

(another story from my memoir partially used in my novel. Stand alone???)

### The Woodturner - Jill Beede

The temperature dropped significantly and it was time to get the wood burner started. Monsieur Barbier, a retired train captain, and his wife who lived across the street came to help me. Everyone in the neighborhood called me “Madame”, not Madame Beede, not Jill, just “Madame” – that is except Monsieur Barbier who had found out from the postman that my real first name was Marilyn. He loved teasing me by drawing out “Mar - i - lyn” with a little giggle at the end always making me blush since he’s the only one in my life who’s called me by my real name. He’s one of those constant teases who always gets the last word, rather joke, in. There’s also a vulgar side to him which took some getting used to. I think he likes getting a rise out of people, but does it with this sweet innocent laugh that offends no one.

His wife, Madame Barbier, adored me. It’s strange how all the formalities of “Madame” contrast with her ease at just entering my house, which no one in my life had ever done before. At the beginning of my stay I got the local bug and stayed home in bed. She saw my car there and walked right in to see if I was OK. Then she came back 15 minutes later with warm soup, later with herbal tea, and I ceased to nap with all the interruptions but was pampered like never before! Anyway after that brief illness she just kept the habit of walking right in.

So here we were trying to get the wood burner working. I already had a fire going in the living-room fireplace, since I was familiar with making fires in a fireplace. I just didn't know how to work these fancy Scandinavian woodburners. So Monsieur explained everything to me about the air flow, leaving a bed of ashes at the bottom, emptying ashes in a metal can so as not to interrupt the heat one needs in the Jura.

All was set, the kindling and wax starts were neatly arranged in the stove and Monsieur lit the match. Immediately the kitchen filled with smoke and the next thing I knew Monsieur Barbier was dumping all the burning kindling into a wheel-barrow to get it outside as fast as possible. Why anyone would have a white kitchen with a wood burner in it I'll never know. There was now a layer of ash covering the ultramodern remodeled kitchen - and the wood burner still wasn't working.

After cleaning up the mess, taking the wood burner apart and having a cup of tea we started in again. Monsieur Barbier double checked to make sure the air flow was working, the vent was open and there was no reason for it not to work. Well here we went a second time and the same thing happened - smoke everywhere! We decided to wait again until the next day when the fire was out in the living-room. There used to be double French doors between the living-room and kitchen which had been removed by the Allain's when they bought the house. Perhaps their absence was interrupting the airflow through the house.

The next day, the house still smelling of smoke, we tried again. This time it worked. The house was the least efficient home I'd ever lived in: the main source of heat being in the kitchen which got the most direct sunlight in the house. I would suffocate while cooking and then freeze in the living-room where the comfortable chairs were. There was no dryer so I continually had clothes hanging in the kitchen to dry. I'd have to iron them, even underwear, they became so stiff from the wood heat. But I was just there for a year, and it wasn't my house, so I just fantasized the changes I would make if it were mine.

The temperature kept dropping. My son, who decided to make an ice sculpture filling empty yogurt cartons with water and freezing them, made this gigantic chef d'oeuvre outside the kitchen doors. It was constructed like a sand castle but made of ice. Day after day we marveled that it was still there and after a week or so decided we certainly were living in a cold climate. I was tired of hanging out in the kitchen and decided it was time to light a fire in the living-room. The wood burner had been working so well for the past few weeks that it seemed unlikely anything would happen again. I invited Monsieur and Madame Barbier over for afternoon tea and suggested we try to light a fire in the fireplace.

As the fire in the living-room started going the wood burner in the kitchen began smoking. I gave up! I had to choose either to hang out by the warmth of the kitchen wood burner or cuddle up with blankets looking at the fire dancing in the living-room fireplace.

Sometimes I would have a fire in the living-room and keep the oven going in the kitchen. Either way a walk down the hall to the bedrooms or bathroom sent chills up and down my spine and made smoke come out of my mouth being about 20 degrees colder than the rest of the house.

One morning Monsieur and Madame Barbier came walking in “Madame they called. It was early and I was still in bed. I came running out of the bedroom in my robe thinking something was wrong. They said “We know what’s wrong with your fireplace!” The next thing I knew Monsieur Barbier was outside unscrewing the vent at the backside of the house talking to himself as he pulled out large pieces of styrofoam. Madame Barbier told me the story.

“The people who lived in the house before the Allain’s bought it, were friends of ours. They were a wonderful couple – Monsieur and Madame Martin. You should have seen their garden – it was magnificent – well kept and manicured. There was only one problem. Madame Martin liked to play around. Monsieur Martin idolized her. One day out of the blue she left him for another man. Monsieur Martin was heartbroken. He plugged up all the vents in the house and opened the gas in the kitchen. Fortunately one of the neighbors found him before he died.

Not long after, Monsieur Martin got a letter from his wife pleading for him to come to her. She’d moved to the other side of France. He was overjoyed and left immediately.

Not long after, he walked in on his wife with another man. Outraged and heartbroken once again, he shot and killed his wife.

The Allain's got a very good deal on the house. Monsieur Martin is in prison and writes to us often. A crime of passion they say. Some day he'll get out. We miss him a lot."

After Monsieur Barbier unplugged the vents everything worked fine. We could have one fire for heat and another heatless fire for atmosphere – all the time pondering over the house's history.