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# The Vine Garden

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## Chapter One

It was just a little over seven years since my young wife and I had packed up our home and most of our life, moved out of the centre of London and arrived in the Luberon region of Provence, where we had bought a dilapidated but charming old farmhouse heavily in need of renovation. It had approximately seven acres of land, of which threequarters was put down to vine, with orchards of cherry, apricot, fig, plum and quince making up the balance. There was no garden at all, apart from a few decorative trees and a handful of misplaced oleander bushes. Coming from Britain, it seemed quite magical to be surrounded by row after row of burgeoning grapes, and reassuring to realise that the climate was warm enough to ripen the fruit.

However, the immediate challenge for me as a gardener was to figure out how to incorporate the vines into a garden design. There were so many vine plants that the best idea seemed to be to clear them out in certain places and make a series of cultivated gardens linked by vine walks. It would be a garden within a small vineyard. Of course, certain economic practicalities had to be considered. If we were to pick the grapes, or let a neighbour pick them for the wine co-operative, we would need to leave room between rows and include turning circles for the little tractors. The basic methods of viticulture and the more sophisticated methods of horticulture would need to be carefully executed. But just as the concepts were being discussed, rough plans drawn up and preliminary marking-out started, any ideas of a vine garden came abruptly to a halt.

We had returned to our house one spring evening - we had been in Aix all day - to witness a tractor systematically working its way down the lines of vine, ripping them out by the roots. The driver, who we had never seen before, had nearly accomplished his mission, leaving a wake of terrible destruction. We finally caught his attention by standing suicidally in front of his monstrous machine. Rippling with indignation at his audacity, furious about the mess and horrified at the uninvited intrusion, we demanded he stop immediately and announced our intention to seek legal advice. Did he not know that we now owned the land, that any work to be done was to be ordered by us, that he had wrecked our landscaping plans and would be sued, prosecuted and probably executed? As we ranted and raged, he turned his engine off, removed his cap and scratched his head. After a few more minutes of being attacked in English-accented French, which he probably didn't understand, the poor chap climbed off his tractor, spread his hands, heaved his shoulders and walked away with a bandylegged gait.

We surveyed the devastated land, the piles of dark wood roots, the muddy troughs and, worst of all, the suddenly open space that surrounded the house. We felt violated. That evening, in a more rational mood, we rang the people from whom we

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had bought the property to see if they could shine a little light on the situation. They certainly could.

It transpired that, prior to selling the house, our vendors had taken advantage of a government-backed initiative wherein the smaller co-operative wine farmers of the Luberon region, and other areas for all we knew, were being encouraged to stop growing vine. It was considered uneconomical. To increase the quality and thereby the profitability, it would be necessary to decrease the quantity. To this end the Ministry of Agriculture paid - and handsomely - those farmers who would give up, or radically reduce, their quota. And yes, our vendor, the sneaky old pigeon, knowing he was about to sell his property, took full advantage. But in order to receive the compensation, the land had to be inspected when the vine had been dug out. No roots pointing in the air, no dosh.

I think the old boy who sold us the land (I thought of him as 'the old boy' because he seemed so frail and nervous when I first met him; actually, and deeply alarmingly, he was a year or two younger than me) should have warned us of the impending rape or commissioned the removal of the vines before putting the house on the market. It was, at the time, a cruel blow.

Moving home, as most of us know, is an impassioned business; moving country even more so. It took time to settle, but with determination, nearly enough money and blind faith, we had turned our farmhouse into a pretty smart place to live. We spent two years stitching up the house and another two to shake the grounds down into some kind of a garden. After the destruction of the vine fields, we planted a lavender river - 2m by 150m - which flowed into a circle of old vine plants we had managed to save (the wine lake). The rest was put down to rough grass and cherry orchard.

Re-inventing my landscape design practice and establishing a reasonable word-of-mouth client base took a while longer. The first landscaping job I was offered was on condition that I designed it for nothing and then, if the client liked my proposals, I would get commissioned. Needless to say, we were duped. Of course they didn't like the designs, of course there was no job and of course they ripped off most of my ideas and got a local nursery to install it. I suspected it at the time and had it confirmed when I drove past the property again a couple of years later. After that if a client wanted to see my ideas they paid for it. Not much to begin with, admittedly, but enough for me to retain copyright and dignity.

When everything is new there is no time to dwell on shortcomings. At the beginning my wife and I pushed and pulled together, united by a little boy, Theo, whose birth had taken us somewhat by surprise. There were no smart cars, and flying back and forth to England needed careful planning. Then, as each year passed, our house became better organised, the puppy went to school and my landscaping business continued to expand. We established residency in France and introduced ourselves to the French Inland Revenue. I travelled a lot, working in Scotland, Ireland and England as well as filming with the BBC in Europe. My learning curve of designing gardens in the South of France started to flatten. I had established trade suppliers, built up relationships with various contractors and attracted commissions by

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reputation. Going to the markets was still an exciting exploration, making new friends seemed easy and being happy at home quite possible.

But with the flattening of the curve came a flattening of life, and now it seemed that the seven-year itch of living together in the South of France was on the verge of becoming a nasty little rash - one that looked like it would require more than a tube of quartazone cream and a few antibiotics to fix. So much had been achieved in a relatively short time that when things started to level out it felt startlingly mundane. Not for us the life of monotony - why, we had far too much to do! Almost without it being noticed, a fatigue of tedium crept in under the back door and dispersed itself silently and slowly around us like slow-release bacteria. Perhaps because the preceding years had been such an enormous adventure our thresholds for normality had been ruined. Perhaps this and perhaps that. Perhaps, perhaps.

Friendships built up from the legends of a shared lifetime slip easily into that comfort zone in which they remain intact even though separation may have spanned huge drifts of time. But making new friends in a relatively unknown country is a whole new cauldron of conundrums. You need to search out like-minded people and start overdoing your best to avoid the grim and chronics. If you happen to be a pretty girl with a baby, are married to a man umpteen years older and missing your girlfriends back in the city, the challenge of settling in is even tougher. The majority of newly discovered friends tended to be older and their children well on their way to becoming parents themselves if not millionaires.com.

However, Provence is arguably easier than, say, Spain, where expensive little compounds in the south sweat with clubby perversity. In Provence people tend to come and go. You might even miss them and look forward to their return. Their beautiful houses remain in a ghostly limbo as they slip off to make movies, publish books, rattle share prices or simply see more of the planet. At least the anecdotes are fresh.

Getting to grips with another language was taxing, too. To begin with it had all been a bit of a hoot, chuckling with neighbours as you tossed hopelessly inaccurate phrases and sayings into fledgling conversations. But as the day job pulled on long trousers, the game raised its stakes, and speaking French passed from foolery into a deadly business. Making sure I was understood became obligatory. Big money was riding on it. Realising that it was unlikely that I would ever get my French up to full speed - enough that is, to handle legal confrontations with contractors, spread eloquent projections across the bank manager's desk and debate the Third World War with French clients - I had to payroll the business with a core of bilingual people. There is a good team now and between us we manage to pull it off. But finding young people to employ, trained or otherwise, is difficult. Like the countryside everywhere, the young tend to moth it for the bright lights, perhaps returning later in life to pick up the pieces and live contentedly in semi-repose. Although around these parts property prices are becoming prohibitively expensive and the returning generations fewer and fewer.

As the winter months approached, an unforgiving melancholy wove itself into our lives, gnawing away at the roots of our comfortable existence in the South of France.

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The suddenly cold weather froze ponds and basins, cracked branches and destroyed plants, closed roads and frightened the elderly. By November, it was clear that the malaise was here to stay.

It all began with a duck.

Deronda was much more than just a duck. She swam with Olympic agility both on and beneath the water, waddled with great charm, and had a most resonant voice. She made hens look one-dimensional, game birds neurotic and peacocks merely vain. But then her lover, Georges, died. For a year Deronda sat resolutely on his grave - we had buried him near the pond - refusing to eat or move, until one night when she froze to the ground and became an easy target for a local fox. All we found the next morning was a paperchase of blood-stained feathers, which petered out in the misty woods. A sobering guilt and misery hung around us all.

But it was as nothing compared to the next blow - the death of my father-in-law. This loss completely annihilated the fragile well-being of my wife, and caused a major reappraisal of her own life. Nothing quite highlights one's own mortality as a family death. It bluntly focuses attention on what has or hasn't been achieved. And out of this chrysalis of introspection emerged a changed woman.

Then one of my sisters, who had been diagnosed with breast cancer, was forced to surrender to its atrocious treatment. She accepted it - and went on to manage it - with inspirational aplomb, never allowing it more than a nod of recognition.

On top of this an old school friend, with whom I consistently enjoyed an irreverent sense of blather, emptied life further by bowing out prematurely. He too had been attacked by the malignant beast, but the speed of devastation was breathtaking. It took him from fine to finished in a fortnight.

Because of, or perhaps in spite of, these events - which all took place that autumn - the matrimonial strings were becoming more and more out of tune, and our lives in France more discordant.

Earlier in the year, a new book of mine had been published. Various journalists came to Provence, with photographers, to 'do' me and the garden for various British publications. It usually meant that they wanted some shots of the family as well so we had to rise to the occasion and put on a united front, even though by that point all the derring-do of leaving Britain, the novelties of a different culture and the gimmick of making these new friends had already lost much of its gloss.

'Just how close to heaven can you get?' a radio reporter asked, looking dewy-eyed at the surroundings. 'And you manage to make money living here.'

'You're in paradise!' was another journalist's view. 'Wonderful old house with an incredible location, a pretty young wife, an adorable child and a job that is making you rich.' She was picking cherries off the tree and holding a glass of local pink wine. Nearly choking, she added, 'And weather to die for.'

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I muttered something along the lines of it might not be quite as perfect as it seems, that difficulties are difficulties wherever you are, that there might be cracks under the surface, there were always taxes to pay, and so on, but it fell on closed ears.

Being told how ideal your life is when you know it isn't can feel rather sickening, but to protest sounds churlish and disingenuous. In any case, my feeble remonstrances were met with: 'Well, it beats rush hour on a wet Friday night in Shepherds Bush'; or 'You should try living on the wrong side of the tracks in Wolverhampton.'

But Provence is not a weather bank, nor a pool of perfect calm; it can throw up the same saddened wrecks you might find on any city street. I appreciate that the lifestyle we had been living was perfunctorily glistened in a golden light, but for us it was by then already losing its sheen.

So what were my expectations of moving to France? In truth, I had never really given much thought to that beyond a simple hope that it would work out. There had been no feasibility reports as to the viability of starting a landscaping business, no crammed French lessons or in-depth studies of French history and culture. I arrived with only a layman's knowledge of the country. The fact that, years before, I had been married to a Frenchwoman may have given me a slight advantage, and, historically, the Scots and the French had always enjoyed an accord. Certainly, when the idea of moving to Provence had first been mooted, I didn't reject it as I might have done had it been Bavaria or even Andalusia.

It had been a low time in the UK. I had been fighting and losing against a depressed market. Recession was snapping at the heels of creative practices and only the wily weasels of property development seemed to be scoring by buying cheap and holding until the market rose. Glad to be out of the race, spurred on by the challenge and still green enough to believe that anything was possible, I held hands with my young wife and jumped with extraordinary confidence.

But running a business in France is even more convoluted than it is in the UK. The bureaucratic system is quite unfathomable to anybody who isn't French, and very nearly so to anybody who is. Whether it's to do with banking and borrowing procedures, tax and property laws, or employment and accounting, it seems to be wrapped up in so much red, blue and white tape it confounds belief. A lively black economy infiltrates the process from top to bottom. The more punitive the taxes the more the people begin to look to the black market. Then the more the black trading, the harder the legitimate players get hit with tax to compensate for the deficit. There is even a tradition of reward from the government to anybody who reports the dastardly behaviour of neighbours, friends and even family who might be avoiding their tax payments. It is sinisterly Orwellian, and must bring terrible pain to small communities if a squealer is caught in their midst.

Nevertheless, I am sure that even if my wife and I had worked late into the night listing the pros and cons, we might have hesitated but would still have gone ahead. There was a mutual confidence, and it suited us both to move. But what exactly our expectations were, beyond a better climate and a different lifestyle, remain hazy.

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Perhaps there was a gut feeling that it would be better for us, a blind faith and a sense of destiny.

But here I was, seven years later, suddenly facing another great leap into the world of the separated.

I needed a break in order to come to terms with this, and, if I was honest, to fuel my creativity, which had begun to feel increasingly lifeless. Creative fuel can come, I have discovered, from many things: falling in love, absorbing art, listening to Elvis or even reading. It can also come from travel. A change of landscape often animates a limping mind.

Perhaps a French road trip was the answer, I told myself that miserable November as the winter approached. I could at once make myself scarce, recharge my batteries and, in a sense, test out France, to see if I really wanted to go on living there. Had my passion for the country been poisoned or had it simply deflated as the air escaped from my marriage? The mere thought of a Tour de France lifted my spirits. Perhaps, I thought, I could visit some of France's famous gardens, even attend some annual flower shows and exhibitions, see what the climatic variations produced and discover some new growers and dealers. I couldn't afford to stop working but I could at least get away and put it down to research. Not only that, but there might even be châteaux that had cultivated both garden and wine - thereby indulging two of my great passions.

Being hopelessly in love with my little seven-year-old boy, I decided such a journey of discovery would have to be made up of a series of short trips rather than any Kerouac-type black-topping. I simply couldn't manage very long without seeing him.

But what, I asked, was I really pursuing? Happiness and spiritual well-being? I never stop believing. To heal from the emotional mayhem (not forgetting the wrenching loss of my garden when I eventually moved out of the family home)? I hoped so. To unfold the secrets of the French countryside? To a degree. To taste some fine wines? Certainly. To be uplifted by some beautiful French gardens? Yes, please.

I was enthusiastically preparing to map out my itinerary when it all, rather unexpectedly, fell into place.