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**The Wild Summer of Your Gaze**

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*Translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa*

## **Chapter 1**

### **Je reviens**

The last days of April. Thick mist everywhere, deep as a well, and a faint aroma of flowers. This is the time of year when the rhododendrons and azaleas start to open. Like something new. Something troubling and new. It's the time of year when we feel our existence to be justified, because the garden is our creation, the work of our hands and soul, and, in a way, it resembles us, it has our smell. When we met in Madrid, he told me I smelled of apricots. And sometimes of tangerines. Later, with a strange, unfathomable look on his face, he told me I smelled of the azaleas, of the garden, the part of the garden he most loves, between the lawn and the sea. A tranquil vale.

Some species of rhododendron can live for hundreds of years. They grow in the woods, where there's always shade. They draw their nourishment directly from the humus in the earth, because the leaves that fall in autumn from the trees growing around them rot down into the soil. The moisture so necessary to their more slender roots is retained by the organic matter, and the nutrients return to the soil according to a natural cycle.

I wonder what it must be like to live for hundreds of years. At the age of seventy-three, the Japanese painter Hokusai wrote that he was finally beginning to grasp the structures of birds and beasts, insects and fish, and the way plants and trees grow, he thought that perhaps by ninety he would have penetrated the essential nature of things, that by the time he was a hundred, his work would have reached the stage of divine understanding, and by the age of one hundred and ten, every dot and every stroke he made would be truly alive.

I never really wanted to live a long time. I preferred, rather, to burn out early, quickly, like the flame of a candle someone blows out in the dark. I didn't like the idea of growing old. And towards the end, there was already a hint of that ageing process, a few lines around my mouth, it starts with the mouth...

The empty mirrors reflect the rooms and the vases of flowers, and only afterwards the thin, pale face, the greenish, almost grey eyes, the long, very dark hair. The loveliest creature he had ever seen. Not the loveliest woman. The loveliest creature. The loveliest creature most people had ever seen.

The empty mirrors reflect the rooms and the vases of flowers. And then, only then, the slender figure walking slowly through the rooms, as if obsessively reconnoitring the same terrain. And yet I know this house so well, every corner, every shadow, every piece of furniture, every object, every book. The nineteenth-century novels. The volumes of poetry. And the shelves full of leatherbound tomes that were here before me and that I would occasionally leaf through when I first arrived at Manderley; they seemed to reject me, though, as if they were happier like that, closed and drowsing. Books have their own existence even when not being read, leafed through, sniffed. And so I left them to continue their sleep, because they were so much a part of the house, part of the primitive soul of the house, and they didn't need me.

I used to enjoy wandering around the house at dawn. I did the same in the house where I grew up, which was smaller and even older, with lilacs round the door and a lawn at the front which, in March, was covered in daffodils.

I've always enjoyed wandering through houses, cities, parks, woods. But I never found anything. Perhaps I didn't go far enough. When I was twenty, I used to plan long voyages, to Japan, to Russia, and then one day, I met him, in Madrid,

and from then on, a journey meant staying in a five-star hotel in some European city. But, again, I never found anything, we never really arrived anywhere.

An April evening. This is the time of year when the rhododendrons and the azaleas start to open. I lean against the window and search in vain for my reflection in the glass. Outside are the rhododendrons...the rose trees. Rhodon – rose; dendron – tree. The flowers are beginning to open, small red flames among the foliage. There are azaleas growing under the window. That particular species needs watering every day when it's in flower, preferably with rain water collected for the purpose, because it's acidic and the same temperature as the air. Its peach-coloured flowers have no scent. (The azalea with the strongest scent is the azalea pontica. On sunny days, a single shrub can fill a whole garden with its sweet, drowsy perfume.)

My reflection finally appears in the glass, mingled with the first shades of evening. This reassures me a little. The thin face, the mass of dark hair. I whisper my name to myself, over and over, and that reassures me too. Rebecca. Rebecca de Winter. And the house is called Manderley. In every Cornish village, tourists can buy brightly coloured postcards of Manderley. On Monday mornings, the house is open to visitors.

I don't want to forget anything, not the important things. I am a woman who has lost touch with all the non-essential things of life. A phrase from a book, from a play perhaps. And, as if I were praying, I try to remember the essential things.

I remember the prayer I used to say every night, and a song that one of my nannies taught me, *Willow Wally, We lay my love and I beneath the weeping willow...*

*We lay my love and I beneath the weeping willow,  
But now alone I lie and weep beside the tree.  
Singing "Oh willow wally" by the tree that weeps with me.  
Singing "Oh willow wally" till my lover returns to me.  
We lay my love and I beneath the weeping willow.  
A broken heart have I. Oh willow I die, oh willow I die.*

I don't know why, but I'm always singing that song now. And I haven't done that since the days when I used to pray every night, asking God my soul to keep should I die before I woke.

The essential things:

A few years ago, I heard Duke Ellington playing the piano in a bar in London.

One September night, in Stratford, I saw Michael Redgrave as Hamlet.

In May, I fell asleep in the woods among the bluebells (nowhere in England are they as blue as in the woods around Manderley).

One foggy evening, I got lost in the narrow backstreets of London, near the river. I went into an obscure little shop and bought a silver ring with a blue stone.

In a museum in Paris, I saw some engravings by Hokusai and Hiroshige that taught me to look at snow, bridges, the sea, the moon, lilac blossom in a totally different way.

In Spain, I saw El Greco's paintings, those thin faces, those elongated bodies, and a man said that I could have been painted by El Greco, created by him.

Throughout my life, I always had dogs and horses and a boat.

I was beautiful, the loveliest creature most people had ever seen.

I made a garden with my own hands, with my gardening books and my soul.  
With rain water and last year's leaves.

For some months, a man was in love with me and I was in love with him.

It's pitch-black outside. The dark mass of the rhododendrons opposite the window. The faint sounds of night. My reflection has vanished from the glass. Inside it's dark too, the fire has gone out, I imagine it must be cold. I always preferred cold to heat, shade to sun, bitter to sweet.

I don't much like wandering about the house after nightfall. Can it be that we creatures of the night are afraid of the dark?

I'm going to the library now. That's where I like to spend the night. There are always coals still burning in the grate. And the dogs sleep there in their baskets. I like to sit next to them, and they sleep more soundly because they know I'm here. They miss their master. So do I.

It's not difficult to find your way. Cross the central gallery, go down a corridor, and you'll find the door to the library. Lately, I've acquired the ability to see in the dark...and a strange familiarity with wild animals and angels.

I hope he comes back. In the early months, he used to spend the night here, not sleeping, but pacing up and down. Then one morning, before breakfast, he left.

He's sure to come back sooner or later. Because I'm here and he can't bear to be away from me for very long.

And I'll recognise his footsteps, just as the little blind dog recognises my footsteps in the dark.

## Chapter 2

### Manderley

When she was fifteen, she used to dream about Mr Darcy and about fairy tales.

It was one morning in early May, and the car was driving slowly down the dark avenue, where the sun didn't penetrate. The branches of the trees on either side met overhead to form a tunnel. All around, the vegetation ran rampant, climbing plants wrapped themselves greedily about trunks, and weeds sprang up among the bushes. All around there hovered a bird-filled silence.

It's like being in a Grimms' fairy tale, said Rebecca.

Her father took his eyes off the road for a moment and smiled at her.

If this were a fairy tale...

Yes.

You would be living in the house at the end of the avenue.

Like a princess.

You are a princess.

He had begun calling her his little princess when she was still only small. He was no longer particularly young when she was born, and the death of his wife shortly afterwards had left them alone together. The old house was their castle, a slightly ruined castle, with velvet curtains whose colours had faded over time, with furniture and paintings that sometimes mysteriously disappeared, a long garden in which the gardener struggled to keep control of their few plants, the azaleas under the windows, the rhododendrons along the paths, the water lilies in the ponds, the white campanulas, and the daffodils on the lawn.

When she was six or seven, Rebecca used to imagine that her father was planning to put her in a boarding school, in one of London's gloomier streets, before he frittered away the rest of his fortune. And she would live in an attic room, with a skylight affording her a view over the rooftops of London, and she would walk along the winter streets, wearing an old blue dress and her one pair of shoes, which would grow ever more scuffed and worn. But she would never cease to be a princess.

She needn't have worried. It was true that, in his youth, her father had spent a large part of the family fortune, almost without noticing, but having a daughter made him err slightly on the side of caution. He continued, however, to spend more than he should because he wanted his daughter to have only the best, like the party he gave for her fifteenth birthday, at which, in a white dress, with tiny pearls woven through her hair and (he suspected) a touch of make-up, she had stood by his side to receive her guests.

Rebecca. She was so very pretty that he found it hard to comprehend quite where she had sprung from. Her mother had, of course, been charming, but she had lacked her daughter's profound, troubling beauty, which had become apparent in early adolescence. She was intelligent too, even brilliant, and had been taught by the finest tutors. He used to buy her books of fairy tales and pirate stories, believing these to be her favourite reading matter, but, from an early age, she had shown a great interest in literature and art.

There was also something of the tomboy about her: the way she rode horses, swam even in the coldest water, and imposed her will on her tutors and on the servants. Rebecca with her hair caught back, followed by her two dogs,

giving instructions to the gardener and leafing through old botany books that he hadn't even been aware were in the house.

On that day, however, she was at her most feminine, wearing a green dress, which was both too expensive and possibly too grown-up, and with her thick, dark hair combed back behind her ears.

The avenue seemed endless.

If I lived here, said Rebecca.

You would transform the whole place.

If I lived here, I would plant rhododendrons on either side of this avenue, red rhododendrons and hydrangeas too, because they flower later than rhododendrons...

The avenue gave one last tortuous turn, and they found themselves in a large clearing. The house suddenly appeared before them, as if it had come into being at that very moment, and they both caught their breath.

It's just like the postcards, she said softly.

The grey stone house was vast and beautifully designed, with chimneys on either side of the roof and a terrace at the front; the steps led down to the lawns, which, in turn, ran down to the sea.

Manderley. I came here once years ago, for a party.

Who owned it then?

The De Winters. And they had a little boy.

He parked the car in the cobbled courtyard. There were a few other cars parked further on.

A young man, the butler, welcomed them at the door. It was Monday, the day when the house was open to visitors. They joined a group being shown round the ground-floor rooms.

Rebecca couldn't help but think of Lizzie visiting Mr Darcy's mansion. Jane Austen had been her favourite author for about a year now, and she identified with those Austen heroines, with Lizzie and Emma and Marianne. Like Marianne, she would only be able to fall in love with a man who felt as she did about music, books and poetry. Someone as passionate as she was. But, at the same time, someone as proud and aloof as Mr Darcy, or perhaps as kindly and aloof as Mr Knightley. She had been aware for some time that men were drawn to her beauty. And the idea amused her. I'm going to be so pretty that I shall have all the men I want.

Her father had struck up conversation with a young woman in the group. Rebecca followed them thoughtfully with her eyes. She didn't like the idea that he had once been here as a guest, but was now walking through these rooms open to the public just like any other tourist. Besides, she hated groups. What interested her were the rooms behind the closed doors, where the family lived. Taking advantage of a moment when the butler was showing them an old portrait, she slipped away down a corridor.

She waited a moment, to make sure no one had noticed she had gone. Then she continued walking, as nonchalantly as if she were in her own house. She opened the door at the bottom of the passageway.

She went in, holding her breath, and closed the door behind her. Only then did she look around and realise she was in an enormous library.

Her first impression was that she knew this room. A room with the curtains drawn back and the window open, but into which the fresh air seemed not to penetrate. The walls were lined with bookshelves right up to the ceiling. There was a heavy smell of roses, lilac blossom, cigarette smoke and old books. The vases were full of lilacs, and a bee was buzzing about among the flowers in the vase nearest her. The fire had burned down, and it was cold.

She turned, startled, when something brushed against her legs. A golden-haired spaniel was sniffing at her ankle. Rebecca knelt down and put her arms around the dog, which licked her face as if it recognised her, as if it had missed her.

She then went over to the desk in one corner. There were a few books and inkwells on it, as well as yesterday's newspaper. One book lay open, almost at the last page.

Rebecca picked the book up, feeling a strange pang of excitement. It was a collection of Robert Louis Stevenson's poetry and was open at a poem that someone had underlined.

*My house, I say*

She read the poem quietly to herself. She had the feeling she had read it before. She had grown up with Stevenson poems that spoke of mysterious towers and seagulls, about the man who lit the lamps in the street every night.

A harsh voice interrupted her thoughts.

Who are you?

The dog bounded over to a young man of about twenty or so, who had just come into the room. In response to a peremptory order from its master, the dog lay down, but continued to gaze adoringly up at him.

The young man was tall, had brown hair and eyes, and was extremely handsome. However, his stern gaze made her shrink back a little.

I was visiting the house.

The library isn't open to the public.

I know.

So what are you doing here?

He looked so threatening that Rebecca involuntarily recoiled. Then she, in turn, fixed him with her eyes and said:

I'll go then.

When she had left the room and closed the door, she broke into a run. She went out into the garden and leaned against a tree. She realised that she still had the book of poems with her and pressed it to her breast.

Who does he think he is, she murmured.

He had treated her as if she were no more than a child. Or an intruder.

And yet, that library had felt strangely familiar, and then there was the way the dog had greeted her... She felt unexpectedly happy.

It didn't even occur to her to return the book. She walked back to the car and waited for her father to join her.

## Chapter 3

### The lilacs in the library

At night, I like to sit on the library floor, between the fireplace and the dogs in their baskets. I have a sense that the dogs never change, that it was this same Jasper who greeted me so fondly the first time I ever came to Manderley, that there are only ever these same two dogs who die and then come back, because this is their house. I even considered killing them once, to spare them any suffering. At least the blind one. But I see now that it would have made no difference, even if I had shot her, she would still be here on the carpet beside me, and Jasper would feel her presence and snuggle up beside her.

There is a heavy scent of flowers in the library, I'm not sure if I can actually smell them or if I'm simply remembering. Even when the windows had been left open all morning, the air never changed, there was always the same smell of roses and lilac blossom, cigarette smoke and old books, plus perhaps a little of my own perfume and his eau-de-cologne, our smell. When I arrived at Manderley, my perfume was already here in the house, in the library, hovering, and I could almost make out my shape sitting in an armchair, near the fire, or standing up to rearrange the lilacs in a vase, because there are vases of lilac blossom everywhere. It's April.

We shared the same earliest memory, the smell of lilac blossom, heavy alabaster vases full of lilacs, as if we had grown up in the same house, as if we had played together, he and I. These are the things we are made of, our first memory, our first love, our first books. We both loved lilacs, El Greco paintings

and Robert Louis Stevenson's poems. But that isn't why he fell in love with me. It had more to do with my body, with my face, with my eyes, which he found so troubling, sometimes I think he married me because he wanted to know what lay behind my eyes, I was his America, his New-found-land. And I...

It's odd, but I think I decided to marry him on that very first day, when I ran out of the house, clutching that collection of Stevenson's poetry and filled with rage that he should have treated me like a child and failed to notice how pretty I was. After all, I had learned from Jane Austen's novels that very pretty but penniless young women do sometimes meet a Mr Darcy or a Mr Knightley and live happily ever after.

Well, I don't know quite what I was thinking that day when I ran out of the library and my father drove us back home, but I do recall that I didn't feel in the least surprised when we met again in Madrid; if anything, I was surprised we hadn't done so before, it was so obvious that we had to meet.

I lean against the wall and crouch down, legs bent, the hem of my dress brushing the floor. The dogs are lying in their baskets, the blind bitch and the two-year-old, preparing to sleep. They feel happy because they know I'm here, it's strange, now I sleep with the dogs. Except that I don't sleep. I watch the gently shifting embers, and the old books shut up on their shelves, and I can smell the heavy scent of roses and lilac blossom, cigarette smoke - and night.

Sometimes I spend the night pondering old questions, the kind that trouble us from childhood on, where do I come from, where am I going, when did time begin, where does the heart begin, do fallen angels know that they fell? I remember an actor saying that only an angel could play the role of the devil, because the devil is a fallen angel.

I always felt like a stranger, like a fallen angel who doesn't quite know where or what she is, only that she's very different from the people around her and has to make a real effort to go unnoticed. A matter of self-defence.

Even then, it always reassured me to see my image in the mirror, whether I was in a mud-spattered riding outfit or wearing one of the dresses my father let me choose in London and that brought a frown of disapproval to the face of Danny, my governess; whether with my hair caught back and my face smeared with mud or with pearls twined through my hair and wearing a near-imperceptible layer of make-up.

I was always slightly perplexed by the world and by people. On the other hand, I have always felt a fierce love for animals and plants. My dogs and my horses and my garden. But I think that, with the exception of my father, I never really liked other people much.

Maybe I simply didn't understand them. What made them live, what made them tick. I think I understood my father, perhaps because we were alike. His love of houses, which verged almost on the religious. The way in which he knew books from the inside out; the little drawing by Degas that he kept in a drawer in his desk and looked at every night. His fondness for dogs and horses, especially the ones he had trained.

It was because I didn't understand other people, but had to live amongst them, that I became an actress.

I always loved the theatre. My father used to take me to the theatre in London. And once, we spent two whole weeks in Stratford at a film festival. And we hardly missed a single film, whether Russian, American, German or English. When I was little, I nursed a vague ambition to be an actress. Then I saw that I

really had to be an actress, but that there was only one role worth playing, the role of my own life, the role of Rebecca. And the first time I thought this, I fell in love with the idea, it was as good as being Hamlet, no, better, because I wasn't riven with indecision, I wanted to get out of life all that it had to offer.

I started acting very early. At the parties my father gave for me or the ones he let me go to. He would buy me whatever dresses I wanted and say nothing about my near-invisible make-up. And I would play the part of Rebecca and dance all night with boys, and pretend to understand their looks and words, and even their feelings.

I suppose I had always acted, almost unconsciously; it was a matter of pride with me to make other people adore me, my relatives, my tutors, even the servants. I think it gave me enormous pleasure to feel adored by the very people I didn't really care about, or for whom I even felt a certain scorn. It was tiring too. Acting does tire you. And I would wash my face afterwards, like an actress removing her stage make-up.

Then I would run out into the garden, whistle for the dogs and spend hours tending the plants, with my old straw hat and my even older gardening books.

In the evenings, when I sat in the library with my father, the fire blazing and the dogs lying at our feet, I would dream of meeting someone, another person I could love. Mr Darcy or Mr Knightley. I had rejected Mr Wickham, not because of his bad character, but because the man I loved would have to have money, lots of money.

The library in my father's house was a mere shadow of the one I'm in now, smaller, but airier, where the books stood untidily on their shelves and fell open

at pages read and re-read many times. And there were just two vases of flowers. Filled with lilacs when it was the right time of year.

The dogs are sleeping deeply now, and all I can hear are the sounds of the night, although I can't tell if they come from inside the house or outside. The night is vast, endless, and I move closer to the dogs in their baskets. The hour of demons has passed – the hour of demons occurs at around three o'clock in the morning, night after night after night.

Soon the fire will have burned out completely and a subtle light will seep in through the window; it's not day yet, but something that precedes the day.

And, like the dogs, I will feel a strange joy at the prospect of a new dawn, and then I will hear the sounds of the servants getting up, windows being opened, and like the dogs, even though they don't know which day it is, I will think that this is the day of his return. His car. His voice in the hall. And the dogs running to meet him. And me running to meet him, as if the intervening years had never happened and we were just a man and a woman who loved El Greco's paintings and who dreamed of the lilac blossom of their childhood.

Meanwhile, it's still night, the night I always loved so passionately, and, like the dogs, I try to find a more comfortable position, the better to be able to wait.

*We lay my love and I beneath the weeping willow.*

*But now alone I lie and weep beside the tree.*

*Singing "Oh willow wally" by the tree that weeps with me.*

*Singing "Oh willow wally" till my lover returns to me.*

Perhaps it will be today.

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