

Excerpted from *Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks.

The Boulevard du Cange was a broad, quiet street that marked the eastern flank of the city of Amiens. The wagons that rolled in from Lille and Arras to the north made directly into the tanneries and mills of the Saint-Leu quarter without needing to use this rutted, leafy road. The town side of the boulevard backed on to substantial gardens which were squared off and apportioned with civic precision to the houses they adjoined. On the damp grass were chestnut trees, lilac and willows, cultivated to give shade and quietness to their owners. The gardens had a wild, overgrown look and their deep lawns and bursting hedges could conceal small clearings, quiet pools, and areas unvisited even by the inhabitants, where patches of grass and wild flowers lay beneath the branches of overhanging trees.

Behind the gardens the river Somme broke up into small canals that were the picturesque feature of Saint-Leu; on the other side of the boulevard these had been made into a series of water-gardens, little islands of damp fertility divided by the channels of the split river. Long, flat-bottomed boats propelled by poles took the town-dwellers through the waterways on Sunday afternoons. All along the river and its streams sat fishermen, slumped on their rods; in hats and coats beneath the cathedral and in shirtsleeves by the banks of the water-gardens, they dipped their lines in search of trout or carp.

The Azaires' house showed a strong, formal front towards the road from behind iron railings. The traffic looping down towards the river would have been in no doubt that this was the property of a substantial man. The slate roof plunged in conflicting angles to cover the irregular shape of the house. Beneath one of them a dormer window looked out on to the boulevard. The first floor was dominated by a stone balcony over whose balustrades the red creeper had made its way up to the roof. There was a formidable front door with iron facings on to the timber.

Inside, the house was both smaller and larger than it looked. It had no rooms of intimidating grandeur, no gilt ballrooms with dripping chandeliers, yet it had unexpected spaces and corridors that disclosed new corners with steps down into the gardens; there were small salons equipped with writing desks and tapestry-covered chairs that opened inwards from unregarded passageways. Even from the end of the lawn it was difficult to see how the rooms and corridors were fitted into the placid rectangles of stone. Throughout the building the floors made distinctive sounds beneath the press of feet, so that with its closed angles and echoing air the house was always a place of unseen footsteps.

Stephen Wraysford's metal trunk had been sent ahead and was waiting at the foot of the bed. He unpacked his clothes and hung his spare suit in the giant carved wardrobe. There was an enamel wash bowl and wooden towel rail beneath the window. He had to stand on tiptoe to look out over the boulevard where a cab was waiting to the other side of the street, the horse shaking its harness and reaching up its neck to nibble at the branches of a lime tree. He tested the resilience of the bed, then lay down in it, resting his head on the concealed bolster. The room was simple but had been decorated with some care. There was a vase of wild flowers on the table and prints of street scenes in Honfleur on either side of the door.

It was a spring evening with a late sun in the sky beyond the cathedral and the sounds of blackbirds from either side of the house. Stephen washed perfunctorily and tried to flatten his black hair in the small looking glass. He placed half a dozen cigarettes in a metal case which he tucked inside his jacket. He emptied his pockets of items he no longer needed: railway tickets, a blue leather notebook and a knife with a single, scrupulously sharpened, blade.

He went downstairs to dinner, startled by the sound of his steps on the two staircases that took him to the landing of the first floor and the family bedrooms, and thence down to the hall. He felt hot beneath his waistcoat and jacket. He stood for a moment disorientated, unsure which of the four glass-panelled doors that opened off the hall was the one through which he was supposed to go. He half-opened one and found himself looking into a steam-filled kitchen in the middle of which a maid was loading plates on to a tray on a large deal table.

'This way, Monsieur. Dinner is served,' said the maid, squeezing past him in the doorway.

In the dining room the family were already seated. Madame Azaire stood up.

'Ah, Monsieur, your seat is here.'

Azairé muttered an introduction of which Stephen heard only the words 'my wife'. He took her hand and bowed his head briefly. Two children were staring at him from the other side of the table.

'Lisette,' Madame Azairé said, gesturing to a girl of perhaps sixteen with dark hair in a ribbon, who smirked and held out her hand, 'and Gregoire.' This was a boy of about ten, whose small head was barely visible above the table, beneath which he was swinging his legs vigorously backwards and forwards.

The maid hovered at Stephen's shoulder with a tureen of soup. Stephen lowered a ladleful of it into his plate and smelt the scent of some unfamiliar herb. Beneath the concentric rings of swirling green the soup was thickened with potato.