

TIFFANY TAVERNIER

THE FRIEND

5 chapters translated from the french by Susan Pickford

susan.pickford@gmail.com



SABINE WESPIESER EDITEUR
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IT'S A SATURDAY LIKE ANY OTHER. I get dressed in the dim early morning light, careful not to wake Élisabeth. Downstairs, no Jules. Time was, I would be met by her joyful yapping. In the kitchen, I switch on the coffee maker, take a mug from the cupboard. The oak leaves outside the window quiver in the breaking dawn. No-one is up yet across the road. Silence fills the world. When Jules died, it was Élisabeth who insisted on burying her at a special animal cemetery, and she choose the headstone, too. White. It was a fine ceremony. Even her sisters came. That evening we drank so much that everyone slept over, except Guy and Chantal, of course. I was touched they made the effort. Guy, especially. Chantal's depression is giving him a really shitty ride. Shitty, yes, that's the word. We sometimes hear them fighting late at night, and then nothing, it blows over. Their dog, Nelly, was a year ago now. Such bad luck – there are so few cars on the road round here. The bastard who hit her didn't even stop, we never found out who it was. We did find Nelly, though. Or at least what was left of her: gobbets of bleeding flesh. Guy and I buried her that evening. Dug a hole in his garden. A grim night, the sort you hope only happens once. Guy wept silently as I dug. Maybe that's why Élisabeth sent Jules off in style when it was her turn. To make up for their loss.

On the table, a *Musca domestica* is rubbing rubbing its legs together, its two big red eyes and grey thorax instantly recognisable. I wonder briefly if they have the same ones in Vietnam. I'll ask Marc next time he gets in touch. He seems to be having a wonderful time out there. All his Instagram pictures show him with a big grin, which puts Élisabeth's mind at rest. Not mine. Why did he have to choose Vietnam, of all places? My father would definitely not have approved. And that job in a grand hotel. I hope they're treating him right.

Outside, the sky is turning pale pink. I've never been much of a traveller, myself. A few days in Spain once when I was twenty-two, and that trip to Sweden with Élisabeth. Then along came Marc. We never much wanted to up sticks after that, other than seaside summer holidays when he was little. I sometimes feel a bit strange when I think how far away he is. I suddenly long for him, physically, brutally. And then the feeling passes, like Guy and Chantal's fights. Strange: its been years since he lived at home, but, well, uni was just a quick hop in the car. These days, we live in completely different time zones and though we do Skype regularly, the longer he is gone, the less we have to say.

The fly has left the table for a window pane. I love drinking in these quiet moments, before the world gets going. No car sounds, no ringing telephones. Just the day slowly unfurling, the branches cracking in the wind. I down my coffee in a single

gulp. Next, my daily stroll along the Aune. I've never seen anyone down there this early, except Chantal, once. The sun had just come up. I found her there, sitting by the water, staring into space. I gave her quite a fright. She'd not slept a wink and thought a bit of fresh air might do her some good. I asked if she'd like to join me for a coffee. She stared at me with an odd look in her eyes, then suddenly got up and left. Élisabeth said it was the pills. Such strong stuff it sometimes took months to find the right dose.

The first rays of sun light up the kitchen. Soon we'll be having breakfast on the new deck. What a job it was to clear the ground. But it's done, the pillars are in place, all I gave to do is lay the floor planks. We can put a swing seat on it, like in Hollywood films. Our firewood can go underneath – I even have plans for a shelter. The view from here is so lovely. Trees, as far as the eye can see. That's what got me most excited when we first saw the house. The wilderness all around. Not Élisabeth. She was scared of living so far off the beaten track. It was such a bargain, I begged her to reconsider. The house was full of potential, it was going for a song, and it was just six miles from my factory and four or so from P., the small town that was crying out for nurses like Élisabeth. A flat in town would mean tens of miles more driving every day and much less living space. Even so, she was reluctant, and I was about to throw in the towel when her mother suggested getting a dog. It worked like magic. With a dog - “A proper guard dog, right?” - then yes, Élisabeth could see herself living there.

Once we moved in, I was so excited I got to work straight away on our bedroom and Marc's, the shower room, the downstairs lounge, kitchen, and garage.

These days we have all that and even a third bedroom, which – since Marc turned out to be an only child – Élisabeth turned into a home studio two years ago. She spends more and more time in there, painting her “revelations” - piled-up shapes and colours that make no sense to me. But I can see it's good for her, and with what she has to go through at work... She keeps a bed in one corner, one of her sisters sometimes sleeps there. My brother, never. But that's another story.

I glance at the clock set to Marc's time zone. Nearly midday in Hanoi, the streets will be bustling. Here, the grass is still damp and the dragonflies are asleep. In the first glow of dawn, even the rocks shimmer. If I'm lucky, I might catch a few crayfish and if the water isn't too cold, I'll go for a dip in the deeper water where the trees arch over the Aune. It'll be a fine day. Not a cloud to be seen. This might be the afternoon to get out the big ladder and check the roof, find where that leak is coming from. I do hope Guy will help me bring it over. It was very late when I heard his van pull up last night. When things with Chantal have got a bit out of hand, he drives around for hours to calm down. He's like a bear with a sore head the next day. Well, for once, I'm not on call. I'll try my luck, but not until lunchtime. Guy is always in a foul mood before then. I've known him long enough.

I pull on my boots with a silent promise to take Lisa up some breakfast when I get back. I'll snuggle back in with her. She'll grumble that I stink of mud, then let me off because I remembered the jam. After all these years, I think to myself, we're so lucky to still be so in love. And to have this quiet life, too, though she works so hard she is exhausted of an evening and I'm finding it ever harder to crawl out of bed in the

night to go and sort out some breakdown at the factory. Even so, it's a far cry from my brother's life in the military, at least the way I've always imagined it, in remote corners of the world. On the rare occasions we talk, I never dare ask him about it, and he never brings it up either. And no wife or kids.

I grab my jacket and make for the door. What's that? An engine? And more than one car. But there are just our two houses here. I wonder what's going on. Opening the door, I am staggered to see one, two, three, four, five, six police cars and an ambulance roaring to a stop. Simultaneously, I see some twenty men in helmets burst out of the forest, special forces style, their visors down, bulletproof jackets on, guns at the ready. The scene is so surreal, it crosses my mind I might be hallucinating. The cars brake hard outside Guy and Chantal's house, kicking up clouds of dust.

"I need you back inside, sir".

I jump back and stare at the man at my door.

"Captain Bretan. I'm with the police." Behind him, the firearms officers are kneeling, pointing their guns at Guy and Chantal's house. What on earth...

"Sir?"

Thoughts swirl and spill chaotically in my head. His high, neat hairline.

"How many people are in there with you?"

I stare at him stupidly.

"Please, sir."

Find my words. The space of words. Their logical order.

"I... just me and my wife upstairs, but... what's going on?"

He glances at the upstairs window and, in a split second, judges the distance between the two houses.

"Nothing for you to worry about, we just need to keep you safe while we conduct our operation".

"What operation? What the..."

"We don't have time for this, sir".

Behind him, four firearms officers are running towards Guy and Chantal's house.

"Is it our neighbours? I mean, they're our friends, we've known them for years..."

I almost want to tell him about my leaky roof and the big ladder, too heavy for me to carry without help. But his open-mouthed stare stops me in my tracks.

"Your friends?"

Well, yes, our friends, lawnmowers, card games, sunshades, barbecues, what could be more normal, no other houses for miles around, so why the stunned look, suddenly I want to shake him, what's happened to them? But the words don't come. And the way he's staring at me. As if he had something against me... as if it were too late...

"Well, yes. You know. Guy and Chantal".

His voice softens.

"Listen, bring your wife downstairs. Don't leave the house until we tell you to, and keep away from the windows. Do you understand?"

ÉLISABETH GIVES ME A BLANK STARE. I whisper there are policemen everywhere, it looks bad, *really* bad, she has to get up *right now*. She leaps out of bed, throws on her dressing gown, and follows me, her hair a bird's nest. She stiffens at the top of the stairs, spotting the firearms officer at the door. The same terror that struck me earlier. Our two houses, this quiet spot... Something crazy must have happened to Guy and Chantal to warrant such firepower. I wanted to run. But I stood frozen at the bedroom door, trying my best to keep cool. Stop my heart pounding. Exploding. As if it already knew what had happened. Something terrible, something I could not and would not imagine.

And now Élisabeth races down the stairs beside me. She's usually so cheerful. So many men for such a little house. Has someone killed them? Downstairs, the firearms officer in his bulletproof vest, his visor lifted, points to the lounge. "Lie down on the rug".

But Élisabeth is still half asleep. It's too much for her to take on board. "On the rug? Why?"

"Nothing to worry about, ma'am. It's just to keep you safe if things hot up across the road."

"What do you mean, across the road?"

Her voice, almost a shout. He says he can't say any more. She turns to me.

"At Guy and Chantal's?"

I nod a yes and I watch her pupils dilate. The officer's ear-piece buzzes an order. "Get down now."

I want to ask if it's because he's about to start shooting or the risk of stray bullets from across the road, if he's ever been through anything like this before, if Guy and Chantal are still alive, if... "Sir, please get down now."

It all seems so absurd, starting with him, a kid young enough to be my son, what made him choose such a career, then us two, dumbstruck and bewildered in our own home. Our *home*. And me, faced with terrible danger, like a machine at the factory that could blow at any moment, I always keep my cool, so why this sensation of impending doom, as if I knew the battle is lost. The kid is insistent.

"Sir..."

Does he at least know how long we'll have to stay down on the floor? Trying to inject a note of authority into his voice, he tells me no, he doesn't, then points again to the rug where Élisabeth is already prostrate. "Can you get down with your wife now?" And I obey.

“I have to go now. Don't get up, whatever happens, and stay absolutely quiet until we come and get you”.

Lying alongside Élisabeth, I whisper about the cars tearing up the road, the ambulance, the men with guns bursting out of the forest. I avoid mentioning the officer's startled look when I said we were friends with Guy and Chantal and the dark sense of foreboding that has been adrift in me ever since. She guesses at a robbery gone wrong. I find it hard to believe. Thieves don't bring out such firepower.

“Maybe they've been attacked by a lunatic?”

A lunatic, here, in this godforsaken spot?

“Or bank robbers? It all went south and they're hiding out across the road?”

I wish that she would stop talking. That everything could go back to its true self, like it was in the kitchen just now.

“Thierry, I know – escaped prisoners”. Prisoners, that might be it, that would explain the firearms officers. She turns pale. “No, terrorists!”

Such fear inside her. Rise up, leave the house behind, float up into the skies, drift away. Across the world.

“What, terrorists turning up on foot in the dead of night?”

“Well, why not!”

Say nothing. Stare at the curtains, the light shimmering in the curtains, hoping she will stop talking. But her thoughts are running wild, spinning out of control. Her words tumble out faster and faster as she wonders out loud how many bombs they are carrying and, if cornered, might they blow everything up and in that case wouldn't we do better to disobey orders like the handful of survivors from the Twin Towers who ignored instructions and left the building! I point out there are over twenty highly trained gunmen outside ready to pull the trigger if she moves. She bites her lip, tells me Chantal will never get over this, she misses the smell of Jules, she needs the loo, she wishes her sisters were here, Marc has no idea what is going on, *but what IS going on?* We'll have to call Marc and he... The words die in her throat. Crushed. Seeing her bewilderment, the ground drops away beneath me. Just thirty metres more, and whatever disaster has struck them would have been for us. She huddles into me.

“We can't hear anything. That can't be normal, can it?” Like her, I was expecting an explosion of orders, guns firing, bullets smacking home. What are they waiting for? Lying on the lounge floor, here, I could almost reach out and touch the violence. A tornado slamming between the walls. I wrap Élisabeth in a hug and stare at the wall by the TV, dappled with dancing light. How will this all end? I am six years old. I tiptoe into the bedroom where my mother's father is in bed. I approach him softly, wondering why the curtains are drawn and the furniture is draped in black cloth. I lean

over to speak to him. His lips are still. I lift one eyelid; the eye is white. Grandpa? Something opens up inside me. A mouth, suddenly agape, gripping me, sucking me down. I spring away from him and knock over a vase. I run until I am breathless.

“Talk to me, Thierry. Stay with me”.

I point out a tiny crack on the ceiling, wonder if it's a sign of subsidence, fleetingly picture the house split down the middle. She huddles into me again, whispers shamefacedly that she would like to pray but she doesn't remember how. Will she still want the deck after all this? What about Guy and the big ladder? To think I nearly got up when I heard him come home last night. I might have scared the intruders off and... I see dead bodies again. Abdane. Jules.

“Did you hear that?”

Yes, I did. A car door slamming, and now another one, two, and vehicles roaring off. Can it really be over so soon? I kneel up. Down where the track curves onto the road, the squeal of tyres covers the shriek of a siren for a brief moment.

“It's safe for you to get up now”.

He appeared soundlessly, slowly pulling off his helmet, his blond hair soaked with sweat.

“The threat has been contained, there's nothing more to worry about”.

“What about our neighbours?”

“Just stay here for now. Captain Bretan will come and explain the situation”.

“UNDER ARREST?”

The captain says nothing, and I think I must have misheard. Élisabeth bursts into a nervous giggle.

“That can't be right... I mean, the state Chantal is in...”

I almost want to laugh myself. The captain's expression stops me in my tracks.

“I understand why you're so shocked – they are your friends”. He stresses the word “friends”. Nameless rage wells up inside me. Élisabeth starts crying. I grab her hand and gently soothe her. She looks at me, her eyes lost.

“But Guy... Chantal... they can't be... what are they supposed to have done?”

A glimmer of contempt in the captain's eyes. In real life, life at the factory and Saturdays down by the Aune, I would chuck him out, but we've tipped over into a new dimension, and I need him. He pulls over a chair.

“How long have you known them?”

Élisabeth is wringing her hands in anguish, so I decide to speak for her. Otherwise she might break down. “Since they bought the ruin opposite and did it up. Four and a bit years ago now”. He turns to her.

“If you disagree with your husband or have anything to add, please do speak up”. She whispers a barely audible “OK”, and I don't know what is stopping me from telling him how sensitive she is, my darling Lisa, any gunfire in a film, any injury, even on a little animal, not at work though, as if her nurse's uniform shielded her, and the same when someone needs her help, that kid at the school fête last week, blood gushing from his finger, she was so great, but here at home she's a real kid, but try explaining that to a police officer, particularly this one, he's a sharp one, you can see that right off, and so middle-class, so sure of himself.

“Have you ever noticed anything off about them since you've known them? Any odd behaviour?”

“No, not really, well, except Chantal has been getting worse and worse... and they've been fighting more and more”.

“Nothing else?”

Choke down the rising tide of fear and anger. “They keep themselves to themselves. Guy is always ready to help out”.

“Nothing unusual about their attitude?”

He's not taking notes, not recording our conversation, just watching my reactions like a hawk.

“No, other than that Guy has been a bit stressed these past few weeks, but seeing

what Chantal is like at the moment.... Her depression was hard to live with, you know?”

No, he doesn't know. Maybe he doesn't care. Maybe he doesn't want to know.

“When did you last see them?”

“Guy, the evening before last, on my way back from work. He was fixing his van in the garage, I asked if he needed any help, he said not to bother”.

“And you, ma'am? What about you?”

Her eyes fill with tears. She turns her head to blink them back.

“Guy would have been on Wednesday... I was off to work, he waved at me from the garden”.

He turns back to me.

“What about Chantal?”

Why this visceral dislike of him? His lack of sensitivity, or my own fear?

“I saw Chantal two days ago. She came over for some sugar, to bake a cake”.

“A cake?! What kind? How big?”

I stare at him in bewilderment. Is it meant to be a joke or something? “I have no idea. What do you think, Élisabeth?”

“Well, I think she might have said chocolate, and it was a hundred and fifty grammes of sugar, so for four people”.

He seems to be thinking at top speed.

“Did they have a lot of visitors?”

“Yes, we went over there sometimes”.

“Just you two?”

Something flashes across my mind. I look to Élisabeth for confirmation, and I see it has struck her too. “Well.... yes”.

Shit. How did we not see it before? I mean, Chantal was depressed, true, but what about Guy? His estate agent colleagues, his friends? Why did we never meet any of them? He was a good cook, too. A proper chef.

“What about yesterday?”

I jump.

“What about yesterday?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary?”

“We just told you, we didn't see them yesterday”.

“No funny noises?” I shoot daggers at him. What sort of noises? Printing counterfeit bank notes? Stolen cars revving? A thirty-strong team to arrest them! What unholy shit have they got mixed up in? He leans in a little closer.

“What about last night?”

I shake my head.

“I just heard Guy come home in his van last night”.

“And what time would you say that was?”

“Not sure. It must have been very late”.

“Thank you. That will be all for now”.

I stare at him, dumbfounded. He can't seriously be going without telling us

anything. And the tools? What about the tools? He stares back at me in puzzlement.

“What tools?”

“The ones from Guy's shed. He asked me to look after them”. His eyes widen.

“What shed?”

“Well... the one in the forest”.

Panic washes over his expression. But he's trained to keep a poker face – what is....

“And you know where this shed is?”

“Yes, of course”.

“Can you point it out on a map?” Suddenly he is gabbling. His fear is contagious.

“Well, yes, but... I mean the map would have to be very detailed...”

Tension is etched on his face.

“Can you take me there?”

“Depends. In the car or on foot?”

He shoots me a black look.

“In the car, of course!”

Keep cool. Don't lose it. Think about something else. Hanoi. The Hanoi streets.

The sparkling red wing case on a *Lycidae*.

“It's about five minutes, maybe a bit more. But there will be some walking...”

“OK, I'll drive. You'll stay in the car”.

OUTSIDE, THE TREES ARE STREAMING WITH LIGHT. I linger on the doorstep for a moment, staring at them, doing my best to avoid the sight of the policeman rolling crime scene tape around the house across the road. So it's all true. Bretan sees my discomfort. He beckons me over. I'm such a cretin. I should never have come outside. Opening the door has just let the chaos leak out.

“Come on”.

I follow him, staring at my feet, angry at myself for not daring to ask them to mind the flowers, especially the white hostas and the camellias and hyacinth orchids. Chantal is so proud of those. By the entrance to their driveway, a thought freezes me. Will we ever knock on their door for evening drinks again? What about our joint firewood order? The lawnmower they let us borrow?

Bretan has gone ahead and is waving at me to hurry. I have nearly caught up with him when, through a downstairs window, I glimpse what seems to be a white-clad silhouette. My heart starts pounding. A reflection in the glass, or a crime scene officer like the ones we see on TV after a murder? I haven't seen anyone going inside. The two front windows are now so black I can't even make out the furniture. I shoot a worried, questioning look at Bretan. He ignores me, ordering five men over to their cars. Why are none of them afraid, when I am a trembling mass inside? Because I can't believe it yet? But believe *what?*

Bretan is waiting impatiently by the cars. I wish I could tell him how I hate myself for leaving Élisabeth, how we met, how from the very beginning we had our own little rituals – Tuesday drinks after work, Thursday shopping, and Saturday...

“Get in the back. Put your seatbelt on”.

His voice reaches me as if in a dream. He drives off without a word, and I wonder why so many cars are following us, what they hope to find at the shed, clinging for now to the idea that it is all a mistake, point left down at the small road, then left again, the bumpy lane full of potholes where you have to drive slowly. I don't mention our ongoing quarrel with the local mayor about it. Or how furious Guy was not to be getting anywhere with it. I picture Guy leaving the last meeting, banging his fist on his car bonnet. How taken aback we were, Élisabeth and me, seeing him lose his temper, his smile at our amazement, before we all doubled over laughing, a memory that still made us giggle. What can he have done? And when? Yesterday? But Chantal wasn't with him yesterday... Maybe it was *her?* Are her pills too strong, sending her round the bend? Like one of those lunatics who drive into a crowd of people? I put my face to the car window, try to picture the scene, no, it makes no sense, but then nothing has

this morning. I gesture to Breton to stop and point at the oak standing in a carpet of ferns.

“Past there, turn left and keep going to the tree trunk struck by lightning. Then take a right and head uphill. When you're at the top, the shed is at the bottom of the slope opposite.”

He steps out of the car, telling me to wait. I want to follow him, but I can't move, like when my father, back after many long months, would call me to him. He never hurt me, but still, something in him scared me. It was not him as a person, but what his silence hinted at – a journey through horror that I had to keep at arm's length, like now, this captain whose superior air and experience were exasperating, terrifying, and soothing all at once.

The sun is rising slowly. Have they found the shed? Guy always padlocked it, which made me laugh. There was never a soul around: who would want to break in? But Guy wouldn't be told. Was he using it as a hideout? I'd been there with him many times and never seen anything untoward, just his tools and a stack of firewood. Was he sheltering someone? But then where were the bed, the camping stove, the crockery, the sheets? Might they have been arrested for some long-ago crime? That might explain everything: buying a house in the back of beyond, Chantal's depression, the lack of friends. I wish I'd thought to grab my phone. It all happened so fast. Has Élisabeth gone back up to bed? How many of them are still there? Is she drinking her coffee? Has she seen the crime scene tape through the window?

A slight breeze stirs the treetops. The world teeters for a moment. I open the window a crack and take a deep breath. Four years we've been friends, but what do I *really* know about them? They couldn't have children, they've been married ten years, but where and how? They never mention their family, though Chantal did once say her mother had missed their wedding because of cancer. Did she die? Lisa must know more than I do. Last year, she talked Chantal into coming swimming with her in P. Guy did his best to put her off. He thought his wife was too fragile. He was terrified she would actually drown. In those private moments, did Chantal ever tell Élisabeth how she met Guy and why they decided to move here? Thinking about it, I couldn't even tell you where Guy was born, if he has any brothers or sisters, or if he has always been an estate agent. Our friendship was really all about tools. No need for much talk when you're busy fixing, fastening, and planing away or sharing little DIY tips – this or that brand of chainsaw is good, this or that wood stain only needs one coat. Nor did our shared enthusiasm for collecting insects call for words, other than for classifying, naming, or giving an emotional account of common green lacewing larvae hatching, two Russian leather beetles mating, or a scorpion fly's courtship ritual.

The treetops teeter once more. Have they managed to get the padlock off, and what have they found? I was surprised when Guy mentioned he wanted to repaint his shed, since he only went there to do DIY or chop wood. But he was fed up of the walls rotting away and it was time to do the place up. We hadn't seen each other much since then. The following Sunday, he asked me if I could store his tools in my workshop while he repainted. I said fine, of course, and then we discussed the best

place to buy decent paint. Guy hated being taken for a ride and was ready to drive an extra twelve or fifteen miles for the right price. I helped him unload his van and asked if he needed a hand with the painting. He looked at me, touched. “No, that's kind of you, it'll be fine”.

And now, the crime scene tape flapping in the sun like a nightmare. I shrink back on my seat, stare at the glove box, wonder if it has a gun in it. I hesitate for a second or two. I might feel better with a weapon. The threat is so vague, but again, it makes no sense. If at least I knew why I am so scared. I close my eyes, imagine the shed, over there. One of them steps onto the moss and twigs. Bretan, or one of his men? He crowbars the door open. Who goes in first? What does he find? I open my eyes in the car and stare at the leaves for a shred of comfort. The gaping hole of an animal's eye, its infinite pity, maybe its distress. But there is nothing but this magnificent green. Shouldn't it be winter? Black mud sticking to their boots? Twisted, skeletal trees?

I am the child refusing to approach his father, the child who spent hours staring at his mother's motionless back by the kitchen table, I am Marc's father, Élisabeth's husband, Mr. Ordinary, the guy at the factory everyone can count on. Why is all this happening to me?

translated by Susan Pickford
susan.pickford@gmail.com