Opening Extract from...

The Olive Route

Written by Carol Drinkwater

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THE OLIVE ROUTE

A Personal Journey to the Heart of the Mediterranean

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For Linda,
don't let us look back,
but onwards, arm in arm

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We will simply not let the writers of history claim we did not exist. Why should the killers of the world be 'the future' and not us?

ALICE WALKER, *The Way Forward Is With a Broken Heart*

Marseille

2005

Glasses of cloudy yellow Ricard pastis between our fingers, a half-emptied bottle of mineral water on the table in front of us, Michel and I gazed at the oil-slicked water slapping the hulls of docked vessels. It was not a particularly inviting sight, rainbowed and sludged with diesel and debris emitted by the constant flow of maritime traffic within this ancient harbour.

'It should have been a carafe of tap water, not San Pellegrino,' I grinned at my husband, 'then this moment would have been intrinsically French Mediterranean.' I sipped my aniseed drink, whose tint was of the fine yellow dust that blankets the Côte d'Azur in spring; pollen blown off the pine trees by accommodating winds.

It was creeping towards July. Early evening. We were in Marseille to mark the 'embarkation' of my journey, though my flight for Beirut did not leave for another week.

Along the waterfront to left and right, the restaurants and bistros were busy with preparations for the arrival of diners. The outdoor tables of the quayside bars were milling with animated folk of all ages and nationalities, blistered by the sun, quaffing *apéritifs*. This was the Mediterranean, after all, where life has been lived out of doors since time immemorial.

Michel turned to me and smiled. 'It's been a long while in gestation, this journey of yours, and we'll celebrate it this evening with a delicious bouillabaisse.'

I had originally set off in search of the historical roots of the olive tree in the autumn of 2001. At that time, my marriage

was hanging together by the slenderest of threads and I had intended that the journey put some distance between me and the solitary experience life on our French olive farm had become for me. I had flown to what I had hoped would be the ideal base, the Levant, nudging the cradle of Western civilisation, to a strip of Mediterranean coast divided today into Lebanon and Syria. It was September 2001. Needless to say, I never reached my destinations.

Back in Europe, the world in shock, I set my project aside, and as events unfolded and the Middle East grew less stable, all plans for those travels were stuffed into a file I might have entitled 'Trips I will never take'. It disappointed me. I had grown excited by the idea of tracing the olive and its culture back to its inception, to see how the trading of it had influenced the personality, the topography of the Mediterranean. My Mediterranean. Our Mediterranean. But it was not to be. War was imminent. I am neither correspondent nor political journalist. The Middle East was no place for me, or so I had decided.

But fate had tricks in store.

When Tony Blair stood alongside George W. Bush and declared his intention to take British troops into Iraq, I flew to London and marched in protest. I remember that Saturday afternoon clearly. Friends and I were nudging the nib of the rally and so arrived early at the finishing stage in Hyde Park. Deed done, my pals drove home while I retraced my steps, walking the line of protestors, stopping at the Royal Academy in Piccadilly to tour an exhibition. When I emerged into the afternoon sunlight a couple of hours later, the procession was still taxiing forward in upbeat spirits towards the park. The numbers were impressive. I was optimistic, but the Sunday papers the following day reported the figures of attendance short of the reality, diminishing in the eyes of

Britain an opposition that had spoken out resoundingly yet peacefully. I was dismayed. A considerable proportion of city windows were flying anti-war stickers, but the protests went unheard. The weapons of mass destruction argument had won the day. War on Iraq was declared. The history books tell the rest.

I returned to France, to the farm. Nonetheless, the reportage coming in from the Middle East troubled me, as much as it did everyone else who had resisted the intervention, and I began to feel depressed by the destruction and my impotence.

On a personal level, the marital challenges Michel and I had confronted were resolving themselves. I felt no need to flee my life, but I felt an urgent need to return to the eastern Mediterranean, to learn the secrets of the olive tree. The project I had shelved remained in my mind; a terrific adventure; a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity I had given up on. And then, quite out of the blue, I received a letter from a complete stranger living in Australia. The sender had read of my passion for olives and had sent a photograph that portrayed him standing within a hollowed-out olive tree in Lebanon. What really grabbed my attention was that he claimed the tree was six thousand years old. If I had been without commitments, I would have jumped on a plane to Beirut that very morning. Instead, I pulled down my boxes, rummaged through the paperwork and reconsidered my route in earnest. I searched everywhere to find out the whereabouts of that Lebanese old-timer, but without success. If such a specimen really existed, it would take the history of olive cultivation further back than I had imagined. I resolved to go in search of it, and once discovered, I intended to continue on around the Mediterranean basin, seeking clues, marking what remained. I ordered obscure tomes on the Internet, I made contact with

universities, publishers working with material in languages that had not been spoken for thousands of years. I visited UNESCO in Paris. I understood they had been debating a World Heritage status for the olive trail, perceiving it as cultural landscape, a shared legacy. The Greek lady I met up with was firmly behind the project, 'But,' she said, 'it is difficult to define such a trail. Where does it begin, or end?'

That was precisely what excited me about the quest. The trails, the routes had not been identified; they were uncharted. This was virgin territory. I would start with the Lebanese tree, if I could find it, and from there I would go wherever the next clue took me. Michel, friends judged my plan too vague, but I knew that I had to get going, not in books, but across the water. I knew I had to be there, at the foot of that old Lebanese master, breathing the scents of the Mediterranean, meeting its people, listening to its winds, giving myself up to its locations and taking my botanical sleuthing any which way.

Michel signalled the waiter. *'L'addition, s'il vous plaît.'*

Someone called, *'Bonsoir!'* It was a grinning African, skin impenetrably black, in leaf-green *galabiya*. He was covered in satchels bursting with sunglasses and attempted to interest us in a 'designer wristwatch' or fishing tackle. I said I'd take the fishing tackle if it was Gucci. He laughed, dallied a while, gazing about, smiled *bonne soirée* and plodded off along his way. This teeming city of Marseille is France's largest, busiest port. It also represents the nation's most colourful melting pot; in that sense, Marseille is quintessentially Mediterranean.

'So why Marseille, why begin the journey here?' asked Michel.

'Aside from the pleasure of a night in a hotel with you, there are two reasons,' I replied.

'And they are?'

'Until 600 BC, this was little more than a well-situated inlet, a deep creek with a backdrop of mountains to protect it. Its history was born when Greek sailors from Phocaea, on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, landed here, founded a settlement and christened it Massalia.'

Steps from where Michel and I were sitting was the original creek of Lacydon. It was to here those pioneering, salt-blasted, pre-Christian Greeks sailed in after their long and hazardous crossing from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. They discovered a well-sheltered estuary, between mountains and sea, ideal for the docking of their boats and the establishment of a portside colony.

'Quite a navigational feat to have plied this sea from east to west in their wooden galleys. Did they chance upon this coast, do you think, or had they been told of it?'

I shook my head. I had no idea. 'But what is highly probable is that aboard those vessels were olive saplings. Those seafaring Phocaeans introduced olive trees to this coast. Here, in Marseille, steps from where we are sitting, the French olive story began.'

Who had spotted their approach? Were they made welcome? Were the olive trees received as peace offerings? Who planted them?

According to the Greek historian Herodotus, those Phocaeans were the first long-distance sailors. But, I wondered, were they really the first on the scene here? Or might it have been the Phoenicians who lived in city-states along the coast of Phoenicia, better known today as Lebanon and Syria? Massalia is a Phoenician word, not Greek.

Michel glanced at his watch. 'If you really want to stay over, we should find a hotel, *non*?'

I nodded.

'We'll come back later and eat bouillabaisse.'

'Ah, good Turkish cuisine,' I jested.

We left a few euros on the table and set off, wandering through the narrow, winding, souk-like lanes of the market behind the port, where two languages, French and Arabic, were being shouted, high-pitched strains across grimy streets, where down-at-heel Arabs in hats milled to and fro, where dark-skinned men with moustaches in black leather jackets brushed close against one another, looking furtively about them before swift exchanges of some illicit substance, where the butchers advertised their wares as authentic halal, Arabic for 'lawful', 'permissible', as opposed to *'haram'* which is 'not permitted'. (From *'haram'* comes 'harem' – wives and concubines owned by one male are forbidden to others.) The streets were litter-strewn and cramped. Everywhere the sweet-stale odour of exposed meat. Here and there at kerbsides, scruffy men, all warped bones and stiffness, stretched out crow-fingers for a euro. Crossing over the main thoroughfare, La Canebière, from the market, we faced a series of deteriorating blocks of flats. *Ashelems* is the French nickname for them, HLMs or *habitations à loyer modéré*: state-subsidised high-rises occupied predominantly by Arab families and African blacks, the most underprivileged sectors of French society. From where we were standing, displays of washing and satellite dishes dominated the meagre terraces. Carried across the evening air, we heard the cries of fraught women and the bawling of agitated babies. Everywhere gypsies, Arabs or squatting whiskery buskers with guitars, few white faces in the *centre ville*. The *vieux* port was more European in this season of tourists, more expensive. The police presence around the streets of the gritty city was disquieting. Their cars screeched round corners as though driven by stuntmen in action movies. Their pedestrian

profile seemed to be equally imposing, patrolling in packs of four.

Pausing outside the Espace Culture, violet-blue eyes looked down upon us from a calm, smiling, well-fed face. A giant poster of Florence Aubenas alongside her Iraqi interpreter, Hussein Hanoun al-Saadi, hung from the façade. Photos taken before they were kidnapped in Baghdad on 5 January. Six months of incarceration. In this Muslim-dominated city, it was reassuring to see the Belgium-born journalist and her colleague remembered. The organisation Reporters Sans Frontières had joined forces with the daily newspaper *Libération*, which Aubenas wrote for, and together they were working tirelessly for her release.

Michel wrapped an arm over my shoulder. 'Promise you'll be careful,' he whispered.

I had intended to visit both Iran and Iraq. Even if olive culture had not originated there, they might contain traces of its venerable past, but a woman travelling alone in war zones without professional credentials would have been irresponsible. Lebanon, though risky, was perfectly accessible and I had friends there. I was going to begin my journey with them, jumping off in search of trees from a secure springboard.

We found a hotel offering the smallest but cosiest of rooms; inexpensive and a step from the port. The lift stopped at the fifth floor. Our room was on the sixth. M carried our bag up the remaining flight and from there we climbed to the roof, to a view the desk clerk insisted was unmissable. We found ourselves gazing down upon red rooftops and all the way along the port past the Fort St-Jean to the lighthouse, the sea, to distant invisible locations where, in future weeks, I would find myself.

Over the bay to the east was the towering Notre-Dame de

la Garde basilica. It shone in the evening sunlight like an overgrown Christmas decoration. We toyed with the idea of climbing to it after dinner, but knew that we would not.

'And the second reason for commencing the journey in Marseille?' asked Michel.

'It was from here that I set off on my first travel adventure. My maiden voyage,' I laughed. 'I had recently turned twenty-two. It was late May. I had taken a high-speed train from Paris intending to change here and continue directly to Antibes, where actor friends awaited me. Unfortunately, the express arrived after sunset and the last train towards Italy had already departed. I had split London a week earlier with £100 in my purse, scrimped and scratched during a poorly paid year as an actress at the Citizens' Theatre in Glasgow. Descending into the deep-blue world of olive groves, mauve mountains and Judas trees, I doubt I even noticed them. I was set on a course for Greece. My funds were precious. They had to be eked out over an entire summer, transporting me to Hellenic isles and back. I had no return ticket. A hotel in Marseille was beyond my slender means, so I settled for a wooden bench in the St-Charles railway station, only to be woken by a porter giving me my marching orders. My protestations in minimal French achieved no results and I found myself turfed out, staring into a darkened sky beyond the cityscape. I descended the sweep of steps lugging my unwieldy case, clueless as to where I might pass what remained of the night.

'Of Marseille it is said all roads lead to its ancient harbour. Instinctively, I traced that path and descended seawards, ending up at the head of the Quai du Port.' I pointed a finger to a spot not far from where we had enjoyed our pastis.

'Once at the harbour, perched on my upturned case, I inhaled the stench of diesel and discarded fish and innocently

awaited the dawn. So naïve was I that it never occurred to me I had installed myself in the red-light district.' Michel laughed. 'In fact, *so* naïve was I that even once there, facing the swell of boats and stinking sludge of sea, engaged by the comings and goings of the night, bemused by the number of males who approached me, I still did not cotton on to the delicacy of my situation. It took one of the women whose beat I was obviously trespassing on to shift me. With a raised fist, she growled at me. Although I did not comprehend her street French, the message was perfectly clear. I passed the remaining dark and lonely hours wandering aimlessly about the streets, dreaming of the distant shores I was bound for, in search of deep, southern skies, exotic perfumes and ancient civilisations whose stories were scored in stone. I knew nothing of primeval olive groves weathered by time.'

'Well, we can afford our cramped little room, and dinner, too. Let's go.'

'There are no drugs in this city any more,' the waiter was assuring a party of five middle-aged American women at a neighbouring table. '*Chères mesdames*, happily life here is not like the film *The French Connection*.'

Marseille's municipality was keen to promote its benign Marcel Pagnol image and leave the vice and drug traffic behind, but having watched exchanges up in the market earlier in the afternoon, in spite of the very active police presence, Michel and I both agreed that the seedy portside underworld was alive and kicking, as it had probably been for two and a half thousand years.

We had chosen a restaurant, plastic tables and chairs, checked cloth adorned with spluttering candle, and ordered a bottle of wine. Dinner was to be the traditional Marseillaise

bouillabaisse. The warm night air reeked of cooked fish and cigarette smoke.

The waiter, balding, black-waistcoated, large white apron, returned with our wine, eager to strike up conversation. It was relatively early. There were only the English-speaking Americans or us.

'Is it true that the origins of bouillabaisse are in Asia Minor and that here the dish is as old as Marseille itself?' I enquired.

He shook his head, hotly denying any such notion. 'The Greeks founded the city, yes, but we Provençals created the fish soup. *"Boui-abaisso"* is a Provençal word. A pot for boiling is a *"boui"* in the local dialect. Boiled liquid, that was the basis of it. It was born out of the fishing community working this coast. The lesser-known fishes were given to the families as well as leftovers and unsold catch. All taken home and boiled up in a solid iron pan. It was a working man's soup, but it was the Catalonians who contributed the saffron, the addition of which gives it its distinct colour and flavour. The dish, like the city of Marseille, is a melting pot. A *mélange*. Every race is here.'

The tourists called for our waiter's attention. He chatted with them for a few minutes and then returned to regale us with the story of how the entire port made a killing out of cheating a local insurance company. A small fishing trawler returning from a night out at sea broke the lines of coastal fishing nets and, unwittingly, hauled everyone's overnight catch into port. The world of the harbour woke the next morning to schools of large fish swimming in between the boats. Everyone claimed damages: fishermen, boat owners, the restaurants for lack of produce, even the trawler. Each stood witness for the rest and the insurance company was obliged to pay up. 'The harbour population relive it as a tale of triumph.'

I wondered from which peoples had the traits of trickiness, wiliness, such caricature-drawn characteristics of the Provençals, been inherited. Our bouillabaisse arrived and we tucked into it with gusto. Unfortunately, it was not the best we had eaten and the sum paid was more costly than our hotel room, but the waiter's tales compensated for the disappointment.

After an early breakfast, we took a leisurely stroll to the lighthouse, past the Fort St-Jean, undergoing renovations. From the farthest point, I spotted, round the quayside, the dock used for ferries and cruise ships, where several mighty vessels bound for North Africa awaited embarkation. If I had intended to begin my journey in Tunisia, it would have been on one of those ships I would have ploughed the sea.

'That's where Quashia boards his ferry for Algeria.' Quashia was our Algerian Arab gardener.

A trio of retired, salty-faced fellows, amateur fishermen in check shirts and flat caps, were seated on canvas stools on the jetty, alongside their rods, baguette sandwiches in hand, calling out to one another, talking recipes and intricate, varied preparations for food. Locals in shorts and canvas shoes sat about reading *La Provence*, smoking, drinking beer. It was not yet 10 a.m., but it was not uncommon to see the diehards in the bars downing their first brandy at six or seven in the morning. Visitors licking ice creams watched on fascinated as the ruddy-faced *pêcheurs* in blue berets, bow-legged, varicose-veined, repainted the hulls of their striped fishing boats.

'The work they are engaged in has been lived out around this basin since the beginning. I will come across it everywhere.'

A couple of boats were for sale. The going rate seemed to be €2,000 apiece, which struck us as precious little for a vessel

that served a man's occupation and his stomach and had done so for millennia. Church bells chimed the hour. It was time to leave. I slipped my hand into Michel's. An empty Fanta bottle bobbed aimlessly in the water, which had a fishy and rank odour, yet I felt its pull. Christened '*mare nostrum*' by the Romans, 'our sea'. I heard its sirens.

'That night on my upturned case, all those years back, my first solo outing, this city was threatening to me,' I said to Michel.

'In what way?'

'The pimps, whores, sailors, the Arabs, the foreignness of their speech, their manners. I feared I would be raped, robbed, harmed in some way. It was the alienness I mistrusted, the unknown. This same city is, today, even grimier, seedier, more hard-nosed than it was then, but what it embodies is no longer alien to me and I don't fear it. Quite the opposite, I embrace it. It is intrinsic to our French Mediterranean, to a way of life that began in this very harbour. Don't look so fearful,' I said, brushing Michel's cheek. 'I won't be staying away for ever, and I will have to return every now and then to help Quashia when you are not around.'

'I don't know why you can't wait until the war in Iraq is over.'

'It is because of the war, don't you see, that I must go now. When the peoples living round this big pond began to look beyond their own patch, to climb into boats, cross the waters, find harbours, ports, trading posts, they commenced the weaving of a Mediterranean tapestry. Our Mediterranean. Our sea. And wherever they landed, the olive tree with its branch of peace seems to have been a calling card. Yet nobody knows from where this mythical tree originally hailed, or who the visionaries were who first fell upon the brilliant idea of domesticating it and turning its products into one of the

cornerstones of our diet. We have an olive farm. I am itching to know its trees' secrets. Before fanatics spread their wars into our sea, before they destroy everything, I have to find what's out there.'