

vladimir

An old guy with reading glasses and a brown jacket. Wore a tie at breakfast; her parents said he was Estonian, famous for something. Every morning he would leave the hotel with a big net under his arm. Then he would come back and talk a lot at lunch, though the words were too big for her. He spent the afternoons in his room writing, the metal insect sound of his typewriter dripping into the hallway. Someone had to tell her what a typewriter was. At dinner he talked a lot too, and the parents gazed at him with admiration. Sometimes after dinner he would show her his butterflies, pinned in rows in albums. They looked like Jesus in the old wooden churches her parents visited. He liked talking to her, describing the butterflies, the people at mealtimes, the flowers in the fields, with the same careful pauses before his words. Not all of them were big words. He never noticed that she did not speak back.

One day her parents were taking her swimming at a lake several miles from the hotel. They stopped the car when they saw the old guy in a field, swinging his net near a hedge. A chance to see him catching them, they said, you'll tell people about this years from now. He scowled, and pointed to a green and orange shape fluttering nearby. A rare one. No one has ever caught one of them. He tried again with the net, came near, and cursed. Again. Almost that time but not quite. She walked towards the rare one, straight to it as you would to a friend, reached out a hand, held the palm flat till it settled, then cupped the other hand gently over it. He swooped with his net, and she opened her hand for the rare one to flutter sideways away into the hedge. The old guy flailed around with his net and she stood a few feet away with her hand out till the rare one came near, then cupped around it again. The old guy swooped his net down and over her head so she couldn't get away, but she opened her hand again and the rare one slid off, almost as if it had slipped through the holes in the net. She began to giggle and the old

guy began to stamp and steam. He looked like one of those funny trains they have here. Her parents took her swimming.

Next day at breakfast he didn't have a tie. He spoke to her first, told her a story about a mushroom that turned into a house in the moonlight. Charming, said the parents. He wanted to take her swimming, and the parents said yes yes how good for her. So off they went, with a driver in front and them in the back with his arm around her. Yuk. Except that he said to stop at the field with the hedge because they need a break for some cake. She ate the cake and then saw the rare one. Palm, cup, net, release, curse. Palm, cup, net, release, curse. Oh dear it's too late to go swimming, too much cake and butterflies. Perhaps tomorrow.

She didn't go down to supper that evening. She didn't want to see him. Instead she walked along the hallway, back and forth till she noticed his door was ajar. She got her crayons from their room and tiptoed in. There was the scrap book, with its faint smell of formaldehyde. The last page had no crucified butterflies, but a lot of writing about the rare one, and when he had seen it. Just him alone. She took her crayons and drew it, green and orange. Then a few more. She closed the book and went back to their room.

Oh he was mad. He said they should buy him a new book, and the whole collection was ruined. Worth thousands, but of course it's the insult to science that hurts. So they decided to leave, her parents very grim and confused. He was in the lobby as the taxi came for them. The parents shook his hand, because that's what grown ups do, adult about it. Come on Dolores, we should go now. She smiled at him and waved. A little flutter of green and orange slid sideways from her hand into the air.