

Year 4 Weeks 7 - 20

The passing of summer: everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux

The first overnight frosts. A reminder that summer is passing, unrecorded.

Fleeting images of the vanishing summer: guidebooks on the bench beneath the apple tree; a burgundy brocade jacket; an alien stinkhorn; young mourners in black; chandeliers over a ghostly banquet; silent headstones in Hindi; jars of peach jam; the stack of apple-wood.

Yesterday was a day of nostalgia too. The last Friday summer walk of the Club Vosgien. The farewell handshakes and kisses were regretful. The companionship of summer was dissolving. Fridays this year had been particularly prone to rain. Macs and umbrellas had been much in evidence. (Yes, umbrellas. It's perfectly respectable for serious walkers here to carry an umbrella. A silhouette of walkers on a rock on rainy day would look very Japanese - the cape macs and umbrellas shading into robes and parasols). The oldest walker, Auguste, had decided that, with his 90th birthday approaching, his days of toiling uphill were over, but most Fridays he would lurk near the car-park to greet us wistfully on our return. But the president of the group was back in action, after months of uncertainty after a heavy beam had fallen on his head. Each week he addressed the group, in a slow and careful voice, saying how pleased he was to be once more in our company. And each week the applause was warm and affectionate.

One (wet) day the president led us up a green slippery footpath by a "torrent" to a rock with a splendid view over Lake Gérardmer - an ideal spot for watching the fireworks over the lake on Bastille Day. We noticed a rope tied to a tree and stretched taut over the rock edge. "It's a police exercise", joked the President, "so don't cut the rope". A group of walkers struck up a few jolly walking songs as we gained our breath on the rock. Then men with crossed skis on their arm badges emerged from below us. Gérardmer's mountain police. For them the songs were a welcome return to normality, following the grisly task of searching for a body below.

Yesterday's walk was sunnier. After an unrelentingly steep ascent and some spectacular views, we passed remains of both world wars. A once-soaring steel observation tower, its metal now twisted and prostrate on the ground, and the reassembled stones of an observation post. Both looked across to the ridges where the slaughter in World War 1 had been huge. Further along our ridge and facing away from the battle lines, cave shelters had been cut into rocky pinnacles. At this point, Maurice, who often leads the group singing, asked, "What does it actually mean, the song *It's a long way to Tipperary*?" He and other lads used to sing it whenever they saw German soldiers, thinking it was rude, as it seemed to annoy them. He started reminiscing about the air battles he'd seen above this point as bombers heading for Germany were attacked. Then about how the American soldiers watched the town of Saint Dié burn to the ground as they hadn't received orders to stop the destruction (a view I hadn't heard before).

Once started, Maurice was unstoppable, and, by the time we'd descended to the road, I'd heard most of his family tree. The most vivid was his account of the uncle, whose sister let go of the pram handle on a hill; pitched out, uncle was badly injured, and never grew properly; in the thread mill, he was given a specially raised seat; but following a dispute with the foreman he wandered from town to town as a journeyman tailor. At this point we reached the road where a couple of vintage Jaguars were parked, which provoked a discussion on what cars the Queen of England drives, and the devices which his father manufactured during the war, when the copper alcohol stills which the family had previously manufactured were no longer in demand; these devices fixed onto the side of vehicles (French and German alike) recycled unspent fuel from the exhaust. And then there was his grandmother You can imagine that after this cascade of memories, I too was really sorry to say farewell to the cast of walkers.

The burgundy brocade jacket was the occasion for more memories. We had been doubtful, if not scornful, when our friend Ann said it would be fun to buy a wedding outfit while she was in France. "We don't have any big shops, just pricey boutiques", we objected. However, in the small glass-making town of Baccarat, Ann and I walked past a tiny shop window. It was crowded with beige models posing in drab beige outfits. But squashed in the back corner glittered this fabulous jacket-of-many-colours. Inside, the shop was high-ceilinged with a heavy wooden counter down each side, women's on the left and men's on the right. Behind the counters, drapers' shelves were stacked with cellophane wrapped shirts and socks and rolls of suit fabric in varying greys. Between the counters, you could edge between closely-packed rails of clothes. But it was the musty fabric smell which instantly evoked the era of bespoke tailors, dressmakers with pins in their mouths, school gabardines and Cash's name-tapes. It being 11.50, and the hours between 12.00 and 14.00 being sacred to lunch, Madame, although very gracious, was clearly clearing up. The jacket fitted well and looked great. "We'll think about it over lunch."

Baccarat had already been rewarding. We'd stopped in the square of tall glassworkers houses, bright with geraniums and petunias. At one end stands the manager's former mansion and the chapel and at the other the huge glassworks. For once the little glassworkers' chapel was open. Entering, we plunged into darkness. A very special exhibition had been designed as part of the festivities commemorating Stanislas Leszczynski, former King of Poland and last Duke of independent Lorraine, who died 250 years ago. Slowly the outlines emerged of a huge banqueting table, running the length of the chapel. One by one the pieces of Baccarat glassware were illuminated, with their crystallised fruits, macaroons, bergamot sweets (Lorraine delicacies). Over the table hung two enormous Baccarat chandeliers. Glittering silver strands hung like cobwebs between the goblets, dishes, vases and chandeliers and the ghostly effect was of Miss Havisham's long-abandoned wedding feast.

Our more modest lunch in Baccarat was pâté Lorrain (imagine a puff pastry filled with minced pork and onions moist with wine, and herbs) from a stall. Afterwards, as we sat in the sunshine enjoying cold drinks at a pavement café, more stalls and roundabouts appeared and a loud speaker blared music and details of the procession at 16.00 which would open Baccarat's pâté Lorrain

festival. At the magic hour of 14.00 we returned to the drapery. The crowded interior seemed packed with customers, and Madame flitted, flattering and soothing, between potential buyers, offering added delights, some dark trousers, a pretty scarf, a different top. It was like a little theatre. She even found time to revise out vocabulary (a jacket is *une veste*, a vest is incomprehensible and *le top* refers only to a sleeveless T-shirt). And of course, Ann left with the beautiful jacket. We decided not to stay for the procession, but to drive back along the river. At exactly 16.00, the rain started and became a real deluge. It must have ruined the procession.

A refrain this summer seems to have been "a shame about the rain!". The new benches in the orchard have looked inviting, but only a few visitors have had the chance of reading and relaxing there. However the damp must have encouraged the strange THING that John found out there one day. I tried to describe it to Chantal, one of the walkers. Balancing on a narrow hillside footpath and waving my arms to imitate an octopus, I endeavoured to explain it was bright pink, with tentacles like an inverted octopus, and might be a plant sucker or a fungus. She looked sceptical, but a few weeks later came up with the name [*Anthurus d'archer \(Anthurus archeri\)*](#), from which John tracked down more information on the rare Octopus Stinkhorn, which seems to have originated in Australia and been first seen here in France in about 1920. Speculation is that the spores were either brought on the clothing of soldiers during the 1914-18 war or on lambs' wool sent to a thread mill in nearby Raon l'Etape. Perhaps we could become a nature reserve for rare species. A couple of days ago our friend Nicola released two hedgehogs into our orchard. She had prised them from the jaws of one of her dogs, who has not forgotten his hunting ancestry. And this morning under the damson trees I saw a lovely auburn coloured red squirrel (most round here are much darker, black in fact).

Hollard, the metal-worker from the next village, finally made our balcony railings in the first week of August, when the rest of France was on holiday. and found a dry day on which to install them, with John's help. He speaks extremely fast. When we don't understand, he laughs loudly ; it's probably a nervous laugh, but can sound a bit maniacal. He is very lean and his navy overalls hang baggily on him; his face looks unhealthily sallow perhaps from his indoor welding and by contrast his eyes look very large and white; with his welding visor on but raised he looks even more elongated. As he leggily scaled the ladder, laughing madly, eyes flashing under his raised visor, he looked uncannily Gollum-like.

Despite an injured finger (trying to catch a falling section of uninstalled balcony railing), John quickly set about painting the assembled masterpiece. After two coats of pale grey, the overall effect was of a sleek ocean liner. Clutching the (now dry) railings on a wet and windy day you could imagine you were with young DiCaprio on the deck of the Titanic.

If you've been following our on-going saga of country folk, you'll be glad to know that Matthieu sawed the felled apple tree into log sizes, which John has stacked neatly, in approved local fashion under a tarpaulin. Farmer Duhaut, who was not the villain of the piece after all, continued to drive his tractor up and down the road until the morning before Gollum/Hollard installed our balcony. John looked up from his computer to see a succession of neighbours'

cars racing up the road: first Madame Duhaut, then commune employee, Alain Duhaut, assorted firemen and the Mayor's secretary and the postman; then the police and ambulance service. Then all afternoon more cars screeching to a standstill at the end of the road. Could Dominique have been gored by a bull again? (but why was the postman or the police car needed?). Or had whoever we'd heard using their chainsaw up in the forest met a grisly fate? The story Madame Laine later told us was that Dominique had been up a ladder against the silo. When it slipped and he fell, the ladder landed on top of him and he was unable to breathe. Terrified, his farming partner Olivier had run down to the nearest house where the retired fireman had summoned the emergency services (which now entails the fire brigade, ambulance, and police all turning up). He also rang Dominique's mother. She was chatting to the postman (hence his return at the end of his round for the latest bulletin). However Duhaut is tough and after a couple of days in hospital, I saw him driving gingerly up the lane in his 4x4. It was reassuring to see him back on his tractor a few days later. And the afternoon cars screeching around? The parents at the other 2 houses at the end of the road were away, so the teenagers were "listening to music."

The teenagers in black, whose image has stayed with me, were coming out of a fortified village church in Alsace. Hunawihr stands on a hill with vineyards all around. Unusually, the church has been used for centuries by both Catholics and Protestants. It has some lovely 15th/16th century wall paintings of the life of St Nicholas. The first time we took friends to see them, we could walk inside the huge defensive 14th century walls, but the church itself was closed. The second time we went, there were cars everywhere and a huge wedding in progress. This time it was a funeral. For a teenager. The wall paintings suddenly seemed irrelevant. When the last of the grieving young people and families left, the grave diggers were working carefully at a family grave within the walls, surrounded by wreaths.

And the Hindi headstones? We came across them last week after we'd had the car serviced in Epinal. We drove northwards to Charmes. It seems to have been destroyed during several wars including the last, so is uncharmingly modern. But along a quiet little road to the east is an irregular triangle of manicured grass and spotless headstones, labelled *Brit* on the map. In the central portion, many of the headstones were for aviators from World War I, mainly 1917 or 1918, when apparently there had been airfields in the area. Against the wall at one end were headstones for Chinese labourers, and at the other those of Hindu Indian labourers. Other graves in the centre were for Scots and Canadian soldiers. With them was a solitary Indian from World War II. I would have liked to have known his story.

An interesting anecdote emerged at the end of another walk with friends. Clutching a local history booklet, we'd explored the old "silver trail" a few miles away. We'd looked at the humps and bumps - slag seemed such a miserable word for the dross surrounding silver - in the present-day farmland where the mined rocks had been washed and sifted. We'd walked along part of the old mule track over to the biggest silver mine town. And we'd read about the old customs post in the village. So we stopped and asked a farmer and his wife about the customs post. "No, that would have been further up, on the

summit.” The farmer remembered his grandmother’s accounts of sneaking past customs men with tobacco (in the days when the tobacco fields of Alsace belonged to Germany). It was also the custom, in those days for everyone to leave their front door unlocked, and only bolt the door at the end of the long corridor. Any pursued smuggler could take refuge in the corridor, as the customs men were not allowed to enter households.

Ah yes. Despite the days of rain, it’s been a rich and varied summer in and around Entre-deux-Eaux. Helen has missed some it, following her mother’s latest fall in which she fractured her pelvis. But we leave you with a few more impressions of this rapidly vanishing summer: Tasting (and purchasing!) wines in the vineyards of Zellenberg. Haggling in the flea-markets. Inhaling the kitchen aroma of cheap peaches ripening (before John’s jam-making) and later of heaped fronds of dill (for freezing) and of sturdier basil (for pesto). Suffering the intense heat in the claustrophobic labyrinth in the field of tall maize. Watching beautiful models prancing in swirling gauze, gossamer, velvet and brocade at the Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines Patchwork Festival. And finally a single colour. John spent a week repainting all the shutters. But directions for finding our house remain “look out, across the fields on your left, as you approach Entre-deux-Eaux, for the house with the blue shutters.”