

First published in Prole - <http://prolebooks.co.uk/index.html> - 2017

The Year Out

That autumn I worked south east of Paris in an industrial town encircled by the wooded Marne Valley. The mists hung over the Seine like smoke as I drove back home to shower each morning before work, grimy from the rumpled sheets of my lover. He mesmerised me. I don't mean that as a figure of speech.

It was a bar-room trick Finn had learned at college and his friend Daniel thought that it would be entertaining to try it again while they were working in France, but preferably not on a Frenchwoman whose family might intervene. So they thought of me as the obvious choice and Finn invited me to lunch one weekend. The invitation hardly surprised me; as part of the insular English-speaking community it was inevitable that we would socialise once Finn and Daniel came to work at my office.

My green Mini buzzed over the river that cold, bright Saturday towards their house, a squat white villa. I had been there once before, to a party given by the previous tenants, but I'd never seen it in daylight. Daniel opened the door with a delighted grin, motioned me in and led me into a large whitewashed room with terracotta floor tiles and pale shutters open to a view of the sweeping garden. A blue vase full of tulips stood in the centre of a rustic oak table, the blooms so far gone they were almost inside out, their scarlet faded to pale purple. Finn's greeting was to hand me a chilled bottle of weak Alsatian beer. He was dressed as always, in blue jeans, a blue lumberjack shirt and trainers. He was good looking enough: tall and dark blond, rat rather than mouse, with eyes so grey and guileless you knew it couldn't be true. Daniel and Catherine, his French his sleek, angular girlfriend, opened bottles of wine and water. Side by side they looked like brother and sister with their dark hair and eyes. Catherine spoke perfect English and the men called her an honorary Brit, thinking they paid her a compliment. She smiled and shook my hand and we chatted about her job in Paris.

Finn grinned at me from the kitchen doorway, showing white teeth.

'I'm making omelettes!' he announced. 'It's the only thing I can do. Years of practice after getting home late with the munchies.'

And he did look confident as he broke the eggs, stirred and then lifted the set mixture in its pan to let the yellow liquid run underneath. I made the salad dressing and watched as he cut and ate great chunks of Gruyere. I admired his long legs and wide shoulders in a detached way, as one would admire a statue. I already had a perfectly decent boyfriend working in Hong Kong.

We sat down to eat the creamy omelettes with crisp salad, crusty bread and copious wine. Catherine put on a Françoise Hardy tape for the benefit of the non-French and we discussed whether it would be warm enough to walk in the forest after lunch. We were rude about the other English people at work and laughed at Daniel's silly puns. Finally, as we tore up the last pieces of bread to wipe drops of olive oil from our plates, Daniel said, 'Finn, why don't you try your hypnosis now?'

Finn looked dubious. 'It's my old party trick, Esther,' he explained. 'I actually had quite a knack.'

'I was hypnotised once,' I said. 'By a famous hypnotist in the Fulham Road. I wanted to give up smoking and she was featured in a magazine. It didn't work, though I did cut down for a while. It's rubbish, isn't it? If it worked, we'd all be doing it for everything.'

'You wouldn't mind being my guinea pig then?' said Finn.

'Not at all. As long as you don't charge as much as the woman in the Fulham Road.' Finn rubbed his hands.

'Let's try an old favourite of mine. Let's see if I can hypnotise you to have sex with me every night for a year. 'We all laughed, though I was more surprised than amused.

'What's in it for me?'

'Not much, I suppose,' said Finn, still giggling. 'I promise to always treat you with exquisite consideration.'

Catherine came back with the coffee, raising her eyes to the ceiling at his last remark.

'Can we stay?' she asked. I nodded, glad she would be there.

'Come and sit here.' Finn patted the sofa. 'Take off your shoes and get comfortable. Here's some cushions. Relax. You will be able to hear and remember every word I say. Now let us begin.'

He hypnotised me just as he had said. I remember the fixing of the eyes on a single point, the heavy eyelids, the lifting and drooping of the arms, the descent through several steps of consciousness. I listened as though from a distance, enjoying the floating sensations. To my embarrassment I could feel my eyes flickering as if I was in REM sleep, but I couldn't open them. Finn's soothing voice continued. I had half thought he was joking, but he really did tell me I would be compelled to have sex with him every day for a year. How juvenile, I thought. I heard Catherine laughing, too.

We commenced the slow journey back through several levels to wakefulness. I blinked several times as they all looked intently at me.

'Well, you don't look that irresistible,' I said to Finn.

'You've lost your touch,' said Daniel. 'Or maybe it only works on gullible students.'

We drank more cups of coffee and although it was clouding over, decided it was just warm enough to walk in the forest if we kept up a brisk pace. It was dank, with no hint of sunlight. The red leaves had not fallen yet and in the foggy light they looked lit from within. With enough daylight not to need torches, we clambered for two hours over mossy slippery rocks and along sandy paths. The air was cold in my lungs and our faces reddened. Finally we arrived back at Finn's wide white house. I was cold.

'Tea? Toast?' he offered. I was easily lured inside.

'A hot bath I think,' said Daniel as he and Catherine disappeared upstairs. Finn made two steaming mugs of tea and took out a packet of Café Noir biscuits.

'Come,' he said, and led me into his room. We sat on the edge of the bed like students and talked about the walk, the lunch, the hypnosis, Catherine's faint, sexy moustache and the way Daniel's hairy hands climbed up her back like tarantulas as they walked along. We ate half a packet of biscuits and the crumbs scattered over the bed. Finn leaned over and put his hand between my legs, exerting gentle pressure on the seam of my jeans, and I realised I wanted to lie down. He took off my sweater carefully, lifting my arms one by one, lay his hand on my shoulder and pushed me back on the bed cover. I admired the little repeated pattern on his wallpaper of inky blue chinamen fishing beside a pagoda. His hands felt very warm.

None of it was my responsibility, and this I loved. There would be no guilt, I realised, no agonising over my motives or his or the future. There would be no relationship. I simply had to turn up.

This I did cheerfully for several months, and Finn kept to his promise. He'd remove my clothes one by one, flinging my underwear over the chandelier, or lifting me to sit on top of the tall fridge, pulling off my boots and sliding his head between my legs. Afterwards we would sit in the bath together and he would soap my back and lather my hair.

He shone with happiness.

'I don't have to think about where I'll take you for dinner, or pretend that there's a possibility I'll give up my girlfriend in Boston, or ask you come with me when I'm posted to another country,' he said. 'We can just enjoy our time together.'

I agreed. It was the first guilt-free sex of my life. My mother had always deplored the idea of sexual freedom and spent most of my teen years trying to prevent it breaking out, like chickenpox, anywhere near me. Now, in a different country, I felt free. I was not even responsible. I didn't even choose to do this, I would think as I lay across the bed, Finn banging away like an express train. It was thrust upon me, I would think, giggling.

One snowy night at a chilly, formal party where we were both guests, Finn instructed me to get into the back of his car in five minutes, and have my knickers off. I crunched through the snow to the car, watching the fat snowflakes whirling in the cylindrical light of the street lamp like immense arctic bumble bees. In the car, I slipped my clothes from beneath my coat and sat in the dense, muffled silence, waiting. Finn arrived, launched into the car and kicked off his caked boots. We burrowed under our coats for warmth and he arranged me over some cushions, concerned about my comfort. We mingled in luxuriant warmth, our bare skin velvet next to the rough woollen coats. I didn't even notice I had been lying on a large spanner and he laughed at the greasy imprint on my back when he flipped me over. When we opened the doors and climbed out of the car, clouds of steam followed us. Finn seemed absurdly grateful, and clutched my hand as we padded back. But there had been a strange kink in time, and four hours had passed in what felt like as many minutes. The party was long over, and the house was in darkness.

As Christmas passed and the snow thawed, Finn began to look a touch pale and tired. We were getting very little sleep. Eventually, Finn stopped throwing my underwear over the chandelier, but I didn't mind; it was no longer so amusing to get it down in the morning. We still frolicked nightly in the blue bedroom. I wondered how much pleasure one woman could bear.

Finn and I did lots of crazy things. One time we had slithery sex, fully clothed, in a coach full of 48 people on the way to a works outing to the Alps, each with a hand clamped over the other's mouth. And once on some thickly mossed boulders in the freezing forest at night, the eyes of a thousand animals watching us.

Since I couldn't get much sleep, I boosted energy from food. I tore into crusty baguettes, whole wheels of melting brie de Melun, tannic red wine and six packs of luscious lemon yoghurts. Finn was too polite to mention that the woman who had flexed like a muscular eel in his hands was beginning to look like a fat, farmed salmon and still performed manfully even if, as the warm breath of spring finally arrived from the south, we no longer needed each other to keep warm. Our contract now had just six months to run.

I continued with my full-time binge but the emphasis changed: rather than augmenting my energy, I fed something ravenous inside me. I would return from work and cut a huge long loaf of bread into two, spread it with butter and imported Marmite and then cover it with thick slices of Emmental. This I would grill until the cheese melted. I would eat it and repeat it.

Occasionally I'd pop into the little shop opposite to buy a tinned dessert called Mont Blanc, which came in vanilla, chocolate or chestnut flavours. I could never decide which I liked best. I'd eat it straight from the tin with a spoon. Then, an hour or two later, I would usually visit a bistro or pizzeria with my friends for dinner. Next we would hit the bars, refreshing ourselves with several litres of Meteor, my favourite French beer. Then I would slip over to the Tabac for a silky milk chocolate Suchard Rocher – three times the size of Ferrero

Rochers. Later, I would arrive at Finn's. He no longer fed me Café Noir biscuits, so sometimes I'd get up in the night and eat one or two to feel the crisp icing shatter between my teeth. He always had plenty of food in his house. I liked that about him. And his omelettes were always made with at least four eggs for each person.

We persisted with our strange pact as spring ripened to summer and our couplings became uncomfortably hot and slippery. Afterwards we would lie silently side by side, our bodies shining and the air heavy with the scent of the garden lavender as we waited for a breath of wind from the window to cool us. My memory of those long hot summer nights has blurred into one endless night with the burning heat and the sound of cicadas and the slowly growing sense of fear within, the fear of losing it all. I longed for rain, a thunderstorm, anything. As soon as the heat became tinged with a hint of freshness and birds began singing in the dark and my sweat cooled, I would get up and drive home, stopping at the boulangerie just in time for the first batch of croissants. The first two or three would dull the gnawing emotions. I didn't even know what they were, only that they had to be stopped. I think Finn felt the same. One day he asked to hypnotise me again, but I refused because we had moments when he was totally with me still.

The night came when, engaged in fat bouncy coition, I noticed that Finn had fallen asleep. This was a bad moment; until then, I had never seen myself as a succubus. And, looking in the mirror in his bedroom, I saw an almost spherical succubus – undoubtedly a first. Finn apologised in the morning. He really was looking a bit peaky. As I ate my two bowls of Frosties with full cream milk, courtesy of Finn, I decided my body was going behind my back to try and make Finn somehow end our odd arrangement. Rather than taking leave of my senses, my senses had upped and taken leave of me and were going out by themselves, buying pains aux raisins by the dozen and ordering calzone pizzas in restaurants. By now Finn and I looked like Laurel and Hardy together, and Finn certainly wanted to be released, but was too polite to insist. I, under the effect of hypnosis, still spent each day in a haze of anticipation for each night.

Was I in love with Finn? I thought not. I thought about him constantly but I wasn't particularly interested in his desires, apart from his waning desire for me. I didn't even want to get to know him better. Like a greedy baby sucking at the breast, I simply craved the sweet relief of his undivided attention. In daylight, we seldom socialised except in a group; we continued to write to and telephone our respective partners until they both got fed up with our lack of availability for weekends and holidays; and although Finn and I did holiday together once at the Welcome Hotel in Villefranche, it was only as part of a larger summer party. Still, one way or another, we contrived not to miss a single night together.

The end of summer is always a sad time, and that year I was unusually alert for the early signs. At first the weather became a little less brilliant and there were a few cool, hazy days. Even on sunny days the light seemed flat and dull, throwing few shadows. Eventually the flowers drooped, exhausted, and the enormous leaves on the plane trees began to remind me of used green dishcloths. I still drove nightly to Finn's but I felt fat and depressed, buried in such mounds of superfluous flesh that the Mini was becoming a tight fit. Finn looked yellow, sullen and worn out but was resigned to completing his year's service. We were locked into a grim battle, our minds lost but our bodies refusing to give in.

Our final night arrived with the first fall of leaves. Daniel and Catherine arranged a celebratory dinner at a nearby restaurant. Catherine had a new lover now but wanted to come to complete the circle. I applauded their choice: the thick linen table cloths, the silver

cutlery, pots of Normandy butter and ceremonial service boded well, culinarily. I noticed little of what the others said or ate. We drank a bottle of cold, bone dry white Riesling. Daniel, Catherine and Finn talked among themselves as I snorted up half a dozen Belon oysters, squeezing out their sea juice against the roof of my mouth, followed by a pile of langoustines drenched in garlic butter, languorous cheeses and finally islands of meringue drizzled with caramelised sugar and floating in a pool of vanilla cream. Then I cried a little. Catherine patted my shoulder.

'You need to get away,' she said. 'You should come to Nice tomorrow. I'm going to introduce Paolo to my family.'

'I want to say sorry for having this idea, because this hasn't been very good for either of you, has it?' said Daniel, his eyes sharply focused on my wobbling cheeks. Finn seemed listless, looking at the tablecloth. I said little, inhabiting my own passive immensity. The larger I grew, the less of an impression I seemed to make on the world.

I lay in Finn's creased white sheets for the last time, taking in the things I would miss about the room like the little blue Chinamen on the wallpaper. The windows were open and the air smelled of wet leaves and wood smoke. I counted Finn's ribs sticking through his parchment-coloured skin and suddenly felt concerned.

'You look terrible. Are you ill?'

He shook his head and turned away. 'Just tired. Let me sleep,' he said.

I had the thought that Finn had hypnotised himself as well as me, or perhaps I really had become a kind of succubus. I chiselled my nose into the notch at the back of his neck below his first vertebra, flung my arm around his waist and slept. I felt tired too.

The next morning I left Finn sleeping, wondering at the failure of the hypnosis on its last night. I hadn't made a conscious decision to resist it, quite the opposite; but now it had happened, I understood that I could have done the same thing any time in the past year. I staggered to my car, feeling not only monstrously sad, but also extremely stupid.

A milky fog from the Seine clouded the air, but as my Mini chugged towards the top of the bridge it cleared a little. I looked down the river and wondered if I should drive right off the edge into the heavenly scene. The white glare of the shivering sun was reflected in the water, surrounded by tall, slender black trees on the river banks. I got out of the car and stood against the cold stone balustrades, staring, and noticed that, even if I was sad, the gnawing hunger had disappeared. White swans moved across the smooth dazzling surface.

With a choke of diesel Daniel drew up in his black car and got out.

'Problems with the car?' he called. I shook my head.

'No. I'm just admiring the scenery.' Daniel came to stand beside me. I looked down and saw my chubby hands lying on the rail, my wrist bulging around my watchstrap. But Daniel didn't seem to have noticed. He gazed into my face.

'You're a complex individual, Esther. I'd like to get to know you better.' I sighed. It was seven in the morning. He'd be asking my star sign next.

'If only you'd let me try to make up for some of the - the inconvenience I've caused with the hypnosis', he said. 'When can I see you again, Esther?'

I couldn't help smiling. I wasn't attracted to Daniel, but the thought of another helpless sleeping man stirred a throb of interest.

The river flowed towards me and then under the bridge towards the sea. The swift current scurried a piece of discarded wood towards us, bobbing and twirling it under the bridge and out of sight. A skiff approached, its lone sculler cutting through the water with power and precision.

I got in my car, opened the window and beckoned to Daniel. He brought his face close to mine and I felt almost tender towards him.

'Never,' I said. 'You can never see me again.'

He retracted his head like a startled tortoise as I closed the window. The Mini's engine rasped into life and I accelerated away from the bridge and the mist, heading for the Route du Soleil. It would still be warm in the South at this time of year.