Angel walked northwards – away from his own country, Spain – for the second time in five years, a free man after five years in the French Foreign Legion, a new French passport in his pocket. He kept going for days on end, got lifts on trucks, slept in barns, ate with people working in the fields. He wasn’t sure what he wanted, but he didn’t want to go home.

At St Gervais du Bosc, something made him stop. It could have been the familiar location: *garrigue* above, vineyards and orchards below, the village crouched at the butt of the hill where the water was available. He entered the café, stood at the bar and ordered a beer.

‘*Trabajo?*’ he asked the cafetier when the beer was almost finished. His mix of French and Spanish didn’t faze people in the Languedoc, their own language poised somewhere between the two.

‘You missed the grape harvest,’ the cafetier said. Angel knew that. Agricultural work was the only thing he knew besides fighting Arabs.

‘Boismal could use someone who can prune vines,’ another client offered. ‘The last man hung himself from a beam in the kitchen.’

At the upper end of the village stood a big old house on three floors, one above the hill, one below, and one level with the road. A little apart from the other houses, its irregular angles were resisting but nevertheless undergoing severe renovation.

Angel stood at the door and shouted ‘*Maison?*’ a few times until a disgruntled elderly woman shuffled out in slippers. This was Boismal’s wife. She put him in a sitting-room. Angel realised it was the first real house – with women – that he’d been in for eight years, if you didn’t count the whorehouse in Algiers.

Warts and blotches covered Boismal’s skin. He had a hacking cough. This didn’t stop him being master of the moment. He pronounced the name the French way. *Ann-jell.*

‘I’ll take you,’ he announced benevolently, ‘lowest hourly rate. Under the table. I’ll deduct a small rent for a house in the village. Start pre-pruning tomorrow.’

No 6, Rue Sans Nom was a three-story house with one room on each floor. The ground floor cellar had a bulging outside wall and contained a toilet. A steep staircase led to a room with a sink.

‘*Kitchen,*’ Boismal said, as if it were true. A tall dresser kept some of the ceiling from falling in. ‘Hard winter snow lay around attics till it melted,’ Boismal shrugged. ‘Bit of a clean-up and it’ll be fine.’

At the top was an attic bedroom containing a rabbit hutch. Someone had dipped a sponge in deep blue wash and stippled the white walls. Layers of dust covered the forgotten bunches of dried onions that hung neatly from a shelf, and equally forgotten bunches of grapes that hung from big hooks.

Back in the kitchen, alone, Angel didn’t wonder which hook his predecessor had used.

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A thorough cleaning of new premises with little or no equipment was something Angel had learned in the Legion. He made a broom from twigs and cord and went to work. Rue Sans Nom, there since medieval times, was narrow and dark. The vaulted cellar bore traces of verdigris which the women had once carried to the market, on foot, 25 kms away. The musty smell reminded Angel of the cellar at home where a few goats were kept. As he scrubbed and dusted, he thought of his journey from home to here.

1957

Home was a small village near Valencia. Angel hadn’t been very good at school, but he liked his old teacher, especially on wet days in winter. ‘Valentia in Latin means “strength,” “valour’” the old man told his unruly pupils. ‘Then the Berbers came and called it Balansiya.’ The boys giggled at his pronunciation. ‘Listen well,’ the old man insisted. ‘Information and ideas will help while away your time in the fields. Some Roman historians were farmers too.’

Angel’s older brother Rodrigo suddenly appeared before the glass window at the top of the classroom door.

‘Sir!’ he burst in, ‘Oh Sir! Please can I have my brother – the floods have carried people away!’

Their parents were never found. Angel left school and he and his brother worked so hard on the little farm that Rodrigo forgot that he bore the same name as El Cid, until his childhood sweetheart, Gloria, reminded him.

Before leaving for military service Angel, a skinny teenager who didn’t even curse, went to see his old schoolmaster one last time. It was winter. He listened outside the classroom door as the master talked about a French monk who had once been bishop of Valencia. ‘For centuries, government of our region seesawed between Spaniards and Moors.’ The boys were quiet, glad to be indoors and resting. ‘Later it was besieged by the English, and even the French. A peasant carries the blood of all cultures, working the land in spite of all the wars carried on around him.’

The boys stirred and Angel knew the master had risen from his desk. ‘Never forget,’ the old man shouted above the noise.

Later, on the train with his fellow conscripts, laughing and joking to hide their fear, Angel didn’t look back or wonder when he would see again the lagoons, the rice fields, the oranges bright in the trees and the garrigue behind. He didn’t understand the proverb his master had imparted before he left: ‘Quemad viejos leños, leed viejos libros, bebed viejos vinos, tened viejos amigos.’

1965

After a sound first night’s sleep in 6 Rue Sans Nom, Angel rose at sunrise and went to meet Boismal’s old vines. Among these lines of tortured old friends, he clipped and trimmed and hummed, feeling the familiar strain on his back. At 10 am he ate olives and bread and drank half a bottle of the local piquette from the village shop. Around two he went home, made a tortilla and salad and had a snooze. Later, back in the vineyard, he watched the gnarled little shadows lengthen. Above the village, the dark garrigue was still in blazing sunlight, but the valley floor was already dark. The bosc, after which the village had been named, had burnt one summer, leaving one side of the mountain looking like an elephant’s hide. Angel could still distinguish the old hill

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terraces, each with its little grove of olive trees, many of which were now being re-invaded by surrounding bush. Walls that once contained the terraces, if not tended, would one day crumble. For Angel forthcoming disaster meant two things: one, that he himself was not in trouble even if someone else was, and two, that there’d be work to do in the future, which made him feel secure. As smoke rose languorously from his home-made brazier – a rusty barrel split in two and mounted on wheels – it seemed to him that St Gervais might be OK. He made bundles of clippings for barbecuing chops and sausage and maybe even the odd fish.

1958

After training, he and his fellow-conscripts found themselves in Ifni in the Western Sahara. ‘You are holding Spanish Southern Morocco against bands of guerrillas coming in from Mauritania and Algeria,’ the sergeant said. None of them cared about Saharawi politics, or deals between France and Spain. The sergeant handed them a Spanish communiqué stating ‘You are protecting the zone from those who disobeyed the king of Morocco.’

They knew nothing of the wiliness of the new Moroccan king. They disliked the food, and the night cold. The new uniform chafed Angel’s skin. Comrades were being killed by groups of guerrillas in fierce fights. ‘You will be part of Operation Ouragan,’ the sergeant said, ‘a Franco-Spanish effort. You’ll back up paratroopers dropped into Smara.’

1968

Because Angel was accustomed to adapting to new circumstances, Boismal quickly saw that he knew his job and employed him full time, officially but at low wages. Angel came and went, getting to know Marinette for her stories of the past, as well as Simone for her worries about the present, and enjoying René Boismal Jr’s visions for a shining future with a revamped Coopérative.

‘They’re mixing good and bad grapes and making slop,’ René would say. ‘Now that heavy Algerian wine is finished they’ll have nothing to mix the slop with. I’ll plant new vines, get some quality going. Mark my words, the old man’ll have to give in.’

They’d raise a glass. René would say what a loss Algeria was, although he didn’t really care because he wanted change. Everyone wanted something. Thinking about such things made Angel’s head spin.

When a hot wind blew sand from the south under the door in the Rue Sans Nom, Angel recalled the sandstorms of that early spring as the Spaniards and French swept through the Rio de Oro together, gaining courage as they went. ‘Valour and strength!’ Angel and the others cried. Few of them were killed. When it all became routine, Angel’s dark beard grew faster and he spat and cursed like the older men, although he still didn’t feel quite like the others. Now it seemed that all of his life had been trotting behind everyone else, trying to fit in.

A neighbour rented Angel a small garden next to the irrigation canal. He grew tomatoes and peppers, carrots, turnips, green beans and soggy potatoes for tortillas, his favourite lunch which he usually prepared the night before and ate cold, out among his friends, the vines. His relentless routine betrayed no visible difference between himself and his neighbours or the other men in St Gervais. But apart from
René Boismal – his only real acquaintance – the local men kept their distance. The very real difference was that Angel was the only man without land of his own or the promise of it. Angel was aware of this, but gave as little consideration as he had other such matters in his life, for what could he do about it? He regularly sent money home to Rodrigo, who wrote very occasionally and unsteadily: ‘My hands shake from work. We’re building a two-room place by the sea for renting to tourists.’

All this Spanish news was confirmed in the autumn by the Spaniards who arrived for grape-picking.

Boismal Jr had known them since he was a kid.

‘Same family, been coming for generations. This year one of the boys has brought his new wife.’ Boismal laughed. ‘They work so fast they outpace the lady of the house, La Meneuse; not the done thing at all.’

Angel often sat with the Spaniards on the village square watching the last of the tourists eat out, aware that this would set him further apart from the villagers.

‘France is very expensive, compared to Andalusia,’ they told him. The new wife did all their cooking from food they’d brought with them, in the small bare house that was their free lodgings. Angel often heard a pressure cooker as he walked by and guessed chickpeas.

‘Near Algeciras,’ they replied, brightening, when he asked where they were from.

‘You’d have passed Valencia on your way up,’ Angel said. They smiled. They nodded to three boys Angel had seen around the village.

‘From Morocco, Cameroon and Northern Ireland,’ they told him. ‘All students, they argue all day among the vines, then hitch a ride into town in the evenings to drink and meet girls.’

‘That is just the beginning,’ the oldest woman said. ‘Machines will soon take the place of all of us.’

1960

The day the army had let them go, the first thing Angel did was phone his brother Rodrigo. The grocery store, in the same street as their house, had always been everyone’s telephone exchange and message centre. The grocer replied, sent a child with the message, and told Angel to phone back in a while.

By the time Rodrigo finally came to the phone, Angel was almost out of change and Rodrigo was out of breath.

‘I was working.’ He sounded rattled.

‘Well, I’m through here, I could come home and help.’

‘I can manage the farm,’ Rodrigo replied brusquely. The real problem seemed to be that the farm was too small to bring in enough to rear a family. ‘We’re married now,’ he said, ‘me and Gloria.’

Then Rodrigo’s tone changed. ‘Apartments on the coast for tourists are the coming thing.’

Angel waited for more, then realised that was all he was going to get. After waiting for a while, Rodrigo finally said what was on his mind: could Angel keep sending the money?

Angel left the phone booth and walked for a long time without purpose. In a café in Perpignan, a family – their accents markedly different from those of the locals
– described, in a mix of Spanish, French and Arabic, how it was, ‘down there’ and wondered what they were to do now, in this France which was foreign to them.

‘We have French papers but we never set foot in the place before,’ they appealed. ‘Not even our fathers ever visited.’

‘Maybe France hasn’t time, place or money for pieds noirs.’ A man at the bar winked at Angel. ‘Ye got the best of Algeria, but now that ye’re refugees, don’t expect the best of here as well.’

The pied noir father ordered his wife and family out. ‘Fissa!’ he hissed in the Moghrebi dialect learned by his parents and grandparents.

Angel got up too and headed straight to the recruitment centre of the French Foreign Legion. After passing the tough initial physicals and medicals, he only just passed the IQ test. Most of his fellow aspirants were dismissed. After that there were four months of even harder training, walking and running, day and night, carrying heavy packs often containing just sand. The trip in the truck to Marseilles, although hot and uncomfortable, provided a panorama of a hot dry landscape that was familiar.

In no time at all Angel found himself back in North Africa, working in the mess kitchens. This time it was Algeria and once again the enemy North Africans. His colleagues called the locals ‘Arabs’, but more often ‘melons’. ‘Tuer les melons - dadadadada!’ the legionnaires would imitate the sound of gunfire, and laugh.

1980s

By the early 1980s René Boismal Jr was married and refereeing arguments between his wife and mother over the colour of curtains at home. Sometimes, when René talked of ‘ma vieille,’ Angel wasn’t sure which woman he was referring to.

Increasingly, Angel took supper in the local restaurant, his only luxury. He smiled to himself as he handled the knife and fork delicately, relishing fancy desserts like crème brulée or the sweet crêpes they brought flambée’d to his table. That invariably got attention. He always slyly eyed the other diners under the stone vaults.

It was here one evening that Angel’s fancy desserts drew him into talk with an English couple, he of tall military bearing, she equally lanky with a wide-brimmed straw hat and a noisy come-hither attitude. Angel was pleased because they spoke to him, and they liked him because they could understand the peculiar French he spoke.

On the husband’s retirement from a multinational, they had bought a huge old house with vineyards and olive groves in an isolated spot above the village at the back of the cirque formed by the river. Now they lived here permanently and were struggling with everything: climate, farming, house. Very soon all three were watching out for each other in the evenings, having a carafe of rosé or sweet crêpes at adjacent tables, or together if there wasn’t much room. Conscious that they were different, Angel was very careful not to encroach on their time or space. When they used the familiar ‘tu’ he stuck to a respectful ‘vous’.

One evening the couple arrived at the restaurant to find it packed with tourists, a poetry reading in full swing. Angel sat in the middle, odd-man-out in his working clothes and three-day beard. They strained their necks for spare seats and caught his eye. He squeezed them in beside him and yelled for food. He was a little drunk. He was fighting with old Boismal about wages and conditions. He was going to see some sort of tribunal tomorrow and was very nervous: ‘My balls are in a cravat,’ he said. Boismal’s terms were just not good enough. Boismal was ill, and crabby, saying take

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it or leave it. Angel was threatening to take it a lot further. It seemed Angel had decided, for the first time, which side he was on.

‘Come over tomorrow evening after the tribunal and I’ll cook you dinner,’ the Englishwoman said to Angel.

Her husband nodded.

For a moment Angel looked puzzled, even shy. Then he raised his glass and said loudly, ‘Viva la Revolución!’ They drank to that, finished the bottle and ordered another.

1960

Angel’s first drinking bouts were among argumentative legionnaires. This involved political discussion – even they understood that de Gaulle’s offer of self-determination to the Algerians had outraged the local French population. ‘Serious trouble brewing – French against French,’ the sergeant warned. ‘Don’t get rat-arsed tonight.’ Newspapers were full of the posturing of generals and statesmen. Rumours and counter-rumours bounced around them of possible army revolt and military takeovers. ‘Tomorrow we leave the desert for Algiers to back up 1st REP paratroopers.’

In Algiers, the legionnaires remained apart from the French row. trained dogs waiting for the order to strike. On those clear cool days, amidst the rattle of trolley-buses and the tapping of glaziers repairing shattered windows, Angel noticed chic French girls and beautiful dark girls. In spite of the tension, many of them eyed the smart young men in their smart white hats. Even wearing his képi, Angel was far too shy to even think of speaking to them.

One evening, carried away by the evening street sounds, by drink, by his companions, he was led to a whorehouse, where the women were subject to checks by Legion doctors.

Angel’s young woman had the unaccustomed features of a South American.

‘Hola,’ she said.

The business between them was dismal. As she buttoned him up again like his mother used to, Angel’s attention was drawn to a reproduction above her bed. He didn’t understand why the girl in the foreground lay stiff and nakedly white against the deep blue, green and red background.

‘What is wrong with her?’ he asked.

‘Paul Gauguin, Loss of Virginity,’ the girl said, matter-of-factly.

‘Is that meant to be a fox at her shoulder?’ Angel asked.

The girl nodded. ‘Where I come from, it is the animal of the devil.’

Angel looked alarmed.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said, ‘you’re no fox. Anyway, the real devil was Gauguin – he got the model pregnant, then walked away.’

Angel had never had such a conversation before, least of all with a woman. Afterwards in the barracks, he found he couldn’t lie like the others, and said nothing.

‘Angel’s in love!’ they laughed.

1980s

After the tribunal determined the conditions of his job with Boismal (minimum wage, regular hours, written arrangements for the rent of the Rue Sans Nom), he headed off for the Mas du Cirque, still suffering from a hangover. Two cars were parked in the
avenue. Three German shepherds bounded out the gate and Angel was impressed when the biggest took his wrist in its teeth and led him straight to its master.

The English couple gave him whiskey – ‘Hair of the dog,’ they said – and took him on a tour of the property. The stone walls had been tastefully pointed. There were bright new shutters in pale green. Inside flagged floors, old furniture, patchwork quilts, Persian carpets and books abounded. A superb fitted kitchen opened onto a terrace with a gigantic pool. Angel had never seen so much vegetation used purely for decoration.

Then suddenly through another door it all came to a halt in a series of derelict rooms with a patchwork of cracked terracotta, open fireplaces, old wallpaper, dust. There were ladders, signs of work begun.

‘Our son,’ the Englishman said. ‘Had to go back to college. Be back next year to carry on.’

‘Now – I bet you’re hungry,’ she said.

They dined outdoors. Angel was astonished to find that good cuisine other than Mediterranean existed. There was still enough light to distinguish the cirque floor, once the village wheatfield, now a balding football ground. Olive and fruit trees had been left to their devices for decades.

‘Those olive trees are sick,’ said Angel.

‘Bug of some kind,’ the Englishman said.

‘I might have a cure for that,’ said Angel.

‘Why don’t you come up and have a look at them,’ she asked. ‘Saturday?’

‘Buy the ingredients and I’ll make you a paëlla,’ Angel said. ‘It’s my specialty.’

1962

Angel first learned to cook in the legionnaire’s mess in Algeria. He passed the time experimenting with paëlla and other dishes, adding little touches he had seen his mother use. He also learned to smoke the short untipped cigarettes of dark tobacco he still prefers. The legionnaires waited. They played cards. The French Army was under attack from the French themselves. All that ‘Week of the Barricades’, as it was called later, chaos reigned. There were rumours that some regiments of the French Army might refuse to budge if ordered onto the streets.

Sharing tajine from a large dish one night, Angel was reminded vividly of home, of his mother’s kind eyes and his father’s rough hands as they all dipped their bread in a dinner that was mostly sauce conjured with tasty care from few ingredients.

When the legionnaires had finished the tajine Angel went outdoors and sat on a hummock. He smoked, listened to a dog bark, and felt homesick.

Angel and his comrades trained, dozed, cooked, waited. This was not their war. What did Spaniards, East Europeans and Germans care about firing on French people who sang the Marseillaise and shouted ‘Vive l’Algérie Française’? They told stories, about 65 legionnaires who resisted 2,000 Mexicans in 19th century Mexico and who, down to their last five survivors, had fixed bayonets and charged. Legionnaires were considered not men, but devils. They had captured Algeria for the French. When ordered, Angel and his comrades-in-arms would fire. They would serve France with honour. Most knew why they were in the Legion: passports, jobs, a better life. Some would make a career of it. Many were escaping their past. Most enjoyed

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the adventure. Only Angel had no ideas at all.

1980s
Angel abandoned his own garden to plant oleanders among the English couple’s olive groves. An insect on the oleanders ate the beetles on the olive trees. He tidied terrace walls after rain and generally looked after things as best he could.

When old Boismal finally quit work because of his lungs, René Boismal Jr came to see Angel at the Rue Sans Nom.

‘He’s had it,’ he said. ‘You can hear him breathing in the next Département.’

They’d all heard about the effects of pesticides. One farmer wore an outfit like an astronaut when he went spraying.

‘Papa never followed the rules,’ René said. ‘I learned my lesson the day I forgot my watch after spraying. Walked back down the line to get it and woke up flat on my back. Stuff knocked me out cold.’

‘The watch still working?’ Angel smirked.

René didn’t laugh. ‘I’m afraid the joke’s over,’ he said.

Angel had already guessed what was coming. ‘I’m to be let go.’

‘Look at it from my point of view,’ said René. ‘I can manage on my own with the machines now. And my son’s coming up. Besides, the new vines I’m going to plant will take five years to come on.’

‘You’ll still have to prune ‘em,’ said Angel half-heartedly.

‘I’d be glad to pay you by the hour occasionally. It’s the social security no one can afford. I bought Maurin’s next door; the whole lot is to be cleared.’

‘No more slop,’ said Angel with a curl of the lip.

Boismal Jr nodded. ‘I’ll plant Chardonnay and Merlot and if they don’t want to give them Appellation Contrôlée it’ll be the best Vin de Pays in the world.’

‘Que conneria,’ said Angel.

They went to the café and drank a bottle of pastis between them. The next day Angel sent a sick note and stayed in bed for a week. He never worked for old Boismal again and the old man never left his house again, sitting alone coughing and wheezing noisily, watching the valley through a chink in the shutters.

1962-1965
Rodrigo wrote to Angel wherever he was stationed. He wrote of Gloria, now his wife, and of babies as they were born. The paper became less smudged, the writing firmer, more confident. ‘I enclose photos,’ Rodrigo wrote. The photos had different handwriting on the back with the children’s names and three kisses, signed Gloria.

When Algeria finally got independence from France in 1962, Angel and his group went on to spend periods all over Africa and the French Midi: Djibouti, Madagascar and finally various barracks in Carcassonne, Castres, Castelnauaudary.

On his walk away from the Legion, his new passport in his pocket, St Gervais du Bosc presented a physical barrier of some kind, stopped Angel on his inland walk, became his home away from home. If something was missing, Angel could not have defined it.

1985
Old Boismal’s death marked other changes in St Gervais: Co-op wine slowly...
improved; more and more tourists came from the north, and some bought houses.
Change didn’t affect everyone: Simone, continued to worry that late frost might ruin
her peach harvest, handling the delicate fruit in her palm like a cloud. Old Marinette
continued to tell of past floods and natural disasters. Many sold land to neighbours
wanting to expand their vineyards. A gap began to show between the new farmers and
the old. René Boismal Jr was one of many who lived in half-built new villas and
worked their farms alone with machines and maybe an eldest son. ‘Young people
these days have no interest in farming,’ he told Angel, ‘they only want out – to bigger
discos in Nimes or even Paris.’ The hippies who had settled in the hills in the late ‘60s
to make goats’ cheese had finally gone back to the cities to earn money. A few ageing
ones remained, drove big old cars or painted. ‘They deal heroin,’ René Boismal said.

No one wanted the old vines, especially those on difficult slopes that had to be
harvested by hand. Angel’s English friends were the only people still producing what
Boismal called slop.

‘Would you consider working for us full time?’ they asked Angel, ‘under the
table, of course.’

Angel took from them less than it was worth, and drew unemployment benefit
as well. He was able to send more money to Rodrigo. With the extra hours he got for
helping Boismal Jr he bought two-tone jackets and peaked caps, which he sported in
the evening at the restaurant or the café. ‘The boys will continue their studies,’
Rodrigo wrote. There were photos of a Spain Angel no longer recognised, with large
white box-like structures sprawling along the coast and over the hills.

Angel shared any vegetables that still managed to grow in his own garden with
the English couple, and stopped paying rent for the garden.

‘They deserve it,’ he said to the Englishwoman one evening as they sat
together on the terrace. They’d being doing this for several evenings since her
husband had left for England on business.

‘Who?’ she asked, turning the cool glass provocatively in her hands.

‘The French,’ he said.

She smiled.

‘I wouldn’t give you a centime for a Frenchman,’ he said.

‘Oh, come on,’ she said.

‘Una mierda,’ said Angel. ‘They think they’re worth more than the rest of us.
Do you want to become a billionaire?’

She waited.

‘Buy a Frenchman for what he’s worth and sell him for what he thinks he’s
worth.’

She read the Tarot cards for him, holding his hand in candlelight. There was a
lot of talk about the Hanged Man. She pronounced his name Ann-hell, and giggled.

Never quite sure why the couple had been so friendly towards him, Angel was
now very much at a loss to interpret this new attitude of hers. If anyone had asked,
he’d have described himself as the man without a country from a street without a
name.

After that he kept out of the Englishwoman’s way until her husband returned,
hideing on the terraces towards evening, watching tourists in shorts rush down the
mountain, their legs torn from scorpion broom, their arms full of orchids and other
rare plants that it was illegal to pull. He listened to the hammering at Boismal’s house

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and the other new villas until it was time to go home.

1990
On his return, the Englishman announced that their son would not be back to continue work on the house. There had been some money disaster. The word equity was used a lot. Angel couldn’t follow any of it although he gathered it was bad.

‘We’ve decided to rent accommodation,’ the Englishman said.

For a while Angel found himself assisting with interior arrangements, hanging curtains and carrying furniture. She was so preoccupied she did not confuse him with strange behaviour and odd signals, and he liked her better that way.

Angel moved into the mazet at the foot of the vineyard nearest their house, and enjoyed living mostly outdoors again. He began to sport a full beard. The two-tone jackets became dirty and were abandoned. Summers were marked by listless people sitting around the pool, walking bareheaded in the afternoon, complaining about local habits and attitudes. ‘Why don’t the French...?’ they would whine. Angel imitated them perfectly for René Boismal. ‘Who burned Joan of Arc?’ René replied. It wasn’t a question.

‘I’m going to stop taking grapes to the Co-op,’ the Englishman announced one day. ‘I want you to rehabilitate the old wine-press – a fine specimen and once the peak of village progress.’

Busloads of people came to taste and grimace. Le Mas du Cirque became synonymous with bad wine.

‘Since when can the English make wine?’ René Boismal asked, sitting on his tractor on the square, waiting for his lunch. ‘When I hear talk of oak casks, I reach for my gun.’

‘Leche,’ Angel spat on the hot flagstones.

Changes came faster now. The Englishwoman took groups for painting holidays, and Sunday painters could be seen all over the village wearing shorts and drinking to excess in the evening. Many of them purchased small houses, drank the worst of the wine and generally boosted the local economy. Angel’s 50th birthday was celebrated at the Mas, overlooking the finest view of the cirque and the valley, with a gigantic outdoors paëlla which he made himself, not talking much to anybody, just tending the giant dish on the fire. When people asked how he was, he replied ‘Comme un vieux.’ Like an old man.

If anyone got into discussion with him after a few drinks, he said, ‘If I’d done 15 years in the Legion instead of five, I’d be retired now with a pension, anywhere I wanted.’

The Spanish families stopped coming to pick grapes. The largest local landowners brought in North Africans to live in the least attractive of the smaller houses and work in the fields, as people like Angel had once done.

In the autumn, carloads of students from the former East Bloc countries drove down for the grape-harvest. Angel and René Boismal watched beautiful, pale, blonde, creased young things piled out of cars on the village square. Angel wondered if farming in Valencia was under similar pressure. He imagined a world of displaced people – his schoolmaster once said there had been economic migrants even in
Roman times.

‘Economic migrants. Caught in other people’s crossfire,’ Angel muttered to René Boismal. René frowned and didn’t reply.

1991

Prices rose, and the French dropped out of the holiday and house market, leaving foreigners the main source of income.

Then one day, a day like any other, the first Gulf War broke out and the world came to a standstill. Foreigners dried up. The international market crash followed. ‘For Sale’ signs went up everywhere. It was a while before the mood at Le Mas du Cirque was finally allowed to slip into despair. By then the English couple owed Angel four months’ pay. He heard drunken quarrels in the night.

Angel wakes from a dream in which his mother is calling him to dinner across a surface of dark green water. He emerges from his mazet to find the two cars, the three dogs and their owners gone. The house is locked. A ‘For Sale’ sign hangs on the gate in three languages.

Angel knows his luck has run out.

For a long time no one will come to ask what he is doing there or if he has any right to draw water, grow vegetables, harvest olives. He will let the vines go wild. They’ll be pulled up anyway, subsidised by government grants whenever a new owner is found. They will make roaring winter fires.

And some evenings, when he sits alone at the door of the little mazet, smoking and watching the sunset, he feels sorry for the vines: these gnarled, dry blackened things may be his only friends – unless you count the Arabs. Angel exchanges the odd word of Arabic with them. Dark, slight women with babies on their backs picnic among the vines, laughing, although they remain subdued in the village. Locals frown on noisy Arab children skipping in the shade of the Rue Sans Nom on summer afternoons. Angel pats the odd little head as he walks by. He doesn’t joke about killing melons. He doesn’t go to the café or the restaurant. He no longer sends money to Rodrigo, who has probably made a tidy income from rentals on the coast. He knows Rodrigo and Gloria will not miss him, although it pleases him to think they may miss his money, now that business is bad in Spain too.

One of the Arab parents, Ahmed, has become a friend and visits regularly. He arrives now, carrying a packet of biscuits, puffed from the climb.

‘Qahwah?’ Angel goes about making coffee in the little ibrik his friend has given him. One of his few, treasured belongings, it doesn’t require electricity.

Ahmed, passionate about words and their origins, draws from his jacket a notebook where he jots the links between Spanish and Arabic. He helps the local children with their lessons. He says the ‘Bosc’ in the village name is from Germanic and Latin roots and means ‘wood’.

Ahmed and Angel study words together. Angel has learnt the Arabic origins of some everyday words, place names and institutions: he has learnt that Gibraltar comes from Jbel Tarik, the mountain of Tarik, the Berber who once invaded Spain, that Montpellier medical school, Europe’s oldest still-active one, based its beginnings on writings of the Arab masters.

‘But we have more than all that in common,’ Ahmed says.
Angel slowly lifts his head from the coffee. ‘We are the lowest forms of life in the village.’
Ahmed points upwards, one hand on his heart, ‘And Allah watches out –’
‘So that neither of us will resort to a big nail on a beam.’ Angel laughs.
They drink good, strong coffee.
Listening to Ahmed and looking out at the vineyards in the blinding sunlight, Angel doesn’t marvel at the confusion and lack of purpose – other than eating and sleeping – of one small life. He repeats for his friend the proverb of the wise king, given him by his old schoolmaster as his only baggage before leaving home forever: Old wood best to burn, old books to read, old wine to drink and old friends to trust.
– ENDS –