

Julia's Folly

Elizabeth McDowall

Commended, Fiction: 2025 Marysville BookNest writing competition

Alice's little hired Renault struggled up the slope in first gear. To call this a road was laughable. Not much more than a goat track, it was deeply rutted and had no passing room. She unfolded herself from the car and despondently surveyed the old stone house in front of her. It was a true renovator's delight: an unasked for and unwanted gift from her older sister Julia.

How Julia had come by this piece of antiquated real estate in a remote village in the Tarn-et-Garonne was a story in itself. Julia, an academic specialising in French mediaeval history and particularly in the old pilgrim routes across France to Santiago de Compostela, had arrived here on sabbatical many years ago and found herself lodging with the elderly and childless Monsieur and Madame Dubois. She, single and childless herself, had fallen in love with the Dubois and they with *la petite australienne*. Each year thereafter she had come back to stay with them. When they died within a couple of months of each other about 15 years ago, they left their house to Julia. She always called it her little French house.

Somehow, in those last years, Alice had never made it to France to visit Julia. She was busy with Charlie and the twins and with her own demanding career. The timing was never quite right although the promise was always there: 'Someday soon, Julia, I promise you'. And now the promise had been called in. Julia was unexpectedly dead and the house was hers.

The stipulation in Julia's will was that Alice had to occupy the house for a month and then, after no less than a year, she would be free to sell it if she chose. Of course I'm going to sell it, thought Alice. It wasn't worth much – a handful of euros that would buy a shoebox apartment back in Melbourne. Even having to hang onto it for a year was burdensome. It had been bad enough dealing remotely with the French

bureaucracy to have the title transferred. But now, the horror of this unwelcome legacy threatened to overwhelm her.

She knew that jet lag and fatigue had something to do with how she was feeling. She had flown into Toulouse the previous evening and after picking up the car had spent a restless night at a hotel in Blagnac. This morning she had navigated herself with help from Android Auto to Moissac, driving, as she thought of it, on the wrong side of the car and on the wrong side of the autoroute.

It had been a relief to get off at Castelsarrasin and head along a lesser road towards the historic town of Moissac, perched on a rocky outcrop overlooking the Tarn. She stopped here for lunch at a bar in the main square, sharing a communal table with a couple of pilgrims from Montreal, with their hiking boots and sticks and scallop shells dangling from their backpacks. After lunch she picked up some basic supplies from a little supermarket nearby and headed into the village a few kilometres away where the house lay. She had liked the look of Moissac with its ancient cathedral and cloister, its intact Art Deco heritage and its mighty river confluence. It should be well worthwhile during her forced month of exile to come back and explore it more thoroughly.

But the house, oh dear. Put politely, it was architecturally challenging. Ranging over three storeys, it was cut back into its hillside so that building and rock were organically one. At the bottom terrace level were vast cellars which had previously accommodated livestock – a cow, pigs, goats and hens – and which now housed junk discarded from the rooms above. A stone staircase led up to the main living quarters.

Alice had retrieved the keys from a neighbour and now unlocked the heavy oak door. Inside felt gloomy. She threw open shutters and started to explore the higgledy-piggledy layout. Clearly, this house had grown rooms whenever a need arose without any thought as to either the logic of their location or the eccentricity of their execution.

There were some inexplicable weirdnesses. For example, at some point the Dubois had decided to upgrade the plumbing to mod cons. Consequently, the outdoor squatter toilet was abandoned and a new sitting one installed inside. For reasons beyond speculation, this was placed in a kitchen cupboard much less than a metre square. Privacy was assured by means of a metal bifold door with a squeaky hinge. Alice could only imagine that constipation was a byproduct for those who were modest about their bodily functions. Similarly, the shower, which could well have been indoors, was instead a standalone small room reached by means of a courtyard exposed to all weathers. Clearly, some major renovations would be needed before she could sell.

Over the next couple of weeks and once her tiredness had worn off, Alice explored nooks and crannies. Surprisingly, the house had a certain charm. Alice, always privately a little disdainful of it, had mentally labelled it Julia's Folly. Now she thought she was beginning to see what had drawn her sister to the place and why she kept returning.

The furnishings were a mixture of *bric-a-brac* sourced from the many local dealers in deceased estates. But among them were some gems. The upstairs bedroom had a back wall of solid rock out from which the room projected. Hard against this wall stood an antique waxed chestnut armoire of the kind used to store household linens. It was a particularly fine piece which Alice thought could be put to better use downstairs in the salon to improve the house's presentation prior to sale.

Testing whether she might be able to move the armoire with some help, Alice pulled one side away from the rock wall. To her surprise, there was a door behind rising to about shoulder height. She moved the furniture fully away from the wall. The door was locked but there was no sign of a key. Alice opened the armoire and with the help of her phone's torch eventually found the key taped to the underside of a drawer.

Alice unlocked the door, to be met by a gust of cool air with no hint of mustiness. Still using her torch, she ducked under the door frame and found herself standing inside a cave hewn out of the rock. It was a little above head height. A narrow ventilation

shaft let in fresh air and a glimmer of light from the hilltop above. At the back was a small camp bed and some old stuffed toys. Alice stooped to pick up a teddy bear and found herself looking in astonishment at a white envelope on the bed. In Julia's looping cursive, it was addressed **To Alice**.

Bewildered, Alice stumbled back out of the cave and went downstairs. She poured herself a robust glass of red and began to read.

Dearest Alice

So you found the cave. I knew you would. You were always the inquisitive one. Did it take you the whole month? Now you know that this house has secrets.

Secrets within secrets.

Have you ever wondered why I loved the Dubois so much? Over the years, as I came to know them better, Monsieur and Madame gradually trusted me with the stories of their lives in this funny old house and its cave cut into the hillside. They were heroes, Alice, unsung heroes.

During the war they joined the Resistance. Perhaps twenty times or more there would come a coded knock on the door late at night. A bundle would be handed across the threshold and its bearer would speed away into the night. Once inside, the bundle would be unwrapped to reveal a small, scared, starving Jewish child. These children had been smuggled out of Poland, Romania, Hungary. They were orphaned by Hitler's concentration camps. The Dubois took them in, fed them, clothed them, taught them and loved them. After the Nazi occupation of so-called Free France, the Germans would come at all hours looking for refugees. Monsieur and Madame led the children into the cave you just found until the danger had passed.

Later, when it was safe, the children would be buried among the produce going down to the market in Moissac. There they were spirited away and hidden among the local people. By this means, Moissac saved over six hundred

*Jewish children. Six hundred! Not a single one was ever betrayed to the Nazis.
The whole town protected its terrible secret.*

*That's why I loved this home and these people. To me this cave is a sacred
space. Do you see why I locked the door and hid the key for you?*

*These truths are now yours, Alice. I give them to you. I know that you'll do the
right thing with them. I can't bear the idea of my little cottage going to strangers
who might be indifferent as to its history.*

All my love forever

Julia

Alice wiped away her tears. She knew now that, year or no year, she could never sell Julia's Folly.