



TOSSING Zdravka Evtimova

The lakes in Josaphat Park in Brussels were heavy with pale, sickly water lilies. The benches looked forlorn and mouldy. Thick crowds of ravens hung above the trash cans, glum birds, bigger than the clouds. It rained constantly, day and night. Josaphat was the centre of the Arab neighborhood in Brussels. Here the women walked slowly, majestically. Heavy women wrapped up in brown veils, followed by clusters of children, big and small. The braver boys fed the ravens, the girls led their mothers by the hand diligently, dutifully, talking to each other in beautiful, soft voices. I watched them every day as I practised speaking French in 'Chez Albert', the cheapest pub in the park. Albert, the owner of the place, asked me to make Bulgarian salads for his customers, all of them pensioners who lived the imposing building, La Maison Communale, across the street. The old gentlemen believed it rained specially for them. They told me maybe this was the last rain they would ever see, and thanked me for it as if I had given them the sky and the clouds.

‘Ma cherie, let’s work on le futur proche, or if you prefer we can choose another tense,’ one of them, Monsieur Duchemin, would offer every afternoon.

Albert owned La Maison Communale, where his customers lived. He told me that a man had died on every step of the narrow staircase from the first floor to the last.

‘Monsieur Fishgrund may meet his maker soon, ma cherie,’ Duchemin told me one day. ‘You should make him pay his rent in advance. One never knows with us, the old fellows.’

I lived in Maison Communale too but I didn’t pay Albert rent. He visited me on Mondays and Thursdays, always tres gentil, very kind. In the evenings he cooked tuna for dinner, bought wine and lit candles. Of course it always rained, but if suddenly the clouds sank to the bottom of the sky and the raindrops died on the roofs, Albert would say, ‘Let’s go for a walk in Josaphat, ma cherie.’

I hated the park. I worked for a retired infantry major who wrote novels five hours every day and in the evenings I edited his prose, feeling his words and his eyes on my skin, his cat purring in his lap. The retired major was Albert’s best friend. I hated going for walks with him in Josaphat. The two friends jogged side by side in the drizzle while I made salads for the pensioners, listening to them debate whether Monsieur Duchemin would piss in his pants before dinner, and who would accompany me to my apartment, Albert, or the major. The old guys called the major Jacques le Fou, Crazy Jacques.

Often, after jogging was over, Albert and the major tossed a coin to decide who was to walk me home that night, a move I considered absurd, since the three of us lived in the same old Maison

Communale, 16 Louis Pierard Avenue. The tenants in this building, the pensioners, went to bed at 8pm, dreaming about rain. From time to time Crazy Jacques appeared on the TV and spoke cleverly and at length on his views, his books and his understanding of the world. He cooked fillet mignon Brusselois with white wine for me, but very often in the middle of the fillet mignon Brusselois he would blurt out, 'We should hurry up,' which meant that the evening would follow the scenario I knew too well. Albert would arrive at 9pm sharp. Most of the time, Crazy Jacques and I were ready before 8.30.

Jacques's love was a dry and voluminous TV show like the ones in which he took part. He never told me I was pretty, never said I was a pleasant company, and I wondered why he kept on tossing the coin in that cold park. Perhaps Crazy Jacques showed up in my apartment in order to describe the episode later in one of his experimental novels. He had already written three of them in which I was the protagonist, a woman who arrived in the clean, generous city from Eastern Europe to look for truth and learn to speak French. In all three novels I, though not quite cleverly, was Monsieur Jacques's beloved whom he took from under his best friend's nose. His novels were highly praised and unreadable, it constantly rained in them and there was not a single page with sunny weather.

Crazy Jacques asked me why I didn't marry Monsieur Duchemin.

'The old grouch admires your salads, ma cherie. All in Maison Communale know that. He'll die soon and you'll inherit his collections of Belgian banknotes which is quite good. He has a good car and as far as I know, he has a magnifique villa in the town of Ghent, which he rents.'

'I can't marry him because Albert will come here in five minutes,'

I said.

‘Chez Albert’ was the strangest pub in the neighborhood. Albert sold only fruit beer. There was cherry beer which the pensioners nicknamed ‘Sweet July death’, mountain berry beer, and a special brand of diet carrot beer. Albert came to give me a test in French after his best friend, the retired Major le Fou, brought back his dry love to his splendid car, the one he bought at an advantageous price from a dying pensioner. After love was over, Monsieur Jacques le Fou left his old electrical appliances for me as tokens of his appreciation.

‘I almost never touched them, ma cherie. An iron, but what an iron! It’s produced by the renowned French company Braun! There is a washing machine for you! That bicycle is a Shimano!’ Two vacant apartments at 16 Louis Pierard Avenue were stuffed with objects Crazy Jacques had given me as presents. He liked it when his love blazed a tangible trail in its wake. ‘Is Albert better than me? Did he tell you some of his new poems?’ Jacques asked.

Yes, he was better than you, I admitted silently.

Albert wrote his poems in a way that made me think of the pensioners’ last rain and of the beer they drank in ‘Chez Albert’. Once he wrote that on 15 July it would stop raining because in July he loved me the way the sky loved its clouds, quietly and sadly. ‘Tomorrow the rain will be for you, ma cherie,’ he wrote. Albert’s love was peaceful, like beer made of forest berries, timid and aromatic, doing no harm, its sparkling depths as infinite as my dreams about Bulgarian summers. His love made me imagine I sat in a village pub with an old drunkard who had a row of empty glasses on the table in front of him. I knew it rained outside the pub and the parking lot was empty. Albert never asked me about Crazy Jacques’s new novel and never said the

major was crazy. He called him my poor old friend. 'My poor old friend wrote again that he stole you from me.'

In summer when Brussels afternoons, tired of their battle against the rain, went to sleep under the roof of some deserted bus stop, Albert closed the pub early. Then the three of us, Crazy Jacques, radiant after his umpteenth TV appearance, Albert and I would go out together to get drunk on vodka. We drank in the garden behind Crazy Jacques's holiday villa. I sat between them, feeling their arms about my shoulders. We drank and hugged, we held each other, our shoulders pressing tightly, we took slow quiet walks along Avenue des Mimosas. I strode in the middle, one man to either side of me, and it rained all over the place. Jacques had bought an enormous piece of oilcloth weeks ago. We hid under it, wrapping it tightly around us and ambled on until Avenue des Mimosas melted under the wet raincoat of the sky. We felt the wind in our bones, and at Meiser Square the men again prepared to toss a coin.

I wondered who was to see me off that night. Would love be a pine forest and a country pub, or would it be a glamorous and silly TV show? I didn't want them to toss that coin, I took it from them and threw it into the fountain, then we stood under the street lamp.

'What if you and I ran away to the Netherlands and left Albert in the lurch? What do you say to that?' Jacques le Fou asked me one day, but I already knew this could never happen. Albert was his best friend. I was Jacques le Fou's best friend, too.

I knew I couldn't go on living like that. I was sure all would end on June 15 when Albert promised me sun in the sky, but the raincoat felt more cosy when the three of us huddled together under it, the evenings beautiful like kisses all along the way to Pierard Avenue. We

walked, hugging, I between the two men, Meiser Square heavy with the moon around our shoulders.

‘You are very pretty,’ Albert said once but Jacques snorted, ‘Don’t believe his lies.’

‘Stay with me if it doesn’t rain on 15 July. Jacques will marry his French publisher. Let us leave the rain to toss the ten centimes coin for us.’

Every evening I watched the quiet Arab women taking walks in Josaphat Park, wrapped in their brown silence and black clothes, flocks of children babbling in their wake. I wished I were a raven trying to perch on their hands.

On the fifteenth of July it rained so badly that the streets turned to streams. Monsieur Duchemin was still alive at the end of the week and phoned asking me to become his wife. Albert and Jacques waited in ‘Chez Albert’ and although it was a Saturday they had closed the pub early and were drinking vodka when I arrived.

‘It’s raining,’ Crazy Jacques said.

It was a long way to Meiser Square where we went every time to toss the coin.

‘What will you do with Monsieur Duchemin?’ Albert asked.

The three of us — I, as always, between them, Jacques on my right, Albert to the side of the privet hedge — trudged through the clouds and rain to Meiser Square. Our clothes became sodden within seconds.

‘There’s no use tossing a coin,’ Albert said suddenly. ‘It feels like the sun is shining. It’s the brightest sun Brussels has had for two

centuries now!

Then I thought of that distant village pub and I thought of the Arab women in Josaphat Park. I thought of Crazy Jacques. I was his best friend.

‘We’d better toss a coin,’ I said.

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