



Sylvette and PicassoYoung,  
acrylic on canvas



## CHAPTER ONE

# Sylvette – Lydia

For a few months in 1954 a beautiful young girl entered the life of the century's greatest artist. What followed turned into a magical episode, a wonderful stroke of good fortune that changed her life. Pablo Picasso was living at Vallauris in southern France when he saw 19-year-old Sylvette David with her boyfriend, Toby. Picasso, in an almost fatherly appreciation of her great beauty and grace, and without trying to take anything from her, gave her the beginnings of self-belief and a feeling of being special. Sylvette became the subject of a series of over 60 portraits, 28 of them paintings, the rest drawings and sculptures. Ranging from the entirely naturalistic to the thoroughly Cubist. When exhibited in Paris later that year they drew an excited response, as people marvelled at the virtuosity on display.





But Sylvette did more than simply pose. Picasso, now 73, fighting fiercely with mortality and separating from Françoise Gilot, mother of two of his children, found in her innocence and withdrawn simplicity a restorative, a refreshment and a distraction.

Gilot was to say Picasso was a Bluebeard, exploiting each woman in his life before passing on to the next one, but this was not the case with Sylvette. She was far from being some empty husk when she emerged. On the contrary, she was nurtured and set in good soil to continue her life with confidence. There is so much more to her story, both before Vallauris and in the many decades that followed, as she gradually blossomed into Lydia Corbett, herself a much exhibited painter, sculptor and potter.

My Mother and I have spent many hours sitting together, snatched here and there amidst our busy lives, in an effort to put down her life story. She talks and I scribble, we laugh, we cry as we go through her life. Mum would love to write this herself, and indeed she has such a wonderful way of putting things that I wish she would but, as she says, there is so much to tell that she doesn't know where to start. So we decided that I should try to put something together and, having experimented with various approaches, I have decided that the only way I can do it is to write as if I was Mum, trying to be faithful to the way she speaks, and also to include a few passages, from other family members, together with lots of pictures. I hope it conveys her bubbly spirit and the originality that make her well loved by all.

I would also ask the reader to allow the mention of God to mean a variety of conceptions and presences. The word God can often prejudice many of us, but you can substitute spiritual electricity or flow or life force for it, to help understand Lydia's multi-faith approach to life. Her outlook on all things spiritual is refreshing, and her life, as I suspect it is for many of us, has been a search to understand the complexities of the human condition – although she wouldn't put it like that in a million years. Mum says that 'most books about artists are all words, too many words –

they are boring – I never read them. I only look at the pictures. I don't want my book to be like that. I want it full of fun!' She tosses her head and stamps her foot. 'And I want to have a thread of God's love going through my book like a prayer. So too God's love winds in and out of our lives without us knowing it, and if we are open to it, we can see which door to choose and find the answer to our questions without asking them.'

I have felt an urgent responsibility to get this book written. It's as if Mum has the burden of her life that she needs to see in print in an attempt to be free of the heartache and anguish as well as to celebrate the laughter and wonder of the past eighty-two years. Maybe it's something that happens to all of us, that when we get to a certain age we feel a great need to tell our children and grandchildren what happened in our lives. Lydia's story is a testament to survival and to seeing beauty all around, even when life deals hard blows and shakes the very ground we stand on.

The tale of her life is also her own artistic journey, showing her amazing drive and vitality. She is prolific and unbound by convention of any kind, painting as if dancing the endless dance of the fairytale girl in the red ballet shoes. She can't stop: her daily life and thoughts, experiences of all kind are put on paper with pen and ink enlivened with splashes of vibrant watercolour, ink and paint sometimes blending and creeping to form unexpected blotches that increase one's desire to look more deeply into the picture to discover more. When you meet her, her sense of fun is immediately apparent, she is warm, funny, emotional and I hope she forgives me for saying – nutty! Her art contains it all and she doesn't stop at painting. She makes ceramic sculptures, driftwood sculptures, bottle ladies: 'you will have to drink lots of wine so I can make some more lady bottles.'

Lydia was born in Boulogne Billancourt on the edge of the Bois de Boulogne in Paris on 14th Nov in 1934, the third child born to her English mother Honor Gell and French father Emmanuel David. Honor had been born in 1903, and Emmanuel was three

Mother and Child in Assisi, watercolour.



years her senior. Called Mano for short he was training to be a solicitor in 1923 and studying painting part-time at The Académie Julian in Paris. Honor had been awarded a scholarship to attend the Académie, which had just opened its doors to women for the first time, and it was there she met her future husband. The art scene in the 1920s must have been very exciting and Honor's talent was obvious. She was commissioned to paint the portrait of Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, and Mano saw great promise in her work.

Mano was born in 1900 on Christmas Day and was the youngest of three boys; Emmanuel, Marcel and Pierre. Marcel died of peritonitis aboard an airship which he was piloting, aged 23; Pierre survived the war and had two children. In the latter stages of the First World War, aged seventeen, Mano volunteered for the army, but being too young was taken on instead as a stable hand, cleaning the stables and grooming the war-horses. He told me he had found them quite frightening and that the officer in charge had shown him how to talk roughly to them to keep them





Honor Gell and Emmanuel  
David on their wedding day.

quiet. Emmanuel then went to Art school in Lyon before training to become a Clerc de Notaire, a solicitor's clerk. His own father was an 'Avocat', a Barrister, and had encouraged him to follow the same career:

Mano and Honor married in 1925 and went to live in Gisors in Normandy. Ultimately, Mano decided against being

a solicitor and became a picture dealer. A son, Philippe arrived in 1926, followed by a sister, Maxence who tragically died after being given an inoculation, she died at Honor's breast. Mano took the little Maxence in a wooden box on the train down to his Mother's home in Provence to be laid to rest in the family tomb in the cemetery of Camaret-sur-Aigues. Honor in her grief turned

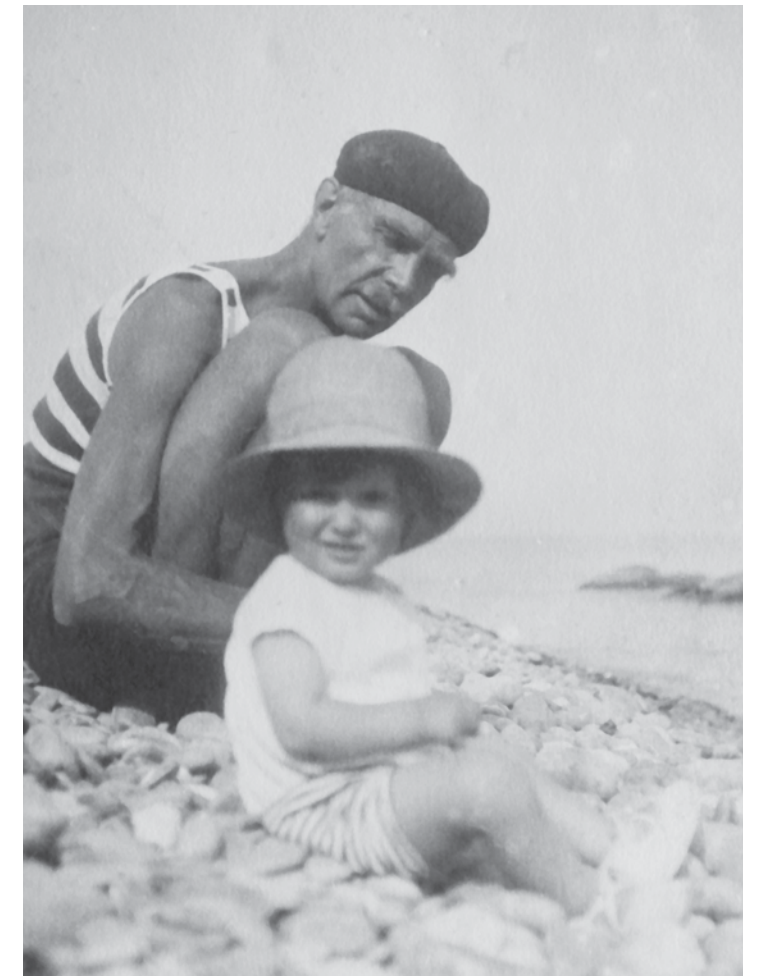
against the orthodox medical world and was crazy to 'clean' herself. Mano didn't believe in any alternative medicine, but when Honor became a follower of a nature-cure doctor called Gaston Durville he went along with the doctor's ideas for Honor's sake.

Durville had bought a Napoleonic Fort on a small deserted island off the southern coast of France, one of an archipelago of four islands, fifteen kilometers from Le Lavendou, and about two hours South of San Tropez. It was an idyllic spot only a forty-five minute

boat ride from the coast, in the glittering azure Mediterranean sea, where the hot, life-giving sun beat down for most of the year. It was his idea to form a nature-cure colony here, on the Île du Levant (The Island of The Rising Sun). It was essentially a nudist colony, following the new trend for eating healthily and living life closer to nature.

Durville engaged the interest of Honor and Mano, who at that time were a well-off and successful couple. Honor went

Honor painting on the Île du Levant and  
right, Grandfather Edward Gell and Philippe  
David on the beach at Gisors, Calais.







Left, Self-portrait by Honor Gell and above, Emmanuel's father, Sylvius David.

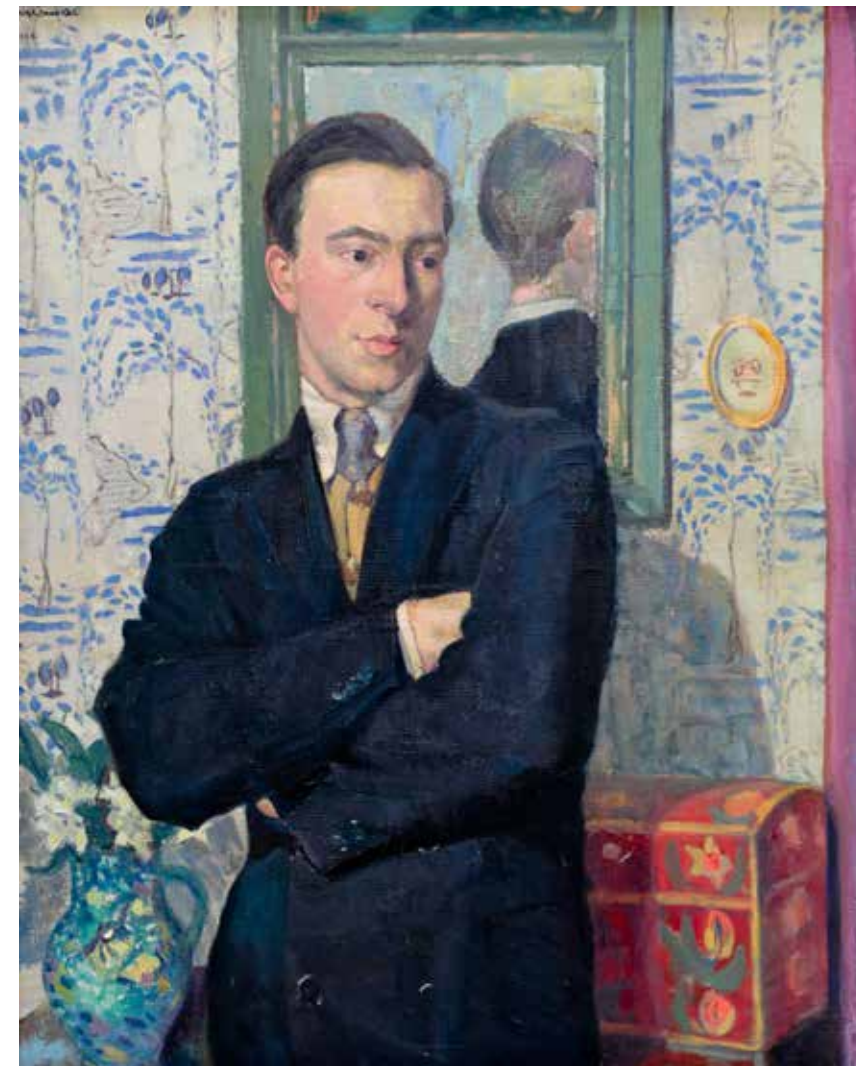
to her father who also became interested in the idea, investing money in the island and building three houses on it. So they lived between Paris and the island, While Lydia (also known as Sylvette and Sylvia) was conceived and swam inside her mother in the sea around it even before she was born.

There was tension building between Mano and Honor because he valued her paintings so much that he didn't want her to look after the children. He wanted her to paint professionally,

but Honor's grief at losing her baby had made her want to give up painting so she could be a full-time mother. Mano, horrified, drifted apart from her. Finally in 1936 he moved away, taking their son Philippe, aged 10. Mano sent Philippe to a Jesuit boarding school in Avignon, near his mother's home in Camaret-sur-Aigues, and Mano returned to Paris to continue his career, breaking Honor's heart a little bit more. Honor stayed on the island, camping amongst the eucalyptus trees with her father and mother while their houses



Above, Honor, Philippe and Mamish, Mano's mother sit in the foreground and right, Honor's portrait of Mano in the family home at Camaret when he was 23.



were being built. She painted portraits for a modest living and little by little she fell in love with one of the men building her father's houses — Marcel Lassalle. She soon found that Marcel couldn't have children but Honor was determined to have one more child after Sylvette. Her solution to this problem will emerge in the pages that follow. In December 1937 she gave birth to a boy in a small clinic in Nice. They called him François Xavier.

So, here on the Island is where I'll start the story, in 1942

with Lydia — Sylvette — Sylvia as a young girl of eight and François who was five.

We have done our best to illustrate the story, scouring attics, albums and archives for photographs, paintings and art. Each is credited to the artist or photographer where known. All uncredited paintings in the book are by Lydia.





Honor; early days in her pregnancy with Sylvette.



A portrait of baby Sylvette and, right, with her mother Honor.

