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The Lost Girl

Written by Carol Drinkwater

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The Lost Girl

CAROL DRINKWATER

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In loving memory of Phyllis Drinkwater, my wonderful
mother, best friend and guardian angel.

I miss you so.

1924–2016

Each man in his darkness grapples towards his light

Les Contemplations, Victor Hugo

Paris, November 2015

A woman in calf-length leather boots strode into view, paused, looked about her. She took another step, hesitant, then continued onwards, her black slacks moulded to her figure, a mane of hair bouncing off her chic leather jacket. Tall, striking to look at, hauling too much luggage, she was making her way along an unfamiliar street in a city that was not her own, pausing as she glanced across to the far side of the boulevard. She was trying to find a bar. A casual, friendly kind of joint to hang out in for a couple of hours, somewhere she could get this load off her back and chill. As she approached a crossroads, she slowed. There was a place right alongside her. Flashing lights from within. A tad garish? No, a TV screen. It looked fine, rather inviting.

Kurtiz Ross pushed at the door with her foot, stepped inside the unfamiliar bar-bistro and glanced about, pausing to choose a table, a concealed corner, not too busy. To her surprise, it was more than half empty. Friday night and no more than half a dozen singles and two couples: sleek, casual Parisians, lolling against pillars or lounging against the zinc surfaces, cradling drinks. From overhead speakers Charles Aznavour was crooning 'La Bohème'. In the centre of the room where the diners, when they arrived,

would be served, there were several sets of red plastic banquettes and half a dozen small wooden tables adorned with red and white check tablecloths. Kurtiz was deliberating whether to grab something to eat now or hang on until Oliver turned up after the concert, hopefully in the company of Lizzie.

Lizzie, twenty years old. Lizzie. *Please, God, in the company of Lizzie.*

Kurtiz's stomach was bunched into what felt like a snarl of wires that were twisting and tightening. She needed a drink. First, a drink. This was not going to be easy, even without the tiring day of editing behind her, followed by the journey from London on a crowded Eurostar, a Friday evening taxi from the Gare du Nord, which had delivered her with her overnight and camera bags to Place de la Bastille. From there, somewhere to kill an hour or two.

Before she stepped any further inside, she threw a swift glance upwards, making a mental note of the name of the brasserie flashing in neon outside, L'ARMAGNAC, then down to her watch. Ten to eight. She was too early, way too early. She could have caught a later train or gone to the hotel first. She hadn't been thinking straight – too keen to cross to this side of Paris, to be close to the concert hall. No matter, she was here now, and with time on her hands, so, yes, she might as well grab a quick snack. Once settled, she'd send Oliver a text to let him know she was now in town and where she was. The remainder of her evening would be about waiting . . . waiting, sitting it out, and praying to whoever might be out there listening that she would, by the end of the night, be back in the company of her daughter.

It was on occasions such as this that she wished she smoked. Occasions such as this? Surely to God this was a one-off in anybody's lifetime. Meeting up with your own child again for the first time in more than four years. Four heart-breaking, despairing, dislocated years. Four years and five months almost to the day. Oh, Lizzie, have you any idea of the desolation your absence has caused?

The bistro was warm, fuggy, hearteningly traditional, comforting with a slightly pungent smell of vegetable oil and fried onions. Burgers? Kurtiz shivered, brushing off the day, the winter evening outside, and her rising dread of . . . what? Inadequacy? Disappointment? A no-show?

Everything was hanging on Oliver's hunch.

But what if he had got it wrong? What if Lizzie wasn't at the concert? Or if she was – What if she refuses to come and meet us? What if she's angry with Oliver and tells him, her own dad, to fuck off? Lizzie, little Lizzie, please, please, be there. *Little* Lizzie? She's twenty. Lizzie is a young woman. A young woman and a stranger to her mother. How had this come about? At what point had their daughter made the decision to run away, skip out of their lives? For what length of time had she planned her escape? Had she always been intent on Paris, or was that simply the way it had rolled? Had Kurtiz's absences been to blame? Oliver would have her believe so. Oliver had never stopped pointing the finger at her.

And what did she believe? Was she responsible for her daughter's departure?

Wearied by the same tired questions, fifty-three

months of them, never missing a day, Kurtiz dropped her travel bag and cameras alongside the chair and sat down at one of the small square tables in the middle of the dining area. A wintry Friday night in Paris. She glanced about her. The place was hardly buzzing, but it was early yet. A waiter strolled towards her, casual, in no hurry, but with an amiable smile. It's not true what they say about Parisians, she was thinking as she prepared to order.

'Bonsoir. What time do you close, please?'

'One thirty a.m., Madame. Are you alone or expecting guests?'

She hesitated. 'Guests? Yes. We'll be . . .' She was determined to be positive. 'We'll be three, but not until a little later.'

He nodded. 'What can I bring you?'

'Un whiskey, s'il vous plaît, avec une grande carafe d'eau sur le côté, je vous remercie.'

The flat-screen television, the sound muted, attached to the wall above the bar, drew her attention. As was the custom in all these watering-holes, it was tuned to a sports channel. A football match was getting under way. The players were shaking their bodies, hopping from booted foot to booted foot, limbering up, loosening their well-toned muscles. France, in the blue shirts, was about to play Germany, in white. A scoreboard flagged it in the top right-hand corner of the screen. Currently, pre-match, it read 0–0. Advertising boards encircled the pitch. A band of men decked out in black costumes, some with drum kits hanging from their necks, were readying themselves for the national anthems. The spectators were singing, waving flags, swaying. Expectant audience members,

thrilled to be there, men with small boys on their laps, adrenalin surging for this floodlit game.

Kurtiz turned her attention to the street. Football held no real interest for her. In any case, she was too wound up to concentrate. Her whisky arrived. She nodded her thanks and took a satisfying slug, straight. No ice, not even the water. Wow, that hit the spot.

A young couple, early twenties, had pushed open the door and stepped inside, shivering, shaking themselves like dogs. With them came a rush of cold air. The corners of tablecloths rose and fell. Two yellowed and rouged chestnut leaves sailed in and sank gently to the tiled floor. The couple heaved themselves up onto two tall aluminium bar stools. They were talking in English. Kurtiz studied them, mentally composing a picture, a double portrait. Both were good-looking. He ordered a beer and the girl a mineral water. Kurtiz observed them for a moment longer as their body language, even in duffel coats, conveyed deep affection, hunger for one another: eyes locked together, they were unable to keep their hands off each other. The young woman with long, dark pre-Raphaelite hair was pregnant; possibly five months, no more. Kurtiz smiled, remembering her own Lizzie-carrying days and her early life with Oliver. She sighed and turned her gaze elsewhere. Twenty years on, what will be the story for this couple? Will they fare better than her family life had?

She glanced at her watch. Eight fifteen.

The door to the street opened once more, swinging and banging. Another blast of air swirled around her legs. The waiter hurried to the entrance and scooped up

the chestnut leaves as a solitary elderly lady wrapped in a voluminous mink coat stepped inside. She had a small dog with her, a Maltese, on a lead. The waiter shook her gloved hand and without hesitation led her to the table alongside Kurtiz. She nodded a *bonsoir* to Kurtiz, shucked off her fur, laid it neatly and with great precision across the empty banquette opposite and settled herself comfortably. Meanwhile, the ivory-haired dog had flopped like a shaggy cushion against its mistress's high-heeled boots. Kurtiz snatched a glance. It was hard not to stare, not to be drawn to the woman. Her grace, her poise, called for attention. She was possibly in her late seventies, early eighties, hard to tell, petite, obviously French, impeccably coiffured, and beautiful. She must have been sensational to look at once upon a time – seamless make-up applied to flawless skin with barely a wrinkle, cheekbones high and as chiselled as the starched wings on detachable collars, beneath pale lilac eyes that were extraordinary not only for their unusual colour but because they were so round and full they might have been jewels, orbs.

Kurtiz had to resist the temptation to pick up one of her two cameras and grab a shot.

Without having received an order, the waiter returned with a jug of water, a long silver spoon, a highball glass with a measure of Ricard *pastis* poured into it and a beaker of ice.

The beauty smiled a *merci* – what a smile, full of generosity, allure, with perfectly aligned teeth – and drew the Ricard towards her, pouring several measures of water into the *apéritif* and afterwards spooning in ice

cubes. She peeled away the taupe leather gloves she was still wearing, finger after finger, dropped them to the table, placed them in alignment one alongside the other, and stirred her drink slowly, deliberately, waiting serenely while the liquid clouds began to rise until the entire glass had taken on a milky complexion. All the while her gold bracelets jingled.

She turned her head and flicked a glance to Kurtiz. *‘Bonsoir, Madame.’*

Embarrassed to have been caught staring, Kurtiz smiled, then pulled her phone from the pocket of her leather jacket, fidgeting with it, pecking at the message box with the tip of her nail. No new mails. Had Oliver and Lizzie crossed paths yet? Was Lizzie at the concert? Might they be together right this minute? Kurtiz closed her eyes and tried to envisage the conversation. Were they yelling at one another above the chords of rock? Or might Lizzie have caught sight of her father across the rows of seats – were there seats in the concert hall or was it standing room only? – turned her back, pulled up the collar on her jacket, wrapped a scarf around her face, fearful he might recognize her? Might she hurry from the auditorium, making a split-second decision to give the concert a miss?

Deciding not to return, she’d slip out, slip away, making a furtive escape along the boulevard Voltaire, beating a retreat towards a Métro station or turn about her in search of a taxi for fear her father might have followed her.

Or might she stay? Was there a part of her, an ache in her heart, that craved to be reunited with her mum and dad, her broken-hearted estranged parents?

‘Oh, Lizzie. Please don’t run out on us. Not again.’

‘*Pardonnez-moi, Madame*, what did you say?’

‘Sorry?’

‘I thought you said something. I’m a little hard of hearing, these days. Apologies for that. I have a hearing aid but I hate to stick one of those contraptions in my head. It’s pure vanity. A life in the cinema and on the stage. Actresses don’t appreciate the harsh realities of growing old.’

Kurtiz twisted her head to her left. Was the old woman speaking to her or muttering to herself? Now her neighbour was gawping at her and frowning. ‘You look a little distressed, if you don’t mind me saying. Is there something I can do? I’m not trying to be a busy-body, you understand.’

Kurtiz attempted a smile. ‘I’m fine,’ she mumbled, and downed the remainder of her whisky. ‘Thank you for asking, *merci*.’ She did not want to be drawn into conversation. She was not capable of engaging with another. Not this evening.

‘My mind is not what it used to be.’ The ageing diva shook her head, with its finely waved white hair. ‘Learning lines was never a problem in the old days. Are you in show business, dear?’

Kurtiz replied that she wasn’t.

‘What line of work, then?’

‘Photographer, and I’ve been . . .’ her thoughts flashed to Alex ‘. . . involved in a few films,’ she admitted, still preferring not to be co-opted into this conversation.

‘Have you, dear? How very splendid. Hollywood dramas or here in Paris? I have spent my life in the film

business. Well, my early life. Later, I returned from the south to perform in the theatre. Many of the great tragic roles, I have interpreted. Several seasons with the Comédie Française. I could have been a star in Hollywood, but . . . but . . .’ she sighed and disappeared momentarily into her history ‘. . . I was a little naive when that opportunity came along, oh, dear me, another lifetime ago.’ She waved her hand and the bracelets shimmied. ‘In any case, I prefer Paris. I chose home ground, you might say. *Jean-Claude, un autre, s’il vous plaît.* Will you be my guest? Please, do join me. I am obliged to drink alone most of the time, these days. Since my husband died . . . My second husband, that is. My first left this earth many moons ago.’

‘I won’t, thank you. You’re very kind, but I’ll stick to the one. I’m meeting my husband and – and daughter later and . . . they’ve gone to a concert.’ Kurtiz glanced at her watch: 8.35 p.m. Time was dragging. The door opened, another couple entered and bumped up tight against one another, shrugging off the cold as they bustled their way to a distant table.

‘Ah, L’Opéra. Our new opera house is really very splendid, don’t you agree? Quite different from the Palais Garnier, of course. Who is singing at Bastille this evening? Or is it the ballet? Tourists come from all over the world to spectate. I am not an opera fan myself but it has done wonders for this *quartier*.’

‘No, not the opera.’

‘Jean-Claude, please bring my friend whatever it is she was drinking.’

‘*Bien sûr, Madame Courtenay.*’

‘I have been coming to this bar, this *petit bistro*, oh, for

years now. Such friendly service. They know me well, treat me kindly, as a member of the family. I live a couple of blocks up the street. Many locals frequent this place, including one or two retired stars such as myself.' She winked coquettishly and touched her hair as though posing for a photograph. A smile crossed Kurtiz's lips.

'Je suis Marguerite Courtenay, by the way.' She held out her leathery hand, which was mottled with liver spots but gilded with heavy rings above pearly painted nails. The cluster of interconnecting gold bracelets looped her tiny wrist. 'Marguerite Courtenay. It's my stage name.' The actress hesitated, for effect or because she was expecting an effusive recognition of her fame, Kurtiz could not tell.

'Marguerite Courtenay. Oh, there were nights when Paris rose to its feet to applaud me.' She paused, head held high, as though replaying the sweet music of handclapping, the cheers and the acclaim. 'Alas, those days are gone. No one gives a damn about an ageing actress nowadays. Michel Piccoli, he will turn ninety just after Christmas, the old devil. He and his generation go on for ever. There are always roles for the men, whereas we *filles* are more or less forced into retirement. Such an ageist industry, ours. Tell me about your photography, your films.'

Kurtiz ran her fingers through her hair, grown to shoulder length, hennaed a rich chestnut tone, darker, more luxuriant than her natural colour. The waiter placed the whisky, ice and water on the table in front of her. She stared at it. She hadn't yet sent a text to Oliver. The concert must have got under way by now. His phone would be switched off. She glanced up to the television

where the athletes were slogging it out, but the score remained nil-nil.

Her neighbour continued to watch her, eyes roving over her profile. 'You seem a little anxious, *ma chère amie*. Troubled. Do you want to talk about it? I'm here to help. I've known heartache and turmoil too.'

Kurtiz pressed two fingers into her eyes, rubbing at them, as though attempting to ward off a threatening headache and to protect herself against her neighbour's interrogation. She had closed off her heart, shut down her emotions four years earlier. Intimacies, even with strangers, panicked and threatened her.

'You're English, aren't you?'

Kurtiz nodded, poured a splash of water into her fresh glass of whisky, dropped in a couple of ice cubes and rattled them.

'I never visited England.'

Cubes clinked against glass. She wished the woman would desist, even though the old soul obviously meant no ill. She was probably simply in need of a natter. Days alone enclosed in her apartment with nothing but memories. Sad.

'Are you staying near here? Filming, perhaps?'

A plate of food was delivered by Jean-Claude to the actress. She winked at the young man flirtatiously and slid the meal an inch or two to her right. 'I'll have a carafe of red. Bordeaux, *s'il vous plaît, comme d'hab*.'

'*Oui, Madame Courtenay*.'

A group of four arrived. Guys intent on the football. They chose a table across the room in a corner with a good view of the screen. 'Nil-nil,' one cried.

‘*Allez les bleus,*’ boomed another.

‘I wish they would remove that bloody screen,’ muttered Madame Courtenay, with an unexpected edge. ‘These football nights are a curse on one’s tranquillity. Even up in my lovely flat on the second floor I can hear the riff-raff yelling in the streets. I believe our president is attending this game tonight, isn’t he? It doesn’t look as though he’s bringing the French team a great deal of luck. No score yet.’

Kurtiz dug into her travel bag and drew out a slender creased paperback. *Love and Summer*, by William Trevor. She was a huge fan of the Irish author and had been intending to read this work for a while. Fascinatingly, its central character was also a photographer so it should offer an added pleasure to the theme. She opened it to the first page, then placed the book, spine down, splayed on the table, one hand resting against the first page. It was getting a little too hectic to concentrate. She’d finish her drink and grab a taxi to her hotel. Why had she not booked somewhere in this *quartier*? It would have been so much less hassle. Was there time to cross Paris and return, ready and calm in a nearby bar, or should she simply sit it out here until the end of the concert? Why had she and Oliver not even managed to agree on a matter as simple as where to hook up at the end of the show?

A gaping lack of communication. Resistance. Embedded anger. An inability to let the other win. Stupid power games.

‘My first husband was English. Charlie Gilliard was his name,’ confided her neighbour softly. ‘He was a gentle creature, a man of the soil. I really was too young to

appreciate his goodness, his fine qualities. I was a silly ambitious girl, and by the time I knew a bit about life and what a gift I had in him, he was gone. Too young. Tragic. How curious. I haven't spoken of Charlie, not even mentioned his name, in a long while. Decades, in fact.'

These last remarks, spoken almost to herself, drew Kurtiz's attention, given her entangled existence with Oliver and her own loss of a loved one.

'You are fortunate to have a husband and daughter waiting for you, excited to be meeting up with you later after the opera. Oh, what I wouldn't give to turn back the clock. I have had a rich and varied life, but growing old when one is alone is not for the fainthearted. Somehow, I didn't see it coming. The darkness, the silence of an empty flat. It was not what I had expected. I had painted in my head a very different scenario.'

The carafe of Bordeaux was set on the table in front of her. *'Merci, Jean-Claude.* But I am grateful and . . . delighted to be sitting alongside you in this bistro this evening. *Santé.*'

'My family –' Kurtiz coughed '– my daughter and husband . . . they are not at the opera. They have gone to a rock concert. Well, Oliver's gone to the concert because he's hoping . . . we both are . . .' Kurtiz dried up. It was too complicated, too tortuous a story to pour out the details, to elaborate. In any case, she had no desire to. She should have attended the concert. It was bullying of Oliver to insist he go without her. She had every right to be there. She had paid his fare over, stood him the hotel, bought the ticket. She lowered her head. The headache

threatened, the fury, the despair, the loss. A hammer beating against a chisel making headway in her brain. No, he hadn't been a bully. She was too tough on him. There had been logic in his argument.

'If Lizzie sees us both, she'll think it's a plot rather than a coincidence. She'll think we've tracked her down and intend to force her to come home. Under such circumstances, she would never agree to have a drink with us.'

'Oliver, she's twenty. We can't coerce her into coming home, and we have tracked her down. To a degree. Haven't we? God, I hope we have because if this trail leads nowhere . . .'

'She'll think it's back to the old days. The arguments. Your absences. We need to prove to her that everything has changed.'

'Yes, it *has* changed, Oliver, and it's not back to the old days. Our situation has moved on. We cannot fool our daughter or ourselves into believing we're back together. And we —'

'Because you left. *You*. You walked out. When I was at rock bottom, you buggered off, but I'm willing to give our marriage another chance. You can see the efforts I'm making.'

'I didn't — I didn't bugger off. I . . . It's too late, Oliver. We've already given it several second chances.'

And so it had gone on, the escalating spiral of blame and criticism and argument. The impossibility of escape. Except for Lizzie, who had escaped, who had disappeared without a trace, until Alex had serendipitously and quite by chance found her.

Alex . . . It would be such a tonic to have a drink with him before she left Paris. If he was in town . . . But she knew she wouldn't contact him. The pact she had made with herself.

Kurtiz touched the fingers of her left hand to her forehead, massaging the flesh, pressing against the bone, attempting to erase the clamour in her skull. She signalled to the waiter. 'Would you please bring me a sandwich? Any sandwich, it doesn't matter, and a glass of red wine. Oh, and some more water, please.'

'*Désolé, Madame*, we don't serve sandwiches in the evenings. No snacks. Meals only. Do you want to see the menu? Hamburger, perhaps, or a steak to accompany Madame Courtenay?'

Kurtiz shook her head, glanced at her watch: 8.49 p.m. She was doing a quick mental calculation, working out the time the concert might finish. No text from Oliver. Was he with Lizzie right now? Bright-eyed Lizzie, was she happy to see him?

Eight or nine youngsters burst through the door, exuberant, carefree and boisterous.

The actress had been talking. Kurtiz had not heard a word.

'Is that the name of the concert hall, where your husband and daughter are now? It's really the only one within this vicinity.' Marguerite Courtenay frowned, trying to recall. 'No, there's no other. Who is playing there tonight? Not that I would know one rock group from another.'

'Sorry, are you speaking to me?' Kurtiz raised her voice. 'It's getting pretty noisy in here.' Not exactly conducive to conversation.

The actress was talking again. To Kurtiz or herself? Either way, Kurtiz had to strain to catch any word at all.

‘It used to be a cinema before it was turned into a concert hall.’ The old lady threw back her head and laughed. Her face creased with delight. ‘I worked there. Oh, for a very short while. Days, weeks. I don’t remember. They sacked me. After the war. It was a cinema . . . ooh, right up until the fifties or sixties, I believe. Until 1969. I met my first husband there. The Englishman. The one I was telling you about. He came to see a film. I was in a terrible fix and he helped me out. Such a sweet person, he was. The perfect gentleman. Who could have known where that would lead? He was always so very generous.’

‘Forgive me, but your steak and *frites* are getting cold.’

‘I’m not hungry, dear. I never touch the meals they serve me. Even in my younger days I wouldn’t have tucked into such a substantial plate. I have spent my life watching my figure, making efforts to take good care of myself. I come here for the company, to enjoy good conversation such as the one we’re having now, and a drink or two before bedtime.’

The din in the bistro was notching up decibels. Added to which, canned music was now blasting out of the invisible speakers, violin and piano swing. Stéphane Grappelli? Neo bossa nova? ‘How High The Moon’? Impossible to identify it. Toes were tapping. Bodies jiggling as their owners talked, yelled, watched the game. One party after another of young folk, breasting the cold night air, pushed through the door, squealing, squawking, hallooing as they recognized mates, colleagues, scrambling and shoving good-naturedly for bar space, calling for beers, shots,

bottles of wine. Such fresh young faces rouged by the cold November air, energized by life. Paris gearing up for its weekend.

Might any of these youngsters have come across Lizzie? Ridiculous. It was rather like asking a Londoner if he had met the Queen.

Kurtiz closed her book. She had time to kill and the old woman seemed hell-bent on conversation. She caught only one word out of every three but she might as well indulge her, hear her story. Pass the time. It was not yet nine. A noise rose from a table of men. Still no score. They were berating the screen, fists clenched above their heads – reminiscent of a Russian Communist poster from the past. The young English couple, honeymooners perhaps, were huddled close at a small table by the window, having vacated the bar. Enclosed in a world that excluded all others, they were sharing a plate of *frites* and the *magret avec miel*, feeding chips to one another, laughing, making plans, relishing the prospect of a promising future.

‘It was 1946. No, wait, I think it might have been ’forty-seven. Yes, it was March 1947. My, such a distance in time. Over half a century ago. I was eighteen, broke, hungry and just a little desperate. I had arranged a screen test in Nice at the Victorine Studios. Have you ever worked on those lots? It’s all wound down now, I hear. They shoot commercials there now. Japanese clients filming sports cars speeding along the Haute Corniche. It’s all very scenic but it’s not cinema. In my day, it was epic moving pictures. Sound had come in, colour images too. There was no going back to the silent era. It was such a

thrilling, innovative time. The beginning of France's Thirty Glorious Years. The film sets were extravagant, costumes opulent, scripts gritty. Some of the greatest films of French cinema were shot at the Victorine, and, without wishing to blow my own trumpet, I played in one or two of them. Cameos, of course, modest roles.'

Kurtiz was already lost, captivated by her companion's post-war world.

'But, first, I had to make my way from Paris to Nice and I didn't have the price of the train, not even in third class. I persuaded Charlie to lend me the few paltry francs for the ticket. He invited himself along for the ride. Without being aware of it at the time, dear sweet Charlie changed the course of my life. He changed his own life too. It is hard to describe to you now, after half a century of peace, the wounds, the damage we were all suffering, the scars we were hiding. Some of us had lost family. Some fled, never to return. We were both on a one-way ticket to freedom.' Head turned upwards, the old woman's lilac eyes lit up, gleaming. She might have been eighteen all over again.