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Snake on Saturdays

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'well-written and thought-provoking, the book is definitely worth reading for an insight into human relationships, as a closer look at the beauty of Llanelli and Cefn Sidan, or simply as a great story' – Suzanne Oakley, Llanelli Star

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San Fairy Anne

Jean Gill

Volume 2 of the Llanelli Saga

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For Dave, who doesn't like (other) lady writers

Thannenkirch (Alsace)

Meet me at the crossroads of
the black cherry tree in the pines.
Walk by the way-marked path
that winds from blossom to dark firs.
Look back before the bend;
the church tower points Germanic
to the village roofs of slate,
still shining from late snow.

Two storks migrating northwards
circle, searching out a twiggy crown.
Diminished log-piles, stacked
methodically by homesteads
feed the fires I'll hold you by.
Of mountain water turned to wine
in long-stemmed flutes, green-rimmed,
hand-etched with graven flowers,
we'll sip the future dry.

If you thought you might die tomorrow, who would share your today? The question, and its answer, beat in Vernon's blood as he shouldered the wireless pack.

He zigzagged along forest paths in his automatic safety precaution to avoid being tracked. He flicked wet hair out of his eyes, nostalgic for the rain of his Welsh home instead of this lethal game of hide and seek in the high Vosges. Sometimes, he couldn't even find his Alsacien comrades, and voices through the trees would whisper mud and trench rats, ghosts from the last war. He'd stumble into a clearing and despite the pre-arranged signal, there would always be a heart-stop when he'd wonder if these were the enemy, these French-German allies of German-French no-man's land, whose very language was border territory, neither one thing nor the other. Alsace had been tossed from one country to the other for centuries and at what cost!

Some days, Vernon too doubted his own nationality or wondered what exactly he was fighting for, or against, but he had been dropped – quite literally – here in Alsace, and orders were orders. From the moment he untangled himself from his parachute, he was in enemy territory, reliant on hard-eyed men who risked their families' lives, not just their own, to reclaim their mountains. Vernon worried about the risks more each week, longing for the visits of Elsë, his sixteen year old comrade, and nervous on her behalf. Today, he met her by the old stone of the Pagan wall, on the long ridge known as the Taenchel, high enough to give them a vantage point and awkward enough as a climb to ensure privacy. Elsë contributed to the quiet disappearance of bread, saucissons and beer, and its reappearance, through a chain of equally quiet glances, among the men of the mountains who resisted the occupation. By her very existence, Elsë sustained a man's sense of what he was fighting for, but it was more than that for Vernon. She seemed the very spirit of the forest in the way she silently appeared, startling even the birds, with that sudden scent of lily-of-the-valley, which announced her presence. She showed him where the ancient stones made natural hideouts, and where the tree line stopped and the snow fell first, at a

thousand metres up the mountains.

Today, she was there before him, waiting, as still and patient as the forest itself. Drizzle spotted her face and dress through the canopy of the trees and he kissed the freezing raindrops from her cheeks, her skin warm underneath the tingle of pure water on his tongue.

“We go tomorrow.”

“I know. I heard.” They both avoided names and knew the risks they took. She asked him once if he knew what happened at Le Struthof, some kind of prison camp the Germans had established in the mountains further north. He didn’t, but he’d heard the rumours too, crazy rumours. Perhaps it was better not to know.

He held her away from him, cupped her face between his hands, and held her gaze until she flushed and looked away.

“Let’s make today special,” she whispered.

He knew what she meant. His blood insisted on a young man’s dues to life itself. He said gently, “No.”

Because he’d said no, she insisted and, because he loved her, he took the gift she offered. He kissed her closed eyes and held her hand against his heart, then lost his sense of self in his body’s flow.

In his returning awareness of small sounds, rustling leaves and water on stone, he watched her eyes open like butterfly wings flashing blue on the forest floor. She sat up, shook the sparkling raindrops from her hair and held his gaze.

“I’ll come back and we’ll be married,” he promised, knowing the risk of death but believing in his own immunity.

She smiled, trusting, and wiped the spots of blood from her thigh with some wet grass.

The next day, 23rd November 1944, Vernon ‘the Hand’, was among the French troops mobilised by General Leclerc to try and retake Strasbourg. The bilingual Alsacien/English nickname had been earned by the young British wireless operator, or ‘pianiste’, for putting isolated resistance groups, such as those known as ‘the Alliance’, in touch with each other and with their military leaders. This time, he was part of a concerted military operation, which drew his comrades out of the woods and into the army ranks, to win Strasbourg and advance across the vine plains of Alsace as far as Colmar. There, on 1st January 1945, the Germans regrouped and launched such a strong counter-attack that the Allied Commander, Eisenhower, ordered that Strasbourg and the Vosges be abandoned. General de Gaulle argued against this decision and was granted the concession that the 1st French Battalion could defend

Strasbourg. The orders from de Gaulle were transmitted by a young Welsh wireless operator, now attached to the 1st French, and it was ‘the Hand’ who made the vital contacts from his mountain hideout. Against all odds, Strasbourg held and was saved while Alsace once more counted the cost.

“You’re old and cold,” he flung at her.

Anne noticed that the Agenda for the departmental meeting was on the Staffroom and it was crooked, pinned carelessly – shoddy work, like everything else Marianne did.

“What do you think you are?” Anton still hurled words at her, “some kind of ice-maiden? Only ice-maiden are twenty-three not forty-three, blonde not grey and when the ice melts they get out into the world open-mouthed and open-legged not –“

“Not here,” she spoke over him. “This is not the place.”

“Your choice,” he challenged, ‘You chose to end it here.’ The Staffroom door opened, some papers fell on the floor as the incomer tried to balance books and nudge the door closed. Neither Anne nor Anton moved to help their colleague as he gathered his documents, talking to himself in the sudden silence. “Now where did I put that ... oh yes...” he muttered as he grabbed something out of a locker and jammed his work-pile into it. He nodded a token bonjour to his motionless colleagues and left.

“You’re right,” Anton said, “Let’s go somewhere else.” He didn’t have to ask when she was teaching; they had known each others’ timetables for three years.

“I’ll drive.” Three years going nowhere. Had it ever been going somewhere? Perhaps, she acknowledged, they had both enjoyed the debates about language and the education system. Perhaps she had even enjoyed the skin against skin contact... perhaps, sometimes.

She glanced at the tic throbbing below a hairline just starting to thin. She didn’t have to look to visualise the ‘grande marque’, designer label jacket, trousers, pristine shirt and co-ordinating tie, all classic and understated. No shabby schoolteacher clothes for Anton. Once, she had thought him attractive, thought them so compatible, thought his neatness of mind and body, a virtue.

She had been here before and she had rules; no answering back if you were the one to call quits. No name-calling, no grudge-counting and most of all, no wavering,

nothing to let them think you might change your mind. Once, worn down by pleading, she'd made the mistake of trying again. It only prolonged the death throes. Not that it was always Anne who said when. On balance, she thought that it was easier being on the receiving end - she could at least guarantee that her own behaviour would be civilised and afterwards - she admitted it - she had felt relieved. She sighed and followed Anton to a quiet corner of the Winstüb, the local bier-keller where they had known better days. Of course he would jerk a string or two, just in case, but at least he seemed calmer now.

"I suppose I saw this coming," he surprised her by saying, "but it is a waste.... we have so much in common. Neither of us is getting younger, you're well past having children and I don't want any..."

"You have no idea what I want," she couldn't help interrupting him, knowing that she should nod, glaze over and endure.

He focused on her, as if really looking at her for once. "Don't be ridiculous - you're far too old."

She could feel the flush. A hot flush? That would be good timing. "I'm talking about feelings."

He patted the hand she had left lying on the table "I understand," he soothed. "Let's leave it there for a while. Perhaps after a few months ... we can talk again. Perhaps start again with a concert in Strasbourg?" He gave the smile she had once considered charming, and the invitation, like the bier-keller, was supposed to be a reminder of warmer moments between them.

"I don't think so." Anne rescued her hand and stood up, "I won't change my mind."

"We'll wait and see," he smiled again, showing perfectly even white teeth. She steeled herself for the kiss goodbye that she felt was owed but she couldn't do it. What was the point anyway, when he steadfastly assumed that this was a minor hiccup in their to-be-continued apology for a relationship. She drove carefully back to school in awkward silence, desperate for home and a long, long shower.

Anton had at least the courtesy - or smugness? - to leave her alone in the Staffroom where she passed a restless hour before her next class, starting to mark and losing concentration. So, this time, she was just dregs, so desperate herself that she

should be grateful for this last chance being offered her by this man who knew nothing, nothing about her private longings and regrets. Her stomach heaved with anger but when she imagined lashing out, hitting him or even shouting, all she could see were her colleagues' faces, pitying, disapproving, making it more difficult to go about a day's work. The anger converted to bile, lying sour and poisonous. The weeks to the end of term loomed long... passing Anton in corridors, avoiding and evading, smiling back – and then, after a summer off, another year of the same.

No, that Agenda was really too much. She stamped across the empty Staffroom and re-pinned the offending document in neat alignment with its neighbours and, as she did so, a notice caught her eye and she read it, disbelieving. Strange, the way she had grown used to ignoring most of the notices on the board, whether the old 'Fire Regulations' or this new one, labelled 'Fate' not only in what it offered but where. What if? She almost took the advert from the board, thought no, Anne Grüber does not make rash spur-of-the-moment life-changing decisions. She turned her back and felt the notices smiling behind her back, a smug white-toothed smile that leered, 'Too old'. She turned again, unpinned the advert, photocopied it, then neatly pinned it up again before gathering her thoughts on 'school vocabulary' for an English lesson with thirty twelve year-olds.

Elsë read her daughter's face when Anne arrived home from school but she asked her anyway, "Anton?"

"I've finished it."

"Then that was the right thing to do."

"And if he had finished it?"

Elsë didn't hesitate. "Then he would be a stupid man who doesn't appreciate a beautiful, talented woman who takes the whole world on her shoulders every day and teaches it English."

"Maman, I'm forty not fourteen to believe such rubbish," was the reproach but Anne smiled. "And you forget, I teach German too."

"But that it is simple." Elsë dismissed the German language with a wave. "*I* can speak German, there's nothing to it. But English..." she shook her head. "It's impossible."

Anne laughed, "I keep telling you, you could learn."

Elsë was emphatic, “No, never. Not even if... Vernon... had come back, I would never have learnt his English.” She could not follow that thought through, into the life that hadn’t been. “But never mind that, what about you? How do you feel?”

“How did you feel, with Vernon?”

Anne had earned the right to ask, this daughter of hers who had so much to give, and Elsë tried to answer. “The sweetness of the moment, a belief in forever, young, so young...”

“You still think of him?”

This was old, painful ground but Elsë was patient. “Yes.”

“And with Papa?”

“You know the answer to that ... you were there ... you know there was nothing missing with your father.”

Anne’s mouth twisted. “You find it twice and I find nothing with anyone.”

“I paid for that first time,” Elsë said softly, “and I think you are better off without this Anton if that’s how he makes you feel, this ‘nothing’. There are many ways of being yourself...”

“... and none of them include Anton. I agree.” Anne brought a sheet of paper out of her bag and passed the advert across to her mother.

Elsë read it twice, tried to get past the word ‘Llanelli’ in her thoughts. “You want to go?”

“It’s for a year.” Elsë waited, watching her daughter’s face, the new shadows under her eyes. “I don’t know. It would mean so much new, so much work... but I would bring my English up to date, learn from different teaching techniques. It would ... stop me getting old and stale.”

“Old? You?” Elsë queried. “Don’t be ridiculous – I am old.”

“Ridiculous seems to be my word of the day.” Anne’s mouth twisted then she continued, answering the real, unspoken question. “It is too much of a coincidence, it being your Llanelli,” she corrected herself, “Vernon’s Llanelli. If I go, I will try to find out what you want to know.”

“But do you want to know?”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted, “but I’ll do it anyway. We’ve talked about it often enough – this,” she pointed at the advert, “makes it practical.”

Elsë struggled to find the words. “My heart goes with you.”

“I might find nothing,” Anne warned.

“My heart comes back with you, regardless...” and Elsë held her daughter long enough to need no more words.

Neil Phillips drove along the region of the Rhine Valley recovered by the French army over fifty years ago, retaken by the Germans and finally declared French once again. In accepting the challenge of a teacher exchange, Neil was most worried about the domestic arrangements. In taking on Anne Grüber’s teaching commitment, he also stepped into her life. He and Anne had met briefly in Llanelli in September, as the French School Year started later than the Welsh one. Like him, she was single, and like him, she lived with her mother. Although she spoke freely, in excellent English, of her home and her school, he gained an impression of deep reserve and there was no mention of her friends or her social life. Her affection for her mother was evident, lighting her eyes with warmth and worry over her own absence. Neil’s own reservations about leaving his own mother, also widowed, were allayed by his conversations with this capable middle-aged woman. He also knew how insulted his mother would have been at the very existence of those reservations. She was clear in her instructions to him to ‘Live your life’ but also enjoyed the closeness the two of them had shared since the death of Neil’s father. His reservations about leaving the pupils, for whom he felt responsible, also faded after meeting Anne. He felt he was growing stale as a teacher and it would be good for both him and his school to get fresh ideas, whatever culture clashes that might mean. He knew enough about the French education system to think that clashes there would be.

He could not imagine being without his car so he drove to his exchange home, following the autoroute east along the Rhine Valley, past Strasbourg. The vineyards coloured the plain with dusty end-of-summer greenery; on his right the folds and peaks of the Vosges shifted in the sunshine; on his left, in the distance, the misty slopes of the Black Forest bordered Germany. When he left the valley to follow a small road meandering up into the mountains, he entered a different world. The wooden-beamed medieval architecture of the houses in picturesque Bergheim gave way to vineyards, then small orchards and roadside homesteads, nestling in the great

forests which dominated the upper slopes. A hairpin bend brought Neil to Anne's home village of Thannenkirch. The floral window boxes faced whichever direction was frontal for the mountain lodges perched at angles on steep streets branching off the main road. Neil parked by the church in the Central Square and checked directions while the chime of the hourly bells rang out, floating over the trees and down into the valley. Neil adjusted to the change of scale; halfway up a mountain in the Vosges would have been the top of a mountain in South Wales. On the other hand, Neil was used to sloping streets and hill starts, and cheerfully took two right turns to find the wooden, three-story chalet-style house that was to be his home.

Madame Elsë Grüber put down the watering can, left the geraniums and lobelia, and from the moment she took his hand and smiled, she created space for them to get to know each other, in talk or in silence. Neil felt the same reserve in her as in her daughter and was relieved not to be grilled over aspects of his private life, which he preferred to keep very firmly private. They gradually established a routine for meals, she having made it clear that she would happily cook for him and he being unused to any domestic chores; a routine for conversations, centring on his teaching, his weekend activities at the Stork Centre and on her knowledge of local customs and language; and a routine for occasional trips in which Neil drove Madame Grüber on a shopping trip down to Bergheim, or to visit a friend. Although she said he could call her Elsë, somehow this lady in her seventies called for a degree of respect which kept her as Madame Grüber. Perhaps the Alsacien tendency to shake hands rather than kiss cheeks helped to create that sense of distance. The most personal conversations were her reminiscences of her daughter's childhood and her speculations on what Anne's life would be like in Neil's shoes. She couldn't get enough detail of the Llanelli home her daughter was sharing. Neil waited for memories of further in the past but they never came. He was told the bare facts that Monsieur Grüber was a cooper and had died ten years earlier, of a heart attack, but stories of her youth never came. Neil knew enough about local tensions not to ask what his new acquaintances did in the war but many of them told him, however selective their stories might be; not Madame Grüber.

Most of these new acquaintances were formed over the months working at Hunawir's Stork Sanctuary, where Neil spent his weekends. The far greater freedom of French teachers to come and go when they were not actually teaching meant that he

rarely saw his colleagues, so it was his fellow-conservationists that formed his social life, such as it was. On this particular February Sunday, Neil was concentrating fully on the large white bird struggling in his arms, and in particular on its thrashing red legs. In his early days at the Centre, he discovered the brutal impact of a stork-kick between the legs, much to the amusement of his co-workers. That, delete expletive, bird challenged Neil's conservation theories to the limit, receiving clear instructions to go fly to Africa, electrocute himself and get shot, for all Neil cared. The two fatal options were the consequence of migration for so many storks in past decades that Alsace nearly lost its lucky mascot forever. In 1982, only two pairs returned in the spring. Now there were one hundred and fifty in the centre and an estimated two hundred nesting in the wild.

Given his love of the herons that lived on the estuary marshes near his Llanelli home, Neil could imagine nothing better than this opportunity to work at weekends with the stork experts at the Sanctuary. His weeks were committed to the school timetable of his Alsacien exchange partner and to his professional aim of improving his French and German. It was very strange to be teaching English as a foreign language but Neil's first language, Welsh, gave him some insights into the quirkiness of English. It also helped him to understand some of the passionate disagreements which raged over the old language (according to some) or dialect (according to others) of Alsace. Attempts to encourage the younger generation to use their 'inheritance' was livened up by television adverts which showed the native storks speaking their native Alsacien.

Perhaps, Neil thought, the birds would be more co-operative if he could speak to them in their own language. He was careful in closing and locking the wire door behind him, with the prisoners safely at a distance. Some of the older ones were capable of plotting the great escape and he was wary if one stayed near the door as he was trying to leave. One good shove with that solid body, or even those feet he shuddered to remember, and he'd be a road to be trampled by a penful of storks. That was not how he wanted to be remembered at the Sanctuary. He noted which birds he had tagged or checked, completed the record sheet and let himself out.

"What's new, Michel?" he greeted the Centre Manager, who was checking data on the Internet in the small wooden office.

“The Czechs are tracking their black storks. So far, so good. Keep your fingers crossed for September.”

Neil looked puzzled. “September?”

Michel mimed a rifle shot. “Hunting season, especially in the south. You didn’t hear about Hynek? It was a big Czech research project. The African Odyssey Project tagged a black stork family and Hynek was one of the babies. You know how many we lose when they cross Africa - through trigger-happy natives.” Michel shook his head. “Hynek was everyone’s favourite, people all round the world watched him every day on the Internet from his birth onwards. They followed his daily flights starting migration. Every detail of co-ordinates was plotted so the whole world knew when – and where - Hynek’s data stopped. It was a massive scandal.” Michel’s guttural accent slurred the French word ‘scandal’ harshly. “He was shot down near Dondas, a village near Agen.”

Neil was starting to understand the Frenchman’s reluctance to tell the story. “Agen’s the twin-town of Llanelli – south-west France, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Michel sighed heavily. “There we were at the forefront of conservation, taking the high moral ground over these ignorant Africans, and where did Hynek die? In France, in total contravention of the laws protecting species. Pah! Southerners! There were protests at the French Embassy in Prague and Czech Radio is still crusading. If you listen to the Czechs, the Dutch and the Belgians,” he shook his head again as if this was the worst possible consequence, to be looked down on by the Belgians. “The Belgians!” he repeated, “If you listen to them, the most dangerous place for endangered species is France.”

Neil carefully said absolutely nothing.

Michel’s grin was disarming. “I know. You’re right. There is a difficulty of attitude, especially in the south. But look what we have achieved.” His gesture embraced the whole Centre. “Storks and otters in the wild again. We have so much to tell the world, including the Czechs, the Dutch and,” he gritted his teeth, “the Belgians. We must use this,” he patted the computer with the flat of his hand,” and people like you will go back to your country with understanding.”

“Do you ever get black storks here?” The Centre bred Alsace’s indigenous white storks.

“One has been known to drop in, en route, but they’ve not been known to stay or nest here. You’ll find any sightings noted in the books.” He pointed casually at some shelves.

Neil had quickly realised that the voluminous records of the Centre were not so much filed as gathered and that it was a lot quicker to ask the relevant enthusiast for some information than to explore ‘the system’. “I have to get back now but I’ll look through some time.” Michel returned to the Internet.

The Sanctuary was still closed to the public for the winter and the huge car park was empty bar Neil’s own Megane and a couple of transit vans. The huge wood-stack with its ‘Beware vipers’ sign seemed hardly reduced by its regular use for fuel in the freezing Alsace winter. The white trails of wood-smoke hung over the houses of Hunawehr clustered behind the stork centre and winding up to the distinctive one-spire church which figured on the local wine labels. At this time of year, the pruned stumps of vines hung on wires, marching in rows from field to vineyards to the horizon, beyond which lay Strasbourg. Above the small church and vineyards on the lower slopes, loomed the forested sides of the mountains. A footpath was clearly visible, passing strange rock formations which proved, on closer inspection, to be man-made and ruined. Higher again, a bald peak of the high Vosges defied all greenery, glinting white in the weak February sunshine.

Neil’s route home followed the meandering lanes along the valley until he reached the road that would take him up through Bergheim, past the pink and purple houses, through the medieval archway and up into the mists of the lower mountains.

Madame Grüber was waiting for him with strong black herbal tea and some solid ‘küchen’, the marzipaned cake which was one of the Sunday treats that she laid on for her guest.

“Anne phoned,” she told him. “It’s raining.”

“That’s not news,” he smiled.

“Your friend Helen has been taking her out and about. I think she liked shopping in Cardiff better than looking at birds through binoculars. It’s not very French to talk about what a bird is called.” How like Helen to take a visitor to the Wildfowl and Wetland Centre, the place where she and Neil met and became friends. He had asked

her to keep an eye on his mother and Helen was obviously looking after his exchange partner too.

“But you do know what all the birds are called, don’t you.”

“Of course. We live together. But I don’t chase them with little glasses,” she mimicked the bird-watcher with binoculars, “I use my eyes and my ears. You need to know what is good to eat and what is not; that’s what your mother teaches you.” Neil could not imagine his mother pointing out a lark and saying, “You can eat that, casserole in red wine,” or even picking field mushrooms. He envied Madame Grüber her apparently instinctive knowledge of her environment but he could only learn it through study. It was frustrating that the people who seemed to have some kind of natural lore by birthright were the very ones who were most difficult to convince of the importance of conservation. Like Madame Grüber, they found the Stork Centre slightly ridiculous, at best an academic hobby to be tolerated. Neil’s allies were people like Helen, another ‘townie’ who had discovered the countryside with the enthusiasm of the convert, or intellectuals like Michel for whom conservation was a scientific field. If everyone was a Madame Grüber and just left everything be, there would be no storks left in Alsace.

As if reading his mind, she said, “Some people watch the river; some build dams. Who knows what is best for the river?”

“The otters are doing well.” The Centre also had a programme for breeding and re-introducing otters to the wild. “They seem to like eels and frogs best, which should please the local fishermen.”

“I’m glad. You and your friends at the Centre work hard. I’m glad that you care so much about our storks and otters.” Neil felt absurdly pleased, as if he had been given both praise and permission. She did not ask him why he cared so much, a question that sometimes worried him with its implication of something lacking, or out of proportion in his life. He had been away from his closest friends for six months now.

“It was the storks that attracted me. But there is so much here to explore.”

Madame Grüber considered her words carefully. “Easter is coming. It is very important here in Alsace, a time for remembering things that are ... difficult. There is a place in the mountains further north. It was a concentration camp in the war and it

has become a place of pilgrimage, especially at Easter. Le Struthof,” she nodded, “you should go there at Easter if you want to understand a little more about Alsace.”

“I will. Can you tell me more about it?” He held his breath, sensing something important.

“Nearer the time.” Her tone was final and changed, lightening. ”There are so many places you should see, be a good tourist while you are here. Why don’t you go to see the monkeys?”

“I get enough of those during the week – I’m a teacher!”

“No, you should go. People tell me that the monkeys make you smile. And it is also one of your wildlife sanctuaries, another endangered species – you would be in your element *and* having fun.”

“You think I should smile more?”

“Too young to be so serious. And so thin! Have some more *küchen*.”

Neil helped himself to more *küchen*, having one of those physiques which enabled him to eat and eat without ever putting on weight. This was just as well, given the solidity of the Alsacien diet, saucisson, sauerkraut and tarte flambé (a type of creamy, cheesy pizza), all laced with ‘lardons’ (cubes of bacon fat).

In his experience, all mothers cooked, persuaded him to eat more and were reassured about his happiness when he complied.

In the bedroom which had become his – not Anne’s but a slightly musty, rarely used guest room - he faced his laptop and typed up the lines of poetry he’d scribbled during the day. Cabrel’s songs played in the background and again he thought of Helen, who loved the music as soon as he’d introduced it to her in the weekly French lessons that they shared. There was one particular song that reminded him of how she struck him when they first knew each other. She was so brittle, so cagey over her past. He’d often wondered why. He repeated the song and started playing with a translation of the first lines.

Winter

*She said that she had walked too long
Unbalanced by the weight of words unsaid
Of too much pain.*

That was exactly what Helen had been like, full of secrets, unable to carry on but never talking about it, whatever ‘it’ was. Although Helen told him, “Friends are for keeps; lover are for fun” it was her lover, Dai, who reached her and brought about a change. Perhaps Neil would never know what had been wrong, or what had made it right, but he could see and enjoy the difference.

C’était l’hiver

Elle disait:”j’ai déjà trop marché,
Mon coeur est déjà trop lourd de secrets,
Trop lourd de peine.

Difficult to capture the lyric qualities of the original, the internal rhyme of ‘disait’ and ‘marchait’, then chiming again with ‘secrets’ and then the jarring third line, ‘peine.’ He looked back at his attempt in English. If he kept the mood, the bitter tail to the verse and set up his own rhymes, out of step and irregular as in the Cabrel but not necessarily in the same place, perhaps it would work. He set to work. Late that night he went online and mailed the final version to Helen.