

Swiss-French to English

Rosie Eyre

Mentor

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Rosie's passion for books, *livres* and *libros* has taken her from Blackpool's library shelves to a degree in French and Spanish, a Master's in translation, and a career as a freelance translator and editor. Along the way, she has worked in Salamanca, Paris and Madrid, before returning to translate by the seaside.

Introduction

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The following extract is from the opening chapter of *Nues dans un verre d'eau* (*Nudes in a Glass of Water*), a short and deliciously quirky intergenerational novel by the award-winning Swiss-French author, Fanny Wobmann.

The book traces the parallel stories of the thirty-something narrator, Laura, and her dying grandmother, Madame Favre, as the two women lay themselves bare in a hospital room. Laura is a watch mechanic back from a summer course in London – having fallen secretly pregnant by a dog walker she met on Brighton's nudist beach. Madame Favre, aka Grandma, is the daughter of peasant farmers and widow of a village grocer, in the final months of a long and tight-lipped existence.

The pair are relative strangers, their millennial and mid-century worldviews seemingly poles apart. Yet as the hospital room turns confessional, and a series of fresh, funny and frank exchanges whisks us between the Swiss mountains and the shores of contemporary Britain, a surprising understanding is born.

This passage ushers in the beginning of Laura's made-in-Britain bombshells. Her story is set in Brighton, but the storytelling is taking place in a deserted hospital canteen, high in the snow-lashed Jura. This is not a tale intended for our ears, but for those of her grandmother, who sits hunched over a mug of scalding cocoa – '*a milky shadow that nobody knows where to put any more*'. But as Laura begins to recount her not-quite love story with a bare-buttocked Brighton stranger, it transpires this 'milky shadow' has her own share of tantalising secrets – as her previously unspoken anecdotes of village life will reveal...

It has been a joy to bring this project to life under the mentorship of Sarah Ardizzone, who has taught me so much about what it means to be a literary translator.

From *Nues dans un verre d'eau*

Fanny Wobmann, translated by Rosie Eyre

What's that you're saying, Grandma? You have this way of contorting your mouth, as if you're about to retch, then speech comes out, accompanied by a patter of glottal noises like raindrops falling on tarpaulin. It turns the stomach a bit. As does the dry, acrid stench of this hospital room. The whiff of cleanliness-at-all-costs, you know, *let's disinfect everything, let's all talk in whispers, let's get you bundled up*. A collective sigh of relief.

I brought you flowers, you didn't really understand at first, thought you were the one who'd bought them and that it was my birthday.

'Snowing, Laura?' you ask me. Or maybe it's a statement, I'm not sure. But it's not snowing. The sun's low, it has scythed off the upper floors of the houses and the town is all askew. It has a wildness about it, brazenly becoming one with the surrounding pastureland. Winter has muddled all the pathways, everything is white, grey and blue, like your hands, whose gnarled fingers are tinkling absently on the tightly fitted bedsheet.

'She's a coloured girl, the nurse, she scrubs my back so hard I'll soon have no skin left on me. She's not very nice, you know, a bit rude like their lot can be sometimes. The other nurses are nice but they don't let me sleep at night. I prefer it when it's a man, have you met Thibault yet? You know, Laura, the woman in the next bed has gone. She's not dead, mind. No, she's gone home, can you credit that? I wouldn't have given her two weeks left to live when she came in, she was a dribbler, oh, there's nothing worse. She smelled, you know. Reminded me of Dad when he used to come in after feeding the pigs. I never got used to that smell. Despite me growing up surrounded by it. Promise you won't let me end up like that?'

I don't know what to reply. I laugh. Because all I know are your silences, your secrets, the veil of restraint that shrouds your existence. Do not disturb. Don't touch. Don't dig too deep. Just edge away as quietly as possible.

Now you're talking to me and your mouth is overflowing.

[...]

'Snowing, Laura.' You haven't stopped to look outside, so focused are you on the act of walking. But it's true, this time it is snowing. Winter has unleashed its forces and the town has surrendered, still cloaked in white and grey right up to the fuzzy lines of the horizon. The symmetry of the streets has lost all sense, snowflakes are swirling, it's mayhem outside and your feet keep brushing along, swish, swish, swish, swish, with rhythmic precision, while I walk alongside you without really knowing where we're headed.

That brushing sound and the smell of your nightdress. I'm not entirely sure I can bear them.

Yet here I am, supporting your arm and presenting you with the mug of cocoa you've been so eagerly awaiting. You blow on the liquid, sending greasy little brown waves crashing against the rim and spilling all over your fingers. I set off for a serviette and watch you from a distance, a milky shadow that nobody knows where to put any more. You take up so much space and yet you're such a tiny thing, sitting there hunched over the plastic table with your candyfloss hair plastered to your head.

We have nothing to say to each other. The silence drives the snowflakes into a frenzy and you look me right in the eye. And so, I begin telling you the story.

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