

## Creative Writing



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### I told you not to eat the butterflies...

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That August, I was in Paris trying to get my Act I scene ii together. I'd sent off a short story to over a hundred small magazines and one of them – published by a writers' group somewhere within the Arctic Circle in Greenland – had accepted it. A small start on the long road to the Nobel Prize, but mighty oaks from little acorns grow. Now, in Paris, I was going to get that first novel written. I had the title, *Fools Rush Inn*. It was to be about an isolated tavern in the wilds of some unnamed northern country frequented by a clientele of the clinically insane. Ken Kesey meets Lars von Trier. I wasn't quite sure where to take it but I'd go with the flow.

The Paris flat that an old lady on Craig's List had lent me in return for dog-sitting was a modern ground-floor affair with the unusual appendage of a garden – unusual for Paris, that is. "Garden" is a big word for a fenced courtyard of about fifteen square metres, but it was paved with flagstones and had plants and climbing vines on the fencing so it really was a little arbour of cool greenery, never mind the size. A barbecue, a tin table with a red beach parasol – the kind with a fringe of tassels that gave it a 50s look – two garden chairs and a reclining chaise-longue. One day there'd be a plaque to commemorate what had been achieved here, but in the meantime I had to achieve it.

My MacBook Air was on the table with notepad, pens and a pack of Villiger Sumatra cigars, and I'd found a freestanding icebucket in a cupboard to keep my refreshments chilled. The latter consisted of a case of Viognier white wine. "Write drunk, correct sober," someone had said – I forget who. I'd also heard that David Lynch ate the same lunch every

day – tomatoes, tuna, feta cheese and olive oil – so I'd do the same. It saved having to make mundane decisions when there was great work to be done.

I didn't know a single soul in Paris and most Parisians were away on holiday anyway. My only company in this oasis of fledgling creativity was Lucky. Lucky was the dog. Lucky was an elderly Cairn terrier who ate anything you threw at him and was no trouble at all. A couple of pee-n-poop walks a day, and that was it. There'd been a 20-minute handover talk from the old girl and now he and I were on our own. There was a blue rubber ball and a squeaky toy but Lucky didn't play. He just liked to sit in the garden with his head resting on his front paws, keeping an eye on me as I kept an eye on him.

I am the only person I know who dresses up even when on my own. It's as if part of me is photographing me, or making a documentary, and posterity must record me as a nifty dresser, cool to a fault. I can't be caught slumming it. On the day in question – for there is a day, and it is indeed in question – I wore a pristine white singlet, baggy mauve Turkish trousers and suede-strapped Birkenstock sandals, even though I was not planning on company. It was all part of creating conditions conducive to comfort, peace of mind and the divine afflatus. Everything was in place, Lucky adopted his habitual pose, the Viognier was in the ice bucket, and I sat down and turned on the computer.

It was 10 a.m.

*Fools Rush Inn*: there was the title. A blank space extended below it, the cursor blinking expectantly.

After a few minutes I wrote the following words: "The day will come when you will die and never return to Earth. Later, a day will come when the last person to remember you will think about you briefly and after that you will never be remembered again."

I sat back and read the words over.

That was quite a big thought. I couldn't see what it had to do with the projected subject-matter of my novel, but it was a strong opening. All the How To books say you have to start with a hook, a gambit, some killer opening lines. And while I couldn't see an obvious connection with my tavern of crazies I could well see what this thought had to do with me.

There was one glaring exception to the rule of demise followed by eternal oblivion and that was the artist whose work continues to engage humanity after his or her decease. Wasn't that why I was writing the novel? Not for money or transient celebrity but for perpetuity, the long-drawn-out survival of my mullings and musings in the chronicles of human history, at least until the next asteroid impact, the next Changing of the Guard. It was a victory over mortality I wanted, not a hacienda in Mustique.

So far, so good. I was happy with how things were going. I looked at Lucky. Lucky looked at me. A butterfly landed on his nose. He squinted down his muzzle at it, opened his jaws and snapped. He was too slow. The butterfly flew off. I wagged my finger. "Don't eat the butterflies!" I scolded him.

I'd forgotten the corkscrew.

I went indoors through the sliding French windows to fetch it from the kitchen, followed by Lucky's mournful gaze. As I came back out an almighty crash rang out beside me. A large earthenware pot with a plant in it had fallen from the sky and missed me by a hair's breadth. I had actually felt the fronds of the plant whisk my face as it passed. The pot had smashed on the flagstones though the earth within remained in a clump, held together by the tangled roots of the plant, which was still upright. The plant in question – for it was a plant, and it was in question – was a mature *Cannabis Sativa Indica*.

I gazed up at the seven-storey modern block of flats, each floor with its own balcony, to see if I could spot the person who had tried to kill me.

Leaning precariously over the balustrade on the fourth floor was a middle-aged woman in a blue kimono. She waved at me. "Je suis désolée!" she called out. Then she disappeared. I looked back down at the plant and shivered involuntarily. A four-storey drop. One inch to the left and I'd have been history with only a title and two sentences to my name. More of an epitaph than a novel...

I sat down to gather my wits. A moment later there was a ring at the door. Lucky stood up and ambled in. I followed. It was the woman from the balcony. I couldn't understand a word she was saying, but it sounded apologetic. I ushered her in. When she registered my incomprehension she started speaking in broken English. "I am confused!" she said, waving her

arms about. "I could have blessed you!" It didn't make sense but I got the gist. She was sorry. She hadn't done it on purpose. Manslaughter, then, rather than murder, though I'd not have been in a position to split hairs.

We walked through to the garden and she got down on her hands and knees, picking up the shards of earthenware. I found her a spare pot to re-home the ganja and a plastic bag big enough to carry it away. As she fussed around I had time to observe her. Frankly, she was a bit of a mess. Early 50s, dishevelled hair, and just in underwear beneath the kimono. She had beaded leather hippy sandals. No make-up, slim in a scrawny way and her face was haggard but kind. "I am dis trout," she said, glancing up.

"I'm sorry?"

"I am dis trout."

I thought about this for a second. "Oh, *distraught*!"

She repeated the word twice to herself with the correct pronunciation then continued gathering up her plant. I fetched her a pan and brush to pick up the last shards and scattering of loose earth. This done, she got to her feet. We stood there staring at each other. What next?

"I'm alive," I said. "Don't worry, but..." I looked back up at her fourth floor balcony. "... you should hang those railing planters on the inside of the balcony, not on the outside."

She shook her head. "Then I 'ave no space on my balcony. Is very – ow you say? – *narrow*."

"I understand, but perhaps don't put a planter immediately over the garden door?"

"You have reason!"

"Listen, would you like a cup of tea?" But her gaze gave her away. She'd already seen the loaded wine bucket and the corkscrew in my hand. "Or – why not? – a glass of wine. It's early, I know..."

"Never early," she said, slumping down in one of my garden chairs. "*Early, late* – I doan like these words!"

I fetched another glass, opened the Viognier and poured us both a shot. It was nice and cold and refreshing, the outside of the glass frosting up the way I liked.

"I am Simone," she said as we clinked glasses. I introduced myself. "We are neg-bahs!"

“*Neighbours*, yes. What do you do, Simone?” (*Apart from trying to kill your neg-bahs*, I thought.)

She didn’t have to think about that question. “I do *nothing!*” she said. “Is quite tragic really. I am lazy woman. I sleep, I watch TV, I drink, I smoke.” She pulled a leather pouch out of the pocket of her kimono and took out some Rizlas and a sachet of weed. “You want?”

“Sure.” It was surprising how quickly we were dispensing with traditional taboos.

“The problem,” she went on gravely, squinting as she rolled, “ees in the ‘ead. I see my psy – ow you say *psy?*”

“Psychiatrist?”

“Yes, an ee give me medicaments, you know? For my ‘ead.”

“You have migraines?”

“No migraine! I ‘ave big depression! Doan ask me why. Ees total fuck-up in ‘ere,” she tapped the side of her skull.

The conversation petered out for a while. She lit up, inhaled as if there was no tomorrow, and passed me the fat spliff. It was good grass and married well with the light Rhône wine.

“An you?” she said, going slightly cross-eyed.

“Me?”

“What you do?”

My paraphernalia was on the table – computer, pads, pens. But I didn’t want to embark on the truth. I just wanted to kill the question dead. “I write reports about the Stock Market – you know, *Bourse?*”

That seemed to do the trick. She nodded, eyebrows raised, and that was it. Then without a word she leaned sideways in her chair and farted.

“Upstairs,” she said, pointing up to her balcony, “this is my ray-alm. I have other ray-alm, but this is my main ray-alm.”

“Ray-alm?”

She pointed to my pen and pad, asking permission. Permission granted. She wrote a word in shaky big capital letters.

“Oh, *REALM.*”

She repeated the word several times until I approved her pronunciation. She laughed hoarsely. The laugh turned into an explosive cough. “Ees no surprise nobody understand a fuckin thing I say!”

“Your English is better than my French.”

A butterfly had landed on Lucky’s nose again and he made a half-hearted attempt to snap it up. “No!” I admonished. “I told you not to eat the butterflies!”

“I am not engaged,” said Simone suddenly. “Are you engaged?”

“Erm, no, as a matter of fact. Not at the moment. I don’t have a fiancée.”

She stared at me, uncomprehending. “Engaged! Engaged! Politiquement. I don’t have op-onions.”

“*Opinions.*”

“Whatever. If you don’t have op-onions, life is more interesting. Understand?” She raised her left hand. “See my hand? What’s going through it?”

I didn’t answer.

“Neutrinos,” she said. “You know neutrinos?”

“As in subatomic particles?”

“Teeny teeny particles! They go through stuff. Whizz whizz whizz! No react. Nothing to see. Like me and op-onions.” She grabbed the Viognier from the ice bucket and poured herself another glass of wine, at last relinquishing the spliff after hogging it for quite a while. I took a big tug on it and blew the smoke up into the air. I suddenly felt high as a kite. We sat in silence. Simone appeared to be mulling something over, her brow furrowed. Then she picked her nose and examined her excavation on her fingertip before wiping it off on the side of her kimono. Her kimono was half open and one saggy breast was flopping out. She caught me staring. “What?”

“I was just thinking,” I managed. “There’s a short story by Gogol called *The Nose*. It’s about a nose that has a life of its own. I mean it leaves someone’s face.”

“If I was nose, I do that too,” she said categorically. “I pack my bags an’ go on ‘oliday.”

As she uttered these words, the colourful butterfly that had been taunting Lucky landed on her nose. He glared at it and snapped, swallowing the insect in one.

“You told ‘im not to eat butterflies,” she said, pointing at Lucky.  
“Not me. Nobody tell me what to do.”

I’d had enough. I stood up.

“Where you going?” she said.

“Nowhere. I live here. Temporarily at any rate. I have work to do. I must ask you to leave.”

She stood up and brushed herself down. “You ‘ave swallowed neutrino,” she said. “Millions of neutrino in fact. Now they comin’ out of your ass. Very very fast! Like bullets!”

“I’m delighted to hear it. Please don’t forget your plant.”

She picked up the plant in its plastic bag and wandered down the corridor to the door. “I try not to kill you again!” she said with a hoarse laugh. With that she was gone.

I went back to the garden. The roach was burning pungently in the ashtrey. She must have helped herself to the wine more often than I’d noticed because there was precious little left. Lucky hadn’t moved. I sat at my computer but nothing came. I couldn’t concentrate. That crazy bitch had nearly murdered me, then shattered my solitude with her insane ravings and incredibly bad manners. I’d never seen anything like it in my life.

Later that afternoon I noticed that she’d shifted the plant holders to the inside of the balcony. No more projectiles from that direction, then. And over the coming days I relented a little and considered inviting her back, but she was too OTT. Somehow it didn’t seem *French*. A little envelope of grass with a pack of Rizlas was pushed under the door one morning and that was that.

My time in Paris came to an end and Lucky’s mistress came back. It was time for me to go home. I’d made no progress with the novel whatsoever and I felt it had died in the water. Actually it had died of dehydration. There wasn’t even water to give it hope of revival and even the Viognier had gone. Was it my fault or Simone’s? The perfect conditions for creativity had been there and then they had departed – pop, like an insubstantial soap bubble. The world had impinged on my serene interiority in the shape of this haggard old harpy with her tit hanging out

of the blue kimono. Perhaps I should have taken up lodgings in a garret? Wasn't that the done thing in Paris? But too late, it was time to go home.

The old lady checked to make sure her flat was shipshape and thanked me as I prepared to leave. "Do you know Simone?" I asked her. "The lady who lives up there on the fourth floor?"

"That's Simone Couturière. She has another place in Saint Barth and a cabin in the woods near Vancouver. She left Paris a couple of days ago."

"Should I know her? What does she do?"

"A writer. Very famous here in France. She won the Prix Goncourt last year. And there were other prizes before that, I forget which."

"Really?" The information came as a shock. "I met her. She was strange."

"She is – how you say? – *eccentric*. We're all used to her in the building."

Back home, I Googled her and there she was. A best-selling, prize-winning novelist, considered to be one of the finest of her generation. How was that possible? Would it have changed anything if I'd told her I was trying to write? She hadn't said a thing to me either, but one could hardly expect her to boast. Her books were not available yet in translation and I couldn't read French. My own writing plans were on ice and, lacking cash, I had to get an office job.

About a year later, I Googled Simone again. She had a new book out. The title was *L'Apocalypse des papillons*. Even I knew what that meant. *The butterfly apocalypse*. It was getting rave reviews. But frankly, even if it did come out in English translation, I didn't want to read it. I felt somewhat nauseous. It was as if inspiration had been there for both of us on that day when she nearly killed me with a potted marijuana plant. I hadn't seen it, but she had, and she'd snapped it up – well yes, and swallowed it whole. OK, my short story had been published in the small magazine in Greenland and they'd sent me a copy but the buck stopped there.

Let's face it, she had the muse and I didn't. I was not going to get over this in a hurry. For the rest of my days I'd just be shitting neutrinos.