★ "Readers will be swept into Valérie's military experience."
—Booklist, starred review



When I Was a SULDING

a memoir by Valérie Zenatti

## THREE GIRLS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DESERT

'We're three losers in a land of losers,' Yulia says, spitting her words out and raising her eyebrows in an expression no one would dare argue with. 'This is the arsehole of the world,' she goes on, 'and nothing special ever came out of the arsehole of the world.'

I look into those big blue eyes she's so proud of, especially since she got her contacts. She used to have horrible plastic glasses, with really thick lenses, and she squinted. Long-sighted, astigmatic and with a twinkle in her eye, as my aunt would say. She carried the burden of it all through her child-hood. Since she swapped her glasses for two tiny lenses, it's as if she wants to make the whole world pay for her past humiliations. She's getting her revenge. Sometimes all you can see in her eyes is anger and contempt, or – worse than that – she's lying and her eyes are dressed up in this immeasurable innocence, all blue and transparent, as she talks to

one of her teachers, or to a boy. I hate her big blue eyes. I hate my best friend's eyes with a sneaky, furious, impotent sort of hate. And I feel just as much loathing for the way she sometimes speaks, deliberately foul-mouthed and hard, as if she's saying, 'I'm free now. I'm no longer my parents' nice little girl.'

She's my best friend, all the same . . . I have to admit it and she seems to agree. At school we've been classified as inseparable, no one could imagine bumping into one of us without the other. We've been sitting next to each other systematically for four years, and we phone each other on average eight times a day. When I'm not with her I'm with Rahel, my other best friend.

They were both born in what was once the USSR. Yulia's from Tashkent in Uzbekistan. She likes saying those names in front of me – Tashkent, Samarkand – as if there were treasure sparkling on every street corner back there. In front of other people from Russia she emphasises the fact that her father's of German origin and her mother Romanian; I can tell she's ashamed of Uzbekistan. Everyone else seems to think that that's where the arsehole of the world is. Personally, I haven't got very fixed ideas about the anatomy of our planet.

Rahel was born in Benderi, a little town near Kishinev in Moldova. When she pronounces the name of her childhood town, she stresses the second 'e' and gives the 'r' a liquid rolling sound as they do in Slavic languages, and she lingers on the 'i' with an affectionate smile. She is definitely what they call homesick.

I was born in Nice, in France, and that's very unusual. Remarkable, even. That's what makes me seem a bit different to everyone, and what makes me interesting - or even charming - to some. I only have to open my mouth for people to gather round. It makes it easier to get to know people but it can be exasperating, especially when you just have to 'say something in French'. Baudelaire, Camembert, solitude, enfant terrible . . . whatever comes into my head. What matters to them is the sound of it. Especially words which contain e, u, an, in, on (de, du, dans, dindon), all sounds that don't exist in their language and which they find so beguiling and exotic. It's thanks to them that I realised a language is first and foremost a kind of music, an assembly of sounds. I say absolutely anything to them, because I can't think what to say to people who don't understand a word I'm saying, and they love it. It breaks my heart, because I really like words: I'm fascinated by them, I respect them, I try to penetrate their mysterious depths, and to use them advisedly in both languages: my mother tongue, French, and the foreign one, Hebrew.

But everyone else couldn't care less, and never stop saying, 'Oh please, say something in French!'

We live in Beersheva, a town of 100,000 inhabitants in the Negev Desert in Israel. Seen from the sky, it looks like Atlanta (minus the CNN building and the Olympic stadium): grey cubes plonked on the grey sand. Anyone who thinks that a desert is always an expanse of fine white sand, with a leafy little oasis here and there, has watched too many

cartoons. Lucky things, I envy them!

Ever since I arrived here five years ago with my parents and my sister, I've thought the desert was ugly, unsettling and pointless. Only the sun, which disappears every evening in a magnificent blaze, justifies the fact that there's nothing else there.

I have two Russian best friends. They have blue eyes and chestnut-brown hair but they don't look alike at all. We have turned, are turning or are about to turn eighteen. In two months' time we'll be sweating it out over the trials of the baccalauréat.

In six months, at the latest, we'll be changing out of our jeans and T-shirts into khaki shirts and trousers.

The army for all of us. Soldier girls. Yulia, Rahel and myself.

At the moment we're lying on the lawn in the middle of the horseshoe shape created by the apartment buildings where we live. The estate is called a 'residential area for new immigrants'; there are no signs telling you to keep off the grass, and people speak in about fifteen different languages.

We're talking about the night before, going over it again and again: a party organised at Ilan's house – he's one of a group of boys who come about as close to normality as we're going to get.

'The same old story! It's always the same old story!' Yulia groans. 'Some Coke, some vodka, the boys dancing like drunken ducks, the girls getting depressed: you sweat, your make-up runs, you go to the toilet to put another layer on, but who for? Who for?'

Rahel and I make the prudent decision to remain silent confronted with such despair. We're quite used to Yulia's whining. In a couple of minutes she'll get up and cut us dead with one sharp sentence, us and this whole rotten hell-hole . . . or she might change to a new subject: herself, for example.

Which of course she does this time.

'Anyway, as usual, they all looked at me all night . . . I sometimes wonder why . . . It's not as if I was as well dressed as you, Val.'

I steal a quick glance at Rahel who's making no effort to hide a knowing smile.

'Yes,' Rahel agrees, 'they were all at your feet, rapt, miserable, devoted, drooling . . . It was too touching for words . . . Who did you decide on?'

A furious stare from Yulia.

A feeling of dismay bears down on me.

If it goes on like this, there's going to be a row, screaming, insults thrown back and forth. And I'm terrified of anger. I go pale, I go red, I start to shake as soon as people raise their voices. Standing there silently with my eyes beginning to prickle, I feel stupid and redundant. Quickly, change the subject. On to the *bac*, for example.

'Have you done your notes for Crime and Punishment?'

'Yes,' replies Rahel, 'but I'm having trouble with it. In Russian, it's about crime, but in Hebrew it's been translated as "sin". It's not the same at all. Raskolnikov commits a crime, full stop.'

'But the crime was a sin,' I counter. 'Dostoyevsky must

have seen it like that, he was very much a believer.'

'What about L'Etranger?' Yulia intervenes. 'Have you finished it?'

'No problem. I've read it three times, I've done all my notes on Camus, Algeria, the absurd, the death penalty . . . Let's just hope the question comes up!'

'It's hardly surprising you're so crazy about him, he's French!'

'So what? That's got nothing to do with it. Are you crazy about Dostoyevsky just because he's Russian?'

'No,' says Yulia.

'Yes,' Rahel contradicts her.

'Will you lend me your notes on Camille?' Yulia asks me casually.

'Try and pronounce his name properly for once. "Camille" is a girl's name! This is Camus. Ca-mus! U! But, umm . . . about the notes . . . sorry, but there's no point. I've written them all in French.'

I'm sure she's seen through my hesitation from the way she turns her head sharply. But there's a little smile spreading over her lips as she tilts her chin forward.

'Hey, girls, look who's coming.'

We follow her gaze. Ilana, alias Paint-pot, is coming towards us. Along with boys, teachers, subjects for the *bac* and the army, she's in our top five favourite topics of conversation. We could talk about her outfits for hours. She regularly commits two mistakes which we rate as unforgivable: she wears red with pink, and her lipstick unfailingly smudges on to her teeth. We make fun of her pretty much

openly. I know it's nasty, but we need Ilana: she's the sort of girl that absolutely anyone can stand next to and feel luminous, beautiful and chic. Anyway, she's clearly very interested in our conversations, even when she hasn't been invited to join in. Her ears drag along the ground and her suspicious expression reminds me of a nosey old spinster running a pre-war boarding house – not that I've ever met one of course, but imagination is one of mankind's distinguishing features. The girl would make an excellent spy.

'Hi! Have you heard the latest?'

'No!' we chorus in reply.

That's an eternal truth. No one has ever heard the latest news. Except, of course, whoever is triumphantly announcing it.

'Orange is THE colour for the summer. Can you believe that?'

'Yuk!'

'No way!'

'It can't be!'

For no particular reason, we decreed one fine day that the colour orange was beneath us. Only suitable for girls with no future. Ilana knows this and she's taking pleasure in giving our little group a good dig.

'Mind you,' I pipe up, 'I couldn't care less about orange. You see, I'm going to be in khaki long before you.'

A respectful silence ensues.

'Right, I'm off,' I say, jumping up. 'I've got work in an hour.'

And I walk off over the lawn, taking big strides, trying to

look as much like Faye Dunaway in *Bonnie and Clyde* as I can. I don't look back, but I know the girls are watching me. If there's one thing I'm sure of it's that they envy me my legs. That's one good reason not to despair of this life.

At school, lessons end at 2 p.m. There isn't a canteen or a lunch break - we study in one long stretch then we're free for the rest of the day, to revise, play sport or watch TV. I work in a big chemist, a chain, where I'm employed under the pompous title of display coordinator'. Basically, this means that I have to go up and down the aisles lining products up so that the shelves look full to bursting, with all the shampoos, deodorants and sanitary towels right up against each other. Apparently it makes the customers want to break up this perfect order, and therefore to buy. From time to time I'm requisitioned by the perfume department for gift-wrapping, and I keep myself entertained inventing really sophisticated wrapping techniques with three or five folds in the paper and with two or four turned-back edges. I'm paid to spend time doing something beautifully when someone else is going to undo it with one swift movement.

When Rafi, the boss, took me on he detailed Extrapharm's philosophy to me for twenty minutes: the customer is king, whatever they want is an order, weare slaves at their service, and when they drive us headlong towards a nervous breakdown while they hesitate between washing powder with or without fabric conditioner (terrified that their wives will create a scene if they don't buy what they were told to), we have to flash them a sweet amiable smile, and soothe their