

IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY

AUTHOR OF *SUITE FRANÇAISE*

*The Wine
of Solitude*

'A wonderfully atmospheric novel . . . captivating
and searingly honest' HELEN DUNMORE, *GUARDIAN*

VINTAGE

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Irène Némirovsky

Title Page

Part I

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Part II

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Part III

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Part IV

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Copyright

About the Book

Hélène is a troubled young girl. Neglected by her self-absorbed mother and her adored but distant father, she longs for love and for freedom. As first the Great War and then the Russian Revolution rage in the background, she grows from a lonely, unhappy child to an angry young woman intent on destruction. *The Wine of Solitude* is a powerful tale of an unhappy family in difficult times and a woman prepared to wreak a shattering revenge.

About the Author

Irène Némirovsky was born in Kiev in 1903, the daughter of a successful Jewish banker. In 1918 her family fled the Russian Revolution for France where she became a bestselling novelist, author of *David Golder*, *Le Bal*, *The Courilof Affair*, *All Our Worldly Goods* and other works published in her lifetime or afterwards, such as *Suite Française* and *Fire in the Blood*.

Némirovsky was prevented from publishing when the Germans occupied France and moved with her husband and two small daughters from Paris to the safety of the small village of Issy-l'Evêque (in German occupied territory). She died in Auschwitz in 1942.

Sandra Smith is a fellow of Robinson College, Cambridge, and has translated ten of Irène Némirovsky's novels into English.

Also by Irène Némirovsky

Suite Française

David Golder

Le Bal (including Snow in Autumn)

The Courilof Affair

Fire in the Blood

All Our Worldly Goods

The Dogs and the Wolves

Jezebel

The Misunderstanding

IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY

The Wine
of Solitude

*Translated from the French by
Sandra Smith*

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

PART I

1

IN THE PART of the world where H el ene Karol was born, dusk began with a thick cloud of dust that swirled slowly in the air before drifting to the ground, bringing the damp night with it. A hazy, reddish light lingered low in the sky; the wind brought the smell of the Ukrainian plains to the city, a mild yet bitter scent of smoke, cold water and rushes that grew along the riverbanks. The wind blew in from Asia; it had pushed its way between the Ural Mountains and the Caspian Sea; it brought with it whirls of yellow dust that cracked between the teeth; it was dry and biting; it filled the air with a howl that faded as it disappeared towards the west. Then all was calm. The setting sun, pale and dull, veiled behind whitish clouds, sank deep into the river.

From the Karols' balcony you could see the whole town, from the Dnieper River to the hills in the distance; its outline was marked out by the gaslights that lined the winding streets with their fluttering little flames, while on the opposite bank the first fires of spring smouldered in the grass.

The balcony was surrounded by boxes full of flowers that had been especially chosen because they opened at night, Nicotiana, Sweet Mignonette, Tuberoses; the balcony was so wide that it could hold the dining table and chairs, a wicker 'love-seat' and the armchair of Safronov, H el ene's grandfather.

The family sat around the table, eating in silence; the flame from the gas lamp attracted delicate moths with beige wings. Leaning forward, H el ene could see the acacias in the courtyard, lit up in the moonlight. The courtyard was

bare and dirty but lined with trees and flowers, like a garden. On summer evenings the servants sat down there, talking and laughing among themselves; sometimes a white skirt could be seen moving about in the darkness; they could hear an accordion playing and a muffled cry: 'Let go of me, you devil!'

'Well, they're not bored down there ...' said Madame Karol, looking up.

Hélène was half asleep in her chair. At this time of year, they ate late; she could feel her legs trembling, aching from having run around the garden; her chest rose and fell quickly as she remembered the shrill cries she couldn't help but make as she ran after the hoop, cries like the song of some bird. Her small rough hand loved touching her favourite black ball, which she had hidden in the pocket of her tartan skirt even though it left bruises as it pressed into her leg. She was eight years old; she wore a dress of broderie anglaise with a white silk belt tied below her waist in a 'butterfly' bow fixed in place with two pins. Bats flew by and as each one swooped down low, Mademoiselle Rose, Hélène's French governess, let out a little cry and laughed.

Hélène half opened her tired eyes and looked at her family. Her father's face was surrounded by a sort of yellowish haze that shimmered like a halo: to her weary eyes it looked as if the light from the lamp was flickering, but yes, it really was flickering. The lamp had begun to smoke; Hélène's grandmother shouted to the servant, 'Macha! Lower the lamp!'

Hélène's mother sighed, yawned and flicked through Paris fashion magazines while she ate.

Hélène's father said nothing, softly drumming his slim, delicate fingers on the table.

He was the only one whom Hélène resembled; she looked exactly like him. It was from him she had inherited her passionate eyes, wide mouth, curly hair and swarthy complexion that turned almost yellow whenever she was

sad or ill. She looked at him tenderly. But he only had eyes for his wife. His loving caresses were only for her too.

She pushed away his hand. 'Don't, Boris,' she said, sullen and irritable. 'It's hot, leave me be ...'

She pulled the lamp towards her, leaving the others in darkness; she sighed with boredom and weariness, curling strands of her hair round her fingers. She was a tall, shapely woman 'of regal bearing' and with a tendency to plumpness, which she fought by using corsets shaped like breastplates, as was the fashion; her breasts nestled in two satin pockets, like fruit in a basket. Her arms were white and powdered. Hélène felt a strange sensation, close to revulsion, when she saw her mother's snow-white skin, pale, languid hands and claw-like nails. Hélène's grandfather completed the family circle.

The moon spilled its tranquil light over the tops of the lime trees; nightingales sang beyond the hills. The Dnieper shimmered a dazzling white. The moonlight shone on the nape of Madame Karol's neck, which was as pale and hard as marble; it reflected off Boris Karol's silvery hair and the short, tapered beard of the elderly Safronov; it cast a dim light on the small, wrinkled, angular features of her grandmother: she was only fifty but she looked so old, so weary ... The silence of this sleepy provincial town, lost deep within Russia, was intense, heavy and overwhelmingly sad. Then, suddenly, the stillness was broken by the sound of a carriage jolting along the paved street: the terrible din of a lashing whip, swearing the bump of wheels against stone, which faded and disappeared into the distance ... Nothing more ... silence ... just the rustling of birds' wings in the trees ... the sound of a distant song from some country road, interrupted by the noise of arguments, shouting, the thud of a policeman's boots, the screams of a drunken woman being dragged to the police station by the hair ... Silence once more ...

Hélène gently pinched her arms so she wouldn't fall asleep; her cheeks burned as if they were on fire. Her dark curls kept her neck warm; she ran her fingers through her hair, lifting it up; she thought angrily that it was only her long hair that kept her from beating the boys when they raced: they grabbed it while she was running; she smiled with pride recalling how she had kept her balance on the slippery edge of the fountain. Her arms and legs were racked with agonising but exhilarating exhaustion; she secretly rubbed her painful knees, covered in scratches and bruises; her passionate blood pulsed quietly, deep within her body; she kicked the underside of the table impatiently, hammering its wood and sometimes her grandmother's legs, who said nothing so Hélène wouldn't be scolded.

'Put your hands on the table,' Madame Karol said sharply.

Then she continued reading her fashion magazine.

'Tea-gown in lemon-yellow twilled silk with eighteen orange velvet bows to fasten the bodice ...' she said with a sigh, forming each word with longing.

She wound a curl of her shiny dark hair round her fingers and stroked it against her cheek as if in a dream. She was bored: she didn't like meeting up with other women to smoke and play cards, as they all did as soon as they were over thirty. Looking after the house and her child filled her with horror. She was only happy in a hotel, in a room with a bed and a trunk, in Paris ...

'Ah, Paris!' she thought, closing her eyes. 'To eat at the bar of the Chauffeurs' Café, to sleep in a train compartment, even if necessary on the hard benches in third class, but to be alone and free!' Here, from every window, the women looked her up and down, glaring at her Parisian dresses, her make-up, the man she was with. Here, every married woman had a lover, whom the children called 'Uncle' and who played cards with their husbands. 'Why bother having a lover at all, then?' she thought,

remembering the men who followed her around in Paris, men she didn't know ... That, at least, was exciting, dangerous, thrilling ... To hold a man tightly in her arms when she didn't even know his name or where he came from, a man she would never see again, that and that alone gave her the sharp thrill of pleasure she desired.

'Ah,' she thought, 'I wasn't destined to be a placid middle-class woman, satisfied with her husband and child.'

They had finished their meal; Karol pushed away his plate and set out the roulette wheel purchased the previous year in Nice. Everyone gathered round him: he threw the ivory ball almost angrily, but every now and again, when the sound of the accordion echoed more loudly from the courtyard, he would raise his long finger in the air and, without interrupting his game of roulette, he would hum the tune they played with extreme accuracy, then softly whistle it through his half-open lips.

'Do you remember Nice, Hélène?' said Madame Karol.

Hélène did remember Nice.

'And Paris? You haven't forgotten Paris, have you?'

Hélène felt her heart melt with tenderness at the memory of Paris, the Tuileries Gardens ... (Trees the colour of tarnished steel beneath the tender winter sky, the sweet smell of the rain, and in the heavy, misty dusk, the yellowish moon that rose slowly above the column in the Place Vendôme ...)

Karol had forgotten everyone else around him. He drummed his fingers nervously on the table and watched the little ivory ball wildly spin and sway. 'Black, red, the 2, the 8 ... Ah! I would have won ... Forty-four times what I'd bet. And with just one gold louis.'

But it was over almost too quickly. There wasn't time to enjoy the uncertainty or the danger, the despair in defeat or the exhilaration of victory. Baccarat, now there was an idea ... But he was still too poor for that, too unimportant. One day, perhaps ...

'Ah, dear God,' the elderly Madame Safronov murmured. 'Ah, dear God!' It was an habitual refrain. She had a slight limp in one leg, but walked quickly: her features were faded, washed out by her tears, like a very old photograph; her yellowish wrinkled neck sat above the frilled little collar of her white blouse. She continually brought her hand to rest against her flat chest, as if every word she said would make her heart pound; she was always sad, complaining, anxious: everything was an excuse for her to sigh, to lament. 'Life is bad,' she would say. 'God is terrible. Men are harsh ...'

She turned to her daughter. 'You're right, you know, Bella. Enjoy life while you're still in good health. Eat something. Do you want some of this? A bit of that? Do you want my chair, my knife, my bread, my food? Take it ... Take it, Boris, and you, Bella, and you, George, and you my darling Hélène ...' Take my time, my care, my blood, my flesh ... she seemed to be saying as she stared at them with her soft, dead eyes.

But everyone pushed her away. Then she would shake her head affectionately and force herself to smile. 'All right, all right, I'll be quiet, I won't say anything ...'

Meanwhile, George Safronov had sat up straighter, lifting his tall, dry body and bald head, while carefully examining his fingernails. He polished them twice a day: all morning long, and once before the evening meal. He was not interested in the conversation of women. Boris Karol was a peasant. 'He should consider himself very lucky to have married Safronov's daughter ...' He opened out his newspaper.

Hélène read the word 'War'. 'Is there going to be a war, Grandfather?' she asked.

'What?'

Whenever she opened her mouth, everyone eyed her scornfully and waited a moment before speaking, firstly to find out her mother's opinion on what she'd said and then

presumably because she was so unimportant, so young, that they felt they had to travel a great distance just to reach her.

‘War? And where have you heard talk of ...? Oh! Maybe, no one knows ...’

‘I really hope not,’ said H el ene, sensing it was what she was supposed to say.

They all looked at her and laughed nervously; her father smiled with a tender, melancholy, mocking expression.

‘What a clever thing to say,’ said Bella dismissively. ‘If there’s a war, fabric will be more expensive ... You do know that Papa owns a textile factory, don’t you?’

She laughed but without opening her mouth: her thin lips formed a harsh line that cut across her face and were always pinched, either to make her mouth seem smaller, or to hide the gold tooth at the back, or because she wanted to look refined. She raised her head and noticed the clock: ‘Time for bed. Off you go ...’

Her grandmother put out her arm when H el ene walked past; her anxious eyes and weary face grew tense. ‘Give Grandma a hug and a kiss ...’ And when the impatient, ungrateful, deeply irritated child allowed herself to be held for a moment by the thin old woman, she crushed H el ene to her breast with all her might.

The only kiss H el ene accepted and returned with joy was her father’s. She felt related and close to him alone, part of his flesh and blood, sharing his soul, his strength, his weaknesses. He leaned down towards her with his silvery white hair that looked almost green in the moonlight; his face was still young, but wrinkled, furrowed by cares; his eyes were sometimes intense and sad, sometimes lit up with the fire of mischievous cheerfulness; he tugged playfully at her hair. ‘Goodnight, Lenoussia, my little one ...’

She left them, and at that very instant serenity and joy, along with pure and simple affection, returned to her heart;

she held Mademoiselle Rose's hand in hers. She went to bed and fell asleep. Mademoiselle Rose sat sewing in the golden beam of the lamp; its light shone across her thin, bare little hand. A shaft of moonlight pushed through the white ruched blind. Mademoiselle Rose was lost in thought. 'Hélène needs new dresses, pinafores, socks ... Hélène is growing up too quickly ...'

Occasionally a noise, a flash of lightning, the shadow of a bat, a cockroach on the white stove made her shudder. 'I'll never get used to this place,' she sighed. 'Never ...'

2

HÈLÈNE WAS SITTING on the floor in her bedroom, playing. It was a warm, clear spring evening; the pale sky was like a crystal ball with the glowing traces of a pink fire at its heart. Through the half-open door of the sitting room, the child could hear the sound of a French ballad. Bella was singing; when she wasn't polishing her nails, when she wasn't sighing from sadness and boredom, stretched out in the dining room on the old settee whose stuffing was sticking through the fabric in little tufts, she would sit at the piano and sing, accompanying herself with the odd lethargic chord. When she came to the words 'love' or 'lover', her voice sounded more passionate and clear; she was no longer afraid to open her mouth wide; she didn't pinch her lips together; she sang out those words of love and her voice took on a sweet, husky tone that was unlike its normally bitter or weary sound. Hélène, who had quietly stepped into the room, watched her in surprised silence.

The sitting-room walls were covered in a cotton fabric that was meant to look like silk; it had once been flesh-coloured but was now dusty and drab. This rough cotton material was manufactured at the factory where Karol was the manager; it smelled of glue and fruit, and the local women used it to make their Sunday dresses and headscarves. But the furniture came from Paris, from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine: ottomans covered in green and raspberry velvet, torchères in carved wood, Japanese lanterns fringed with coloured beads. A lamp lit up the nail buffer absent-mindedly left on top of the piano. Bella's nails sparkled under the light; they were round and curved with

sharp tips, like claws. In the rare moments when she displayed any maternal affection, pressing her daughter to her breast, her nails almost always scratched H el ene's bare arm or face.

The child inched her way into the room. Sometimes Bella stopped playing and fell silent; with her hands resting on the keyboard, she seemed to be waiting, listening, her heart full of hope. But from outside came nothing but the indifferent silence of the spring evening and the sound of the impatient wind pushing along the endless yellow dust from Asia.

'When - it's - all - over,' sighed Madame Karol. H el ene watched the way she clamped her teeth together; it was as if she were eating a piece of fruit; her wide, bright eyes that seemed so harsh, so empty, beneath the curve of her slim eyebrows, were full of tears: sparkling water that welled up but never spilled over.

H el ene went and stood against the window, looking out into the street. Occasionally she would see an old carriage pulled by two slow-moving horses, driven by a coachman dressed in the Polish fashion: velvet waistcoat, puffy red sleeves and peacock feathers in his hat; it was Bella's aunt, a Safronov from the older generation, a branch of the family that had kept its wealth, that hadn't squandered its fortune, that didn't need to marry off its daughters to insignificant little Jews who managed factories in the poor part of town. Lydia Safronov was thin and stiff with dried-out yellowish skin and shining dark eyes; her chest was ravaged by cancer, which she suffered with a sort of aggressive resignation; always cold, she wrapped herself in an ample, regal fur coat. On seeing her niece, Lydia Safronov would barely deign to nod in icy acknowledgement, her mouth pinched close and her face wearing an expression that was impenetrable, distant and full of bitter, cruel scorn. Sometimes her son Max sat next to her; he was still a thin young boy dressed in the grey

uniform worn in secondary school; his cap bore the symbol of the Imperial eagle; he held his little head very high atop his long, fragile neck, with the same harsh and haughty attitude as his mother; he had a delicate hooked nose and seemed aware of its fine quality, just as he was aware of the lush richness of the horses, the carriage, and the quality of the expensive English rug covering his knees; his eyes were cold with a faraway look in them. Whenever they ran into each other in the street, Mademoiselle Rose would give Hélène a little nudge, and she would curtsey, lowering her head in a sullen manner; her cousin would briefly acknowledge her before turning away, and her aunt looked at her with pity through a gold lorgnette that sparkled in the sunlight.

But on this day, only one carriage passed slowly beneath the window; a woman was inside; she was holding a child's coffin tightly to her breast, as if it were a bundle of clothing; this was how the poor people avoided paying for funerals. The woman's face looked peaceful; she was chewing some sunflower seeds; she was smiling, doubtless happy to have one less mouth to feed, one less cry to break the silence of the night.

Suddenly the door opened and Hélène's father came into the room.

Bella shuddered, quickly closing the piano, and looked anxiously at her husband. He never came home this early from the factory. For the first time in her life, Hélène saw her father's face twitch slightly, a twitch that pulled his hollow cheeks to the side and which would come to represent for her the first sign of disaster, the mark of defeat on a man's face, for Boris Karol never knew any other way to show he was upset, not then and not later, when he became old and ill.

He walked into the middle of the room, seemed to hesitate, then said with a little harsh, forced laugh, 'Bella, I've lost my job.'

‘What?’ she cried.

He shrugged his shoulders and answered curtly, ‘You heard me.’

‘You’ve been let go?’

Karol pursed his lips. ‘That’s right,’ he said after a pause.

‘But why? Why? What did you do?’

‘Nothing,’ he said in a hoarse, weary voice, and Hélène felt a strange sense of pity as she heard the irritated little sigh that escaped through his clenched teeth. He lowered himself into a chair, the one nearest to him, and sat there motionless, his back hunched and arms dangling, looking down at the ground and whistling without realising it.

‘Nothing!’ Bella shouted, making him jump. ‘You must be mad! What did he say? What happened? But we’ll be penniless!’

She twisted her arms together with a sudden, supple movement that reminded Hélène of the serpents on the Medusa’s head she was drawing for her art teacher. From the delicate, convulsed mouth words, sighs and curses came flooding out: ‘What did you do, Boris? You have no right to hide anything from me! You have a family, a child! You weren’t let go for no reason! Did you play the stock market? I knew it! Admit it, go on, admit it! No? Well, then, did you lose money playing cards? At least say something, admit what happened, say something! Ah, you’re killing me!’

Hélène had slipped out through the open door. She went back to her room and sat down on the floor. She had heard them fighting so many times in her short life that she wasn’t overly concerned. They would shout, then they would stop. Nevertheless, her heart was heavy and tight in her chest.

‘The director called me in to see him,’ she heard him continue, ‘and since you want to know, Bella, he wanted to talk to me about you. Wait a moment. He told me you spent

too much money. Just wait. You can have your say afterwards. He talked about your dresses, your trips abroad, which, according to him, I couldn't possibly pay for on my salary. He told me that the money I had easy access to was a temptation he didn't want to inflict on me. I asked him if a single penny had disappeared. "No," he said, but it was inevitable that one day it would, if your lifestyle didn't change. I warned you, Bella, remember? Every time you bought a new dress or fur coat, every time you left for Paris, I said it over and over again: "Be careful, we live in a small town. People talk. I'll be accused of stealing." The director of the factory lives in Moscow. It's natural that he must be able to trust me, and he can't trust me. I would have done the same if I were in his shoes. I can't refuse you anything. I can't bear it when a woman nags and cries. I'd rather give in; I'd rather people take me for a coward, a thief, a hen-pecked husband, because, in the end, another man might suspect that ... Be quiet,' he shouted suddenly, and his rough, wild voice drowned out what Bella was saying. 'Be quiet! I know exactly what you're going to tell me. Yes, I trust you. Don't say a word! I don't want to know. You are my wife. My wife, my child, my house ... When all is said and done, you're all I have. Of course I have to take care of you,' he said softly.

'But Boris, what are you saying? Do you realise what you're implying? Boris, my darling ...'

'Be quiet ...'

'I have nothing to hide ...'

'Be quiet!'

'Ah! You don't love me any more; you would never have spoken to me like this a few years ago. Remember? I was a Safronov; I could have married anyone I liked. Then you came along. Remember the scandal our marriage caused? All those people saying to me, "*You! You* marrying that little Jew who came out of nowhere, who wandered around Lord