

## Butterflies

Veronique surprised her husband in the conservatory, where he was writing out labels for his butterfly collection. He was an amateur lepidopterist, like his father, who'd taught him how to euthanize the captured specimens in jars with chloroform and pin them to a cork display board, their wings fastened with thin pins, much like needles. Michael had told her they needed a serious discussion and she was impatient to hear what he had to say.

‘We need to get on with selling the house in France,’ he announced, not looking her in the eye.

The house where she was born: lived the first nineteen years of her life. Veronique thought of Grand-père; he'd taught her to swim in the river and begged her not to go to England. She remembered how, in the summer, she slept with the windows wide open, and listened to the carp flip flop. In the winter she huddled in blankets, soothed by the hum of her mother's voice. Her father would sip a Pernod, her mother a tiny cognac. They always stayed up past midnight. They never owned a television but her mother loved the radio and taught Veronique to dance on the terrace. How could Michael ask this of her?

But both her son, who joined in the subsequent discussion from Dubai via Skype, and her daughter were in rare, total agreement. The house was of no use to either of them but the money would be. They didn't want to spend holidays in a quiet rural village in the middle of France and the grandchildren didn't care. They were at University and went with their friends to festivals in Croatia or back packing in the Far East. Susie said they hardly came home to see *her* anymore; Ian grunted, just like his father.

So the house would be sold but neither Susie nor Ian thought their mother should travel so soon after leaving hospital; she still couldn't speak properly, didn't speak in sentences and couldn't name simple objects. She pointed, mumbled, spoke Franglais, as if she'd forgotten who she was, neither one thing nor the other, though she understood well enough. The speech therapist assured them it was natural after the kind of stroke Veronique had suffered. She'd probably recover her mother tongue first. This upset Susie even more, as the grandchildren didn't speak any French.

Foolish children, Veronique thought. They'd never win an argument against their father. William was anxious and Veronique had to sign the papers, so the trip would go ahead.

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When Michael parked at the top of the village, outside the bank, he told Veronique to wait in the car. She watched the double doors slide open and close behind him. Then she walked away from the hired Renault, leaving the passenger door wide open.

She went directly to the square, to the bar and the remnants of the Saturday market. A group of teenagers sat in the shade of an awning, smoking.

She pulled a chair into the sunshine and dragged a table up next to it. She sat down and wiped perspiration from her forehead with a paper napkin that someone had left behind. Her clothes, picked out for her that morning by Susie, were more suitable for an early English summer's day. Trousers, a sweater over a long sleeved shirt, boots and socks.

She unzipped her boots, peeled off both socks, and stuck her bare feet into sunshine: she took off her jumper, undid the top buttons on her shirt, rolled up her sleeves.

A pretty girl, about the same age as her eldest granddaughter, asked in faultless English what she would like to drink. Veronique pointed to a poster on the door. The waitress smiled and brought her a small glass of beer. Veronique sipped the cold froth then wiped her top lip. It tasted yeasty, fizzy, deliciously cold.

The remaining stallholders began to pack away. Veronique paid close attention to the lilt of their words. She watched with pleasure as Charentais melons, big fat tomatoes and skinny haricots verts went back into wooden crates. Knives of all shapes and sizes with pouches and belts were wrapped in oilskins. Lacy white tablecloths were folded into suitcases and dusty women's underwear wrapped in a large sheet. She sniffed tobacco floating on the air and wriggled her toes in the warm sun.

The last stallholder to leave was a man with a walrus moustache wearing dungarees and a checked shirt. He poured olives back into a plastic tub, spooned tapenade into another one, packed discs of brie and pyramids of goats cheese into a box in the back of his van. All the while he kept up a monologue directed towards an older woman who fanned herself with a newspaper. She sat majestically in the shade of a parasol on a fold up stool; her legs planted far apart, her skirt hitched up showing thick calf muscles and wide bare feet.

‘Encore, Madame?’

Veronique nodded. The waitress shouted for another beer, which she brought with the bill and set down with a flourish. Veronique drew a line through the condensation on the outside of the glass with the tip of her little finger.

Shutters began to close on the old stone houses surrounding the square. Smells of stewing meat drifted down. The chatter in the bar died away as the teenagers left on scooters. The waitress wheeled her moped from the alleyway, strapped on a helmet and bounced over the cobbles out of the empty square. Veronique sipped her second beer.

Five minutes passed peacefully.

And there he was, Michael, running down the street towards the bar, his face purple like a, like a, yes, an aubergine! His coat was folded into the crook of his arm, his shoes slapped on the stones.

He stopped, dropped his coat and bent over, his hands on his knees, steaming from every pore and blowing hard, like a horse brought up short.

Veronique offered what was left of her beer.

“You .... I ..... the car.... You ...”

She pushed the cold glass into his hand, hopefully. He collapsed into the chair next to her.

“Two minutes was all I asked! I didn’t know where you were ... I worried you ...”

Veronique was sorry that Michael had missed the market and touched his knee. He’d said earlier they might buy a picnic, like they used to, and eat it out on the terrace. Now, he might want to take her straight back on the plane, to the greyness, the cold.

“Come on,” Michael drained her beer and hauled himself up. He left a €5 note under the saucer and said something to the barman about his ‘femme’. The barman chuckled as Veronique picked up her socks and boots, tucked them under one arm and left bare footed.

She tried to take Michael's hand but he shook it off.

"It's too bloody hot," he said.

Veronique, glad they weren't going back to the car, walked ahead. She paused outside the window of the tabac where she tried to read the magazine headlines but the words blurred and jumbled. She stopped to admire the cakes in the boulangerie. Another hundred metres and the street narrowed. Veronique ran a hand along familiar black railings. The paint on the shutters was cracked and flaking, the plastic shelter over the porch covered in bird droppings, the door dusty. She remembered flowers and light streaming through gleaming windows, Maman standing in the wide doorway.

Michael pushed past.

He patted all his pockets then produced a key, which stuck in the door. Wouldn't turn, wouldn't budge.

He pushed then pulled then swore. Veronique touched his arm. He shrugged her off, pushed again. She put her hand on his, felt his tension, his rage. He loosened his fingers and she wiggled the key in the lock, turning it just a fraction, this way and that, feeling the resistance, waiting for the click. They heard it at the same time. Veronique laughed but Michael just grunted.

The house was dim; the tiles cool. Soft light filtered through thin sunscreens and together they pulled the cords to reveal the terrace and the river beyond.

Michael opened the French windows. Two geckos scurried into shade behind cracked earthenware pots lined up next to the wall. Veronique bent down and ran her fingers around the rim of one, rubbed off a dried crust of soil. Geraniums, she remembered, catching the word before it fluttered away, in French as in English.

Orange red trumpet flowers dipped from a broken trellis towards the water. Clusters hung from branches as thick as her wrist. Veronique remembered her father breaking up the stone with a drill, her mother burying the roots deep, away from the hot sun. Now they'd grown wild and strong.

Across the river, taking no notice of them, a fisherman squatted by a fallen log beneath the cypress tree, his pick-up truck backed down the track, the boot open. He checked his rod, went to a cool box box and got a can of coke. Veronique and Michael heard the pop as it opened. The fisherman lit a cigarette and sank back onto his haunches, watching the river flow by. The strong, acrid smell drifted across to where they stood.

“Veronique?”

Michael had brought out two wooden chairs from the shed, dusted off the spiders and cobwebs, and erected a parasol.

“It’s too hot,” he said. “Come on darling, stay out of the sun.”

Veronique lifted her face skywards and pointed.

“What is it?” he said.

“Le soleil” she ventured. Then, gaining confidence, “le ciel, les arbres, les fleurs, les oiseaux, la rivière ...”

“Yes, oh yes. But try in English, darling. The sky, the trees, the flowers?”

She frowned. She couldn’t see those words, couldn’t catch them.

“Oh never mind,” Michael grabbed her and twirled her, just like Maman used to. “It’ll come back. Where’s my phone? Oh, it’s in the car, in the glove box. Don’t move. Don’t do anything. I must call Susie! I *knew* this was a good idea!”

He kissed her noisily, wetly, enthusiastically: on the tip of her nose, on her cheek, on her forehead, like a proud parent, and then he was gone.

Veronique turned to see if the fisherman had noticed the fuss Michael made but he'd gone back into his truck and shut the doors. She sat down on *la chaise*. The chair. It wasn't very comfortable. So hard and angular, English words: such a struggle. So difficult to get hold of, pin down.

The sun really was hot. The river looked cool and inviting. Such a pity Michael would miss the *papillon monarque*. Oh, there it went, over the river to the other side. Grand-père was a good strong swimmer. Stand on the wall, ma petite, he'd say. You don't need all those clothes. Don't be afraid, chérie, I'll always catch you. And on the cool bank, beneath the cypress tree, Grand-mère laid out a simple picnic, fresh baguette, Camembert, plums and wine. Maman on her stomach watching, always watching. Papa with his fishing rod, smoking.

Veronique carried a chair to the wall and used it to climb up. It wasn't so easy, without Maman to lift her. She dangled her bare feet, watching the green fronds ripple, like long grass in a breeze. When she dropped down into the water it was shockingly cold but only for a moment, then it embraced her.