

## Adam Lindsay Honsinger

### Silence

I use Max's silver-plated Zippo to ignite a tightly-scrunched section of *The International Herald Tribune*. We have already burned through an Ellery Queen novel and a map of Paris. The smoky flame of newsprint flickers and illuminates the damp, stone wall around us.

I manage to get some work done in that sputtering light — calmly, rationally, taking notes and drawing sketches with the pen and pad that were luckily in my shirt pocket, while Max, seemingly oblivious to the wonder and severity of our predicament, nonchalantly sips his wine. You'd have thought he was sitting in a bistro in Montmartre the way he dabs the corner of his mouth with a stained hanky before extracting a mangled wing from his mouth. They are everywhere — hundreds, possibly thousands of them surrounding us, clinging to the stone walls, resting on our shoulders, crushed under our shoes — an entomological phenomenon, a discovery that would surely earn me the Foundation's Thomas Say Award for systemics, morphology and evolution. But first I have to deal with four facts: one, this species of butterfly was supposed to be extinct; two, every time we move we are in danger of crushing several specimens; three, Max is getting drunk; and four, we are trapped at the bottom of a well.

"These little critters would make a fine salad topping if you ever run out of croutons," Max says, holding the papilionid close to the flame of the tightly-twisted paper. "But they have to be fresh," he adds.

I know he is trying to provoke me; he rarely misses an opportunity.

"So much for extinction," he continues, "I suppose this discovery is going to make you famous in terms of — what do you call it — lepidorera study, not to mention the ecological hullabaloo."

Max and I had been brothers, well, all our lives, and after forty years, I was used to his inability to grasp the gravity of a situation.

"It could have something to do with why whales beach themselves," I speculate out loud, "something to do with a malfunction or interference with their echolocation. Or maybe Verllain was on to something, and in response to some survival instinct they became nocturnal and have been hiding out in dark places like this well for

the last thirty-odd years, navigating at night by planetary alignments.”

“Or, this is a bad trip,” Max counters, “something in the Parisian water, or a rabbit hole — a wonderland nightmare where you hallucinate your greatest fantasies.”

I sigh. It is times like these when it is difficult to believe that he is my older brother, but I’m still not beyond the childish inclination to return his verbal spars.

“If that were true,” I whisper, “then for you, this would be an Andy Warhol installation and we’d be sitting at the bottom of a giant can of Campbell’s soup.”

“Just be glad I had the good sense to come down after you with my backpack. You know how I get when I’m hungry,” Max adds as he refills his glass and bites into the end of a baguette.

There is no telling when we would be rescued — my cellphone signal is blocked by the circular stone wall. I had tried standing on Max’s shoulders, but we were still about six feet short of the top. Looking straight up from the cold earth floor, the perfect telescopic opening is a beckoning yet inaccessible light at the end of the proverbial tunnel, or as Max more optimistically noted, a romantic full moon, a complement to his afternoon *déjeuner*. With our legs crossed, we have about a foot between us — enough room to picnic, but not enough to sleep, or as Max points out, certainly not enough room to do his daily yoga exercises. Max emits a long monotone “om” as the flame sputters into small, rising orange ashes leaving us once again in the thick pitch of darkness.

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I am an entomologist. I study insects, more specifically, I specialize in butterflies — Papilionidae, Lycaenidae, and my favourite, Nymphalidae. I am in France studying the migratory instinct of the *Vanessa cardui* — the Painted Lady — part of a working holiday — slash — determining if my wife is having an affair thing. The frequency of her business trips had recently increased and she seemed to be chronically suffering from a headache whenever I amorously manoeuvred myself towards her side of the bed. And then one day, halfway to work, I realized that I had left my cellphone on the kitchen table and I pulled a U-turn.

She was still home when I got there. And she was back in bed. Neither of us spoke for an uncomfortable length of time.

“Oh, I’ve come down with something,” she said.

The silence split open like tightly-stretched plastic.

“Food poisoning maybe. I decided to stay in bed and sleep it off.”

“Hmmm.”

I leaned up against the doorframe and didn’t say a word. I wasn’t sure how to deal with this growing distance between us. I hated the idea that someone might be giving my wife excuses to lie to me, withdraw into the shady back alleys of secrets, get food poisoning. She had allegedly worked late the night before and had stopped at her favourite sushi joint. I ate her leftovers for breakfast and I felt fine. I scanned the floor for stray socks, an errant tie, a telltale cufflink, or a book of matches with an anonymous phone number. But the room was clean with the exception of a faint musty funk in the air.

“Aren’t you late for work, hon?”

I nodded, restraining the sudden urge to break down into a mess of tears, and tried desperately to channel this vulnerability into manly anger.

Glancing at the calendar as I left, I noticed a flight to Paris booked for the following Thursday for one of her quarterly conferences. I checked my Day-timer, grabbed my cellphone, did some quick juggling with some deadlines, secured a catsitter, booked time off for field research, and called my brother.

Max came along as a consultant. He had lots of time on his hands ever since he made his fortune trading commodities. He’s a big kid really, a voracious reader of crime pulp, always carrying a Discman, rock and roll leaking out of the headphones. He smokes expensive cigars, wears a fedora, and has a closet full of ridiculous T-shirts like, “I’m with stupid,” or “My parents went to Florida and all I got was this stupid T-shirt.” His favourite had a black tie screen-printed on the front. He wouldn’t know a Bordeaux from a Pilsner, but he enjoyed the extravagance his wealth afforded him with a genuine simplicity. He came with me because I needed support, I needed his knowledge of the private-eye genre, but he only agreed after I reminded him that Jim Morrison was buried in Paris.

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We laid out our plan on the plane somewhere over the Atlantic. We would locate the target (my wife), secure lodgings (preferably with a continental breakfast included), and while I went about my business (checking weather patterns, capturing and tracking specimens, measuring flight speed, et cetera), Max would visit the museums, cafés and graveyards of his choice. In the evenings we would rendezvous back at the hotel and establish surveillance on the target's activities.

"The trick," Max said, "is to get a handful of fake business cards so you look legit while impersonating taxi drivers, flower delivery people, room service personnel, and the like. People never question the authority of a business card."

At the Charles de Gaulle International Airport we rented mopeds in order to blend into the traffic. "The helmets will add to the disguise," Max noted. I insisted that Max get rid of the striped shirt, and the early grooming of a pencil moustache, but he absolutely refused to part with the beret.

We had managed to book a room on the third floor of an inconspicuous pension across from the hotel my wife was staying at. Max was committed to the game and spent long hours in the "stake out," his amateur astronomer 14x Tyco telescope pivoting between my wife's window and the hotel lobby.

The first two nights my wife stayed in her room and retired early, her lights going out on the seventh floor at around 10:15 p.m. It was strange watching her like that. I felt both excited and guilty. Part of me knew I was trespassing on her privacy, but this discrepancy was justified by the possibility of her infidelity. I couldn't think of any other way that I could bridge the distance that had grown between us. Truth is, we only spotted her once each evening when she approached the window to draw the curtains. Other than that, it was an exercise in patience and I was tired of losing my traveller's cheques to Max's superior skill when it came to cheating at cards.

On the third day, at Max's insistence, we infiltrated the hotel kitchen by impersonating health inspectors. Max even sampled the crème brûlée simmering on the stove. I failed to see how any of this

would benefit our mission outside of an opportunity for Max to practice his French and pocket some fine Brie from the walk-in. When we left the kitchen we got momentarily lost in the labyrinth of basement halls before finally emerging through an employee entrance into the hotel bar. I then spent ten anxious minutes explaining the risk of being discovered while drinking in the hotel where my wife was staying.

"Je ne pas comprendre," he said.

It took all the strength I had not to strangle him.

I should have known better than to leave Max alone, but he was still sleeping the next morning when my wife broke her routine and jumped in a taxi. I abandoned my fruit cocktail and followed her on the moped — a long, slow, aimless drive through the city along Rue de Rivoli, across Pont-Neuf to the Boulevard Saint Germain before finally stopping in front of the Louvre. The smile on her face was naïf sweet as she leaned in the window to pay the driver, who had obviously taken an exceptionally indirect route. It is strange watching someone you know without them knowing. You notice subtle nuances, their unconscious mannerisms; they seem more relaxed, more natural, and more beautiful. She was no longer my wife, but a thirty-seven-year-old woman alone in Paris; attractive, mysterious, and — for all anyone knew — single. I imagined meeting her for the first time, our shoulders close as we inspected the *Mona Lisa*. Is the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre? I imagined saying something witty and profound, some little-known fact about Leonardo. Our eyes meeting, her lips puckering as they do when she is working on a crossword.

And then she shakes her head. "Sorry," she says, "but I'm married."

I was close enough to see the little lines at the corner of her eyes as she squinted in the direction of the museum. I was close enough to feel my heart skip a beat when I noticed that she wasn't wearing her wedding ring.

When I met up with Max back in our room that evening he was fidgeting with a small bottle of nail polish.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Exhibit A," he said.

He held the little bottle up like a happy housewife promoting a new and improved cleaning product. "I snuck into her room after the

two of you left. Her room is red and very elegant, much nicer than this place. The bathtub is marble, there's two single beds, and if it's any comfort, they're about three feet apart," he said. "How was your day?"

"What the fuck, Max?" I couldn't contain myself. "Did you go through her underwear drawer too? This is my wife, remember." Despite the circumstances, I felt that my wife's bedroom, even if it was a hotel, was my bedroom as well. Max was unfazed.

"It's a clue," he said.

"That's unprofessional," I scolded. "And besides, what if she misses it? Tomorrow we'll hand it to the concierge. Tell them you found it in the elevator."

"It's called *Deception* blue," he said, tossing the bottle on the bed.

I couldn't sleep that night. Maybe I was sobering up from the jealousy, because I was beginning to feel foolish. I unscrewed the lid of the nail polish, dabbed a bit on the pinky of both hands, and blew on them as I had seen my wife do. The hard edge of my anger softened, my shoulders dropped. I felt like a dandy, like Oscar Wilde, or Ziggy Stardust. *Deception* blue is metallic, a deep rare shade, hard to compare to anything in the natural world, except maybe the colour of eyes, my wife's eyes. I remembered being struck by them when we first met, and I wondered when, at what moment, I stopped seeing how incredible they are. I examined my fingers by the window. I'd never seen her wearing anything this extravagant. Not since we were dating. Back when her hair was auburn, black clothes offset with tartan accessories in honour of her Scottish heritage, her ears pierced seven times. But she lost that tinge of an accent, no longer drinks beer, rarely wears nail polish, and when she does it's usually something conservative and red, not too bright, something to complement her lipstick. Was this part of some secret disguise, a part of her personality that she couldn't share with me? From our third floor perspective I couldn't really make out what was happening in her room, so I was left to the cruel and vivid insecurity of my imagination.

I glanced down at the dark, empty street: the geranium boxes in the windows, parked cars, the tilted chairs on café patios. The sky was overcast, no stars, no moon, and on the seventh floor, second from the left, there was still no sign of my wife.

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I was dozing in the chair, despite the rhythmic saw of Max's snoring, when he awoke suddenly with an epiphany.

"It's a woman." Max was on his feet, even in the dark I could see that his boxers were twisted and riding low, his hair comically astray.

"She's sleeping with a woman. That explains the nail polish."

Tears welled in my eyes, but I pretended that I was asleep, increasing the volume of my breathing. The pain and longing in my chest was more than I could bear. I couldn't have that conversation. It didn't matter if it was a woman or a man; the point was that I wasn't sure I wanted to know the truth. If I didn't say anything, I wouldn't be part of this anymore. I wanted to go back to the oblivion of ignorance. Silence was a way of not participating. It excluded me from the situation, gave me immunity from what might be revealed. As long as there was silence, there was room to speculate, and in the safety of non-participation there was the possibility of a happy outcome.

Max climbed back into bed and I heard him tug the covers up and turn to face the wall.

"Did you ever think that it might be your fault?" he said.

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I felt an overwhelming sense of embarrassment and sadness as I watched the morning sun melt the ice cubes in my juice, congeal the marmalade on my croissant. Max had his nose buried in a French newspaper. He was ignoring me and I knew I owed him an apology.

"Okay, it's over." I said. "I give up." Whoever it was she was sleeping with — man or woman — could have her. I probably didn't deserve her anyway.

She referred to my work as another woman on more than one occasion, but this remark was usually followed by a nervous laugh. Maybe there were clues, attempts to hint at the early stages of her affair. Perhaps they were only flirting back then, exchanging marital grievances. Maybe she wanted to get caught so that once and for all we could deal with the things we couldn't seem to say. But I missed the cues. "Yes," I would counter on such social occasions, "I'm in love with Queen Alexandra," a reference to my favourite butterfly.

“But don’t worry,” I would add, “she’s extinct.” And that’s how I was treating our marriage vows, like some slightly humorous memory — a precious thing of the past.

“Take the rest of the day off.” I told Max. “I need time to think. Go visit your grave.”

The wall of newspaper between us crumpled. “No, no, God knows you need me now more than ever.”

When I decided to call her on my cell, I was standing in a field in Montrouge just on the outskirts of the city plotting the flight direction of a cluster of red admirals on a rose graph. Max was lying on his back looking at the clouds through the wrong end of my binoculars, “Love Me Two Times” muted and tinny, hissing out of the headphones. I was feeling calm, rehearsing my nonchalant greeting before actually dialing. One last ray of hope pivoting on the simple possibility of whether she would mention visiting the Louvre, share something personal, tell me what it was like to stand before the *Mona Lisa*. And if she could manage this intimacy, I would ask her to come home. A man’s voice answered the phone.

“Who’s this?” I asked.

There was a stutter, and then some rustling on the end of the line, and then my wife’s voice, high and flustered. I could feel the distance between us, the distance between everyone close to me. I felt a wave of hopelessness. And in that pregnant moment of silence I couldn’t decide if I was sad or angry. And once again I couldn’t bring myself to say anything meaningful. I just held the phone to my ear and listened to the drawn out pause, the live connection of silence between us.

And then it happened.

At first I thought it was a trick of light, lack of sleep maybe. A flicker of iridescent wing, a sparkle of blue like the swatch of my painted little fingernails came to rest on the lip of a milk thistle not more than two yards away. I had to remind myself to breathe. My heart pounded, my hands grew sweaty. The blue markings on the tips of each wing create a sparkling effect when flying in the sunlight. A wingspan of fifty-two to sixty millimetres, feeds on grape vines and soft fruits, migrates from Morocco in the spring, progeny returns south in autumn — extinct. My wife’s amorous rendezvous was eclipsed by the impossible. I turned off the phone and slowly

withdrew my guide to be sure, but there was no mistaking *Papilio deceptis*, otherwise known as the Translucent Swallowtail.

There have been no recorded sightings since 1972. The Translucent Swallowtail is arguably the most beautiful and unique of its whole genus. The last reported sighting was by a young amateur collector by the name of Casper Verllain who compared it to the cross-section of a sapphire. Registered on the Red List since the mid 1960s, Verllain claimed to have chanced upon a cluster in a mine near Bordeaux. Having worked underground for the better part of his youth, he had extracted precious stones from deep and dark places, but never had he seen such a natural and exquisite wonder. Glimpsed on the wing, indeed it resembled the fractures of light caught in a rare stone, and when at rest the simplicity of its design made it a unique and breathtaking specimen. Each facet refracts the object on which it is perched, creating a kaleidoscopic effect on the fragmented surface. Verllain was seventeen, barely literate, and, despite the fact that his diary descriptions and sketches were extremely detailed and accurate, Verllain and his sighting are largely held in the field with as much credibility as the Loch Ness monster.

It took all the concentration I could muster to keep from collapsing into the grass. I couldn’t begin to express the personal and intimate depth of this occurrence. I started scribbling, recording cloud cover, temperature, details of wing, thorax and abdomen, latitude and longitude — my hand shaking as I wrote. When the specimen alighted from its perch, I took flight and followed it over a stone wall, through a stand of alders, and into the courtyard of an abandoned farmhouse where it came to rest momentarily on the edge of a well. I approached slowly, net at the ready. I paused. It paused. I tested the wind, raised the net, but it evaded my first approach, fluttered erratically in the light broken into rays by the surrounding trees, changed direction in haphazard zigzags, adjusted to imperceptible air currents, and then, nightmare of nightmares, it disappeared down into the shadowy darkness.

I had no idea how long I was unconscious, but I suppose I was lucky the well was dry. It was pitch black. I closed my eyes and focused on each part of my body to determine what hurt the most. Three fingers were badly shredded on both hands; they had done little to impede

my descent once my Birkenstocks had lost their footing. My new prescription frames held up to the fall very well, and despite a mild headache, so had I. That is, until Max came down after me.

"I jumped," he said matter-of-factly. His voice sort of echoed in the dark.

"What, no hesitation, no investigation, no assessment whatsoever?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I saw your backpack up there. I called down to you but there was no answer," he said. "Jesus Christ, I thought you were dead for sure."

I was torn between Max's selfless concern for my well-being and the obvious repercussions of his choice to follow me into the well instead of going for help.

"Holy shit, Max!" I shouted. "I just can't trust you to do anything right."

It wasn't until Max had lit one of his foul smelling cigars that we noticed the butterflies. The walls were literally breathing with *Papilio deceptis*, the ground a writhing mess of wounded and dead.

"You don't trust anybody," Max sighed.

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Max removes his shoes and opens a second bottle of red while I perform an autopsy on a dead but undamaged specimen.

"Maybe she's having an affair with an etymologist and the whole thing is a simple typographical misunderstanding — etymologist, entomologist — get it?"

Max is drunk, but at least he is talking to me again. I start thinking about my wife for the first time since the phone call. Max and I have a plane to catch in nine hours. I imagine the conversation when I get home, me leaning up against the doorframe of our bedroom, dangling the blue bottle between my fingers. Her tell-tale skin, a subtle red flush of guilt.

Silence.

"Okay, now what?"

Silence.

"Say something," she would demand. "It's like you don't give a shit."

Her guilt would need the climax that my silence denied her. I would refuse to break, to allow her the power of betrayal. I imagined

my wife with her knees pulled up, the sheets held in clenched fists under her chin. "We don't talk anymore."

"That's it," Max says, "nothing left to burn." Our eyes meet and even he who was so oblivious seems a little worried.

We watch the little yellow ashes rise up towards the circle of light.

"Now what?" he asks, a voice in the darkness.

I had made a clumsy discovery, the result of a series of misguided actions. What I would do with this information would drastically affect my career, but for some reason at the bottom of a well, this thought left me feeling empty.

"When we were kids," I say, "I used to be afraid of the dark. I remember hearing you whisper my name but I wouldn't answer. I'd just lie there in bed pretending I was asleep, because if I answered you, whatever it was that was hiding in the darkness would know where I was. And in the morning I felt embarrassed because the light made my fear seem ridiculous."

I hear the thud of air as he finishes gulping straight from the bottle, the glass abandoned in the inky blackness.

"I remember," he says. "I was afraid of the dark too, but I just wanted to let you know that I was there."

I want to reach out and touch his shoulder, to thank him. But instead I withdraw into the darkness, into the quiet of contemplation, into the thick comfort of it, the years vaporizing into meaninglessness, the darkness folding into itself until we are kids again, alone listening to the mysterious sounds of unseen things, frightened and fascinated, waiting to be saved by the morning light.

I imagine the butterflies carrying us out, their tiny tarsals hooked into the knit of our clothes, thousands of wings in unison lifting our bodies slowly into the air. We rise up in a swirling thermal, engulfed in a cloud of extinct butterflies. I imagine that we are weightless, rising up toward the heavens until we are high above the well, gazing out at the countryside, the vineyards to the south, Paris to the north, home to the west. And I smile when I see a little boy prop his bike on its kickstand, nudge the backpack leaning against the well with his shoe, and then call down into the darkness.

"I love you." The words come out pointy, jumbled, each letter scratching the back of my throat. I can't see him in the darkness,

but I know he is awake. I can hear him breathing. Max doesn't say anything, and I am glad. It was good to speak those words to him, let them linger in the air. I can hear Max shift his weight, I can feel the comfort of his presence, and I wonder if I had ever been so kind to him before. But more than this, without diminishing the meaning in my declaration, I know, and I think that he knows it too, that I am really only practising for when I get home. )))