

weakly by the reed beds that fringed the shallow water. Deciding to take it the buzzard swooped gracefully yet powerfully towards its target and quickly took and killed the duck then carried it to the lake shore in its claws and began to devour it.

There was no authority present to mark the moment or record its significance but that incident was the first of a series of occurrences that led ultimately to the first great human flu pandemic since 1918/19 far surpassing the flu epidemics of 1957 and 1968. The avian flu virus had begun its slow but remorseless movement up the food chain for the duck was infected with the H5N1 strain picked up from other birds on the Russian steppe and would have died soon if the buzzard hadn't taken it. The virus from the duck's flesh slowly spread through the Honey Buzzard's body as she hunted across the Luberon over the next twenty-four hours until she eventually succumbed to the combined assault on her immune system, couldn't fly any more and died very close to a small isolated poultry farm on the southern slopes of the Grand Luberon hills, a favourite tourist haunt in Provence.

That smallholding was carved out of the forest and scrub that clothed the hillsides there, and was many kilometres from the nearest village. On the upper slopes there was maquis: that aromatic Mediterranean low forest scrub full of stunted Holm oak, myrtle and juniper. Lower down near the farm there was low maquis scrub, or garrigue as it was known locally, where the Holm oaks were more dispersed and there was gorse, heather and box amongst the myrtle and juniper, that all struggled to attain two metres height on the bare soils in that dry climate. In the still evening air there the aromatic oils of those plants brought a sense of well-being but it was deceptive for the farming was very marginal: a constant struggle to hold back the re-growth of the garrigue into the small fields with their thin, poor soil hard-won from the wilderness many years earlier – backbreaking work for little gain. The small single-storey house and other farm buildings, such as they were, were derelict and unhygienic and a stranger would be forgiven for thinking it was just an old barn left to fall down and long forgotten by some farmer. The only door into the