

WE ALL RAN  
*into the*  
SUNLIGHT



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*into the*  
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For Aurea Carpenter



Je dis: ma Mère.  
Et c'est à vous que je pense, ô Maison  
Maison des beaux étés obscurs de mon enfance.

*I say: Mother.  
And my thoughts are of you, oh House  
House of the lovely dark summers of my childhood.*

**Oscar Milosz**







PROLOGUE  
THE ENGLISH COUPLE  
LUCIE  
BASEEMA  
DANIEL  
SYLVIE  
EPILOGUE





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# PROLOGUE

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*Canas, South-West France, 1985*

From the middle of June that summer the heat went up into the high thirties and stayed there, so that nothing much happened in the village and nobody moved. People sat in their chairs with their mouths hanging open. Most of the time they slept. In the village shop, the water supplies and the ice creams ran out long before the delivery came on a Monday afternoon. Only right at the end of August, when the holidays were over and the motorways clogged with cars going home, did a wind pick up off the sea. It came in quite violently; clearing the heat out of the sky and making the sea go a deep blue far out. Then it rose over the sand dunes and the dry grasses on the floodplain. It moved through the swinging doors of the roadside cafés that lined the motorway on its final stretch to the Spanish border, until it came to where the vineyards were, some twenty miles from the coast, which was where the land began to rise into the hills.

The wind brought with it relief, and a kind of foreboding. In the village the children felt it. Even the cicadas might have felt it for it went very quiet all of a sudden as if, on the plane trees lining the main road, they had ceased their sucking of the sap and taken a pause, while the leaves turned in on each other with whispering relief and the rooks, startled out of their slumber, crashed around madly then stretched their wings and flew,

croaking resentfully, at the sun.

There was only one road into Canas then, and you had to turn round in the square and drive out again with the church on your left this time and the east wall of the chateau rising up to your right. You could sit at the café, at a table under the lime trees, and that wall would dominate the square, blocking the afternoon sun. It was like a medieval fort, with only one window near the top. But if the shutters were open, which they often were in those days, and the light was right, you could look up through the balcony railings and see in through the old panes to the giant rose on the ceiling of Lucie Borja's bedroom.

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Things changed that August day. Things changed in a way that no one would want to talk about in years to come. There was the heat, and then the air coming in like that, lifting the dust from the ground in the chateau courtyard, and nuzzling up to the front walls.

Lucie withdrew from the balcony and into the quiet of her bedroom. When her eyes had adjusted to the light she saw that Daniel was there – barefoot and silent; he was standing in the doorway.

'Come in,' she whispered and he stepped forward with the birthday present in his hand.

'It's not much,' he said. 'It's not as if there's any choice here though.' He stood beside her while she untied the ribbon and counted the almonds out on the bed. He'd tied them in a muslin cloth using a sprig of olive he'd got from the courtyard, and Lucie made a fuss of this, bending over

with enthusiasm and attaching all kinds of importance to what was never really there.

‘Chocolates would have melted,’ said Daniel. He was nineteen. He was wiry, and dark-skinned and his eyes were a pale greeny blue, like pebbles of washed-up glass. His mother gazed up at him.

‘Happy birthday,’ he said, but his voice had no life in it. ‘I’ve got to go because Sylvie’s coming to help us prepare.’

‘That’s fine,’ said Lucie, with her watery eyes. ‘But will she stay for the party? And is Frederic coming?’

‘Later,’ Daniel said. ‘He’s up on the heath at the moment, with the flying club. They’ve got a sea plane coming in up there for fuel.’

‘Are the fires still burning on the hills, Daniel?’

‘Yes, Maman,’ he said, quietly, ‘there’s an arsonist up there. He’s setting fires on the hills, and now there’s a wind picking up. It will only get worse through the afternoon.’

She reached for his hand and held it; rubbing the smooth skin with her thumb. ‘It won’t come for us though, Daniel. Nothing will come to disturb us on this night. Your poor Maman is getting old. But tonight we will eat all of your favourite things under the olive trees in the courtyard.’

‘Me, Frederic and Sylvie won’t stay for the whole meal,’ said Daniel, backing away towards the door.

‘Of course. I knew that. When does Frederic leave?’

‘Monday,’ said Daniel.

Two days, thought Lucie. ‘I imagine that Sylvie will miss her brother when he goes,’ she said. ‘And you too.’

‘Happy birthday,’ he said.

‘Thank you, my love.’ Lucie smiled at her son’s back as he turned to go.

And then he was gone, walking quickly in the corridor and down the wide stairs on the hard pads of his feet.

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‘Am I too early?’ said Sylvie as she reached where Daniel was standing outside with one leg up against the wall. In the courtyard it was bright; intensely white, and Sylvie, in a floral dress, put her hand up to shield her eyes.

‘It doesn’t matter much,’ he said. ‘Early or late, it makes no difference to anyone.’

He shrugged and ground his cigarette into the step. Sylvie laughed. She had braces, which she did her best to hide, but her freckled face, in its corral of wild black hair, was almost pretty.

‘I don’t mean it doesn’t matter much to me,’ said Daniel, touching her on the shoulder to make her feel more at ease. ‘I just mean it doesn’t matter much to this place. Nothing makes any difference here.’

‘Except this,’ said Sylvie, taking the plastic wallet from the bag slung across her hip.

‘You went to Béziers,’ he said, excitedly.

‘It’s really good stuff. It was easy.’

‘Same guy?’

‘Same as always. Nice guy.’

‘Did your dad notice you’d taken the car?’

Sylvie blushed, shook her hair forward, and then busied herself lighting a cigarette which she held out far from her body.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Daniel grinned.



‘It doesn’t matter at all,’ she said. ‘Nothing does. Right?’

He kissed her once, very quickly, on the cheek. Then he drew a green stem of marijuana from inside the wallet and held it under his nose.

‘Mother of Christ,’ he whispered, carefully putting it back into the pouch. It was how they’d got through this summer, he and his two friends from the village, smoking pot in the garden room across the courtyard from the chateau. Week after week, singing and laughing in there, rolling up smoke after smoke so the nights could go on, leading them on through the games and the psychedelic frogs towards the dry light of dawn.

‘You ok, Daniel?’

‘I’m fine,’ he said, and he swallowed, his cheeks sucked right in as he put the wallet of grass in the pocket of his shorts. In his other pocket he flicked his lighter on and off and after a while Sylvie put her hand into his.

‘You’re going to miss him. We all are. It won’t be the same.’

Daniel laughed coldly.

‘You are going to miss him, Daniel?’

‘Huh!’ he muttered, taking his hand back and kicking the stones at his feet. ‘He shouldn’t be joining the bloody army. I wouldn’t go, not for anything. I don’t understand Frederic. Why he just takes these things lying down.’

‘That’s not how it was... he *wants* to go.’

‘It’s fine,’ said Daniel, and he stuck his jaw forward and looked out across the vineyard. There was silence then. The heat came down. The cicadas were shrill in the grass. Sylvie was squinting as she looked at him.

‘Is Arnaud here?’

‘He went to town in the car.’

‘Let’s go see if your mother needs help,’ she said, pulling the pocket of his shorts playfully, and then she walked ahead of him, grinning back at his solemn face.

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By seven the light was pink-tinted and the midges were out and dancing around their heads. Lucie Borja stood on the steps with her ankles pressed together in little cream shoes. Daniel and Sylvie were carrying the dining-room table through the front doors and down to the olive trees, Daniel with his end of the table behind his back, Sylvie struggling as she came behind.

They bent beneath the trees and placed the table down. Sylvie flopped down over it. Lucie took in a breath of air between her teeth. It was right to bring the table outside. There was more air in the courtyard than round the back in the garden; it was a perfect fit between the four trees and soon they would hang the Chinese lanterns.

She watched Daniel standing back now, a little way off, looking up to the road that wound up through the pine trees onto the heath. On a grassy plateau up there was a runway, a turning field and a small hangar for the planes used by the flying club. The runway went from one end of the plateau to the other, and Frederic was up there cleaning the planes, helping out with the fuel. It was manly work and Lucie knew that Daniel wanted to be up there with him, not here with his mother. She wondered again about his restlessness and agitation. He was dreaming, perhaps plotting his own escape, and she felt the tears prick – always tears on a birthday; she was much too sentimental

– so she smoothed the linen on her hips and walked down the steps towards them.

‘Oh, Daniel, Sylvie,’ she croaked, ‘how beautiful this looks. We should take a picture, no? Shall we light the lanterns, Daniel, *chéri*?’

‘After dark,’ he said, without looking at her, and Lucie felt the snub and that same old cold feeling, which was what propelled her from the edge of the table, walking towards him when her ankle gave on the bald patch of ground and the soft outer edge of her foot caved in. The fall wasn’t a bad one, but Daniel didn’t go to his mother, and the sound she made was a sound like no other sound he had heard. Only a child, only a baby, made a sound like that, thought Daniel, clapping his hands over his ears as he ran from his mother and across the courtyard into the garden room.

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At three in the morning, Lucie’s eyes flicked open. She lay very still. Then she flexed the ankle and felt to the end of the bed for her dressing gown.

In the room next door, her husband was snoring, his spirit sunk in the food and drink from the party. It would take an age to wake him. She kept close to the wall, clutching the handrail on the stairs. She couldn’t smell the fire but she knew it was there, feeding like a lion in a corner of the kitchen. She moved quickly, talking to herself as she went. So they may have forgotten to check the gas rings; something might have been left on, some faulty electrical application. You could never trust the electricians; the place was wired in a haphazard way and the mice chewed

through everything. But the fire wasn't in the kitchen, and Lucie had known that before she had even left her room. She came to the bottom of the stairs, and hobbled slightly across the hall, folding her dressing gown across her chest.

She slipped out of the kitchen door, along the front of the house, down the steps and through the keyhole archway, and down towards the garden room. The air was bitter. She stopped to breathe and she looked up at the stars and the white moon and there was nothing else – no wisps of cloud, no planes in the air – and it felt for a moment as if it was she alone standing on the earth right now, just Lucie Borja and all her stories, standing still under this big awful sky. She heard them singing as they had done earlier in the evening. *Bon an-ni-ver-saire...* like children singing from a colourful bank on the far side of her memory.

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'*Fucking!*' her husband had said – just to take the wind right out of her mouth, just to take her fingertips off that napkin for a moment. Arnaud had been in high spirits at the dinner, better when the cheese and the pile of cherries dipped in chocolate arrived and everyone cooed and gathered around. The sugar went to their brains. The summer was killing them, it was true. Lucie stood up to make coffee.

There were four of them left at the table by then – the chef from the pizzeria had come and perched on the edge with his wine and cheese and Daniel, Sylvie and Frederic had gone to the garden room. Arnaud reckoned he'd have a fight on his hands to ask one of them to part with a

cigarette but still he had gone off to find them, and the rest of the party had gone a bit quiet at the table.

He came back pale and lurching. ‘I couldn’t find anything to smoke,’ he said. ‘All the rooms in the chateau. Nothing, anywhere, to smoke.’

He was sweating.

‘I thought they were *fighting*, Lucie. It was dark in there. They seemed to be fighting. Rolling over. Daniel was growling.’

‘*Bon an-ni-ver-saire...*’

‘Lucie!’

Her sixtieth birthday. The lanterns were pale pink and very still in the trees.

‘They’ve always fought, those two – since childhood, Arnaud.’

‘Sylvie was passed out on the floor by the sofa... It was just the boys. Lucie, listen to me!’ But Arnaud stopped because he couldn’t say what he’d seen. She wouldn’t have let him, either.

‘There is coffee. Could you bring the coffee cups, Arnaud?’ she said and she went indoors then and straight up the staircase and up to the air on her balcony. The doctor, who had come for the supper, had lined her medicine cabinet with enough sedative to shush all the gossips in the village. She took one of these sedatives now and stood for a few moments breathing and then she sat on the edge of her bed and reflected on how the evening had gone, how well the food had been done; how subtle the cheese.

She took the air and she felt the softness in her head, and there was nothing to be thought about then, except sleep, which came and then went – like a coverlet being stripped away – to leave her with this fear that fluttered

around her heart as she walked through the garden with the grass rasping around her ankles.

She kept walking, her face on the door to the garden room, her shoulders hunched forward. She opened the door and felt the thickness of air behind it; in her throat and eyes the smoke was bitter and she heard Daniel coughing, saw the flames licking yellow in the seat of the old horsehair sofa and leaping in the curtains above it. There was Sylvie on the floor by the sofa, drugged and sleeping, and Daniel was crawling towards her, shouting for her to wake up, fanning his arms over the sofa. Lucie's eyes glazed. She took in the chaos through the smoke in the room. She saw a chair broken and tipped over.

Daniel bent down to Sylvie with a towel over his head, his intention to move her outside to safety, but Lucie screamed and ran for her son, and the old paraffin lamp on the floor burst and flamed into Sylvie's hair.

Daniel's shoulders rounded over Sylvie's face; he battled the flames with his hands and screamed at his mother to get out as he stumbled with Sylvie down to the pool. Lucie tripped after him, out of the doorway, into the dark hiss of the garden.

'Do something!' he yelled, running back up the grass towards her. 'Get Frederic. He's in the fucking bathroom!'

His eyes were wide open, and red. Lucie knew that he was gone now; he was a million miles from where she was; Daniel, beloved, her little boy.

'I can't,' she whimpered. 'I...'

'You can't?'

The sweat was pouring from his face.

'Why can't you?' The muscle in his jaw was protruding

like a knuckle. 'What's wrong with you? What's wrong with *us*?' he rasped.

'I've done everything to protect you, Daniel,' she said. 'I've nothing left.'

Lucie felt her heart break then as her son ran back into the darkness. Arnaud was coming up behind her, running, his belly leaping from side to side. He was shouting, cursing God. He was waving something that looked like a piece of cloth.

'Frederic's in there, Lucie. Quick!'

He pointed to the bathroom, adjacent to the garden room. They had made it for Daniel. En suite. There was a door from the bathroom onto the courtyard and Arnaud had tried to get in that way to get some water to put out the fire. Now she turned after her husband and followed him in, running her hands on the wall in search of the light switch. But the light was already on in the bathroom. Light like at the circus. And the legs were hanging behind her head. She turned. She could hear Arnaud moaning, bending over, his head in his hands. The feet were there, like long brown rats dangling from the ceiling. He wasn't wearing shoes. And he wasn't wearing any socks. It was only his jeans torn around the ankles, and they were stained with oil and engine fuel.

The old couple backed out of the bathroom together and separated. Lucie's legs were moving beneath her nightdress to the outside tap to turn on the hose. She bent to collect up a handful of gravel, her thought to throw something at the fire; if she could find the strength, *Saint Perpetua*, to throw a handful of these little stones.

Then silence. A deep and total silence. And an odd numbing sensation, a fizz, like lemonade, up to the brain.

Lucie hit the ground, which smelt of dry limestone rock. She lay on the ground and the base stones of the chateau rose up like boulders on the overgrown grass.