



Villa Sylvia

by Milly Thompson

Sylvia was in bed, reading a glossy volume on Art Nouveau, the sensual, uncompromising style of the *fin-de-siècle* demi-monde, with whom she felt such an affinity. She shared, she was sure, their attitude to life and beauty. She scanned a passage she'd read a million times before: 'Taking its inspiration from the natural world, its characteristic motifs include delicate tendrils, organic forms, swooping, swirling lines, eccentric geometry and exotic bodies.' A familiar thrill ran through her body and out through the silk pyjama set Camilla had bought her from the Louvre gift shop last time she and Augustus had visited on one of their special 'relationship weekends'. The pyjamas were 'garment dyed', grey-violet at the hems gradating into an almost shimmering charcoal at the top. They were piped in the colour of dying sunflowers. She admired the fabric momentarily before reading on: 'Art Nouveau designers found greatest inspiration in nature – not necessarily nature's beauty, but instead its vital force, its never-changing life cycle of birth, life, decay and death. Nature sometimes took the role of a creepy other-world, governed by dark uncontrollable forces.'

Though it was close to 11am, Sylvia was propped up in her replica Émile Gallé Dawn and Dusk bed (c.1904). She had read these books over and over till now the ideas just ran through her, over her, within her. A coffee pot stood on a bedside table together with an elegant pearlescent porcelain cup containing the dead dregs of an Americano. The real Dawn and Dusk bed (now in a private museum somewhere in Europe) is mainly rosewood, and features a footboard inlaid with a mother-of-pearl mayfly laying a 'cosmogenic' egg, representing 'dawn' and 'renewal', and a headboard inlaid with an ebony moth-as-dusk. Sylvia wondered if it symbolised intellectual death, rather than a physical one – a moth to the flame of thought. She was intoxicated by its visual language, and the reminder of the cycle of life as she dozed off at night and dreamed.

These well-worn books were her bibles, and were kept beneath a good-quality fake Tiffany table lamp. Its shade depicted a past-its-best cinnamon dahlia bloom, the colour turning to brown at the tips of its translucent, etched-glass petals.

Since she'd been young, Sylvia had been intrigued by Art Nouveau. It was deeply psychological, erotic, yet romantic. Its relationship to nature was at once earthy and cerebral. Over the years she had surrounded herself with its *objets d'art*, some of questionable quality, while a few pieces, like the bed, despite being a replica, really were good show pieces of craft and artistry. Sylvia was interested in the overall image or effect, and though she loved the best, she would put up with junk or kitsch to achieve

the right look. She received the experience, generosity and excitement of Art Nouveau's philosophy, and the craftsmanship of its makers, designers and thinkers, with a careless gratitude. A recognisable Art Nouveau-esque domestic environment had slowly evolved in Sylvia's image, while she had put herself together in its. A ying and yang; hand-in-glove, snail-shell perfection.

She got out of bed and walked to the window, pulling back the curtains. Her feet were in black furlanes – Venetian velvet slippers soled with recycled bicycle tyres. They were

currently very chic and quite expensive, but before being redefined in velvet for the demi-monde in the early 1900s they had been developed by farmers and peasants as a practical solution to their poverty. Later, gondoliers had taken them up as a solution for jumping in and out of wet boats while they plied their trade, ferrying citizens and tourists across the dank canals of Venice.

Sylvia's dressing gown today was a rather heavy poly-cotton mix men's robe made in Thailand, which she'd bought from an online martial arts store as one of her many experiments in internet shopping. It stuck out stiffly, in origami-like planes of brilliant purple and black. It was miles too big for her and thoroughly impractical, but something about the relationship of the angled planes of fabric and Sylvia's nose and flat hair made her look glamorous as hell.

She looked out over her garden and let her eyes hover across the grasses and their seasonally drying feather-like flowers and seed heads. Mist and an iron sky drew her back into the room. She sat on a small sofa upholstered in lilies and Islamic designs sourced from the Alhambra, positioned so as to be able to see both the view through the window and into the hallway beyond.

A print of Alphonse Mucha's poster for *Gismonda* was hung in the corridor, framed by the doorway. In the late 1800s Mucha had made a series of graphic adverts for the Théâtre de la Renaissance



in Paris featuring the actress Sarah Bernhardt in various roles that made her audiences swoon with psychodramatic delight. For many, Bernhardt summed up the era. *Gismonda* was Sylvia's favourite work of Mucha. Instead of the accepted image of flowers in the hair, his *Gismonda* wore leaves. Not fresh young leaves, but autumnal husks.

Sylvia was stiff from lying in bed too long, but she wasn't ready to get dressed quite yet. Her mind drifted to a poem that had fed the souls of the artists and writers of Art Nouveau, and which she kept coming back to: 'L'Après-midi d'un faune' by Stéphane Mallarmé. Two nymphs prance in and out of states of reality. An image of herself and Deidra roaming the tidal estuaries not far from Woodbridge formed in her mind. Days this summer had been defined by mirages both in the water and on the road home. We do live in enchanted times, she thought. She looked around for her copy of Mallarmé's collected poems. It fell open at the page she wanted and, ignoring the cramping in her hips, she read:

'In the air drowsy with dense slumbers.

Did I love a dream?'

A little thrill ran through her at the lovely words. Sylvia was often thrilled, delighted or excited. She found beauty and energy in many things, in many ways. She stood up and tried to remember some yoga forms she'd learned as a young woman – but Oh! Impossible! So stiff. She wondered if she should join the town hall aerobics class with Deidra. Or perhaps the Bend and Stretch (Tums, Thighs 'n' Bums) for OAPs on Thursday afternoons might cater more realistically to her level of fitness.

'Sylviaaaa....' Deidra's voice came calling up the stairs. 'Are you up? Can I come in?'

Deidra walked in uninvited and sat on a chair opposite Sylvia's chaise. Sylvia was not thrown by this. Their doors were always open to each other. She looked up and smiled at Deidra, who she suddenly noticed strongly resembled Mucha's Bernhardt. Lovely, she thought, and slightly spooky.

But Deidra was in a practical mood and tried to ignore Sylvia's gaze. She could see that she'd walked in on one of Sylvia's 'visionary' moments. Deidra thought her romantic notions were nonsense and as ever refused to engage. But Sylvia was enjoying looking at Deidra, placing her in her visual lexicon, and despite Deidra's dislike of being absorbed into something she sensed but couldn't really understand, she appreciated the look.

'Jonty's downstairs. He wants to start mulching and wondered if we'd go and get manure while he gets started. Are you free to go this morning?'

Sylvia glanced outside.

'It's the weather for it. Yes. I'll get dressed.'

They agreed to meet again as soon as Sylvia was ready.

Sylvia quickly washed her hair and combed it flat. It was so thin it would dry in two minutes. She enjoyed these trips with Deidra immensely. She threw her nightclothes on

the bed and dressed in a blueberry velour lounge suit, accessorised with the matching Scottish agate and silver jewellery Ted, her ex-husband, had given her many years before. Each piece of agate in the set was pleasingly unique yet unifying, its colours gleaming mineral, luminous and dark – colours of the highlands. She was pleased with the combination of the jewellery's earth tones and the velour's 'Nordic bleu', as it had been described on the shop's website.

Deidra went back to hers to make a shopping list. A celebration of Waitrose own-brand goodies and the song for the 2006 Marks and Spencer's Christmas advert warped and whispered round her mind. She recognised the music now: Santana's *Samba Pa Ti* and Dervla Kirwan's voice wrapping the food in her own special creaminess. It wasn't Christmas yet, but a trip to Saxmundham on a cold day with Sylvia felt like it.

'Traditionally cured Scottish gravadlax salmon ... wrapped in maple-cured bacon ... packed with plump sultanas and steeped in Courvoisier Cognac ... This is not just Christmas food, this is M&S Christmas food.' Not Waitrose, but it would do, she thought.

Fifteen minutes later, they were off in Sylvia's Renault to Saxtead Bottom Riding Stables just outside of the village.

'Would you mind if we did a quick shop at Waitrose?' asked Sylvia. 'What do you think? We could have lunch at Emmett's?' She knew that Deidra would have made a Waitrose shopping list, and she was playing her.

'Oh yes, *perfect* Sylvia. Mmmmm. Make a trip of it. But we'd better drop the manure back for Jonty first so he doesn't just waste the morning.'

'Right, yes you're right – we are paying him by the hour after all!' Sylvia said a little drily, while salivating over the thought of mountains of award-winning ham and home-made piccalilli. 'So let's just go shopping first. We won't be long and like I said, a quick lunch at Emmett's. Jonty's got plenty to do.'

'Just what I was thinking. We'll only be an hour,' Deidra replied.

Emmett's Stores was the go-to place in Saxmundham. A visit to Saxmundham's Waitrose always included lunch there, and Sylvia always said something like, 'I wish I'd never discovered this ham! It's a disaster for my waist. So pudgy.' And Deidra would reply something like, 'Nonsense Sylvia. You look ... delightfully extravagant. Let's not think of being healthy today!' So they wouldn't.

'Ohhh, cold isn't it?' said Deidra. Sylvia drew her padded down Moncler coat round her. Her greatest ever extravagance, it was a two-tone electric lilac and violet damask; the pattern was acanthus leaves. She glanced sideways at Deidra, who was wearing her old beige cashmere with a navy scarf. Her long shapely legs ended in a pair of new walking boots. Both women thought that Sylvia had rather overdressed for a trip to pick up manure and an Emmett's lunch.

The cold was kept at bay with hot chocolate decorated with marshmallows and whipped cream on top. As she paid for their lunch, to make up for their lateness,

Deidra bought Jonty an award-winning ham and cheese sandwich and a flat white. When they got home, they went out to see how he was doing. He had heard the car pulling in and made himself look busy, disguising the fact that he'd sat playing Candy Crush in the greenhouse the whole time they'd been gone. He ate the sandwich quickly, enjoying the award-winning ham, and then made a start on mulching Sylvia's garden. The flat white stood near him on a table, softly evaporating into the moist cold air. He was keen that the two women wouldn't ever know that he much preferred working in Deidra's flower-filled beds to Sylvia's European landscape any day. Despite being apparently easy to look after, Sylvia's garden was in fact rather fiddly. And he found her aspirations for it a bit pretentious.

Deidra went upstairs to dabble with watercolours in her 'large nook'. Gazing out through the arched window at the far end of the room she was inspired to try and paint the sky *alone*, with no structure, no window, tree or bird – to have a go at a sort of Turner perhaps. The sky had shifted throughout the day between shades of greys: silvers, charcoal smudge, gunmetal and iron filings. Now the clouds took on a strange shade of manganese violet, meaning it was time for a gin and tonic. She sipped the cocktail, appreciating the gin's effect, and went to her easel. She read again the lines of poetry that Sylvia had cut out and given her last week. The little piece of paper bearing the two lines was pinned above a blank sheet of thick cold-pressed paper, which was awaiting inspiration. After spending an afternoon idly chatting about Deidra's pictures, as Deidra herself referred to them – painted mainly in unselfconscious blues and carmine, straight from her Windsor & Newton starter set, unmixed and untroubled – Sylvia had been reminded of another poem by Mallarmé.

Je suis hanté. L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur!

I am haunted by the sky, the sky, the sky, the sky!

Deidra wasn't really haunted by anything, but Sylvia had enough imagination for the two of them.

Back at home now, Sylvia was being haunted by the ham they'd gorged on at Emmett's, its salty fat surging through her blood. There was a little stack of it now in the fridge. And a jar of their exquisite piccalilli stood in the middle of the kitchen workstation, fairly fizzing with undisguised provocation. She controlled herself and went into the living room to survey her handiwork. She had been trying out ideas for a country cottage version of some Belgian *grande salle*, attempting to emulate with a grey wash the two-dimensional relief plaster mouldings and carvings of Art Nouveau interior design. A coffee-table book lay open at a black-and-white photo of plaster mouldings that described a vastly magnified underground cavern dug from the roots of a tree, or perhaps the veined structure of a butterfly wing. Sylvia was cutting large Bezier curves out of rolls of lining paper, which she planned to trace onto the walls with loose arm-sized gestures. Her design would take in the whole room, from the skirting board to the curved coving Jonty had installed especially for this purpose.

She looked out of the window and watched Jonty digging around Deidra's best rose.

Then, though she couldn't hear him through the window, she saw him swear, checking the bottom of his boots. He'd trodden in a mound of cat shit and disappeared lopsidedly, carefully avoiding walking the shit into Deidra's lawn, round to the bin yard where there was a tap and plenty of buckets.

'Oh dear,' thought Sylvia. 'That'll be Willy.'

Excerpted texts from: the Victoria and Albert Museum website's Art Nouveau collection page; Apartment Therapy's 'Quick History: Art Nouveau', and Stéphane Mallarmé's poems and Stéphane Mallarmé's poems 'L'Après-midi d'un faune' (1865-7) and 'L'Azur' (1864).

Image: *Gismonda: Bernhardt*, Théâtre de la Renaissance, poster, Alphonse Mucha, 1895, France. Museum no. E.261-1921. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.