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Love and the Maiden

Marie-Jeanne's cradle stood under a broad-canopied olive tree some people claimed was over eight hundred years old, something the tree would neither confirm nor deny (at its age, one did not comment on how old one was).

She was giggling at the silvery rustling of the leaves, which were smiling in the gentle Pontias breeze. The wind was a local phenomenon, a last taste of magic in a century seemingly shorn of it. It was the steady breath of the four mountains—Essaillon, Garde Grosse, Saint Jaume, and Vaux—that shielded the town of Nyons like sentinels. The mountains breathed out in the morning, filling the valley of the river Eygues with the scent of herbs and the cool air of upland nights, always at the same time of day for precisely half an hour, and inhaled again after sundown every evening. This cool stream of air seemed to rise in the calanques and salty bays of the distant sea. It brought with it fragrances of lavender and mint and drove the searing heat from the day.

From the large kitchen—the main living space in every *mazet* in the Drôme Provençale, a place for cooking, chatting, staying silent, being born, and waiting for the end to

come—Aimée was able to keep an eye on her granddaughter's cradle as she shuttled back and forth between the wood-fired stove and the table.

Aimée placed sliced potatoes, black Tanche olives, eggplants, and fresh pink garlic in a well-worn fluted baking tin; drizzled the vegetables with silky, hay-green olive oil; and scooped chunks of the local *fromagerie*'s fresh goat cheese from a clay dish. Last, she rubbed some sprigs of lime-scented wild thyme she'd picked the previous evening between her fingers.

A pan of milk was cooling on the windowsill. It would soon be time. Marie-Jeanne was quite capable of making her feelings known if her grandmother was too slow getting lunch ready.

Every time Aimée turned her face toward her granddaughter, her thousand sharp wrinkles softened into a far younger complexion.

The proud old olive tree went on singing its chanson to the little girl under its boughs. It hummed the secret song of the cicadas—*your light makes me sing*. It tickled her nose and cheeks with a dappling of shadows and delighted in the tiny fingers clutching at the breeze and in the waves of gurgling, heartfelt laughter issuing from her tummy.

Marie-Jeanne and Aimée. Each meant the world to the other.

It was love.

I watched Aimée Claudel, whom I had last touched many years ago, but she couldn't see me. Everyone knows me, but none can see me. I'm that thing you call love.

I came to Marie-Jeanne's grandmother early in her life.

She was barely thirteen at the time. It was summertime then, too—the record-breaking summer of 1911. Life took place outdoors. For weeks on end, this bright land boiled under the sun. After laboring since before sunrise, people whiled away the evening hours in blissful idleness. That summer was sweet and redolent with the melodies and whisperings of the leaves of the olive trees. The grasshoppers chirped their silvery tunes. And oh, the soft fall of the figs at night! The whole summer was like a dazzling fever.

I placed my burden on so many people that summer. How heavily I was to weigh on them only a few years later.

Aimée fell in love with a boy who used to sing as he worked in her father's milking parlor. First he became a soldier; in the Great War he became a man. He didn't return for many years and when he did, his boyish nature had retreated deep inside him, along with all his songs and all his colorful cheer. The mountains were so silent, but the roaring inside him was so loud. As his wife, Aimée spent the rest of her life exhuming his buried soul. She sang soft lullabies to him in the night when he screamed, chased the dullness from his eyes with patience, and fed him hot onion soup in the evenings when he drank. In the quiet, endless winter nights she warmed her husband's body with her bare skin to calm his incessant shivering. Her skin became softer and softer over the years, ever thinner, even as it burst with emotions and energy and cares. With life itself.

Back in the summer of 1911 I touched Aimée's skin, running my hands down her body from top to toe. She was naked and had just bathed in the Eygues's shimmering turquoise waters as they flowed toward the calm and mighty Rhône. She was

beautiful, her straight back a symbol of her personality and fortitude, and she had a stout, tightly coiled soul. I poured a great deal of myself into her, maybe too much. Maybe I was in love with her—lovers pay no heed to how much they give, which is usually more than is desired. This was partly why I returned to see her, on the day the events you are going to hear about took place.

Aimée spent her whole life rescuing the lost boy inside the man. Every single day. I'd given her such an enormous capacity for love, and this capacity stirred the defiance and kindness in her nature that made her the woman she was.

When the second war began to rage, it came to Nyons too. Yes, it hurts, the memory of boots ringing out on the cobbles and the voices of boys doing drills on the Place des Arcades, blinded by the southern light, bothered by the Mediterranean wind, dazed by hopeless, pointless exercises. What had these marching men done with what I'd bestowed on them? They too had been granted love. Where had I gone wrong?

Those were the years I doubted myself. Those were the years when I almost lost hope. What were people doing to one another? It was all so unnecessary.

Aimée, her husband, and their daughter, Renée, fled to Dieulefit to join the Resistance. One thousand five hundred refugees found a safe haven in Dieulefit—Jewish children and adults, artists and writers, Louis Aragon and Elsa Triolet, the German painter Wols. Not one of those refugees was ever betrayed by the inhabitants. Not a single one was deported. Every time their pursuers swept through the village, those in hiding would be spirited away through the night, on carts

and wagons and along secret mountain paths and wild boar tracks, to other farms. Farther and farther they traveled, into the mountains and valleys, into the gorges of the Baronnies, into the perilous side valleys of the Eygues, along the twisting Angèle valley, into the depths of the Oules and the hidden folds of the Lance. With the help of council secretary Jeanne Barnier, Aimée faked over a thousand sets of identity papers.

That strong backbone. In such circumstances, it takes an inner light to cope. Courage and resilience, honor and empathy, that stretched far back into her childhood.

The war passed, and Aimée returned to her valley near Nyons at the foot of Mont Vaux. Then one day, after twenty years spent between the four mountains, summer meadows and winter fires, vines and streams, olive trees and lavender fields, apricot groves and purple-flowering Judas trees, my sister Death came along. She took away Aimée's singing milk boy to continue his journey elsewhere. His name was Jean-Marie.

Next, Fate took her daughter and her son-in-law, hurling them off a road into a ravine. Even now, as I look into Aimée's heart, beating in her chest as she moves back and forth across the old patinaed tiles between the stove and the table, her hands reach automatically for four sets of cutlery before she realizes she needs only one.

Hearts, you see, are like beautiful, perfectly glazed earthenware cups at first, but over the years they get cracked and nicked. Hearts break once, twice, repeatedly, and each time you do your best to put them back together again, trying to live with the wounds, patching them up with hope and tears. How I admire you for not giving up on me.

I inspected Aimée's heart and saw it was shattered. That was my doing. I do not spare people. I force them to depend on what they hate and to lose what they need.

The nicks in the cup continued to grow deeper, and occasionally Aimée would cut her lip on a sharp edge. Her skin wept when she heard a song, caught a whiff of sheep's milk and the earthy smell of autumn soil; whenever she unwittingly rolled over onto the cold, empty side of the bed; each time the bells of St. Vincent's struck eleven with the same short, sharp metallic chime as at Jean-Marie's funeral.

Neither love nor death recognizes such a thing as justice. What wouldn't I have done to change my nature? I was ashamed, and maybe it was that shame that made me bend over the cradle to avoid the sight of the sharp edges and Aimée's weeping skin. Maybe what followed was the consequence, the price I had to pay.

"Hello, Marie-Jeanne," I whispered.