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The curious case of the fallen apple tree: everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux

In a charity shop in Nottingham I found a guide book to the museums of Paris. After that, nothing would satisfy me but to spend my birthday in the museums of Paris. In all our years of visiting and living in France, John and I had never made a joint trip to Paris. So we booked a charming sounding hotel in the Gobelins area, closed our blue shutters and drove off in early May across the rolling plains to Paris. We had a wonderful time looking at mediaeval art, Egyptian and Assyrian splendours, Impressionists in the railway station and Christofle silverware in their canal-side factory. Evenings in restaurants ranged from Georgian to Japanese. And our last morning concluded at the opening of an exhibition about the Jews of the Marais area and then with vegetarian fallafel wraps at a vibrant Israeli café.

Replete, we drove back across the rolling plains. The first sight of the blue mountains of the Vosges in the distance always tugs at my heart and makes me happy to be returning home. We drove into Entre-deux-Eaux, stopping at Danielle and Pierre Laine's to collect our post. Unusually, they had no news of village life during our absence. On our windowsill we found a birthday Oleander from Nicola. Beyond the house, fragments of wood littered the road, and on the verge lay the shattered remains of our largest apple tree.

Now this apple tree had withstood the great Boxing Day hurricane of 1999. It had suffered the indignity of having branches sawn off by Farmer Duhaut during the great drought of August 2002, when huge high-sided lorries from Alsace rolled down the lane bearing relief maize fodder for the cows. It was my mother's favourite apple tree, as its fruit was sweet and soft to bite into. And despite the fact that we could see rotten wood in the hollow centre of the trunk, there was no way that it had just fallen over, broken off some branches and then moved itself tidily onto the verge of our road.

Our number one suspect had to be Farmer Duhaut on his tractor. This apple tree was more or less where he and John had had a shouting match a couple of years ago. It was in the way of lorries accessing his cowshed. He'd have noticed the blue shutters closed every day as he passed. However, the following morning, Mme Laine, who is also his devoted aunt, was quick to assure us when just "happening to pass" in her car, that it had nothing to do with Dominique, but was the fault of the wood-cutter Matthieu's son; he had been transporting wood yesterday. Shortly after that, young Matthieu himself arrived clutching a piece of paper. He was anxious to assure us that it was not his fault either, but the guilty party was a contractor from St Die. He himself had been horrified as he drove on his tractor behind the lorry carrying large tree trunks and saw the tree branches had caught by the high-sided trailer and the whole tree had been pulled over. We should phone the number on the scrap of paper. That seemed a bit fruitless, as they could hardly replant the tree, and would claim that it was rotten anyway. So in the end young Matthieu offered to chop it for firewood.

One evening a few weeks later, excitement was provided by a hot air balloon flight coming to an ignominious end near the site of old apple tree. The evening had become still, the enormous yellow, pink, green, and blue balloon

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had lost height at the edge of the forest, then bunny-hopped down the field, as it tried to rise and find an air current, but failing, was anxious to avoid landing and flattening the farmers' uncut grass. It finally gave in behind the trees opposite. Neighbours came rushing up on foot and by car, ready to greet the intrepid balloonists. They, however, stayed miserably silent as they got out of the basket. No doubt they were saving up their recriminations about how much they'd paid just to bounce along the ground only a few miles from where they'd launched. The balloon retrieval car and trailer raced up, parked by the remains of the apple tree, and, with the aid of ropes, coaxed the balloon basket onto the trailer and collapsed and coiled the colourful balloon, snake-like, into its basket. The still silent ex-passengers were driven away.

On summer evenings the balloon is not an uncommon sight, as visitors will testify, as we dine on the large balcony outside the (first-floor) sitting room. Until now it has been important not to become too inebriated. Since the new flat was created, the balcony has been just a bare cement expanse, without railings and with ample opportunities for our own rapid descents to earth. However, Project Balcony is now in hand. A local metal worker will be making and installing balcony railings in July (fingers crossed). So in April we selected some tasteful tiles in two shades of grey, and ordered them together with large quantities of sand, cement and a cement mixer. A large lorry delivered the goods, fortunately depositing them just beyond the apple-tree's orbit. John's first task was one of changing the level balcony to one with a 1 in 80 slope so rainwater would drain away from the house. This involved mixing and laying nearly two tons of concrete.

Ann and Derek (John's sister and brother-in-law) had decided to come out at the end of May and kindly offered help with work on the loft. However, on the way down to meet them at Basel airport, John spotted an end-of-season (!) discounted electrically-operated awning blind of sufficiently large dimensions (5 metres by 3.5 metres) to shade much of the balcony from the afternoon sun. We had long been looking for just such a blind. So Project Loft rapidly merged with Project Balcony Blind Installation. On the then hottest day of the year (33 degrees), we put the roof bars on the car, joined Nicola, Roger and Dorinda at a restaurant for a lunch to celebrate Nicola's special birthday, then, in all our restaurant finery, set out to purchase the blind. It took 3 strong employees to heave it onto the roof-rack, and that was only after they'd debated whether the roof rack was strong enough for its weight. It was a very slow drive back over the mountains to avoid flexing the package too much.

The next morning John attempted to interpret the instructions to calculate the optimum height on the wall and assess the appropriate bolt fixing to bear the mighty weight. Roger, who is an engineer, had unfortunately gone off to Alsace for the day, so calculations had to be made without his expertise. By 4 o'clock when he and Dorinda arrived all the drilling and fixing installation had been done and what was needed were a hundred sturdy pyramid-builders to haul the blind up into place. It was a truly amazing spectacle. As farmer Duhaut and Olivier beavered away in the field behind us, turning, baling, and bagging the grass they'd recently cut, Dorinda and I lounged in the shade watching the blind elevation. With the aid of Ann, Derek, two step ladders, two long ladders, and a scarlet rope running from the blind up to a large hook under the eaves

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and down to loop round Roger's waist, the mighty blind was edged up the ladders and eventually into position. Dorinda applauded wildly. But despite her desire to see it unfurled in full splendour, it was decided to let it settle first.

However, the next evening, following morning thunderstorms and trips to a couple of Sunday flea markets, we were able to celebrate French Mothers' Day (it's always a different day from UK Mother's Day, though interestingly Father's Day is the same) with dinner under the awning. Perhaps not a typical French menu: roast pork, red cabbage, courgettes, broad beans, roast potatoes and parsnips, and an apple and cinnamon tart.

With the prospect of a splendid balcony, work has been needed to improve the view from it (and the apple tree "falling over" was not part of those improvements). Last year I'd laboriously dug over the heavy clay and planted potatoes. This year I've been gradually planting up a flower bed (despite the attempts of rogue potatoes to reclaim the patch). With scarlet poppies, mauve clematis, peonies, and lavatera beginning to take shape at the back of the border, and an assortment of summer bulbs (an unmissable bargain at 1 euro a bag), I next fancied a brick path winding through it. On impulse we ordered some paving bricks at the same time as the balcony tiles. After the blind was up and work on the loft wiring almost finished, Derek helped me to roughly lay out a path and calculate how many more to buy. He was much impressed by the helpfulness of the young man in the builders' merchants, who helped load the 70 additional bricks into the car. He was even more impressed when I got home and realised I'd got the wrong ones and the same young man helped to unload them and reload the right ones without a word of reproach!

We'd set aside the Wednesday of Ann and Derek's visit for a train trip. From the road it looks as if the St Die to Strasbourg single track railway line must be really exciting as it disappears into gorges then swoops over the road on a series of viaducts. So we'd long planned to take the morning train to Strasbourg. It was a minor worry when SNCF employees also announced that they'd decided to have a strike from 8pm the same evening. However, the booking clerk assured us there was no way the strike would start early, and we'd be safely back in St Die around 7pm! What's more, as there were four of us, we could have a special day-trip discount. Reassured, and clutching our tickets, we found a café for early morning coffee before the journey. Once inside one of the two elderly diesel carriages, we had to admit that the railway track was less exciting than it had looked from the road with many views blocked by trees. Happily, the return trip felt more exciting as we rattled at high speed back downhill from the mountain pass to St Die in good time to avoid the evening strike. However Strasbourg railway station was impressive (do try their 24 hour loos some time. The staff in their white jackets look like sanatorium or asylum assistants).

The three-day tourist tickets we bought at the station tourist office were an incentive to cram as many activities as possible into our day out. The cathedral clock striking mid-day (at 12.30) is a must, as figures from every tier jerk into action (including the cock crowing thrice). So we hurried down to the canal for a boat tour first. We'd often looked down on the boats going through the lock at Petite France, so it was fun to be the glass-encapsulated, head-phoned

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people nodding at the commentary, the familiar buildings from unfamiliar angles, not to mention the quayside loungers. The European Parliament looked tranquil from the water. But it looked even better from the cathedral tower which we climbed after we'd heard the clock strike. It's a great view as you can see the whole city and our mountains and pass looking very blue and distant. As we puffed our way up the stone spiral staircase it was a bit disconcerting to be overtaken by German students running up. And alas on the way down we didn't hear the beautiful but unearthly singing of the male soprano we'd heard after a previous ascent with our friend Elspeth (who'd enthused that she always liked to climb church and cathedral towers). After that we deserved a light lunch (beers, tartes flambées, and salad) under the shade of an awning in a cobbled square. Then tourism resumed with the Museum of Alsace Life in a quaint gabled canal-side house and (after coffee and fruit tart) the Museum of Modern Art (we selfishly regretted that their Klimt had been returned by the courts to the heirs of the pre-war owner). Then back for the evening train.

We were sorry to wave Ann and Derek off after all their help with the loft and balcony. We'd also enjoyed exploring waterfalls, lakes, vide-greniers, and railway tracks with them. On Sundays the vide-greniers continue, and as we cross the Vosges we often overtake teams of scarlet, yellow and blue cyclists, pedalling furiously up slopes that will next month host the Tour de France. Occasionally it is processions of classic or vintage cars. And of course there are the files of leather clad motorcyclists weaving between lager stops along the peaks. During the week John has completed tiling and grouting the balcony.

And finally, we discovered what we should have done with our fallen apple tree. Last night the neighbouring village of Saulcy commemorated John the Baptist with a huge bonfire - "Feu de Saint Jean". His actual saint's day is 24th June, but nowadays, there seem to be feux de Saint Jean in different villages throughout the summer. You just look out for the most enormous, beautifully constructed pyres towering above the villages. But last night was the first time we'd actually been to a burning. We weren't quite sure what time the bonfire would start, as the newspaper just said "nightfall". All day the centre of the village had been lively with roundabouts, candy-floss stalls, dodgems and hook-a-duck. But as it got dark everyone drifted down to the football pitch, where the local firemen were hosing down the grass around Saulcy's great bonfire. And what a bonfire it was. Built from long tree trunks it towered up in the beautifully constructed shape of the wooden horse of Troy. It's mane, tail and stomach stuffing was all brushwood. It was magnificent. Around 10.30, with the tiniest of children still wide awake and expectant, the great pyre was finally lit. Slowly the flames took hold of the mighty legs and slowly they flared upwards, the tail resisting for a long time. In some areas you hear of people leaping barefoot over the fires to prove their bravery, or walking nine times round to ensure a baby or a marriage. But here a small barrier kept us a safe distance from the flaming horse. And as it burned, you could imagine people at the dawn of time watching the same flaming fires at the solstice. No wonder the Church had to appropriate the festival (the official line is that as Christ's light grew, after Christmas, the light of John the Baptist diminished after the longest day). I'm not sure where the Trojan horse came into it, but Saulcy's was magnificent as it burnt. So maybe on June 24th itself we'll burn our apple branches (but keep the logs) in memory of John's patron saint.

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