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Opening Extract from...

The Silent Hours

Written by Cesca Major

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I am standing outside again, looking up at that window.

Through the glass I can see hands reaching up, grasping at nothing. I can make out their wails in amongst the barrage of bullets, the foreign shouts and my ears buzzing so noisily that I want to clap my hands to the side of my head and scream for it to stop.

But I can't reach, so I just watch their movements, knowing I can do nothing but stand outside.

I am always looking up at that window.

PART ONE

ADELINE

1952, St Cecilia Nunnery, south-west France

They are talking in hushed voices through the grille in the door. Sister Marguerite has a distinctive southern accent and, even when she is trying to speak quietly, her words seem to echo off the thick stone of the corridor walls with an energy for which she is often chastised.

'She said something,' she insists, pleading with her listener.

'Marguerite, we've discussed this before . . .' The voice sighs.

From my bed I tilt my head to catch a glimpse of its owner: Sister Constance. Although her voice is firm, it doesn't fit her face. The woman seems to have aged twenty years in a fraction of that time. Her watery eyes are practically hidden in the folds of her face; her lips are thin and cracked. Even from this distance I can see the veins in her hands, the large blue lines protruding from her skin look like great rivers on a map of France.

'She was muttering something. I'm sure I heard some distinct words, I'm sure I heard her speak . . .'

'Don't excite yourself, child,' says Sister Constance. 'If the Lord has made this woman mute then it is not for us to question why, or try to change her predicament. We can only wait and . . .'

'But don't you think there's been progress? If we could encourage and . . .' The younger nun trails off as she catches sight of Sister Constance's expression. 'Forgive me for interrupting,' she says quietly, dropping her head.

'Get along, Sister Marguerite,' Sister Constance says, not unkindly. 'No more of this. You know what has to happen.'

'I . . . I . . . Yes, Sister Constance,' comes the defeated reply, and with one last look back at me I watch her turn and walk away.

Sister Constance stays there watching her go before peering through the grille at me lying still. Then, making the sign of the cross at my door, she turns away, her steady steps echoing rhythmically down the stone corridor, to Vespers.

A mute: a mute woman in a nunnery. I've been that woman for years. I draw a finger along my bottom lip and pray the same prayer to whoever is listening: 'God, forgive me.'

A crucifix hangs on the wall opposite my bed. Jesus is staring at me. He is always staring at me.

Sister Marguerite has spent weeks, months, now years, sitting at my bedside, on the bench in the garden, at meals. In the early days, as a young postulant, she took my silence in her stride, chattering on about the everyday – the men planting in the neighbouring fields, the dreadful food served up, the bone-seeping cold . . . but she mustn't complain – others have so much less.

Recently she has grown quieter, watchful.

Others take my silence as a personal slight, readily giving into Marguerite's pleas for her to attend to me. I notice every shadow, every new line as each year passes. She has the dancing eyes of another and sometimes, when something has tickled her, the past tugs at my heart and the other face skips across my mind in a whisper . . . and it's gone, as quickly as Marguerite muffles the little laugh in her hand.

Some mornings, at the edge of sleep, I see that other face in the shadows of the room; moments before I am awake, I am convinced she is there, her long hair tousled, her straight neat nose, long neck, her tiny waist.

I get up and trace an outline on the wall opposite. Sister Marguerite finds me, palm resting on the stone, staring into a past I can't reach,

guiding me back to the chair by the fire, searching my eyes with hers as I return to the room.

She says a prayer for me, hand resting on mine in my lap; her words are quick, tripping into each other as she mutters an 'Amen'.

The automatic way that I mouth it. Empty.

How would she find me now? How would she learn where I've ended up? I remember being discovered after I'd left her. Men found me submerged in the mud. There were three of them. I didn't recognize their faces. The tallest one lifted me out. Pain shot through my lower body as he placed me in a wheelbarrow. That was how they got me out, with my legs over the side, him trying to manoeuvre it as gently as he could over the cobbles, to a waiting motorcar.

I'd never been in a motorcar before. They folded me into the seat; there was earth and red on my clothes, skin, smears on the leather. They drove me out; I couldn't look out of the window, didn't want to see. There was a younger man with kind eyes looking back at me over the front seat, asking me questions. I didn't know the answers, couldn't hear him properly. Felt the soil in every crevice, blocking my throat, nose, ears, dulling everything. Then images came lapping over his words: the green, the people, her face, the snatch of Vincent's hand as he left me – a reassuring squeeze, then gone. The relentless shuffle behind the person in front of me and then losing him, wishing I had a second more. Not realizing that at the time.

I can't pinpoint the day I appeared here: those days, or was it weeks? A patchy phase of blacks and greys, a numb coldness that settled and has never left. I know I travelled, I remember vaguely the rattle of a train: a mail carriage, perhaps? I remember the scratch of the hessian sack beneath me . . . or perhaps I am adding details, frustrated always by the gaping holes in my memory. Large chunks of my life are removed; other parts return to me quietly, subtly; others in a sweeping, sudden, roaring rush that leaves me spinning and breathless, as if I'm

back there, witnessing it all anew. And then there is the blank. A huge expanse of nothingness. Whispers sometimes, sounds that I don't want to dwell on. The edges get cloudy, as if someone has blown smoke straight into my brain. A smell, familiar, sickly, and I want to sleep, to nestle down, wait for the noises to subside until it is just me, on the edge of darkness, trying to feel my way back into the light.

What do I remember really? Where it started. I always return to that day: seeing Paul burst into the shop, his sandy hair wild, waving his hat; as if he were here, bursting into my room in the nunnery.

'Maman, have you heard?' He starts to speak with the energy of a younger boy, only just missing tripping on a stack of newspapers. 'They've confirmed it,' he rattles on. 'I heard it on the wireless myself. Old Man Renard kept us there for an age talking, otherwise I would have come sooner.'

And so it is confirmed. I feel something leaden in my stomach, reach my hand up as if I can dull the sudden ache, shore up the hole. Frozen behind the counter, I know he is waiting for me. I try to smile at his enthusiasm, to play out the reaction he wants. He takes a step towards me, an eager look in his eye. I notice a patch on his chin that he missed shaving and feel a rush of love for him. 'Come on, Maman,' he says, enveloping me in a hug. Normally I might wiggle away, embarrassed, but this time I let him hold me. I breathe in deeply, trying to ensure his familiar smell fills my nostrils. Leather and grass and the pages of a favourite novel. A tear threatens and I stiffen in his arms. Paul draws away, his hands on my shoulders, looking at me seriously, already playing the role of heroic young man. Paper-thin lines around his dark green eyes deepen as he assures me, 'Maman, don't be like that, it's going to be fine. I'm going to be fine.'

'It's like the last time,' I whisper, pushing him away lightly with one hand. I turn and walk over to lug the last box of apples from the door, leaving a smeared path on the lino as I drag it over to the wooden counter.

'Here, let me,' Paul says, taking over. 'It's not, you know. We're better prepared, Maman. We're . . .'

Paul's words are drowned out as the door is pushed open once more and Isabelle stands on the threshold of the scene. Strands of blonde hair have broken free from her plaits and she is panting slightly. 'Is it true? Are we? Is it really happening?' she asks, looking to both of us for answers.

Paul straightens up and nods at her. 'I heard it on the wireless myself.'

At this Isabelle launches herself across the shop and throws herself into his arms. 'My big brother, the soldier!' She laughs and then takes his hand. 'I can't believe it.'

I retreat behind the counter again, wipe pointlessly at the surface of the wood, sit down on the stool, flick the last pages of the ledger, stand up again.

'Can you watch the shop?' I ask, moving through to the door at the back, the stairs to our apartment. They don't hear. They're swapping their pieces of news, as they have done since they were children.

I go straight up to our bedroom and close the door behind me, lean back against it. On the bureau, amongst the clutter of Vincent's small change, is a photograph of my father back home in the garden on his first leave. The portraits were usually sombre affairs: the patient wait, the held pose as the photographer worked his magic, but my father always seemed to be on the edge of a great joke, his mouth twitching with quiet amusement in the picture. This was my father before it all.

He would return a few times the following year a different man, somewhere else, in amongst the constant rattle of machine-gun fire and barrages of artillery shells, his mouth turned down, his eyes dulled. And then in 1916 he would return no more. Bits of him, maybe interspersed with parts of another man, were buried there.

He looked so like Paul.

I can hear them both laughing through the floorboards of our room. I close my eyes and pray with all my might that this time things will be different, this time they will all return.

The walls of the nunnery are dark, lamplight softening the stone as we file into the great hall for dinner, a long snake of women winding around the passage. Waddling forwards, heads bowed, nothing but the scuff of our feet, an occasional cough or the rumble of a stomach. The relentless march so that we can eat as a community.

I am standing behind Sister Marguerite's delicate frame, looking determinedly forward at the black cloth of her habit so that I do not have to look at the door on my right, think of what is behind it. They took me there when I first arrived; it smelt of cinnamon and damp. I had trembled as I stepped into it, felt the walls shifting closer as the room became a tunnel, narrower; the wood, the stone, the light, all pressed in on me, so that I had to back out quickly before the whole room collapsed, before the ceiling came down.

I shuffle forwards once more, attempt to focus again on her back and think of the food that awaits, the comforting sound of a hundred women spooning soup out of bowls. I can't stop a glance as I pass the door, think again of the room beyond it.

Sister Marguerite turns: I flinch, but then feel the warmth of her look.

The door is behind us now. They don't make me go there any more.

ISABELLE

Dear Paul,

It is so dull now you've left. The house is as silent as the grave, which is wholly appropriate as Maman seems to be already in mourning for the loss of you. Don't be absurd and do anything silly like die on me, darling brother – I would be very annoyed.

Father has been visiting the Hotel Avril a little more than usual but hides his feelings – and the whisky fumes – well … It is strangely quiet here all of a sudden, I'm often bored. My only entertainment is seeing Claudette Dubois pining for you when she moons about in the shop, doe-eyes staring out of that sad little face of hers. Honestly it's rather repulsive – you must promise me never to marry her, even if you do become old and desperate to settle. As for me, I will definitely be dying an old maid as it seems all the men have left France. And I know it sounds selfish but I wish it would all be over so we could all enjoy a good dance and forget all this gloom.

Do you remember last summer when we snuck out to the little copse by the river and I lit my hair on fire with the gas lamp after you told me that terrifying ghost story and I was only saved when you had the sense to throw me in the river? I can't remember ever laughing so hard. Oh, you see, you HAVE to come home soon as it is simply no fun without you.

Tell me news – is it terrible? Are you very scared? I know you probably wouldn't admit it if you were, but I do hope you would be honest with me. Father says Hitler is heading east so maybe he will stay over there and won't trouble us. I am terribly proud of you, brother dear, and I'm sending you a hundred kisses from

here – let me know if we can send anything useful out to you – socks? (I could even try and darn some!) Bonbons? Caramels? Whatever you want, I'll make it my personal mission to acquire it.

Your loving sister,

Isabelle