

## Snakes

From a distance it sounded like English, so he listened. English is insect-like, thick bits and thin bits, but French is snake-like, slithering from one thickness to another, sometimes darting between sounds like a quivering tongue. Those snakes were the good ones. The bad ones were in his head, heavy uncomfortable reptiles shifting position as he walked along the Boulevard des Forges while his thoughts stayed behind in the waiting room of the Trois Rivières soins intensifs, as near as they'd let him get to her. Images of her unconscious and of her only days before, round and round like a writing ball of angry cobras. The writhing continued even when he was free of the images of the accident and the hospital, uncomfortable large presences that had to change position every few minutes, as if held cramped inside his skull, rolling and twisting as he walked through the rain to the hotel each evening, for a lonely meal and an anxious night.

You don't hear much English in Trois Rivières, so you notice it when you do. He hurried to catch up with the two men, just out of curiosity, till they turned into a café. He followed them in, ordered an Americano, and sat drinking it and smoking a cigarette - almost everyone else was - near enough to the two men to hear and not so near that it was obvious. But it wasn't English. Wasn't French either, didn't have the darting smoothness of French. Perhaps it was Dutch, something like Frisian, with knobby bumps sticking out like English, familiar until you try to understand it. One of the men spoke rapidly and fluently, and the other replied with single syllables. But that didn't make meaning of it. There was something comfortably engrossing in hearing the assertions and replies, though. He remembered a game his mother and he used to play, when they had long conversations in nonsense words with declarations and protests and concessions, all as a kind of jabbering duet.

Another day, another return, with a heavier heart. This time the two were already in the café, though he could only see their outlines through the haze. Only one was doing the pretend talking thing. The other was moving his hands, making the occasional grunt, and looking at the first, giving encouraging and topic-changing glances. It was as if the hand-moving one was calling for the words to be thrown to him, then showing when he had them and when he wanted more. He thought of a guy with flashlights guiding planes on the deck of an aircraft carrier; he thought of a baseball catcher signalling to the pitcher.

At first he wanted to interrupt them, perhaps even try some of this strange speech himself. But he stopped himself, and just sat, knowing that it was happening but not even wondering what it was that they were throwing around. He began to think about what had happened to her, what was being done to her now, what it might be like to be her, what her future might be. Again, again. He stopped; he let them do the signalling and replying, and he watched the shadows and the smoke. After a while he remembered where he should be going, and walked back to the hotel. He was at the door when he felt the snakes in his brain. They were still there, still fat and venomous, but they lay motionless, fading and reappearing rather than thrashing around.

He dreamed that he saw the talkers that night. He was in the café trying to order an orange juice but the girl at the counter couldn't understand what he was saying, and when he pronounced *orange* very carefully she pointed out the window to the storm outside. "Americano" he said finally, giving up. "Canadiana" she corrected him, or seemed to, and reaching under the counter gave him a lemonade in a tall glass. He sipped the lemonade, which was extremely sour, and sat down. The two men suddenly had always been at the table opposite him, but they were not doing their talking thing. He leaned across to the signalling one, who brushed him aside and looked at the pitching one, who now always had been to the right beside him. He began

talking to the pitching one, and told him all about her disaster in Trois Rivières and how he spent all his days waiting, hoping for the impossible.

Third café visit. He sat for half an hour but the men were not there. He walked slowly through the streets in the fading light and the drizzle. He found them in a park, or rather a few trees and a bench near the old port, one of them on a bench and the other facing it from a couple of feet to the left. He walked right up to the bench and sat beside the man there, pretending to take no notice of either. He really wasn't noticing them. He saw in the river the light from the setting sun shine through a gap in the clouds to illuminate a cloud in the east. He knew that someone in front of him and slightly to the left was doing something like talking to someone right beside him. But he didn't pay attention to it. He just let it happen. He noticed how quiet it was. Both men were using their hands. Sometimes one seemed to be mouthing sounds to the other, but gradually that became gentler and miniature until there was none of it. It occurred to him that one was teaching the other sign language, but he wasn't sure who was the teacher and who the learner. He didn't try to make sense of the conversation, or whatever it was, but sat as night came over them. Then it was dark and he left.

On the way back, the exchange between the two men stayed with him. Silent, back and forth, gentle and probing. He remembered his dream, and imagined that the one was repeating all he had said to the other. Their hands were vivid in his mind and he turned his dream report to the pitcher into gestures that were thrown across to the signaller. He moved slowly and it took him half an hour to the door of his hotel. By that time the words had gone and all he could think of were the two men's hands, telling his story. He opened the door and in the bright yellow light of the lobby he felt the absence of snakes, felt the open space in his head where they had been. The memories and fears were still there, still vivid, not writhing, waiting to be thought. His first tears came then.

© Adam Morton 2011