figures out the mystery along with Mathilde and shares her joy as she is reunited with someone who is almost, but not quite, her fiancé. Her love for him has never wavered. Although there

are many anti-war sentiments expressed in the novel, the overriding ideal is that of an enduring love that can conquer war and death and sadness.



# Saturday Evening

## Summary

It is Saturday Evening, mid-January, 1917 and five French soldiers who have been convicted of self-mutilation are being marched through a trench full of mud, and muddied soldiers, to a destination they do not know. The first man in the line is called Eskimo but his number is 2124. He is 37-years-old, a carpenter, and a decorated soldier who had taken prisoners in 1915. He is not guilty of his crime, having shot himself in the hand accidentally while attempting to pull a gray hair from his head. He is wearing German boots.

Number 4077, a welder with a wife and two daughters, is next in line. He really has shot himself, but he has done it just to be among the group. It was a sign of unity; there had been twenty-eight of them. Eventually, he thinks, they will all refuse to fight. He is called Six-Soux.

Third in line is number 1818, a farmer. He is from Dordogne and has been raised by the Bureau of Child Welfare. He finds it interesting that his number is 1818 because his number with the Bureau had always been 18. A large and quiet man, he had always been obstinate and a loner. He had once strangled an officer, taken his gun, and run off for a while. His wife, also a foundling, is twenty-one-years-old, nine years younger than himself. She has been left on the farm with their small son. He has been in the war for thirty months and has been home on leave twice. He has shot himself in the right hand, the one he uses to write and shoot.

Angel is next in line. He is twenty-six, and his number is 7328. He is handsome, a lady's man, and an arrogant smooth-talker. He is also hysterical, afraid, and pathetic. On July 31, 1914, he was put in jail for killing another neighborhood pimp, and he chose to join the war effort rather than complete his sentence. He shot himself because he had heard there would be an offensive, and he knew that meant many more deaths. He and a notary's clerk agreed to shoot each other in the right hand. Angel lost his courage at the last moment and jerked away. He ended up shooting the other man in the face and losing a few fingers himself.

The last man in line is called Cornflower, the nickname of the military class of 1919. Only nineteen-years-old, he is afraid of war, of the wind, of himself. He had been a daredevil before the war. His name is Jean, but he is also called Manech, and his number is 9692. He has left behind his one true love, Mathilde. Jean had managed the war and the fighting well until another man had been blown up right next to him. He had come back from the battle having stripped off his uniform because pieces of the dead man were all over him. Jean was never the same. On the advice of other soldiers he had eaten poisoned meat so that he would appear jaundiced. There was a court martial, but because of his age the only punishment was that he would have no leave of absence. Still determined to get out of the war, Jean lit a cigarette and held it above the



trench so a German would shoot him in the hand. Everyone wanted the sergeant to let it go, but he said no. At the second court martial, his lawyer, a father who had lost a son in the war, had tried to defend him, had gotten three others off, but could not get a reprieve for Jean. He is now smiling like a crazy person, clearly no longer in control of his faculties.

Mathilde is seventeen when they tell her Manech was killed in action. She cries, but “women don’t give up easily.” She feels that somehow Manech is still alive and she will find him, that there is a wire that connects them. “If this wire does not lead her back to her lover, that’s alright. She can always use it to hang herself.”

## Analysis

This chapter is rich in imagery that sets the tone of confusion, of mystery. The mud that is ever-present in the trenches is mentioned over and over again. The Eskimo’s German boots stick in it; it is caked on the faces of the other soldiers who are standing back to make way for the criminals. Their eyes peer out from it. Just as this image would indicate, the five men are confused about where they are and what their fate will be. While they know they have been condemned to death, they are unsure why they have been brought to this trench and how their sentence will be carried out. At one point, two of the characters find a British uniform button in the dirt. They have been moved around for days, and this button shows them that they have made a long circular journey and are back where they started. It makes them more confused. The repetition of questions in the head of one man adds to the mysterious tone. As he thinks back to his life and service, he tries to remember things that people had said to him and where events had happened. “When was that?”; “What did he say?” To top it off, Cornflower or Manech, is not in his right mind and is picturing himself back home with his love. He seems to think he is heading back to her.

The reader is left almost as lost as the five men. The author gives descriptions of these men, of their lives before and during the war, and it is clear the reader is meant to have compassion for them. It is unclear, however, who the hero is until the reader meets Mathilde and knows it is Manech she wants to find.

The wire is mentioned numerous times as well. The soldiers are continuously told to “watch out for the wire.” It seems an ominous warning, as the reader is not told what type of wire this is. Then an entirely different wire is mentioned, the one that Mathilde is willing Manech to watch for, the one that connects the two lovers. She thinks that if the wire does not connect them, she can use it to hang herself instead. The wire becomes a symbol of hope and a symbol of death if the hope does not come to fruition.

## Vocabulary

glimmering, staggered, wrench, sinister, foundling, eminent, proliferation, clambering, intrepid, reprieve



# Bingo Crepuscule

## Summary

In August, 1919, Mathilde Donnay, who is living at her parents' vacation home at Capbreton with her caretakers Sylvain and Benedict, receives a letter from a nun. A sergeant lies near death from Spanish influenza and wants to talk to her. Daniel Esperanza had been an exporter of wine, handsome and popular with the ladies. He had gone to the war in 1914. Sylvain takes Mathilde to the hospital to see him. He tells her the story of his encounter with the five men.

On January 6, 1917, Esperanza was told to take the five soldiers to the front line. He was the one who had written and mailed the last letter Mathilde had received from Manech. He tells her the story of escorting the five soldiers to the front along with ten other men he had chosen to accompany him. The first of the condemned men was called Eskimo or Bastoche. He was wearing German boots, and he told Esperanza that he had shot himself by accident. The second was Six-Soux, who admitted that he was guilty of his crime. Common Law, the third man, had been a convict before the war. The fourth man Esperanza knew only as That Man. He was quiet and kept to himself. Finally, Esperanza mentions Cornflower, or Manech, the youngest of the men. He tells her that a medical officer came to take care of the five men and that Manech's hand had been amputated because his wound was so bad. Two of the men had picked up a uniform button from the snow. Esperanza wonders why it interested them.

When Mathilde looks upset, Esperanza asks her if she would like him to go on or to stop. She is exasperated with the question, wanting the sergeant to continue his story. He resumes the telling. After the men's wounds were tended, they were taken to a trench called Bingo Crepuscule. As the men walked through the trench, they were told over and over to watch out for the telephone wire. In the trench, they met up with the captain, who was angry with Esperanza for not helping the prisoners escape. He told Esperanza that the men were to be dropped into no-man's-land in the dark with their hands tied and with no weapons. The Captain thought the idea despicable, but he had no choice.

The men were given food by Celestin Poux, the cook who was called the Terror of the Armies because he was so good at procuring goods for his men. Manech, who had lost his mind, requested hot chocolate and bread with honey. Somehow, Poux found what Manech had asked for. Esperanza decided to let the men write one last letter to a loved one. Only Manech and Common Law were wounded in their writing hands, so they dictated their letters: Manech to Esperanza and Common Law to Poux. The men were put into no-man's-land -- Eskimo wearing new shoes and offering to help Manech. Manech seemed oblivious to his surroundings, but he was obedient.

The Germans had noticed the commotion and had sent up flares before beginning to fire. When the firing ceased, the Sergeant had cognac with the captain. The captain told



Esperanza that he had been a history teacher before the war and that he had enjoyed stamp collecting as a boy. He told him about an important stamp bearing the words “Victoria Anna Penoe”. The captain passed out, and Esperanza left. He found out that his corporal, Celestine Poux, had given Manech one of his gloves for his good hand.

Esperanza was transferred and separated from all those who were involved with the five soldiers. He was even given a promotion in rank. Having been wounded, he happened to meet up with one of the men who had been in the trench, Urbain Chardelot. Chardelot told Esperanza how they had taken the two German trenches and been beaten in the third one. All five criminals had been killed along with many other soldiers. He did, however, say that he would bet on Cornflower, who had built a snowman during all the fighting. As Mathilde is leaving, Esperanza gives her a package which contains his copies of the five letters, a list of the names of the five soldiers, and a group picture.

## Analysis

Sergeant Esperanza has carried the memory of this unfortunate night for a long time. It is eating away at him almost as much as the Spanish flu is. He hated being part of the barbaric thing that was done to these soldiers. It is ironic that it is the flu that is killing him after he was able to survive the horrors of the war. Knowing he is going to die, he seems to think little else matters except clearing his conscience of this knowledge. Mathilde, even though she cannot walk, is pictured as strong, stronger than the Sergeant and ready to hear whatever he has to say. While the news of Manech’s demise is difficult to hear, her only goal is to find him. She has been told that he was killed in action, but this new story brings doubt about the truth. Esperanza’s story gives her hope that she may still be able to find Manech alive, and she pushes him to tell her more and more clues that will help her find out what has happened to Manech.

Esperanza’s story reiterates the happenings of the previous chapter, adds his point of view, and continues the story. The reader finds out that the men, who did not know what was going to happen to them in the first chapter, are going to be tossed into no-man’s-land with no means of defense. While the reader see the horrible effects of war, the author also presents the compassion some of the soldiers have for the others.

The image of the wire is continued. The reader finds out that the wire they were to look out for was a telephone wire. The soldiers need the telephone to receive orders and ask for help. It is a lifeline just as Mathilde’s wire is a lifeline between herself and Manech. The button is also mentioned again, the button that tells the soldiers where they are. The reader knows why it is important, but Daniel Esperanza does not know.

## Vocabulary

hypocrisy, derision, defy, hailing, ravings, rapturous, torrent, fatigue, astonishment, carnage





# The White Widow

## Summary

Mathilde opens a package given to her by Esperanza. It contains a list of the prisoners' given names, hometowns, and military class; a picture of them; and the letters each had written to loved ones on January 6, 1917. Kleber Bouquet, Eskimo, had written to his friend Louis Teyssier and had asked Louis to speak to Vero, Kleber's lover, on his behalf. He wanted Vero to know that he was sorry about the fight that they had had, and he wanted her to have the money he had left with Louis for safekeeping. He reminisced about good times with Louis and told Louis he had made up with his friend, Biscuit. Francis Gaignare, Six-Soux, wrote to his wife, Therese. His letter is simply full of love for his wife and two daughters. The letter that makes the least sense is the one from Benoit Notre-Dame, or That Man, to his wife, Mariette. There are no declarations of love; rather, his letter speaks of the mundane working of the farm and the price of manure. The fourth letter, from Ange Bassignano, Angel or Common Law, to his lover Tina Lombardi, is full of pet names for her. He tells her he should have left for America when he had the chance and says they will be happy together if he gets out of the war. Finally, Mathilde looks at the letter to her from Manech. She has read her own copy many times, but she reads again of his love for her and his desire to marry her.

There is also a letter from the captain written to the Esperanza on January 7. The prisoners had all managed to remove the ropes from their hands and had dug in. He had heard from all but one of them – the farmer. He was determined to keep them alive if he could, even if it meant mounting an attack against the Germans. He speaks again of the stamps, including the special stamp he had been able to obtain, which had the name of his beloved Queen Victoria. The Anne was the currency of the place the stamp originated. And the Penoe was a misspelling of the word pence. It was a two pence stamp. It was quite valuable, and the captain had been proud of it. After reading all of the letters, Mathilde writes down everything Esperanza has told her.

Mathilde's story is then told. She had an accident, falling off of a ladder, at the age of three. She never walked again. Her father took her to hospitals all over the world and tried all sorts of remedies, but there was nothing that could be done. She has learned to do many things on her own, and is a gifted painter. She also has six cats and helps to teach the children at the village school. She has a vivid imagination, and she dreams of flying.

Aristed Pommier had been a friend of Manech and had come to visit Mathilde, bringing her earnings from Manech and telling her about his well-being. At first, he said that Manech was fine, and later he changed his story. Manech had been a good soldier until someone next to him was blown to bits. He was never the same after being drenched in a friend's blood, stripping his clothes off screaming. He had tried to poison himself in order to be sent home. At the time, Pommier had known about Manech's self-mutilation and his death sentence, but he had not told anyone. Mathilde had been angry with him,



but now that she knows the story from Esperanza, she goes to see Pommier and he tells her all he knows. He describes Manech's trial and the time they had spent together before Manech was taken away. He had agreed not to tell anyone about Manech's sentence so his family and hometown would not know.

Mathilde goes to visit Esperanza, taking him chocolates which he will not eat, but he keeps the box, which he thinks is pretty. She asks why it took him so long to tell what he knew. He tells her that it seemed the wrong the thing to do until the nun who is his nurse, suggested that his knowledge might help Mathilde to marry Manech posthumously. Mathilde already had sufficient evidence that Manech had intended to marry her, but neither of them had been old enough to marry without their parents' consent. Neither set of parents thinks the marriage is a good idea. She asks Esperanza question after question about the people who were with him in the war, about everyone who may know what happened to Manech. Esperanza will not answer any more questions.

## Analysis

In this chapter, the reader is introduced to epistles and letters, as clues to Mathilde's mystery. The letters intrigue Mathilde. She is especially confused by the mundane letter of That Man to his wife and wonders if there are clues in it. She also wonders if the misprinted stamps spoken of in the captain's letter will help her in any way. The captain had said that the men were alive on Sunday morning. Manech had answered when his name was called; he had survived the night. This letter gives her hope that he may still be alive. She wants to find out if the wives and friends of the other four men have any more information than she has. Her search is beginning.

The reader is also given a further glimpse into Mathilde's character. The things she has learned to do on her own after her accident shows she is stubborn and capable. She is able to paint, to teach, and to tolerate her injuries. What she despises are doctors and hospitals. These hobbies and traits are all parts of what the author calls her "other lives", while her love for Manech, although he has been dead for two years, remains the strongest part of her. She would like to marry him even now, as other white widows of the war have done. A white widow is a young woman who was engaged, but never married, when her fiancé is killed. Many white widows married their fiancés after they had been killed. It was a good way to receive their pensions. For Mathilde, a pension is not important. Marriage is her way of continuing their love affair even after his death.

## Vocabulary

vaguely, munitions, nostalgia, effigy, euphemism, engraving, bonds, inferior, infirmity, subterfuge, traipsing, erratic, abandoned, glimpsed, resign, armistice, sardonic, captivating



# The Good Old Days

## Summary

Mathilde attempts to contact the loved ones of the five unfortunate soldiers in October of 1919. She visits Therese Gaignard, Six-Soux's wife who works as a laundress and raises their two daughters. Therese is going to remarry, and she thinks Six-Soux would approve. Therese tells Mathilde that Six-Soux had been a good man who loved bicycles as much as he had trade unions and that he had been a mechanic for Garrigour, the 1911 Tour de France winner. She knows he had shot himself in the hand, but she has chosen not to find out anything more.

Mathilde writes a letter to Marriette Notre Dame, That Man's wife. When the letter is returned, she contacts the mayor in the town where the farm is. The letter is answered instead by the local priest, who had married the couple and baptized their son. Marriette sold the farm when she received news that her husband had been killed in action. Her last known address is near Paris, but he tells her that the official death notice he had sent there had come back to him unopened. He asks Mathilde to let him know how Marriette is if she finds her.

In response to a letter to Tina Lombardi, Mathilde receives correspondence from the godmother of Valentina, Emilia Maria. The godmother, Madam Conte, says that Valentina was a wonderful child until she fell in love with Ange. Madam Conte had heard of Ange's death in January of 1917, and Valentina had told her Ange had died near Somme. Valentina's last visit had been in December of 1918.

Mathilde visits Little Louis, who is a former boxer, owns a bar, and is the recipient of the Eskimo's final letter. Veronique, the woman mentioned in the letter, still comes by to visit Louis. Veronique and Eskimo had had a huge fight during the Eskimo's last leave from the war in 1916. It is still a mystery to Louis what the argument was about, but he assumes it has something to do with a woman. Mathilde asks about the "Biscuit" mentioned in Eskimo's letter. Louis tells her how the two men had been best friends, were carpenters together, and had served together in the war. Somehow they had become enemies. Little Louis cannot remember the man's real name, but he had been pleased to hear in the letter that the two had become friends once more. Mathilde sees pictures of Kleber in America with his older brother and doing laundry as a soldier. She likes his face and chooses to think that he has been able to protect her beloved Manech.

## Analysis

In this chapter, Mathilde begins attempting contact with the people in the condemned men's letters. Her search for Manech has begun. She is calm and reasoned; there is no hysteria. She is like a scientist. She has spoken to Six-Soux's widow who obviously



loved him very much but wants to move on with her life. She knows that Six-Soux was convicted of self-mutilation, but she thinks he was killed in action. She loves him too much to look for any more information, wanting to remember him as a good man. Mathilde wonders if she ever could have moved on from Manech if she had had two children with him. Mathilde is interested to find that both Mariette Notre Dame and Valentina Maria Lombardi are nowhere to be found. Their absence is a clue for Mathilde. Is it possible that these women might have information about their husbands and are keeping quiet to protect them? Her suspicions foreshadow upcoming events.

She also wants to find out what has happened between Eskimo and Biscuit. Did their fight and subsequent reuniting have anything to do with the death sentence being carried out? Again, there is some foreshadowing that this relationship will be important. She sees photographs of Kleber, and she likes his face. She thinks he looks capable of protecting Manech as Esperanza had told her he hoped to also. Her hope strengthens and pushes her to keep investigating.

## Vocabulary

armistice, pension, penitents, obstinacy, riddance, intrigued, grimace, contrition, revelers, regaling, smithereens



# Queen Victoria's Tuppence

## Summary

Mathilde has asked Pierre-Marie Rouvière, her father's lawyer, to help her find news of Manech. The lawyer says Esperanza has fabricated his story to make himself more famous. Rouvière has contacted the lawyer who represented the men accused of self-mutilation. The soldiers had all been given a reprieve and sentenced to hard labor rather than death. Manech rejoined his unit and was killed in action. Santini, the medical officer, was killed in a bombardment, but he was not sent out to treat five criminals as Esperanza had said. Mathilde places an advertisement in the newspaper. She offers a reward for information about Bingo Crepuscule, Lieutenant Jean-Baptiste Santini, Urbain Chardot, Benjamin Gordes, and Celestin Poux.

Mathilde sends Sylvain to the address of Mariette Notre-Dame which the priest had given her. The landlord tells him he remembers Mariette and her young son. They stayed a while and went out a few times to visit friends. When she left for good, she took a taxi to the train station at gare de l'Est, leaving no forwarding address.

Mathilde spends days perusing a stamp collecting book. Finally, she finds the captain's stamp, the blue one with the misspelling of the word pence that makes it look like Queen Victoria's name is Victoria Anna Penoe. If the stamp is real, the information in the captain's letter is real.

## Analysis

In this chapter, Mathilde proves herself stubbornly hopeful in the face of defeat. The lawyer considers Esperanza's story of Bingo Crepuscule completely false. He has agreed to investigate the matter only in deference to Mathilde's father, and he treats her like a child. He endeavors to prove to her that, even though the trench did exist, no soldiers were dropped into no-man's-land. Manech and his fellow-accused had been pardoned and reassigned to the trench, where they were killed in battle. There was no medical man who came to treat the soldiers, and there is a casualty report with Manech's name on it. Mathilde uses her imagination, coming up with possible alternative scenarios. She tells herself that the lawyer is wrong, and she continues to believe she will find Manech. The lawyer's "proof" only serves to make her work harder rather than to abandon her search. She will not let go of the wire that connects her to Manech. It is the existence of the misprinted Queen Victoria stamp that solidifies her belief in Esperanza's story. A stamp, unlike the documents of war, is a constant, a truth for her. The war documents could easily have been forged by people who wanted to cover up what they had done. The existence of the stamp means the captain's letter is true, so Esperanza's story is true.

## Vocabulary

casualty, pensive, armistice, flouting, commuted, penal, taboos, frumpy, trounced, ruthless, philatelic, arcana, torment



# The Mahogany Box

## Summary

Mathilde receives a letter from Veronique Passavant dated January 12, 1920. Veronique reveals her abiding love for Kleber Bouquet. They had fought during his last leave, but she had expected to make up with him. A woman had come to see her with news of the death sentence and what had happened to the five men. She wanted to know if Veronique had had news of the Eskimo. Veronique wants to hear from Mathilde. She thinks that one of the five escaped. It was snowing, and Kleber was used to snow, so Veronique is hoping he is alive. Mathilde writes back, feigning ignorance but saying she will visit. She is keeping all the letters in a mahogany box purchased by Manech. She tells the cats, "This casket contains the story of one of my lives."

A Mr. Adolphe Leprince responds to the newspaper ad Mathilde had placed. He knew Célestin Poux "the terror of the army", but he had been at Bingo before the dates in question. Adolphe believes that Celestin is still alive and tells Mathilde to look in Charentes.

Valentina's godmother writes again. The last time Madam Conte saw Valentina, she was dressed in fancy clothes and had brought presents. The moment was ruined when the godmother shared Mathilde's letter with Valentina; it made Tina angry, and she had shouted that she would kill everyone who had hurt her lover, Ange. It is Madam Conte's opinion that Ange was shot by French soldiers rather being killed in battle because he was such a bad person.

The lawyer reminds Mathilde that, even if Jean is alive, he is still condemned to spend life in prison. He presses her to quit trying to find him to protect him, herself, and also any of the five men who may still be alive. She receives a letter from a toy maker, Oliver Bergetton, who knew Corporal Gordes. There is a letter from Germain Pire, who runs an investigation agency. He says that he once had as a client the wife of Corporal Gordes, who was killed in action. He sends her the address. Benjamin Gordes's widow, Elodie, says Germain Pire had helped her have her husband declared dead so she could receive his pension and care for her five children. A letter comes from an Emile Boisseau, a man who had known Benjamin Gordes in the army knew that he had a fight with his friend Eskimo in 1916. The falling out was so bad that Benjamin had requested a transfer so that he no longer had to fight alongside Eskimo. Benjamin died in 1917.

Rosine Charolet, the mother of the corporal Esperanza had seen at the train station, writes that he is dead. She confirms the story of the five prisoners and that her son had seen five men lying dead in the snow, but he thought at least two of them were not the people they should be. Emile Brausuet writes that he knew Benjamin Gordes. His best friend was the carpenter, the Eskimo. He was "Biscuit". Emile had gone on leave with the two of them. They had fought. Biscuit was killed. The Eskimo shot his hand by accident and did not deserve to be condemned.



## Analysis

The Mahogany box was something that Manech had purchased, although Mathilde confesses that she does not know why. She stores all of her investigative material in it – the letters, her notes – they are the wire that is still connecting her to Manech. She calls the box a casket, a place to put dead people. She confesses to her cats that she is afraid, so she is telling her story in the third person. She is hiding her fear this way, pretending to be brave. All of the information about her dead fiancée is contained within. Her hopes are not dead, though, and she hopes the box will bring Manech back to her. Mathilde is reluctant to give too much of her thoughts away. She is still discovering whom she can trust and is collecting all her evidence scientifically, taking her time. Veronique's letter gives her something important to think about. Tina Lombardi questioned the Eskimo's mistress only – no one else. She wonders what makes the Eskimo different. She thinks it is those German boots. She writes in her journal that "A new piece of the puzzle falls into place." There are so many small pieces of the puzzle that keep coming to her from different sources, and with each new piece "Hope is swelling so violently inside her." It is interesting that her hope is violent rather than peaceful, as if she must be militant in her quest.

## Vocabulary

grill, affection, consigns, counsel, wary, quandary, rapture, sulks, gilded, piques, imperturbable





# The Woman on Loan

## Summary

Mathilde goes to meet with Elodie Gordes, but Elodie becomes upset when asked about the argument between her husband and his dear friend, Kleber. She runs away in the rain but comes back to say she will write it all down in a letter. The letter tells her story. She had fallen in love at a young age, had had a child, and was abandoned by her lover. Benjamin had been left a widower with four children, his former wife's, whom he had adopted. Hearing that Elodie was a single mother in need of a job, Benjamin hired her to care for the children and him. They eventually married. Elodie loved Benjamin, but she never had the same passion for him as she had for the father of her child or later for Kleber. Benjamin and the Eskimo were good friends, working together as carpenters. Benjamin could have chosen to be stationed nearer to home because of his family, but he chose to go off with Kleber. With every leave, every visit home, Elodie could see that Benjamin was becoming more despondent. He believed the war would never end, but he knew he would be sent home if he had six children. He told Elodie that if she had an affair with his friend Kleber, she might become pregnant. He could not have any children of his own, but it would be okay if this child belonged to Kleber. When Eskimo came home on leave, Elodie left the children with their aunt, and Eskimo came to visit her. At first, they were both reluctant, but finally they made love. The affair ended when Kleber went back to the war, and Elodie never became pregnant. This event was what caused the breakup of the friendship between Eskimo and Biscuit.

Mathilde produces a very successful art show. Art is another one of her many lives. Daniel Esperanza dies. The only one at the funeral is the widow of his former corporal. He has a photo sent to Mathilde that shows how handsome he had once been.

Germain Pire writes to confirm that Benjamin Gordes was indeed wearing German boots when he died. They meet at the art gallery. He is helping her search for Tina Lombardi. He also offers to look for Celestin Poux. For payment, he asks for one of her paintings.

Veronique Passavan comes to visit. She describes the woman who came to ask about her man and the Eskimo, and from the description Mathilde determines that the woman was Tina Lombardi. Veronique says that the woman was certain that her lover and Kleber are alive. She accused Veronique of keeping a secret. Veronique, a sweet woman, has no secret. She has heard nothing from Eskimo other than the last letter sent to Louis. Tina's visit had made her hope for a little while, and that hope has made the reality of his death even more difficult to bear. Veronique had vowed not to talk about the fight between Eskimo and Benjamin, but she decides to talk about it to Mathilde. Mathilde does not tell that she already knows the story from Elodie.

The lawyer calls. Pierre-Marie has learned of a cemetery in the Somme where the five men were buried in March. Mathilde does not cry.



## Analysis

In this incredibly poetic chapter, the poignancy of the human condition can be seen. War is such a horrible institution that it would cause a man to give his wife to his best friend in order to gain some hope of coming home. This action does not produce the desired effect, but it does effectively end the friendship. Now Mathilde is left with the question of what extraordinary circumstances might have brought the two men back together. Elodie's letter is full of metaphor and substance. She blames the war and time for all her loss and expresses her love for both men.

Mathilde seems to have some clairvoyance when bad news is coming. Even the ring of the phone sounds sinister when the lawyer calls to tell her he knows where Manech is buried. At his point, Mathilde begins to call her investigation "Operation Dwindling Hope". In this case, the phone line connects her to Manech's grave, but she is still wondering if he is really in this grave. Still, Mathilde wills herself not to cry. She does not give up her hope.

## Vocabulary

bistro, implacability, amorous, recounted, interlude, quarreled, sparingly, sinister, interred, summarily



# The Mimosas of Hosseger

## Summary

This is the story of Mathilde and Manech: They met in the summer of 1910; she is ten, and he is thirteen. The first thing he says to her is, "You can't walk?" Then he asks if she has any friends; Mathilde shakes her head. Manech wants to be her friend, but Mathilde says no. He offers to teach her to swim, but Mathilde again refuses. Despite her rudeness, Mathilde cannot forget Manech. She is relieved when he comes back the next day and offers again to teach her to swim. Sylvain and Benedicte like Manech, a hardworking fisherman's son with a sickly mother. The children become best friends, Manech teaches Mathilde to swim, and they share their first kiss in the summer of 1914. There are mimosas by the lake where she learns to swim. In April of 1916, Manech learns that he will soon be going to war. When he tells Mathilde, the two cry and declare their eternal love for one another. They make love often until he has to leave. Manech tells Mathilde that they are engaged; to show his love, he carves three M's in a poplar tree. The three M's mean: "Manech's Marrying Mathilde, and Mathilde's Marrying Manech." Manech writes, telling Mathilde that "everything is fine." But everything is not fine. Sylvain is the one who tells Mathilde that Manech is dead on January twenty-eighth.

In January of 1921, Mathilde uses the money she earned by selling her paintings to buy the hut and property on Hosseger Lake where she and Manech had made love. She is determined to live there and wants to build a house without destroying the poplar or the mimosas. She visits the cemetery in the Somme where he is buried, talks to Manech, and leaves a sprig of mimosa at his grave. She realizes that she is now older than her fiancé had been when he died. She can tell from flowers left at Common Law's grave that Tina Lombardi has been there, but she is unable to find Tina. Even Germain Pire has given up on finding her, and he suggests that for her own safety Mathilde should stop looking for Tina. Even when an innkeeper says he might have seen Tina, Germain refuses to look into it further. There seems also to be no way to find Corporal Celestin Poux. He had come home after war and worked for a while. He left in 1920 saying he would like to buy a car garage.

Mathilde goes to New York to have surgery. She is bored, but the pain in her hips is gone.

It is a difficult year with many deaths including both of Manech's parents in June of 1922. His father's death is a suicide, although officially ruled a drowning, and he has left a letter asking forgiveness from Mathilde. A former teacher also dies, as do some of her beloved animals. In 1923, there is one more death, that of Valentina's godmother, Madam Conte. Mathilde moves into the new house, called MMM. She paints "to forget" and exhibits more of her paintings. She also runs another ad in the paper, this time seeking information only about Bingo Crepuscule and Celestin Poux. An anonymous person writes to say that Poux is dead.



Mathilde receives a letter from Quebec from Manech's friend Aristide Pommier. He has spoken with a client who was part of a group of Newfoundland soldiers, the first to come upon the five bodies near Bingo on Monday, January 8, 1917. One of the soldiers was young and thin and could have been Manech. The Sergeant of that group is Dick Bonnaventure. If Aristide can find Bonnaventure, he will give her more details. In July, Mathilde is on the terrace painting the kittens. The sun is about to set; she hears a motorcycle.

## Analysis

This chapter begins with a flashback to the meeting and relationship of Mathilde and Manech. Perhaps Mathilde is telling her story to her readers in third person so she will not be frightened as she told her cats in the previous chapter. The story is told in a rather matter-of-fact way. The reader does not get the idea that Mathilde is telling this story and sharing her feelings but that an unbiased third party is relating the love story. The story is presented as just one more piece of evidence that proves the unbreakable love between the two young people.

Although many of the mysteries Mathilde would like solved do not seem to be answered to her satisfaction, the reader's curiosity is sated. The reader now knows why she will not give up the painting of the mimosas and what the MMM on the poplar tree in the painting means. The suspense is still building, however, as the reader wonders who wrote the letter saying Poux is dead. Also, it seems clear that Manech is dead, but Mathilde does not stop looking. Again, she shows some talent of knowing if something good or bad is going to occur. She knows the sound of the motorcycle is a good sound that brings hope.

## Vocabulary

evocation, hoarded, veterans, consultation, heartily, revolting, pilgrimage, ingloriously, carnage impeccably, pretense, torpor, discretion



# The Terror of the Armies

## Summary

Celestin Poux arrives at MMM on his motorcycle and tells Mathilde his story. Manech was building a snowman, soldiers on both sides encouraging him and tossing out parts to finish it. He fell, but Poux did not see it. A German plane had bombed, and someone said Cornflower had died. Poux saw Six-Soux die. Six-Soux had stood and urinated and sang a song from the Paris commune. A German shot him in the head. During the night, the Germans had been sending over grenades, so the French sent some over. The Eskimo was in a hole. The farmer, That Man, had not been seen since the flares. Everyone assumed he had been killed because he never answered. Eskimo brought down the plane with a grenade, but he was killed in the process. Common Law ran in and surrendered. French Corporal Thuvenel, killed him. When asked why, Corporal Thouvenel said he heard Common Law telling the enemy he would give them information.

The next day, Mathilde receives a letter from Germain telling how he had found Poux. A lady friend had a flat tire. Poux helped her and they ended up in bed together. When the friend tells Germain the story, he is thrilled that he has finally found Poux.

After he tells Mathilde his story, he spends the night. The next morning, she shows him the contents of the mahogany box. He confirms that Gordes gave the Eskimo his shoes and wanted to cut the wire and join him but was prevented. It was Poux who gave Manech his glove. He reads all the letters and is sure the one from That Man is coded; he also thinks that if anyone survived it would have to have been That Man. He explains some codes. He tells her that he thinks the commanding officer, Old Fraidy, was holding the pardon under his arm.

## Analysis

When Celestin Poux, *The Terror of the Armies*, finally makes an appearance, he proves to be a wealth of information, and he and Mathilde become good friends. The author gives a wonderful characterization of a free-spirited but kind individual who wants to help Mathilde. When Celestin describes the deaths of the five men, Mathilde does not let his emotional state affect her. The idea that the CO might have been holding back the pardon spurs her on because it flies in the face of her lawyer's insistence that Manech had been pardoned and not condemned. She is still the investigator, still looking for clues. Although Celestin does not think any of the men could have survived, Mathilde sees clues that he does not see. For instance, Celestin had not seen That Man or Manech die. Mathilde only trusts first-hand accounts and objects she can hold. Her hope is still alive.



## Vocabulary

clambering, billet, quench, impending, impedimenta, ablutions, unscathed, sanitarium, obliged, catastrophic



# The Other Side of No-Man's Land

## Summary

Mathilde, Sylvain, and Celestin go to the place where it all happened. They locate a local girl who had found a buried tin with a paper explaining the burial of the five men. The girl's mother remembers that when the men were dug up, all had bandages on their hands. The names of the soldiers had been read. There was Notre Dame, Bouquet, an Italian man, a young man, but she doesn't know the name. The bodies were in the cemetery Mathilde has already visited. Mathilde notices that there is no mention of any of the bodies having a red glove, the glove Poux had given Manech. They find Lefty, the former owner of the farm where the battle took place. He lost an arm to a grenade left in his fields. Mathilde learns that the brick ruin that had been in the middle of no-man's-land was a chapel turned tool shed with a cellar underneath.

An Austrian woman introduces herself. She has come to pray where her brother died. The commanding officer remembered some things about when he was being led away as a prisoner. One of the five was kneeling in a ditch. There was a man at the bottom of the stairs by the brick ruin. He was wearing German boots. Also, he remembers Manech building the snowman and being killed by the plane. Mathilde finds out from the morning paper that Tina Lombardi was executed for murdering an officer. She has sent a sealed letter to Mathilde.

## Analysis

With the hope that Manech is still alive, Mathilde chooses to look for evidence to support her belief rather than assuming the evidence will prove the opposite. The reader's curiosity is piqued when the red glove is mentioned. Could it be? Could it be that the body was not that of Manech since it was not wearing Poux's red glove?

The descriptions in this chapter add to the suspense and also to the melancholy mood. Mathilde feels as if she is on safari "hunting sorrows". Their guide, the new owner of the land, says, "That war hasn't finished killing." He is talking about land mines, but the reader wonders if this is where Mathilde's hopes will be killed. Poux is worried about Mathilde and wishes she could stop clinging to the hope that this tiny detail brings. Mathilde ignores him. She seems so certain.

## Vocabulary

truncated, guise, vindictive, superimpose, silhouettes, gratis, pitiless, massacred, niches, arrayed



# The Lovers of Belle de Mai

## Summary

Valentina's letter is dated, July 31, 1924. She tells Mathilde she killed Lovrouye and the other officers to avenge Nino's death, and she does not regret her actions. Nino was the only man she ever loved. Other than her godmother, he was the only person who ever loved her. Tina explains to Mathilde that it was her idea to become a prostitute and not Nino's. She made the decision because the couple needed money. They had lived a happy life in a nice apartment with good furniture until Nino got into a fight and was sent to prison. Tina confirms Mathilde's suspicion that Nino's last letter to his lover was written in a code that only the two of them understood. Because of the code, Tina knew where Nino was and that he was in trouble. She did some of the same investigative work that Mathilde had done, and her answers led her to murder all who were involved in Nino's death. A medical orderly had told Tina that a man wearing German boots, had been treated in Combles on Monday. It's not Nino, but she hoped that a younger man who was with the first one might be. When Tina had found Sergeant Favart, he had told her that Nino was shot by Corporal Thouvenel when he tried to surrender. Favart also told her about the pardon the battalion commander Lavrouye, Old Fraidy, had kept under his arm. Tina thinks Benjamin Gordes had traded the German boots with Eskimo, and it was Eskimo who was in the hospital in Combles. Also, another soldier had told her that Benjamin Gordes had helped Jean Desrochelles cross the battlefield to the hospital. Jean Desrochelles was wearing a red glove on his left hand.

Mathilde asks Poux if Desrochelles had come back to the regiment after the fighting at Bingo. Celestin says no. Pierre-Marie Rouviere had once checked all the military hospitals looking for Manech, and now Mathilde asks him to do the same in the hope of locating a soldier named Jean Desrochelles. Germain Pire admits that he had suspected Tina Lombardi might be a murderer, and he had withheld his information; he also tells Mathilde that none of the five buried men was wearing German boots. Mathilde promises Pire the mimosa painting, the one he had always wanted, if he finds Jean Desrochelles still alive. Pierre-Marie Rouviere calls to say he has found a record of Jean Desrochelles being evacuated from the Somme on January 8, 1917, and he is now living with his mother.

## Analysis

Although Mathilde and Tina are such different people with such different lives, the letter from Tina in this chapter serves to highlight the similarities of the two women even as it gives Mathilde the final clue she needs: the young soldier at the hospital is wearing Poux's red glove. He must be Manech. The other soldier who is wearing German boots must be That Man. Tina's letter says, "Love is the same for everyone and has the same happiness and the same pain." At this point, however, Mathilde feels Tina's happiness but does not feel Tina's pain. She is too happy that she has found the truth. There are





only a few more steps to take before she will be with Manech again. The information comes in quickly, and the excitement builds as the reader makes the realizations along with Mathilde that Manech could well be alive and living as Jean Desrnelles. This is the climax of the story, when the reader can finally breathe a sigh of relief that Mathilde has found her answers. Mathilde does not seem to care that Manech has a new identity. She knows their love will endure no matter who he is now.

## Vocabulary

rackets, evacuated, stagnates, permeate, verify, interwoven, revealing, intuition, virginal, artillery



# The Sunflowers at the end of the World

## Summary

After spending a few more days with Mathilde, Celestin Poux becomes restless and speeds away on his motorcycle. Heinz Gerstacker, a former German soldier, whom Heidi Weiss had contacted, writes to Mathilde. After the trenches at Bingo had fallen, Gerstacker had been taken prisoner by the French. The men who were leading him across what had been no-man's-land, stopped to look at the bodies lying there. There was an old cellar whose door had been partially blown off. When the soldiers had pointed their flashlights down the stairs, Gerstacker had seen a dead soldier wearing German boots. In Mathilde's imagined chain of events, Benjamin Gordes had returned to look for Kleber at some point during the fighting and had been killed. One of the men had traded boots with Gordes. Mathilde knew that Manech's mind was too far gone for him to think of doing this, and she was certain that Eskimo, Six-Soux, and Ange had all been killed. The only man left who could have taken the boots was That Man.

The priest at Cabignac answers her questions about the strange letter that Notre-Dame had written to his wife. Benoit had never purchased manure for his farm, and he does not know anyone with the name Bernay. Thinking Benoit's letter must have been written in the code called the elevator, a code Poux had told her about, she writes each word of Benoit's letter out on separate, small pieces of paper. She rearranges the words over and over until she comes up with the message: "Come Bernay March. Sell everything. Say nothing. Heed nobody. Benoit." Sylvain remembers that when Benoit's wife had left her lodgings near Paris, she had gone to the train station called the gare de l'Est. Mariette had taken the train to visit friends for the day, so she could not have traveled far from Paris. Sylvain finds a village named Bernay that was serviced by the gare de l'Est on one of his many train maps. Sylvain takes Mathilde to Bernay, where they ask the schoolteacher if he has a student named Baptistin. The teacher sends them to the family farm called the End of the World. Sylvain leaves Mathilde at the edge of the farm, sitting in her wheelchair. After Mathilde has waited only a little while, That Man arrives. Benoit is surprised at first to see Mathilde, but he has always known that she would find him. He is afraid she will tell his secret. Mathilde assures Benoit that he is safe. Benoit tells Mathilde the story she needs to hear. When the five men were first tossed over the fence, he, Eskimo, and Manech were in the same shallow hole. Manech untied their arms. Benoit decided they should split up, and he headed for a pile of bricks he had seen. It was part of an old cellar.

Eskimo and Manech went looking for a bigger hole in which to hide. He hid in the flooded, rat-infested cellar. Early the next morning, he heard someone calling the names of each of the condemned men. He decided not to answer. When he poked out his head to see what was happening, an Albatross plane flew over. It shot, destroying the snowman Manech had built sending Manech to the ground. Eskimo was killed by the plane but not before he managed to hit it with a grenade. A piece of debris hit Benoit in the head. He crawled back into his hiding place and then passed out. In and out of



consciousness, as the shooting continued, Benoit heard someone yelling that Manech was still alive. It was Biscuit, who had come to check on them. Another shell exploded, sending Biscuit into the cellar, where he died. Benoit switched his identification with Benjamin Gordes. He also traded his boots for Gordes' German boots. Outside, he discovered Manech, badly injured, but still alive. He switched Manech's identification tags with those of a dead soldier lying nearby. His name was Jean Desrochelles. Benoit carried Manech on his back to the military hospital, where they were separated. Benoit escaped before the hospital was bombed. Benoit is now Benjamin Gordes, the farm manager for the widow Notre-Dame.

## **Analysis**

The end of the world farm is a field of tall, beautiful sunflowers, where a person could become lost. It really is the end of the world for Benoit, the last place he can go to be safe and happy and forget about the war. His character is still shown to be quiet and reserved, but he has also shown compassion in carrying Manech out of the battle and giving him a new identity. This place is nearly the end of the world for Mathilde as well. Having heard Benoit's story, she knows that when she finds Desrochelles, she will find her Manech. Her journey is nearly complete, and her imagined turn of events turns out to be exactly what happened. With this chapter, the falling action begins.

## **Vocabulary**

prostrate, pelt, inexplicable, obstreperous, graven, compositions, vipers, quarry, resonant, flanked



# Lieutenant-General Byng at Twilight

## Summary

Mathilde shows her father the contents of the mahogany box. He wants to comfort her, but he does not know how. Germain Pire finds Manech alive and living in Milly-la-Forêt. He is in good health, but he has complete amnesia. He has been told that he is Jean Desrochelles. Juliette Desrochelles, whom he thinks is his mother, cares for him. Juliette's real son Jean was two years older than Manech, and he was killed in the war. Mrs. Desrochelles, a widow who raised her son alone, was distraught when she learned of her son's death. Corporal Urbain Chardolot, had been the one to bring her the news. He had related the story to her of the five soldiers who were tossed over the trench where Jean Desrochelles was stationed. He told her she could save the youngest of these men who was still alive and had taken her son's name.

Germain Pire pleads with Mathilde not to change the situation. He is afraid Juliette will die of grief and Jean will be sent to prison. Mathilde ignores his warning. She asks her father if he will find her a new place to live near Milly-la-Forêt. She meets with Juliette, her future mother-in-law, and they cry together over their losses. After their meeting, Mathilde goes out to the garden where Manech is. He has been told that a young woman with whom he had once been in love would be visiting. He is painting. When Mathilde sees Manech she lets herself cry for the first time. His first words to her are, "You can't walk?" When Mathilde shakes her head, he asks if she would like to see his painting. He tells her she can see it when he is finished, and Mathilde sits in her wheelchair watching Manech.

## Analysis

Mathilde has finally found her Manech, and when he asks "can't you walk?" she knows he has picked up the wire. The story of their love has come full circle, the repetition of this question a poetic indication that he will fall in love with her again. His emotional state, the fact that he does not know her, does not matter to Mathilde. She still loves him, and the reader knows from the comment about meeting her future mother-in-law that everything will work out. The fact that the two have both taken up painting since they were parted gives another clue that they are still connected in some way. Mathilde's character has remained stubborn from beginning to end, and the author tells us that her father knows better than to argue with her. Later, Mathilde will receive yet another painting, the painting of General Byng. On the back of this painting is the name Bingo Crepuscule. Mathilde puts this painting in her mahogany box, the box that contains the story of her love, how she lost him and found him again.

## Vocabulary

vital, encounter, obscure, dusk, bizarre, exploits, minaret, decisive, inauguration, commemorated, testimony, ferocious, savagery



# Monday Morning

## Summary

At ten o'clock on Monday morning, Eleven Newfoundland soldiers march into Bingo. Between the French and the German trenches, these soldiers find the bodies of five men. One is kneeling in a hole, and the youngest one is found nearby, the only one without an injured hand. The Sergeant insists that these men be buried. After they record the names of the fallen soldiers, they bury them together with a small note inside a tobacco tin.

## Analysis

While Mathilde's story has ended, *A Very Long Engagement* wraps up with the story of the Newfoundland soldiers discovering and burying five men who had been found dead in no-man's-land. One of those men, the one with the identification that matched Manech, did not have an injury to his hand. Mathilde has uncovered the truth, and the story ends where it started, continuing on with the true and final events of the night at Bingo Crepuscule. These men had been treated with such disdain, but Dick Bonnaventure, a man who had once hunted in Alaska just like the Eskimo whom he had pitied when he saw him kneeling in the hole, had compassion. He told his men that anyone who dies with his shoes on deserves to be buried, and so they were buried. Then the soldiers go off to keep soldiering just as the rest of us go on to live our lives. The reader knows from the end that Mathilde has lived a good long life because she finishes telling us the story many years after the terrible war that almost took her Manech away from her.

## Vocabulary

labored, vast, reconnaissance, regimental, shrapnel, insignia, deliverance, barbarity, shafts, outraged, pitied, enclosing



# Characters

## Ange Bassignano

A twenty-six-year-old handsome Italian man living in France, Ange has joined the war in order to escape a five-year prison sentence for assault. He is one of five condemned soldiers. Referred to as Nino by his girlfriend, the prostitute Valentina, his only known occupation is pimp. He is also called Angel.

## Bénédicte

Loving wife of Sylvain, Bénédicte is a friend and caretaker to Mathilde.

## Kléber Bouquet

Kléber Bouquet, also called The Eskimo or Bastoche, is one of the soldiers accused of self-mutilation. He is called The Eskimo because of his time spent traveling in North America. Kléber is a gifted carpenter, and at thirty-seven is the oldest of the five men. He has been falsely accused of self-mutilation. His closest friends are bar owner Little Louis and Corporal Gordes, another carpenter. Kléber fights with Gordes after encouraging Gordes to have an affair with his wife and help her conceive another child who could be his ticket out of the war. While managing to take down a plane in no-man's land, he is killed there.

## Urbain Chardolet

A corporal who is charged with escorting the five prisoners to the front lines, Urbain Chardolet, is wounded and meets up with Esperanza in a train station, where he gives Esperanza all the information he has about what has happened to the five men.

## Madame Veuve Paolo Conte

Madame Veuve Paolo Conte corresponds with Mathilde regarding her goddaughter, Tina Lombardi. She is in her fifties and is not healthy. She is able to give Mathilde information about Tina and Ange's relationship but is told by Tina to stop writing to Mathilde. She dies in 1923.

## Jean Desrochelles

Jean Desrochelles, the only son of an older widow, is killed at Bingo. Jean, or Manech, is given his identity and taken in by his mother after the war.



## **Mathieu Donnay**

Mathieu Donnay is Mathilde's father. He is a wealthy builder who will do almost anything his daughter asks of him.

## **Mathilde Donnay**

Mathilde Donnay is the story's protagonist. Although she has been paralyzed since an accident at the age of three, Mathilde is strong-willed, capable, and intelligent. While spending time at her parents' vacation home in Capbreton, Mathilde meets Manech, who teaches her how to swim. They fall in love. Manech goes off to war when Mathilde is sixteen. While he is away, she paints and teaches children in a nearby school. She has a good life with her caretakers and her six cats.

Mathilde receives word that Manech has been killed when she is seventeen. Being given information about Manech's death from Sergeant Daniel Esperanza, Mathilde begins to search for the truth about the events of the day of Manech's death.

## **Paul Donnay**

Paul Donnay is Mathilde's older brother. He is married to a woman whom Mathilde despises, and he has two children whom Mathilde thinks are brats.

## **Daniel Esperanza**

Daniel Esperanza is the sergeant who is in charge of escorting five soldiers convicted of self-mutilation to the front. After the war, he is near death due to the flu, and he decides to tell his story to the "white widow", the fiancée, of one of the soldiers, Jean Etchervery. He has always thought that what was done to these men was wrong, and he wants someone to know the truth. His confession is the catalyst that causes Mathilde to think that Manech may still be alive and to search for him.

## **Jean Etchervery**

Also called Manech and Cornflower, Jean Etchervery is a nineteen-year-old fisherman in love with a wealthy young woman named Mathilde. After a particularly traumatizing event in the war, Jean becomes unstable and intentionally gets himself shot in the hand in the hope of going home. He becomes one of five soldiers left in no-man's land to die. He builds a snowman with his one good hand. Everyone around him knows he is not in his right mind.





## Captain Etienne Favourier

Captain Favourier is in charge of the group of soldiers in the Bingo trench. He must put the condemned men into no-man's-land, but he thinks it is a horrible thing to do. It is his letter to Daniel Esperanza, in which he talks about stamp collecting, that helps Mathilde sort out the truth about what happened to Manech. The soldiers call Favourier "Fancy Mouth" because of his use of bad language. He is killed at Bingo.

## Francis Gaignard

Francis, or Six-Sous, is one of the five French prisoners. He was once a corporal but had had his rank reduced. Six-Sous, a welder by trade, is an outspoken socialist, pacifist, and trade unionist. Six-Sous is shot by a German soldier after spending his time in no-man's-land urging everyone to throw away their weapons and denounce the war.

## Thérèse Gaignard

Thérèse Gaignard is the widow of Francis Gaignard. After the war, she lives near Paris and takes care of their two daughters by working as a laundress and collecting a pension.

## Benjamin Gordes

Before the war, Benjamin Gordes, or Biscuit, becomes the widowed father of four adopted children. He is twenty-years-old. He then marries Elodie who adopts her child as well. He is a carpenter and has been friends with another carpenter, Kléber Bouquet, since 1910. He is one of two corporals assigned to the detail that is escorting five condemned men to the front. One of the those men is his friend Kléber. The two have quarreled because of Benjamin's plan for Kléber to get Elodie pregnant and get Benjamin out of the war. Benjamin is killed at Bingo because he goes back to help his friend.

## Elodie Gordes

Elodie Gordes tells her story to Mathilde after the war. She is raising five children after the death of her husband, Benjamin Gordes. Elodie had an affair with Benjamin's friend Kléber in the hope of conceiving a sixth child who would bring Benjamin home from the war. She does not become pregnant.

## Tina Lombardi

Valentina Lombardi is the lover of the soldier Ange Bassignano. She calls him Nino, and she has known him since her early teens. They are both foundlings, and she is a



prostitute. After the war, she has reason to believe that her Nino is still alive. She searches for him, but she refuses to help Mathilde. Instead, she seeks revenge by murdering the military officers who were involved in the incident that killed Nino. She is executed for her crimes and leaves a final letter for Mathilde.

## **Benoît Notre-Dame**

Benoît Notre-Dame, also called That Man because he is so quiet that no one knows his name, is a farmer, a shrewd man, and one of the condemned. He does what he must to survive, including writing to his wife in code to tell her where to meet him. He saves Manech and himself.

## **Mariette Notre-Dame**

Marriette is the wife of Benoit. She is twenty-years-old, and the two have a young son. After she learns of her husband's death in the war, she sells her farm and disappears. A letter to her from her husband gives Mathilde the clues she needs to find out about Manech.

## **Veronique Passavant**

Veronique Passavant communicates with Mathilde about her boyfriend, the soldier they call The Eskimo. Shortly before his death at Bingo, Veronique and The Eskimo have had a falling out over his affair with Elodie Gordes. Although she is angry, she is still in love with him, and she holds out hope for some time that he is still alive.

## **Germain Pire**

Mathilde hires Germain Pire, a private investigator, to help her find out what happened the five soldiers at Bingo. He requests to be paid in Mathilde's paintings.

## **Aristide Pommier**

Aristide Pommier writes to Mathilde in response to an ad she places in the newspaper for information about Bingo. Aristide had been a cook in Manech's regiment. He writes from Quebec to give Mathilde some information.

## **Célestin Poux**

Célestin Poux is an elusive former soldier, whom Mathilde manages to locate after much searching. During the war, he was called The Terror of the Armies because of his ability to obtain any needed supplies for his regimen. He is cunning and free-spirited.



When Mathilde finds him, he is working in a garage, but he wants nothing more than to ride from place to place on his motorcycle. He tells Mathilde all he knows and helps her search for more information. They become good friends.

## **Pierre-Marie Rouvière**

Pierre-Marie Rouvière is the Donnay's family lawyer. Mathilde asks him for assistance in her investigation. While he does not believe that Daniel Esperanza's story is accurate, he placates Mathilde by helping her as much as he can.

## **Lieutenant Jean-Baptiste Santini**

Jean-Baptiste Santini treats the injured hands of the five condemned soldiers. He is later killed when the enemy bombs the hospital in which he is working.

## **Sylvain**

Sylvain is a dear friend to and caretaker of Mathilde. He is middle-aged and is married to Bénédicte.

## **Louis Teyssier**

Louis Teyssier had once been a boxer and is now the owner of a bar. He is a close friend of The Eskimo, and he knows Veronique and Gordes. Mathilde visits his bar, and he gives her all the information that he has.

## **Heidi Weiss**

Heidi Weiss is a young Austrian woman who has come to France to visit Bingo, where her brother had been killed. She tells Mathilde all that she has heard about the event concerning the men who been tossed into no-man's-land.



# Objects/Places

## Bingo Crepuscule

Bingo Crepuscule is the trench over which the condemned soldiers are tossed. There are many different people who tell Mathilde how the name came to be. Many, many years after the war, Mathilde is sent the small wooden sign on which the name was painted, on the back of a painting of a Canadian officer named Byng.

## Wire

As they are being moved through the trench, the condemned soldiers are constantly being told to watch out for the wire. This wire is for the telephones that connect the soldiers in the trenches with those on the outside. Mathilde also wants Manech to watch out for a wire that is their love; it will either bring them back together or kill her.

## Lake Hosseger

This is where Manech taught Mathilde to swim. It is surrounded by mimosas. There is also a poplar tree with the letters MMM etched into it. The MMM stands for Manech marries Mathilde, or the other way around.

## The End of the World Farm

This is where Benoit ends up at the end of the war. It is a farm of sunflowers, tall and lovely, that hides him from his past and let him start a new life.

## Motorcycle

Celestin Poux's motorcycle is a symbol of the ways in which war changes people, even if they seem to be normal. Poux can never really settle down because he cannot stop long enough to have to think about the war.



# Themes

## Love

In Mathilde and Manech's relationship, the author shows the enduring nature of true love. In fact, this story proves that love can even outlast the grave. After Mathilde is told of Manech's death in battle, she is still determined to marry him. There were many young women left behind during World War I who were known as white widows; they were engaged but not married before the war took their men. Many of these white widows sought to marry their fiancés posthumously. Mathilde seeks this route as well, but she goes a step farther, refusing to believe that Manech is really gone. She never forgets her love for him and spends all her time looking for him. When she finds him, she realizes that he has complete amnesia and does not even know who she is. As it turns out, her Manech is deceased; he has taken on a new identity. Mathilde knows, however, that their love will endure no matter who he has become, and she is willing to start all over again to win his heart.

## War

No one comes out of World War I unscathed; war changes everyone. Every soldier who is a major or minor character in this novel either dies or loses the life he once had. Those who die have obviously lost everything. Six-Soux is shot down even in the midst of preaching peace, Common Law in the act of surrender. Both the Eskimo and Biscuit die at Bingo. The circumstances of the war have caused them to end their friendship and to pick it up again. Biscuit has been so desperate to leave the battlefield that he has suggested his wife sleep with his best friend in order to bring him another child, his ticket home. Daniel Esperanza goes to great lengths to tell Mathilde that he had once been a handsome and happy wine merchant, even sending her a photo of him from before the war. The war and its aftermath have left him a shell of his former self, and then he dies. Even those who seem fairly normal after the war, like Celestin Poux, are different people. After the war Celestin is never able to settle down; he must be on the move at times. All the soldiers' loved ones have become different people as well. Valentina becomes a vengeful murderer; Veronique can never quite forgive herself for not making up with the Eskimo before he died; and Elodie says, "the war destroyed everything." While Mathilde changes in the way that she sees others, becoming more compassionate, she remains constant in her love for Manech.

## Compassion

In sharp juxtaposition to the terrors of the war and the punishment of the soldiers that so many find disgusting and immoral, the author presents compassionate characters who restore the reader's faith in mankind. That Man has compassion for Manech. He carries Manech out of no-man's-land even though he knows this act could jeopardize his



chances for escape. Poux not only finds hot chocolate and bread with honey for Manech, he also gives Manech one of his gloves. Even though Biscuit and Eskimo have had a fight that has ended their friendship, Biscuit has compassion for Eskimo and his horrible predicament. They are able to make up; Biscuit gives Eskimo his shoes and goes out looking for Eskimo. The women left behind have compassion for each other as well. Mathilde understands Elodie's love for both Eskimo and Biscuit; she understands Veronique's mixed feelings; she even has some kindred feelings for the murderer, Valentina.



# Style

## Point of View

This novel begins and ends with an omniscient point of view, telling us about the five condemned soldiers, giving the background of each, his reason for being where he is, and his state of mind. The rest of the book is told mainly from Mathilde's point of view, but Mathilde receives most of her information through epistles and telegrams and interviews. In this way, the emotions and thoughts of the other characters are presented. While the reader has the pleasure of discovering clues to the mystery along with Mathilde, the author also uses these letters and interviews to round out each character.

## Setting

The setting of *A Very Long Engagement* is essential to the plot, character development, and themes. France during World War I is a unique environment, which makes it possible for the author to present an anti-war and pro-love message. The war scenes in trenches and hospitals are vividly described, where fields that once produced crops now produce mud and blood. The pretty and flowery surroundings in which Mathilde finds herself are a reminder that her love still exists.

## Language and Meaning

*A Very Long Engagement* is literary, poetic in style, and with rich imagery. The symbols of the wire, flowers of all kinds, and the mud of war provide a deeper understanding of the ravages of war on people. This book was originally written in French. It was translated into English, but the French place names and character names can make reading difficult.

## Structure

The book begins and ends with the actual events of three days in January during the war. It begins with Saturday Evening when the five prisoners are being marched to the front lines of battle. It ends with Monday morning when Newfoundland soldiers bury the dead men they find. The middle is a chronological account of how Mathilde solves the mystery of her lover's whereabouts. Her information comes in letters and interviews.

## Quotes

Never had a man been more ill-named.

[Things will be better when soldiers have all] dumped all their guns and ammunition on a rubbish heap and settled their differences with toothpicks.

Something had broken like a monstrous abscess.

He felt an animal sense of well-being.

The war destroyed everything.

Nothing is ever black or white because time turns everything to gray.

They quarreled because we are people, not things, and no one, not even the war, can change that.

The only master of us all is time.

Love is the same for everyone and has the same happiness and the same pain.





# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Compare and contrast the characters of Valentina and Mathilde. How does their love for their men make them alike even though they are such fundamentally different people?

## Topic 2

Discuss the ways in which the war changed the soldiers and their loved ones.

## Topic 3

Is war ever a good thing?

## Topic 4

How are flowers important to the story?

## Topic 5

Who was moral and who was immoral in the Bingo trench?

## Topic 6

Discuss the importance of the nicknames given to the soldiers. How do these names show something about the people they represent?

## Topic 7

Why was it so important for soldiers convicted of self-mutilation to be severely punished?

## Topic 8

Discuss the importance of time in the book, especially in light of Elodie's comments in her letter to Mathilde. Why did some of the characters change so much while others remained constant? What made Mathilde different?