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## The alluring butterfly

‘The violence of my desire for her is new even to me.’ With these words Robert Dugran welcomes the audience in the packed auditorium. The writer’s face suddenly exhibits a slight hesitation, as if from his entrance until the moment that he blows those first words into the microphone, he has focused exclusively on the lectern, and only now sees the possible impact of his improvised confession. Interested listeners continue to drift in. No longer able to find seats they join those standing in the back rows – have they hurried in at the last minute because of the stream of rumours cropping up hither and thither on book blogs? Most are young students, their smartphones, fished out of their sloppy anoraks, giving rise to a composition of ringtones like an orchestra of insects.

It is unusual for the builder of an oeuvre, decorated with prizes, as familiar as any with the circuit of lectures at the invitation of sleepy university professors, to fall into a long silence after his first sentence. Dugran reaches for the glass of water on a serviette next to the microphone before him, but retracts his hand when he notices a light tremor. Feeling for his mouth with his right hand, as if to keep it from further recklessness, he touches the smooth groove above his lip. No stubble has broken through yet. His left hand, lined with wrinkles, rests on his copy of *The Alluring Butterfly*, the book with which he has hopped from continent to continent over the past five weeks, from clubs full of tea ladies to bookshops on the edge of bankruptcy. On the back cover Dugran sees the photo used on all his books over the last five years: roughly in the middle of his broad head, like an insect pinned on a card, sits his signature moustache. But it is not nostalgia which overcomes him at the lectern, so much as weariness, as if old age were now pushing him to his knees in punishment, ready for preservation in formaldehyde. Dugran decides that his next sentence, although not necessarily related to the first, will nevertheless be fully understood by the audience. Plain and clear: ‘I suspect this may be my last book.’

A rivulet of sweat trickles down his back. Robert looks through one of the rectangular auditorium windows at night falling over the city. This morning, still oblivious to the fault lines forming in his life, he checked into the Jerusalem Hotel, where he took a nap and reread what he had prepared. On the plane he had jotted down a few words of thanks in his notebook, based on his previous speeches – reformulating the odd phrase here and there so that it would not be obvious to the professors wanting to pin a new badge on him or place a new feather in his cap that evening, in exchange for a blurred group photo destined for the walls of their university offices. He then flicked through *The Alluring Butterfly* to find a few passages to read out. Ironically the head of literature had vaguely suggested he might refrain from reading out the sex scene due to the shocking content. ‘Not that our audience is especially puritan, Lord no, this comes from higher up you must understand. Of course, we’d love to hear it again, in your wonderful voice, clear as a bell, but well, what can we do? Needs must.’ Within a few months of the launch of his novel he had grown accustomed to the reactions to that particular passage, and in one of his narcissistic moods, brought on in the evenings by a couple of gins, he would admit without complaint that he had quietly hoped for the commotion his book had caused, even sought it out. Some feminist site, Women’s Council

for the Advancement of Armpit Hair or whatever it was, declaring certain pages of the book the most tasteless literary sex scene of the past decade of world literature, had merely fanned the flames. This was the fire he had so missed as an established author, since his debut to fireworks as a boy of twenty.

The neatly dressed hotel manager had received him with the requisite deference and offered to carry his suitcase to the room – ‘How was your journey, Mr Dugran?’ He did not place his case, bulletproof steel in cabin baggage format, a gift from his wife Emily for his tenth anniversary as a writer – at the time he had been travelling a good deal – in the wardrobe. He would only be in this city one night. Tomorrow he was to fly to Paris for a stopover with an old writer friend, then back home to Emily and their children and grandchildren.

After his nap he sat up straight on the hard mattress – God, what a relief it would be for his back to get home – and opened his laptop on his knees. Username: RobertDugran.

Password: Nikkita.

Robert Dugran’s rheumatic fingers still had it in them to write an erotic love scene. He would have liked to pen the literary language concealed in the sex act in elegant letters with his trusty fountain pen, but the stiffness in his knuckles did not allow it. The countless boxes of cigars he had raced through over the years had silted up the veins in his arms and legs, forcing him to learn to write on a computer, letter by letter. He had created pleasure by having the two main characters of *The Alluring Butterfly* clap together like wings, the displacement of air causing the remaining hundred pages to flutter open.

The day he delivered his manuscript, Robert had been particularly charmed by his editor’s low cut dress, and felt even greater satisfaction to see her so thrilled at that particular chapter. In Dugran’s presence she immersed herself in the scene where the two main characters became acquainted as the beast with two backs and proceeded to read two sentences out loud, her meandering voice lifting his loaded words as if they were damp riverbank stones, blind to the underlying innuendos crawling out like woodlice. Innocent and unblushing she commenced editing. Dugran had expected the phone to ring at any moment, for her to admit recognising herself in the female protagonist and seeing the advances of his literary alter ego. But in her eyes the chapter, and with it the entire book, remained dead letters; she did not see herself come to life in the black ink.

Even before the printing presses, groaning under the weight of such a great load, had ground to a halt, the critics had announced themselves in unanimous agreement that the ever vital Robert Dugran had produced a masterpiece – newspaper articles which sent him hurrying to the publishing house with a bottle of champagne to share the success with Nikkita, the one to whom the book was unofficially dedicated. Amazingly the critics primarily expressed reservations over the pornographic content in relation to his age, looking no further for the true origin of the characters who threw themselves at one another with such abandon. The scholars had not yet found the key to his caricature of reality, he had thought until then.

Robert clicked a browser open and typed the link to a literary website into the address bar. Let’s see what my colleagues are up to, he chuckled. As always the younger gods and nymphs were chirping away on their social networks, desperately pleading for a handful of followers for their unsold

paperbacks. Flapping birds with their one-liners and blow-dried hair, trying to find favour with their readers. The literary issue of the day was a debutant who had set fire to some reviews on stage in a theatre in his home town. A frivolous stunt, the young writer cried out at the top of his voice; giving idle literary criticism the finger, the journalists on the scene reported.

He took a saucer from the bedside table, placed it on the bedcover and lit a thin cigar. He refreshed the page, hacking up a lungful of acrid smoke. 'The Advances Of Robert Dugran Towards His Editor Nikkita Watson: How The 61-Year-Old Renowned Author Fell In Love With His Editor Thirty Years His Junior.'

The racy article was accompanied by a picture of his swollen potato head, the sort of ugly stock photo people always pull out of the dark recesses of their archives to fit a tone of writing not altogether pleasant to read, least of all for Dugran himself, who on studying the malicious piece, was suddenly struck with the absurdity of the bristly moustache he had been maintaining over the last thirty years, carefully trimming, thinning and, yes, even retouching its roots.

Slowly he closed the laptop, then realised that this might remove the article from sight, but the buzz around him would continue to grow. Clearly this represented a set-back in his business relationship with Nikkita, if not its complete destruction in a matter of minutes. At that moment he realised he had not yet given a second's thought to Emily, and by extension the children, precious pearls, who must surely think their father a randy old bugger now he had embarrassed their mother with his worn-out old prick. He looked at the clock radio and wiped his sweaty hand dry on his suit trousers. Another two hours until the reading.

Pepping himself up for what awaited him, he nervously lit another cigar with the previous one, a bad habit, and stubbed out the old one on the Jerusalem Hotel logo in the coffee cup. He felt sorry for Nikkita, with whom he had developed a productive working relationship over the last six years, unimpeded by unspoken criticism of one another's faults. While contact with his publisher remained limited to polite notes dryly announcing advances and calculations of royalties, the ability to be fundamentally in disagreement with one another was the key to his successful collaboration with Nikkita. He picked up the charcoal grey phone from the bedside table, dialled the number of the hotel reception and asked to be put through to an international number which he gave figure by figure from memory. A soft buzz sounded from the speaker until it was interrupted by a beep indicating that it was connecting. He plucked at his moustache with thumb and index finger, twisting the hairs clockwise to a point.

'Hello?' said the woman's voice on the other end of the line. Robert swallowed a couple of times and sucked briefly on the insides of his cheek to moisten his dry mouth. 'Robert, is that you? Hello?'

'It's me, Nikkita,' he replied. 'Robert.' His heart leapt fiercely, as if he were suddenly understood after all those years. He drew greedily on his cigar, held the smoke in his bulging cheeks a moment as he laid the stub on the saucer, then blew it out forcefully.

'How's it going there? If I'm not mistaken you should be giving that reading soon.' Shit, thought Robert. She hasn't heard yet. Or doesn't want to believe it, and is doing her best not to mention the unpleasant news.

'Fine, thanks,' he lied. He looked at the stub of cigar, balanced on the edge of the saucer, as it went out. He who had subdivided his life according to his books, crammed pages full of words in an attempt to capture the

light of the decades, worn down fountain pens until the nibs bent with the hundred thousandth attempt to put into words that which so many cannot, and succeeded with gusto, must now admit that he had lost his tongue for the first time.

'I'm pleased for you,' said Nikkita. 'Why are you calling, if I might ask?' It wasn't that Nikkita held his pen as he wrote, not at all, but just as her smooth voice had so often massaged an entrance into the conversation for him, so she had driven him to greater heights over the last six years, pushing him over hurdles he had never previously dared to jump.

'Nikkita,' he said. 'I have to tell you something.'

The unmasking was complete. As a writer he had always created smokescreens to hide his true self, burying himself like a treasure chest at the bottom of the ocean, but now he was exposed. It did not matter how the journalist had managed to break into his soul. Now it was a case of surveying and limiting the damage, regaining control over his lost image. Nikkita was behind him, at least for now. He would worry about Emily later. Robert stood up from the bed where he had spent the last hour, and felt remarkably relieved. As he looked at *The Alluring Butterfly*, which lay on top of his suitcase, the cover seemed to have lost some of its shine. Only now did he notice the fold lines, the dog ears, the erosion worn into the pages over many readings. He walked to the basin in the bathroom, carefully took out his shaving brush and razor and a few careful strokes later the metamorphosis was complete. He felt clean, like an empty page. His bristly white moustache, yellowed with nicotine under the nostrils, was gone.

Dugran peers over the microphone into the hall. There is a buzzing, interrupted only by the mechanical noise of smartphone cameras. The audience laps up this confessional entertainment, he can see it in their greedy eyes, and there on the stage, Robert Dugran decides to break free of his shame and his lie, and in reading the most thrilling chapter of his life, allows the two protagonists to dance over the heads of those present one last time.