

Alice

a short story by James Essinger

That August morning, Ed and I decided to try to reclaim the pond for the carp, assuming they still existed.

The pond was in the park surrounding the family's French country house, the Villa of Sequoias, and was about the length and breadth of an average-sized suburban lawn, though infinitely more mysterious.

The water's surface was almost covered with tiny suffocating platelets of green duckweed, except in many places where a riot of darker green water-lilies, some insolently thrusting star-shaped white flowers a foot into the air, completed an even more merciless stranglehold.

Alice told me that the pond had once been full of carp. She said that her father, Ed, who'd retired about a decade ago, had enjoyed many a pleasant summer afternoon fishing for them.

I was an angler too, though only a casual one, yet what Alice said about the carp captured my imagination at once. Every angler, even an occasional one like me, has a cherished fantasy of discovering a secret pond or lake somewhere full of great, half-mystical, pot-bellied carp or tench which, never fished for, don't fear a baited hook.

But there were no carp visible now in this choked stretch of stagnant water. There was just a sullen hazy silence, occasionally punctuated by the soft plop of a frog as it hopped from one glossy, dark green, oval-shaped lily leaf to another.

Ed and I gazed at the stretch of weed-choked water with dismay.

'The pond's been choked up before but never like this,' Ed said, sadly, shaking his head. I knew it had been almost two months since he was last at the house.

‘The carp must be staying well down,’ he added, ‘if we don’t clear it, they’ll die, even if they aren’t dead already.’

I asked him how deep the pond was.

He glanced at me. ‘Maybe twelve feet in the middle.’

‘Then they could be pretty big,’ I said. ‘I wonder if they’re still alive?’

I was an angler myself, so I knew something about carp: that they can survive in ponds with low oxygen levels, though in those conditions they become inactive. I was sure that if any carp were in a pond as choked as this one was, they’d be living on borrowed time.

Ed and I both agreed on that. So we were full of resolve as, right away, trying to find suitable pond-clearing tools, we started exploring the several large outbuildings of the house. Ed soon spotted a length of old rope, maybe eight or nine metres long. The question was: what could we attach to it?

The answer was a discarded rusty iron sink - evidently designed for a small room, for the sink was barely eighteen inches wide. I found it in a murky corner of one of the outbuildings.

Ed had no idea where it came from. ‘It must have been there since long before we bought the house,’ he said. The sink, complete with taps, seemed precisely the kind of jagged, irregularly-shaped device that could be hurled out at the end of the rope and retrieved bearing (I hoped) a harvest of duckweed, water-lily leaves, humiliated star-shaped flowers and looping tendrils of roots and stems.

In his working life, Ed had been a commercial artist, and an art director for some of London’s leading advertising agencies. Nowadays, one of his favourite retirement pastimes, as well as fishing, was producing imitations of old masters so authentic they could have been sold at Sotheby’s.

Or at least they could if Ed hadn’t, with scrupulous honesty, signed his works using his own name instead of ‘Vincent’, or the names of any of the other

great artists whose efforts furnished Ed with an original to copy and - in many cases it seemed to me - even to improve upon.

The walls inside the house were adorned with Ed's paintings. The family - modest, loveable, unpretentious - never called their house a château, though it certainly looked like one to me.

As for Ed's paintings, they so uncannily resembled the originals that during my week at the house I frequently found myself doing a double-take as I climbed the stairs or explored the long, winding corridors.

I mention the paintings because I discovered that August morning that Ed didn't confine his inventive ingenuity to his art. At first, after I'd tied the sink to the end of the rope, swung it a few times to build up momentum, hurled it out as far as I could into the pond, let it sink what I judged was a couple of feet, then tugged it back, the results were a disappointment. The harvest was nothing more than a few broken stems and crushed flowers.

Then Ed suggested tying to the sink the multi-spiked business end of an old wooden-handled garden rake, specially beheaded for the purpose.

His idea worked brilliantly. This time the choking lilies were no match for the strange sink/rake hybrid, and now a wonderfully satisfying mess of leaves, smashed flowers and vast amounts of root stock came back with it. I unpicked all the debris and Ed and I loaded it all onto a wheelbarrow. Once the barrow was full, Ed wheeled it away and dumped the contents in a hollow by the base of one of the nearby tall sequoia trees in the park.

I was under strict instructions from Alice not to allow him to indulge in any strenuous activity, so despite Ed's frequent pleas to chuck the sink/rake contraption out himself, I suggested it might be best if we kept to our pre-arranged job demarcation. Of course I said this gently. It was, after all, his house, and his pond.

The Villa of Sequoias is a large, square-shaped house - four storeys high if you include its extensive dark basement with its numerous mysterious rooms that are largely unused apart from the one that contains the heating system and another accommodating the laundry machines. The external brickwork, which alternates russet and cream-coloured bricks, give the house a jaunty look, and the sharply-roofed skylights add to this effect.

The house is just outside Noyant d'Allier, a village in the quiet, lovely, pastel-coloured agricultural region of central France called the Bourbonnais.

The river that flows close by Noyant is the Allier, known to the Romans at the time of their occupation of Gaul as the *Elaver*. The Romans found the river's long, broad, sluggish stream vital for transportation.

Today, a hundred generations later, the Allier is just as sluggish, broad and meandering. Largely abandoned as a means of transport, it infuses the Bourbonnais with indolent memories of the past and creates a wealth of opportunities for riverside restaurants and delightful walks.

I'd never set eyes on such a place as the Villa of Sequoias in my life, at least not from inside the gates. To be spending a week there, not having won a lottery jackpot beforehand, seemed like a dream, though without a dream's nonsensical stream of *non sequiturs*, and still less without the horrible finale when you wake up in the morning and realise that a dream was, heartbreakingly, all it was.

That I was visiting the family's French mansion at all stemmed from an enormously lucky accident: not the winning of a lottery jackpot, but something even better.

I'd met Alice the previous winter at a party in the surreally lovely Kentish town of Tenterden, in the heart of the Kentish Weald. I'd always regarded Tenterden as more like a 1950s film set than anything real. I only knew the town at all because you have to drive through it on the way from my home town of

Canterbury to the Sussex seaside resort of Hastings, where I often went for the sea air in the summer and the chess in the winter.

Alice was a teacher of French in a school for kids aged from eleven to eighteen. She had a gift for inspiring her pupils. Under her tutelage many kids, who started off thinking of their French lessons as an uncool nuisance, wound up loving the language and the country.

Alice was passionate about animals, her family and friends, music, movies, cooking, dancing, travel and France. She loved wearing purple. Her clothes sense was divine. She had long, rather unruly, blond hair. She was full of life, beautiful, easy-going, thoughtful and kind, and she was socially at ease in any situation, which I knew wasn't true of me at all.

I was a professional writer, and for the past four years I'd been working harder than I'd ever worked at anything to try to learn how to write fiction. That goal had been my practically only dream.

Finally, about a month before I met Alice, I'd at last sold a novel. Yet in truth my spirit was marooned, and I was lonely despite the friends I had. I no longer wanted to immerse myself in the free life of the artist, but wished to be human again. And when I met Alice, I was sure I'd found someone I could be human again with.

For a few months, months I shall never forget, we were passionate friends. Then, inexplicably it seemed to me, her feelings began to change.

Yet we knew each other so well, and we cared about each other, and we'd always said we'd keep on being friends whatever happened, and so when she broke up with me, we did stay friends.

By the time Alice invited me to stay with her and Ed and her younger sister Harriet at the family's French house, Alice's love for me was gone, though not yet mine for her. She knew, I think, how hard I'd been working on my writing, and that I'd gone back to working even harder at it after things ended between us.

We made our rendezvous at the Eurotunnel terminal on a chilly August morning. I hadn't seen Alice for a month. It felt good to be with her again, and to be sitting next to her in the cosiness of the car. I would be staying at the family's house for a week. I could see Alice every day.

We reached Calais, then travelled on further south, into the heart of that dream of all writers: the sun-blessed southern lands with their olives, their vines, and their promise of long warm afternoons for creating art and for having conversations with the friends of one's soul.

Yes, we were heading south, and far away from *La fatigue du Nord*, an expression whose provenance I don't know but which seems admirably to sum up so much about England that one often wants to escape from, including the disappointing weather; the endless obsession with money; the English tendency to over-verbalise pessimism; and the elevation of crassness and selfishness to a sort of new religion.

These are all things one wants to flee from when one feels less inclined to remember all the great qualities of England: such as the creativity and energy of the people; the splendour of the countryside; the beauty and wonder of the old towns, and the way things, generally, work pretty well considering what the alternatives could be.

So southwards we went, and ahead of us the bright yellow haze of the southern sun to which we were heading beckoned us along the neat, well-ordered and relatively empty French roads. It took us six hours to get from Calais to Noyant. As we drove, the car's air-conditioning made us oblivious to the increasing heat outside, so that when we finally pulled up near our destination, to admire the view of the Allier by a riverbank restaurant in Villeneuve-sur-Allier, the heat hit us like the remote blast of an H-bomb.

Ed and Harriet were already at the house when we arrived. On my very first morning there, a Sunday, and the day before Ed and I conducted our maudlin inspection of the pond, I went out into Noyant before breakfast and walked to the

boulangerie. The silent village reminded me of the setting for the film *Chocolat*. I headed round the church whose front doors had been trustingly left wide open. I passed by the small, closed *Petit Casino* grocery shop, went beyond the abandoned mine workings and then headed past a surprising park of pagodas installed as a cure for homesickness by Vietnamese families twenty years earlier who'd found a refuge here in Noyant, as in a sense I had.

No longer chained to my desk, I felt freer than an albatross, a man of the world, who could flit between England and France as any free-born spirit might, with little to worry about except exactly why Alice had finished with me - something I thought about very often - and how many baguettes I should buy for the loveable, unpretentious English family who had been so kind as to invite me to their French house and the park that surrounded it.

During the long August day that Ed and I spent clearing the pond, I was seized with a strange passion to make the pond so well again that nothing, *nothing* would stop the carp from having a chance of life.

I worked like a man pursuing something - some dream, some love, or perhaps some dream of love - even until the late afternoon sun began to fade and darkness started to fall. I knew I would only be happy with the results when there wasn't a single lily left in the pond.

Earlier, when it was still light, Alice sometimes came and watched us for a while. I remember one particular time, when Ed had disappeared with his laden wheelbarrow and I was again busy clearing the pond. Alice was watching me, with what seemed to me careful attention, from some distance away, close enough for me to see her face, but too far for me to tell whether her expression was a half-smile or a half-frown.

So I didn't know whether she really approved of my gusto in helping Ed clear the pond or thought I was being excessive, a vice of which she'd sometimes accused me when we were going out.

Finally, when it was almost dark, Ed and I completely finished clearing the pond of lilies. The duckweed was reduced, too, as loads of it had come in with the harvest of lily-plants. Now, most of the pond consisted of patches of clear bright water.

Every morning that week I breakfasted with Ed, Alice and Harriet on a terrace overlooked by the largest sequoia of all, a 200-year-old eighty-foot tree that seemed a strange kind of mystical sentinel, watching over the family. Every day after breakfast, I went to inspect the pond and see if I could spot any carp. But so far I had seen nothing.

Alice and I were leaving the Villa of Sequoias at lunchtime on Sunday. We had had a good week together, though only as friends. I knew now what I had, in truth, known for a month but hadn't really allowed myself to accept: that the relationship was finished for ever.

That last morning, when I went to see the pond, I'd given up any hope of seeing any life there besides the usual morose frogs. By now I was sure that the efforts Ed and I had devoted to the pond had been unrequited.

But at that moment, as I watched in amazement, I saw two dark brown dorsal fins, moving along in parallel next to each other, breaking the surface tension of the water under the weeping willow on the far side of the pond.

Each dorsal fin was about a foot long.

I caught my breath. A carp's dorsal fin is about the third of the length of its body, so the two carp that were staying just below the surface must have been monsters.

I turned round, to call to the family that I'd seen two carp. But I didn't, because Alice was only a few feet behind me. I'd been so absorbed, I hadn't heard her padding softly up toward me.

She was smiling.

'I can't believe it,' she said.

'You saw them? You saw them just now?'

Alice nodded breathlessly. ‘Yes.’

She came to stand next to me. We watched the pond. For a while nothing else happened. Then, on the far right-hand side, an even larger dorsal fin broke the water, and this time for a few moments we saw not only the fin but the great wide head of a carp, a fish that must have weighed close to fifteen pounds.

With a mighty splash, the great carp once more plunged deep.

The pond was alive again.

I glanced at Alice.

‘Why wasn’t I enough for you?’ I murmured.

She said nothing for some moments, then her eyes met mine.

‘You’re too attached to your writing,’ she said, softly. ‘I don’t mean you shouldn’t be, of course you should be; I just mean it’s not helpful when you think other things don’t really matter, such as that how you are in company doesn’t matter. How you are in company does matter to me. There were often times I felt uncomfortable with you.... like when we visited your friends the Richardsons and you ate all the pistachios from the glass dish! Or when you put your foot on the coffee-table that time we were having tea with my aunt and uncle! But those were just two times... there were others as well. I loved your enthusiasm, but not your excessiveness.’

She fell silent.

I thought, briefly, of trying to defend myself. The Richardsons were always ultra-hospitable and I knew they’d have been glad I’d liked the pistachios. As for the time I’d put my foot onto the coffee table, it had just been for a minute or so, and I’d only been wearing my socks.

But I said nothing. I respected Alice, and I was her friend, and so what mattered to her mattered to me. And besides, it was too late now anyway.

‘And it’s not as if that’s only something in the past,’ Alice added, suddenly. ‘You bought ten baguettes a week ago. Ten baguettes, when there are

only four of us! I wasn't going to say anything about this. Ten baguettes, though! You're so excessive!

'But... Harriet said the spare ones can go in the freezer.'

'She was just being polite. They didn't all fit. I've put the ones that didn't into the fridge, but I expect they'll be stale by now.'

Alice looked at me reproachfully, yet also I think with some affection. What I do know is that she looked very beautiful indeed; with the kind of beauty one only sees in a woman one has loved and whom one has lost forever.

Then she murmured: 'You live your life like a... well, like a hand that's always bunched up into a fist. I don't mean you're aggressive of course, I just mean you're so intense. I can't live the way you do. I'm more easy-going than you. And I work hard too; quiet times are very important to me. Now we're just friends, the differences between us don't matter so much. But please...' and for a moment I thought she might be about to cry, though she didn't. Instead, in a whisper, she added, 'let's always be friends.'

'We will. I know we will.'

I knew I didn't need to ask Alice now whether she'd been half-smiling or half-frowning when she'd watched me clearing the pond that time earlier in the week. I knew which one it had been. I also knew that it would have been futile for me to point out that, perhaps, if I'd been doing the job only enthusiastically, rather than excessively, the pond wouldn't have been cleared properly, the oxygen levels would have stayed right down and the carp really might all have perished.

Would it have been worth my while mentioning this, or even that maybe some things *do* need to be done excessively if they're to be done properly. Things like writing a novel that has a chance of doing any justice to your dreams of what it could be, or fighting for a cause you believe in, or caring for what is good, and beautiful, and precious, as Alice was to me? Like I said, I respected Alice, and I

was her friend, and so what mattered to her mattered to me. And besides, it was too late now anyway.

This all happened some time ago. Alice has a new relationship, and is engaged to be married. But we're still good friends, and I never feel anything less than very lucky to have met her. I'm still looking for love, and I hope I'll find it. That's my new dream. And if I do find love again, I won't be too attached to my writing. I'll also try - I really will try my best - to be enthusiastic rather than excessive.

And Ed? Well, I think he's a very lucky man too. He's got a super wife, two beautiful and fascinating daughters, and a house in France with five Van Goghs, three Rembrandts, two Gauguins, a Vermeer and several Monets and Manets on the walls.

Oh... and he has a pond with carp in it. And that summer morning, just before Alice and I left Noyant, the four of us spent twenty minutes feeding pieces of the stale baguettes to the carp.

Obviously hungry after their protracted indolence, they surfaced majestically in great splashless swirls to swallow the pieces of bread.

What I noticed most of all, though, were their long leathery dorsal fins.

Somehow, I couldn't help thinking that they were like the sails of mystical ferry-boats, conveying to the Underworld the souls of the dead.

THE END