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The Forgotten Summer

Written by Carol Drinkwater

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The
Forgotten Summer

CAROL DRINKWATER

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'I almost wish we were butterflies and liv'd but three summer days – three such days with you I could fill with more delight than fifty common years could ever contain.'

– John Keats, *Bright Star: Love Letters and Poems of John Keats to Fanny Brawne*

*Oh, je voudrais tant que tu te souviennes
Des jours heureux où nous étions amis
En ce temps-là la vie était plus belle
Et le soleil plus brûlant qu'aujourd'hui.*

Les Feuilles Mortes (Autumn Leaves), Jacques Prévert

PART ONE
LOSS

1

September, South of France

A bouquet of succulent flavours was drifting up the stairs from the kitchen, whetting Jane's appetite and urging her to get out of bed. Even at that unearthly hour, her stomach was growling. She and her husband, Luc Cambon, had been awake since before dawn. The difference was that he was up and busy, while she was still idling beneath the bedcovers. Eyes closed, she inhaled the delectable smells of breakfast. Matty – God bless her cotton socks – was cooking up a feast, a healthy Provençal alternative to a fry-up. Eggs, tomatoes, thinly sliced, garden-grown, purple-black aubergines, their own single-estate olive oil, thick slices of boiled ham from the pastor's pigs, fattened on wild chestnuts, home-baked bread, fresh fruit . . . Mmm. A scrumptious repast.

'Lazybones, get out of bed,' Jane mumbled to herself.

She could hear Luc singing softly in the shower. He had already been at his computer for some time. Knees curled up to her chest, eyes closed, she had listened to him firing off emails, writing texts, preparing interviews: work, work, ad infinitum. She had always been in awe of his passion and energy, but if she were honest, there were times when his relentless drive left her feeling inadequate. Her work as a translator was fulfilling and challenging, but she did not bring to it the same level of obsession he brought to his

films. Luc had always been so much more single-minded than she.

She yawned loudly, sounding like their dog, threw off the sheets and perched on the edge of the mattress, rubbing her temples. A mild headache, and her back and pectorals were killing her. The result of lifting and carrying all those baskets the day before, and she had probably downed a glass too many during the grape-pickers' first dinner the previous evening.

She rose gingerly – the aches would soon disappear once she was back out in the fields and her muscles had warmed up – and crossed barefoot to open the shutters. These late summer mornings were blissful: Indian-summer days, warm and golden. There was little to beat the pleasure of being outdoors, away from her laptop and the reams of French text awaiting translation. Terrific exercise and usually fun. However, the previous day, the temperature had crept into the low thirties, higher than forecast, higher than average. Jane, along with the team of hired hands, was hoping that today would be more merciful.

Luc and the estate's gardener-cum-caretaker, Claude Lefevre, had been debating climate change, and its effects on the crops, in the barn the previous evening. Jean Dupont and Michel Lonsaud, two locals regularly employed by the Cambons, had thrown in their cent's worth too. All four had eventually agreed that viticulture was a great deal less predictable and, hence, more financially precarious than it had been when those farming men were boys growing up here in the South of France.

Jane flung open the French windows. Their bedroom was on the first floor at the rear of the big old Provençal farmhouse. A generously sized corner room, with two sets of windows: one facing inland, north towards the mountains, and the other east, across sprawling plots of black-berried, espaliered vineyards. It was a calming yet invigorating landscape, and Jane welcomed dallying there, before the demands of the day flooded in upon her, to absorb the split second of silence that accompanied sunrise. It was as though every living creature was holding its breath, awaiting the sun's appearance from beyond the mountain summits. It never

failed to exhilarate her, to burst her banks of gratitude for the gifts life had given her.

She stepped out onto the iron veranda, dewy-damp underfoot, stretching her arms and torso as the sunlight streamed into the room, a hundred glorious fragrances riding on its sheened wave. Pine resin, wild lavender, garden-fresh thyme, rosemary, juniper . . .

Les Cigales' forty-nine hectares of arable grounds were presided over by the eighteenth-century eight-bedroomed manor house. Three storeys high, constructed with blocks of local stone and adorned with slatted wooden shutters, painted to protect against the southern heat, it was the principal residence in a landscape of low-lying vineyards, outbuildings, cottages and fruit groves. Further inland, the estate's gnarled olive trees clamped the rising grounds, like hunched hikers scaling the mountains.

Jane inhaled the crisp air and listened to the cacophony of calls that came with the dawn: the birds' chorus, an assembly of cocks crowing, a distant donkey braying. Soon it would be the pealing of the Angelus bell from the church in the nearby village of Malaz, summoning the faithful to the first of the day's devotions. She shivered. She needed coffee urgently. A strong shot of Matty's fine Arabic brew. 'I definitely drank too much last night.'

'*Chérie*, what are you mumbling about? The bathroom's free. I'm going to grab some breakfast. See you down there. Don't be too long.'

'Righto.' As much as Jane relished the early starts, she would happily have settled for another hour in bed this morning, but she wouldn't let the team down, couldn't disappoint Luc. In fact, she enjoyed mucking in along with everyone else, a witness to Luc's satisfaction at superintending yet another first-rate harvest, and it certainly went some way to keeping his mother quiet. God, *Luc's mother*. Jane loved almost everything about Les Cigales, except Clarisse Cambon.

The sun was rising fast, hitting the flanks of the mauve mountains, the virid acres of sloping vineyards, and bathing the olive groves in a soft flaxen light. Voices called and echoed in the

distance. *Les journaliers*, Clarisse's hired hands. They must already be congregating by the tractor, raring to get started, and Luc would not be far behind them, waving, smiling, orchestrating the launch of the day's picking. Judging by the day before, the first gathering day of this vintage, the workers seemed a jovial bunch and the grapes were top quality.

Whatever his professional commitments, Luc always made a point of returning to Les Cigales to preside over the harvest, the *vendange*. It was a tradition, a family ritual, taught to him by his late grandfather. And Jane always accompanied him. It was a lively, social few weeks although, truth to tell, the family business, these days, was little more than a mother and son affair. It had been struggling since the death of Luc's aunt Isabelle, who had been the driving force, the quality control behind the whole enterprise. Clarisse had no head for figures and she was equally negligent with her staff, which left Luc to pick up the pieces.

Now he opened the door, darting back into the room. 'I forgot my phone.'

His hair was still damp from his shower. Jane noticed that he hadn't bothered to shave. He was so handsome, charismatic, younger in all senses than his fifty-five years, and still trim in jeans, a black T-shirt and sturdy boots. He had a half-eaten croissant in his hand. 'Aren't you dressed yet? Matty's serving breakfast in the barn across the courtyard. Dan's down there.'

'Dan?'

'He arrived about midnight, shortly after you'd gone to bed. Claude is about to drive the first bunch up in the trailer to the fields.'

Jane picked up the iPhone from Luc's bedside table and handed it to him. 'I'll be five minutes.'

He nodded, took the phone, tapped at its screen, as though expecting a message, cursed silently, then pecked his wife on the cheek.

Jane thought he seemed tense. 'You all right?' she called, as he returned to the open door.

‘Of course. Do get a move on, *chérie*, or we’ll have to send the tractor back a second time for you, and I need Claude to keep an eye on that Dutch couple. They haven’t picked before and quite a few of their loads were bruised yesterday. It baffles me why Clarisse put them on the payroll. “A waste of precious funds”, in her own words. Claude spent half of yesterday explaining how to choose and snip the clusters and then, what with keeping an eye on them as –’

‘Hey, I know how important the *vendange* is, but it is only grapes, Luc.’

Luc shook his head and smiled. ‘Better not let it get to me, eh? Spoil the fun. Hurry up and join us. It gives a bad impression if we turn up late.’

And with that he was gone.

She listened to his feet pattering down the wooden staircase. Something was on her husband’s mind. He had been bickering non-stop with Clarisse, edgy about his film, uncharacteristically short-tempered. He usually took such delight in the *vendange*, even when things weren’t a hundred per cent. He handled any snags or problems with grace and ease, without fuss. Jane washed hastily, threw on cargo pants, Converse sneakers, T-shirt, scarf and a wool hoodie. She’d lose the outer layers as the sun’s heat began to bite and her body to burn with activity.

But what was troubling Luc?

Downstairs, she breezed through the breakfast room. Because it was too clammy to eat indoors this year, even with the fan whizzing at full speed, the room stood still and empty. Silent, save for the ticking clock on the chimney breast. It read ten past six. Heading towards the rear of the house, she noticed that the door to the large pantry was open. There, she caught sight of Matty, shifting produce from one shelf to the next, lining it up like soldiers. Over the years, Matty had grown thickset – a result of her own splendid recipes – but still she moved efficiently in her rope-soled espadrilles.

Eggs, cups of flour for pastry, fresh leafy salads coated in dew, glass jars running over with preserved fruits. A large, sunflower-

yellow bowl chock-full of dark sticky figs bleeding juice. Here, a subtle alchemy was practised, all presided over by Mathilde Lefevre.

Jane veered right to the pantry and the two women greeted one another with a kiss on both cheeks. When Jane had been a girl, visiting Les Cigales with her father, who had been setting up a wine outlet in Britain, Matty had sometimes looked after her and a lasting bond had grown up between them.

‘Morning, Matty. Looks like you’re planning one of your delicious tarts for lunch.’

‘And a quiche or two, Madame Jane,’ the housekeeper replied.

‘That’ll keep the team happy. See you later.’

Outside, Jane swung left onto the stone paving, jogging towards coffee and sustenance. She was intercepted by Walnut, their Springer Spaniel, who bounded to the courtyard barn ahead of her, tail wagging at the sight of his mistress. Clarisse Cambon, clad even at this hour in broad-brimmed sunhat and oversized dark glasses, was hovering by the open door, smoking.

Damn!

No morning kisses were exchanged between daughter and mother-in-law.

‘You’re the last,’ was Clarisse’s salutation as she tossed the stub of her cigarette to the gravel and ground it out with the toe of her Chanel sandal.

‘*Bonjour*, Clarisse. I trust you slept well?’

‘When do I ever sleep well, with all this responsibility on my shoulders?’

‘I’ll just grab a coffee.’

‘You’re too late. Claude has already left with the second load for the fields. Everybody was ready except you. I’m still here here because I’m waiting to ferry you up in my car before I go to the winery. Luc needs Claude on the spot. He can’t be back and forth just for you.’

‘I’ll take one of the bicycles.’ Jane eased past Clarisse, who was blocking the doorway, intentionally or perhaps not; Jane didn’t know. ‘After coffee,’ she added emphatically. She had been looking

forward to tucking into a substantial breakfast to set her up for the day, but in the company of Clarisse her appetite had unexpectedly diminished.

Clarisse followed Jane into the barn. A long wooden table cluttered with the leftovers from the hired hands' meal dominated the space. Platters of fruit, dredged bowls of coffee, jugs, jam-sticky plates. The older woman, queen bee of the establishment, set her walking stick upright against the vast pine-wood dresser and stood rubbing the backs of her hands as though smothering them in cream. Jane helped herself to an apple and slid it into her pocket. She downed her black coffee in a couple of gulps and ignored her mother-in-law, who looked as though she was agitating about something. Was it Jane's punctuality or was Clarisse spoiling for a row about a more serious matter? There was tension in the air, no doubt about it.

'What's Dan doing here? He turned up late yesterday with all his camera equipment.'

Jane didn't reply. She didn't know the answer.

'Has Luc spoken to you about this wretched film he's making?'

Jane shook her head, puzzled. 'He rarely does until he's finished shooting, you know that.'

'I don't understand why he's digging up the past like this. Rooting about, questioning anybody he can get an opinion out of. Why doesn't he leave the bloody dead to rest? What the hell is the point?'

Jane took a fig.

'You saw the way he rounded on me yesterday, blaming me, making me wrong for employing the Dutch couple. How was I to know they were not up to the job?'

Jane was bemused by Clarisse's leap from one subject to another, not to mention her edgy frame of mind. 'It's only day two, Clarisse. They'll get the hang of it. It's grape-picking, not brain surgery. One basket of fruit was a little squashed, that's all.'

'It was more than one, and what the hell would you know? Luc is mad with me for hiring them. Or mad with me about something. I can't be held responsible for every bloody mishap. I'm not as

young as I was. I've had to struggle to keep this place against all odds . . . When Isa and I first came here Luc was just a small boy. He wouldn't remember how we were despised, and you know why?'

Jane did. She had heard this rant on many previous occasions.

'Because we were colonials from Algeria. We are a French family, French citizens, French passport-holders, but they call us Pieds-Noirs. No one bothered to ask if there was another side to the story.'

'See you later, Clarisse. Have a good day.'

With that Jane was on her way, haring across the courtyard to the sheds where the bikes were stowed. Walnut panted hot on her path, relishing the activity. 'Double damn!' The door was locked.

Jane swung on her heels, retraced her steps to the rear of the house, into the kitchen, past the range, and begged Matty's set of keys, which the housekeeper drew out of her pinafore pocket. 'Two seconds and I'll be back with them.'

'*Merci beaucoup*, Jane. I promised Monsieur Luc I'd dust downstairs in his den later this morning. I think he and Monsieur Daniel are intending to work there later.'

Jane stopped in her tracks. 'Surely not.'

Luc had always set aside his professional commitments during the harvest. It was a sacrosanct period, a crucial season for the estate. Their next year's income depended on it. Overseeing the gathering and crushing required experience and skill. As the grapes ripened on the vines, sugar and acid levels increased, diseases set in, tannin levels changed. Luc had always insisted on being there to oversee the work. Dan's arrival, as Matty had suggested, would mean that Luc had shifted his priorities.

She grabbed a bicycle and set off, cutting across a couple of fields before bouncing onto the firm, dusty tracks that fringed the vineyards. The ride inland towards the mountains would take her about twenty minutes. Time alone. Time with nature, overlooking the Mediterranean, on the borders of the Alpes-Maritimes and Var regions. Jane pedalled fast, singing, hoping Luc wouldn't be angry with her for being so late. Walnut charged along at her side, black ears flapping, racing the bike, then slowing to catch his breath,

pink tongue hanging loose, chuffed with himself and his energetic start to the day. In the distance, the bells of the village churches were pealing, beckoning the remaining faithful to the first of the morning's weekday masses. Here on the estate, grapes were the religion and Jane, she chuckled to herself, was the pagan.