

Eclipse

by Jane Delury

On the first day of autumn, in the rear courtyard of the Léger estate, Yvette Mongrain was scrubbing down the glass tables and wrought iron chairs that had been trucked in from Paris the morning before and arranged across the flagstones. Already the wind was on the rise, whirling through the vine-strangled trellis above Yvette's head, sketching waves on the koi pond, as it prepared its assault on the mustached men and sparkling-necked women who, in just seven hours, would mill about the courtyard, shaking and kissing each others' hands. By the time the foie gras and oysters had been served and the wild boar rolled out from the house on its bed of braised endive, the women's shoulders would have erupted in goose bumps above their silk bodices and their husband's noses gone pink at the ends. Yet none of them, Yvette thought as she laid aside her rag to scrape off a belligerent splotch of magpie dung, would request the wraps and overcoats hanging inside the house. The rich never admitted to growing hungry or lonely or cold.

She flicked the brown bits from under her fingernail, hauled her sloshing bucket off a chair and emptied the contents into the koi pond, recently emptied of its original inhabitants by the cook's now deceased tabby cat. Monsieur Léger had ordered as replacements a tank of catfish whose silvery film of excrement the gardener, Pierre, skimmed from the top of the water each morning and used to fertilize the pear and plum trees. The sweet, putrid smell of the fish, their thick whiskers and egg-like eyes, reminded Yvette of the drunken crémier who had once put his sticky thumb on her cheek when she was a girl. Her heart lurched into her throat. She refilled the bucket from the stream that gushed from the mouth of a marble lotus flower, and trudged to another row of tables that sat under a fine veil of dust blown in overnight from the forest.

In the hard light of morning, the glass showed both of her chins, the squared lump of her nose and the wispy gray hair pinned tight to

her head. She had once been a slight girl with blue-white skin and a milky smile who, beginning with the *crémier*, seduced a long line of men before giving her heart to Gustave, the head gardener at the Léger estate. She had been that girl when Monsieur Léger's father returned to his native village, after fifteen years spent blowing holes in the sides of distant mountains, accompanied by an entourage of engineers and architects who plowed a road into the forest and cleared a space for the house in the trees. She had been that girl the day that she stood with her fist raised at the front door of the estate, her references in the pocket of her well-mended coat, Gustave's good luck kisses still warm on her neck. She was less of that girl when she walked with Gustave down the aisle of the village church, and became even less with the birth of her son, who died after only a week, leaving her with swollen breasts and glossy trails down the sides of her waist. That was the same summer that Monsieur Léger and his wife arrived at the house with the colicky child whom Yvette had rocked through her grief, whose first steps she had applauded, whose picture books she had pretended to read, whose fevers she had cooled, whose nose she had wiped, whose tears she had dried the summer that his mother left the house early, and the next summer when she didn't come at all. And now that child, the only person left who had known the girl Yvette had once been, had, this very morning, looked down his no longer adorably stubby, now long and straight nose and told her with nary a hello that he had seen out the window that the tables looked dull and could she do something about it? The tables that she and the housemaid had spent hours scrubbing the previous afternoon, entering the evening with cramped necks and chapped hands that by this, her sixth table, were already stinging.

“Glorious day, isn't it?”

Yvette let go of the rag and squinted up the yellow façade of the house. Three stories into the air, Madame Léger had come to the edge of her balcony. Her loose *décolleté* fluttered on her high breasts. With a loud smile, she lifted a bottle of spring water and began to empty it into a box of nasturtiums.

“Please don't bother,” Yvette cried. She knew exactly what was happening on the other side of the stone balustrade. The water was splashing into the soil and sending black flecks onto the hem of Madame Léger's just-washed dressing gown, which would end up in a pink heap on her bathroom floor. But Madame Léger just smiled wider and cried back, “I need to do something to help out, don't I Yvette?”

Yvette did not know if she was supposed to answer this question. Madame was always asking questions that seemed to require no answer. Do you think Monsieur Léger will be home on time for dinner tonight? Have the lines by my eyes grown deeper? The night after Gustave died (having fallen from the roof of the house, where he was scraping moss from the gutters), Madame Léger appeared on the threshold of Yvette's room, a bouquet of lilac clenched in her fist. How dreadfully lonely you must feel, she said, her eyelashes beating back tears. She looked as moved as she had the morning that that cook's cat was found floating, tail-up, in the swimming pool. Yvette stared dumbly into the hallway, her hand on the doorknob, her bare feet growing cold on the floor. As the scent of lilac floated past her into the shuttered room, where the smell of fertilizer and male sweat was already fading, she wanted to say that she and Gustave had not kissed in over thirty years, had not even had the passion to fight, had built between themselves a stone wall of silence and that it was that wall that she missed, the sturdiness of it, not the soft, airy things that she knew Madame Léger was imagining. Instead she muttered her thanks and, after shutting and locking the door, shoved the flowers under her mattress.

“I sent out the housemaid to fetch your new gloves,” she now shouted at the balcony. “Your dress has been pressed. I think you will need the silk stole. The wind is gathering already. The first day of autumn is no day for eating outside.”

She was pleased with herself for having said this, even though Madame Léger was no longer listening. She stared out at the forest, with the expression of a martyr before the axe fell. Yvette picked up her rag. The sun had changed position. In the glare of the glass she

could only see a faint suggestion of herself next to Madame Léger's smeared reflection, which rose suddenly higher.

Yvette turned just in time to see Madame Léger cascade into the air, past the gargoyle that grinned under the balcony, down the bay windows of the second floor, the dressing gown billowing around her bare ankles like a failed parachute.

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On the west side of the house, in the rose garden, Pierre Frontin heard the wet thud and thought that a flower box had fallen from a window. With a slow smile, he pinched a bruised petal from a Queen Elizabeth and flicked it onto the ground. He was a thin, young man with the long articulations of a praying mantis and the tight little face of a cockroach. His wife had sun-cured skin, breasts that were just another roll of fat on her chest, and buttocks white and lumpy as goat cheese. So Pierre did not have to worry about her being wooed by the postman while he was out. And though he might have found comfort in slimmer arms, he was too tired at the end of the day to drive to the village to buy a drink for a girl, and, anyway, could not afford to buy drinks for girls. So his clothes never got thrown out of the window into the swimming pool that he did not have.

He pulled a pair of scissors from the side pocket of his trousers, clipped the pink rose free of its stem, and tossed it onto a nearby heap. While Monsieur Léger was constantly having his estate repainted to stave off the damage wreaked by storms and sun, the paint of Pierre's house could not peel because there was no paint. The grass outside did not need to be mowed because it was wild grass, meant to grow wild. He did not have colleagues with fancy cars and high expectations. He did not have a weak heart from the stress of being rich and important. He was not resented by the men who worked for him because, aside from the chore boy, no one worked for him. He was not stupid enough to host an outside dinner on the first day of autumn.

By now the tightness was gone from Pierre's chest. He even felt lucky as he studied a ragged hole in the leaf of a wilted Louis Philippe. Through the hole appeared a patch of black soil. Against the black soil, a slug nursed on a flesh-colored petal. When the elder Monsieur Léger was alive, bugs and rodents had remained on the other side of the stone walls that encircled the property. Even as an old man, his back so bent that his mustache nearly grazed the ground, Monsieur Léger, père, worked spring mornings in the vegetable garden in his broad-brimmed hat and disappeared on fall afternoons with his mushrooming basket.

But this Monsieur Léger had no respect for the forest and so the forest had no respect for him. The summer that he arrived with his wife in their long silver car, the deer jumped the fence and chewed away the rose leaves. The hawks and swallows pelted the striped parasols by the pool house with crusty white splotches and the pool itself swam with pine needles and oak leaves. The life of the outdoor servants was consumed with erasing traces of the forest from the part of the estate that Monsieur Léger could see from the back door of the house or as he floated at dawn in his swimming costume. For Monsieur Léger, unlike his father, never wandered his grounds, and you could for this reason get away with things. You could trim, for instance, only the side of the bushes that faced the house for on the rare occasions that Monsieur Léger walked in his gardens, he never left the pathways. He wanted things to look nice but not necessarily be nice.

When he had worked for the elder Monsieur Léger, Pierre would have never thought to cut corners. He picked the orchard fruits one by one and laid them like eggs in his basket. He made a compost heap of peach skins, onion tops and spoiled figs, stirred the putrid soup twice a day, then spread it thick on the spring flower beds, which exploded in color each year more violently than the last. If, asleep on his lumpy bed, he heard a night storm begin to brew, he threw on his coat and boots and rushed to the estate to tie back the roses and cover the geranium beds. He knew that the elder Monsieur Léger, having drunk his tisane by the downstairs fire,

would, as he mounted the stairs to bed, see Pierre in the garden, drenched by the cruel rain. He believed, just as he had once believed his mother's stories about forest gnomes and fairies, that this recurring image would result in his being mentioned in Monsieur Léger's will, that he could pick and pluck and spray his way into a life like the one the junior Monsieur Léger was leading off at his fancy Parisian school. All day long he worked alongside Gustave, whose rants and wheezy sighs filled him with pity. Think, he wanted to say, of the tulips that jut from the iron-poor soil at the side of the house, the rhododendron that rerooted itself after being torn from the ground by a hostile wind, last autumn's apple trees breaking out in perfect red fruits despite being eaten away by fungus. He had tried once to explain these thoughts to Gustave as they sat together under a pear tree, sharing a baguette and a round of Brie. In response, the old man had lowered his hat over his eyes, let out a great belch and rolled onto his back for his afternoon nap. Then, one evening, the year that Pierre turned twenty-eight, the elder Monsieur Léger choked on a bone in his *truite aux amandes*, leaving everything to his son, who had not been to visit in years. All through that fall, winter and spring, Pierre had continued to manicure the grounds for the junior Monsieur Léger who would see the next summer when he came to the house how Pierre had kept alive his father's well-ordered spirit in the well-trimmed bushes and well-weeded flower beds. But when Monsieur Léger, fils, appeared on the steps of the mansion, he was wearing dark glasses and his wife was wearing furs despite the June heat. Monsieur Léger summoned Pierre into his father's study. With a sour glance at Pierre's boots, he said that the flowers in the rear garden were drab as death and the bushes in front of the house too prim. "We must drag this pile of rocks out of the last century," he said. "I don't want my guests thinking that I'm a stuffed shirt." That afternoon, as Pierre dug up a bed of African violets, taking care not to damage the roots, Gustave walked by with a bucket of concrete for the fish pond. "Stop caring so much," he said with a grunt. "It will get you no

where.”

Pierre was not a stupid man. He recognized that Gustave had cared so little that he had missed a rung on his ladder and broken his neck in the fall. You needed, he had decided, only to care enough to survive.

He collected the roses and dropped them into a bucket, which he shoved into a stripe of shade drawn by a nearby cypress tree. As he strolled around the side of the house toward the rear garden, he wondered whether the unfortunate flowerpot was the clay one with hideous faces carved on the front that Monsieur Léger had brought back from some country in Africa. Perhaps it had shattered into thousands of unmatchable pieces.

The breeze that had been a bare whisper between the roses was a soft wind at the back of the house. When Monsieur Léger had announced his plans to host an outside dinner, Pierre had said nothing, even though, on the other side of the forest, the villagers were staying home from the fields behind fixed shutters. They would spend the evening over bowls of cider and plates of bread pudding as they told stories about the first day of autumn. Babies born with claws instead of hands. Fields of wheat turned to lavender. Young girls who disappeared into the forest and did not return. Gustave had died on the first day of autumn; just after, the villagers had seen a huge, bird-shaped cloud rise over the forest and fly toward the sun.

Pierre walked through a shin-high forest of bonsai plants, his eyes trained on the windows of the house. The doors that led to Madame Léger's balcony were flung wide open. A green silk curtain had been sucked outside and was flapping up and down. Pierre ducked under the trellis of vines that hung over the rear courtyard. A few feet from the house, Yvette stared down at a pink mass, one hand on her hip, a rag dripping from the other.

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On the east side of the house, Dominique, the chore boy, sat in a

chestnut tree above the swimming pool, his legs dangling down either side of a branch. So far he had heard and seen nothing, save a loud thump and a squirrel with an old plum stone clenched in its jaws. He was beginning to think that he had chosen the wrong tree. Madame Léger had said the large chestnut with the twisted branches, but there was a similar tree behind the house.

She had come to him the previous afternoon as he stood in the tool shed, cutting a pine plank in two. When she said his name from the doorway, the saw bit into the flesh above his knee. She wore a buttery silk dress cut low on the chest and high on the calves. Her hair was clasped in a gold clip but a few tendrils had gone loose and wavered in the breeze.

"Come please," she said, turning back toward the house. "A plant is dying."

Dominique hurried behind Madame Léger, his leg throbbing, the saw shrilling in his hand until, not knowing where else to put it, he dropped it on the grass. He followed her through the servants' entrance to the house, along the cracked tiles to the glossy oak floors, up the marble staircase, down a hall covered with photographs of Monsieur Léger: Monsieur Léger at the yawning mouth of a mine, Monsieur Léger receiving the Légion d'Honneur from Maréchal Foch, Monsieur Léger astride an elephant, Monsieur Léger kissing the hand of the Pope, to a foyer where Madame Léger stopped next to a set of long windows and pointed at a fern with tobacco-colored fronds. "Look how pathetic it is," she said. "I tell the housemaid to give it water but who knows if she does. It just gets more and more miserable looking." "It needs more light," Dominique said. He dragged the ceramic pot closer to the windows. Madame Léger watched him with a distracted smile, her shoulder blades balanced on the wall, the rest of her body dripping toward the Oriental rug on which the toes of her bare feet were splayed. She had yanked off her high heels on the stairs and dropped them in front of one of the bedroom doors, hers, Dominique had assumed. Now, as he plucked a few especially offensive fronds from the fern, he glimpsed for the first time a misshapen tooth at the

corner of Madame Léger's smile, gray and melted-looking, before her lips shut down and she brushed by him toward a nearby door. "You should take a look at my husband's cactus," she said. The walls of Monsieur Léger's study were papered in brown silk. A fat globe sat on a pedestal next to a mahogany desk with brass hinges, the only spots of light in the room as the black velvet curtains were pulled halfway shut. On the windowsill, a long, shriveled cactus rose crookedly from a pot. As Dominique prodded the soil, Madame Léger threw open the doors of a liquor cabinet and pulled out a bottle of cognac. She set two champagne glasses on Monsieur Léger's desk and filled each one to just under the rim. She took a long sip that rippled down her white throat. Dominique wiped the soil from his fingers on the sleeve of his shirt. He gulped the cognac quickly, his eyes fixed on the open door.

"Don't fret," Madame Léger said. "He never comes home early from his shooting trips. He spends the first four hours trying to locate the trigger." She licked the rim of her glass and set it back on the desk. "He ordered a boar from the Vosges for tomorrow night's dinner. He may be a poor huntsman but he is not stupid." Dominique tried not to smile but failed. He had once assisted Monsieur Léger when he went shooting with one of his overnight guests. Monsieur Léger marched over the slick leaves, recounting in a too-loud voice how he had hunted big game in Africa and crocodiles on the Amazon. When a fox darted from its hole in a clearing, Monsieur Léger shot an oak tree instead. On another occasion, Monsieur Léger had asked Dominique to come along on a mushrooming expedition meant to impress a man from the national senate who was from the coast and thus knew nothing about mushrooms. Monsieur Léger could not tell a chanterelle from a morel. By the end of the outing, he had tossed several poisonous mushrooms into the senator's basket. That evening the senator was driven away by an ambulance, green faced and holding his stomach, as, in the kitchen, Monsieur Léger berated the cook for having undercooked the porc à la moutarde and "given a great man worms."

Madame Léger sat down on a large leather couch at the corner of the room, under an oil painting of a blond woman with blank eyes and a frosty smile. "Come," she said, patting the cushion next to her. "Tell me something."

Dominique set his glass on the desk. "Nothing has ever happened to me," he said as he sat down. "So I have nothing to tell."

"It will," Madame Léger said. She was melting into the couch, her long arms and legs running across its back and down its sides. The skirt of her dress had fallen open, showing a strip of her thigh.

"I think it won't," Dominique said. "I think I will live my life waiting for something to happen and something won't happen."

"I felt that way until I met my husband," Madame Léger said. "Soon I started feeling that way again." She shifted closer to him, her eyes dry and fierce. "I have seen you watch me at my husband's parties. I have danced by the window and seen your face framed by the bushes. It reminded me of when I was younger. I had a black fan. I would take it with me to the cabarets and hide my face behind it. The fan was trimmed with lace so that I could see everyone but they could not see me."

Dominique thought of the soft swirl of Madame Léger's hips as she floated by the window, her cheek crushed against a black lapel, her bored, desperate mouth. He set his hand on her knee. She knocked it away.

"Don't be silly," she said.

She jumped up from the couch and glided over to the door. But on the threshold, just before Dominique clumped away, red-faced and trembling, she leaned into his ear and told him in a sweet, high whisper to sit in the branches of the chestnut tree the next morning at ten fifteen precisely.

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Madame Léger's eyes were open and unblinking. Her nostrils flared around the breath that entered her body in a shudder and left in a sigh.

"I think she's trying to say something," Pierre said.

"She is saying nothing," Yvette said. "She is in that moment between life and death where there is really nothing to say."

The rag in her hand had soaked her left knee through its thin white hose. But she could not bear to let it go. She stared at Madame Léger's smooth forehead and thought of how Gustave would turn his back to her as he undressed in the evening, the wiry gray hairs on his shoulders, the puckered skin of his waist. She had not cried in so long that her tears were solid, crusty with salt. Pierre reached over to squeeze her hand, but he kept his eyes on the pavement, where the blood from Madame Léger's head was branching into the limbs of a sparkling crimson tree.

As she stared past Pierre's pointed chin and Yvette's slack breasts, at the liquid blue sky, Madame Léger had never felt so peaceful. It was like floating in a bath that would never grow cold. She remembered how Gustave had sailed through the air, how, through her window, he had resembled a swan, a fat, old man made suddenly graceful and light. She thought about the chore boy watching all this from the branches of the chestnut tree. One night, years from now, his wife would open her eyes to the sound of his sobbing. When she shook him awake, he would tell her about the beautiful woman whom he had once loved.

"Look," Yvette cried.

A shadow was spreading out from the roof of the house, swallowing the sky as it went.

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When the sun disappeared, Monsieur Léger was at his desk, adding to his list. He rose from the chair and peeled a curtain back from the window. Under a black sky, he could make out the long run of the front driveway and the shaggy roof of the forest. He had seen this happen once before, when he was a small boy. He was walking the wall between the house and the trees when suddenly the world went black. He tried to climb down, but he could not find his footing

and tumbled over the edge. His heart in a fist, he followed the hazy line of trunks, twisting his ankle and falling twice into a bed of brambles until, finally, he saw the wooden gate that the servants used to fetch wood for the fires. As he stumbled over the lawn, his mother ran out from the side of the house. She crushed his head to her stomach and listed all of the horrible things that she thought had happened to him. "Never," she said with a shudder. "Never vanish again." This was not long before she herself started to vanish, wandering the gardens without her hat, staring out the windows at the forest, kissing him on the head rather than the cheek until one morning, she left for Switzerland to take the waters and never returned.

Monsieur Léger felt his way along the wall. He reached up for a tulip-shaped sconce. The switch clicked twice. No light. Slowly, using the edge of his desk as a guide, he walked toward the door of his study and stumbled into the hall.

"Hello," he called. "Where is everyone?"

He slid his feet over the runner, toward the stairs, taking the steps one by one. When his slippers slapped on the marble landing, he ran his hand over the wallpaper pattern of roses and grapes until his nails stubbed on the door trim of the dining room. Next to the hulking lines of the butler's pantry a faint light glowed from the kitchen. He pushed open the swinging doors. The cook was crouched in front of the stove, the red light of a cigarette in his mouth. Above his head, blue tendrils of gas licked the bottoms of shadowy pots. Monsieur Léger cleared his throat and shuffled closer. The cook looked up at him, his face a blank plane marked by three dark splotches that suggested eyes and a mouth.

"A fine pickle," the cook said. He blew a pale curl of smoke through the darkness.

"An eclipse," Monsieur Léger said. "Nothing to worry about. I cannot, however, explain the absence of electricity."

"Of course you can't," the cook said. "It is not explainable."

Monsieur Léger blinked hard and cleared his throat again. "I am looking for my wife. Have you seen her?"

"I can't say that I have. I can't say that I haven't. It is quite dark, you know."

"I know that she comes here sometimes in the mornings to refresh her pot of tea."

"No." The cook stubbed out his cigarette on the floor. "She drinks coffee. Yvette brings it to her. Though I did see Madame once a few weeks ago. She was under the sink calling for the cat. She turned her face away but not before I saw that she had been crying." He struck a match and blew it out again. "Such a pity what happened. We have mice now you know."

"I can smell your caramel burning," Monsieur Léger said. He turned and made his way toward the door and into the hall. He tried to conjure up what exactly the cook looked like, whether his eyes were as beady as he remembered and his eyebrows as high. He would fire the man tomorrow. Gisèle would not be happy about it, but the season was almost over. She could make onion soup and omelettes of the kind she had made him in her apartment on the Left Bank, stuffed with rounds of goat cheese that ran all over the plate. She was always saying she wanted things to be simple again. Let's go back then, he would say. Just you and me and your one-coil burner. Before the cat started climbing into bed with us, before you stopped taking my hand under the table.

He found the icy handle of the front door. Outside, the sky was flat and cloudless, the birds silent, the forest a clump of shadows. He moved slowly down the stairs, his hand on the metal railing until his foot crunched into the gravel of the drive. He headed in the direction of the swimming pool, calling out his wife's name. Once he found her, he would bring her into his study and show her his list: the yellow scarf on the floor of the third floor guestroom last month, the foggy stain of her naked buttocks against the French doors, the paper she had slipped into the pocket of a visiting duke at last week's tea, the bisecting rings on the edge of his desk yesterday afternoon. Tonight, he would tell her, would not be so easy. Tonight there would be no coincidental trips to powder her nose just as the viscount of such and such went upstairs for a phone call, no twenty-

minute expeditions to the kitchen to ask for a lemon to squeeze into her glass of vodka. This time she would be surrounded by the emptiness between the courtyard and the house and she would not pass through it without him at her side.

On the other side of the pool, a shape slid out of a tree.

"I am looking for my wife," Monsieur Léger shouted. "Have you seen her?"

"An enormous bird," replied a quaking voice. "It rose up from the forest and swallowed the sun."

Monsieur Léger could not see the boy's face but he could smell his sweat.

"Fool," he muttered. "The sun always returns."

He called out again for his wife, louder this time, then tripped off the pavement, onto the grass. Something sharp grazed his heel. He cursed but did not stop. A wall of bushes rose at his side, barbed and shapeless, as if they had never been trimmed.

