

Les Moulins

By Maria Clark

Languedoc, France, 2017

She wants to be a *sage-femme*.

The conversation crumbles between us like the rocks beneath my sandals. They're not equipped for climbing to the windmill, nor am I equipped with more than a hesitant grasp of her language.

Words spill amongst the murmuring of the crickets; the sun is setting above Nissan-lez-Enserune, and they sing in force as we stumble among the white rocks and weeds of the fitness trail.

She'd kept her word and taken me into the hills overlooking the Languedoc countryside. She climbs the paths effortlessly, dark hair swinging behind the bandana I gave her. She reminds me of a deer - gentle, fragile, wide-eyed innocence – but her earnestness about becoming a midwife is profound, and I find my words slipping away in admiration.

We continue upwards, following the fitness trail once placed in these hills. Nature disagreed: tendrils of wildflowers and nettles circle the monkey bars, threatening to snag our feet as our hands tingle against the rust. The trail has been abandoned. Despite the orderly vineyards in the valley below, the chaotic growth of thyme and lavender beneath us whispers that nature will always reign.

Earlier, I rode the Hérault bus as a chariot back from Béziers. I was the sole passenger, and watched in sticky, sweat-driven fear as the driver swung through the narrow provincial streets, skipping all the stops until mine. Grimacing, wincing at the blazing heat.

We were all surprised by the heat: a burning tidal-wave that makes me long for air-conditioning, or a sharp taste of winter's breath. None of this dry-lipped, shallow-breathed aridity.

We stop to do sit-ups, on a moss-covered plank of wood sheltered by the drowsy sun. We work in rhythm, rocking backwards and forwards. She tells me, not even missing a breath, about her passion for gymnastics, her plans for *collège*. I labour on, still tasting the brioche and Nutella from this afternoon's goûter, watching as she runs her fingers through the nearest plant. To me, it's nothing more than a plant causing an irritating scratch, to accompany the agonising pain of my mosquito bites. For her, the plant represents a gift: an opportunity to show her grandmother how much she loves her.

She rubs a stem of thyme between her thumb and index finger, snapping it decisively. We'll later take it back to the village, discarding the freedom of nature for the present, chatting with her brother about his broken foot. Rap music thumping in the background.

But for now – in this moment almost suspended in time – she tucks the thyme into her bandana, and motions for me to follow her to the hill's edge.

I inhale, unable to speak. No words – not in her language, not in mine – can describe the beauty of the open landscape. It's not that remarkable – no gleaming rivers or futuristic skyscrapers or architectural wonders to gaze at. Just fields, running towards the horizon, with the rosy glow of the sunset caressing their edges.

Rising on the hill opposite is the Oppidum d'Ensérune, a Gallo-Roman settlement occupied from the 6th century BC. Its weather-beaten eye stretches across the valley, where we blend into a millennium of human civilisation. The beauty of these fields may not be remarkable, but they possess a tranquillity acquired from a thousand years of stasis. Behind the Oppidum, the sun gazes upon its reflection in the Étang de Montady, a lake drained in the 13th century. The fields stretch as sun rays, with the water draining towards the centre in a feat of medieval engineering indescribable today.

She continues to the *moulins*, but I linger, knowing that with my broken phone, my memory is the only camera I have. The sun grazes the top of the hill, resting its head upon the same fields that will remain for eternity. I see her check the time on her phone, and suddenly she melts into a small silhouette, adjusting her bandana with one hand. Here, I'm at the boundary between the past and the future, and it makes me smile.

She wants to be a sage-femme, but I think she's already there. Only a wise woman could bring me here.