
Opening Extract from...

The Olive Harvest

Written by Carol Drinkwater

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THE OLIVE HARVEST

A Memoir of Love, Old Trees and Olive Oil

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You are gone. The river is high at my door.
Cicadas are mute on dew-laden boughs.
This is a moment when thoughts enter deep.
I stand alone for a long while.
. . . The North Star is nearer to me now than spring,
And couriers from your southland never arrive –
Yet I doubt my dream on the far horizon
That you have found another friend.

Li Shang-yin, *Thoughts in the Cold*

Je ne puis pas regarder une feuille d'arbre
sans être écrasé par l'univers.
I cannot look at a leaf on a tree
without being bowled over by the universe.

Victor Hugo

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For Michel

I love the gypsy soul in you and the joys
and sorrows of your changing face.

A Dry Welcome

A puzzling silence is the welcome that awaits us. Only the familiar screech of cicadas cracks through the early summer stillness on our Mediterranean hillside. In fact, so mute is the reception from our olive farm, so scruffy its terraces, that the place gives off a melancholy air. It appears abandoned, not tranquil.

'Good heavens, I hope nothing awful has happened to Monsieur Quashia.'

'He was in good spirits when I telephoned yesterday morning to say we were on our way. He talked of a surprise.'

Michel and I are climbing the driveway on foot, looking from left to right, baffled by what we are discovering. We pause to inspect the veteran as well as the young olive trees, most of which are sadly lacking fruit, as we saunter up to the parking area, to the threshold of our romantic home. Arriving in front of the garage, our suitcases ditched at our feet, still clad in our city clothes, hot, sticky and bemused, we linger, taking stock. Everywhere is shuttered and locked up.

'I hardly recognise it as Appassionata. It's as though we're strangers here.' That quickening excitement of arrival, of expectation, of being back home, has been replaced by dismay.

'Come on, Carol, it's not that bad.'

I spin around in a circle. The bougainvillaeas are in

livid blossom and have snaked their way around the villa's creamy, weathered balustrades and are now coiling in heavy magenta plaits up the electricity lines towards the roof; the swimming pool has turned slimy green, while browning rose petals and dead geranium heads lie scattered in puddles on the terracotta terrace.

'It is bit of a mess, that's true,' murmurs Michel.

'What's all that up there?' I am pointing midway up the grounds, to beneath the first stands of pine trees. There, alongside our woodshed and my modest fruit garden, are several substantial hummocks of rusty red earth, spires of stacked stones and three hefty boulders.

'I can't really tell from here. The vegetation is so dense,' sighs Michel. 'Have you got your keys handy?'

'They're in my case. And where have all these materials come from? Quashia wouldn't have ordered them.'

Surrounding us and our two cars, both unwashed and splotched with sticky patches of resin, is a veritable cargo of treated pine beams and what must amount to something in the region of five hundred locally baked, cambered Provençal roof tiles. 'And where are the dogs? They are always here to greet us.' I scan the slopes hopefully, eyes piercing our ten unkempt acres in search of three rough-and-tumble mutts bounding towards us, or one lone Arab busy at his chores, but I cannot see a soul, not a whisper of life. 'And Monsieur Q. gave you no inkling?'

'He said there was a surprise.'

'Well, he can't have been referring to the condition of the land. It hasn't looked this grotty since we

bought the place. It must be something to do with all this masonry equipment!'

'Let's take a look up the hill,' says Michel, moving on ahead, leaving me to clip-clop an unsteady path after him. My low-heeled sandals are hardly suited to the loose stones and the sharp verticality.

It is mid-June. The weather during our absence has been unseasonably hot and Quashia has been complaining about the lack of rainfall since late April. The fields of spring wild flowers are long over and what remains, what has grown up in their place, is bone-dry, scratchy and pallid. The greensward is made up of knee-high, dehydrated grasses. Within it, I spot a bristly purple-blue flower that I recognise as viper's bugloss. I point it out to Michel who frowns, continuing his ascent. I believe it was once thought to be a remedy for snake-bite. This is the first time I have run into it because our grounds are usually kept neatly shorn to counter the risk of fires that accompany this climate's long dry summers.

'This is dangerous,' I mutter.

'Quashia and I will have to cut it back as soon as possible.'

I am puffing, out of breath, out of the habit of scaling our steep, pebbled hill, particularly in open-toed shoes and a skirt, and I feel saddened and confused by the disorderliness we have returned to. Michel, long-legged and lean, is striding purposefully ahead. He says nothing more, but his silence tells me that he also is frustrated. We come to rest alongside the upper cherry tree whose fruits this year would have been devoured by the flocks of thieving magpies

who nest here. We have both been away from the south on extended career assignments and have not been around to harvest the crop.

'Strange there's no sign of Quashia.'

In the distance, from one of the neighbouring mediaeval villages perched high above the coast, I hear the keening of a works siren and I glance at my watch. It is midday. Time for lunch.

'He's probably gone off somewhere for a bite to eat.'

And then suddenly, from beyond the curvature of the hillside, we hear a cry: '*Monsieur 'dame*!' It is Monsieur Q., waving and smiling, wading through the hip-high grass to reach us. In spite of the heat he is wearing his black lambskin hat and dark ankle-length trousers. He never shows up in shorts or without a long-sleeved shirt, no matter what the weather. Behind him, through the thick undergrowth, I make out a pair of upright tails: Lucky, our Alsatian, and Bassett, the little black and white hunting dog, are following in his wake.

'He must be boiling in that battered old hat. Where's Ella?' I mutter. Ella, our golden retriever, is past retirement age, fat and arthritic these days and I worry that while we are away there will be a message from Quashia or Gérard, our vet, informing us that she has been taken ill, or worse.

'She's probably dozing in the stables and didn't hear us arrive.'

Yes, on top of everything else, the poor old girl is going deaf. Lucky and Bassett have spotted us and are bounding on ahead of their companion, a chorus of howls and dribbling affability.

Monsieur Quashia speeds up his pace as he draws near. He is laughing, delighted to find us here. Our loyal Arab gardener and the pivotal cog of this modest olive farm has obviously been doing his rounds, completing a reconnoitre of the land. It is essential that our fencing is inspected regularly for signs of illicit entry by the wild boars who gnaw through it, dig up the earth, buckle the walls and tear at the branches of all our newly planted trees, particularly the apples. The trunks of our two hundred young olives have been encased with wire netting to protect them against rabbits who chomp away at the bark; this needs occasional reparation. A further requirement is to visit our basin at the hill's summit to gauge the water level and guard against stagnancy. The hundreds of metres of piping that transport water up the land's gradient must also be kept under close observation in case a length perishes, springs a leak and dribbles away our most precious commodity. All these tasks take time and require attention on a twice-weekly basis.

'Bonjour! Bonjour!'

He pulls out a creased, purple checked handkerchief and mops his tattooed brow before kissing the two of us twice on both cheeks. Hearty handshakes and backslappings are exchanged with Michel, a twinkling, ageing, appreciative eye is turned on me, and then he begins to set forth about 'the project in progress'. Profuse apologies that he has not found time to cut back the land as yet but he is digging foundations, he announces proudly.

'But for what, Monsieur Quashia?' I beg.

To create a toolshed extension to our woodshed,

which he built for us a few years back. 'Just a few structural changes and improvements I have been attacking during your far-too-long absence.' He winks and shrugs with theatrical modesty. 'Oh, but it's good to have you both home!'

'What are the dimensions of the extension?' enquires Michel uncertainly.

'It will go as far as . . .' our obliging Arab is goose-stepping in his dusty brogues along the terrace in question, '. . . *cinq, six, sept,*' counting aloud – each of his strides is loosely, very loosely, measuring out a metre – until he arrives at the eastern extreme of our land, where he stops, turns and faces us again, beaming. 'Here. *Vingt*! Plenty of space! It's what you've been dreaming of, eh, Carol?' he grins proudly, hollering back at me.

'Well, I . . . but twenty metres plus the fourteen already in service, Monsieur Quashia, seems a little long for a shed.'

'*Pas du tout*. Not at all.'

I have been banging on for some time now about clearing out the garage, which has never housed the cars and currently serves as a desperately overcrowded and ill-organised work room. I have been hoping that, when we can afford it, we can transform the front half of it, plus the two horse stables adjoining it (where the dogs sleep and the dusty washing machine lives), into two light and airy guest bedrooms with en-suite shower rooms and, next door, a tiled, L-shaped laundry room.

'I wanted to surprise you!'

'Well, you certainly have,' smiles Michel politely.

Tired of listening to my idle speeches and grand schemes that rarely get off the ground, Quashia has, in our absence, taken matters into his own hands and ordered the requisite materials from the builders' merchants where we keep an account. His reasoning is that the first stage of my project necessitates creating alternative storage space for our numerous gardening utensils and ever-escalating collection of farm gadgets and machines. This argument is perfectly logical, but it will involve us in unforeseen expenses. I glance at Michel, who does not return my look; he is surveying the scene with furrowed brow. Quashia has never taken such an initiative before, certainly not on decisions of structural or financial consequence.

Michel and I are both stressed, edgy from a surfeit of time spent apart, living independent city lives, and are a little unsure of how best to handle the situation. At least that is my reaction and what I detect from my husband's expression.

Aside from all this, I had been lovingly planting up and tending this particular patch, which is located a couple of terraces up behind the house, below the pine forest and Michel's amazingly fertile little palm grove, as a mixed-fruit orchard. Looking at it now, the plot resembles nothing more than a heavily tramped-over building site. Solid blocks of rock, recently quarried from the limestone mountainside on which our farm has been constructed – Quashia must have hired an electric drill from the builders' yard for this stage of the proceedings – have been hewn into manageable slabs, piled into two triangular towers and left. Later, they will be used to construct what, when accurately

measured, proves to be a 24-metre retaining wall to his shed extension. He has broken up half-a-dozen rough-wood pallets used by the builders' merchants to deliver tiles (and which, contractually, are supposed to be returned) and nailed them back together, transforming them into crude but rather natty hand-made trestles. Unfortunately, he has left them stacked over several of my recently potted bougainvillaea cuttings. Freshly dug earth has been chucked everywhere – its final resting place to be decided by Michel and me later, he explains – leaving holes and shallow trenches. The upheaval is causing sections of the farm's original, free-standing stone walls to be displaced. Two wheelbarrows, rusted and contorted with age, seamed with dried mortar, stand empty and idle; several tons of blond Biot sand have been shovelled into three hillocks alongside further hillocks of the coarser, grainier sand *normal*; all lined up on corrugated-iron sheets in readiness for mixing with the dozens of bags of cement currently stabled next to our chopped wood in the area of shed already in use. The sand must have been there for some time because there are native ground-pines (which though they smell like pine are in fact of the mint family), growing up through it.

Michel walks the length of the site. I look about me and sigh. I dread to calculate the total cost of the bills Quashia has run up.

Fortunately, my young fruit trees – two peach, one pear, a nectarine, three apricots, one stupendously robust, self-seeded almond, my beloved pomegranate (the Phoenicians transported these bushy trees from west Asia to Carthage. Mine has travelled a far shorter

and, no doubt, less hazardous journey. Still, I was obliged to uproot it and rehouse it a respectable distance from our lower olive grove by order of one of the many agricultural inspectors who have visited us) – are all holding their own, thriving even, some with clusters of unripened fruit on offer, in the midst of this nightmare building scene.

'I even found out the name of the wood merchants we used last time and organised the delivery of the beams,' grins Quashia triumphantly. He lifts his arm and points an oil-stained finger towards the lengths of wood lying about in the *parking*, and my heart softens. I am saddened to observe a slight tremor in his hand. The wrinkles on his dark-skinned face have deepened and he has grown a gut. Several years back he stopped smoking during Ramadan, a moral obligation of his Islamic faith, and afterwards he announced to me: 'If I can stop for Ramadan, then I can kick the filthy habit altogether.' I was pleased and promised to support him in any way I could. He had been a sixty-a-day man and I knew it might prove challenging, but I misjudged him. He beat the addiction, just as Michel had several years earlier, and never said another word about it. Still, in spite of his rigorous physical activities, he has an indisputable belly on him now, and he is looking older.

'Yes, we noticed the beams when we arrived.' How could I be angry with this man? I love Monsieur Q. His life is dedicated to this farm. How could we fault him for his initiative? Nevertheless, there were plenty of other projects I would have preferred he had launched into ahead of this one. There's no money

for my dreamed-of additional bedrooms, not now or in the foreseeable future. Nor have we commissioned architectural drawings or submitted the endless forms and documents required for planning permission. We would have lived with the higgledy-piggledy clutter in the garage for the time being and concentrated on more pressing matters such as drilling for a subterranean spring-water source, which has been on our to-do-list for way too long. Single-handed, this shed development will take Quashia the entire summer to accomplish and employing extra manpower to assist him cannot be an option for us right now.

'Why don't you let me cope with this?' says Michel to me in English.

'Yes, of course.'

Michel hands me his keys. I take my leave, descend to the house and circle to the main door while the men above are locked in a discussion about masonry matters, costings, the unkempt state of the land and Lord knows what else.

As a rule, Michel and I would deal with these small problems together. It is unlike him to send me away.

Inside, I am greeted by imprisoned heat. I slip off my sandals and splay my tired feet against the cool, unyielding *tommette*-tiled floors, and I pad from room to room, throwing open the slatted shutters and French windows, letting in sharp sunlight which instantly floods the tall-ceilinged spaces, and the lovely old house seems to sigh and expand like a woman discarding her corset. '*Bienvenue*,' I hear it softly whisper. I breathe in trapped fragrances of dried lavender in

bowls, eucalyptus leaves fallen from a vase on top of the television set, whiffs of lingering cologne and humidity, while I attempt to allay my uncertain mood by rediscovering *home*.

In comparison with the galloping growth in the garden, the interior of the house feels pleasingly calm and surprisingly neat, aside from legions of mummified insect husks decomposing on the bookshelves and chairs. The house needs airing, of course, and there are cobwebs hanging like miniature hammocks from the corners of a couple of ceilings, but the plants have been watered and much has been cared for. Serenity.

Peering through the open glass doors, beyond an outdoor living area with its begrimed teak furniture, I am faced with a bank of bougainvillaea so tall and perpendicular it looks as though it has been electrified; punky pink shoots screening the sea from view. So much pruning and tidying up to do!

Back inside, our pine dining table, which we purchased at an auction on the Left Bank in Paris, is strewn with books and files. Mine. I was the last at the farm and departed in a mad dash for the airport, leaving myself no time to return my papers to the shelves in my den. Amongst the piles, I discover a stack of letters curled with heat, awaiting our return, and I decide to get stuck into them. Circulars, journals, fortnightly notifications of upcoming diary dates from the olive farmers' union and a depressingly thick wad of bills.

I find a communication from the local council informing us that if our land is not cleared '*sous quinzaine*', within fourteen days, and maintained 'in

accordance with the Code Forestier articles L322–3 and 14, and the prefectoral *numéro* 96–00261', we will be liable to a considerable fine. The letter goes on to point out that the condition of our land does not meet with any of these requirements. I am crestfallen. There is no other holding in the neighbourhood that keeps their terrain as pristine and fire-risk free as we do, but, for once, we have no grounds for debate. Quashia has left the terraces to their own devices. I glance at the date at the top of the correspondence. It is already more than a month old. You can bet your life as I dig deeper through the envelopes there will be a follow-up letter with an order to pay. And there it is, stipulating settlement within seven days. A staggering 1,500 francs is the demanded penalty. Michel will have to attend to this one. He handles the bureaucracy. He is a past master at sweet-talking all those *fonctionnaires*. I washed my hands of all that a while ago. I lack the patience for it.

I toss the final demand aside and make for the kitchen, deciding to mention it later. Through the window I see Michel coming down the slopes. He is deep in thought, head bowed. He looks tired, strained, in need of a haircut and city-pale. I noticed it last night when I arrived in Paris from London and he met me off the Eurostar. We haven't seen each other in over six weeks and I thought he would be upbeat, overjoyed by our reunion, but he was distant and preoccupied and has remained so since. I hear him enter the house through the wide-open French windows in our bedroom. 'We are soon to become the proprietors of a thirty-eight-metre, curving garden shed,' he calls,

pulling off his linen jacket and tossing it on to our bed. He turns the corner – there are few doors in this open-plan space – and bumps into me, a little awkwardly, in the spacious *salon* with its original brick fireplace, on my way through to the dining room, where I am returning to the letters.

'I am brewing coffee. Want a cup?'

'It's not straight.'

'What isn't?'

'The wall. He hasn't aligned it accurately. I will have to keep an eye on it. I can't think what possessed him to begin it.'

'Well, he did warn you on the phone that we have very few olives this year, so he obviously decided to get on with something else.'

'Barely a crateload on the lower slopes.' This is Michel's gloomy but accurate appraisal of our olive situation on this sunny morning back at the farm. 'I asked him about the swimming pool and he said the chap hasn't been by to clean it for several weeks.'

'I'll call the company.'

'The wild boar have broken two more walls below the old vineyard. Quashia's repaired the fence twice.'

'I hope he didn't request a gun again?'

'Yes, he did, and he mentioned the bees, reiterating just how much he had been looking forward to our own honey.'

Quashia loves honey and frequently asks one or other of us to bring home a few jars from our travels. He hates the choices on sale in the supermarkets, claiming they are 'boiled'.

'Well, as the hives never arrived, let alone the bees,

it was pretty obvious there wasn't going to be honey. Did you stress that we want no guns here?'

'It might be our last resort.'

'Michel, we agreed. No guns.' I sigh. 'You promised.'

My mind is also on the olive yield, or rather the unexpected lack of one. This will be the first year since we bought our farm, a little over a dozen years ago, that the mature trees have not produced fruit. It is not a question of a poor-quality crop: the groves are practically bare. Why? I decide that I must call René, our olive guru, later. He may be able to furnish us with an answer even though he is no longer directly responsible for our olive production and doesn't oversee our harvests any more. Because he was so rarely available to lend us a hand during the season of gathering and pressing yet continued to insist upon two-thirds of the rewards for himself, I made the decision a while back to ease us out of that rather too costly financial relationship. I allocated the lighter manual tasks to Quashia and myself. We heave and ho with them while Michel deals with bureaucracy and business affairs and, when he's home, Michel and Quashia attack the more gruelling labour together.

We could manage without René, I reasoned, but now, in spite of several years of truckloads of fruit and first-class oil, I fear I have made a hash of it. Might I, out of ignorance, have caused long-term damage to the trees by pruning them incorrectly or neglecting to feed them sufficient quantities of organic horse manure at a crucial moment? I have no answers to these nagging doubts. I am baffled by this year's short-

fall. Yet I know these trees to be hardy; they are survivors par excellence. When we acquired the farm they were entombed beneath a jungle of creepers, snaking ivy and overgrown *maquis*. We hadn't the slightest notion of what was there – or that we were purchasing not only a house but an ancestral way of life – but, in spite of countless years of neglect and a stranglehold of gorse and climbers, when we cleared back the land and discovered the craggy trees they were bursting with health, growing vigorously, and lacked only drastic pruning and tender care; sixty-four gnarled and weathered, silver-grey *oliviers*, each one close to 400 years old. So, what has gone wrong?

I can usually hope to find René at home in the evenings for no matter how elusive he proves to be during the day, he always returns to eat a late dinner with his octogenarian and, sadly, housebound wife. René, our canny seventy-nine-year-old Provençal olive expert who generally arrives bearing bountiful gifts and leaves having attempted to fleece me over some deal or other. Just the same, I am extremely fond of him, particularly now that I am honing my own brand of Provençal cunning. These days, he makes me an offer, I counter it with another, we raise our glasses, settle on terms that suit us both and then toast one another appreciatively. When I reach him on the phone later and he learns that we are back he is delighted and suggests dropping by 'bright and early' the very next day. 'And I will bring you some exceptional tomatoes,' he offers enthusiastically.

'No, thank you. We have plenty.'

'Oh, you have some?'

'Plenty!'

'But mine are splendid, you'll see.'

'So are ours. Please, René, don't bring tomatoes.'

He giggles. 'Ah, I thought I could offload some of them on you. See you tomorrow, then.'