
Hélène Gaudy

**If Nothing
Changes**

Publisher: Éditions du Rouergue

Date of Publication: September 2009

Foreign Rights Manager: Elisabeth Beyer
e.beyer@actes-sud.fr

Translation: Linda Coverdale
ljcoverdale@aol.com



© Jean-Marc Bâstère/Éditions du Rouergue

BIOGRAPHY Hélène Gaudy was born in Paris in 1979. Her Young Adult story *Atrabile* (Éditions du Rouergue, Coll. “doAdo,” 2007) was a finalist for the Prix Chronos 2008, and she has shared authorship in several collective works, including *Une chic fille* (Naïve, 2008) and *Vingt ans pour plus tard* (Elyzad, 2009). She is on the editorial board of the magazine *Inculte*.

PUBLICATIONS *Vues sur la mer*, Les Impressions nouvelles, 2006 (Short-listed for the Prix Médicis).



As she has each year since she was born, fourteen-year-old Nina is spending the summer on a Mediterranean island. Hidden in a pine forest, the house and swimming pool provide a sheltered refuge where every vacation drifts smoothly along in a timeless and peaceful rhythm. This summer, however, the simple presence of sixteen-year-old Sabine will disturb this family equilibrium, and the wonderful vacation will soon fall prey to a ferocious game. At loose ends and trusting in their newfound powers, Nina and Sabine begin boldly to experiment with the force-field of human relationships. Until things go too far. Nina and

her family then discover just how far *they* will go to make sure that nothing changes ...

In this, her second novel, Héléne Gaudy examines with the precision of an entomologist, an ordinary, happy family suddenly challenged by a teenage girl from outside their milieu. In the tranquil setting of an island off the coast of southern France, adults and adolescents alike will be swept up in a dangerous current of ever-increasing tension. Each meticulously crafted sentence carries us deeper into the exploration of the growing friendship, that drives both intense and cruel, this story of gripping emotional impact.

From a distance the house is lightweight and rickety. One kick and it would collapse. The door sticks; it does that every year because of the winter's drifts of dirt, the way the walls shift, the warped walls and uneven ceiling. That's part of the house's charm, they say, the warped walls like cardboard, that's part of the charm of summer homes perched there forgotten like the playhouses kids build.

You have to pull the front door toward you as you push in the key. Nina tries every year but never manages it. Year after year her mother encourages her. This year you'll get it, and each time Nina thinks, if someone's chasing us like in a horror film, I'll be stuck at the door with the killer closing in, I'll be here rattling the door and unable to get inside.

This year, her mother doesn't suggest that she attempt to open the door. She doesn't mention the piled-up dirt, the crooked walls on a slant. This year, she feels rather proud of this not-so-bad house, of the pine forest and the swimming pool, of the sea down there, close by. Proud to show them off to someone.

Right behind her mother, Nina glances at Sabine from the corner of her eye. She hopes Sabine sees it all, all around. Hopes that nothing escapes her. Neither the sea nor the swimming pool nor the pines that are so tall, so old. She would like to show her things one by one. To watch her eyes grow wide. Sabine's gaze brings a lump of joy to her throat, a velvety pride, a silent cooing that changes the sound of her words when she says offhandedly, Look, the Sénéchals have arrived. She points out to her parents the home across the way, glimpsed through the trees: the stone house with its shutters flung wide open.

Those other years, she never says, Look, the Sénéchals have arrived.

With a smile her mother replies, Yes, I saw their car in the lane. Nina nods. She would really like to add something else, a well-timed memory demonstrating even more clearly that she is at home here, and proving how close she is to the Sénéchals, to the pines the sea the swimming pool, one of those brief remarks by someone long familiar with a place, remarks that provide their special satisfaction, however, only when familiarity is not complete, the place not yet entirely possessed.

She nods again. Mustn't miss any of Sabine's gaze, the movements of Sabine's head on her thick neck, Sabine's feet treading on the dirt and the pine needles.

Sabine does not turn her head toward the Sénéchals' house. She does not look at the sea, either. She stares at the swimming pool, and walks toward it.

Nina would like to grab her arm, to push her along in front of her so she would be the first one to go inside. She would place her hands on her shoulders and guide her, to savor every movement of that gaze Sabine would surely turn upon the American-style open kitchen with the wooden counter, the low table in the middle of the room. And Nina would show her her bedroom, their bedroom, the way she has imagined doing so many times. But Sabine is staring at the pool.

Inside, her parents set down their bags, turn on the electricity. Nina watches Sabine go over to the pool. Walk all around it. Not looking at the sea, just the pool. The sweet lump in Nina's throat comes back. Sabine gazes at the pool. At *her* pool. Nina walks over there quietly, so as not to disturb her, and smiles with a smile she wishes were less blissful. Sabine is pouting slightly, which turns up her nose. No water in it, she says.

The villages—the real ones—are all inland on the island, tightly clustered among the mountains. At the seashore there are mostly houses like this one, ramshackle and white, usually empty. The coast is flat, edged with oleanders. They have been coming here every year for ages. No need to look any further, once you've found a place like this one you return to every summer, exotic, steadfast, unchanged.

Usually they only go into town now and then to please Nina, because her parents soon find it difficult, almost painful, to tear themselves away from this place where they would happily stay on day and night. Nina fidgets and grows bored as soon as the sun begins to set, when darkness erases the presence of the sea and the games on the beach. The distant town then comes alive with light.

Nina always dresses up before going out. It's incredible, says her father, the time you spend in the bathroom only to come out looking exactly the same. Nina gets dressed for no reason, no one in particular, simply to catch sight of herself in mirrors as if she were meeting herself by chance. Then they drive into town and park near the harbor. Nina walks alone ahead of her parents.

She always keeps the same distance between them. She would like to lead the way but knows perfectly well that they are leading her like a dog on a leash.

At night, the only lights in the pine forest are their cottage and the Sénéchals' place. And yet there are other houses, hidden in the vegetation in a seemingly random pattern intended to simulate the appearance of villages. You must go closer to the shore, beyond the pines and their twilight, to find the luminous jagged curve of the coast. Here, identical memories follow and cancel one another out every year, so that Nina remembers only those images she finds in this place summer after summer, as if time were not passing, not changing anything, as if it were impossible to grow up here. Nothing much ever happens to Nina, who often imagines with guilty appetite tragedies both large and small that would distinguish one year from all the others, send it flying into the landscape, cracking the façade at last. Every year she concocts a different scenario. When a car accident wears out its intense appeal, she replaces the twisted metal and shredded flesh with a silent parental disappearance. She would get up one morning to find everyone gone. The pines would rustle alone in the forest as in a silent film.

This year, Nina doesn't know what to use instead of the car crash and the hushed vanishing of her parents into the stillness of the island. This year, just at present, her thoughts are elsewhere.

They have not yet put away their belongings, opened the dusty cupboards. They try to put the gloss of habit on, things they never do when they are on their own. Spreading a cloth on the table. Opening a bottle and offering the girls a sip of the syrupy wine. It's like a birthday dinner, thinks Nina: all that's missing are candles out here under the bower. The night is mild and the sound of the sea seems muffled, reassuring. It's like a birthday dinner, only better, since even birthdays are all alike year after year, whereas today everything is unusual, including their voices, which sound different to Nina.

Nina has always preferred to eat inside but now she refuses the jacket her father tries to drape around her shoulders, her father whom for the past few hours, out of the blue, she has taken to calling Samuel. He had looked at her with slightly ironic pride, the kind reserved for those who are playing at being grown-up, who are perhaps already a lot more so than others realize but who always seem to us to be mimicking habits in reality adopted long before. Unable to bring herself to address her mother as Lise, Nina prefers not to address her at all. To ask her something, she lightly touches her arm, momentarily re-experiencing a contact that is brief, glancing, familiar.

Take a sip, Sabine, says Samuel playfully, and Sabine readily drains her glass of wine in one go. Samuel applauds. Sabine serves herself generously without any prompting. Lise watches in satisfaction as the girl eats with gusto, wolfing down the tomatoes and mozzarella at a steady pace. Sabine, at least, knows

Hélène Gaudy

If Nothing Changes

how to do justice to a meal, she says, and adds, So, girls: tomorrow morning, the beach? Nina looks up from her plate; that *girls* makes her feel funny. The strangeness of Sabine here—Sabine beneath the bower, Sabine hanging around the swimming pool—might melt away in that word, *girls*, and she, Nina, would become one half of two, a small part of something. Beach, yes. Sabine says nothing in reply, barely raising her face from her plate, and Nina can see that she has noticed nothing of what has made this evening exceptional, nothing of the effort to make it seem to her like business as usual.

I'm going to bed, says Nina, without waiting for the liqueurs that tempts you to stay up late, sitting by the uncorked bottles and dirty dishes they will clean up only the next day.

Lise stretches out on the bed. Her head nestles in its place on Samuel's chest. Sit up a bit, she says, your shoulder's drooping, and she tucks her cheek into the soft niche. My feet are killing me, murmurs Lise, and it rather does her good, to be so tired, and gives her the oddly reassuring impression that they will never be able to leave again.

On the white wall the lamplight is faint and orange. The bedroom is almost empty. They like not bringing much here. Playing Swiss Family Robinson on their familiar island. Lise is obsessive about keeping the walls white, the tile floors spacious and bare.

Do you think they'll get along? Uh-huh, replies Lise. The question makes her a touch uncomfortable, as does Samuel's shoulder, which is sagging again, leaving her head at an awkward angle. She's nice, that girl, continues Samuel. She doesn't say much, but she's nice. And she's a good eater. Lise snorts in amusement against Samuel's shoulder. Weary and uncomfortable, she can't help finding this conversation tiresome and comical keeps seeing Sabine's bulging cheeks, Sabine's jaws industriously chewing tomatoes and mozzarella, and she laughs even louder, saying over and over, on the edge of hysteria, Oh, no question, she's a hearty eater! Cut it out, says Samuel, don't be silly.

The girls are sleeping in the same room. Two twin beds, which Nina has taken care to draw closer to each other. It's hot and the window must be left open. Mosquitoes are coming in, buzzing around. In the darkness Nina listens to their flight. Their silence when they land on a wall. She raises one of her sandals very slowly—then squishes them with one blow, making tiny thick brown stains she hurriedly wipes away, wondering each time whose blood it was they had gorged on.

Tonight there is a tepid breeze from outside and the presence of the other girl, who has fallen asleep right away, mouth open, head buried in the pillow. Nina has someone sleeping near her for the first time in a long while, since when she was a tiny thing, in the crook of her mother's arm. Afterward, empty beds. Nina sleeps all the worse for it, as the slightest noise awakens her. Perhaps

her parents always made so sure nothing disturbed her sleep that she has grown used to being on the alert in that safeguarded silence, a diminutive sentinel throughout the overlong nights. If anyone were to enter their apartment—lock quietly picked, a silhouette in the doorway—it would be she, Nina, who would sound the alarm have just enough time to hide under the bed before the intruder entered the room. She is always the first one awake, even before the alarm goes off. Always the last one asleep, because you never know. And here she is now with this body near hers, lying heavy and open-mouthed instead of chatting with her beneath the coverlet.

Nina tosses and turns. She's sorry she pushed her bed closer to Sabine's. The incongruity of this presence nearly stifles all sleep. Even with her eyes closed, she knows she is there from her labored, whistling breathing.

Might as well see her up close, she decides, once and for all, then I won't think about her anymore and I'll go to sleep.

Nina gets up. Looming over Sabine, she leans down. Crouching on the tile floor, she looks at this open mouth she thought would be bigger and blacker. The teeth are large and white, and the lips, puffy. Sabine in her sleep has the calm and weighty immobility of a stone or a beached whale. Her skin is smooth, damp and sleek like the skin of a cachalot, thinks Nina, because she considers *cachalot* less insulting than *whale*. Sabine's hair on the white pillow seems longer, curlier, thicker than in daylight.

From beneath the sheet peek out her round shoulder, the strap of her nightgown. Her body swells with each breath and gently rises almost to Nina's cheek as Nina leans ever closer. Her gaze is fixed on Sabine's body as on that of a dead woman, fascinated by what this immobility allows and reveals. Surrounded by beings as familiar as objects, Nina does not remember ever having drawn this close to anyone before. She can even smell Sabine's perfume. Until now she has been familiar with only the odors of her own kin—same blood same skin—and her mother's above all, that pungent scent of bruised leaves. Sabine smells like girlish *eau de toilette*, cheap berries, and sunscreen. Toward that supple cetacean skin as soft as butter, Nina stretches out a curious finger.

Hélène Gaudy

If Nothing Changes