

Out Of Her Depth

by Graham Masterton

It was a strange afternoon in May. The sky was thundery black but the sun still shone on the lime trees. Anne-Joëlle was walking through the Tuileries gardens, walking quickly because she was afraid that it would soon start to rain again, and she hadn't brought her coat or her umbrella. It was one of those days that had turned sour.

She had gone to an address in the Rue des Blancs Manteaux in response to an advertisement in *Le Figaro* for a job as an English translator. The advertisement had promised 'Today, A Whole New World Awaits You!' When she arrived there, however, she found that the address in the advertisement did not exist: the building had been demolished and there was nothing but weeds and rubble. On the way back she had snapped the heel of her shoe on a broken paving-stone. Now she was hurrying through the Tuileries in her bare feet, the sandy-colored mud splattering her ankles. The breeze dropped and the gardens were filled with a terrible stillness. Even the traffic along the Quai des Tuileries seemed oddly muffled.

She suddenly realized that she was alone. There was nobody in the gardens except her. She walked more slowly, feeling the wet grit under her feet. Ahead of her lay a wide puddle which reflected the sky, as black and shiny as a marble gravestone. She walked straight into it, to clean her feet. At first it came up to her ankles, but as she walked further she found that she was wading in it, almost up to her knees. She tried to turn around and go back, but the puddle grew deeper and deeper, until she was up to her waist in it, her gray wool dress sodden and dark.

Anne-Joëlle cried out for help, but there was nobody there: only distant figures walking along the Rue de Rivoli. She took three more steps forward and suddenly she was up to her neck, and then she was out of her depth. The water was freezing and she couldn't swim. Even if anybody had walked into the gardens, they would have seen only a woman's head, in the middle of a puddle, and one arm briefly waving.

Gasping, thrashing, Anne-Joëlle sank under the water, and under the water it was colder and darker than anything she had ever imagined. She sank down and down, her eyes wide open, her hair flowing behind her, still holding on to the last breath that she had taken before she disappeared under the surface. Six or seven bubbles broke on the surface of the puddle in the gardens, and then the water was still again.

Copyright © by Graham Masterton, 2000.