

Third Prize outstanding LGBTIQ Short Story competition

French Lessons by Diana King

FRENCH LESSONS

Lesson 2

"Do you have baggage?" the teacher asks.

Ellen looks up from a page of incomprehensible sentences. What a weird question from a woman she's spent only an hour and thirty minutes with. Halfway through the second lesson the teacher tips her head back and to the side and asks, "Do you have baggage?" Her eyelids are at half-mast and her eyes shimmer with humour. Ellen imagines a cigarette between her fingers and ropes of smoke caressing her face; a cloche snugging her bobbed black hair and red red lips leaving traces on the lips of those she kisses.

Ellen's heart rate won't steady. Eloquent, as usual, she says,

"Um.....Baggage?"

"Oui. Baggage."

"Oh. As in. Complications?"

The teacher nods. And smiles. "Yes. As in. Complications."

"Um..."

"As in a... husband ..." A quirk of the lips. "...a.... partner?"

"Oh. Yes, sort of. Back home. It's... complicated."

The teacher nods with an "I see" sort of tone.

"Les enfants? Children?"

Ellen laughs. "No." The teacher nods again. And quirks again. The teacher glances at the text book on the table and lays her hand gently on the cover.

"I have enough for both of us."

"Oh?"

"Quatre. Four boys"

Ellen shudders. "You're right. That's more than enough." That's not accidental motherhood. That's serious mother desire.

Ellen sucks in a breath. "And a husband? I presume?"

The teacher nods again. She looks up and straight into Ellen's eyes. Her gaze moves from eye to eye. "Oui."

Ellen packs all her wishful moments of sexual frisson into a tiny mental box and stuffs it way, way out of mind between the Tony Abbott defenestration package and the Peter Dutton in a leaky boat package.

The teacher gestures broadly taking in all the half-packed boxes around the room. "Do you need help? My sons have a truck, they will move it for you...."

"Oh no. No thank you. Thanks for offering. Them. Um. How old are you?"

No!.. are they?"

"The oldest is thirty one. The youngest, twenty four."

Oh good. Not dependent. Ellen coughs. "So. Where were we?"

"I am trying to teach you how to ask directions and find your way in France."

"Oh. I'm not concentrating."

"I noticed."

Lesson 3

Ellen has syrupy music on the radio. The apartment is orderly around the disorder of packing. Her pulse is visible on the side of her neck. Her legs wobble. That music, what is she doing? She spins on her heel. There is a quick rap on the door and the teacher shoulders her way inside. She's early.

The teacher notices the difference. She looks toward the music player. Her cheeks flush.

"Nice."

Ellen blushes. And stammers. "A bit soppy."

The teacher sits and organises her teaching materials. She's cool.

"Did you do your homework?"

"I did."

"Any questions?"

"If I do... I don't remember them."

"Non?"

"Non." In fact, Ellen doesn't remember her own name. "Um. Did you have a good week?"

"Oui. Et toi?" The informal pronoun. Ellen warms all over.

"Yes. I mean oui. I mean....."

The teacher's gaze drops to Ellen's mouth. "I have to leave on time today.

Let's begin."

Lesson 4

"I'm not retaining anything."

"I've noticed"

"Maybe I'm too old to learn a new language."

"Don't be silly."

"It's complicated."

"English is more complicated."

As she leaves, the teacher hesitates at the door. She turns and pulls Ellen into her. The warm circle of her belly presses against Ellen's. She cheek kisses, left and right. Her lips linger. The teacher is trembling as she steps back and walks away.

It takes Ellen a whole minute to prise her feet off the floor.

Lesson 5

Ellen is edgy. The teacher arrives, precisely on time, with two coffees. She shrugs her bag from her shoulder and hands a cup to Ellen. "Asseyez-vous.....sit down. Please."

Ellen's stomach clenches. Her knee is one centimetre from the teacher's. She

imagines forks of electricity snapping across the gap.

"I have to tell you something."

The hairs on Ellen's neck stand up and her ears fizz.

The teacher is tense. She steadies herself. Wipes her palms on her thighs.

"I'm having... feelings. When I left last week I had to stop the car and pull off the road. I wanted to come back to you."

Ellen expels the breath she has been holding. She reaches out and takes the teacher's hand. The entanglement of their fingers feels like home.

This could get complicated.