

A  
**FRIEND**  
*in the*  
**DARK**





# A FRIEND *in the* DARK

**PASCAL RUTER**

Translated by Emma Mandley



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“I would rather walk with a friend in the dark  
than alone in the light.”

*Helen Keller*



This story takes place in a village in France,  
a few miles south of Paris...







# 1

The alarm clock rang. One second later I heard Dad come up the stairs and fling open my bedroom door.

“Come on, get up, today’s the big day!”

He gave me a shake.

“Get a move on, you’re going to be late!”

He bounded back downstairs. During the holidays, I’d completely forgotten about the morning rush to get ready – and today, the first day of a new school year, my brain felt full of fog. I could hear Dad bustling about downstairs, getting breakfast ready. The familiar sounds were just rocking me gently back into a deep sleep when he yelled, “Are you going to get up or do I need to get a crane to lift you out?”

I jumped and sat up in bed, tentatively stretching one foot out, as if I was dipping it into cold water.

Then I randomly grabbed some trousers and a T-shirt. Oh well, so much for looking stylish. My feet felt like lead as I went downstairs.

In the kitchen, Dad had made me a hot chocolate. The warm, comforting smell helped lift the fog in my head a little.

“Have you got all your stuff together?” he asked, raising his eyebrows as high as they would go and wagging his right hand as if he was massaging my head from the other side of the room. I tried to look as if I had everything under control.

“Yes, I think so, but ... you can’t always be sure ... can you?”

He washed up a couple of cups and, before going back to bed, he said, “Don’t forget to shave off your chocolate moustache. It’s important to look your best!”

I ambled into the living room. The sun was just coming up and it shone into the little yard. A few fallen leaves were lying on the ground like dried butterflies. It was getting late, so I went to find my rucksack. It looked very small and battered. This year I wasn’t going to let myself be intimidated by the problems that lurked inside it. I rummaged around and found the list of school equipment I was

supposed to have bought. I'd forgotten to give it to Dad. Too late now. Still, he might have thought of it himself: isn't that how it's supposed to work, when you're part of a team?

I nearly charged into his room to tell him, but in the end I didn't bother... I began to empty my rucksack to assess the situation. I unearthed some pencil ends and a picture of an apple tree with big red apples lying all around its trunk: one of my friend Haisam the Honourable's bizarre drawings. I hesitated, but then I stuck it to the wall. What had he been trying to tell me? As a general rule, I don't understand either his drawings or anything he says, and if I ask him to explain it's even worse. I also found my last paper for Year Eight – with a mark of 2 out of 10 and the comment "Some progress" – as well as a photo of a woman in a swimsuit, torn out of a magazine. The swimsuit was quite revealing, though there wasn't all that much to reveal. I shook the rucksack to make sure it was completely empty: there's something hopeful about making a fresh start.

Now it felt oddly light. Obviously, a rucksack with nothing in it seems a bit pointless, but I managed to make it heavier with a couple of blank exercise books that had been languishing at the bottom of a drawer

since last year. So far, my school prospects weren't looking all that much better, despite the resolutions I'd made about getting my things more organized.

I had to adjust the rucksack's straps and let them out a bit, because they were cutting into my shoulders. It felt like I'd grown, so I went to check in the long mirror. It was true, I'd filled out quite a lot. I was pleased, because among other things, it's important in life to have a good physique.

Before leaving, I called out a half-hearted "Bye!". As I'd expected, there was no answer from Dad. It wasn't his fault. He must have got back from Paris very late. As usual, he'd been really careful not to wake me, and now he needed to catch up on his sleep.

It wasn't too cold, just a bit grey. Dad's old car, a 1960s Panhard, was parked in the paved yard. Dad was obsessed with that car. He'd spent the whole of the previous day adjusting the rocker arms and he'd had terrible problems with the oil feed. I'd suggested refitting the oil feed pipe last, and it had done the trick. After I'd gone to bed, Dad had set off on his deliveries – the M10S engine thrumming beautifully as the car started. It was the perfect lullaby.

\* \* \*

When I got to school there were people everywhere. I walked past the caretaker's lodge but Haisam wasn't there and nor was his father, the caretaker. So I went to join the other kids in the playground, where we were supposed to assemble while we waited for the head teacher.

The playground was crowded and some of the parents, who were behind the railings, stuck their heads through the bars, trying to catch a glimpse of what was happening. They were holding on to them with both hands, like prisoners desperate for a sniff of freedom. It was a strange view of the world. The head teacher arrived and began to call out our names. One by one we got into line in front of our form teachers. And when everyone in a class had been called, the form teacher led them inside. Whole processions of children disappeared in this way, and little by little the playground emptied. I was wondering where on earth Haisam the Honourable could have got to, when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I didn't need to turn around to know it was him.

"Honourable Egyptian," I murmured, "I hope we're going to be in the same class."

"It's sorted."

So then I turned round, because I was eager to

see his face again. He seemed to have got even fatter over the holidays. His great stomach was stuffed into a massively uncool, thick checked shirt and he was wearing corduroy trousers that were much too short, revealing different coloured socks. His small eyes were smiling behind his ever-present horn-rimmed specs. He had the calm, unruffled look of someone who's seen it all before. I've never understood how Haisam could be so impervious to the world of fashion, but hey, that's his business. I was nudged in the ribs by a sharp Egyptian elbow.

"Victor! Absent? Absent already?" The head teacher was yelling through her megaphone.

This really wasn't the moment to make her think I'd bunked off: I didn't want to draw attention to myself right at the beginning of the year. Better to wait a little.

"No! No! I'm here," I shouted, waving my arms wildly. "I'm coming, look, I'm getting in line!"

A little later Haisam came to join me in the queue. He'd said, "It's sorted," and it was. We trudged through the corridors behind our form teacher. I didn't know anyone else in the class but maybe that was a good thing, if I wanted to keep a low profile.

We sat down at our desks and the teacher asked

us to fill in a form with our personal details, because at the beginning of the year “they” wanted to know something about us. I’ve never understood quite why, but anyway... Actually I would have liked to know more about the teachers, but I’d never raised it, because coming from me it would probably have looked suspicious. But still, it would have been interesting to know where they lived, what their families were like and so on. More interesting than quite a lot of other things.

Haisam, as usual, had sat down in the back row. I’d hoped that he might have had a change of heart, but apparently not; he still wanted to be on his own at the back of the class. He explained that this was because during lessons he entered into a state of deep concentration that could easily be mistaken for sleep. Of course, I knew that it was a sort of essence of concentration – like strong Turkish coffee – but at the beginning of the year the teachers were always fooled by it and thought he was having a snooze. His eyes would be half-closed, his arms crossed over his stomach and sometimes his chin rested on his chest. Haisam said that at times like this he was being a Nile crocodile: he appeared to be asleep but in fact he was soaking up the whole lesson like a sponge. He

could react to the teacher's slightest word or tone of voice, just like a croc who seems to be sleeping but can grab anything passing with one snap of its jaws.

Last year the maths teacher was demonstrating the solution to a totally baffling problem on the board, with root thingummies everywhere and formulas that looked like something out of science fiction. While the teacher was scurrying backwards and forwards from one end of the board to the other, my friend the Honourable Egyptian was his usual serene self, peacefully dozing with his chin on his chest, writing nothing down. Then he lifted one eyelid and very politely asked the teacher if he could say something.

"With all due respect, sir, I think there's a simpler way of doing this."

Haisam strolled over to the board and picked up a marker. We all sensed that a miracle might be about to take place. In a little corner of the board he wrote one small, perfect line of figures and symbols. The teacher opened his eyes wide, as though he'd looked through a door and glimpsed infinity.

"You're quite right," he said, in a thin little voice that was both despairing and admiring.

After that he went on sick leave, probably to think a few things over.



On the personal details form, I was wondering what I could put down as “father’s profession”. I wrote down “buyer”, because that’s what seemed to fit best. He sold things as well, of course, but I thought that “buyer” sounded more mysterious, and also more distinguished.

Then my mind wandered back to the car. Had Dad remembered to leave 0.15 mm slack on the Panhard’s inlet and exhaust valves? If not, the rocker arms were unlikely to last very long. I worried about it for a little while and lost track of what the teacher was saying.

After the last lesson, I met Haisam in the playground. We headed towards the caretaker’s lodge, where his father would be waiting for him, sitting at the chessboard, with a pyramid of translucent Turkish delight beside him. It was slow progress, because Haisam never hurried.

I called him Haisam the Honourable because he always introduced himself in the same way, like a recorded message, “I’m Haisam: it’s an honourable Egyptian name.”

He was a sort of philosopher: once he’d told me that in his opinion the Egyptian pyramids were clear proof that human beings never learn their lesson, and

that their natural inclination is to lose heart and get lazier and lazier. I didn't really understand, so that evening I'd asked Dad. At first he'd nearly choked laughing and then he'd advised me to watch out, because Haisam was clearly a pessimist. I'd looked in the dictionary that Dad had given me as an incentive to study and this is what I found:

**Pessimism** *a tendency to believe that the worst will happen.*

I always liked being the last to leave school – and the last to arrive too for that matter – and Lucky Luke couldn't understand why. (It was Haisam, by the way, who'd pointed out the similarity between the Head of Year and Lucky Luke, the cartoon cowboy.) So that day after school I watched Haisam and his father play chess for a while as the school emptied, lining my stomach with Turkish delight. Haisam moved his pieces very slowly and ceremoniously, like a magician. His father always had a little smile playing on his very thin lips, but the two of them hardly ever spoke to each other during a game. My dear friend took a piece of Turkish delight after each move, chewing slowly while he waited for his father to respond. Before the icing sugar fell on his checked

shirt, it floated for a moment above the chessboard. There was something secretive and cosy about the peaceful silence and the little cloud of sugar hiding us from the world. Now and then someone would look into the lodge to ask Haisam's father something, and he would reply with a vague wave of his hand.

There were many mysteries surrounding my friend. How come Haisam was so fat and his father was so thin? And why did he have an Egyptian name when his father was Turkish? And also, above all, why did my noble Egyptian observe the Sabbath, the Jewish day of rest, which didn't seem to be a very Egyptian thing, nor Turkish either for that matter. There were many things about my friend Haisam that I didn't understand. Sometimes I looked in my dictionary, but even then I couldn't always find an answer. So I watched them play chess and stuffed myself with Turkish delight, which is called *lokum* in Turkish.

**Lokum** from the Arabic "comfort for the throat". An oriental sweet made from flavoured cubes of jelly dusted with icing sugar.

"So how did it go?" asked my father later, peering out from underneath the bonnet of the Panhard with his face covered in oil. "I hope you kept out of trouble?"

I sighed.

“So far...”

He frowned suspiciously. At the end of the previous year he'd promised the school authorities – in particular Lucky Luke – that he'd keep tabs on me. To encourage me, he'd bought me a book called *The Three Musketeers*, by Alexandre Dumas, as well as the dictionary I've already mentioned.

“Did you remember to leave 0.15 mm slack on the Panhard's inlet and exhaust valves?” I asked him. “If not, your rocker arms are done for.”

He said nothing and wiped his tools clean.

“Dad...”

“Yes, what?”

“How long do you think it took Alexandre Dumas to write *The Three Musketeers*?”

“I don't know.”

“A whole year?”

“Perhaps ... but I expect it took him longer.”

“Maybe three years? One year for each musketeer?”

“Maybe.”

“Another thing, Dad...”

“Yes ... hang on, I'm going to sit down, in case you're going to spring something nasty on me.”

He plonked himself down on the car's front seat.

“What I’d like to know is... Did you do well at school, in the olden days?”

He looked relieved and smiled, gazing into the distance. He seemed to be searching through his memories. With his right hand he slowly rubbed his chin, as though it was a magic lamp and sparks from the past might shoot out from it.

“Yes, I was completely brilliant!”

“In what subjects?”

“In all of them.”

He gave a rather strange smile, proud and a bit sad at the same time. Behind the windscreen his face looked slightly distorted.

I wasn’t entirely sure whether to believe him or not, since it’s a father’s job to set a good example. I went inside. I’d ask Haisam the Honourable about *The Three Musketeers* and Alexandre Dumas. I drank a glass of water before going up to my bedroom in the attic. Then I emptied my rucksack and put the new textbooks away on the shelves that had been specially built for them. I stuck my weekly timetable to the wall, because in Year Eight I’d got the subjects, days and times muddled up and I never had the right books with me. Lastly, I wrote the subject and the name of the teacher on the first page of all my exercise books and covered

them with clear plastic. It took quite a long time, but it was good to see them looking so smart and it felt like progress. Progress in my method. And I don't care what anyone says, method is important in life. I went back down to the sitting room and asked Dad if we could cook some Egyptian rice, using the recipe that Haisam had given me.

While we were eating, he asked, "So, young man, are you happy with your teachers this year?"

He sounded so serious that I was alarmed. I could see he was thinking of his promise to Lucky Luke and wanted to check that I was setting off on the right foot from the very start of the year. I nodded firmly to reassure him.

"You see, my boy, it's the beginning of the school year that sets the pace. It's all about how you start. Not too fast, but lively enough. Obviously, you have to watch out you don't get knac— puffed out too quickly."

He put his hand on my shoulder.

"Life, old buddy, is like a cycle race. You have to approach it like the mountain stages of the Tour de France. It's not a time trial. Remember that."

Where on earth did he pick up these sayings? He seemed to be developing as much of an obsession with metaphors as Haisam.

“There are too many hills for me and I keep skidding all over the place. And anyway, Dad, cycling hurts your bum. So no offence, but if you want to encourage me and teach me about life you’ll have to come up with a different comparison.”

We cleared the table and sat down facing each other in the two deep, shabby armchairs. I began, because I’d lost the previous evening.

“The date of the first Panhard and Levassor three-point engine suspension patent?”

He thought for a few seconds.

“Easy: January the fourteenth 1901. My turn. In what year was the Panhard car first equipped with a radiator?”

I shut my eyes to make it easier to think. First radiator ... first radiator...

“I’ve got it: 1897. And what’s more I can tell you that it was in the Paris–Dieppe motor race.”

My father whistled in admiration and got up, because he had work to do.

“I still don’t understand how it is that you can learn everything there is to know about the Panhard car by heart, but you can’t...”

I could see where this was going, and even if he was right, that didn’t make it right.

“I get it, Dad. Stop now though, because, well, you know.”

“Do you remember when you thought Nelson Mandela was the centre forward for the Auxerre football team?”

“Don’t poke fun at me.”

We had a good laugh, blowing memories to each other like bubbles.

“You wait,” he said, brandishing the Krebs manual, which is a sort of bible covering everything there is to know about the Panhard car. “Tomorrow I’ll have a really impossible one for you. You’ll never get it.”

“I will too. And you won’t either.”

In my bedroom, I had a quick look at the timetable stuck on the wall and felt a bit depressed. My first lesson the following day was at eight-thirty. I thought again about what my father had said: “It’s all about how you start. Not too fast, but lively enough.” I saw Alexandre Dumas’ book on the bedside table. There was no doubt it was going to take me longer to read than it took him to write. I was at page four. I decided to read the Krebs manual instead, because I really wanted to catch Dad out.