

HOTEL BEAU RIVAGE
1918*by Linda Lappin*

The train pulled on through the blizzard. Katherine pressed the small of her back against the seat and took short, tremulous breaths to keep herself from coughing. The stuffy air in the compartment was pervaded by the sickening smell of mothballs, perspiration, and wet galoshes wafting forth from the gentleman in the gray overcoat sitting opposite her. At Calais, he had poked in his head with a hearty, "Alone madame?" then bundled in and plopped down before she could protest. He now snoozed blissfully, a newspaper spread over his face, snuffling beneath a map of the latest German offensive, while the pool of melted snow at his feet slowly seeped towards her side of the compartment.

If Ida had been there, she would have shooed him away and dried the puddle, but luckily or unluckily, Ida's request for a visa had been denied and she was forced to stay behind. She was now in Katherine's flat in Old Church Street, watching over Katherine's cat.

His eyes met Katherine's with uncanny frankness and he smiled hideously, then brought his yellow hand to his lips to blow her a lecherous kiss.

Murry could not be trusted with such an important task. There was no room for a pet at his lodgings in Redcliff Road and he was too busy with his new job at the War Office to bother with a cat. To Katherine, Ida's absence was cause for rejoicing. She hoped Murry might possibly be prompted to join her in Bandol—knowing that she was ill and alone while traveling abroad, without Ida's assistance. That was

not likely to be soon. Murry's war work was considered vital—it might be months before he could obtain leave. Still, she had begged Ida not to make a second request for a visa and Ida, reluctantly, had agreed.

Outside the snow swirled down through the boughs of skeletal trees. The country road following the tracks was quickly filling in with white. A small fox, or perhaps a hare, bounded across a field, leaving a jagged trail in the snow. Yet the quiet countryside could not assuage Katherine's restlessness. She had been sitting there for hours. She would be sitting for hours more. The train stopped in every station on the line where the engine died with a groan. After an interminable wait, it lurched to life again, shunting five yards forward; five yards back, then crept on to the next stop. No one knew the reason for the delay. It was the war, they said.

She yearned for something hot to drink, but the restaurant car was closed. There was not a cup of tea to be had anywhere on the train. That too, because of the war. Whatever was wrong these days, it was the war, and one had to be resigned to it.

Her feet burned, her back ached, her head throbbed. She shifted in her seat to soothe a cramped knee and frowned as she thought that Ida would not be there tonight to massage her painful tendons. How would she manage all those heavy bags? Perhaps it was unwise of her to venture so far into France alone with the war on. But the doctors had insisted she



could not weather another English winter without grave risks to her health. And look at it now! The worst snow storm in over twenty years. Just imagine what it was like in London.

She prayed she would be able to manage well enough. She was, after all, an old hand at traveling, and this wasn't her first trip alone abroad in war time. She had already challenged the French border officials when she had followed Francis Carco to the front two years ago. There in the little town of Gray, she had spent three days in a tawdry pension under a false name, waiting for her lover Carco to knock at the door, as she imagined bullets whizzing by the window. What an adventure! As for Carco! Whatever had she seen in him? He was no war hero, only the postman for a bakery unit, and not even much of a writer. It was only to rankle Murry that she had consented to that rendezvous, which had been so disappointing in the end. And then Carco had insulted and offended them both. What was Murry doing now, she wondered, scribbling at his desk at the War Office, writing clever phrases for recruitment posters? Or wooing that vixen Lady Ottoline who once claimed to be her friend? Now that Murry was in service to his country, he could not leave England to follow her to France, but he could gad about London, making love to all her so-called friends. Upon her return, she would put an end to all that, by marrying Murry, once her divorce from George Bowden came through at last. *That* had been a terrible mistake: marrying Bowden on the spur of the moment, simply because he adored her and seemed so well-connected. Well, of course, that wasn't the *real* reason she had let George rush her to the altar. The real reason had been the fatherless child in her womb, which she had lost later in Germany, and that had all been Mother's fault. She would never have miscarried if Mother hadn't sent her to that dreadful spa to get her away from Ida.

George Bowden. The timbre of his tenor voice had always grated on her nerves, but he had seemed so manly and sophisticated and by marrying him she had thought she might punish and escape her family. When one is young, desperate, friendless and penniless, half-baked solutions sometimes seem practical, even auspicious. Their marriage had not even lasted 24 hours before she had flown the coop with Ida's assistance. How they had laughed about it then. Good God, how many years ago was that, and why was she thinking of George Bowden?

She sighed and suddenly missed Ida, upon whose dumpy bosom she often rested her small sleek head. It was going to take all her reserves of courage and energy to see herself through this time alone in France. Courage she had plenty. Energy much less. At least she was returning to a hotel where the owner knew her well. Madame Galle would surely fatten her up again on butter and cream, quite unavailable in England with the rationing, and help her replenish her strength. Katherine had written ahead to reserve the same room which she and Murry had occupied during their last visit to Bandol before moving out to the Villa Pauline on the edge of town.

She smiled thinking of the villa where she and Murry had been so happy together: the crisp sheets scented with lavender, the gleaming marble floor splashed with sunlight, the mimosa trees outside the window frothing yellow in the sea breeze. She pictured the two of them sitting at the breakfast table, surrounded by piles of books and papers, she so seductive in her emerald kimono, Murry, looking so dignified in his burgundy-striped silk dressing gown, doing his work, she hers—the table strewn with egg shells and milk bottles and empty pots of *crème fraîche*. Murry standing before the mirror of the armoire asking anxiously, "Have they cut my hair too short?" At her negative reply, "Then have they left

it too long?" She chuckled remembering this scene, then felt something snag in her chest. The sting of tears astonished her. No one would ever understand why such a scene was her ideal of domestic bliss. And now how much time would pass before she would see Murry again? This trip to France, they had vowed, would be her last trip alone. He had promised her that after they were married, hopefully in May, or as soon as the divorce came through, he would never allow her to travel abroad again without him.

The dry air tickled her throat. She coughed with a wheezing raucous croak, most unladylike, downright disgusting. The drowsing gentleman grumbled and twitched beneath his newspaper. Alone or not, thought Katherine, as she observed the corpulent form slumped across from her, whatever happened, she had a secret friend, a hidden helper, a pistol purchased just before departure on the advice of her father. *My dear girl*, he had urged in a letter from Wellington, *for heaven's sake, get a gun and learn to shoot*. Father was so practical about that sort of thing. Who would imagine that this delightful London lady in her cloche hat and gray tweed traveling suit was packing a pistol in her handbag? She imagined pulling it out now and pointing the polished blue barrel at the snoring gentleman. Catching a glimpse of her reflection in the dark window as the train threaded a tunnel, she nodded slyly to herself. With a flask of brandy in her overcoat pocket and a pistol in her purse, this little New Zealander was ready for anything.

They reached Marseille at one o'clock. Here it was sunny, though the sky was slaked with gray and a mistral was blowing. The station was crowded with soldiers on leave, and peasants transporting baskets of cabbages and onions. Few civilians, even fewer women, milled about, trying to get somewhere on non-existent trains for nothing was running on schedule, and all the signs indicating platforms were wrong. A railway official informed her that the express for Bandol was not due in for another two hours, at least.

There were three queues to wait in. One for her ticket; another to check her visa; a third to collect her trunk. Before facing such enervating tests of strength, she craved refreshment, but there was not a speck of food left in the station. The station buffet was cleaned out. Not even an orange vendor or a coffee wagon. There were no oranges because of the war, no coffee, either, of course, and no place to sit down. Every bench along the quays, every chair at the buffet was occupied, mainly by soldiers, hundreds of young men, their rucksacks and duffle bags piled in huge pyramids against the station wall. Whenever she saw soldiers she thought of her dear brother Leslie, dead in the war, whose face once shone among hapless ranks like these. She singled out a few boys to study: rough country lads, ruddy faces tinged with fear, pocked with gonorrhoea. They had not yet become names in newsprint, numbers in a ledger. This war was such a waste of youthful virility.

She got through the queues all right, turned her trunk over to a porter, and registered it for the next leg of the trip, praying she would find it again once she got to Bandol. Then she dragged her remaining bags down to the end of the platform where the first class carriages would be when the train came in. From here the tracks led out of the station, through a deposit area where abandoned cars with shattered windows lay on dead sidetracks. Beyond, the black mouth of a tunnel beckoned.

Piling her bags together, she perched herself on top, wrapped herself in her cashmere shawl, a gift from Ida in their school days. As she tied the shawl round her shoulders, a few beads from the fringe slipped off to the ground and one rolled over the edge of the platform. She frowned. How was it that Ida had not noticed the frayed fringe and mended



it before packing her things? That was the sort of detail she counted on Ida to perform. Katherine gathered up the loose beads and put them in her pocket, then tied the silken tassels in a knot to keep them from unraveling any further.

Now that she was settled, she decided to dig out her emergency provisions, for she knew Ida must have packed some biscuits. Rummaging through her carpet bag, she found a packet containing a tin of French butter biscuits, imported from Normandy, five times the price of ordinary English biscuits. Imagine buying imported French biscuits for someone on their way to France. And with a war on! That was just like Ida to have no practical sense. Besides it was Katherine's own money she had squandered. Katherine opened the tin and took out just one. The delicious biscuit crumbled in her mouth bringing welcome satisfaction. Smacking her lips, she took out another biscuit, forgiving Ida and even blessing her for this extravagance. The biscuits made her thirsty, but her water bottle was nearly empty, and she knew she must save the rest for her journey. But she had hardly touched the brandy. She took a discreet sip from the silver traveling flask hidden in the secret vest pocket Ida had sewn into the lining of her coat. After all, she was alone on the platform, and it was a while before departure time. She needed a little something. The brandy burned her parched throat and she coughed again.

She took out her copy of the *Times Literary Supplement*, shook it open to Murry's latest review, imagining a conversation with him as she began to read. *I do so agree with you entirely, but my darling why do you praise such dreadful prose?... Smoothing out a crease in the page, she sniffed the pungent scent of a cheap French cigarette. Looking up, she glimpsed two male legs encased in khaki standing within the rim of her vision.*

What now? she thought. With all the space on the platform, some fellow had glued himself to her. Wherever had he come from? Perhaps from the maze of tracks just beyond the platform leading away from the station. She glanced down the quay towards the crowded atrium. She and the gentleman were quite alone.

Why is it women are unable to travel without this sort of nuisance? She liked being looked at by men, she knew she was attractive, but she did not like to be stalked in such a way. She did not want to give him the satisfaction of looking at him directly for he might take that as an invitation. At any moment he would slink over and simper "Vous êtes seule madame" offer help or perhaps a cigarette. She held her breath and waited, pretending to peruse the page. The legs inched closer. She heard the man humming under his breath in an insidious manner. If he moved in just another foot or so, she could reach out and give him a chop in the knee. Perhaps he wants to steal my bag, she thought. Clutching her purse with pistol to her breast, she jerked her head round to challenge him, eye to furious eye.

She was startled by the paltry figure leaning on a nearby column. The soldier was not even looking in her direction, but was gazing out toward the tunnel. The man's face was gaunt with jaundice, his cheeks sunken, his hair a colorless streak plastered to his scalp. One shoulder stooped askew, beneath it dangled an empty sleeve. He turned to stare at her blankly. It seemed to her he resembled someone she once knew long ago, but could not place.

Their confrontation was cut short, for a whistle blew and a train chugged through the tunnel onto the adjacent track. As the great engine shut down, the brakes screeched, a huge cloud of soot billowed from the smokestack, filling her eyes and nostrils with black grit. She covered her face with her handkerchief and coughed. This time she felt something rip behind her left shoulder blade. She coughed again, to see if the pain repeated

itself, and there it was, a tiny tear in her flesh.

Wiping the soot out of her eyes, she saw the train doors burst open, releasing a mob of soldiers, half drunk, shouting and singing, pouring down the platform into the main body of the station. Home on leave from the trenches, she thought, still vertical and intact, unlike beloved Leslie. Tears blurred her eyes as her lips murmured his name. She blinked and glanced again at the one-armed soldier. Puzzled, she saw that the man had gone. She scanned the empty platform, and surmised that he must have headed out of the station, on across the tracks.

Headlights glared in the tunnel as another train emerged and lumbered onto her quay belching soot. The express to Bandol had arrived. A small crowd gathered around the second and third class carriages. She rose, collected her things and dragged them towards a first class carriage, where a handful of people disembarked. As she was about to climb on, there was a sudden uproar down at the other end of the platform near the third class carriages and she was dismayed to see the horde of drunken soldiers now rushing toward her train. The men ran along the quay, pushing people out of the way, jumping up to knock on the train windows, leaping aboard at every door. Horrified, she watched as civilian passengers and their bags were thrown off onto the platform. The soldiers were taking possession of the train, but there were still several cars between her and the shouting mob. Perhaps they would not invade the first class carriages. She threw her bags on and scrambled up, just as a soldier a few cars down spotted her and bellowed, "Madame, arretez-vous!"

The first compartment was locked, so was the second. The men had almost reached her carriage. She could hear the thundering of their boots down the corridor of the next car. There was shouting on the platform. Frantic, she tried the third compartment. The door was stuck, but she put all her weight on it and pushed. She stumbled forward as it swung open, nearly landing in the lap of a young officer sitting by the window with a huge dog at his feet. The dog snapped viciously as Katherine groped to regain her balance, and the officer yanked it back on its leash, giving a harsh command in an unfamiliar language. There were five other men in the compartment, all wearing officers' uniforms with braided epaulets and cutlasses lashed to the waist. They looked at her astonished. She saw immediately that they were neither French nor English. For one wild moment she feared they might be Germans.

"S'il vous plaît," she began, fixing her eyes on the man holding the dog. "Is there a seat free? Please, I am not well. I must join my husband in Bandol tonight."

Before they could reply, three French soldiers burst into the carriage from the next car and stormed into their compartment.

"This train has been requisitioned. You must get off," barked one, grabbing her from behind by the waist, ready to hoist her off like a pack of rugs.

Katherine opened her mouth to scream but all that came out was a strangled gasp.

One of the officers in the compartment jumped to his feet and shouted in clipped, guttural French, "That is my wife. She has joined me here for my period of leave. Release her immediately, otherwise you will have me to deal with," and he drew his cutlass with a flourish. The other men placed their hands on their decorative scabbards, and at this signal the dog growled. The fellow holding the dog slackened the chain and the animal strained forward, its black lip curled to reveal formidable incisors.

Katherine felt a thrill of terror as her self-proclaimed husband seized her by the arm, wrenched her from the French soldier and pulled her to his side. There was nothing to do but play the part, although her legs were trembling. She composed her face, glanced



down, and tried to look demure as he crushed her protectively to his chest. The rough weave of his tunic scratched her face. She could smell the rank scent of his sweat.

“All right, all right,” the French soldier scowled, “but hide her out of sight!” They trampled on toward the next carriage.

As soon as the French soldiers had gone, the officer released his grip, clicked his heels in salute and offered her a seat by the window. One of the men tossed her bags into the overhead rack, kicked the door shut and fastened the lock, while another shut the window and jerked the curtains closed.

“Just until we leave the station. They must not see you here,” her would-be husband reassured her.

Almost disbelieving this stroke of luck, Katherine leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes, trying to calm the pounding of her heart. Opening her eyes again, she found all six men staring at her with probing eyes. The only thing to do now was to pretend they were not there, at least for a few moments, so that she might define the boundaries of the private space she would be occupying for the next few hours. She began preparing herself for the journey as if she were alone in the compartment.

She smoothed down her skirt and spread her traveling rug across her lap. Removing a scented handkerchief from her bag, she wiped her forehead and hands. Then she took out a comb and mirror and adjusted her hair. The dog, meanwhile, pushed its nose against her knees, demanding a caress, then dropped at her feet, panting.

Coolly, through eyes half-closed, she observed the men as they, in turn, observed her. She reflected that her pistol would have been quite useless against six men with knives, and a dog. Still, these officers seemed to be gentlemen and were certainly handsome enough. Blondish with Slavic features, they all had that curious Slavic upward cut at the corner of the eyes, a stubble of reddish beard on sculpted cheek bones, fine teeth and beautiful hands. It had been exciting to be contested by two armies. She allowed her fantasy to elaborate on the experience now that the danger had passed. She was already describing it to Murry in her mind. How jealous he would be.

The train idled in the station for over an hour. With the window closed, a sour smell of sweat and a doggy odor soon filled the compartment. Again she repressed the tickling in her throat and was grateful for the men refrained from smoking. Two of the officers spoke French, and all spoke German, which she spoke fluently, so time passed quickly in pleasant conversation. They were Serbians on leave. She told them that her husband had been wounded while rescuing a comrade from German gunfire and that he was now in a hospital near Bandol. She had left her two small sons with their Aunt Ida in England to rush to his bedside. When they learned she was a war hero's wife, and possibly soon to be a widow, the Serbian officers treated her with due reverence, and she was so convincing that she half believed the tale herself.

When the whistle blew and the train lurched forward, she peeked behind the dirty canvas curtain and was startled to see that soldier again standing right below her window. Yes, there was no mistake. That was the fellow, the sickly yellow face, and the dangling sleeve. His eyes met Katherine's with uncanny frankness and he smiled hideously, then brought his yellow hand to his lips to blow her a lecherous kiss. She dropped the edge of the curtain, coughed and nearly choked on the gurgling in her throat. When she finally caught her breath, the train shunted to a halt for five long minutes. Katherine peeped out again from behind the curtain as the train began to move forward. The soldier on the quay



had vanished. A thought flashed through her mind, and her pulse raced with fear: *Perhaps that man had boarded her train!* Thank god with these officers she felt quite safe.

Hours and hours later, finally Bandol. The gallant Serbian officers handed down her luggage and with heartfelt sincerity wished her and her husband well. She almost felt ashamed for having lied to them, but then she was a writer. It was her business to tell lies, as long as they were interesting and harmed no one. After saying goodbye to the soldiers, she felt alone and vulnerable again. She looked about the busy station trying to get her bearings. Here too, in Bandol, the station was teeming with soldiers, and also with nurses and orderlies, for several carloads of wounded men had just arrived on her train and were being carried off on stretchers and put into horse-drawn carts waiting outside the station. Suddenly remembering the one-armed man, her fear, briefly forgotten during the trip, now returned again. She scanned the crowd, and to her immense relief, did not spot him. Had she really seen that fellow beneath the window as the train pulled out, or had it been a trick of her nervous imagination? She shuddered thinking of that hideous kiss. Surely she could not have imagined that.

The baggage car attendant informed her that her trunk would be sent on to her hotel the next day, so there was nothing else to do now but find a fiacre and go to the Hotel Beau Rivage. A porter fetched a driver for her, threw her bags on top of the cab, and helped her scramble up. Driving through the town, she saw many changes. Fewer people about the streets, and many shops boarded up. Long lines waited outside the bakery. A cart creaked past, heaped high with wooden legs and crutches. Pulling up outside the hotel, she was cheered to see the familiar garden with its waxy evergreen shrubs, pink japonica and lemon trees with ripening fruit. To think it was snowing on the channel. She paid the driver, climbed down, and ordered the man to carry her bags inside the hotel.

Stepping into the main salon, she saw that the place was not what she remembered. The marble floor was dulled by a patina of dust. A stink of mutton disguised with mint and onions lingered in the air. The front desk was deserted, but from the half-open door behind it came the unconsolated bawling of an infant whom no one seemed to be tending. The child's crying jarred her nerves. She rang the bell and waited, leaning against the wooden counter, fearing her knees might buckle under her from sheer exhaustion. At last a strange woman with a puffy red face appeared at the top of the stairway, wiping her mouth with a grubby serviette.

"Vous desirez madame?"

Katherine introduced herself. "Vous n'avez-pas reçu ma lettre?"

The woman shrugged. With the war, the post was always delayed, but she had plenty of rooms, and wadding the serviette into her pocket, she invited Katherine to follow her upstairs.

Katherine looked round for a porter, but there was none, and Madame did not offer help. She struggled up the stairs with her things and when she reached the top, Madame relieved her of her hat box and strode on ahead down the corridor, rattling her ring of keys.

The hall was silent, the great furnaces in the corridor unlit. The floor chilled her foot through the thin soles of her shoes. Her old room was currently occupied by a gentleman traveler, but there was another suitable one next door. This one also had a view of the garden, and was a little closer to the lavatory. Katherine peeked out through the shutters. Cats prowled amid scraggly bushes. The begonias in Mme. Galle's flowerbeds had been replaced by rows of salad and leeks. The price 12 francs a day was far too much, but she



had no choice. The other rooms cost more, the proprietress informed her, for running water had been installed since the hotel had changed owners.

Katherine ordered a dinner of broth, toast, and a boiled egg for she could not face the idea of tough mutton doctored with herbs. While waiting for dinner to be brought, she unpacked her carpet bag of the things she would need for the night: her shift and medicine bottles. Murry's picture in a tortoiseshell frame, her little square traveling clock. Arranging these things on the bedside table, she thought how they defined her life: the photograph of the handsome absent husband; the phials of colored pills. She took the gun out of her purse, slipped it into the drawer and turned the key just as the maid arrived with her dinner tray and a tepid hot water bottle. At ten o'clock, too tired to write even to Murry, she downed the rest of her brandy, and crept between icy sheets. She touched her wool-stockinged foot to the hot water bottle. It was as cold as stone.

The man next door kept her awake nearly until dawn, for she could hear him coughing and shuffling about through the thin wall. Perhaps he too suffered from weak lungs and like her had come here trying to cheat the winter by anticipating the spring. No doubt he was an insomniac, and moreover, he seemed to be afflicted by dysentery. At least three times in the night she heard him plodding down to the lavatory, where he produced a cavernous sputtering of sounds which at first amused, then annoyed and at last simply exhausted her. The floor boards creaked as he padded back to his own room, jiggled the key, shut the door firmly. Once it seemed to her he had paused outside her door. What was he doing out there, loitering in the corridor? Waiting for a sign of invitation from a woman traveling alone? How could she bear up under all this? She could not even demand a different room, for the others were all too expensive.

By morning the sirocco was blowing. The shutters banged and rattled, the wind whistled through the cracks in the plaster. She opened the window and pushed the shutter back against the force of the wind to see palm fronds flapping and linden trees tossing wildly against a yellow sky. She stayed inside till noon when the mistral dropped, and then ventured out for a walk in town to do a little shopping. There were no cigarettes at the tobacco shop, only cigars. The stationer's was boarded up, so there was no writing paper to be had. She called at the grocer's where she and Murry had once shopped for sundries, but the shopkeeper did not recognize her. The prices were outrageous, much more expensive than London. She dawdled before half-empty shelves, making mental calculations of francs and sous and finally selected a tiny pot of cherry preserves and some almond biscuits for tea time, although she could ill afford such luxuries. As she stood counting out her coins beside the cash desk, Madame looked up from the jambon she was slicing, frowned at Katherine and said, "Madame, mais c'est vous. . . . You are much changed. You have not been well."

A boy brought a chair and Katherine was obliged to take her place among a row of flour and lentil sacks slumped against the wall and listen to the town gossip for nearly an hour. So much had changed because of the war, so much had been swept away so quickly. Mme. Galle had died. Her son too had been wounded. The bread in town had become indigestible because the bakers mixed sawdust in their flour. So many brave young men gone, the music master and the doctor's son. Finally weary of this recitation of catastrophe, Katherine rose to take her leave. The shopkeeper peered at her curiously and asked with a hint of insinuation in her voice, "But has madame come without Monsieur?" Katherine provided a respectable excuse for Murry's absence, and though she spoke calmly, she felt the blood rush to her



cheeks. Returning to the hotel, she reminded herself that she could expect no letters as yet for it would take at least eight days for the post to get through. How would she survive until Murry's letters arrived? She stared at the row of empty boxes behind the front desk, at the two brass keys dangling side by side: the key to her room and to the one next to hers. All the other rooms were unoccupied for only the desperate or criminals travel in war time. She and the gentleman next door probably had more in common than she imagined. Sooner or later, she thought, as she trod up the stairs, she would have to make his acquaintance and join him in the smoky dining room for roast mutton and haricots with vinegar, of which he was apparently too fond, given his nightly performances in the lavatory.

In the afternoon she tried to work, sitting at the window, propped up on cushions, wrapped up in rugs. After all, that was what she had come here for. For her health, yes, to avoid the London cold, but also to work. Murry had given her a stack of books to review for the literary magazine he edited and her finances depended on those few pennies he promised to pay her per inch. But she hadn't counted on such a nerve-rattling wind. The kitchen maid had no idea how to fix a proper pot of tea and had brought her up a quart of dirty liquid with three tea leaves floating on top, which she had left untouched. After several false starts, she threw down her pen. The flow would not come as she bid it. How could she be expected to hold up through all this? She rubbed her eyes and stared out the window at a scrawny cat slinking through a laurel hedge. She wondered now why she had ever come here alone. Ida would have at least offered some distraction.

Her black mood had descended. The only way to throw it off was to take a walk somewhere. A small amount of physical exertion. Get a bit of air in her lungs. She bundled up, clapped on a hat, and swathed her throat like a mummy. Leaving her key at the desk on her way out, she saw a white envelope sticking out of the box behind the desk and nearly jumped for joy. Murry must have found a way to dispatch letters quickly through the War Office. The proprietress handed her the letter with a smirk, saying "Bonnes nouvelles, j'espere."

Katherine's face fell as she recognized the childish scrawl. It was only from Ida. She mumbled a response and went out. As she walked down the boulevard, reading her letter, the wind nearly tore it out of her hand.

Katie dear, said the letter, I have posted this before you leave, so that it will be waiting for you when you get there. Although it is funny, as after all, you are here with me asleep in the next room. It's as if there were two of you. The one here with me and the other far away in Bandol reading this now. I hope you like the surprise. Love Ida

Katherine was furious. How absurd it was to be loved so devotedly by the wrong person! She crumpled the letter into her pocket, and walked briskly down the avenue, the wind stinging her cheeks red. Thank goodness Ida was not here to torment her.

The wind swept her along, exhilarating her. However the town had changed since she had last been here, the landscape was still inspiring with a foaming violet sea, mauve pebbles along the beach, little red boats tossing near the shore, although the gray hulk of a warship looming further out added an ominous touch to the scene. Rounding the curve of the little road leading out of town, she darted down a country lane, skirted a vineyard where dead leaves shivered on the vines, and found her way to the Villa Pauline.

She was sad to see the house abandoned, the pink facade crumbling, the plaster peeling, one shutter banging loose in the wind. Still she had never realized how beautiful it was. Only now, gazing in through the gate at the tangled garden, did she understand how

much she had lost and how much she still had to lose. She recognized the wrought iron chairs now rusted where she and Murry had once sat discussing Dostoevsky and Chekhov. She leaned her face against the cold iron grille of the garden gate. How was it possible that the villa had gone to ruin in just two short years? A swampy, sweetish odor of decaying leaves hung in the air, mingled with the smell of smoke from a nearby house. She pushed the gate open, then hesitated. Perhaps she really did not want to explore any further. It had been a grave mistake to leave Murry in London and come back to Bandol alone. She certainly could not get any work done here, with this burden on her heart.

The walk back was further than she remembered. She had to stop to take small cautious breaths for her left lung scorched like a flat iron. Lights came on across the bay as she crept down the boulevard back to the hotel.

At the cafe across the street, the pink-striped awning, not yet rolled up for the night, swelled and flapped in the strong wind. A lone, hatless figure sat at a table along the street, wrapped in a great coat, smoking a cigarette. The hair prickled on the back of Katherine's neck as she stared at the man for it seemed to her she recognized the odd stoop of his shoulders, the limp sleeve, the colorless hair. The one-armed soldier! He had followed her all the way to her hotel in Bandol! He must not see me she thought, as she dashed across the street, summoning energy from some untapped abyss, and nearly colliding with a delivery boy on a bicycle. Glancing back before pushing through the hotel door, she saw the man square in the face. A doubt assailed her. This fellow was fatter and had a moustache. The man rose now, and shuffled off down the street with a cane.

It was the wind she thought, the wind had agitated her imagination and had played tricks on her eyes. Relieved, she went to the desk and demanded her key.

"Madame should not have gone out in this wind," chided the proprietress.

She sipped on broth and a boiled egg, then sat at the table by the shuttered window, trying to work, but a gale had begun to blow. With the wind howling and the rain battering the shutter, she almost felt as though she were on a ship a hundred miles from the coast. Shelley must have drowned on such a night, she thought, closing her notebook. There was nothing to do but crawl into bed with her little worn volume of Shakespeare. It was just the night for *The Tempest*—or perhaps *The Winter's Tale*. She read for an hour, underlining archaic words to look up in her dictionary the next morning.

Just before she was about to put out the light, something strange happened. She coughed and felt once more that lacerating spasm in her shoulder. An unfamiliar tang filled her mouth and she brought her handkerchief to her lips. A small bright red stain remained on her handkerchief. She examined the blot—not the viscous black of menstruation, but frothy crimson, but only a small spot, surely nothing to worry about. Lawrence had told her that he too had coughed up blood. My dear, it is absolutely nothing to worry about, she found herself saying aloud in the empty room. But what would she tell Murry if it should happen again? The poor boy would be frightened out of his wits.

Too restless to sleep, she got up and took out Ida's letter, read it again by lamplight and sighed. How silly and thoughtful. Dear Ida. The perfect friend. She smoothed out the creased page, lay it on her breast, put out the lamp and finally fell asleep. Long after midnight, she sat up with a start. Had there been a noise at the door, or was it only a dream? The moon shining in through the slats of the shutters cast a ladder of light across the floor. She stared at the brass handle of the door. Terrified, she saw it move.



She unlocked the drawer of the bedside table, took out the pistol and pointed it at the door. Finger on the trigger, she sat bolt upright, her back pressed against the cold brass rail of the bedstead. The handle jiggled again. Her heart began to pound and she nearly gagged on her own fear, but still managed to cry out, "Quesque-vous voulez?" Throwing off the covers, she climbed out of bed, leapt to the door and thrust it open with a bang.

There was no one in the corridor, but the blue smoke of a cigarette swirled up in the beam of a lamp still guttering at this late hour along the hall. Beneath the door of the next room a thread of light shone upon the worn red carpet. She stood there listening, alert to any sound, but heard only the silence of a sleeping hotel. Then the gentleman next door coughed once, discreetly, as if to signal to her.

Stepping back inside, she shut the door firmly, turned the key twice, then looked round the room, in search of something to bar the door with. The oaken bedside table was far too heavy for her to manage, but the armchair would do very well. She dragged the chair from its corner by the window and pushed it up against the door, then fell into bed exhausted.

SHARON DOYLE

MOON RIVER

-FOR AUDREY HEPBURN

She is singing before we see her,
before the window-well comes into focus
through the rain; and the notes
rise off her skin. Her wet hair loosens
in a towel, her sweatshirt
is too long, her collarbone too fine.

Her voice follows the weather wherever it chooses—
melody slightly at the edge,
breathing at a center that is
trapped in her eyes, and we let
the reluctant afternoon go
inside her reluctant siren song.