
Opening Extract from...

The Olive Farm

Written by Carol Drinkwater

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THE OLIVE FARM

A Love Story

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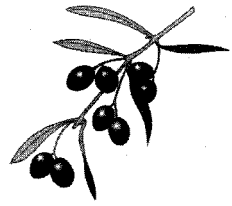

This book would never have existed without Michel. So it is to him that I first say thank you: for his encouragement, generosity and expansive love. Special thanks also to our families and the friends who inhabit these pages.

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For Michel, who lives life through colours richly.
A private story told out loud.
Je t'aime.

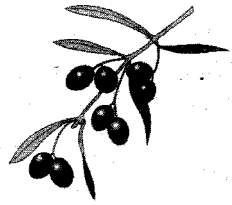
'Too much of a good thing can be wonderful.'

Mae West

'Southwards into a sunburnt otherwhere . . .'

W.H. Auden

Preface



The girls stare in dusty dismay.

'Is this the wonderful surprise, Papa?' asks Vanessa.

Michel nods.

Papa had promised them a villa with a swimming pool. Unfortunately, in his enthusiasm, Michel has omitted to mention that the pool is dry as a bone. Worse, not only is the interior cracked, chipping and devoid of one drop of water, but its faded blue walls and a fair portion of the base are overgrown with thickly entwined skeins of ivy.

'I need a swim!' wails Clarisse.

'We'll cut back the ivy tomorrow and fill it on Sunday, I promise.'

I overhear this pledge as I stagger past with armfuls of cardboard boxes laden with ancient and practically useless kitchenware exhumed from the cluttered cupboards of my London flat. Michel's promise, if given casually, is not without good intention, but a doubt whispering in my ear tells me he

may live to regret it. Suppose we discover the pool leaks? I choose not to voice this within earshot. In any case, my doubts are probably nothing more than the negativity born of a sleepless night.

We drove through most of the night to avoid the worst of the holiday traffic which throughout yesterday jammed the main arterial roads to standstill. At around 8.30 in the evening we approached the outskirts of Lyon only to discover that the *péage* had become a holiday resort in itself. The delay to pass through it was announced as two hours. So, the French, in true French fashion, were grabbing the opportunity to attack a spot of dinner which, of course, delayed matters further.

It was a colourful and fascinating spectacle. A tailback of vehicles many miles long, peppered with families and pets seated on camping stools alongside their cars (the less organised spread out picnic blankets on the motorway surface), all eating three-course meals and drinking copious amounts of booze. Aside from our general frustration, I found it highly entertaining. Strolling alongside several miles of the queue, I witnessed vehicle-owners offering *dégustations* of their regional wine to fellow travellers, morsels of succulent dishes whipped up at the roadside, wobbling and brightly coloured desserts passed on spoons up and down the traffic line, snippets of advice on the fine-tuning of an otherwise well-known recipe, and, to round it all off, hands of cards accompanied by after-dinner coffee followed, in one or two instances, by a glass of calvados. What a knack the French have for turning any event into an opportunity to relish the finer points of eating.

By the time the jam was unjammed, I observed families who had become the firmest of buddies with other roadside families exchanging addresses in the way some folk do when they've spent a week or two together at the same resort.

Once through the city of Lyon, we kept going, stopping only for a brief nap in a roadside parking area, where poor Michel

had to grab some sleep with fat Pamela attached to his ankle by her lead to stop her attempting an escape. And then we pressed on again before dawn, breakfasting outside Fréjus. There, half the local population were already gathered in bars enjoying their first cognac of the day.

Now, having safely arrived, after sixteen hours of such travelling, Pamela, finally released from her confined space, is huffing at my side. Why has this infernal creature taken such a shine to me? 'The dog needs a drink!' I call. No one takes any notice.

'So, we'll have a pool in two days?' Vanessa is always the more punctilious of the two girls.

Michel nods and embraces both daughters, an arm wrapped around each. 'Well, do you like it here? The house and all the grounds? I know it needs a lot of work, but the sun is shining and it's very hot . . .' The final phrase of his sentence melts away in the midday swelter while the girls stare up at him as though he has singlehandedly created a galaxy of suns. After their initial disappointment they seem happy enough, and I am mightily relieved.

I find an outdoor tap alongside the garage and cast about for a saucer or bowl, to give this dribbling mutt some water. I spy a bright yellow, dirt-encrusted plastic utensil – it looks like the cup from a lost Thermos – lying among the weeds at the foot of one of the cedar trees and I hurry to fetch it. Pamela puffs and waddles along beside me. She seems about ready to collapse. I return to the tap.

By now, Michel and the girls are dragging the mattresses, twisted out of all recognition, from the boot of my VW. Two single mattresses for four of us. In this heat. Are we insane?

'Where shall we put these?' he shouts across to me.

'You decide.' I am busy battling with the wretched tap, which is locked rigid. 'Must be a while since anyone used this,' I mutter, but no one is listening to me. Not even Pamela. She is

lying on her side in the shade of twelve tall cedars which form a semi-circle round the parking area, where there is cool, loose earth; a beached whale snoring contentedly.

I turn the tap so hard it almost comes away from the wall. A small green lizard darts out from a fissure in the stucco and, sensing unwelcome visitors, slithers off, disappearing into an otherwhere. Perspiration breaks out all over my face. I can feel the flush. I am giddy with the effort and now it is I who needs the drink. Pamela has long since forgotten her thirst.

Eventually the tap begins to shift, making horrendous squeaking noises as it does so. 'A drop of oil,' I tell myself, beginning a mental 'to do' list which is destined to become longer than life. The ancient faucet turns and turns but still no water flows. 'This tap is not functioning properly, or . . .' But there is no one in sight to hear my concern. I decide to try another.

Upstairs, indoors, the villa is cool and insect-infested. The blinding, dry heat outside emphasises the musty and crepuscular damp within. The smell reminds me of compulsory childhood visits to elderly relatives living alone in unaired spaces.

The mosquito netting, curling away from the windows as though it were fighting to get out into the light, creates blocks of shadows and gives a sombre, prison-like feel to the main living room. Shafts of sunlight cut angular patterns on the floor's terracotta tiles, spotlighting the years of gathering dust and mouldering miniature reptile life. Michel is standing with *les filles*, who are looking about them in horror and disgust.

'*C'est dégueulasse, Papa!*' I cannot avoid noticing Vanessa's battle to keep her tears at bay.

'We'll clean it up,' he encourages, with dwindling enthusiasm.

'Before or after we've attacked the pool?' snaps one of them and stomps outside in a sulk.

'*Chérie*!'

'Michel?' I hardly dare begin, knowing this is a rotten moment to impart such drastic news.

'*Oui*? Go after your sister,' he instructs the remaining daughter.

'I've got a sneaking suspicion . . .'

'What?' he looks frazzled, ready to give up. The drive from Paris, in a baking car packed to the gills with luggage and livestock (Pamela) on roads frying with exhaust fumes and August weather, has been interminable. None of us has slept properly. Nerves are frayed. Even the insistent chirring of the cicadas, a sound I usually find romantic and exotic, is enough to make me want to scream.

Suddenly, I see all this not through the eyes of love emboldened, setting sail on an adventure, but from the children's point of view. This is their summer holiday. I am not their mother. They barely know me. It has been a while since they have spent time with their father and the place to which he has brought them belongs (or will do) to him and this other woman, who is not even fluent in their mother tongue. On top of which, the villa is uninhabitable and we have no money left to put it right.

'The girls are disappointed,' he confides. I hear the weariness and regret in his voice as I struggle not to cast myself in the role of the outsider.

'Michel, I know this is not a great moment, but—'

'Perhaps it was a mistake to bring them here. It was our dream, after all.'

Was? I find myself thinking but refrain – just – from voicing it.

'Michel?'

'What?'

'There's no water.'

'What?'

'No water.'

'Well, you haven't turned it on at the mains!' he snaps and, calling after his daughters, he follows them out on to the terrace. I stay where I am, amid the dust motes and shadows. Through tall French windows I watch them: two slender girls gesticulating angrily at their rangy, handsome father while he attempts to quieten and reassure them. I leave them to it and return to the unloading of the car.

When the girls are less upset and Michel is less harassed, he comes looking for me. 'Is the garage locked?'

'I haven't unlocked it,' I reply, engaged in the business of trying to repair the broom. Beneath heavy boxes in the boot, head and handle have been separated.

'The switch for the water is probably in there.'

He disappears into the garage and finds a tap, which he opens, but there is still no water. He wanders off in silence to pour a glass of wine and figure it out. I return inside the house. 'The water must be fed from an external tank which has dried up,' he says when he comes back.

'Fed from where?'

'Not sure. Once I find the tank, I'll be able to tell you. Madame B. said something about a well. I thought she was referring to a secondary source, but perhaps not. Girls all right?'

I nod. 'They've gone investigating.'

'Good. You're not to worry about them. They'll settle. They love it here. Really.'

Our eyes meet fleetingly, looking into one another's. These last couple of days have been hectic and have left no room for us. I am bustling about the living room with the broom, trying to lift at least the top layers of dirt off the earthenware *tommette* tiles, fearing that if I stop Michel will read my hurt. I don't want to discuss it; I know it will pass because it's stupid.

We are all tired and unhinged. But he approaches me and fondles my neck, strokes my hair. I concentrate on the task in hand but the dust just rises and resettles centimetres from where I have swept. I am wasting my time. The whole house needs a damn good scrub with lashings of hot, soapy water.

'*Je t'aime*,' he says. 'Please don't forget that.' Then he hurries away.

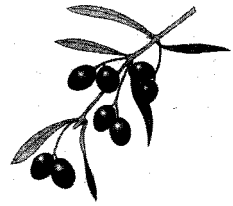
How did we get into this? I am thinking.

All my life, I have dreamed of acquiring a crumbling, shabby-chic house overlooking the sea. In my mind's eye, I have pictured a corner of paradise where friends can gather to swim, relax, debate, talk business if they care to, eat fresh fruits picked directly from the garden and great steaming plates of food served from an al fresco kitchen and dished up on to a candlelit table the length of a railway sleeper. A Utopia where liquor and honey flow freely and guests eat heartily, drink gallons of home-produced wine, chill out to the dulcet chords of evergreen jazz and while away star-spangled hours till dawn. I envisage a haven where city manners and constraints can be cast off and where artists, travellers, children, lovers and extended family can intermingle and find contentment. And, in among all of these gregarious and bohemian activities, I slip away unnoticed to a cool stone room of my own, lined head to foot with books, sprawling maps and dictionaries, switch on my computer and settle down peacefully to write.

Yes, it is me and my crazy chimeras who have got us into this.

Still, who has not idled away a wet winter's afternoon or three with such a dream?

A p p a s s i o n a t a



Four months earlier

'Shall we look inside?' suggests Michel, climbing the stairway to the main entrance, which is situated on the north-west side of the upper terrace. The estate agent, M. Charpy, confesses that he does not have a key.

'No key?'

It is only now that he owns up to the fact that he is not actually handling the sale but, he swiftly assures us, if we are genuinely interested, he will be able to *faire le nécessaire.*

We are in the south of France, gazing at the not-so-distant Mediterranean, falling in love with an abandoned olive farm. The property, once stylish and now little better than a ruin, is for sale with ten acres of land.

Once upon a time, M. Charpy tell us, it was a residence of *haut standing.* With it came land as far as the eye could see in every direction. He swings his arms this way and that. I stare at

him incredulously. He shrugs. 'Well, certainly that valley in front of us, and the woods to the right but, *hélas*' – he shrugs again – 'most of the terrain was sold off.'

'When?'

'Years ago.'

I wonder why, for nothing else has been constructed. The villa still stands alone on its hillside, and the magnificent terraced olive groves Charpy promised us have become a jungle of hungry weeds.

'An olive farm with vineyard and swimming pool,' he insists.

We stare at the pool. It looks like an oversized, discarded sink. Dotted here and there are various blossoming fruit trees and some very fine Italian cedars, but there's no sign of any vineyard. There are, however, two cottages included in the purchase price. The gatekeeper's house, at the very foot of the hill, is firmly locked and shuttered but, even from the outside, it is plain that it needs major restoration. The other cottage, where the gardener or vine-tender would have lived, has been swallowed up by rampant growth. As far as we can tell, for we cannot get within 200 metres of it, all that remains is one jagged, stone wall.

'The villa was built in 1904 and was used as a summer residence by a wealthy Italian family. They christened it "Appassionata".' I smile. Appassionata is a musical term meaning 'with passion'.

'*Les pieds dans l'eau*,' continues Charpy.

Yes, it is ten minutes by car to the sea. From the numerous terraces, the bay of Cannes, where the two Îles de Lérins lie in the water like lizards sleeping in the sun, is within tantalisingly easy reach.

To the rear of the house is a pine forest. Most of the other shrubs and trees are unknown to me; those that are not dead, that is. Michel asks whether it was drought that killed off the little orange grove and the almond tree, now an

inverted broomstick of dead twigs in front of a tumbledown garage.

'*Je ne crois pas*,' says M. Charpy. 'They caught cold. Our last winter was harsh. It broke records.' He stares glumly at four bougainvillaea bushes which once straddled the front pillars of the house. Now they are lying across the veranda like drunks in a stupor. '*Aussi*, the place has been empty for four years. Before that, it was rented to a foreign woman who bred dogs. *Evidemment*, she cared nothing for her surroundings.'

The years of neglect, aided by the recent freak weather, have certainly put paid to Appassionata's former glory. Still, I am drawn to it, to its faded elegance. It remains graceful. There is beauty here. And history. Even the gnarled and twisted olive trees look as though they have stood witness on this hillside for a thousand years.

'The *propriétaire* will be glad to get shot of the place. I can arrange a good price.' Charpy's offer is disdainfully made. To his way of thinking, any sum paid for such dereliction would be scandalous.

I close my eyes and picture us in future summers strolling paths we will discover beneath this jungle of vegetation. Michel, at my side, is surveying the façade. The baked vanilla paint flakes to the touch. 'Why don't we try to find a way in?' He disappears on a lap of the house, tapping at windows, rattling doors.

Charpy, ruffled, sets off after him. I hang back, smiling. Michel and I have known each other only a few months but already I have learned that he is not one to be defeated by such a minor detail as the lack of a key.

The land is not fenced. There is no gate, and the boundaries are not staked. There is nothing to secure the property, to keep hunters or trespassers at bay. There are broken windows everywhere.

'Come and look here,' Michel calls from round the back. He,

with his more practised eye, points out the remains of a makeshift vegetable garden.

'Squatters. Been and gone in the not-too-distant past. The locks on all three doors have been forced. It should be relatively easy to get in. Monsieur Charpy, *s'il vous plaît.*'

And so we look on while the preposterously arrogant M. Charpy totters back and forth, thrusting his pristine Armani suit against the solid wood door.

Once inside, we are moving through a sea of cobwebs. Everywhere reeks. A deep, musty stench that takes your breath away. Walls hang with perished wiring. The rooms are high-ceilinged, sonorous spaces. Strips of wallpaper curl to the floor like weeping silhouettes. Tiny, shrivelled reptiles crunch underfoot. Such decay. We tread slowly, pausing, turning this way and that, drinking in the place. Rip away all the curling and rusted mosquito netting fixed across the windows and the rooms would be blissfully light. They are well proportioned, nothing elaborate. Corridors, hidden corners, huge rust-stained baths in cavernous bathrooms. In the main *salon*, there is a generous oak-beamed fireplace. There is an ambience. A *chaleur*.

As our voices and footsteps reverberate, I feel the rumble of lives lived here. Tugging at the netting, pulling it aside, grazing a finger in the process, I gaze out at eloquent views over land and sea, and mountains to the west. Sun-drenched summers by the Mediterranean. Appassionata. Yes. I am seized.

Charpy watches impatiently, fussing at the sleeves and shoulders of his jacket, while we open doors, shove at long-forgotten cupboards, run our fingers through layers of dust and disintegrating insects and flick or turn switches and taps, none of which work. He does not comprehend our enthusiasm. '*Beaucoup de travail*,' he pronounces.

Back outside, the late-morning sun is warm and inviting. I glance at Michel and, without a word spoken, his eyes tell me

he sees what I see: a wild yet enticing site. Still, even if we could scrape together the asking price, the funds needed to restore it would make it an act of insanity.

We head for a bar Michel frequents in the old port of Cannes. The *patron* strolls over to greet him. They shake hands. '*Bon festival?*' he asks. Michel nods, and the *patron* nods in response. The conversation seems complete until Michel takes me by the arm and introduces me. My future wife, he says. '*Mais félicitations! Félicitations!*' The *patron* shakes our hands vigorously and offers us a drink on the house. We install ourselves at one of the tables on the street and I feel the heat of the midday sun beating against my face.

Although it is only late April, there are already many foreigners bustling to and fro, laden with shopping bags. Several wave to Michel, calling out the same enquiry as the *patron*. '*Bon festival?*' He nods in reply. Occasionally, he rises to shake someone's hand or, in French fashion, lightly kiss somebody's cheeks. Mostly these fleeting encounters are with executive types in sharply cut blazers, lightweight slacks, soft Italian leather loafers. They talk of business. It is the closing day of the spring television festival which precedes the internationally famous Cannes Film Festival. Both events are dominated by the markets which run alongside them. The world of television, the filming of it rather than the selling of it, seems to me a million miles removed from these markets. I marvel at how Michel can survive in such a milieu, and am reminded again of how much we have yet to learn about one another.

A lithe waiter zips by with our glasses of Côte de Provence rosé. These are accompanied by porcelain saucers filled with olives, slices of deep pink *saucisson* and crisps. He deposits the dishes on our table and departs without a word. We clink glasses and sip our wine, silent, lost in our morning's visit. Both

musing upon our find, buried aloft in the pine-scented hills way above this strip with its glitzy hotels.

'I wish we could afford it,' I say eventually.

'I think we should go for it. They want to be shot of the place, so let's make an offer.'

'But how could we ever . . . ?'

Michel pulls out his fountain pen, spreads out his napkin and we start scribbling figures and exchange rates. The ink bleeds into the soft tissue. The answer is clear. It is way beyond our price range. There are Vanessa and Clarisse, Michel's daughters from his previous marriage, to consider.

'But the pound is strong,' I say. 'That will work in our favour. Still, it *is* way more than we can afford.' I glance at the clock on the church tower up in the old town. It is after one. Charpy's *immobilier* office on the Croisette has closed for the weekend. It is just as well. We will have left by Monday. I am returning to London, where it is raining; Michel to Paris. I turn, peer up the lane which leads to the old fish market and tilt my head skywards. Only rounded summits of green hills are visible above the blocks of crab-coloured buildings. I cannot tell which of them harbours Appassionata. I know, though, that life on that olive farm would be a world away from the money-hungry resort of Cannes, just as this television market is a world away from my experiences of film-making.

'Let me talk to Charpy on Monday,' says Michel. 'I have an idea.'

'What?'

'Perhaps they'll sell it in stages.'

'Of course they won't.'