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Return to the Olive Farm

Carol Drinkwater

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I heard the thunderous crash while I was ironing, folding tablecloths, bed linen, napkins by the score.

'Five bottles of white wine smashed!' a female voice shouted, followed by 'Help!' and then my name. It was Bridget, an Anglo-Irish friend from Cannes who had offered to come up and lend a hand with preparations. I hurried from the second of the two stables where we kept washing machine, ironing board and wicker baskets spilling over with dirty clothes, rather grandly referred to as the 'laundry room', to find out what had happened.

'I'm soaked!' she cried.

The bottles had been stored on top of the fridge in the garage because there was no space left within, nor in any of the other fridges belonging to this farm. This one, a rather decaying specimen, was really only fit for beverages and it was stuffed to bursting with bottles of rosé, soft drinks, water and whites. I went in to take a look. Seeping liquid and shards of green glass greeted me. Several chunks of plaster had fallen away from the ceiling, landed on the wine and sent the bottles skittling to the ground. My friend's T-shirt was splashed and stained.

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'Oh, sorry! Give it to me. I'm just about to do another load. Borrow one of mine, why not? And I'll clean this mess up.'

Bridget smiled, shook her head. 'Don't worry about it. Courage,' she said. 'I best be off to cook himself some lunch and change my clothes! I'll see you later.'

'Thanks for helping.' I kissed her on both cheeks and waved as she wheeled off down the drive.

Where were the others, I wondered. Quashia, our Algerian-Berber gardener, had taken the weekend off and gone to Marseille with a carload of his woolly hatted companions. Michel, with the first of our house guests, had driven to the supermarket hours earlier to do a 'big shop'. I glanced at my watch. It was close to two. The dogs were sleeping beneath the trees, out of the heat. Summer had suddenly swooped in, threatening thunder but never delivering. Besides myself, only the cicadas were busy. I traipsed off to find the dustpan and brush, doubting that we would ever be ready for this upcoming event. Commencing the following Tuesday – today was Saturday – arriving over the course of five days, we were expecting one hundred and twenty-three guests. Michel had decided that a welcome home and belated birthday party for Carol was in order. I cleared up the glass, poured the shards into a box in the boot of my car, to dispose of at the bottle bank down near the gypsy settlement, painstakingly sponged up the three and three-quarter litres of wine, gave the cement floor a brisk mop, took one look at the shambles this garage had become during my absence and retired to the cool white walls within the farmhouse, within my den, where I settled back into an African planter's chair, one of a pair I had found in a brocante in the fourth arrondissement in Paris some years back.

I had been home almost three weeks and was still in limbo, still unpacking, still attempting to heave myself into the swing of things here at Appassionata, our olive farm. Silently, I was missing so much. I closed my eyes and listened to the cicadas, to the fan overheard whirring in whispers, transporting me back to foreign lands, to stark, evocative rock formations, sea-fringed, shadowy silhouettes looming into the midday light.

Gone were those scrub-faced mountains of Lebanon with olive trees growing at every turn of the eye, gracefully blotting out the intolerable heat; the ancients and juniors at every step along my way, in every Mediterranean land into which I had ventured. One foot off the bus diving directly into groves, cracked earth beneath my boots, picnicking with nature and birdsong; lizards; solitary walks in the mountain ranges encircling the moist lips of the Mediterranean; surprise encounters with strangers. I was home now and removed from remote backwaters, the villages nestling within hilly enclaves where sonorous church bells tolled the long, slow hours; I had left behind me remote Islamic lands; no more perambulating along streets where the glinting or frowning eyes of the women dressed in black, be they Catholic or Muslim, stared upon me. I felt such a distance now from the war zones, the deprivations, the razed groves of Palestine, the pinched faces of farmers deprived of a living, the fragrant citruses in Sicily encircling classical ruins. And what of the classical ruins rising up out of the deserts of Syria, Libya, of those unexpected gems

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in Algeria? And what of the hard-nosed oil industry in Spain? Gone was the time warp – the hours of every day spent in past millennia – I had been returned to the twenty-first century – and gone was the freedom to go wherever I pleased, to change my mind at a second's notice without a word or thought to anyone. Such a luxury it had been, a previously untapped freedom, an untapped loneliness as well from time to time.

Less than three weeks earlier, I had deposited my weather-beaten backpack on to the bed – my bed, our bed, our capacious space, full of love and secrets, with its inviting mattress and lavender-sweet sheets. This was not some matchbox offering in an unfamiliar room where I was intending to pass a night, or to lay my head to rest for an indefinite, unquantifiable period of time. I was home. I had slipped off my well-worn trekking boots, scuffed but still sturdy, and stowed them at the back of the wardrobe. I would not be needing them again for a while.

Home.

And Michel had decided that it was party time. Perhaps I was not quite ready for an onslaught of festivities? Still, the arrival of friends was always a delight and many I had not seen in a long while. Most were flying in, from countries near or far. It was the perfect moment to introduce Michel to a handful of the many new friends I had made during my travels and Michel wanted us to celebrate the fact that I had actually completed the journeys and found my way back, safely.

After sixteen months alone on the road – aside from one or two short hops back here – I had closed the door on my travels and returned. Journey's end. The quest I had embarked upon – oh, so long ago, it seemed to me now that I had finally set foot on our own dry terraces – had been accomplished, if not completed. Quite possibly my searches would never be completed, that much I knew now. And this quest had sunk beneath my skin; it was a part of me. Much of what I had set out to discover remained undiscovered, and a great many questions and thoughts I had never even considered had been posed, thrown at me, made manifest. I had returned with a million faces in my head, a thousand smiles, beckonings and wavings and they continued to call to me. I had been welcomed into the homes of many a stranger, made bonds, won friends, no enduring enemies as far as I was aware, and had returned to this old farm a different person. I had not conquered, for conquering had not been my objective, but I had penetrated and much had been set before my eyes, revealed.

I felt new, newly born, yet as old as the limestone rocks themselves.

And because I am who I am, the material – piled high beside me now on my desk, alongside my camera – these myriad experiences begged to be assimilated, leavened, shaped into material. Not for nothing … There were thousands and thousands of photographs to sift through, dozens of notebooks to reread, conversations and ideas in my head that had been earmarked for notation, consideration … And the added delight: these kept me there, on my travels, prevented me from settling. Recalled me at a moment's notice, and when I least expected it, I was gone. Like a puff of smoke, I had disappeared off again out through the wardrobe of my imagination, my

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memory, travelling through time and space, flying through the souk-like alleys of my mind.

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Our old blue bus was wheezing up the drive. Michel gave the toot-toot that signalled his return and I lifted myself out of the chair and went down to greet him and the two guests already installed in the house. He stepped out and gave me a hug. I knew that he was at peace now that I was in France and not some place where he needed to feel concerned. Perhaps it had strained him more than he had expressed.

'Hans and Sabine will unload. How are the preparations coming along?'

'Garage ceiling still collapsing, smashed several bottles of party wine.'

'Oh.' My husband made an immediate detour. I followed and we stood at the door's entrance side by side, brushing comfortably against one another, looking in.

'I fear we can't leave this much longer,' he muttered. 'I'll get some quotes in after the party. Now, lunch!'

How will we fund this, I wondered. Most of my resources had been sunk into my journeys and Michel's documentary films were not exactly super-lucrative.

'Have you managed to contact Marie-Gabrielle and François?'

François and his warm-hearted wife, Marie-Gabrielle, were apiarists and they had been instrumental in the correlation of my travels through Algeria. She in particular. They had introduced me to a network of very resourceful beekeepers who, during weeks of suicide bombings and deaths in that confused Maghrebian territory, had protected me and offered refuge. It seemed fitting that they should be on the guest list of our summer celebrations, particularly given that none of the Algerians themselves were able to obtain exit visas.
Michel, strides ahead of me, loaded down with a carton of foodstuffs, shook his head and called back over his shoulder. 'Non.'

'I'll try them again now.'

'After lunch, please. Let's eat!'

When lovers are reunited after a time apart, there can be a certain shyness in their coming together again; a period of readjustment is frequently required. A first overwhelming rush of passion, of satisfaction – ah, such forgotten completeness, integration, the slaking of the thirst of desire, and then what? One step back, and at that moment comes the realisation that the love you have held so dear is not entirely the reality. Or, rather, the reality does not quite match up to the image you have cherished and carried so tenderly in your heart and head.

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And so it was with Appassionata and me. Not so with my husband, Michel, because we had whenever possible stayed in daily contact, nattering on the telephone, sending hugs via emails, brief visits to one another, stolen kisses not specified on the itinerary. Our love had evolved along with the journey as far as I was aware, but our farm had travelled with me only in my heart; in my imaginings and memory, a cracked snapshot as a reminder stuffed into a back pocket. Equally, the farm, its lands and vegetation, had not stood still awaiting my return. France had not stood still. If I had changed, so too had my home and the world in which it flourished. My place, my position on the farm, required renegotiating, re-establishing in the light of new awarenesses, new discoveries made throughout my travels.

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