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Opening Extract from...

Black Water Lilies

Written by Michel Bussi

Translated from the French by Shaun Whiteside

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Black Water Lilies

MICHEL BUSSI

Translated from the French by Shaun Whiteside

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Three women lived in a village.

The first was mean, the second a liar, and the third an egotist.

Their village bore the pretty name of a garden. Giverny.

The first lived in a big mill on the banks of a stream, on the Chemin du Roy; the second occupied an attic flat above the school, Rue Blanche Hoschedé-Monet; the third lived with her mother, in a little house with the paint flaking off the walls on Rue du Château d'Eau.

They weren't the same age. Not at all. The first was over eighty, and a widow. Almost. The second was thirty-six and had never deceived her husband. Yet. The third was nearly eleven and all the boys in her school wanted her to be their girlfriend. The first dressed always in black, the second put on make-up for her lover, the third plaited her hair so that her tresses flew out behind her in the wind.

All three were quite different. But they had something in common, a secret. All three dreamed of leaving. Yes, of leaving Giverny, the famous village that compels swarms of people to travel across the entire world just to stroll in its gardens for a few hours. Because of the Impressionists.

The first woman, the oldest, owned a pretty painting; the second was interested in artists; the third, the youngest, was good at painting. Very good, in fact.

Many would find it strange, wanting to leave Giverny. But these three women viewed the village as a prison – a big, beautiful

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garden, but surrounded by a fence. Like the grounds of an asylum. A trompe-l'oeil. A painting from which you could not escape. The third woman, the youngest, was looking for a father. The second was looking for love. The first, the oldest one, knew certain things about the other two.

But once, for thirteen days, thirteen days only, the gates of the park were opened. The dates were very precise: from 13 May to 25 May 2010. But the rules were cruel – only one of them could escape. The other two would have to die. That was how it was.

Those thirteen days passed like a parenthesis in their lives. Too short. Cruel, too. The parenthesis opened with a murder, on the first day, and finished with another, on the last day. Strangely, the police were only interested in the second woman, the most beautiful; the third, the most innocent, had to carry out her own investigation. The first, the most discreet, was left in peace to keep an eye on everyone. And to kill.

It lasted thirteen days. Long enough for an escape.

Three women lived in a village.

The third was the most intelligent, the second the most cunning, the first the most determined.

In your opinion, which one managed to escape?

The third, the youngest, was called Fanette Morelle; the second was called Stéphanie Dupain; the first, the oldest, that was me.

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PICTURE ONE

Impressions

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DAY ONE

13 May 2010

(Giverny)

Assembly

1

The clear water of the stream is tinted pink, in small threads, like the fleeting pastel shades of water in which a paint brush is being rinsed.

'Neptune, no!'

Further down the stream the colour is diluted and clings to the green of the weeds that hang from the banks, the ochre of the roots of the poplars, the willows. A subtle, faded shade . . .

I quite like it.

Except that the red does not come from the palette a painter has been cleaning in the river, but from the battered head of Jérôme Morval. The blood is escaping from a deep gash at the top of his skull, neat and clearly defined, washed clean by the Ru, a branch of the river Epte, in which his head is now immersed.

My Alsatian approaches, sniffs. I call him again, more firmly this time:

'Neptune, no! Come back!'

I suspect it won't be long before the corpse is found. Even though it's only six in the morning, someone out for a walk will pass by,

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or a painter, or a jogger, someone out collecting snails . . . they will discover the body.

I'm careful not to go any closer. I lean on my stick. The ground in front of me is muddy, there's been a lot of rain the past few days, and the banks of the stream are soft. At eighty-four, I'm not really the right age to pretend I'm a water-nymph, even in such a piffling stream less than a metre wide, half of which used to be diverted to feed the pond in Monet's gardens. (Apparently this is no longer the case – there is an underground pipe which feeds the lily pond these days.)

'Come on, Neptune. Let's keep going.'

I lift my cane in his direction, as if to keep him from poking his snout into the gaping hole in Jérôme Morval's grey jacket. The second wound. Right in the heart.

'Go on, move! We're not going to hang about here.'

I look one last time at the wash house just opposite where I am standing, then continue along the path. It is impeccably maintained. The most invasive trees have been sawn off at the base and the banks have been cleared of weeds. You have to remember, several thousand tourists walk along this path every day. You might pass someone with a pram, or in a wheelchair, an old woman with a cane. Like me.

'Come on, Neptune.'

I make a turn a little further on, at the spot where the brook divides into two branches, cut off by a dam and a waterfall. On the other side you can see Monet's gardens, the water lilies, the Japanese bridge, the greenhouses . . . It's strange, I was born here in 1926, the year of Claude Monet's death. For a long time after Monet's passing, almost fifty years, those gardens were closed, forgotten, abandoned. Today, the wheel has turned again and every year tens of thousands of Japanese, Americans, Russians, and Australians travel round the world just to linger here. Monet's gardens have become a sacred temple, a Mecca, a cathedral . . . In fact, it won't be long before those thousands of pilgrims descend upon us.

I look at my watch. 6.02. Another few hours of respite.

I walk on.

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Between the poplars and the huge butterburs, the statue of Claude Monet stares at me with the malicious expression of an angry neighbour, his chin devoured by his beard and his skull concealed by a piece of headgear that vaguely resembles a straw hat. The ivory plinth indicates that the bust was unveiled in 2007. The wooden sign hammered into the ground beside it explains that the master is watching 'the meadow'. His meadow. The fields, from the Ru to the Epte, from the Epte to the Seine, the rows of poplars, the wooded slopes that undulate like soft waves. The magical places he painted. Inviolable . . . Varnished and on show for all eternity.

And it's true – at six in the morning, the place can still be deceptive. I look in front of me at a pure horizon consisting of fields of wheat, of maize, of poppies. But I won't lie to you. For most of the day, Monet's meadow is, in fact, a giant car park. Four car parks, to be precise, clustered around a bitumen stem like a water lily made of tarmac. I think I can afford to say this kind of thing, at my age. I have seen the landscape transform itself, year after year. Today Monet's countryside is just a commercial backdrop.

Neptune follows me for a few metres, and then sets off, running straight ahead. He crosses the car park, pees against a wooden barrier, then lopes on into the field, towards the confluence of the Epte and the Seine. For some reason this little wedge of land between the two rivers is known as Nettles Island.

I sigh and continue on my way. At my age, I'm not going to go running after him. I watch as he scampers away, then circles back, as if he's taunting me. I don't want to call him back yet, it's still early. He disappears once more into the wheat. That's how Neptune spends his time these days – always running a hundred metres ahead of me. Everyone who lives in Giverny knows this dog, but I don't think many people know he's mine.

I walk along the car park and towards the Moulin des Chennevières. That's where I live. I like to get back home before the crowds arrive. The Moulin des Chennevières is by far the most beautiful building in the vicinity of Monet's gardens, and the only one built beside the brook, but ever since they transformed the meadow into fields of metal and tyres, I feel like a species on the

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brink of extinction, a rare animal that has been put in a cage so that inquisitive people can come and have a look. There are only four bridges over the brook to get from the car park to the village, one of which crosses the steam just in front of my house. I feel that I'm besieged until six in the evening. At that hour, the village closes down again, the meadow is given back to the willows and Claude Monet can reopen his bronze eyes, without coughing into his beard at the smell of hydrocarbons.

In front of me, the wind stirs a forest of sea-green wheat, studded with the red pearls of scattered poppies. If someone viewed the scene from the other side, along the Epte, it would inevitably remind them of an Impressionist painting. The harmony of orange tones at sunrise, with just a hint of mourning, the tiniest black speck in the background.

A widow dressed in dark clothes. Me.

A subtle note of melancholy.

I call again: 'Neptune!'

I stand there for a while, savouring the momentary calm, until a jogger arrives. He passes in front of me, headphones jammed in his ears. T-shirt. Trainers. He bursts into the meadow like an anachronism. He is the first of the day to spoil the picture; others will follow. I give him a little nod, he returns it and disappears, the noise from his headphones like the buzzing of an electronic cicada. I see him turn towards the bust of Monet, the little waterfall, the dam. I imagine him running along the brook, he too taking care to avoid the mud at the edge of the path.

I sit down on a bench and wait for what will happen next.

There are still no coaches in the car park when the police van screeches to a halt on the Chemin du Roy, between the wash house and my mill, around twenty paces from the drowned body of Jérôme Morval.

I stand up.

I wonder about calling Neptune one last time but he knows the way home, after all. The Moulin des Chennevières is nearby. I cast one last glance at the police getting out of their vehicle and then I

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leave. I go back to my house. From the fourth floor of my mill you get a much better view of everything that is happening.

And much more discreet.

2

Inspector Laurenç Sérénac begins by marking out a perimeter of several metres around the corpse, attaching a wide orange plastic tape to the branches of the trees above the stream.

The crime scene suggests that this will be a complicated investigation. Sérénac is reassuring himself that his reaction when the call came in to the police headquarters in Vernon was sound; he had set off immediately with three colleagues. Right now, Officer Louvel's chief task is to keep away the rubberneckers who are starting to crowd along the brook. It is incredible, in fact – the village seemed deserted when the police van drove through it, but a few minutes later it was as if the entire population had converged on the murder scene. Because it certainly is a murder. You don't need three years at the police training academy in Toulouse to be sure of that, Sérénac thinks, observing the wound to the heart, the gash in the skull and the head immersed in water. Officer Maury, supposedly the best forensic specialist at Vernon headquarters, is carefully picking out footprints in the ground, just in front of the corpse, and taking a mould of the prints with quick-setting plaster. It was Sérénac who gave him the order to immortalise the muddy ground before they even began to examine the corpse. The man is dead, he can't be saved. Trampling all over the crime scene before everything is bagged and photographed is out of the question.

Inspector Sylvio Bénavides appears on the bridge. He stops to get his breath back. Sérénac had asked him to run along to the village with a picture of the victim, to see if he could get some initial information – especially the identity, if possible, of the murdered man. Inspector Sérénac hasn't been working in Vernon for long, but it didn't take him much time to work out that Sylvio Bénavides was very good at following orders, organising, filing meticulously.

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The ideal deputy, to a certain extent. He suffers, perhaps, from a slight lack of initiative, but Sérénac senses this may stem more from an excess of timidity than a lack of competence. And the man is devoted – yes, devoted – to his job as a policeman. Because, in fact, Bénavides must view his superior, Inspector Laurenç Sérénac, fresh from police academy in Toulouse, as some kind of unidentified police object . . . Sérénac was dropped in as boss of the Vernon station only four months ago, without even having reached the rank of detective chief inspector, so were they really expected to take seriously – here, north of the Seine – a cop who wasn't yet thirty, who talked to both criminals and colleagues with his southern, Occitan accent, and who already approached each crime scene with an air of disillusioned cynicism?

Sérénac isn't sure. People are so stressed up here. Not just in the police. It's even worse in Vernon, a large Parisian suburb that has spilled into Normandy. The border with the Île-de-France passes through Giverny, a few hundred metres away, on the other side of the main river. But people here think of themselves as Norman, not Parisian. And they're proud of it. It's a kind of snobbery. Someone once told him, in all seriousness, that more people had been killed at the Epte, that ridiculous little stream that had once defined the border between France and the Anglo-Norman kingdom, than had died at the Meuse or the Rhine.

'Inspector . . .'

'Call me Laurenç, for Christ's sake . . . I've told you that before.'

Sylvio Bénavides hesitates. It hardly seems the fitting moment to discuss it, given that Inspector Sérénac is talking to him in front of officers Louvel and Maury, about fifteen rubberneckers and a blood-drenched corpse.

'Erm. Yes . . . fine, chief. I think we'll be walking on eggshells . . . I had no trouble identifying the victim. Everyone here knows him. He's a local bigwig, apparently. Jérôme Morval. A well-known ophthalmologist, with a surgery on Avenue Prudhon in Paris, in the 16th arrondissement. He lives in one of the nicest houses in the village, 71 Rue Claude Monet.'

'He lived . . . ' Sérénac corrects him.

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Sylvio takes it on the chin. He looks like someone who's just been called up to the Russian front. A civil servant who's been seconded to the sticks – or a cop transferred to Normandy. The image makes Sérénac smile. He's the one who ought to be sulking, not his deputy.

'OK, Sylvio,' Sérénac says. 'Good job. Not worth stressing about it for the time being. We'll examine his CV later on.'

Sérénac unhooks the orange tape.

'Ludo, have you finished with the prints? Can we come on over now?'

Ludovic Maury nods, then moves away, carrying various plaster moulds. As he approaches, Inspector Sérénac's feet sink into the mud. He clings with one hand to the branch of the nearest ash tree, and with the other, points at the inert body.

'Come here, Sylvio. Take a look. Don't you think it's strange, the way this crime's been committed?'

Bénavides steps forward. Louvel and Maury turn round as well, as if this were their superior's entrance exam. They are keen to see him in action.

'Look at the wound, there. Whatever it was went straight through the jacket right to the heart, so clearly Morval was killed with a sharp weapon. A knife or something of the kind. Even without consulting forensics, we may hypothesise that this was the cause of death. Except that if we examine the tracks in the mud, we will notice that the body was dragged several metres to the edge of the water. Why take all that trouble? Why move a corpse? Then, the murderer picked up a rock, or another heavy object, and bashed in the top of his skull and his temple. Again, why would anyone do that?'

Louvel almost raises a timid hand.

'Perhaps Morval wasn't dead?'

'Perhaps,' says Sérénac. 'But given the size of the wound to the heart, I don't think so . . . And if Morval were still alive, why not simply stab him again where he lay? Why move him and then stave his skull in?'

Sylvio Bénavides says nothing. Ludovic Maury studies the site. There is a rock at the edge of the brook the size of a large football,

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covered with blood. He has taken every possible sample from its surface. He attempts a reply.

'Because there was a rock nearby? He grabbed the weapon closest to hand . . .'

Sérénac's eyes shine.

'I don't agree with you there, Ludo. Take a good look at the scene. There's something even stranger. Look at the stream, twenty metres along. What do you see?'

Inspector Bénavides and the two officers look along the banks. They haven't the faintest idea what Sérénac is getting at.

'There *are* no other rocks!' Sérénac says triumphantly. 'There isn't a single other rock along the whole length of the river. And if you study this one more closely, there is no doubt that it too has been moved here. There is no dry earth stuck to the rock, the crushed grass underneath it is fresh . . . What is it doing here, this providential rock? The murderer must have brought it here; it's blindingly obvious.'

Officer Louvel tries to drive the locals back towards the right bank of the brook, towards the village side, although having an audience doesn't seem to bother Sérénac in the slightest.

'If I may sum up what we know so far,' the inspector continues, 'we can assume the following: Jérôme Morval is stabbed somewhere on the path, a blow that is probably fatal. Then his murderer drags him to the river. Six metres away. Then, as our man is a perfectionist, he digs up a rock from somewhere nearby, something that must weigh not far off twenty kilos, and comes back to crush Morval's skull . . . But it isn't over yet. Observe the position of the body: the head is almost entirely submerged in the stream. Does that position look natural to you?'

'You just said, Chief,' Maury replies, almost appalled. 'The murderer struck Morval with the rock, beside the river. Then the victim slid into the stream—'

'As if by chance,' Inspector Sérénac says ironically. 'No, guys, I'm prepared to take a bet on this. Imagine picking up that rock and smashing Morval's brain in, there, on the bank. And the corpse's head would be found, beautifully submerged in the water at a depth

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of ten centimetres? The chances are less than one in a thousand. Gentlemen, I think the situation is much simpler. We're dealing with the triple murder of a single individual. One, I stab you. Two, I smash your head in. Three, I drown you in the stream . . .'

A rictus grin appears on his lips.

'We're dealing with someone highly motivated. Someone stubborn. And someone very, very angry with Jérôme Morval.'

Laurenç Sérénac turns towards Sylvio Bénavides.

'Wanting to kill him three times wasn't pleasant for our ophthalmologist, but in the end it's better than killing three different people once each, isn't it?'

Sérénac winks at an increasingly embarrassed Inspector Bénavides.

'I don't want to spread panic in the village,' he goes on, 'but nothing about this crime scene seems to have been left to chance. I don't know why, but it almost looks like a composition, staged. As if every detail has been chosen. This precise location, in Giverny. The sequence of events. The knife, the rock, the drowning . . .'

'An act of vengeance?' Bénavides suggests. 'A kind of ritual? Is that what you think?'

'I don't know,' Sérénac replies. 'We'll see . . . So far it doesn't seem to make any sense, but I'm fairly certain that it makes sense to the murderer.'

Louvel continues in his feeble attempt to herd the onlookers back towards the bridge. Sylvio Bénavides remains silent, concentrating, as if trying to sort Sérénac's flood of words.

Suddenly, a brown shadow emerges from the clump of poplars in the meadow, passes under the orange tape and paddles through the mud.

An Alsatian! Officer Maury tries unsuccessfully to hold it back.

The dog merrily rubs itself against Sérénac's jeans.

'Hey,' the inspector says, 'our first witness.'

He turns back towards the locals on the bridge.

'Does anyone know this dog?' he calls.

'Yes,' an elderly man dressed as a painter, with velvet trousers and a tweed jacket, replies immediately. 'It's Neptune, the village dog. Everyone meets him sooner or later. He runs around after the kids

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in the village, the tourists. He's part of the landscape, you might say.'

'Come here, big fellow,' Sérénac says, crouching down to Neptune's level. 'So you're our first witness? Tell me, did you see the murderer? Do you know him? Come and see me later, give me a statement. We still have a bit of work to do here.'

The inspector breaks off a willow branch and throws it a few metres away. Neptune responds to the game. Runs off, comes back. Sylvio Bénavides watches his superior's behaviour with astonishment.

At last Sérénac straightens up again. He takes a while to itemise his surroundings: the cob and brick wash house overlooking the brook; the bridge over the stream and, just behind that, a strange, crooked, half-timbered building, dominated by a kind of four-storey tower. Engraved on the wall is its name: *MOULIN DES CHENNEVIÈRES*. Nothing must be neglected, he notes in a corner of his mind; we'll have to question all potential witnesses, even if the murder was probably committed at around six o'clock in the morning.

'Michel, make the public stand back. Ludo, pass me a pair of plastic gloves; we'll go through the doctor's pockets. We're going to have to get our feet wet if we don't want to move the body.'

Sérénac throws aside his trainers, his socks, rolls his jeans halfway up his calves, slips on the gloves that Officer Maury holds out to him, then walks into the stream barefoot. His left hand holds Morval's body steady while the other searches his jacket. He removes a leather wallet, which he holds out to Bénavides. His deputy opens it and checks through the papers.

No doubt about it, the victim is Jérôme Morval.

Sérénac continues to explore the corpse's pockets. Handkerchiefs. Car keys. Everything passes from gloved hand to gloved hand and ends up in a transparent bag.

'Hang on. What the—'

Sérénac's fingers extract a piece of crumpled card from the outside pocket of the corpse's jacket. The inspector lowers his eyes. It is a simple postcard. The illustration depicts Monet's *Water Lilies*, a study in blue: a reproduction of the kind sold by the

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million throughout the world. Sérénac turns the card over.

The text is short, the letters typed: ELEVEN YEARS OLD. HAPPY BIRTHDAY.

Just below those five words is a thin strip of paper that has been cut out and glued to the card. Nine words, this time: *The crime of dreaming, I agree to its creation.*

The freezing water of the stream suddenly feels like two steel fetters around the inspector's ankles. Sérénac shouts at the onlookers who are crowding around the Norman wash house as if they were waiting for the bus:

'Did Morval have any kids? An eleven-year-old, for example?'

Once again the painter is the quickest to reply:

'No, Inspector. Certainly not!'

Bugger . . .

The birthday card passes into Inspector Bénavides' hand. Sérénac raises his head, looks around. The wash house. The bridge. The mill. The village of Giverny waking up. Monet's gardens, a little further off. The meadow and the poplars.

The clouds clinging to the wooded riverbanks.

The crime of dreaming, I agree to its creation.

He is suddenly convinced that something is out of place in this postcard landscape.

3

High up in the tower of the Moulin des Chennevières, I watch the police. The one wearing a pair of jeans, the boss, still has his feet in the water, the other three are standing on the bank, surrounded by that stupid crowd, nearly thirty people now, who don't want to miss a thing, as if this were a scene in the theatre. Street theatre. Stream theatre, in fact.

I smile to myself. It's stupid, don't you think, making puns to yourself? And am I any less stupid than those rubberneckers just because I'm up here on the balcony? It's the best seat, believe me. I can see without being seen.