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The Mistletoe Bride

& Other Haunting Tales

Written by Kate Mosse

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THE MISTLETOE BRIDE

& *other* HAUNTING TALES

Kate MOSSE

Illustrations by
ROHAN DANIEL EASON



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SAINTE-THÉRÈSE



Montolieu, Languedoc, south-west France

Summer 2003

Sainte-Thérèse



Still, methinks,
There is an air comes from her: what fine chisel
Could ever yet cut breath?

Act V, Scene III, *The Winter's Tale*
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

In the blinking of an eye can the world shift. A pinprick of time that changes everything that has gone before it or will come after. Between one catch of breath and the next, the rest of forever defined by that single, solitary moment. For some it is a falling in love or a death or a song.

For Hermione, it was a saint.

*

They stopped in Montolieu for no better reason than Leon decided he'd had enough of the car. Even with all the windows wound down, like bitten nails, the heat had won. Parched brown fields stretched out in all directions as the road climbed higher up into the hills. Stumped plane trees,

bark peeling and stained like liver spots, under which old men would play *boules* later in the day. The names of villages on signs – Alzonne, Pézens, Moussoulens – slashed through with a red line as you left the village. The occasional cluster of houses, but no sign of food or life. Nothing. Just the shimmering heat floating above the ribbon of tarmac.

As usual, Leon seemed to think it was her fault the morning hadn't gone well. For at least half an hour he had been picking away at her, criticising her map-reading skills, her organisational skills and . . . well her, in fact. It had taken her a while to accept he actually took pleasure in putting her down, making her seem stupid. Hermione knew that friends found his behaviour embarrassing and it made them feel awkward. She despised herself for putting up with it but, after ten years of marriage, their patterns were set. She no longer had the energy to argue back.

Habit, habit, thought Hermione, shifting in her seat. The leather sucked horribly under her legs. The irony was that her biggest fault, according to Leon, was that she was such a doormat. Always letting people take advantage of her. And now she had that familiar knotted feeling in her stomach, of tight nerves and disappointment at another day gone bad.

Hermione glanced at her watch, hearing the irritation in Leon's pointed silence. Twenty past eleven. She sighed, set her eyes on the middle distance and hoped for something to turn up, to make things go better.

*

The last bells of midday were clanging as they pulled into the village. Odd that a sound designed to gather people together should be so lonely, so plaintive. Montolieu looked like so many

other of the pretty mountain places they'd passed through in this part of the Languedoc. Wooden shutters, opened just a crack to let in a little of the August heat. Elegant narrow stone houses that gave directly onto the street. Tubs of red geraniums on window ledges and on scrubbed stone steps. A heavy sense of stillness, a lack of hurry.

A romantic place, Hermione thought, the sort of place to discover hand in hand. She glanced at Leon, registering the beads of sweat on his upper lip and the patchwork of tiny red cuts from shaving, and sighed. Romantic with someone else, she corrected herself. Romantic in a book. She glanced at the guidebook open on her lap and saw that Montolieu was famous for its many bookshops. She opened her mouth to say something to break the silence, then stopped. Leon's expression made it obvious anything she said would be wrong.

She closed the book and looked out of the window.

A cock-eyed sign welcomed tourists to PARKING DE L'EGLISE. The capital letters made her want to shout the word aloud: L'EGLISE – THE CHURCH. Leon was frowning, concentrating so as not to bump the wheels of his precious Xantia on the high kerb. He pulled into the nearest space, killed the engine, then tapped his fingers three times on the steering wheel, like he always did: one, two, three. Was it pride at a task accomplished? An excess of nervous energy? Relief? Hermione had never been sure.

She was conscious of him jabbing at the switches to shut the roof and windows, aware of the soft whirring of mechanisms in motion, the clunk of each window arriving in place. All very subtle. All very top-of-the-range.

Until Leon got out of the car, still without saying a word, she hadn't thought he'd keep the sulk going. The sound of his

door slamming was like a slap in the hot air. She assumed he was heading for the restaurant in the square opposite, but forced herself not to turn round in her seat to give him the satisfaction of seeing her watching.

Usually she'd feel upset, then blame herself for not averting it. But today, something inside her snapped. It was simply too hot and unfair and she couldn't summon the energy to move or follow or call out. She had done nothing wrong. She went along with what he wanted, did her best, but it was never good enough. Today, it didn't seem worth even trying.

She opened her door to let the air in, and sat quietly. Little by little, she started to feel better.

*

After fifteen minutes or so, she'd had her fill of the view and being looked at. Eyes behind net curtains. And if she stared any longer at the bizarre metal flamingos holding up the porch of the house opposite, Hermione knew she'd start laughing and would not be able to stop. In fact, she felt quite light-headed.

Finally, she glanced over to the square and saw Leon was sitting at a table, his back to the car, to her, drinking his wine and examining the menu with large look-at-me gestures. Hermione was surprised he hadn't gone ahead and ordered his meal too. He was waiting for her, she realised, having clearly decided to forgive and forget.

The normal pattern of things would be that Hermione would make the most of it. That she would hurry over and be grateful for the chance to put things right. But whether it was the sun or the stress of the holiday taking its toll, Hermione found herself rebelling. What, precisely, was she feeling

grateful for? That he wasn't going to continue to be a pain? That he wasn't going to carry on behaving unreasonably?

She wouldn't do it. Not today. Today Leon could wait. Wonder where she'd got to. Perhaps even worry something might have happened to her? The thought of it made her feel powerful. She was standing up for herself. He could wait.

Hermione got out of the car and turned to the church itself. It was the only place that looked open. She'd have a quick look inside. She was not a manipulative woman, but the idea came to her – if Leon complained at how long she'd kept him waiting for lunch – that she'd say she assumed he'd be pleased she was taking an interest in the local architecture.

The thought made her smile.

It was an ugly building. Fourteenth century? Fifteenth, maybe? Gargoyles with lewd mouths squatted around the edges of the roof. Unpleasant. Years of having her appearance criticised had made her self-conscious, so Hermione found herself pressing her T-shirt to her chest as if the stone watchers were leering down her cleavage. She pulled at her shorts too, to reveal less orange-peeled thigh. Leon said the backs of her legs were ugly.

Hermione didn't want to go in, not really. She didn't much like churches. But the thought of Leon watching her dither compelled her to hitch up her bag on to her shoulder and walk with purpose to the wooden door. It had a clumsy iron latch, the sort you'd expect to find in a National Trust cottage. She pushed down with her thumb. It didn't move. She tried again, this time giving the door a vicious little kick with her foot. A creak and she was in.

*

The ecclesiastical chill slipped over Hermione's bare arms and legs, the lingering smell of a Sunday service and damp.

As her eyes got used to the gloom, she realised that the church was much bigger than it appeared from the outside. Metal chandeliers hung from the rafters like fake wagon wheels in a country pub. Scenes of the crucifixion covered the walls, the reds and blues obscene against the grey of the stone. Beneath each tableau, thin candles burned in rows, their yellow flames giving no light or warmth. Faded scraps of paper were pinned on the walls, curt instructions on what to do and how to behave. Light a candle, drop a *centime* in the box. Pray for me.

Remember me.

Hermione supposed that her discomfort would fade once she was inside, playing the bona fide tourist, but in fact she felt nervous. One of 'her headaches', as Leon would put it. She put it down to the heat and too little to drink.

Clasping her hands in front of her, Hermione began to walk around with that shuffle particular to churches and art galleries, slow and steady and serious. The slap of her leather sandals was embarrassingly loud on the flagstones and the only sound except for the tick, tick of the electricity meter above the door.

Nerves sloshed at the pit of her stomach, intensifying with every step she took. Everything seemed unpleasant, threatening, rather than interesting. All these scenes of suffering and torture, nothing of faith or forgiveness. The pulpit seemed to lurch out from one of the pillars in the nave like a twisted dragon and when she screwed up her eyes, to test the truth of what she was seeing, she saw only images of hell and retribution.

The side chapel was no more pleasant, like a room in a giant doll's house, three-sided with the front open to the nave.

Wallpaper, broken furniture and everyday relics peppering the altars – an empty vase, flat-topped glass cases protecting scraps of material and feathers.

Protecting them from whom? From what? Those who came to worship unseen? It all repulsed her, made her want to smash it to pieces. She realised that she was twisting her wedding ring on her finger, round and round, making the skin underneath the gold sore and red.

By now, it was only the thought of Leon and the scene to come that was keeping Hermione in the church. She couldn't shake the idea she was being watched, the sense of activity just suspended, as if she'd interrupted something. She imagined that, as soon as she left, the air would whoosh back into place behind her. More than once she spun round, sure that someone else was there – a tourist who'd slipped in without her hearing or a local woman come to polish or pray – but there was no one.

Hermione found herself standing at the communion rail. She lifted her head and saw a bleeding Christ, nailed to his cross, and a starched white altar cloth embroidered with greens and golds. More oppressive was the army of plaster statues, like a fossilised congregation, stationed between her and the altar.

Their paint was ragged round the edges, chipped pastel pinks and yellows and sea-green. Saint André, Sainte Germana, Saint Jean, Saint Antoine, adult faces on three-quarter size bodies, as if they'd stopped growing before time. One in a monk's robe, a naked baby in one hand and a Bible in the other. One leaning on a staff, a lamb warming his dead feet. One clutching a skeleton's hand, sharp like a claw. But most of all it was their dead eyes, their claustrophobic eyes, which pressed into her, accusing her, judging her.

Suddenly, Hermione couldn't bear it a moment longer. Overwhelmed by a need to get out of the church, she turned and ran back down the nave, her leather sandals slipping on the smooth stones. Where was the door, why couldn't she find the door? And still the eyes were burning into her back, challenging her to stand her ground, to stand up for herself. But she'd forgotten how.

She didn't see Sainte Thérèse until it was too late. Hermione collided with the statue. Dazed, she touched her forehead with shocked fingers and found she was bleeding. She couldn't make sense of it. How could she possibly have missed seeing the statue when she came in? It was so much bigger than the others and set right in front of the door.

She raised her head.

The plaster face of the saint wore an expression of such serenity, such grace, that Hermione's fear evaporated. She felt her shoulders drop and heard a sigh, of relief or contentment, slip from between her lips. A cobweb was caught between the fingers on Sainte Thérèse's right hand which cradled the outline of a quill. No longer frightened, Hermione found herself reaching up to brush it away. It was an act of such intimacy, she found herself blushing.

And in that moment, no more than a pinprick of time, she was touched by a presence that was white and clear, as if something pure had crept inside her head and was pushing out all other sensations. Such lightness, such stillness. An absence of physical being, a calm and peaceful silence that seemed to go on for ever.

For a moment, she was looking into living eyes. Thérèse looking at her. Hermione smiled.

Then, it was over. Just the grey of the church and the tick,

tick of the electricity meter and herself, alone again, but at peace. Hermione had no idea what had happened, only that something had. And even though she didn't believe in living saints or spirits, she knew that her world had shifted.

Hermione pushed the hair out of her eyes, picked up her handbag, then opened the door and walked out into the Midi sun. Lost in the shadows or an act of deliberation, she did not notice her wedding ring lying on the cold floor at the feet of the saint.

*

Years later, friends would still talk about how Hermione came back from that French holiday a different woman. About how strange it was that, after years of putting up with Leon's bullying and belittling, she'd had the courage to send him packing. Walked out of a church in a place called Montolieu, called a taxi to the airport in Toulouse, bought a new ticket and flown home on her own. It was as if she'd got a new lease of life, they said. As if she'd got a bit of her old spirit back, they said.

You could see it in her eyes.

Author's Note



Along with 'Red Letter Day', this is another of the earliest stories I wrote set in the Languedoc.

In the 1990s, when we were discovering Carcassonne, we spent many summer weekends driving from village to village, exploring the region. We fell in love with Montolieu – known as the 'village of books' – a pretty place north-west of Carcassonne. Like most French towns in the Aude, large and small, the church is at the heart of the community and unlike their Protestant counterparts, Catholic churches are usually colourful affairs – plaster saints, vivid paintings, richly decorated.

There are several Saint Teresas. Saint Teresa d'Ávila, a sixteenth-century Spanish saint, has a quill and book as her symbol and, among her various responsibilities, she is the patron saint of those in need of grace.

Reading this again after ten years – and after the publication of *Labyrinth*, *Sepulchre* and *Citadel* – I found it interesting to see how I was already trying out themes that were to become so important to me: the connection of history and emotion; the idea that architecture and landscape influences storytelling; the sense that reality can be momentarily suspended.

A version of this story was first published in *Woman & Home* magazine in 2005.