

THE BLUE SEA by John Gusdon

Prologue

I never met my grandfather. Lots and lots of stories about a white knight or a beast, not sure which one he truly was as one daughter claimed the former and the other swore the latter. Together the image made for an intriguing character who fought through two world wars, made and lost a fortune, and sipped wine with Picasso on the beach in the south of France. One day I was given an opportunity to learn a bit more about this man and took a trip with my son to that glorious part of the world where the light feels more romantic, where the sea air is serene, and the women, well, you will most likely hear more about the women.

Ahead could have been a straight forward story about this fellow's life. but the writer, being of narcissistic demeanor, decided to complicate things. So here goes my effort to make the reading smooth and gentle sailing, the best my feeble skills can manage. There will be three stories intertwined. One is rather spot on narrative of the French man's life, he who befriended a German General and took his secrets to a famous American dancer in Paris during the Second World War (but that is getting ahead of myself), the next is exposition of the trip I took with my son to paradise, after all, just remembering that world brings thrill to my soul, and, being more than travel log, this turned into swashbuckling mystery adventure all in itself, and the last, about me again, are recollections of a life gone agonizingly wrong and why the son I traveled with did not even know that I was his father. There it is. Pretty damn true and sprinkled with sweet, sour and metaphysical. I hope you will be amused in spite my schizophrenic wanderings.

1964 The Petite Zinc Cafe/Bar at the old port of Cannes, France

“Leave him alone,” Madame Katarina, owner of the Petite Zinc, calls over to her new employee, Jacques, who was shaking the old man by the shoulder.

“He’s been lying here for an hour, hasn’t ordered a thing, and then he stinks to high heaven.” The young man looked down at the customer whose head was flat on the round table, mouth open, saliva dribbling out, dead asleep. Disheveled and bourre would be a generous description.

The proprietor of the distinguished establishment imagined she must educate her young barman, first day on the job, big and tough enough to work in such a place, and she would need that muscle in other times, but there was a decorum and a historical propriety to her establishment, and certain customers, Henri Bastille among them, might, on occasion, deserve a pass.

“He wakes and he’ll swing at you,” she noted as now she was standing next to Jacques and both were gazing down at the old man who wore a navy blue beret and a tattered grey woolen jacket. There were no others in the bar, only eleven in the morning after all, but this customer had downed several Pernod and the effect was typical.

“Then I’ll grab him by the rump and swing him out into the street.” Impressive words from a stout looking youngster.

Katarina, a tall lady and much older than her manicured and painted face might indicate, puts her hand on Henri’s shoulder and the old man shifted position to the touch. He had not shaved this week, his hair, what little there is of it, is ruffled and sticking out at angles. “My friend has some kind of cancer but not so long ago he might pick you up and throw you into the sea, not so certain that he could not do so even today. Look at this medal he wears on his jacket.” A tarnished round bronze coin hangs from a red triangular ribbon at the drunk’s lapel.

“The fellow is a kook. Who goes around wearing his war medals now? Especially, the guy must

be a hundred years old,” scoffs Jacques.

The Petite Zinc is Cannes’s bar for reprobates and ‘kooks’ and drunks and hookers and even tourists who are lost and know no better. Dark interior with ruby red walls and lots of mirrors, maybe she had a certain ‘je ne sais quois’ Jazz Age flair when the maître d’ had opened her so many years ago, but now she was certainly on the squalid side and success lay in having the cheapest booze in town. But even if glove treatment were necessary to accommodate such characters for the sake of business, that was not the why for the gentle touch from Katarina.

“General Charles De Gaulle himself came down to Cannes and handed this medal to Bastille after the town had tarred and feathered him. This little bastard is the meanest damn snake I ever knew and, yet,” a long pause, “you’ll see when you ask around. No, our Henri is nothing at all like you are imagining.”

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September 1986 Cambridge

“ I want the math nerds!” Lydia yells. She and Janie were the captains this week -- meant they got to pick amongst those of us who showed up who actually intended to play volleyball. To be honest, it was the beer. And the girls. And the music -- someone had put “Addicted to Love” blasting from a boombox. Volleyball was an afterthought for the majority, although amongst this happy hippy bunch there might be one or two who could really get irritatingly competitive. Four PM Fridays at the field by the Charles, mix of guys and girls, freshmen to a few graduate students, tall, runt, jelly bean and even beauty queens. Impressive how so many of these guys

and girls were in good shape considering this club did not attract jock types -- all that hiking and rock climbing and granola, I guess.

Thing is I did not like being branded as a math nerd. Matthew and Jerry Lee and I were lumped in such category because, one, we took math, well, we did major in it, and most of these students avoided the courses, and two, well, we took math and we probably looked a bit like the stereotypical math nerds to boot -- the wrong clothes, plaid sometimes, the wrong glasses, of course thick black frames, and disheveled was a common refrain I heard. But, rather like the guy who does not get into fights because he can damn well figure out the odds, and kind of like the guy who doesn't date because girls more or less avoid him very efficiently -- there were plus and minuses to the situation. Here and now, the thing is that Lydia just wanted Jerry Lee on her team. I lied before -- he wasn't like me. He was, after all, six foot three, and, in fact, was a gifted athlete. Add to that that she and about every other girl purred around him. Disgusting, as a matter of fact.

“Damn it, you know, this is pretty close to discrimination. You have castigated us,” I advised her. Castigate, castrate? -- pretty sure I got the point across. I wandered over to her side of the net.

“Don't cuss at me man, that ain't cool!” Lydia yells back. Brilliant reddish long hair blows in the autumn breeze, the cute dimples on her cheeks highlight a gloriously perfect visage.

“You know, about this business of calling us math nerds -- we are people, too. You must realize that I am flesh and blood and I have feelings. By the way, I am kind of sure that I am sincerely in love with you, Lydia.” She was alleged to be my best friend's girlfriend. Also, a “Brick House.” The song runs through my head when I think of her and I think it means that the

girl is gifted in having impressive parts in the right places which she does in spades. The thing is I know my friend Jerry Lee, and I know his proclivity to say and do the wrong thing eventually and so I guessed opportunity could possibly come. Not specifically to me exactly, that would be a bit of a stretch, girls are yet to be my forte, but even the disadvantaged have a right to dream.

A good day. There was, after all, a keg. This is the cool thing about the Outing Club. A few scattered greenish outings, of course, but their 'raison d'être', point of being, in my estimation, were excuses to drink. A keg of beer that the twenty or so of us would work through over the next two hours was not a shabby deal for two dollars. Maybe it was only Narragansett, but since the girls hardly drink at all, what the hell, the rest of us could just about get tipsy -- drunk, actually. Us, Matthew and I, math nerds, had worked the details out. Everyone contributes two dollars and that all equals up to enough to buy a half barrel keg of this cheap but perfectly palatable beer, which could equate to about ten cups to those of us who were actually intent on enjoying the stuff. Made for a hell of an outdoor party and even punching a volleyball now and then was not too much of a price -- as I noted, a percentage of us are not athletically inclined.

"Meet Susanna. She's on our team!" Lydia yelled and literally shoved this new girl in front of me. "This is Jay. Don't let his uncombed hair and silly pants fool you," she continued. Lydia could be brusque and vulgar -- maybe that was why she could so easily ignore my best friend's own coarseness. I would do perfectly well turning off this new girl quite expeditiously and without any help. Obviously, drop dead gorgeous was out of my stratosphere, so I kind of knew how such things turn out.

I had let my hair grow a bit long. A rough unkempt look was a plan. The pants were bell bottoms, maybe not the shorts they ought to have been for playing volleyball in September, but

good looking, nonetheless. Roses had them on sale and I liked the color and I always wanted some purple velvet pants. Honestly, I did understand the reason they were on sale is because hip people do not wear bell bottoms or velvet as of a year or two ago. Yeah, well, I have a budget. In addition, I also know that purple is for royalty. Makes me kind of unique. This is supposed to be the kind of place where unique is not a nugatory.

“Our Kiplinger Scholar,” she was discussing me with the newcomer girl, “not really from the homeless shelter,” and then stared at me quizzically, like appraising a cornered chicken you are about to butcher, as if the damn thing can’t understand your plan. Of course I am standing right next to these two lovely ladies and keenly aware of the inappropriate sullyng introductory remarks. “Shake her hand dummy,” she finally instructs, and adds, “he is smarter than he looks, just space cadet syndrome is all. Susanna is an English major, most likely your competition for ‘most likely to succeed.’ In truth, I have second thoughts about that for you Jay, really, the thing is that you don’t often seem to be paying attention.”

“To what?” my quick retort.

“To life as a matter of fact.”

This new girl was a visual delight and I was trying to think of something additionally clever to say, trying to ignore the implication that I might be improperly wired. This was to be splendid day, cool air, congenial people, two fine beers down already and there was no reason for turbulence.

“I can get you a beer,” I offered, attempting my audacious flirtation in a deep confident voice.

“Pretty sure I can get one myself. I paid my two dollars.” She turned away from me.

“ Yes, well.” The end of brilliant interplay. As I stared at her side profile I did get to notice not just the angelic look with long black hair and bangs cut straight across her forehead, Emmylou Harris kind of beauty, but with a big fluffy wool sweater puffed out in the right places she actually had a level of pulchritude which unambiguously placed her out of my zip code. Not that I don’t have confidence to aim high in the world, two more beers will likely get me there, but my only experience was in the voyeur hypothetical aspect of encounters with these spectacular female specimens. I honestly hadn’t a clue what one says to such a girl. I do suspect I like them far too much.

Jerry Lee materialized next to us.

“ Hey, Jay, you meet Susanna?”

I guess he had not witnessed my Waterloo.

“ We were thinking maybe you would go out to a movie with us later. Not a date, you know,” he was explaining to Susanna. She did not appear amused. “ Lydia and I are going and Susanna is Lydia’s new roommate. What’s her name went nuts and moved out. You guys’ll hit it off.”

The girl did kind of turn toward me to sort of reappraise things. The expression was not entirely discouraging. I tried a virile smile.

My friend Matthew pops up right next to me, kind of shouldering me to move. He is a good four inches shorter, nearly the same ill chosen clothing selection, and in my estimation even more nerdy than the definition. And, yet, I had heard a girl once say he was a ‘dreamy’, whatever the hell that means, and, obnoxiously more than that, he is particularly competitive in all things concerning me.

“ What’s the movie, Jerry Lee?” he asks, nudging further into the circle.

“ This new Steve Martin comedy.”

I could see him ogling the new girl. The damn fink.

“ Heck, I’ll go. You say you’re an English major?” he took the new girl’s hand like he was some kind of fucking prince. “ I signed up for Professor Kline’s class on Oscar Wilde.”

Then he actually steps in front of me completely cutting off any repartee on my part.

Their conversation took off like a zombie plague. The volleyball game began. I did not go out with Susanna that night and the damn beer really did not help me get her off my mind, kind of ever. If I could have moved on.

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About twenty years later    Present day    Manhattan

“ Where to?” Jerry Lee asks.

“ The Dive Bar.”

“ You are frickin kidding me? Isn’t that the place where that orangutan tried to put her hands down my pants?”

“ It’s close by. I’ve got to get up early and start setting up a show at MOMA.”

Ten at night and there was quite a crowd walking along Amsterdam, a mix of bundled up mostly Hispanic and African American men, few women and no children, altogether a rather gnarly looking group in the darker section of the city where the buildings hadn’t been renovated

and might remind one of the movie 'Taxi Driver' and that street of drug dealers and pimps -- in fact, scenes of that movie had been filmed just a few blocks away. Frozen winter air with gusts of knifelike ice made the walking particularly disagreeable, and, in addition, the streets and sidewalks were covered in slush and dirty puddles from the latest storm. We were tiptoeing a sort of tunnel clearing in the middle of the sidewalk so as not to completely soak our shoes, neither of us wore galoshes or boots.

"I thought you liked that kind of stuff?" I asked my erstwhile friend.

"Hell, then she threatened to beat the crap out of me when I told her I preferred my girlfriend. You know, the damn place isn't safe."

"My stud friend who used to get all the girls has become the 'Bashful' dwarf. Pretty girls make you run screaming away. And, by the way, you don't have a girlfriend."

"Hell, pretty? You kidding me? She had more mustache than I do."

Jerry Lee appraised me with an exaggerated self-righteous gaze. Yes, he was considered a rather handsome guy, not that I am at all attracted to the bum, but tall and suave, black mustache that actually might make him intimidating, and, in spite the silly name, imagine being named after a certified crazy, he, honestly, used to be a babe magnet. But there had been a run of failure in recent years. The toll was visible -- so I had invited him down from Boston when I'd heard my former college roommate had lost another job.

"What difference does that make?" I asked. "Well, yes, I get it and a bristle on the lips, even a stubble chin, might dampen excitement. But, there are times when one ought not to demand too high a standard. How long has it been, by the way, since you have been with a woman, like meaning intimate relations with a woman, not spent an hour on the phone with this

Polish MasterCard clerk halfway around the world trying impress her with your wit? We have all been thinking that maybe you might be leaning in the other direction. Not that I care, particularly, about your predilections, as long as you don't try to have your way with me in some nasty dark corner. I don't go for any of the kinky stuff, you see."

"You know you can shove it up your fucking ass," Jerry Lee spit out. "For your information that lady actually seems to like me and she did say she had plans to visit the USA. Anyway, it isn't MasterCard, it's my Comcast bill that they keep getting screwed up, and she's saving me a bunch of money. She's not exactly a fantasy." There was a pause as even he seemed to understand the ludicrous implausibility of such a hookup. "All this moola," he continued, "and the best you can do is drag me out again to the worst frickin dive bar in New York City. Hell, they even call it 'The Dive Bar.' You know we're liable to get the piss beat out of us just getting there. We're gonna get fucking robbed, beat up in an alley and fucking raped. Couldn't we take a cab? Your best damn friend, you see him once a year, the boy suddenly has more money than God, and you take me to a damn shit-hole in the middle of a god damn frickin ice storm!"

"It's called being busy working, bub. My son didn't whine like you when he was a baby with a diaper full of crap. And it isn't even snowing." I stopped and flexed my biceps -- kind of a Hercules imitation. Being rather bundled, and not quite ripped, it was not an impressive display. "Here we are two big as hell, mean ass machines walking down the street like we own the place, me in my twenty year old ragged black sweater and you, well, this hairy gorilla Neanderthal-like creature, looking particularly boulderous and rotund in a Walmart goose feather jacket -- is that the same damn one you had in high school? -- and what is it now, two hundred fifty pounds of

toned jelly at the least? Where the hell did you get these grotesque plaid pants?! I'm guessing some dead homeless guy bequeathed them? By the way, there is clearly the suggestion of a lack of moola with the both of us. I mean, really, it would take a truly dumb moron to want to rob boobs like us much less have sex with us. Good thing, because this used to be a rather difficult neighborhood for stupid white guys."

My friend stopped suddenly in the middle of the sidewalk and a crowd of folk behind almost ran into him. He spread his arms out dramatically, attempted to say something and just began laughing, then pulled himself together, a thought suddenly flashing to him and he then displayed an angry riled up indignation that actually blazed indignant fire in his eyes.

"Walmart? Guess I can't Gucci like you these days. By the way, who did you sleep with to get this damn money tree you've latched onto? Is there a ninety year old bimbo billionaire paying you to suck her twat these days?"

"I guess you never heard I had talent?"

"Susanna never shared with me your twat sucking expertise."

This image particularly annoyed me. Maybe because such experience was no longer a thing.

"As a sculptor. Matter of fact, like a world class famous sculptor now for your information."

"I damn well remember you poor as me and crying over a beer that nobody would ever buy your stuff. Fuck it all, now I can't even watch the local news without them bragging about the local boy hitting the big time. They make it seem like you're the reincarnation of fuckin Leonardo Da Vinci. By the way, where is all this frickin dough you're hiding? You sure seem

shy about showing me any of it. ”

“ Numbers on a piece of paper. Not like I ever went for fancy stuff.”

“ Well, come on big boy, I can go for the fancy stuff. Give me the hell some of that shit. I come to visit you out of the goodness of my heart, to this god-awful town on a damn twenty dollar bus ticket, guy behind me drinking stinking wine and then barfing in a bag the whole way, just to visit my supposed lonely friend who tells me what a wonderful fucking place this is, even though it is the home of the mother fucking Yankee asshole devils. And, this friend, who I expect to treat me to an interesting night out on the town, maybe visit some exclusive rich boy sites that poor unenlightened Bostonian bastards like me never get a chance to experience, maybe one of these over the top strip clubs I see in the movies filled with high end skinny ass models with gorgeous tits, or even just treat me to a simple fucking T-bone steak, at the least, but hell no, you decide to take me back to your crapola cheap bar for losers in Harlem, their claim to fame being that they serve the worst goddamn chicken wings I ever had.”

I did have to laugh.

“Well, technically this is not Harlem. We’re still on the Upper West Side for a few more blocks. Makes a difference as far as the price of real estate. The Upper West Side has some of the most expensive apartments in the city as I well know now.”

“ Whoop-t-fucking-dooda! Thank you for the geography lesson.”

“ Also, your language is inappropriately filled with cuss words, so much so that I sometimes can’t quite figure out what you actually mean to say. And, by the way, we are not in Boston now and some of my friends here are accustomed to the King’s English, culture and all that shit, if you don’t mind, of course.”

Jerry Lee had a wonderful chiseled face which produced an incredulous smile that was inescapably likable, and he now used an exaggerated comical gaze to search minutely up and down the sidewalk. “Cultured bastards, eh? Little people hiding in the cracks, you think?” he muttered professorially while doing a rather decent imitation of Inspector Clouseau.

This was the thing I missed the most, not having such a goofball to call up at the last minute and get a beer like in the old days, somebody more or less real to talk to, with opinions and passion, even if most of these thoughts and proclamations were probably completely wrong and damn irreverent about all the time. Still, there had been those days of vacuous conversation in a Somerville bar, oh, and the pitchers at happy hour which were half the price of one beer in this city, no matter what the hell I can afford now, and all of that felt something close to my really good old days. The thing is, it does occur to me that I am too young to be imagining the ‘good old days.’

New York City has its enchantment, but the people selling my sculptures, those coming to my shows, almost without exception prefer fancy complicated cocktails and hundred dollar bottles of wine, and then are determined to enlighten with intellectual, exquisitely boring conversation. Like I give a wit about the “radical interruption of Abstract Impressionism with the unmetaphysical Pop Art of the everyday world,” a damn comment I heard by this art critic discussing Ed Ruscha and explaining the shift in art that had taken place decades ago, and my work was a “metempsychosical leap into sycophancy.” It took a dictionary for me to understand that this, most likely, was a frank insult. Such a city, the particular milieu where I am ensconced anyway, of over the top pretentious perfectionists, all seemingly manicured and not a proper beer drinker among the bunch. The nirvana of a cold Pabst Blue Ribbon draft is lost on these blue

bloods. And, the hell of it is that I had lost connection to my old enjoyments as well. Something about having empty pockets had once magically made cheap boos and soggy pizza taste pretty damn close to heaven. Thus this journey to a more or less pedestrian local tavern.

“ If somebody picks on you I might even protect you,” I offered and raised a competent fist. Not completely a bluff as swinging a hammer and chisel for years on massive rocks, maybe not exactly chain gang level, but such work was not for sissies.

“ Like you protected me from the gypsy goon from hell?”

“ Just like that.” I slapped my fellow Bostonian on the back.

A cacophony of taxis zoomed down the road honking their horns at each other for no discernible reason. Occasionally, frequently, one of these maniacs would veer too close to the curb and spray a rain of muddy slush on the pedestrians. I suspect a bit of dark cabby humor.

“ You know, what the fuck ever happened to Preston? Can you imagine someone like her actually wanting to go out with us,” Jerry Lee declared and smiled brightly like one does when thinking things you might not want everyone to completely discern.

Preston was the prettiest, sexiest girl from back in college days.

“ She didn’t exactly go out with any of us. Just a group of senior girls, who started out as my friends by the way, and they then condescended to babysit for a group of immature freshmen worshipping idiots -- you included.”

“ I took her home drunk once. I could have really done something,” my friend proclaimed.

“ You were just as timid as me and you wouldn’t have had the balls.”

“ Like it might have been considered rape, you know, if she wasn’t really awake. I’m not

a fucking criminal!”

“ Still, you’ve got to admit we were on the order of losers. Well, you had Lydia, but you know what I mean.” Lydia was his girlfriend at that time, very attractive, but the romance, impressive to all of us at the time, did not survive college.

“ I kind of think I am not quite out of that ballpark. Still, I’m pretty fucking sure you don’t have bigger balls or anything else than me, but hell, you hit a homerun with Susanna and threw that goddess away.”

I stopped and looked at Jerry Lee.

“ Sorry,” he said.

Some things hurt too hard to joke about. One thing to lose a temporary girlfriend, even if you actually love her, but I had lost more than love -- a whole family, actually. Remembrance of the happy junk inevitably leads to the screwed.

“ You haven’t gotten over her, have you? God is a piss bucket. He gives all the good shit to idiots who don’t have a clue. You think they have any pretty chicks at this place?” We had arrived at the Dive Bar. “ Hell, I just want one half acceptable girl with monster tits, real or fake, does not actually matter. Intelligent conversation is not even a requirement. Is that too much to ask of God? Is God even a fucking real person? Do you hear me, God!?”

“ They’ve got darts,” I explained.

“ Fuck the darts.”

The building was rough brick and had a small neon sign hanging above the doorway which actually proclaimed in violet neon glory -- ‘DIVE BAR.’ We ambled into the cavernous place and found two vacant stools at a well-worn wooden bar counter. The rest of the stools were

occupied by a regular crowd of elderly sots. Jerry Lee was looking the place up and down to see if there might be hidden beauties hanging out anxiously waiting to meet us, him. I ordered pints of Sam Adams Winter Lager and the chicken wings inferno style.

“Damn funny they would serve Boston beer here,” he noted when the beer arrived.

“Don’t tell anybody that their fucking Yankees suck.”

“I called her, you know.”

“Who? Preston?”

“Who the fuck you think, moron? Susanna.”

“She’s married to someone else now, Jerry Lee. Not available even to a dick weasel like you who might wish to screw his best buddy’s former wife.”

“I didn’t call her to date her, I wanted to say hello and see how she was making out. She was my friend, too, you know, and a damn sweet girl. How is your boy?”

“Good.” I kind of wanted to punch this fellow.

Someone put Otis Redding’s ‘The Dock on the Bay’ on the jukebox. At least the place had decent music -- maybe my favorite song even -- existential melancholic Margaritaville, without the drinking bit, calming. Still, I kind of did not want to speak to Jerry Lee and I kind of thought the good old times were damn exaggerated.

“How often do you see him?”

“Last month for a weekend. Too much going on.”

“You gotta spend more time with the kid, buddy. Life ain’t about money.”

“Thank you for your fucking insight.”

“Just saying. Hey, I’ve got a joke for you. Voted the funniest joke in the world by this

website 'LaughLab.'”

I didn't want to hear it.

“Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy calls 911 and in panic tells them ‘My friend's dead. What can I do?’ The emergency operator tells him ‘calm down and, first, let's make sure he is dead.’ There is silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says ‘Okay, now what?’”

Jay stares at his friend.

“You ain't got no sense of humor. That's your problem.”

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The far past

In the center of Bauberg sur la Rhine, once known as Bauberg dur Meist, there stands a nondescript Romanesque Church in whose garden is a small white marble cross. Written on the middle bar are five names and the date 1871, the etching worn and nearly illegible. This marks the location of an event that is but forgotten now after two world wars and all the horrific deeds that have attended this part of the world.

(Yes, history, often kind of a downer actually, but relevant to this story and to the business of the why-for of evil. Memories are long.)

Early in the winter of 1871 Germany took possession of most of Alsace-Lorraine after the

defeat of the French Emperor Napoleon III. The Treaty of Westphalia awarded the semi-independent region, which had ostensibly been governed by France for five hundred years and consisted of a majority French speaking populace, to the nascent German Empire.

On March 19, 1871, with two feet of snow on the ground and more snow falling, the newly installed German Military police herded five men out from the relative warmth in the nave of the Church building, which had been turned into a holding cell for disgruntled citizens of Bauberg, around to the side of the building toward a stone wall. There a squadron of immaculately clothed German/Prussian soldiers stood at attention with rifles at the ready. The five men had allegedly refused to sign a pledge of allegiance to their new government. Many others had objected as well but the standing officer for the occupation concluded that it would not take too many examples to bring proper order to his jurisdiction. With the war not fully concluded here he had determined that a demonstration of proper import would be necessary to discourage resistance.

Like sheep, some dressed in their Sunday finest, some disheveled and wearing rags for shoes, all shivering and mumbling, wondering what this was all about, they shuffled through the virgin snow. Soon the purpose of the morning excursion became obvious and the group had to be pushed and prodded by the tips of polished bayonets against the ancient wall of the Church transept.

Firing squad formation. Two men bayoneted as they attempted to run through the line of soldiers. The Obersthauptmann raised his arm and barked "Entlassen!" The bodies fell. Howling, lingering screams. An order to fire on those still moving. "Gott-rest Ihre seelen," from the officer. Blood on the white snow and splatters of brilliant crimson across the Church wall

would be left there for days to publicize the procedure.

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Six months after Present day    On the way to the Statue of Liberty

“ Four years old and his family all killed during the Second World War. Shipped off to another universe with a fake name and nothing else, and no one even knew where he came from. What a way to start out life, don't you think? Can you imagine not having a home or family or country?”

My son must have grown two inches since we had returned to the USA. We stood out on the deck of a ferry crossing from Battery Park to the Statue of Liberty, outside at the rail and gazing back at the tallest building in America. A bit cooler than I thought it would be and we should have dressed warmer.

“ You found him?”

“ That's why I brought you here.”

Isaac, oblivious of the chill, was clearly mesmerized by this early morning view of the Manhattan skyline. Above the mist a crimson sunrise brilliantly illuminated the top half of the mirror glass building like she were a swaggering ghost.

“ Weren't there two towers once?”

No, he was not yet born then, but he must have seen the images a hundred times on television.

“ Well, they rebuilt them into something even more spectacular.” I did not want to remember details of that day. We were here on account of another war that had ended several generations ago, but it occurred to me that the tentacles of war reach out infinitely. And now, the trip I had taken earlier this year with my son, a walk into some family history, had led us to this place.

“ Why are we going to the Statue of Liberty? You told me he lived in one of those skyscrapers. Couldn't we have gone to his home?”

“ He wanted to meet us here. I spoke to him a few times on the phone and he is an old man and has his ideas. It is your job to give him this.” I handed my son the package we'd brought back from France.

“ Does he know what we are bringing?”

“ I haven't told him. In fact, it took forever for this Mr. Nigel Livingstone, a.k.a. our little Jakub Rothstein, to even take me seriously, like anyone could possibly joke about such a matter. But, I sent him the photo we found and that's what it took.”

“ You sure this is the boy, well, he's an old guy now, isn't he? I guess it matters to know who your parents are?”

My little fellow had a way with words. He was looking at me and smiling.

“ The orphanage found the original paperwork and the name and dates all match the letter we found in Cannes.”

Quite a wind blowing. The ferry was massive and seemed to plow right through the choppy waves with a steady roaring grind. A foghorn bellowed in the distance and then suddenly we could see emerging from mist the emerald green lady holding her golden goblet.

“ Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me...” I recited what I could remember of the poem written inside at the base of the Statue of Liberty. I looked forward to hearing the orphan’s story and tell him about where we had been and where he had come from. The package was just a thing, in spite it’s worth, and, yes, my grandfather had saved it for a boy he would never see again, this boy. The story was the valuable thing here, and I was pretty sure Mr. Livingstone would appreciate knowing this bit about this past.

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The far past      Colisee Strasbourg      1913 German occupied Alsace Lorraine

Bastille slugged him hard as he could. Kind of a wild punch and he was usually more disciplined than such thuggery, but the bald guy insisted on insulting his manhood. “Schwul! Schwul!” -- either calling him a faggot or a limp dick, German not being his preferred language, Bastille, nevertheless, was pretty certain that the words were a rank affront. Not unexpected, really, as many of the first string boxers were a cocky sort and wouldn’t be in this business if they weren’t primeval bastards, but Bastille, even if he were just one of the guinea pig untrained street boy fill-ins, didn’t like such boorish slander a bit and figured he would end this thing quickly. They give you twenty Marks to win or ten if you lose and they think it was a good show, a good show meaning a plethora of pounding and, better yet, spit up teeth and blood and get back up for more punishment, but the hell with the show part of this shit. This was full tilt now even if the folks who put him in the ring clearly expected and wanted easy fodder for the new bull on the

rise.

The crowd demanded buckets of blood and broken bones and screamed in fury every time the favored giant threw a punch.

Short and stocky, ninety five kilos of gristle and stout bone and stone muscle, no fat, not a damn bit of fat in the Bastille family, and no cowards he knew of in his bloodline, the guinea pig Bastille held his ground and wouldn't back up from the furious fists of the Kaiser bastard. His mother had died of liquor and his father, who knows where he was, and that left Bastille at sixteen to fend for himself, alone, and it was remarkable what one does learn when there is no other choice.

He faked a hook and came in with a solid undercut to the bloke's belly. Hard as hell stomach muscles and the fellow did not even flinch. The son of a bitch was four inches taller and twenty kilos heavier, a true heavyweight and Bastille had no sane business going against such a monster, but there was more money in the heavyweight bouts and too much chutzpah in Bastille blood to know any better. He'd lied about his age, but he was a big kid, a French speaking kid, that they liked, and they told him he had nothing to worry about.

A goddamned straight right put flashing lights and an awful rum drunk grog to his head. The room was spinning and his legs walked silly. Instinct took over and he lay against the ropes with balled up arms trying to protect his nose. A few good smashes to his kidneys could end it but the bully was filled with maniacal rage and not thinking, figuring he would soon bust his way through the covering arms. This wasn't going to go down easy at all. Certainly, Bastille figured, he must have spit out enough blood now to get his ten Marks, but that wouldn't go far enough to pay his hospital bill, and especially pointless if the brute killed him, but twenty marcs could buy

a heap of stout meals and beer and a bit of the rent he owed his cousin.

Another goddamned awful smash to his chin. Hell, maybe it was time to find a real job. Of course, there were few jobs these days in Strasbourg for a proud French speaking Alsatian even if you hide your true colors and speak fucking German and wear their prissy clothes and bow to these mother sons of bitches. The Germans owned the businesses, had all the money. One more stiff belt to the nose and this time he felt a continuous stream of thick liquid running down his cheek. He opened his mouth, felt it get stuck and figured the guy must have broken his jaw.

The devil was smiling at Bastille, mouthing another cute taunt -- "Deine mutter geht in der arsch." A common enough blasphemy, but about his dead mother -- this was obviously going too far! Why would anyone say such a thing about another fellow's mother? Damn, another wop to the face. Wop! Wop! This big boy definitely had a really good jab and was toying with him like teasing a wounded ant. Maybe the fellow got paid more for stretching out a massacre.

Twenty fucking kilo difference!! The scheduled fighter had pulled out when he broke his hand sparing and, hell, a few murderous blowout knockouts to please a crowd and at least one patsy on the cards who could be carried away on a stretcher -- this always made for a profitable night of theater for the promoters -- and thrilled the bloodthirsty maniacs in the crowd. Still, Bastille, today's fill in and supposed patsy, did have five wins and one loss as a middleweight, and he didn't think of himself as the sacrificial goddamned patsy. He needed money. Not a full meal in a week and he was tired of sleeping in his cousin's barn. And, anyway, the guy who had beaten him before, a pro, was just a decision and close at that, and Bastille had had plenty of experience on the street with bigger mothers. Damn, he had even kept his teeth through all the

fights. The bigger they are the slower, and he had figured as plump as this bucket of muscles was he might be slow as molasses and a few good belly busting chops ought to knock him down to size.

But the hell with this thinking stuff, the only thing he was getting was a nasty brutal pasting to the face, maybe a broken jaw, and yet, he ought to get a bonus as he was certainly doing his part with the blood splaying out onto the canvas. Looked like a regular butcher shop whenever he thought to glance around a bit. The crowd ate it up and hollered like banshees wanting more carnage and gore. They were mostly Germans, truly, spoke German, immigrants and converts as well who hated the native French, those few who had somehow stuck it out here after losing the last war.

He had to win this damn thing. Maybe get some real money by going up to Freiburg and fighting more monsters from across the river -- the native true Germans. A Frenchman pummeling a German in Germany, that sure as hell ought to pull in anarchy and beaucoup marks.

Damn it again, Bastille was on the canvas and the gym was whirling out of control wildly. He could see the ref counting him out with his fingers. Like a dream, didn't feel a thing, maybe dead -- grabbed the ropes and tried to pull himself up, stumbled badly, the ref should definitely have ended it here, but there must not be adequate butchery yet. Let the poor fellow get up the crowd roared. Just slink back to the fields Bastille was half thinking, to a nice safe job breaking only his balls in the fields for pennies a day, Jacques's father happily hiring him in exchange for a bed of straw and meals of rotten meat -- they sold the good meat and only cooked those few pigs that died of disease -- and maybe work him to death, which might to be about equivalent to being clobbered to death. But that wasn't the life he was after. The pain was all

gone as he considered this predicament.

Got up at the count of ten and covered his head as the bull rushed in and this time pummeled unfettered at Bastille's gut like he was determined to drive the spleen flat through him or at least turn his insides into a mush and blood pudding pie. Kept smashing him, but now Bastille dropped his elbows low and caught most of the blows and survived until the bell rang. Stumbled toward the stool, couldn't figure out where his corner was, eyes weren't quite working, or maybe just blinded in blood. His handler, who didn't give a flip, handed Bastille a wet towel and suggested maybe he deserved this beating for not fighting like a man.

"Put your fucking damn hands up and swing at him you sissified French pussy," he mumbled without much enthusiasm. A punch drunk himself, the pudgy rabbit-eared former boxer manned the corner for all the chumps who had no name or standing or hope in hell, like Bastille, this day's sacrificial lamb.

Bastille thought of the waitress at the cafe. She was a pretty little dish and even condescended to wasting some time chatting with him whenever he had accumulated a few Pfennings and could buy a glass of the house Rhine wine. Wouldn't do much good if he came out of here with nothing -- they don't let you sit in the cafe if you can't afford even a simple cup of coffee. Ought not to get any more bumps or bruises, he thought, thinking of the girl and that he must look quite the pretty mess now.

The bell rang and he drug himself slowly toward the muscle-bound leviathan. Kind of like a hairy gorilla and the bitch wielded arms that were clearly too inflated for such an ugly small bald skull. Time to get serious. He shook his head a few times and pounded the side of his face with his gloves to get the cobwebs out, wake himself up a bit for this last round. He didn't

usually let guys hit him so generously and he'd never been knocked down before today. Time to pay attention.

“Nique ton mere vous spec de con!” Bastille spit at the bull.

The beast heard the words and hesitated a second, maybe he understood, puzzled and outraged that the little shit still had some fight left in him. Then he smiled and came rushing in without a worry in the world as if his opponent were a tiny flea that just needed some swatting and he started throwing big boulderous wild punches meant to slaughter all hint of life out of this persistent arachnid. Ponderous, powerful, but getting rather slow now and predictable if you could pay attention, and Bastille, beginning to get his wits about him finally did duck and could block the majority of blasts, but the bull was this massive whale and strong and kept swinging and backing Bastille to the ropes and it seemed like he would be quite content to keep this up until he could mash the little insect through to the ground dead and squashed to eternity. Bastille tried to jump to the side and around him but the fellow knocked him back and kept throwing more furious sledgehammer roundhouse punches. The savage was indubitably determined to break the little French fucker's neck. Niceties had gone out the window.

Nonetheless, even murdering beasts get tired, and after a particularly enthusiastic fury the colossal arms sunk off to the side for a touch of rest, and, maybe, as well, because the beast wished to admire such fine demolition. Then, just with that little vague hint of breathable air, Bastille sent a right uppercut with every bit of sinew that he had left straight up and into the mother fucker's epigastrium. You could hear a pop of air gush out of the bull's mouth, and his eyes bulged from their sockets in stunned surprise. Must have caught him just at the perfect moment as he was breathing in and the stomach muscles were unguarded and loose, the stomach

full of air and like a balloon exploding, or maybe it was plain serendipity, but this one categorically fucking good shot was all it took as the man gasped furiously and couldn't pull any air in, couldn't bring up his arms to protect himself, the arms splayed out wide as if he were being crucified, eyes bugging out in terror and pain, and he was furiously struggling to breath. Bastille reared back and let loose a litigious right hook flush on the bastard's nose, clearly busting something into pieces as there was a massive cracking noise, the blow knocking the German gentleman silly and unconscious, still standing like a broken tree for an impossibly long impotent moment, more or less dead on his feet. The crowd seemed stunned to silence. Bastille sent one left cross more for fun and vengeance, right smack on the chin and breaking more bones, and the tree thundered like an earthquake onto the canvas.

“For my grandfather ...” Bastille whispered as he stood over the hulking bloody mess on the canvas.

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Present day Logan Airport

Clearly she was far too attractive to be effective in interviewing me. Youth, blond, thick cherry red lips, dark eyebrows, sporting a rather obvious strip club muscled dancer body and not at all the nerdish Harvard grad I had expected. A guy couldn't really concentrate with such earthy distraction and my thoughts were jumbled as I battled the impulse to flagrantly stare at her face and then explore the rest of her – Italian maybe, a hint Egyptian with sharp dark

mesmerizing features, Nefertiti in the flesh – did they have blonds in Egypt? I recalled an exhibit at the Met where they once displayed a collection of four or five small ancient wooden bust sculptures supposedly of that lady. The sculptures were sublime, spoke the definition of feminine beauty and seeing them at that time I would count as a defining inspiration to my future. Well, at the least, it gave me a good idea of what I wished but could never accomplish.

“Your last sculpture sold for what would be literally many times my full year salary.”

The statement was an accusation, I suppose. But, I could not admit to a reporter, even if she were decadently stunning, that, yes, certain people, the right kind of people in this business, had likely confused me with something more substantial.

“Christie's apparently wants to buy a year of your work and sell it at auction like that British fellow a few years back who set some kind of multimillion dollar record. You must feel on top of the world?”

Wasn't sure how you answer such a question, is it a question at all? I could imagine this girl on a moonlit evening, her ruby lipstick glowing, lacy sheer flimsy white gown, her breath close and fresh on my face as I faintly brush my lips to her cheek. My imagination was running wild .... oh, the hint of intoxicating perfume.

“You are off in space, you know? They told me you were not quite right,” the journalist said with a decidedly pointed tone.

“Who are ‘they’?” I was also tired and didn't like to give interviews and wouldn't have done this one except that the lady had persistently called for weeks leaving text messages on my cell phone. It did not hurt that she'd sent handwritten scented notes in the mail. And, of course, I did google her photo, and that was the kicker. Clearly, the lady must know she is pretty and uses

the gift brilliantly. Never quite polite to ignore beauty.

“My boss.”

“Well, he’s got a point, I don’t much like talking about my sculpture. If I have to explain the work then it loses some meaning to me.”

“This is going to make for a spectacular article. I’m guessing you expected we would talk about the local food scene or the weather? We’ve been sitting here for an hour and I’ve done ninety percent of the talking. Maybe you could just tell me what you think makes so many people want to pay a fortune for your work.”

“You don’t concur?”

“I’m writing a story about a Bostonian who has become a successful artist. I wish I had money to buy art.”

“Would you buy something of mine if money was not a question?”

“I understand Jeff Koons – at least he makes work I recognize.”

“Balloon animals. Nudes with impressive you know whats. I don’t think he makes them with his own hands, maybe not even his own ideas. But the nude stuff, the Disney cartoon animals, these are always a crowd pleaser.”

She had a column in the Boston paper that was more celebrity gossip and sightings around town, not the arts, nothing intellectual. All that Ivy League education more or less for fluff.

They were at the Boston airport, the American Airline terminal, where she had met him after his arrival from New York. They sat in a corner at the far end of the building and were almost alone. Not an unreasonable spot for an interview -- big glass windows and lots of bright

skylight in a massive space. Pity, he had not had any alcohol to say too many stupid things, at least they might then have an entertaining conversation. Across the way facing them was a couple, obviously married, middle-aged. She was staring off in one direction, he the opposite direction, nothing notable or discernible in their expressions.

“You see those two across there?” I nudged my shoulder in their direction. They were far enough away that they could not hear our conversation and so I felt emboldened to create a story. “Maybe getting close to fifty, kids in college or grown up, a reasonable house in the suburbs, perhaps they live next to Winchester Country Club, a million dollar house at least, well, two million in Winchester. Now they are going to visit their grown up boy who is just flunking a class at Columbia, and they’ve spent seventy thousand a year for that.” He could guess at some kind of desperate ennui in their eyes, a hint of something not kosher peaking out. Like Koons, the child and the adult, a ying and a yang, the juxtaposition, the disturbing always makes the story.

“I didn’t want my life ...” I started and paused. This was the problem with interviews – one can take them too seriously and wander off into directions that are better left unsaid. Who should care what I think, really? The safe path is to come up with a standard spiel and do it enough so it feels natural and makes the interviewer content, and certainly don’t treat a reporter like they are your psychiatrist. The sun was coming hard through the tinted windows of this massive space, the warmth luscious on my brow. All this nonsense.

“They have wonderful faces, full of something unique and fascinating. I try to find that spark in people I meet or see in life. I envision their lives, their essence, this spectacular soul all humans have that I engage in little glimpses, try to capture a hint of that in my work. I think there

is a nobility in all of us, any of us, but we rarely take a moment to appreciate such grace. You know, like slow down and count your blessings kind of meditation. My faces attempt to exude the majesty ordinary people have coping with their labyrinthine existence.”

Sounded like rather good bull shit to me, maybe a bit too much, and certainly a hell of a lot different thread than what I actually see when I look at this particular couple. They remind me of me. They exude no damn excitement at all.

My journalist beauty was smiling as if she bought my explanation, or maybe she was truly brilliant and saw through me as a clown.

“I don’t see it,” she said. “They appear like anybody else on the street, and the experts say your stone sculptures are extraordinary. To quote the New York Times ‘Extraordinary constructions of futuristic phantasms, the Gods of nature wrought in sunder of stone.’”

“Silly description. What the hell does it mean anyway?” The quote referred to the bit of work that had brought me success, these damn bubble abstract sculptures, nothing to do with my faces, although even those were not exactly Rembrandtesque.

I did want to tell her that I agreed, that the folks across the way were likely just simple people with a dispirited visage and my objective was to not end that way. But the way she agreed with me reminded me of another time when I actually could become mesmerized by almost any anonymous face, the twists and turn of their lips, subtle squints of their nostril, inflections in the wrinkle of their eyes and brow as they mused paying bills and dreamed lies of future fortune and happiness. Each wrinkle, each gray hair and twitch stood for some difficult patch and beating back the inevitable. In time back far before now, with such honest intention, all of these rocks I had fashioned, all of those weeks, sometimes months spent on just one face,

did seem a purpose and then, before, when I had something of a soul, this was nothing to do about money.

“I make structures that people like to look at. Luck, not much rhyme or reason, I guess. That’s what my stuff is all about – who you know, who you shake hands with, sleep with, all this elegant perfect timing, serendipity, ect., ect. Why don’t you come to my studio down in New York, maybe there I can speak more eloquently while around my work? Actually I think you would make a wonderful model for a sculpture – you have the perfect lines.” The heck with interviewing, she was so much better to look at than the couple across the way, or any damn inanimate object I would have in the studio. Another artist friend once told me that many women would remove their clothing just for the chance to become immortal, and I had never yet actually engaged in that tack. The fact that I generally carve faces, abstract or not, was beside the point.

“A rather perfect line.”

“Your newspaper has called me a so called ‘expert.’”

“Your faces are elongated and disfigured – I don’t know if I would want that. My grandchildren would laugh at me.”

“Surely you can not have grandchildren yet? Damn, you are a special woman.”

I could sense a smile breaking just slightly.

“Maybe I can capture a part of you that would not remind anyone of deformity, which you don’t seem to have any, by the way. Exquisite lips, maybe a sculpture of your lips only. You are abstractly and prophetically transcendent and I would promise to try my best to capture that.”

“My guess is that reality to you is a pejorative, and hyperbole apparently has gotten you

places you wish to go.”

“I don’t exactly know how to respond to that, but, I could give a better effort with the interview. I think I am tired. I’m not always such a boring lump. You guys surely have a budget and can interview a fellow in his proper environment.”

She got up from the seat and smiled. This certainly looked like a good riddance kind of plastic smile.

“A dinner, perhaps, when I come back to Boston,” I persisted. In my early years, when I didn’t have anything to go on but personality the girl would be running off. No, hell, I had not done so badly at all. Tired and out of practice.

“You know I did a little research about you before I came out here. You’re married and have a little boy.”

“The married part is over about two years now.”

“This interview has been a complete waste of time. You are a particularly insipid conversationalist, but I kind of like the idea of a sculpture of my lips. Maybe.”

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The far past      Strasbourg, Reichsland      October 1914

“We’ve got to be at the square in the morning.”

“Yeah, hell I will.”

“They’ll come get you.”

“In a pig’s ass will I join the pig’s army,” Bastille spat out in a hushed voice.

Jacques ordered another two steins of Karlsbrau lager. The pub was packed and they were seated at the last two stools of the bar. A cacophony of frenzied conversations, mostly concerning the edict to report to the Reich Minister at the Kaiser Platz in Strasbourg's contribution to the *Deutsches Heer* /German army. There were supposed to be twenty thousand volunteers from Strasbourg, of course there was nothing volunteer about any of this as all men aged eighteen to twenty-five were obligated to report. The notices had been sent out a week ago and posters plastered all over town and throughout the province. At the least, the Germans were efficient and they kept meticulous records of everyone, knew where you lived, how old each member of the family, and rumors abounded about the fate of those who did not honor their duty to the motherland. At least in this district of primary German speaking public most of the men would go to military camp while those in the primary French speaking districts of Alsace were off to some sort of education camp, prison most likely.

"Heinrich, how about an order of choucroute and sauerbraten!" Bastille yelled across the ancient bar to the fellow pouring beers from a keg.

"You got money?" he yelled back.

Bastille flashed some Deutsche Marks. This was certainly an unusual circumstance that he could afford food at the Kammerzell Bar. But he had been winning his boxing matches and the pig farm owned by Jacques's father was rather busy these days with the army's rapid expansion and need for provisions. His cousins could actually pay him for work there.

"You'll share with a friend, of course?" Jacques suggested.

"What kind of damn friend are you? You suggest I head off into the abyss and most likely go and kill our own fellow Frenchmen?"

“You won’t be alone. I’m obligated as well, and, in any case, war is not a certainty. Seems like every year is some scare or another, and our French brothers have a propensity to talk big and slink away when the time comes. Think of it as a vacation, three stout meals and even five pints of lager a day for a regular soldier, and perhaps some damn spiffy uniforms. No more stinking in this rot of rags you wear.” He inched down the bar suspecting that the humor would be lost on his cousin.

“You’ve been around swine too long and lost your senses. How do you think a Jacques Cartier and a Henri Bastille will fare in the German Army? We should have changed our names like the rest of the cowards when these bastards took over. The Bosch will string up our skinny little asses and cut off our balls and then use us as target practice. You know we sure as hell can’t fight for the goddamn Heines!”

A few others around them heard the slur but this was mostly native Alsatian at this bar and they were generally not discordant with Bastille’s sentiments.

“Keep your voice down, Bastille,” the bartender yelled when he came by and slapped a plate of steaming sausages and cabbage and potatoes in front of him. “No Sauerbraten today.”

“I’ll join my sister in Paris,” Bastille whispered to his cousin. “She’s married some rich fellow who owns a shoe factory -- hell, he’ll give both of us a job. We can get out of here tonight.”

“You’ve got a match this weekend -- that big monster from Munich. A thousand Marks if you beat him and then a chance at the championship. Hell, you might even get the girl you like to look at you if you win that one. She’s not exactly a fool, you know. Pig farmers don’t attract women.”

The damn shame of it, Bastille thought, exactly when he was getting somewhere in this boxing business and he would have to slink away in the middle of the night. They had even put his name on the marquee at the Colisee. Five straight wins over favored brutes and bigger and louder crowds each time. The loss of the girl at the cafe would be another tragedy, she had hinted a bit of eyes for him these days.

“The frogs will put you in their army. They’ll feed you cold frog soup and force you to grow some pansy frog mustache. You know these sissies will clearly get their butts whipped again and you’ll end up back here in prison or dead. And can you imagine drinking the swill they call beer? The Germans damn well make the best beer.”

Bastille sipped his lager. His cousin did have a point.

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The present

“You’ve got to go. It can’t wait until the summer.” There was almost panic in her voice.

“Listen, I’ll buy you a first class ticket. I am in the middle of a really busy season of shows. Heck, I’ll put you up at the Carlton.” The Carlton was Cannes’s most illustrious hotel on the beach. “I’m doing pretty good financially.” I set down the hammer. Brilliant late afternoon light filtering into the Central Park penthouse and I should have turned off the cellphone if I had wanted to work.

“No, no, you don’t understand,” there was a pause, “I don’t know what might be in that

box.”

Danielle was not healthy enough for the trip. My aunt was generally a ball of fire and supercharged lovability, but she sounded discombobulated and rattled. Must be a bit of dementia, after all how old was she? A box of her father’s belongings had been found at the house of a relative who had just died in the south of France. My grandfather died in 1963. The dead guy’s sister had found the box in a closet as she was processing his affairs and had called my aunt.

The dead man, Charles Jouselet, had been Danielle’s first cousin, therefore my mother’s first cousin. Henri Bastille, my grandfather, had died of a brain tumor before either daughter had been able to return to France. Both immigrated to the United States in the late 50’s and you would have thought that a box of memories like this would be a welcome surprise.

“I’ve been considering a trip back -- it’s been a lot of years for me.” Yes, this was a family thing, and I had been quite the slug in such matters. And, there was Professor Medaine who had sort of gotten me into the art business in the first place. There was the old house on the hill our family still owned. Only one trip in the last ten years -- that was all Susanna and I could afford in earlier days.

“Take Isaac. He needs to know something about his ancestors.”

“Not sure how Susanna will go for that.”

“She’s remarried, I heard.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.”

We talked for a few more minutes. A few odd things she said about her father, about the restaurant on the beach she said they should have inherited, all the bills he left them, the drinking, and finally, a letter her father had written just before he died – she would send it, I

would understand. I told her I would get back with her about the matter. I had a show coming up, damn it all. Would think about it. Yes, damn it, I would go, just had to work out a schedule. No, I didn't tell her the 'damn' part, just thought the damn word.

Sunset flood the room which was at the back side of the whole floor apartment. About half an hour or so of this light, and although I am not a painter something about such luminescence was wonderful for creativity. In the morning there is the sunrise over Central Park invading the living room and making for a luxurious coffee. But it is the late afternoon which is best, especially in winter, with the colored heavy light ensconcing through these massive windows when one could almost imagine you are lost in an ethereal paradise.

My mind travelled to thinking about family. Danielle had run away with a rich Spanish playboy. While that affair didn't last, she did finally make a reasonable life for herself in the US and never, in my presence, had ever had anything good to say about her father. There were vague comments about sexual shenanigans, leaving their mother kind of thing -- rather the style of French men and women anyway in my experience. And there were stories of making his daughters work for little pay at his beach restaurant, 'slave labor' as she called it, and then the hints about Corsican friends -- I looked it up, a reference to the French version of the mafia. Could there be fear about the old guy having more debts out there, or even enemies? How old would they be? One hundred? Funny thing is, she did not even want the box, rather wanted me to sink it at the bottom of the dark blue sea and that part made me laugh, but she would not elaborate when I asked.

The good part, and I soon realized there might be a good part, was that maybe I could take my son with me on his spring break from school next month. After all, he was supposed to

spend some time with me in New York. What do you do with a little boy in New York -- a museum or two, I suppose, maybe a little party, but he would be bored with my gilded friends here. Six days might be enough to take a trip overseas if I could get a direct flight to Nice. My aunt had never asked me for anything in my whole life, and, surely, this was a little enough matter.

We would visit what was left of the old plantation where my sisters and I had played, the wonderful restaurants I used to dream about back when they were out of our price range, the road through the countryside into the Alps, the Upper Corniche from Nice along the coast to Monte Carlo and then into Italy which I had described in great detail in all my Teddy Bear stories to Isaac growing up. And there was my teacher. Not for so long a time perhaps, but he had made a difference. And, regardless to Danielle's attitude about her father, I did have a fretful fascination in learning more about my grandfather. The tales I had heard as a child, that time that had played so much into my psyche, World War II and its aftermath, a France nearly in ruins and needing to be rebuilt, the playground of my youth when there were still remnants of war high on the hill where we stayed -- old German bunkers at the park on the Croix Des Gardes with hidden machine gun or cannon mounts, a few remaining potholed and destroyed buildings still standing on our drives through the countryside, and the abandoned Jewish mansion where German Officers had lived during the war.

I never met Henri Bastille. In 1957 my mother had come to the United States and married an American navy officer, and never had the funds to travel back to France until it was learned that her father was dying from a brain tumor, and by then it was too late as he died the week before she could get to Cannes. This had been the great regret of my mother's life.

Danielle's portrayal of a drinker, a scoundrel, a womanizer, a schizophrenic businessman who had pursued multiple harebrained schemes and lost the family fortune countered to that of my mother, who described a man who had started the first beach restaurant in Cannes, Riviera Plage, and, supposedly, had been a war hero with the French Resistance. The one picture I have of him -- bald, built like a bull, standing on the beach in Cannes with a baby lion in his arms and smiling like he owned the world -- had stood on top of my mother's desk for all my youth. Snippets of conversation between the two sisters, rumors of bootlegging and murder, but I don't think my mother ever believed any of that. Might even be something interesting in this box, and if it were full of foul surprise then I would do my duty and sink the blasted thing at the bottom of the Mediterranean.

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The far past      The Battle of Verdun    1916

The rifle butt smashed hard against Bastille's helmet, just enough to cause only a minor concussion but not so hard as to break any bones in the skull. He tumbled from his perch leaning against the mud wall and landed face first in the icy foul slime which filled six inches on the trench floor. He lay there half awake, hallucinating, imagining he was on the farm and cleaning the pig stall -- the taste of wet shit blistering on his tongue. The Lieutenant ripped him up from drowning by the cuff of his coat collar and thrust him like a ragdoll as hard as he could back against a wood plank which braced the mud wall. A cocked pistol barrel was shoved to his cheek and held there as Bastille opened his eyes to see wild fury in his Lieutenant's eyes.

“Espece de Con! You will be shot for dereliction of duty!” It did not appear that the officer intended any trial. Out here such battlefield discipline was not extraordinarily rare but generally applied to those running in the opposite direction or hiding in some hidden space. “You fucking Fritz cunt – I knew we couldn’t trust a Wackes!” (a particularly foul slang referral to Alsace Lorraine recruits).

Bastille mumbled an attempted apology as he regained his senses and felt a horrible headache. He’d been on duty on the front line trench for three days with no relief, water or food -- what did they expect? Close your eyes for a second and they try to whack your brains out. More explosions and a moaning cry down the line, certainly more casualties.

“You will pay for this!” The gun was withdrawn and the Lieutenant had not shot him and was running toward the wounded.

Ten feet away was a dead comrade, his head partly blown off this morning and not by the French Officer but a lucky bullet that came right through the gun hole in the sand bags above the trench wall. The damn fucker had actually screamed and lay there moaning for hours until death finally arrived. All Bastille could do was put a blanket over him and wonder how anyone could make any sort of noise when half their brain was missing, an eye brown out, no ear, a sucking sound when he breathed as the air came through mangled sinus bones and cheek bone. Truly, the fellow had damn good fortune to be out of this mess. Bastille saw no point in straightening the body, but he had grabbed the man’s ammunition and the ration of wine. The poor bloke wouldn’t need that now. The dead would lie bloating for days, and sometimes he was allowed to help carry them away himself and he knew of the massive pile of French soldiers rotting and stinking at the western end of a rear trench. Now there was a squad in his section,

lucky bastards maybe, and all they did was carry the dead away and they were busy today. The officers would no longer let the regular soldiers do such a task and see how many on their side were getting slaughtered, as if they were not brutally cognizant of the butchery.

Explosion after explosion, each one causing the earth to shake. Jacques had been right -- the French were an inept and dysfunctional army. One defeat after another and now finally lodged backed up to the right bank of the Meuse River, interminably, another defeat here and there would be nowhere to hide but the sewers of Paris. Perhaps he should have stuck with his cousin, he reflected, joined the German Imperial Army and had some wiener schnitzel and beer instead of this rotten horse meat and molded vinegar wine. But he'd just be complaining in the same position half a kilometer away.

There would be no more sleep for awhile. Between explosions and a Lieutenant's bullet and six inches of slimy muck on the trench floor, much of it urine and shit as there were no proper latrines out here and too many decaying dead soldiers, there was no place to lay down in any case. Nothing to do but wait for death.

He peaked out the four inch square hole in the sandbags above the trench wall, just large enough to stick out the end of his rifle and sight a bit of terrain that was his responsibility to protect. 'No Man's Land' was nearly four hundred meters of cratered and muddied fields. Shoot any fucking thing that moved night or day, but of course if you kept your face in the hole too long it would surely get removed. Best to just fake the bullshit and pray this was not the day the Germans decided to invade his little corner of hell. He picked up the bottle of army issued wine and took a sip -- cold, bitter, tasted about like piss. "Visser les grenouilles!" he screamed to himself. (screw the frogs).

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## The present

“I’m sorry. I guess I should have called.”

“He thought you had forgotten about him.”

“The flight was delayed because of wind, I think.”

Susanna’s new house was in the heart of Belmont – three story brick, looked to be a hundred years old, classical Colonial style with glassed in porches flanking both sides and a vast front yard for Boston standards, must be half an acre. This neighborhood had real sidewalks, our old neighborhood had had a rather muddy nonexistent curb for a walkway. Here there were fancy street lamps lining the road. Where we had lived together was working class.

“You are in a palace,” I noted. I had heard that she had insisted on the move from her new husband’s old house which he had built with a previous wife. The thought of ‘new husband’ was still discomfoting although the split between us had been as amiable as people generally can do such a thing. Susanna did still look like the girl I had married -- tall, trim, just about magazine perfect -- but then there was a particularly pompous diamond on her finger. I wonder what happened to the little diamond I had given her. Flowers every once in awhile would have been good. Wouldn’t have made a damn difference, still me in the picture after all.

A wind was blowing and it was cold, maybe a hint of snow to come. You can smell it in the air when you live up here long enough. New York does not get destroyed nearly as miserably as Boston with these ridiculous storms. And, although I had on a rather thick long black cashmere coat on I was shivering, had become a wimp on top of everything -- but I suspect it was not really the cold bothering me.

“We’re getting used to it. What time will you bring Isaac back?”

I’d missed seeing him last month, quite a lot of misses in fact. The thing is I should have paid for her to fly with him to New York again for a weekend. First class and five star hotel and all that, I could afford it, and she had actually done such a trip once before, and it was easier on my psyche not to see how well she was doing and I kind of thought she had even enjoyed herself. No need for this New England middle of winter freeze - reminds me of the massive snow storms we had lived through together. Ah, hell, there had been a few times, once at least, huddled together in front of a fireplace when we made up, run outside into the cold when our son could hardly walk, the three of us carving giant faces into the fresh snow of the morning.

“Focus, Jay.”

“Yes, I guess so. By eleven, I imagine. All I can manage this weekend. No, we’ll go to The Wagon Wheel and then the new Star Wars movie, what is it – episode 10 or something like that? He always loves that sort of stuff.”

“He did last year. Now it’s Dr. Who. You want to come in and have a cup of coffee? “  
She finally offered. Maybe my face was turning blue.

Phillip would not be home. This new husband allegedly made a boatload of money redesigning fabulous faces and impressive breasts. Good guy, sense of humor, brilliant, nice by

all accounts from what our mutual friends who might still talk to me had raved -- did they think I should appreciate such gushing nonsense?

“No, I don’t think so. Your house is lovely, and knowing you it will be impeccably elegant inside. We don’t have a whole lot of time.”

“Isaac is getting his coat.” She yelled inside for their son to come down.

Another minute of awkward silence as I stuck on the idea that this person beside me, intelligent and of free will, had once declared forever to our union. I glanced again down the street of million dollar homes filled with real Picassos perhaps, perfect electrical and plumbing systems -- you think about such things when a pipe leaks and you haven’t got the two hundred dollars to pay a plumber to fix it, which had happened to us. My Susanna did seem to fit well in this Brahman neighborhood. Could she have ever fantasized that I might find equivalent success one day as an artist? The thing is, the true debacle, it was not the lack of such faith that broke us apart.

“Do you think you’re up to taking him on a trip to France?”

This bad habit of daydreaming. Plus, maybe I’m not quite so into this thing we’ve got now.

“We ought to have a wonderful time.”

“I mean are you physically up to it? You told me you had seen a cardiologist.”

“False alarm. My coronary arteries are like a baby’s. The doctor attributes my youth to too much wine, or in my case, the right amount. A bit of stress is what he says is to blame.”

“How does stress cause chest pain?”

“Some kind of acid reflux nonsense, I don’t know, but I feel better now and we’re not

leaving for a month, so I'll be perfectly fine."

"And how does someone feel stress when they finally achieve what they wanted? I never told you, but I'm proud of you. We all saw one of your sculptures at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art last month. They had it featured at the center of the main gallery."

"You guys took a trip to San Francisco?"

"Harold gave a talk there on a technique he's come up with for hiding scars on reconstructive facial surgery. He's published the report in The New England Journal of Medicine."

The life of a plastic surgeon with a position on the staff at Brigham and Women's Hospital, let's see now, taller than me, published in a fancy journal -- most likely smarter than me, makes my old friends sing ovations to his charm and can afford trips to exotic places when in our previous world I could afford an occasional visit to the Olive Garden in Dorchester.

"Can you remember when San Francisco put me in a show a few years back, my first national show?" I regretted this as soon as I said it, wanted to take the damn comment back.

"Yes, I do recall one of the curators seeming to like you." Susana said it without a hint of the wreckage it implied.

The Assistant Curator of Sculpture was young and flirtatious, and I had taken it the wrong way. In the total breath of my errors this had been a sliver of a miscue, really.

"Is he looking forward to our trip next month?"

A bit of a pause. "He hasn't really said. Maybe he doesn't like to leave home."

"He's used to travelling I suppose with this cruise you guys went on and the San Francisco trip. He seemed to like coming with you to New York." I was guessing. I spoke to him

on the phone about every few days, but our phone calls were brief, me talking, just a little boy after all. “Hell, it’s a straight flight to Nice, first class and he’ll probably sleep the whole way -- nothing much more to it.”

Isaac came to the door and I gave him a hug.

“What the hell happened to you?!” I stood back and saw that he had grown almost as tall as his mother now. “Two damn inches since I saw you last.”

“Jay, you need to control your language.”

“Yeah, sorry. But isn’t our fellow something, don’t you think? The girls must be going crazy over this handsome whippersnapper.”

“Dad!”

“Not quite into girls, yet, eh? I can not blame you about that in the least. I’ve got a joke for you. Knock knock.”

Silence.

“You’re supposed to say who’s there?”

More silence.

“Well, then I say ‘police.’” I waited. Nothing. “Police who? Po-lease hurry up – it’s chilly out here.” Maybe there was a hint of a smile.

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The far past

Henri Bastille was thirty three years old when he made his way to Cannes in 1930. This was a monstrously bad year to be looking for work in the south of France as the Great Depression had begun and tourists were not coming to the Cote D'Azur as in previous years. Unemployment in the wealthier countries had reached twenty per cent and there seemed not a shred of hope on the horizon. But Henri did have a distinct talent of sorts, undeterred confidence, and getting a job of some sort was rarely a difficulty for such a man. Having never travelled except to Paris and two years marooned in a muddy hole in western France dodging bullets and bombs and mustard gas, not quite the picture of an idyllic holiday, he had chosen Cannes almost as casually as one would throw a dart at the map. There had been an article in **Le Figaro**, not that he was much of a reader, but he had picked up a discarded magazine while waiting for coffee at a busy cafe in Metz, and read about this so called 'British summer paradise' where it was always warm and hospitable year round, wine and oysters were cheap, women particularly lovely and plentiful, and that's all it took, couldn't get this 'paradise' off his mind and he determined the 'Cote D'Azur' would be the perfect spot to try out his luck. Alsace had become gloomy, never really recovering from the war, it was too cold, and, in addition, he had an unhappy husband on his heels. The provenance of this indignant pursuit did not appear to be sufficient reason to stick around and sort the matter out. She, Colene, the wife he had toyed with, was really rather demanding and, moreover, empty-handed, and therefore not worthy of the potential broken bones and more if he were to hang around.

Such muddled quagmires aside, Bastille's talent was, in his mind, at least, decidedly, women. They seemed to like something about him and he imagined it unlikely that this something was good looks as more than a few would remark, crudely, that he was too short and

stocky and rough, and even going so far as to remind him that he was approaching baldness at this young age. Yet, there was a secret, perhaps a real gift he possessed, and although he considered himself built like a God, that wasn't the thing. This secret had to do with simple words and the willingness to use them no matter the foolishness of the meaning or the exaggeration of the truth, in fact, one had to use ornamented hyperbolic flattery with bounty and inhibition and gusto. The trick was to imagine whoever you wish to seduce as a magnificent wildflower that you have providentially chanced upon in the forest and then allow the lady to hear you compare her allure to such sublime splendor. Maybe it was a drunk in a bar, he could not recall where he'd first picked up such stratagem, but whoever it was had been insistent that all women categorically live to hear men gush ebullient embellishment and reassure them that they are indubitably a special gift from God himself, even the finest such gift on the planet for that matter. Every woman! Along the same line, you must smile foolishly, act sincere, go beyond overboard, recognizing this feels particularly ridiculous the first few times you execute these shenanigans, but exaggerated craziness or not, such antics reliably bring rewards in return. Sometimes it was just a conversation and smile, but often a meal, a place to stay, and when he needed it even an odd coat or shirt from a husband's drawer. Ultimately, there was another type of reward which was the most particularly salient to a French male. This reward had led to quite remarkable knowledge and expertise in said department, which, predictably, then led the woman's clinging and exigent behavior. Yes, all good olives have a pit. So, especially when the exaggerated cajolery was just that, about most of the time, the encounters would grow stale or the other fellow in the picture would get wind of it all and get his blood up, such as this last escapade. Funny thing is sometimes Bastille was certain that the cheated fellow ought to thank

him. Now he really wondered whether such a gift of savoir faire and sexual bravura was really a blessing or a curse.

He walked off the train, one small leather suitcase in his hand, all that he owned in the world. Wearing a slightly dated tight pale blue plaid suit which had been a gift from a former acquaintance, her dead husband's Sunday best, and a navy blue beret tilted just so, he was dashingly ready and anticipating better times. Although it was late night the Cannes station was brightly lit and crowded and the air had a smell of ocean, or he presumed this dead fish odor meant such as he had never been so close to the sea before. Hotels and cafes flanked the rail station, quite a rumble of people for so late at night, and most were looking down and out much more so than he had expected in this rich man's paradise. The crowds were milling about and glancing at specials chalked on the boards of the cafes and restaurants -- Soupe de Poisson, Daube Provencale (slow cooked beef stew), Red Mullet salad, Les pieds-paquets (stuffed sheep stomach and feet) -- which particularly reminded him of an awful Baeckeoffe stew his cousins would feed him, always made of leftover parts from one of their butchered animals, the parts they could not sell and which sophisticated people really did not want to eat. He noticed that the majority of the crowd were only window shopping and most of the establishments were empty of customers.

A brilliant neon sign lancing up the side of the building in glowing orange letters, Roberts Hotel, and next to it was the Bar Des Negociants. This place seemed lively enough with a bevy of boisterous fellows drinking beer at a long dark wooden counter. Bastille nudged himself up to the far corner to order a draft. Damned if the place did not have Fischer La Belle, one of his favorite Strasbourg beers.

“ A half pint of Fisher,” Bastille called to the bartender. Take it easy on the drinking, he told himself, as he could see some ominous eyes, most likely well practiced and preying on newcomers like himself.

“ Damn fine night, eh, Comrade?! See you’re new around these parts?”

Didn’t take long at all. Of course, the suitcase was a fine clue. This gentleman was unshaven and smelled rotten on top of it all. His shorter older buddy ambled up on the other side and appeared rather even more rumped and beggared. Together they were clearly stewed. Not professional thieves in any case.

“ Buy a drink for a fellow traveler, would ya?” croaked the old man, English accent.

“ Hardly got enough francs to buy one for myself, Comrade.” Bastille didn’t like the term, and had no fancy with the communists who had nearly taken over Strasbourg when the war ended.

“ Hell no, sweet suit like yours, hell of a nice material. You must be doing yourself fair enough.” The tall bugger was running his fingers along Bastille’s jacket sleeve as if it were fine silk.

“ You must be a true connoisseur of elegance and top of the line fashion, I can see. Coco Chanel’s brother I would bet,” Bastille spat back at him and roughly moved the fellow’s gnarled fingers away.

“ You making fun of me, Bloke?” The boozed gent jumped back and looked up at Henri with the petulant blaze of threatening battle.

Bastille had to quickly consider his options. Both of these chums, down on their luck ruffians, were stout enough, one rangy and barbarous looking, the older just scabrous, but it was

tough to gage their fitness in the ragged tattered outfits they wore, and they were tipsy on top of it, making them dangerous in itself, and they knew the lay of the land, maybe the bar owner and police as well, and he was out of his element here -- so the outcome of a fray would be unclear. He suspected nothing but trouble would come of this if he pushed them too far.

“ Just a bit of play. The war sort of makes one cheeky in a foolish sort of way. Didn’t mean nothing rude by it,” Bastille announced, taking the sensible road.

“ The war, eh?” the taller guy echoed, scratching his grizzled chin and giving a long look up and down Bastille. “ Long time ago that war for blaming bad manners. Jersey here got his head screwed up in that mess, shell shock they say. He ain’t never gone back home again. Stayed here in a hospital a few years and now he gets to enjoy the Riviera with his bloody mate Michael, that being me for your information.”

Jersey just stared at his talking friend with a sort of half smile and simmering invective lingering toward Bastille. He actually did look a trifle buggered by the bombs. There were many of those casualties out there still staggering around, those unlucky enough to survive the worst of it, and you could tell almost instantly when you were around one of the poor bastards. They didn’t talk much, didn’t quite smile, seemed to jump at anything.

“ Yeah, I got punched around a bit myself, two years in Verdun. Don’t fancy Jersey here enjoyed all that nonsense. It ain’t never so far away, kind like just yesterday sometimes.”

“ Verdun, eh? Hell of a shithole, I hear. Jersey got his bell rung at the Somme and I got my education at Ypres.”

“ Damn fucking education, weren’t it? ” Bastille pulled out his wallet, holding it close, still weary enough of these puds to suspect they’d slit his throat for a few quid. “ Hell, I think I

got enough education to last me til Timbuktu. I guess I can buy two fellow cannon fodder bastards a pint or so.

“ Fischer for these two mates!” Bastille yelled down.

“ Damn German beer? Hell no!” The Ypres veteran screamed.

“ Made near my home in Alsace by Frenchmen. They aren’t German any more. Fucking never were.”

“ Va te faire foutre! You’re a god damned Bosch! I ought to cut your goddamned Bosch wiener off!” The little guy jumped into the discussion, suddenly awake and aroused and appeared completely unglued. He had his fists balled like he was ready to go full blast, trying to fancy himself into a boxer’s stance. Of course, when he took his hand off the counter he had no balance and about fell flat on the dirty bar floor except that Bastille caught him and braced him back up again against the bar. The shell shocked goon stared back indeterminately.

His buddy swung a fist, lousy roundhouse and Bastille ducked and then grabbed Michael’s shirt collar. He tightened it just so the drunk could barely breathe, just enough to really get his attention and yet not quite suffocate him.

“ Fellow once threatened me, officer at that, and I don’t take threats very well. This degenerate might have made it through the war if it weren’t for implying that he wanted to do a very bad thing to me. Do you understand this advice I am telling you?”

There were a few others in the bar whose attention now centered on the commotion. The bartender yelled for them to cut out the nonsense, or something to that effect. Nobody was coming to the other man’s defense and Bastille held him in such a tight choke until the inebriated former soldier grunted submission.

“ Two Stellas for my new friends here,” Henri barked to the bartender.

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The past -- birth of an artist    Mougín, France

“ My English not so good.”

“ My French is much worse.”

“ Your mother she French but you no like to speak French?” The man sat a small table with his weathered hands clasped patiently in front of him. A compact muscular guy, covered in dust and wearing a large straw hat like Van Gogh, the wispy pepper black mustache and cascade of crows eyes marked him as rather old. “ Do be clear with me – you say you are interested to carve stone and you like to sweep this floor?” His hand gestured at the floor and his expression expressed ridicule or mirth.

Jay had trespassed down the man’s driveway to the glass walled studio because he suddenly had a vision, uncontrollable kind of silliness surely, but he pushed on and knocked on the door and interrupted the sculptor in the middle of work. Luckily, most French don’t own guns.

“ Well, I would like to learn from you how to carve rocks. I am not exactly after sweeping floors but since I have no money to pay you for lessons I propose to offer to work for free.” The studio was on a country road he had ridden his bike along many times and never really paid attention. Just a beautiful route for a bike ride leading to his cousin’s factory along the

autoroute near Mougins. Something mysterious inundated him this time, maybe the color of the rocks piled near the front of the driveway, always a pile of rocks here, and one was green with streaks of bright white, and because of the rain last night the green glistened like emerald, terribly attractive -- a vision eating into his psyche, didn't exactly make sense but the inclination to visit this fellow's studio turned overwhelming. "The thing I do know how to do is sweep floors, lift heavy objects, shut up when that is necessary, and carry out any errands you might wish of me."

"In exchange, I am to teach you to carve marble?"

"That will work."

"No, I am asking why. Why! Why do you do this? You say you are a student at the University of Aix-en-Provence. Why don't you take class from an art professor there? Good school?"

"I'm studying math. My mother is from Cannes and I visit her relatives here on weekends."

"I am not a math teacher, you see, and far from Aix." He got up and walked toward the door as if the conversation was over. Jay sat at the table.

"Well, that's the thing. What does a fellow do with math when you finish? You teach, I guess, and I am not a teacher type. There's that big sculpture of yours on the main square in Mougins, and you must be good at what you do if they put something like that out there for the whole world to see. And, these rocks in your driveway, well, they tell me something."

"Zut! Tell you? Tell you what -- that you are a crazy man!? You are a crazy god damn American, like you all think you own the world."

Oddly that sounded close to sensible thinking. "Yeah, well, that may be likely, but I

would like to make shapes like this, work with my hands, this thing sort of stuff talks to me. Did you ever have such a dream when you were young?"

A bit of briddled laughter. Eyes staring at Jay incredulously but thinking.

" The Greek, they have a saying that there is no genius without a touch of madness." The man was back at the table, shaking his head, twisting a finger in the air. In spite of his cuss words he seemed more intrigued than angry. "You, I believe may be tres grande fou, but just because you lunatic does not mean you can make art. I am Fellow of the French Academy of the Arts, not that I care about such titles, but I have many advanced students beg to spend time in this studio. Maybe you have portfolio of your work, a resume, galleries where you've shown your work? Leave it here with me."

" There is no resume. You see I ride past your studio going to my cousin, Charles Jouselet's factory, and down your driveway there are these huge colorful blocks of rock and I don't know what kind of rocks they are, and at the end I can just glimpse this glass house with abstract forms inside and I got this feeling that I might be meant to do this kind of ...," he realized how ridiculous the explanation must sound. The man was probably famous and Jay had never even painted a picture.

" Jouselet is your cousin?"

" My mother's first cousin."

" Victoria?"

" Yes, you know her?"

“ Bien sur. Victoria Bastille, mais oui, many, many years ago. The beauty who married an American sailor. Bastille’s daughter, of course. Everyone knew your grandfather.”

A changed expression, softness, maybe even a smile. He was quiet for a long bit, even took a seat at the table. Jay glanced around at the spectacular shapes. “ Ah, maybe... ‘A vaincre sans péril, on triomphe sans gloire.’” He scratched his head and stared at the young man. “ In the mornings, promptly at seven. Me, maybe more American than French -- I work long hours.”

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The present

“ How have you been?

“ Okay.”

“ How is school?”

“ Okay.”

“You’re ten years old. A big fellow now, boy, you’ve grown up. Tall as your mother almost.”

“ Yeah.”

The conversation in the car had been of a similar verbosity. My little guy had grown faster than I could even imagine, with me just about invisible, and no doubt I deserved what I received. The waiter set a basket of bread on the table and we were sipping water waiting to order. The faint sound of Jacques Brel in the background fit rather nicely with circular red

leather booths and dark wood decor, although the guttural ‘Port of Amsterdam’ was not particularly soothing.

Later in the night The Wagon Wheel restaurant would become packed and boisterous as my grade school friend, Paschal Metier, had become a renowned chef. Of course, I could remember when this half French kid, my mother’s best friend’s son, could not cook an egg, much less classic French cuisine which had now made his reputation -- cassoulet was my favorite dish and apparently Bostonian food critics do like beans. We had been best friends until I punched him in the mouth for some forgotten reason. A few hundred dollars worth of braces repair and after that we didn’t see him or his mother much. I don’t blame them particularly. Tried to make up for it on the special occasions I would bring Susanna here over the years and gush over Pascal’s culinary skills, even left some generous tips.

“ You okay, Dad?”

“ Oh, yeah, just remembering when I was a kid and stupid. The guy who owns this restaurant and I were fine friends back a long time ago.”

“ I know. Mom and Dad and I come here sometimes. He’s always nice to us.”

“ Dr. Peterson is not your dad. I’m your dad.”

“ Well, he acts like my dad. What is the difference?”

“ A lot. You’re like half me and half mom and I helped bring you into this world. You are not a zero part him.” I tried not to sound too angry, probably wouldn’t get the point across any better.

“ You’re never around.”

“ I’ve got a job in another city.”

“ Fine.”

My son, I’m pretty sure he really is my son, lucked out with his mother’s dark thick hair and a very handsome profile, although he was skinny as a rail, and quiet as a snail. Wasn’t my son, eh, I would have a special talk with Dr. Peterson.

“ How’s your new neighborhood?”

“ Fine.”

“ You make any friends?”

“ Not really.”

“ Maybe at school. How’s school?”

“ Okay.”

Well, we could have a good meal if nothing else. My attention turned to a couple in another leather sofa booth across from us. They appeared to be on some kind of celebration - he wearing a spiffy light tan three piece suit with a pale green tie, even a white carnation poking from the chest pocket, and she a shimmering sapphire silky dress with pink lace trim, her hair pulled back in a school girl’s ponytail. Huge, probably fake, diamond studs sparkled on her earlobes, and a ruby colored brooch dangled in the middle of impressive cleavage. I could even smell a hint of her perfume which wafted over to us, maybe Chanel #7, didn’t have a clue, but mixing with the scent of garlic roasting chicken from the kitchen the place felt a rather savory fete.

They were too old for the prom, maybe an anniversary, maybe she was pregnant and they were planning their first child. Perhaps just a terribly bad week and something special to forget about all that, yes, that was my most favorite type of celebration. Pascal’s Wagon Wheel

and a good bottle of French wine had done the trick for me the few times back then when I could afford it. Dr. Peterson, my son's 'dad,' the bastard, most likely never had occasion to worry about bouncing a check. This thought gives me fucking shivers.

Pascal came up to the table interrupting these amusing daydreams and the scintillating conversation with my son.

“ Back to visit us, Jay.”

I stood up and shook his hand. A strong grip for the guy who used to be a little bit of a wimp. Why the hell hadn't he just punched me back? All kids get into tussles once in awhile, after all. This present fellow would probably punch back now.

“ You're in New York I hear?”

“ And I hear you got yourself a James Beard award, kind of like getting a Michelin star, isn't it? You deserve the accolades, but I did notice,” I held up the menu, “ that these prices have escalated rather drastically.”

“ Got to pay for recurring repair to these teeth that some boy messed up a bunch of years ago.”

“ I apologize if I haven't before.”

“ I'm joking. No, the thing is they don't take you seriously in this business unless you raise your prices to ludicrous levels. The critics rave and the crowds grow bigger the more outrageous I price our menu. This is an unfortunate equation for success.”

“ Of course, I'm sure I've told you before but you do have a marvelous talent -- the best cassoulet I ever had. And yet, I don't see it on the menu anymore.”

“ The old fashioned dishes don't quite interest Millennials. Jay, it is good to see you. I

have to run back and supervise. Your son is a splendid specimen. Isaac, you are one hell of a stud. Let me send your waiter to get the order.”

“ What’s a stud?” he asked me after a bit.

The waiter saved us. Saved him, I actually thought such a conversation might last more than two words between us.

‘Black Angus Steak Frites’ for Isaac, as there was no hamburger on the menu.

‘Translucent halibut lightly flavored with Jasmine - served with cauliflower crème and petit pois on a bed of uruchimai rice’ sounded a bit Japanese, so I ordered ‘Bourgeois braised Pot Roast with roast asparagus and Caviar d’Aubergine,’ -- which wasn’t really caviar but purple eggplant cooked in olive oil and lemon, a Provencal dish.

The elegant meal progressed silently until Isaac put his fork down and sat staring at me.

“ Mom says I have to go to France.”

“ Well, you don’t have to go.”

“ I don’t want to go.”

“ In three weeks the weather on the Cote D’Azur will be perfect. Spring in the south of France is as wonderful as it gets in life. We’ll have a good time and it is only for less than a week.”

“ I like staying with Mom and Dr. Peterson.”

“ Remember all those bedtime stories about Teddy Bear and Ducky I would tell you, driving through the mountains along the cliffs right along the edge of the sea, visiting little villages and Roman ruins and World War battle sites. I kind of thought you liked those stories and I’d like to show you these places for real and spend some time with you, Isaac.”

“ Why don’t you stay at our house and do stuff with me?”

“ It doesn’t work that way anymore.”

“ You just shouldn’t have left us.”

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The far past

“ You want what?!” the lady barked at him, laughing at the same time. “Get out of here. Merde!”

Henri could tell that there was a hint of hesitation in spite the directness of the words.

“ It is simple, you know. I set up a few a few dresses at the most busy avenue and when a beautiful woman passes I tell her where she can purchase your wonderful garments.”

“ C’est absolument absurd!” Madame Felice yelled at him.

The lady was definitely not his cup of tea, mature and a touch joufflu, but the woman’s clothing store was quiet, and she looked bored, and he imagined that business was not up to snuff.

“ Here is what is so wonderful about this idea I have – you don’t pay me one centime unless I increase your sales.” With an extra effort smile, for which he had the gift, there was no question of her answer. “ Nothing, no pay if I don’t sell, and then a little commission on top -- in fact I will pay you what you ask for your dress and add a little for my commission. If I don’t sell anything then you will not see my pretty face here again.”

And so it was that Henri got a job on this second day off the train in the first shop he'd entered. The proprietor turned out to be a true pushover, he could tell when she smiled at his inane jokes, and the slight twist in her lips as she did her best not to laugh. Funny thing was, it turned out that he actually had come up with a damn good idea and he was, more or less, a born salesman. Here he could take a few of this lady's self designed clothing and hang them on a branch across from the Hotel Carlton, the fanciest hotel in town -- turned out to be the stroke of genius. In the middle of the beach boardwalk, where all the rich would walk in the evenings, the fancy strollway lined with beggars and musicians and ice cream stalls, but not a single one had ever tried selling clothing out here, which turned into a gold mine for his new boss lady's store, and, to some extent, for Bastille as well.

Madame Felice invited him to her house by the end of the week. He expected she, who did not appear married, would obviously make some untoward behavior. Hubris, perhaps, but he knew women. She was twenty years older, a mite on the large size for his tastes, but the bigger breasts did make up for that, and clearly a domineering type personality which was also not his preference, but when one needs a job and you wish to eat more than horse and stale bread, 'eh bien', you do whatever it takes.

On arriving at her spacious home on a winding road up the small hill from downtown Cannes, a steep hill of farmed land cut into 'bancaus' ( terraced levels), he could look down at a brilliant vista of the bay and islands. Couldn't not smile, certainly this was pay dirt. The thirty minute walk from the fleabag hotel where he had been staying near the train station, and this was a million miles from the world of scoundrels inhabiting that neighborhood. Damn good thing he had washed up and found a bit of cologne. Wished he had a better change of clothes. He was

surprised when he saw there were others invited to what he thought was his date.

A crowd that looked to be farmers and peasants, large big boned folk with rough hands and weather beaten faces, dark tans, the kind that did real work for a living. They were dressed in less than fashionable attire, nothing at all like that from Madame Felice's fancy store nor even a hint of the typical wealth he could see in so much of Cannes. And then this dialect they spoke, kind of thick and spit out, he could hardly understand a word -- Provençal they called it. In fact, this turned out to be a gathering of people who lived and worked on the Croix des Gardes, this hill, this blue collar working man's community. Later he learned that in spite of proletarian appearance many here were land wealthy. One family, with two daughters at the party, owned half the hill and had apparently made money in the perfume trade. The girls were hardly more than teenagers, really, but one seemed to have eyes for him. He recalled a painting he had seen by Van Gogh on a postcard -- they were all over the shops in downtown -- she must have been the model for that postcard, heavy apron dark dress with long sleeves and floppy yellow hat half covering one god awful ugly head, and a drooping red bow to top it off, burly and looked like she could whip him with one arm. This girl's cheeks were remarkably rouge, too much sun or was she really so sloppy with makeup? Her hands were so stained with dirt he suspected she must not have washed in a week. And these peasants have a certain smell! On top of it all, it was clear Madame Felice had another suitor, an older refined gentleman with the look of money. Bastille knew one thing well -- you have to make the best of a situation. He looked at the girl who smiled at him again. Damn crooked teeth of hers, but one can ignore that when the matter is important enough. The other sister, who did ignore him, was exquisitely different, celestial even, and carrying herself as if she were a princess. The dogged faced girl came up and

introduced herself.

The crowd gathered outside at a table under an ancient chestnut tree, the thick oaken table laden with a vast buffet of fragrant food -- stew of aubergine with red pepper and tomatoes and onions, a platter of grilled pungent fish he was told were anchovies, massive bowl of leaks marinating in olive oil, a bucket of boiled potatoes, roasted chickens, decanters of wine.

Henri sat himself next to Odette de Salvy. The only seat left.

“Your family is German?” she asked him brusquely.

“Why would you suppose that?”

“Madame Felice says that she hired someone from Alsace Lorraine.”

“My family is from Strasbourg. We are always French.”

“They fought with the Germans during the war. You realize we don’t like Germans much around here –my uncle died at Verdun.”

“For your information I fought with the French army at Verdun myself. Alsace was French until Napoleon three lost it for France in some silly war in 1875 when the Germans killed my grandfather. There are those who consider themselves French and others who are more German, and except for killing each other we got along well enough.”

“They ran you away from your home? Couldn’t be much of a place.”

She did have a swine like mug, but buxom as these southern country girls seemed to be, still, the damn noise she made. Could he live with that? You must think of these things when you are considering an advance.

“You wish me to go back?” Actuaaly, now, Henri wanted to sample the food and not continue talking to this girl who had no manners.

“ My family is from St.Tropez. My great grandfather was Napoleon’s Commodore, in charge of the whole French navy.”

“ I am very proud of your dead relative. By the way, why if you are from such illustrious family do you now live on a hill and grow chickens?”

“ De Salvy. Do you know what the ‘De’ stands for? We are nobility for which you have, most likely, no familiarity. My sister and I own the mimosa plantation. They make perfume from our flowers, perfume that is sold around the world. What do you own? ”

Alas, the girl did have a certain hint of a smile, more likely a decrepit smirk, but these things were in the same ballpark if you have the correct attitude. Madame Felice was chatting away the goosey looking elderly bloke and he must certainly have been all wrong about her intentions.

“ I sell clothes and I am good at it. Just ask our host. Won’t be long before I turn her operation all around. How big is your plantation?”

“ Two hundred hectares.”

“ Who is this other young lady? They told me she is your sister.” Bastille turned his eyes across the table at the beauty. “ Maybe she wants to go for a walk and you guys can show me the flowers?” The pretty girl had not even noticed him.

“ Camille. She has a beau.”

“ Nevertheless, perhaps she’d like to take a walk with us.”

The cheeky girl occupied herself with the food. Quite an appetite she had.

He poured her a glass of wine. A few more. Tried very hard to smile.

“ Someday I’d love you to show me these mimosa flowers they make into perfume.”

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## The past

In downtown Arlington is the Mission Coffee Shop, a large, airy, bustling place whose twenty five foot tall brick walls are filled with an assortment of local artist's work for sale, the majority charitably described as amateurish, but the owner, who had a soft heart, could turn down no requests when the artist personally appeared before him and begged to display their treasures. Actually, no begging was required and he took on almost all comers. The fee was twenty percent if sold and a weak request that the art be taken down if it didn't sell after three months. Truth is that the coffee shop made their money selling food and coffee, not selling art.

Jay was given the privilege of being Harry's first sculptor, and Jay's first sale, only sale, had been made at the cafe. This crude marble bust of a middle age man in a wide mouth scream, embellished by a Boston Red Sox cap, maybe less than perfection Jay recognized in retrospect, had sold after a month on a counter here for a grand total of one hundred dollars. Not so shabby but the rough marble rock itself had cost more than half that. Jay, being a loyal customer, a cup of coffee on a daily basis, although usually the one dollar basic house brand, did think of Harry as a true friend, but he had a nasty suspicion that the cafe owner had paid someone to dispose of the rock masterpiece at the bottom of Spy Pond, that said pond being deep and dark and notoriously untraceable. The thing is when he asked about specifics in regard to the sale Harry had been skittishly obtuse about who may have bought the sculpture, finally an old rich lady

from Bedford. Why would an old rich lady from Bedford, miles away, come shopping for art or coffee at Harry's shop in faraway Arlington? Ought she not want to see more of Jay's work?

Like so many times he wondered this choice of career -- "two roads diverged in a yellow wood and sorry I could not travel both." Hell, yes. Ten years, maybe he had taken a wrong turn on the dang thing? The French sculptor never told him that financial survival as an artist generally requires a generous inheritance or disability check or some spouse to pay your bills -- yes, he had learned well the last part, and the disability -- delusional persistence without an inkling of encouragement, neither from monetary gain nor so called experts acknowledging competence in your work. How many batches of photos had he sent out and virtually no reputable show acceptances nor galleries nor laudatory comments forthcoming. Hundreds, maybe? Bounce your head against a wall a few times might help as the ugly clanging sound could possibly awaken you from inappropriate deathly ambition.

A thought occasioned that he could go back to school and finish the math degree. He had once been damn good at that. Thing is, to Jay, going back to school felt like surrender even if such subsequent jobs would pay about ten times as much money. Money, damn money!

Jay stirred two teaspoons of brown sugar into the small coffee. The T-bone steaks he packed everyday into customer bags at the store, which he could rarely afford to buy and take home, the lobsters from Maine napping in a big glass aquarium, all would have to wait. He had promised Susanna a fancy trip for their honeymoon, maybe to his family's place in France. Did he really want to let his French teacher know that he had finally given up on breathing, joined the stale world of normal people? Breathing, dreaming, follow your heart, surely this must be an overrated and overvalued destination.

There were nice things for sale on the counter. Sit down with your one dollar cup and take space away from big spenders -- a nice selection of premade sandwiches sitting majestically in a lighted all glass refrigerator and there was a large terrine of fragrant homemade vegetable soup, a delectable selection of pastries. If Jay were in charge, certain impoverished daydreamers would be given direction to Dunkin Doughnuts one block away and gently but swiftly kicked out the door.

“ Jay, I read a nice book about this ship that got stuck in the ice on the South Pole for more than a year. The writing is beautiful. You wanna borrow it?” Harry, short, plump, dark receding hairline, thick lensed black rimmed glasses hanging too far forward on his nose, in the direction of professorial, stood next to Jay having secretly come out from behind the counter. “ Ernest Shackleton led a few men in a dingy 850 miles across the sea to save them all. You’ll enjoy the book.”

“ Survival story, Harry?”

They had a running joke, morbid in fact, although this interpretation was Jay’s inside take. Living on the edge of madness and starvation, a perfect subject for a writer’s examination of futile perseverance. Subtle admonition? No, the truth is that Harry did like survival stories and always had one to recommend.

“ I particularly enjoyed the last book you lent me, Survive the Savage Sea,” Dougal Robertson’s tale of his family’s survival when their 43 foot schooner sunk in the Pacific, another British story of indomitable spirit and all. A bit of British blood might have been a good thing to have. “How about another sculpture for your counter, Harry?”

Harry’s eyes suddenly dilated perceptively. In an attempt at retort, perfectly babbling

effort, intelligible words were not forthcoming.

“ It is a wonderful golden tinged stone I dug up, laced with hints of crystal and garnet and black flakes. I’ve got an idea to widen the eyes a bit and lengthen the ears, sort of emphasize the boy’s anguish in the wrinkled brow, rather like the exaggeration Japanese use in their drawings. Of course you probably won’t be able to tell it is a face – more of a suggestion, I’ve moved further down the road I’m trying to find, might take a practiced eye to understand what I’m after.”

Harry’s own mouth was now open. His eyes darted around searching the coffee shop as if to suggest that all possible room for any such sculpture was obviously already taken. He actually appeared to be shaking. Good damn fellow this Harry.

“ I could push over the soup pot,” he finally murmured, paused, looking again around the place. Lost, upset. “ Umm... How big is it exactly?”

Jay opened his arms about a foot in each direction.

Harry stammered some more indecipherable blabbering whispers, shook his head a bit, was the man actually seizing?

“ You know I’ll have to raise the price,” Jay added. “ More money for you in commission, of course. Damned good of you to sell the last one and this is even bigger. Don’t you think I ought to get more money if it’s a larger rock? Not that art actually works that way, but hell, this ought to be worth a try. Thing is, because it is more modern art, Dada like even, this one might take a bit longer to sell.”

Eyes downcast, maybe pondering the increased cost he would absorb to dispose of this potential monstrosity -- you could never find a more loveable gent.

“ I don’t think I can afford more than two hundred,” his voice was about inaudible, “ not a damn bit more than that.”

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The far past

“ Do you suppose one can make money running a restaurant?” Bastille asked Camille.

They sat at an outside table at the Reve D’Or on the port of Cannes with a fabulous view of the ancient harbor. A row of yachts were docked backed up to the street and many of their owners sat on leather cushioned lounge chairs, teak decks, sipping colorful drinks and watching the hoi polloi on the sidewalk gaze up at them as if they were celebrities. Some were. This village had become a playground for ultra wealthy bon vivant.

“ Perhaps,” she replied, looking clearly bored.

The two had been married hardly half a year and they did not present well as newlyweds. Quite obvious. She kept her eyes away, did not even try to hide how uncomfortable she felt being in public with her husband.

“ You know, your sister and you have money just sitting there doing nothing. That flower business is more profitable than anyone would have guessed and I could never have imagined people paying so much for yellow flowers like that -- they are not even roses and don’t sit so well in a vase.”

“ The flowers are called Mimosa. They make one of the most expensive perfumes in the

world and our farm grows a type that is not found elsewhere and is needed for the finest perfumes,” she answered, indifferent tone, her gaze was across the street, maybe settled on someone she recognized on one of those yachts, an old boyfriend, perhaps.

Bastille decided he might as well get on to the matter. She needed to know what he was up to as he had already discussed it with Odette, her sister, and arranged this meeting with the owner of the property he wanted to buy. She would have to give her okay as it was her money after all. The clothing business was particularly colorless and there would be no fortune made there as others were now copying his idea and had better merchandise. Even branching out and traveling to local towns to sell the dresses for the past two years was not profitable and drearily difficult.

“ So your family has all this money and it sits like a sad beautiful woman alone in her mansion and unappreciated.” Well, it was a dig at their reality, change she to he, and she needed to get the point that she owed him. “ I have an idea how we can make it profit ten times over. The fellow who owns this restaurant has a piece of beach for sale around the corner. He wants to get rid of it almost for nothing.”

“ That’s why you brought me here? It’s always about money with you.”

“ I never had any. I guess I would like to try it out.”

“ My friends say you are a schemer and a rogue and that you would just take what you could and run off with it.”

“ I haven’t run anywhere.” He should have. “ Who would say such foolishness?” There were many, her family especially, who had screamed even to his face that he was hardly in her class.

“ You realize, Camille,” get to the heart of it, “ I didn’t bring secrets into this marriage. Maybe I deserve some kind of civility every once in awhile.”

Camille turned to her husband, an unreadable expression on her face, perhaps a sign of boredom. Bastille had been told by myriad Cannoise that he had trapped the prize of the Cote D’Azur, the most extraordinary beauty ever produced in Cannes. Yes, she was quite breathtaking, dazzling, elegant, even with her pregnancy. Yes, there was that and the question of who had actually trapped who.

The sun felt calming on his face. At least this climate was honest and predictable, every day a bit of warmth and generally bluer sky than he had known and sometimes the ocean breeze could wash away hard difficult thoughts. Oh, he had chased her. Made a fool of himself. For the first time in his life maybe he had actually fallen in love with a girl. There was the daughter of a merchant in Aix en Provence, where he’d sold dresses, really quite a chemistry for her, but never a fire like this. The thing is -- so damn pretty, but empty ornament otherwise, empty appreciation of him. Odette, on the other hand, she was the rock in the family, steel testicles and a business sense. This had become a damn arrangement and that was about all it was.

“ Sort of a bribe, I guess?” She smiled, this time engaging him with her marvelous blue eyes.

Before he could answer her with a soliloquy about inner passion and these things he had given up ... hell, he’d be making that part up ... a tall grey haired gentleman, distinctive in a suit and tie, approached their table with a bottle of champagne. He kissed Camille on the cheek and then shook Bastille’s hand. A waiter placed a tray of anchoide on their table (anchovy garlic olive oil paste on petite toast).

“Congratulations on your marriage,” Monsieur Rothstein greeted them.

Another waiter set three fluted wine glasses on the table. With a dramatic flourish the older man poured the champagne.

“To the lamp of love, may it burn brightest in the darkest hours and never flicker in the winds of trial.” Rothstein held up his glass with this Yiddish toast. “Your sister, Odette, is giving me a very hard time with this year’s crop. She is always asking for too much money.”

“I guess you know my wife?” Bastille interjected. He had spoken to Monsieur Rothstein several times and with Odette’s assistance they had come to an agreement.

“Oh, only since she was born, I suspect. We are neighbors and I live in the house just across the hill from you, Bastille.”

“No, we live in a house,” Camille interjected, “an ancient shack more properly. Monsieur Rothstein lives in a ‘Chateau’ with the most fabulous view of the sea. My sister and I would play in his yard growing up and you must have wondered who these ragamuffins were hiding in your garden.” She smiled in a way Bastille never saw, the look almost explained why these folk might consider her the local goddess.

“But Odette, you know, she is tougher than anyone I ever deal with,” the restaurant owner states with a twinkle in his eye, “why can’t I do business with you instead of Odette? Even if you disagree with my offer at least my eyes can enjoy a touch of heaven, oh, if I could only be forty years younger, Bastille, and you would then have a battle on your hands. Excuse me, Henri, I am flirting with your wife but it is impossible not to do so.”

“Odette runs the business for good reason. They let me feed the ducks and chickens,” Camille noted.

“ I suppose I’ll just have to figure out a way to make your sister not scream at me quite so frequently.”

“ Monsieur Rothstein buys our flowers for the perfume factory he owns in Grasse,” Camille went on, looking now at her husband as if she really were his wife and they were in love. “ Of course, he also owns this restaurant and an art gallery which sells Renoir and Degas and all the great Impressionists.”

“ Too many fingers in the pot,” Rothstein answered, clearly enjoying the flattery and not disputing it, “ and maybe that is why I wish I did not have to spend so much time bargaining and bickering about flowers. Tough as nails is not nearly strong enough word to describe this girl. And, by the way, the restaurant is run by my wife, who has a bit of rheumatism tonight, and so I am manning this fort tonight.”

“ I’ve told Camille about the land you have for sale,” Bastille interrupted. “ The parcel down the beach.”

“ Yes, where they play volleyball. Not sure why you would want such a property, Bastille, it’s just a strip of sand where people put down towels. Maybe you could rent out cushions like the Carlton hotel does but we’re rather the poorer end of town and not sure anyone would pay much for such luxury here.”

“ Cannes will grow. The rich will keep coming.” Another idea of his. It was obvious that eventually this side of Cannes would gentrify, the beaches were actually wider here and there was room to build hotels to compete with The Carlton, and with a plot of land on the water he could build a swell cafe.

“ Well, yes, I spoke to Odette, she’s made the deal to get your bit of beach and I get some

kind of bargain with the flowers, but I think Odette is smarter than I understand. I don't see it now but I am certain she's gotten the best of me here.

“ Oh, yes, our special of the day, which I highly recommend as the fish is fresh from this morning -- Turbot avec cauliflower creme and petits artichokes in a peppery saffron sauce. Magnifique! Edward does it so perfectly.”

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The present

When I pass Carmine's on Broadway, oh you can taste the garlic and the grilled food in the air, I am reminded of the steak at 'Franks' in Cambridge which was always too expensive to take my family, and when I walk past the fancy displays of jewels in the window of Tiffany's on Fifth Avenue there is painful remembrance of Susanna's surreptitious glances when we occasionally wandered through downtown Boston and viewed similar, maybe less illustrious displays. That prior world -- it is lost. And, hell, to be honest, fair to my former wife, money, lack of money, was not her objection. Much of me wishes I could play the hand again and do a better job but then I guess I am endowed with a hefty load of Byzantine imperfections and people like me tend to not change their stripes. We aim egocentric and oblivious to what we damage in the pursuit. Perhaps I kind of get that now.

I pour a glass of Jack Daniels into a crystal glass. The glasses are a gift from a Park Avenue couple who bought a sculpture of mine. I like that they are heavy and the crystal cuts

prism light into diamonds of color reflected on the wall.

Take a deep breath. Inhale. Relax. Get lost in this. Certainly, Jack helps and I can push even harder.

My hammer, bunches of them sitting around, a few various sized chisels, a worn little round table with a big fat square rock sitting on top of a sack of sand. My notes written this morning at the corner Starbucks are also sitting here on the table waiting for me to take action. I do feel like this room is too fancy for proper work, too immense, skylights, world class artificial lighting, even a state of the art air chisel with a Volkswagen sized compressor hidden with sound insulation in a giant closet. Ought to feel guilty having all this space to myself, and maybe think about sharing it with an orchestra.

Here are my notes -- ‘The man would walk down the street with his eyes staring at the pavement, not meeting anyone’s gaze, shy of people, someone who had the weight of a wasted journey on his shoulders. Still, gets on with it, puts a foot forward and walks into whatever the devil should throw at you.’

Maybe I was in a funk this morning. This repetitive theme was enveloping me recently and in this new sculpture fellow’s case, “to endeavor to persevere,” as I recalled from a Clint Eastwood movie, my battle was perhaps aiming toward a not quitting attitude. Of course, in the movie the Indian who recites this line is amiable and not the stoical sort I had stumbled onto with this rock in front of me, or there should be bright smiles and plainly visible lines of witty optimism.

Paul Newman drank Jack Daniels. I had tried a fifty year old single malt at my agent’s office earlier in the week. That man has expensive tastes and tried to cheer me up. But I like this

fellow better -- nothing subtle about such a fine mellow fellow. Throws me for a loop quick enough and eventually I find calm.

Unfortunately, there is the morning payback. Is this the cause of my dour predilection? I follow a ritual at the cafe where I sit quietly with a yellow pad of paper and pen every morning, mostly daydream and try to write a little description of the work I want to create that day. My intention is there ought to be a soul behind the face or structure I am carving, and the smile and frowns I encounter in the coffee shop, well, they are substance, a picture of actual beauty. Staring, glancing at them -- must do so surreptitiously or they think that I am a deviant -- it is a process I imagine better artists have followed for eons. A cafe in Paris, maybe sitting on a bench in Central Park on a festive Sunday, fantasizing brilliant cheerful tableau -- Hemingway's Jake running with the bulls, Toulouse-Lautrec's dancing hookers. But it never does not flow so gregariously in my case. Some friends would allude that my people sculptures give off a disturbed perturbation. Reminds me of this lunatic genius guy named Mittelschmerz, a German artist in the 1800's, who obsessed with his own face and expressions, and spent a lifetime fashioning exquisitely perfect renditions of his craziness. The artist died in an insane asylum. Why am I attracted to this kind of deviation and negativity?

A certain art gallery owner, back in my previous life, explained to me that no one would buy an "angry, ugly" looking thing, they wanted some object that would lift up the ethos, embellish the dreary aspect of our otherwise plebeian existence. The directive felt along the same order as an art collector, a wealthy lady who I had encountered, who wanted a sculpture to match her living room wall color and furniture and to blend in -- I got it, I understand that what I do is not God's work, but I did not understand very well, and to the detriment of a needed paycheck I

ignored her request.

You would think that success would lie in following intuition of what you can forge of grace and beauty. Didn't work for me. The continuance of failure taught me that believing such bullshit like a naive boy scout would lead to nothing but poverty and hell. And so I listened. I changed. I did what one needs to do to get a bit of attention. Now my sculptures really do decorate nicely in billionaire's castles.

This liquor has a nice clean gleam -- the ice sparkles golden vibrations through it. And to think most of my life I stuck only with beer. Beer is not nearly the hell strong enough to drive my truck into nirvana.

'Joshua was fifty years old, a birthday remarkable for a long life of little remarkable. He worked in a factory, foreman of the metal shop. His boss had just retired and got a gold plated watch after forty years at the place. What a wonderful goal to bleed and trudge and damage yourself. There had been a broken marriage which should have stood as a one night stand. But then a child. They all drifted away.' This is crap and I rip up the paper and throw it on the floor. How do you reset, how do you make the world come out the way you imagine it ought to be?

The swing of the hammer on the virgin red orange alabaster creates a cleft of whitish bruised indentation. Again and again in a gentle fury as alabaster chips away and bruises easily, better to use the power tools but they take away a pleasure that is like caressing a woman's face. I love the lines and the curves and nothing is ever really more enjoyable than playing with wherever the rock breaks and takes me. After a while the words on the paper get forgotten, a game anyway, and I can become lost in minute repetition, chip by chip by chip. Hours drift by and soon a tiny glint of magic enlightens my eyes. Serenity in this ambrosial trance. Even in the

days when all the hours did not lead to monetary recompense I had this thrill at least.

I look at the second page -- ‘The color of the sky is distracting, the sun luscious and soothing, just enough to lead to opaque daydreams, visiting places the man had never been but imagined. One day he would find a beach in the Costa Sola of Spain, a million dollar yacht sitting swanky in the port, laze in a captain’s chair on a teak deck, sip a glass of expensive Rojo.’

Yes, a smile here or there, what could be the harm? And of course, my bubble sculpture, what I am now known for, must show up as well, the same damn structure over and over again. No one would ever guess that I actually had a thought here, that there was purpose and vivid imagination. I must turn it all into meaningless brilliant shining pretty abstract decorations and die with buckets of money surrounding me and wearing a concocted grin.

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The present

“ A Bloody Mary mix sans alcohol for my son, a glass of your red wine for me, please,” I request the stewardess as she stops at our seats. These days the American airlines hired more for politically correct reasons rather than drop dead gorgeous good looks. Luckily, Air France had not adopted such politically correct silliness. She even directs a bright smile toward me. Of course, that was her job, and I knew such, but, nonetheless, such smiles on stunning faces are agreeable distractions on an eight hour flight.

“ We have a Chateau Margaux or a Pinot Noir from Burgundy, which I am told is very

engaging.”

“ Why don’t we start with the Margaux and then you can join me later and we can engage a bottle of your Pinot Noir.” She was splendid looking, after all.

“ I do think that sounds inviting but I am enamored with keeping my job.”

“ Another time perhaps?” I did know the answer, but I figured flirtation was allowed in First class. “ Maybe if we run into each other in Cannes?”

Brunette, dazzling eyes, a bit younger than me by a few years and ethereal. I looked at my son who was playing a videogame on the airplane console and oblivious to his father’s inappropriate beguiled expressions. It occurred to me that he might be better served not to inherit such an insatiate woman attraction. Really, the question is, is there any way to rewire genetic aberration and let the boy be at peace at least until he is forty or so. After that, hell no. Well, maybe his dad had his share of picadillos and I had obviously made a mess of things with my part of the daddy stuff, but this was a new start for us. I should make an effort to be properly behaved.

As far as being a real daddy for a few days, who could have guessed that such a chance would even come about? It was only five years ago that I was bagging groceries at Johnny’s and dreaming of another life, not imaging how that dreaming and my boorish behavior could break a pretty good world all to hell. My God you do play a wicked game. A deserved ride of wretchedness and now you take me into something like Disneyland.

The airline magazine described the choice of beverage on this flight, three different reds and three whites, and even a Champagne, plus a barrage of top shelf liquors. The 2009 Chateau Margaux sounded like pleasant enough stuff. Having a bit of French blood I had heard of

Margaux, and even once considered buying a bottle for a little birthday party for my wife. I think I read James Bond would drink this particular beverage, or maybe it was Chateau Rothschild he liked or was it martinis -- 'stirred and not shaken'? Alas, on that birthday occasion, I had decided that seventy dollars for a bottle of wine was too extravagant and so I'd substituted a Two Buck Joe from Trader Joe's. Yep, I did. This party had not fared particularly well, but unlikely to do with my choice of wine, something about other dysfunctional endeavors, something about a girl, or maybe it was money, either way it ended with 'you lazy bum' sort of thing.

This was not enjoyable reverie. Vacation will go better if I am able to concentrate on something else - such as the finances of going First class, meaning the cost of this special glass of wine was nearing two thousand extra American dollars in comparison to traveling with the common folk and drinking a perfectly acceptable pedestrian brand, which was not usually an extra charge on overseas flights anyway. Isaac was not even drinking wine. Yeah, there was the extra legroom and comfortable full reclining real leather seats, and the food would be different as well, some kind of gourmet grand slam. My last ocean flight with the regular folk, our only trip together as a family to France, had been bargain basement Priceline tickets with two extra stops, waiting for hours in crowded airport lobbies, struggling each flight to jam our carry-ons into the overhead bins before they were filled and then still usually stuck with one or more jammed at our feet. Isaac had been a baby and sat on our laps. I could see the three of us crushed like trussed geese preparing for a celestial foie gras festival. Goodbye to all that. Having the extra seat space was a nice touch, and all together it felt remarkably amiable of these folk to make me feel luxuriously important.

The stewardess handed us our drinks. Mine was actually in a true wine glass as opposed to plastic throwaway, and she had even set down a white cloth napkin.

The scent of a delightful perfume.

“ We have a house in Cannes with a splendid view of the sea.” The trees were grown up and the place was a disaster for all I knew. “ My family has owned a flower plantation there for more than a century -- fruit trees of every kind you can think of, you can even hear the sound of the waves from up there. Really quite the place where we could enjoy that bottle you promised me,” I glanced at my son, hoping he wasn’t paying attention.

“Did I really promise such a thing? Well, I don’t recall, but I believe I have a flight to Munich tomorrow morning and so will have to pass on your pleasant invitation.”

“ Pretty as you are, my guess is you get all sorts of cads sputtering out these propositions. I don’t mean to be obnoxious, just my son and I, you see, and we’re off to have a bit of fun on his spring break. I’m not married anymore.” Yes, I did add that tidbit.

“ Cannes is a spectacular spot for a getaway . You two will have a marvelous time together.”

“ Tell him, he didn’t want to come.”

“ He appears quite happy now,” the stewardess said as she looked at the little fellow who was furiously enjoying whatever game he was playing on the back of the seat computer.

The wine tasted splendid. My head felt embarrassed by my inane and amateurish flirtation. I need Jack Daniels. No, that would be a mistake. Maybe a vacation from that world would do me good.

Isaac was sipping his coke and now staring out the window. I could not recall when we

were last together like this -- relaxed and me not worrying that I'd have to leave in a few hours. Our last family trip together was five years ago. We'd finally scraped enough money together to take a real vacation to a beach in the Carolinas, and, of course, it was mostly Susanna's money, as she made twice what I did in those days. Plus she saved money and I was foolish with money, she was sweet and faithful, and I was .... what was the word she called me one time -- a 'debaucherous bastard'? A memory of my Slovenian grandmother yelling at my grandfather, repetively, 'Jebem ti boga!' comes to mind. Not sure what it meant, not good. Something like 'you dirty bum!' What the hell, such negative memories were not conducive to enjoying the narcotic laziness of wispy white clouds and blue ocean sitting just outside our airplane window. I should aim to savor the expensive wine and stop reminiscing bullshit.

We are on our way to Cannes, a big freaking crowded city full of anxious tourists and pretentious jet setters. No, we are on our way to a week together to an exotic city that has sailboats and fabulous food and beaches filled with naked women. Well, this was spring, quite possibly the beaches won't yet be laden with bebies of naked beauties, but there was otherwise myriad splendid attraction and something magical about taking my son to a hill where I'd spent so many summers growing up, where my ancestors had built a fortune and then lost all of it.

“ How about a story with Teddy Bear and Duck and you and me and Oscar going on a trip up into the high Alps, this ancient cave where there is a treasure of Neanderthal paintings?” My mind was reeling with how I could twist the story around with neat details about riding my old Ford Mustang around death defying curvy roads to some mountaintop medieval village and then encountering a grotesque monster we would have to fight off. The stories always needed a good battle or two with impressively ferocious beasts.

“I’m ten years old, Dad,” Isaac stated pointedly and continued playing his game.

“Just because you’re a big boy now doesn’t mean you have to give up stories, or my story telling.” It occurred to me that he had called me ‘Dad’ and not ‘Daddy’, and certainly not Dr. Peterson. “Well, how is Teddy Bear and Ducky? Are they packed in your suitcase?”

“Maybe.”

“Yeah, I guess you’ve kind of grown up, but this storytelling business is a wonderful thing to continue, makes one use imagination and improves your brain, my brain anyway. I remember telling you these stories every night almost since you were born. These guys were always with us fighting off the enemy, going into the jungle, the enchanted forests, going with us on all our adventures. They’re kind of like my family, too, you know? Teddy Bear and Ducky became like my favorite friends.”

“Dad, I’m kind of gone beyond that sort of thing. You want kids to beat me up at school?” He looked at me with a calm, rather caressing expression as if he understood that such a proclamation, to see his son was no longer that little boy, this thing which we had done so often together was not really fun for him anymore. I did doubt it, though, and I sure as hell wanted to hear another one of those ridiculous stories, even if it was me doing the telling.

“Doesn’t Mom tell you bedtime stories?”

“Dad does sometimes. I mean Dr. Peterson. Mom hasn’t for at least a year now.”

The Boeing engine roared, a weightless shiver as the plane passed through a layer of clouds on the way up to a cruising altitude of at least six miles high. In the past I would always feel an inside panic when the airplane would have that kind of falling off sensation as it passed through clouds or turbulence or whatever it was that made you feel like you were dropping all

the way down to hell. Certainly, even at its worst, it wasn't nearly the jolt of a fairly typical ride at a county fair, not nearly as jarring or blood draining as a good roller coaster even, but somehow the thought that we were thousands of feet up in the air, nothing but invisible nebulous stuff between me and the ground, my imagination accentuating the sensation, and, matter of fact, used to make me damn close to puking. These days, flying more frequently, usually from New York to LA, I thought I was finally getting used to it, but there was still a remnant hint of utter skin bleaching terror hanging on. Isaac was oblivious to my discomfort.

'Get the box before it disappears or gets opened by the wrong people.' Who the hell are the wrong people? Danielle's admonition. She was about ninety years old and had trouble walking, and then there was the money problem, which had always been her big problem, something to do with living in Las Vegas and enjoying playing machines that make lots of noise, give you very little exercise and cost repeated fortunes to keep you happy. I told her that we would be happy to get this damn box for her.

Isaac was calmly oblivious to my daydreaming, again staring outside, clearly fascinated with the rug of cotton ball clouds laid out like a vast ocean brilliantly contrasting with the steel cobalt infinite sky. I imagined he had never seen anything like this before, not even one of the greatest of artists could reproduce such magnificence.

"It's where Jack in the Beanstalk lives," I told him.

He looked over at me with a smile and then a grimace as if recalling that he was not to act like a little boy anymore.

"Yeah, you think he's just a made up story but I've seen things up here in the sky that you can't even imagine. Sometimes in the distance, way beyond the clouds there are these

mysterious objects that people on airplanes sometimes see.”

“ Like what? ” he asked.

“ Oh, if I were to tell you you wouldn’t be able to handle it. One has to be grown up enough years and mentally powerful to know about how to deal with these dangerous matters. The government is afraid to let us regular people know certain things.”

“ I’m older than you think.”

“ Even a twelve year old would have trouble with such secrets.”

“ I can handle it, Dad,” he implored me. “ You’re talking about flying objects, I know all about them from the History Channel.”

“ Okay, well then, maybe you won’t be so interested in something that happened to one of your ancestors up there in that sky?”

“ Go on. I want to hear it.”

Ten or not, grown up or not, he still had the fever in him – an addiction to hearing a story from his real father. In the past it was always one ridiculous exaggerated adventure every bedtime and a few in between, me never preparing, making it up as I went and making it as fanciful as I could. Poor kid, he couldn’t help but have a lazy lout like me as a dad, filled with so many scatterbrained and stupid tales, but he always did seem to love my effort and I loved to tell them.

“ Darkness was on the horizon, a feeling of gloom in the air,” I started, just enough foreboding in my voice. “ The taste of wet fuzz on her face as the sky was filled with ominous blood black clouds getting ready to spit out a torrent of fury and death. The lady was in the navy blue uniform of a soldier, wearing a leather helmet on her head and blue glass goggles. She stood

out in a field of mowed grass standing next to her biplane, waiting for a signal. It would be crazy to get in and fly off in such weather with lightning exploding in the near distance. This could be suicide even. The wind blew her body so hard she could hardly stand still.

“ The signal came. Three quick flashes in succession from the far edge of the field. Elaine Bastille climbed into her 1916 Breguet Fighter airplane and started the engine.”

“ Isn't that your grandfather's name? The guy we're going to get his stuff?” Isaac asked. “Bastille?”

“ Elaine Bastille was his sister -- your great great aunt. As a matter of fact she was one of France's first woman pilots and actually fought for the French army during World War I.”

“ You're kidding?”

“ Nope. Not one bit. ”

“ Tell me some more.”

The boy smiled. I told my story -- maybe I verred a bit from the true story I had heard, but after all she was real and had actually flown airplanes in combat for the French -- maybe the alien Zeppelin she spotted was pushing it a bit? Ah, but his eyes lit up and I knew heaven. He slept. The low roar of the engine, the faint shudder as the giant steel structure knifed through atmosphere, the blanket they bring you, huddling in the warmth, and quiet when you look out the window at miles of nothing but blue on and on forever. I drifted into an uneasy sleep of memories.

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The past the first date

“ Why are we doing this? Are you truly out of your mind?” Susanna asked.

“ Hunter told me about the place, got permission from the farmer, showed me a sample of the rock and I figured this would make a glorious afternoon.”

“ Who is Hunter?”

“ My sister’s sort of boyfriend.”

“ Another artist?”

Jay wasn’t sure how to describe the fellow accurately.

“ He is tall, ten years or more older than me, built like a Greek god but hardcore vegetarian, has this kind of goofy Zen like philosophy on all things to do with anything, which you become aware of when you delve into just about any discussion with him, which are rather pleasant enough but elliptical to someone like me whose focus tends to be earth centered. Otherwise, he has an engaging personality.”

“ Very nice dissertation. I just asked whether he was an artist or not.”

“ Well, that particular question is more complicated, you know. The fellow does not make anything tangible that one can hold in your hand and read a signature sort of stuff, but in the end the meaning of artist is more about personality. Yes, I would surmise that he is an artist to a ninth degree.”

“ What would tenth degree imply?”

“ Black belt off the charts kind of loony. My sister, for instance, would be ranked even higher than that. There is a sense that she is not even slightly mentally engaged in this dimension, but she can be a truly wonderful fruitcake when she makes an effort.”

“ And what degree are you?”

“ Not even a four, I don’t think. I would not consider myself an artist.”

“ You are shitting me?”

“ Sculptors, at least stone sculptors, don’t exactly associate themselves with that crowd.

Those other guys are kind of out there in a serious way. I do this stuff for fun.”

“ Jay, that makes about as much sense as you dragging me to this hot as hell cornfield to show off a few silly rocks as if that will somehow convince a girl that you are, like, dating material ... I don’t know.”

“ Thing is, Lydia told me you were an outdoor type.” This girl was absolutely the prettiest girl on campus and he had not stopped thinking about her since he had first seen her on the volleyball court. But that was two years ago and she had been dating the bastard Matthew while he’d been in France.

“ Lydia knows I’ve been on a camping trip. One camping trip.”

“ Yeah, well, I am a math major and this is like a good break from all that. Not that I’m crazy enough to think I can make a living chiseling rocks.”

The truck was bouncing now down a dirt road through the three hundred and fifty acre farm. The soil had recently been plowed. Jay looked at his companion and saw a hint of a smile on her face and realized she wasn’t completely put off by this sort of adventure. Damn cute and tall, angular, muscular arms and wearing overalls, might likely beat him arm-wrestling. What kind of girl actually wears overalls?

“I suppose I could have asked you to a movie,” he said. “ What’s happened to Matthew?” He figured he might as well get it straight. There was an etiquette to dating a so called friend’s girlfriend and all that.

“ Matthew got a job out west. A new company called Microsoft.”

“ I hadn’t seen him around.”

“ One year to go on his degree and he up and quits and heads out into the boondocks.

Where were you for the past year? I used to see you at the Volleyball games, kind of like you dropped off the face of the earth.”

Jay smiled at the thought that this girl even remembered him from back then.

“ My scholarship paid for a year of study in France -- the French even know a bit about math. Heck, an hour from the beach, real french fries and the prettiest countryside you can imagine.”

“ So what is it about all these damn rocks you want to show me?”

“ Oh, yeah, well, kind of like it’s become my hobby. Met this fellow who carves marble in France and he showed me how to do it. The rocks here are soft enough so that I can make something with just a hammer and chisel. Most of the rocks you find laying around are too hard for that sort of carving and I can’t afford to buy marble or alabaster and an air chisel like the pros use. And, this stuff is free.”

“ What exactly is the shovel for?”

“ My dear friend, you’re about to find out.”

“ I am not your friend yet, you know that, right? In fact, we are teetering on tenuous ground.”

Jay pulled the old Datsun truck to a stop in the middle of the vast field of plowed rows of dirt. He motioned to his guest with his hand pointing out a long line indicating a broad straight band across the field.

“ Some bizarre geological formation that these rocks are here in a rather small cluster buried just a foot or two deep in the ground. After they plow the field some of the rocks get pulled up and you can see the tips of them. Hunter said that this is why the farmer is happy to let us cart them all away. They tend to tear up a plow.”

“ You didn’t really bring an extra shovel for me, too, did you?” A look of mock horror on her face.

“ Another thing Lydia told me is that you are a very stout and athletic young lady who does not mind getting your hands dirty. She was highly complementary of your physical attributes.”

“ I am pretty sure that Lydia and I just don’t know each other all that well. She may be my roommate but I don’t think she has ever seen me do anything physical except hitting a volleyball. That’s it. And stout is not an adjective most women would wish associated with their being. You get that part, right?”

“ Maybe not exactly the perfect word, but, I, too, did see you play volleyball and you are clearly anatomically gifted.”

“ Lydia is an idiot.”

Well, he actually did expect her to say no when he’d called. Got his courage up thinking that, in truth, this was just a rock digging excursion, not like a real date, and as a matter of fact, a bit of a necessity as some of the rocks were quite hard to get out of the ground. Thirty minute trip into the countryside and then digging these up in the sun all by himself was no Sunday picnic. It was pushing 95° outside today, a blazing sun. The funny thing is that this girl had actually agreed to come with him.

Her second thoughts were obvious when he turned off the motor and the air conditioning and opened the truck door. At least he had a cooler of ice and drinks in the back. When they were out of the truck he handed the volleyball girl one of the shovels.

“ I thought you were joking. This is not my idea of a date. I sort of imagined you were going to show me maybe pretty mountains or a beautiful ride past a covered bridge or at most we might even look for gemstones like when you sift through buckets of dirt at a comfortable roadside mine. Not like really digging in the ground for a stupid rock.”

“ Most of the rocks are small enough to simply pull out of the ground with your hands -- you know about this big.” He held his hands about 10 inches apart. “ They are the easy ones and often have beautiful plow marks on them. Those marks make them kind of fun to incorporate into the shape of whatever I am trying to carve, although that is an inside secret and no one realizes that my faces are often distorted just because I have to carve around these plough marks that I don’t like to destroy. I am pretty sure that if I had perfect big symmetrical size stones my stuff would look a lot better and I would actually be in the photorealist camp.”

“ As opposed to the nut-cake realist asylum?”

She was actually smiling when she said that but the smile was rather more like someone imaging that she was lost in psycho lala land and trying to figure a way out.

“ Well, the thing is that a lot of what I make are a bit hard for people to figure out.”

“ Good thing you are a math major, hunh?”

Susanna was leaning on her shovel, already beads of sweat on her forehead, and they had not yet started doing anything. She seemed to mumble something about an inattentive and mean spirited God.

The fact is that she did have a really pretty face, and that was the key to true beauty -- he realized he was staring at her and had to come back to earth. He noticed he had given her the larger shovel and switched with her.

“ I must be out of my bum fucking mind,” she stated without a hint of gentleness.  
“ Someday you’re gonna give me one of these damn sculptures and it better be worth a bucket of money.”

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The far past

In the early spring there are frequent rain showers along the coast in the south of France and it can get surprisingly chilled, as it was this April afternoon. Sweater cold and outside a pounding rain and vicious mistral wind blasted the beach. Such weather was not attractive to tourists who before the war made up the majority of business at Riviera Plage. Yes, he could remember, there had been a run of ten years when he could pay the bills. Riviera Plage was something of a success in those days as one of Cannes’s first beach bar restaurants and several more had subsequently followed his act on the Croisette, the ritzy other end of Cannes where the fancy hotels had been built. Now there were no tourists since his fellow Frenchmen had held up their hands and bent over, Marshall Petain explaining that they were saving the country, but, more likely, they had they had simply conceded cowardice and would permit the barbarians to have their way with them. Bastille knew well the future. In his experience Germany treated

conquests as literal brothels who supply free labor and material and women. Yes, they lust for our women and our terrain and they are the most efficient and merciless of damn sweethearts.

He took the dried glasses from the counter and slid them through wooden racks which hung the glasses upside down over the bar. There was a delivery of flowers to be put on the tables, attractive ruby red and pink gardenias. These days this was one luxury the bar did not need, for although the flowers came from the family plantation and were hardly expensive, especially using the labor of his daughters to cut them, there was a fee to Odette, and even that token amount was lacking most days. Cut some corners, all of the corners, or sell the damn place he had decided. Increasing business would be an unlikely outcome until the French grew balls and demanded, not politely, that their house guests go home and fiddle their own clan. But the silly concept of French growing testicles, actually standing up to a bully, hell, what was the chance of that?

He sipped a glass of his cheapest white wine. Dry with a hint of pear and thyme, grown in fields near Draguignan only an hour through the countryside from Cannes. The grapes from those rocky fields had never received much acclaim. As a region it was considered rather peasant quality by the 'haute' crowd, suitable for the local table, and never for export or special occasions and especially not to be sold at any reputable restaurant. Not that his place was on any list of haute couture. He could buy this particular wine dirt cheap by the barrel -- and it was remarkably tolerable in a pinch. And, yes, Riviera Plage was not Le Petite Zinc, the wino's cheap haunt up the hill who truly did serve a selection of rabid swill. He knew that well enough as he had been their client until he'd gotten his feet on the ground in this damn town. But now, in the almost ten years of Riviera Plage, he had built a certain reputation, a clientele of distinction

certainly, even if most of these folk could no longer afford even a franc or two for the cheapest glass of wine. The hell with reputation, he would have to attract the few sots who were left, men who did the odd jobs for the occupation government, a few elderly widows with some money in their pocket, all decrepit, arthritic, and on their last legs, but being French, you know, well, you have to have your glass. Yes, he must steal the drunks from Madame Katerina. Maybe when the war was over and the wealthy returned Bastille should kick the sots out again, back up the damn hill, damn scabrous crowd anyway, and perhaps regain a bit of reputation. Quite a bold plan. He sipped the wine, refilled the glass.

Rather a bit early for such indulgence but the rain pounding on the glass windows and tin roof had put him in a dark mood. He wanted to open a Grand Cru Bordeaux which he used to sell for five francs to the glass. Ought not to get drunk on expensive wine. If your plan is to get drunk you should not concede that this swill he was drinking is truly shit. And, of course, Bordeaux should not be so expensive, and who was buying Premier Cru these days? Must be piling up in the cellars or were the Germans stealing it all? His suppliers were taking advantage and would charge exorbitant amounts blaming an inability to freely travel through the country to obtain first class wine from the hinterlands. Maybe he should take his truck the three hundred kilometers there himself and buy the barrels for a quarter the price, or maybe half that distance to Châteauneuf du Pape -- these Rhône were as good as any Bordeaux -- but there was not, in any case, the business to justify such travel and expense, and, really, the fucking pear flavor had an amusing allure, became nearly agreeable after a bit.

The front of his bar was a sliding glass wall facing the sea. He could remember the cost of getting that glass installed and the hell he had endured from both his wife and her sister for

such luxury. But on the beach you need to see the sea. Most days a wonderful view across the bay to the islands directly in front and the mountains jutting out into the sea to the west, but today nothing but a mirage as five foot waves crashed wild and harsh, splashing explosively over the rock jetties and flooding far up the sand beach. Mist of cloud arrived like ghost trains obscuring everything in the distance and yet even with this maelstrom one could feel a personality to the water. You spend enough time at the sea and sometimes the sea feels like she is real flesh and blood. As most of his days were here alone staring out a window at this water, this beach of his, this aspect, the sound of repeating thunder and the feel of salty spray when the glass walls were pulled open, the taste of she could be inexplicably mesmerizing. Certainly felt like a woman with moods and tantrums and cacophony but there was also the mysterious, the precarious caressing enchantment. She could break you – as maybe the life he had chosen had already done, the women he had entangled, the foolishness of enterprise, neither gentle nor proper in their subversion. Yes, he had loved a girl, a pretty girl he'd met in Aix en Provence when he was selling women's clothing, but he was determined to make a fortune and a woman of no means just ties you up ... yes, it ties you up and there it all goes, but then he had lost out in any case in a more fundamental manner. That girl had at least had a smile for him.

He pulled himself away. Feeling self pity is unacceptable. There are chores to do. Dishes had to be washed and dried. Some sort of menu to put together, even a trip to the farmer's market for fresh goods, in case, with luck, whatever business came this evening. Yes, a nice Soupe De Poisson, perhaps, if the lady at the market had fresh rascasse or rouget. Just the aroma of simmering fennel and garlic ought to make the place more presentable. And then there are odds and ends that ought to be polished and refinished and re-stained and painted.

His daughters would come after school to help him, just kids, but they could work the afternoon and then back up the hill to their mother. Oh, he had pushed her to let them come down and spend some time with him now that they were a bit older, what, ten years, eleven years old? And, no, he did not really know them well. How can you when they live with their mother and he is not allowed. All his energy was spent building the restaurant into the ‘Belle of Cannes’ and attracting many of her most privileged natives and its share of wealthy tourists, not so shabby an accomplishment for a school dropout yokel. Obviously, the place was a little run down now, but with the pretty flowers on all the tables and when his daughters were here, they were cute as butterflies, a good pot cooking and filling the air with magnificent aroma -- that would bring in customers... Then he started thinking about the bills again, the lack of paying customers, the mortgage he still owed Rothstein and his sister in law. Would she really kick him out and sell the place if he missed just a payment or two? Not like they were family anymore.

He had another glass. There was a rustling noise as someone was trying to open the door. He dashed up and unlocked it. In came a group of German soldiers, bustling like a herd of donkeys, brushing off water from their uniforms.

“ Vous être ouvert?” one of them shouted.

Bastille considered his response. No business during the day. There was no profit in déjeuner (lunch business) outside of summer. His daughters would set up the evening service, and the bartender, when their cousin Charles was available, he had no money to pay him anyway, would not arrive until dusk. Customers was what he needed. But these were Germans, not the Italian soldiers who could fake a laugh, and he needed to fight off the urge to tell them to fuck off.

“ Certainement.”

“ Ich habe gehört dass du Deutsch sprechen? Wir wollen einen drink.”

Bastille feigned not understanding.

The soldier, an officer, spoke to him in fluent French.

“ Your sign says you have Baeckeoffe?”

Bastille realized that he had made a stew yesterday and posted the menu on the chalkboard outside the restaurant on the sidewalk. Spent all day cooking that Alsatian dish. Potatoes, onions, mutton, beef, pork, white wine, even goose fat -- simmer it a full day in a bit of herbs. Wonderful dish but no one had shown up and he had forgotten to erase the board.

“ We’d like a bite to eat. You make German food?”

The stew was not German, actually closer to a modified boeuf bourguignon, but too damn close to sauerbraten.

He regarded the tall man more closely. When the soldier removed his great coat it revealed an august uniform with a gleaming Iron Cross and a cluster of medals and ribbons. The man was quite old for this sort of business, mottled pale skin and spider webs at his eyes. The four other men, all far younger, also appeared to be officers.

The stew was in the refrigerator. Could be warmed up.

“ Come in.”

The four junior officers sat at a table near the glass wall. The elderly man with the splash of metal on his chest sat himself at the bar.

“ Maybe a bottle of good French wine. You have Chateau Margaux 1937?” he asked in German.

Bastille reached in a cabinet and took out the correct number of glasses.

“ No, just a glass for you and I. They,” he looked at his men at the table, “water for these gentlemen and maybe some coffee later.”

“ I have no Margaux or anything so elegant, I’m afraid,” Bastille answered in German. The language returned easily to Bastille, but it felt like sticking a rod up his ass, each syllable recalling unpleasantness from another world. “ I do have a very nice Chateaux Billancourt. Not so grand as the finest Bordeaux but ten years old now and ready to drink. The bottle is a bit expensive, twenty francs.”

The officer seemed amused and set a twenty franc note on the bar counter.

“ Certainly.”

Bastille opened the bottle. He suspected that letting it breath for a few minutes was not a requirement for this customer.

“ We’ll let it sit there for a moment,” the officer said and smiled, looking directly at Bastille.

“ Herr Generaleutnant von Gersdorff,” the man said and extended his hand.

“ Henri Bastille,” Bastille replied and shook the man’s hand reluctantly.

“ In older days when we were not at war and I was a simple businessman I would take trips to Paris.” The German paused, obviously cognizant of Bastille’s qualm. “ Even then your fellow Frenchmen never seemed too pleased to welcome a Bavarian, but I did grow fond of some aspects of your country. You know, with money, as always, people become friendly enough and suppliant. I learned that there is a certain class of French who have an equally fine appreciation for the better things in life. Unfortunately, here, in Cannes, money does not buy

what bounty it could in Paris and your local citizens are a surprising group of,” he considered his words, “provincials. This is a country with attraction and yet a lack of, let’s say, character. Such imperfection and sloth is evident in virtually all I have noticed in this part of the world.”

Bastille did not have much to say to that, rather much he would wish to say, but was not yet keen on being hung. Still, his expression must have said what he thought.

“ But then, here on the Cote D’Azur, surprisingly, I do actually find a German making real food. Well, we’ll see. What a surprise.”

“ I’m not a German. I was born to French parents in Alsace.”

The German paused and picked up the bottle Bastille had opened, poured the wine into his glass and sipped it.

“ Not terrible. Not Margaux. Adequate. You realize that Alsace was always Germany?” the man proclaimed and smiled. “ Alemanni. They fought the Romans in many great battles. You should be proud of your heritage.”

Bastille put the pot of stew on the stove and lit the burner. Turned back to the officer and had to make a conscious effort not to bare his teeth and snarl.

“ I grew up in the countryside outside Strasburg. In Martin sur Rive we spoke French when we were allowed. We cooked French food. We paid taxes to your so called German Empire, that was all.”

“ You say what you wish. Your stew smells like a fine Sauerbraten.”

The beef had been marinated for several days in wine and a touch of vinegar. Vinegar was the mistake, and did add a Teutonic hint to the dish. Regardless, Bastille considered it slanderously hostile to call his stew a Sauerbraten. In fact, this was the kind of insult a true man

could not stand. He'd had too much wine and ought to be careful with his words.

“ I used the box in Strasburg. My family was long gone when I was fifteen and my fists were often the only way for me to find a bite to eat. My biggest success in life was fighting this giant log from Freiburg, the ‘Kaiser Gorilla’ everyone called him. I remember the place was packed and exploded in a riot when I broke your German bastard’s nose and he retired in the second round, short a pint or two of blood. I am pretty damn sure that not many Alsatians will eat a Sauerbraten.”

“ You don’t exactly talk like a Frenchman.” Oddly, the officer did not seem particularly offended by the outburst. “ Sissies, so many in this place, really, but you on the other hand appear perfectly happy to get shot by a firing squad. I am laudably impressed, really.”

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The present

When you land in Nice, in spring, when the weather is perfect, as usual, one sees a patch of the snow covered Alps hugging almost up to the sea, brilliantly forbidding and surreal, contrasting starkly with water so blue your eyes tell your brain that it is just imagination, or so I thought as the plane took a perilous loop out beyond the cliffs over the water and then beyond the airport and then banked and dropped precipitously seeming as if we would dive into the gentle Mediterranean waves. This, perhaps because of too much very good libation, reminded me of a song – ‘Coming into Los Angeles’ – although I wasn’t carrying cocaine and this was not

La La Land but did surely look a bit like my kind of Disneyland.

The Nice Airport is pristine, lots of chrome and blue, clean, modern. We made our way through customs rather easily, nothing at all like watching the TSA guys frisk ninety year grandmothers at Laguardia.

“Dad I’m hungry.”

“You didn’t eat the food on the airplane?”

“It was awful.”

“Filet mignon and artichoke hearts and perfectly roasted potatoes and tiny peas, and vanilla ice cream, yep, I think you had two ice creams. Exactly what was the awful part?”

“The peas.”

“I imagine your mother must be spoiling you. I have to admit that I have been thinking about a baguette of French bread, some salami, camembert and a glass of Rose.”

“I’d just like a hamburger.”

“You know that they’re against the law in France.”

“What is?”

“Hamburgers.”

“I don’t think so.”

“So we come five thousand miles to where the food is considered by the gods to be the finest in the world and now I have to search for an American fast food joint on our first day?”

Isaac tapped me on the shoulder and turned me to the right to the glass wall beyond the immigration counter. There, in the main court, among other rather more interesting restaurants, was the ‘Golden Arch.’

“ You realize the French like their hamburgers made of horse meat. And they don’t like to cook the meat at all, raw even.”

Isaac did not even bother to give me his typical skeptical gaze. “The Golden Arch” did, at least, offer draft beer and wine on the menu.

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The far past

Bastille lifted the woolen cap off his head, wiped his brow of stinging sweat and stood resting for a moment at the fork of the ancient path that led from his wife’s house down to the coast or across to the Rothstein mansion. The distance was perhaps only a quarter mile by a crow’s flight, but he was not a bird and it was steep down the hill through an overgrown jungle where he had to use a machete to hack through briars and bamboo and ancient fig trees all covered in prickly thistle, then across a wide grass field uncut for years, steep back up again over impossible rocks and bramble and finally over the ridge. The Valley of the English is what his wife’s family called the place, as the English monarchy had owned this land in the 1800’s.

He had not considered himself geriatric but this bushwhacking business was more work than one wanted to accomplish in a day and was no wonder that the passage had been abandoned years ago. A proper good road ran above his wife’s house and gradually descended the Croix de Gardes toward Rothstein and then beyond to the port of Cannes. With a car, no problem, but his truck was in the shop.

Finally he made it over the ridge and saw a vast green grass field where at the end of that field standing like a picture postcard stood a pink marble chateau backed by impossibly blue sea and sky. As he approached the house the view became a sublime panorama with the Esterel Massif mountain range hugging the coast to the west, the old port of Cannes below in front and the Lerins islands shimmering golden in the distance.

He knew about the restaurant and the shop that sold art in Cannes, how much money can you make selling soup and nouveau paintings, but there was also the perfume factory that bought mimosa from the plantation. Were there so many woman who could afford fancy perfume? And what kind of competent businessman would sell a perfectly good plot of land on the beach for such a low price? Someone who had too much money. Maybe he thought he'd get a deal with Odette and Camille but the poor fellow could not possibly have guessed how quickly Bastille would get out of sorts with these two women so thoroughly.

All around lousy news for Bastille. The damn truck. The wife, or absent wife actually. No business at the cafe except for these German. Odette and her husband had loaned him money to build a simple shack on the beach land, but then, of course, she became his boss and she was the most miserable human one could wish to encounter in a lifetime. So now he slept at the beach and sometimes he would only see his daughters when they were allowed to help out down there.

Not the life he had envisioned when he had first arrived at this glitzy quarter on the Azur Coast. So many years had past and pitifully little to show -- but then again he was not a Jew. This rich fellow, Rothstein, he was the yid. With the French surrender everything had changed and Jews in business were no longer welcome in Cannes, most likely all of France these days, but still, Bastille could hardly tell Rothstein was Jewish, none of that black clothing, skullcaps and

pigtails he used to see all over the place in Paris. Anyway, what kind of Jew can live in a palace like this?

Bastille had gotten a message that Rothstein wanted to speak with him about some work. Of course he could use whatever business came his way as the tourists had stopped coming to Cannes. No one was afraid of an Italian and at least those soldiers loved the beach and loved to drink and then it didn't feel exactly the enemy or a real occupation. Now Gestapo police had arrived and something like frozen hell had descended on the town.

He walked across the manicured lawn to a huge ornately carved walnut door and pulled the chain, the bells rang a musical chime in the distance. A dour faced black tuxedoed man let him in. They walked along pure white marble floors to a large room with tables and chairs in clusters and walls that were shelves filled with books, except for the far wall where a hundred or so paintings covered it like a checkerboard.

He looked at the books, leather-bound, and he could make out a few titles, but what do you get when school ends at ten years old? The furniture was a bit flimsy for his taste, silver and gold inlaid trim, the chairs looking like they would collapse if he sat down in one. Colorful paintings hung almost on top of each other and they felt incongruous with the furniture. 'Modern Art' is the term he had heard, 'Impressionism' - must mean awful damn art in his estimation. If you need to paint something, paint the damn thing. In Paris after the war he had visited a museum or two, and he knew of Ingres and Delacroix, true French artists. The signatures here, yes, he's heard of a few them -- Picasso, Matisse, Cezanne, Signac -- none of these would he hang in his bar if the fellow gave him one. The few regulars to his establishment would likely throw their beer and wine at these dogs.

Rothstein entered the room. His hair pure white, he looked emaciated and walked with a limp. Dark circles under his eyes, and even with a regal tailored gray silk suit, a pink handkerchief peeking from the breast pocket, you could imagine the man was a skip from death. He shook Bastille's hand and asked him to have a seat.

“Richard, please get us some Brandy,” he directed the butler.

They sat there for a long moment, silent, waiting for the butler to return. Rothstein was lost in some daydream or another, and Bastille wondered if maybe the man who had aged so quickly had also become demented.

“Your wife and her sister used to steal into my yard on a regular basis when they were children. Even steal my flowers, but I could never shoo them away. You are a lucky gent. But I hear not so lucky these days. I hear you are not in the house anymore?”

“Women are fickle.” Bastille supposed he might have been better off with a monkey looking woman.

“I have a wonderful opportunity for you. You might help me in a fashion.”

Bastille, the proprietor of a simple beach bar restaurant, and now not even a faintly successful enterprise at that, how could he assist such a man?

“I'd like you to transport some goods to Spain.”

“I don't have a vehicle. I have one but it is badly broke, and with the war, well, there isn't money to replace a motor.”

“I think I have a solution for that. The Germans have felt the necessity to limit my trade. Not shut me down completely but I can not so easily sell my perfume outside of France, oh, maybe Germany and Austria now, but the German women, let's say they are not appreciative

of the quality items we sell. Their standards of grooming are beneath ... it doesn't matter. The fact is that I would like to get a load of these goods from here to Spain where I have wholesale buyers. This could make some money for you."

"A few boxes of perfume can really make so much money?"

"Not finished perfume, but the essence. This can be processed at a foreign factory and sold to my largest market after France - the United States. A few liters of the essence produces thousands of small bottles of perfume which each sell for the equivalent of a bottle of 1929 Chateau LaTour."

"My truck is broken."

"Rogan Jouselet will loan you one of his trucks or he'll fix yours."

"I think his wife will not let him."

"They understand business and I've talked to Odette. You haven't been paying on his loan and he hasn't been paying me for my loan and so there we are."

"Yes, his wife would want me dead, I am certain. There is a war, you realize, and the Spanish border is closed." Of course, he was making no money at the restaurant. He could contribute nothing to the family welfare, and if not for the sisters' business they might all starve.

"Rogan says there are ways through the mountains. Because of this war we are all suffering. You'll be impressed by the money I can make you."

Bastille got up and walked over to the wall of paintings. "This is quite a museum here," he noted.

"My family has collected art for generations, and there are wealthy collectors in this part of the world. Lots of supply for my gallery downtown. Yes, there used to be buyers until this

war began.”

“ They like these things?”

“ Not your style I suppose?” Rothstein walked up next to him and pointed to a painting that looked like a bunch of triangles and squiggly lines and maybe musical instruments.

“ Kandinsky, absolutely brilliant. His earlier works that look like simple country scenes, not so easy to sell. And Paul Klee,” here Rothstein stood transfixed and silent admiring what appeared to be even more meaningless squiggles and letters and pointless objects to Bastille. “

Mesmerizing, a perfect play with color and form.” He walked to another, a cubist painting by Picasso. “ This is worth thousands of francs. The artist comes to Grasse in the summers and sells me his work for a song when I am able to get him drunk enough. This one is by Cezanne. He painted Mount Sainte-Victoire eighty times. Interestingly, there was a notorious battle here one hundred years before Christ was born, and the Romans who controlled all of this part of France, defeated an invading army of Teutons – the German barbarians, actually. The valley below the mountain is called ‘Campi Putridi’ – rotten fields—as it is claimed that one hundred thousand of the invaders were left to stink and decay in the field, never buried, a reminder to the enemy what would become of future trespass. Perhaps someday again.”

“ You surely know people with boats who can get around the German embargos? There is smuggling on a regular basis.”

“ It was working with the Italians. Now there many rotten ears around and I’ve lost too much this way. Our invaders are meticulous and astute, and gather traitorous friends in every discipline you can imagine. I’ve heard about your own experiences in war and think I can trust you. Plus, you owe me money.” He regarded Bastille sharply, maybe reappraising him. “ Rogan

himself says you have some skills.”

There was no question that Bastille would take on the job, but it would be improper not to exaggerate risk and drive up the price.

“ The Vichy can be the real devils to deal with. A good bit of cash ought to do the trick to buy them out when necessary. You realize I’d be risking my life for a bit of perfume? ”

Rothstein told him about what the commission would be for each trip. Bastille did not haggle any further.

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The present

Walking out of the terminal, out into the air fragrant with some indelible bouquet combination of sea and flower and piercing light awoke a type of excitement in me from years of dormancy, a drawer in my brain slipped open hinting at forgotten youthful exuberance and the ability to be thrilled and calmed by simple sensations. I could just taste the feeling, not quite retrievable, and I looked at my son and wondered what he was thinking. Maybe these nectarine stirrings are that bastion of youth I had generally lost -- having a whole world of experience ahead of you to dream and every corner you turn being new and amazing. Well, yes, that part of me had been absent and its fleeting return felt meaningful and worth sharing. How does one communicate the appreciation of reborn ambrosial abstract pleasure? What does ambrosial mean

-- I don't damn know, just being fancy -- but the feeling was truly wonderful and I'd like to give such positive philosophy to my blood.

There was almost no humidity, a pleasant warmth in spite of pushing ninety, and the sound of jet engines split our ears. We pulled our suitcases and walked to an Avis building out in the middle of a vast parking lot. The building itself was not much more than an industrial ten foot by ten foot tin hut that suggested an IKEA special exhibit with gleaming aluminum walls and spare bright plastic furniture, but truly brightened further by a pretty young girl who could not be too far out of high school. She stood at attention behind the counter and greeted us with an enthusiastic "Ello" -- our provenance obviously hinted at by our own bright smiles and then again my son did have 'Harvard Medical School' emblazoned on his shirt. The attendant wore a silly looking uniform dress with a bright red neckerchief and a ridiculous matching red cap hat, although, in spite of the clownish fast-food type of uniform, she was otherwise my idea of French feminine exceptionalism. My memory being good in such matters, the majority of these creatures sport practically perfect facial features, bathing suit slender forms, and were always stylishly coiffed, exception noted. And, in the way such frivolous thoughts occur to me, when one ought to be attending to the business at hand, I wondered about the contrast with French men who were utterly unattractive, mostly on the scrawny side, and had a loathsome demeanor to match. This is possibly racism of a sort on my part, but the conundrum is that I am technically half French, and could be describing myself as well. Isaac nudged me hard with his elbow.

I handed the pretty lady my license and credit card. She typed on her computer and then handed the cards back with the rental agreement to sign. No chit chat, just pleasing smile and perfunctory easy, and then she asked us to take a seat at the bench outside the building, that

someone would bring us the car.

When we sat down I pulled out the letter I'd brought with me to read one more time.

“What is that?” Isaac asked.

“A letter my grandfather wrote to my mother before he died.”

“Where did you get it from?”

“Danielle, your aunt, emailed me a copy.”

“Where did she get it from?”

“It was written in 1964 and I suppose my mother must have sent her a copy many years ago.”

“It looks like it's in English. I thought your grandfather was French?”

“Google translated the letter for me.”

“You don't speak French?”

“Not so well anymore.”

“What's it about?”

“Before you wouldn't say even a word. Now you've turned into a curious loquacious creature.” I held out the letter so we both could read it.

May 15, 1964

My dear Victoria,

Look forward to your visit to Cannes this summer. Did not explain over phone that my prognosis is dismal, did not want you to worry more about me. Doctor says that this tumor I have is inoperable. I know how foolish my fear of traveling to the United States to see you, and Paul, and the grandchildren who I never met, but your letters keep me comfortable and informed about the life you find in America, such a gift you have always had with words. Going off to an unfamiliar world is not something I can do. I am an old man with his idiosyncrasies, and so, this letter is in case I am not here when you arrive. Things I should have told you, some things that occur in a complicated world better locked away and I could not put to paper before now.

During the war it was not always clear to me that France would ever emerge again free, civilized, or would she be servant to the Germans forever. There is an old French saying that one

can not eat morals, or something to that effect. Maybe back to Mary Antoinette and her ‘let them eat cake’ -- there was no cake. The point is that I did what I thought I needed to do .... to get us through to the end.

Some of my ranting must seem like rubbish. I was always about a grand idea, and war, all I am good at maybe -- when it takes a devil to beat a devil they say. Still, to my defense, I have to state that even if I started out more abominably as any, I hope, before it was too late, garnished some measure of honor. So many lies after the war, so much even then I could not talk about, even at the end, especially at the end. Monsters continued to be powerful. And you know, I am not a talking type.

Perhaps now I am in heaven where we will have this next conversation. It occurs to me that I might not be welcome there – so I have arranged to give you a box of mementos and a letter if I die before you get here. I’ve explained it all. Unfinished work that God has suggested I complete. He speaks to me in my dreams recently. He forgives me maybe for calling him numerous names.

You were wonderful, magnificent daughters – this God could not have been more kind in this regard – but I was terribly hard on you both growing up. (the last part of this sentence is circled and ‘you think!’ penciled in by his aunt). What can I say? Somehow you both made a better life for yourselves in spite of me.

There are others who may cause trouble – be careful. (another circle around ‘trouble’ and the words ‘someday I’ll tell you what I saw’ written by his aunt).

I love you. Henri

“ What is that all about? Trouble?”

For such a little fellow Isaac read much faster than I.

“ Your aunt wants me to pick up a box from a cousin’s house, a box that contains some of your great grandfather’s things. He left it for my mother and my aunt and it was never found. But, you know, a lot of old people get crazy about rather silly little things, think grandiose thoughts about themselves and the importance of their life and I’m thinking that this is one of those times.”

“ What does grandiose mean?”

“ Kind of like imagining yourself really important when you’re just a regular person. This Bastille fellow, your great grandfather, may have had a bit of dementia. He did, after all, die of a

brain tumor right before my mother got to France on that trip. Have you heard the term ‘delusions of grandeur’? I think he might have imaged he was James Bond or a secret spy, or, what was the book called – [The Da Vinci Code](#)? Maybe we’ll find out we’re related to the King of France? You and I are heir to the French throne? Maybe there is even a diamond encrusted crown in the box. I think you should start calling me ‘Master King Daddy.’”

“ I think you are making a joke.”

The car rental lady called out our name.

“ J'espère que vous avez trouvez pour nous une automobile qui est si belle que vous etes,”

I announced to her in my rusty French. “Je pense que les filles en France avez les plus belles yeux du monde.” Kind of felt good remembering a few useful French phrases.

“ Monsieur, they are driving up your vehicle at the moment. Everything is set, the BMW is filled with diesel and I hope you are pleased with your car and have a wonderful vacation,” she responded in finely enunciated English.

“ What did you ask her?” Isaac asked.

The lady behind the counter laughed.

“ I told her that French women have the most beautiful eyes in the world.”

“ Mom says you say something like that to all women.”

Didn’t really know how to respond to that comment.

“ She really said that?” I asked.

We got into the car and started our journey. Of course, the first complication came almost immediately as I could not figure out how to release the parking brake, then I could not figure out the shift pattern to put the car in first gear. Living in New York City without a car had turned

me into quite the dork.

“ Press the button on top of the gear shift,” Isaac told me as he noted my frustration.

“ How do you know?”

“ Dr. Peterson has a BMW kind of like this.”

“ He does, does he?” My last car had been a twenty year old beat up Ford pickup with a shift -- take that you damn doctor pussy -- of course they say you are not supposed to forget these things the way you don't forget how to ride a bike. This was a top of the line sports cars and it did have some four hundred plus horsepower, which would surely come in handy when stuck at a light somewhere and somebody wants to race, but the fool who rented the car had not previously encountered such a contraption. Finally, with the help of my son I jerkily navigated several roundabouts to get out of the airport.

The signs were in French, mostly strange numbers, and none of them clearly said which way to Cannes, meaning like an arrow or something practical and universally simple as that. I do recall the French can be damn constipated with their superiority complex. Must be some rhyme or reason to the road signs. At another large roundabout outside the airport I drove around the circle about four times, got honked at twice, someone even waved his hand out the window at me, mercifully not the finger as the French are also not so bold, except, well, a few do imitate the Italians and threaten with a bizarre underhand wave at you, and only at a distance of course. I sort of remembered that the sign with parallel blue lines might mean the Autoroute. The Autoroute was the fast way to Cannes to the south and Italy to the north. Not so complicated. Italy up the coast, Cannes down the coast. Simple enough.

Finally I could relax a bit. How can you not in Shangri-la? With the windows open an

intoxicating cool breeze and salty sea scent erased my homical intentions. Palm and eucalyptus trees everywhere, their tropical fragrance shouting that I had arrived back in paradise.

Damn, I somehow missed the turn to the Autoroute. Maybe too much attention to cobalt seascape in the distance. Then appeared a sign Plage Cagnes-Sur-Mer to the right and Promenade des Angles to the left. I knew from a earlier life that the English road led into downtown Nice, the wrong way. The coastal route through the little villages would add more than an hour to our drive.

Damn okay of course. Finally I was getting my bearings. We made it all of two miles before I pulled over to the side of the road, which was a long expanse of asphalt parking lot right next to the beach. There were no other cars stopped here and I was not cussing and I was not at all angry.

“ We will walk on the beach,” I explained to my son.

“ Dad, it looks like this beach is just a whole bunch of rocks. Nobody’s even here.”

“ All the better.”

Nice was notorious for its ‘inferior’ pebble beach, as opposed to Cannes, which had white sand. And yet, this vast carpet of multicolored stones leading to the sea, the sound of the surf crashing on rocks sounding like being in the middle of a storm -- I could hear it even while driving -- the beginning of morning on a crisp spring day, all felt wonderous and shouting to me to get out and breath in the balm. Good memories.

“ Come on.” I started walking down the second class beach. Ahead of us was a peddler sitting odd legged in front of a display of nuts. I remembered such fellows would normally walk up and down the beach offering samples but today there was no business. The African, tall, long

forehead, wearing a golden beret, a long white gown and multiple strands of multicolored glass bead necklace looked like he had just gotten off the boat from Senegal. He gazed up at us with a begging kind of big smile, half his teeth gone, skinny as hell and he was young. His French was atrocious and I was sure he must be asking for too much money. Maybe this would be his only sale for the day and he had to eat after all. I bought a bag of the almonds and did not bargain and then we walked down to a rock jetty where the sea waves marched close to the road and there were massive piles of pebbles formed up into little mountains. I sat down on one of the smaller mountains. Isaac right away began playing with the rocks and then began carefully placing larger flatish rocks on top of each other like he was making a pancake sculpture.

“These are called shu-shu nuts.” I opened the bag and gave him a few. “When I was your age and spent my summers here we would always beg my mother to buy some. I’d watch the African guys roast them in sugar right on the beach and they would give us samples. Heaven on earth for a little fart. Yeah, and then there are these little food booths that sell nougat which is a square chewy candy, and Calisson, sort of fruit and nuts in tiny pretty layered cakes. This place is the holy grail of candy as I remember.”

Isaac nibbled on one of the nuts. He was more interested in the rocks and went back to building his masterpiece.

“How many times did you come here, Dad?”

“Quite a few summers. We’d stay with my Tata, means aunt, my mother’s aunt, who lived in the old house on the hill where we’re going now. It is an old beat up peasant house which you are about to see, and this was where my mother and her sister grew up.”

“Who lives there now?”

“ Nobody. We’ll have it to ourselves.”

“ Who owns it?”

“ Well, I do, a bit of it anyway -- with my aunt and my sisters and some cousins, you’ll meet one of them, Bernadette.”

“ Why didn’t we come here before?”

“ We did once. You were too little to remember. But, the thing is, it is called being poor, Isaac. Before I began selling my work it was hard enough paying bills, much less taking a trip to the south of France. Most of the world would give their arm to come to a place like this.”

“ A whole arm?”

“ Just to the elbow. You know what I mean. Kind of means they would be exceedingly really happy to see such a beautiful place at least once in their life.”

I started imitating my son and began stacking rocks on top of each other. I looked for pure white and black colored rocks. He was quite good with the architecture and my aim would be aesthetics. Soon we had two exquisitely attractive foot plus tall splendid sculptures.

“ So you think we should try to sell them?” Isaac asked.

We gazed in rapture at our pebbles.

“ I don’t think we would get too much for these,” I conceded.

“ Mom says that you get a stinking amount of money for your sculptures.”

“ ‘Stinking’ doesn’t exactly sound like a compliment. Does she say any nice things about me ever?”

“ You kind of left us didn’t you?”

“ I didn’t want to, Isaac.” Felt like I ought to say something more profound. Hardly my

forte. “ The road of life has lots of bumps and wrong turns. Luckily your Mom figured out the right direction and she and you and Dr.Peterson are on the perfect road.”

He looked at me. Not sure what he saw. There was just a bit of curiosity in his gaze and nothing accusing or belligerent. Still, this conversation made me feel inadequate.

We walked back to the car. I was not certain that I could keep from saying unpleasant things about his mother. No, I had not willingly left her or him at all. No, I actually felt about like death and suicide when all the bad luck transpired, and brilliant me, trying to be the good pill about it all, take one step after another, get back to walking, get on with it, British way of doing things is it not? I somehow did actually understand that it was the right thing to do for them, and for the whole damn world’s benefit. Damn thing is, somehow, I had also gotten used to not seeing my son grow up, and that was the fucked up part. God, Isaac, you don’t know how much I love you, do you? I could not blame Suzy for any of that business.

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The past        the second date

“ The trick is marinating the cubes of steak in a good red wine, like a fruity Beaujolais. Of course the better is ‘Nouveau,’ which means from this year’s crop, which would double the price and therefore I could not afford to make you such a froufrou dinner. Kind of on a budget, you know, school and all that. Then again, the more expensive French wines seem acidic to me and wouldn’t do well in a stew. When I am rich I’ll sort it all out.” It was not also steak, rather

chuck roast which sells for a fraction and when marinated is quite acceptable.

“ You are rich. You’ve got a full scholarship and a job at the Blue Moon, and what is it these guys offered to you for a job next year -- twice what I’ll make?” Susanna sat across the room from Jay on a well worn sofa someone had left on the street.

“ That is the plan. But now, can’t quite afford the proper wine and that sort of thing. And then this apartment -- you see the thing is if I stayed in a dorm room then I’d have some money left over, but, you know, two years in those dorms and one gets about done with the juvenile junk you have to deal with -- a fellow needs a place to get away from noise and cacophony, get my head on straight and all, and so this eats up most of the money. I used to be quite the good student but getting to the end of this seems like a miserable rush now.”

“ You complain a lot.”

Jay, standing at the kitchen counter, really just a corner alcove in the studio room, a bit of counter space, one cabinet against the wall, a half sized refrigerator, and a two burner gas stove, looked over at the girl in a red flannel shirt and corduroy skirt. How had the Gods smiled on him. A real girl and the first one to come to his apartment, well, except for Lydia when she came over with Jerry Lee. Simon and Garfunkel played on the record player, ‘Cecilia’ -- specifically Jerry Lee’s instructions to play this music as he had promised many girls love to listen to this group and fall for guys who listen to the right kind of music. Seemed kind of dorky to Jay but then again Jerry Lee had actually had real luck with women.

“ Means I’m nervous.”

“ Why?”

“ I didn’t expect we would get this far along or you would give me the time of day after

those rocks I got you to help me dig in the field, and, anyway, you are sort of a first class girl.”

“ We are not exactly so far along. And by the way, aren't you a first class kind of guy? What does that mean anyway?” she asked with a bit of frown on her face.

Jay stood there not exactly sure how to answer. This girl was so damn pretty. Should he let her know that he considered himself a less desirable loser sort or puff himself up and bullshit, because he did actually consider himself less than prime material in dealing with the opposite sex. There are fellows who know how to talk to girls and then there is the world he inhabited with most of his friends - honest, not pretentious, decent group as a matter of fact, but dorks. No, he had not dated much, well, any -- school was demanding and then there was the fact that the kind of girl he was attracted to, a girl like this Susanna, normally did not actually give him the time of day.

“ Jock, popular, movie star looks kind of stuff,” he answered.

“ I do admit you are an ugly looking dude. Good thing I don't go for looks.” She was smiling, looking him up and down, her head bobbing a bit side to side as if not sure of the verdict. “ As I recall you are no good at volleyball either. That damn silly rock thing, I haven't the faintest clue why I agreed to see you again.”

“ Seriously?”

“ You are near tallish and maybe your biceps are impressive. You don't exactly look like a math kind of guy. I am joking Jay.”

“ Thanks.”

He tried to smile. Some kind of intelligent small talk would be good. Jay emptied the marinating steak from a large clear plastic bag into a glass bowl. Then he grabbed a purple onion

and several cloves of garlic, placed them on a cutting board and commenced to dicing rather adeptly.

“ You seem to know how to do that,” she noted.

“ The Blue Moon and then I did have a stint at McDonald’s in high school.”

“ They make Boeuf Bourguignon at The Blue Moon?”

“ Blue Moon is hamburgers and beer, and McDonald’s is more hamburgers. So I am damn good at hamburgers and slicing onions and tomatoes. No, this is on account of my year in France, and my mother was French and she was a splendid cook, although while she was alive I did not appreciate how lucky I was.”

“ She’s dead?”

“ About five years ago from cancer.”

“ I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.” This was the kind of thing you just try hard not to think about -- crying in front of a girl would likely be a faux pas. “ I can’t really remember how she made her beef stew. I try to follow Julia Child’s recipe, but it is missing something essential for my tastes, so I’ve played around with parts of the recipe. What a trick if we could only go back to when we were kids and pay attention. Mom used to make this thing called ‘Pot Au Feu’, means pot on the fire, like in ancient days when they cooked over a real fire in the fireplace, slow cooked roast with leeks and carrots. I would complain, acting a real ass when she made me eat it, but how I adored the aroma that would seep through the house all day long. Boys don’t like to tell their mothers how good they are at anything, everything -- and then when it is too late you wished you had told them.”

He didn’t mean to get sentimental and he wiped his eyes as tears came rolling down his

cheeks. Poured half the meat into a frying pan with the diced onions, she would see that the onions were the reason for these impertinent droplets, a ribbon of olive oil, then turned the flames up to medium, used a big chipped wooden spoon to mix it. From the refrigerator he grabbed a large tomato, a packet of mushrooms and some bacon, commenced chopping.

She gave him a hug.

It did actually take everything he had to keep from bawling.

“ I ought to let it simmer for two hours,” stiff upper lip finally. “ Still, might work out okay if we can do it for an hour -- I left the chuck to marinate for two days. Ever tried cooking a duck, that is not an easy trick, all that fat does not seem to want to go away.” Talk. Nervous, silly comments. “ Good thing I can’t afford duck.”

“ I don’t have a kitchen and you are the first guy to ever cook for me, Jay. On top of asking me to dig up rocks you are not the standard type.”

“ Give me a few years to build up a nest egg and I will gladly take you to a fancy restaurant. To get money now means working more hours at the Blue Moon and less studying and I’m on the edge of things as it is with school.”

“ I heard you are about at the top of our class.”

“ To get into the best grad school in mathematics requires one to be just about perfect. Without a top notch grad school the jobs are not so enticing.”

“ Maybe you shouldn’t have picked a math major.”

“ They tell me you can’t get a degree in taking naps and daydreaming and those are the two other things I am really talented at. How about you?”

“ I like philosophy and I want to become a teacher.”

“Teaching Kierkegaard and Thoreau at a university?” He knew that she, too, was straight A’s.”

“No, little kids, I hope, like first or second grade.”

“All that screaming and running and screaming and they hardly even pay you for the abuse.”

“There is more to life than money.” She looked at him, serious now. “If you don’t go after what you fancy what is the point exactly? When our soul doesn’t breathe then we are nothing more than ants.”

“Money is a reasonable destination. Looks like I’ve made friends with a romantic type,” Jay noted, and turned back to the stove. “Just to warn you fairly, there is a method to my madness.” He lit the other burner and put the bacon strips into a second frying pan. “My intent is to mesmerize you with culinary skills -- I actually read about the technique in an anthropology course I took concerning the caveman method of attracting a female -- roast a big fat leg of something, bear or deer or maybe mastodon, in my case a few doleful pitiful strips of pig, over a blazing fire, ignore the fact that I have this wimpy natural gas flame, and then the whole shahbaz performs like an aphrodisiac. The thing is I am pretty much certain I nodded off during the lecture and may have misunderstood the details.”

“Who did you accuse of being a fruitcake the other day? Is it safe for me to stay around here?”

“Math major, remember? Like pale skin, dorky presentation, not known for getting into fights with anyone but his calculator. I’m a pussycat. You even outdid me getting rocks out of that field. No matter all of that, I am pretty sure you can take care of yourself if I were to make

any wrong moves.”

“ Thank you for compliment. You said you would show me some of your sculptures?”

Jay turned the burner down as the bacon fat was spraying the counter. He poured the browned meat into a large pot with the onions, sprinkled it all with salt and pepper and a dash of ‘Herbes de Provence’.

“ Here’s the deal, I may have an Adonis exterior but I also have a fragile ego and negative vibes from you might keep keep me from my destiny.”

“ An artist who wants to become rich and has a fragile ego? Sort of a flapdoodle.”

“ Whatever that means. Be assured that there is absolutely no chance I will make amorous advances on you unless you become much more dishonest with your flattery.”

At the first rock out of the ground on their first date and actually the first day he had seen her on the volleyball field he had fallen head over heels for her. They had laughed and stumbled while digging out the rocks in the hellish corn field, and after an hour or two together it had felt like they were friends and there was not anything better than that kind of feeling. She wore no overalls today, she was dressed like a real girl, and that aspect was uncomfortably obvious. He had not a clue how to act at this point.

“ Over there in the corner if you open the cabinet door you’ll find some things I’ve worked on.”

Susanna walked across the room and Jay poured half a bottle of the red wine into the big pot, broke the sizzled bacon into pieces and threw them into the pot. He added a tablespoon of Dijon mustard, not sure why, just seemed to remember that nugget from his mother’s cooking. He filled two wine glasses with the rest of the wine.

Susanna was sitting on the floor and sorting through his pile of wooden sculptures.

“ I didn’t expect this.” She had one sculpture of an old man’s head in her hands and was looking at it closely.

“ He’s modeled after a Roman general I saw at a museum.”

“ How long have you been doing this?”

“ I used to play with carving wood since I was seven or eight, I guess. My sister had a cheap set of wood chisels that I borrowed.”

“ And nothing but faces here?”

“ You could call it an obsession.” Jay opened the closet and took out a larger stone sculpture that he had most recently been working on. Of course the rock was from the field they had visited.

“ The nose is bigger than it ought to be. I meant to put an expression in his face -- that is not easy to do.” He held it up, never showed any of this to anyone and didn’t feel particularly comfortable doing it now. “That effort is truly taking a tremendous lunge into a new territory.”

“ Yes, that is quite obvious.”

He looked from the sculpture to the girl and she appeared barely able to suppress laughter. Suddenly she came close to Jay and kissed him on the lips.

Yes, there is this thing called rapture, moments which are incapable of being improved on, moments you can mark as perfect when all the neurons in your brain are singing and dancing and ecstatic, when all the stars align, and he was absolutely lost now. Is this how love works? Another entity on this planet sees what you see, sees how spectacular you might actually be and praises you. Maybe. Maybe actually a gorgeous girl who kisses you and all the bells start tolling.

Love and it is real and gorgeous and he had never known such a sublime feeling.

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The far past

“Château Polinard ist auf Boulevard Cointet? Nicht weit von hier?” the German General asked. The Riviera Plage was otherwise empty except for his entourage who had returned to their usual table.

“Up the hill on Avenue Beau Site. Almost to the end of the road. You can see the white mansion on the corner of the hill facing the sea,” Bastille said in French.

“Is it ready?”

“Yes, she is ready.”

The General barked to one of the officers who came up to the bar and set down an envelope stuffed with French francs.

Blood money, Henri Bastille thought as he quickly put the bills away. Not his doing, city hall, the damn mayor, a Petainist surrounded by Malice, all thugs and traitors and cowards, were rounding up the foreign Jews and taking everything from them. So Bastille had beaten those bastards to Count Polinard’s mansion in what was really a favor to Rothstein, the Count, who was a Jew with no French citizenship. The German wanted a large house with a view of the sea, offered Bastille a fee to find such a place. Yes, he might make a little money in the process lending the empty mansion to the Germans, but maybe the Count would get his property back

when the war was over, he reasoned. He knew a man in the records bureau who had not turned sides, and had helped the family forge documents and transfer ownership to a trusted non Jew French citizen for the duration of the occupation.

“ A wide view of the sea?”

“ It is a most beautiful chateau. Count Polinard is among the most wealthy men in France. My French Government has decided to send him on a vacation to your reception camp in Drancy.” In fact, the Count and his family were in hiding.

“ A damn Jew’s house!”

“ When you asked for a grand estate you did not specify religion. You think the air might infect you?”

The acid gaze was more than pungent. When one had the power of life and death with no questions asked it was clearly foolish to provoke them.

Still, Henri thought the matter humorous. These German perversions were getting on his fucking nerves.

“ I paid a couple of gypsy sweethearts to clean the place up, exterminate all the Jew germs. The place is now up to Deutschland standards.”

Bastille refilled the German’s glass.

“ Maybe you should be sent to our camp for subversives.” The general had a rough look in his eyes. Of course he was well versed in dealing with the defeated and word was he had no hesitancy in inflicting punishment.

“ I’m not Jewish.”

“ You help them, or maybe they pay you enough. I’ve been told you are also in their art

business.”

Bastille just stared at the man and said nothing. How the hell did these guys know everything?

“ You sold a Van Gogh recently to an Italian collector.”

Would they put him in jail for selling a painting? The painting had been really rather pitiful work, just a simple flower. Rothstein’s gallery had been forced to close shop and all Bastille had done was transfer the painting to collector near the Italian border.

“ What you are doing is a problem if it facilitates the ability of these people to circumvent our laws. But go ahead and make your damn money on these Untermensch -- that is not why I am here. I have a colleague who has expressed an interest in some of these French artists. I personally agree with Hitler that this modern work is generally unworthy of attention. Be that as it may, I would like you to obtain a few paintings from your group of Jewish friends, perhaps a Picasso or another Van Gogh, and take them to a friend of mine my who is in Paris.”

“ Maybe you can bring your friend here to Cannes and I can gather up several worthy tableaus for him to look at?”

“ The war, you know. I believe he is stuck in Paris, if such a thing is really so heinous. And all these rich friends of yours down here who you French have foolishly sold half your country and treasure to, imagine the choice -- a weekend retreat for you to visit Paris with a few rolled up canvas or I can arrange to have you skinned and quartered and lead us anyway to these damn Jews and their hidden stash. I have tried decorously not to be a barbarian and prefer the civilized route.”

“ You folks are destroying my enjoyment of a good glass of wine.”

“ You need to get a keg of beer in here. I am getting damn tired of this pretentious Schnecke wine.”

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The present

The winding drive led up Boulevard Leader, the second large hill in Cannes, the Croix Des Gardes, past a huge apartment complex awash with ruby red bougainvillea then past several gated houses where one could only glimpse hints of palatial homes. All the ancient bungalows and simple pink peasant houses of my youth had been replaced. We took a right onto Boulevard Cointet near the top of the hill and these houses were even more hidden except for one high above us, an incredible glass and steel rectangular mansion, Frank Lloyd Wright kind of style, opulent, gardens of splendid roses and palm trees -- a billionaire's hideaway. The bushes on the sea side of the street were eight feet high and perfectly trimmed and thick as a rug so there were no views of the water except in tiny teasing peeks. Sightseers lost up here might not know how disappointed they ought to be as I knew the panorama these homes possessed can effect euphoria.

Our hidden driveway was overgrown with quince and flanked by giant chestnut and cedar trees. There was a rusty steel gate that needed to be unlocked and pushed open and then the road wound back down the hill through what felt like getting lost into a forest, all overgrown and untrimmed and it occurred to me that the money we sent to a caretaker had not likely been used

toward making a proper French garden. The road leveled to a circular drive and expanse of parking and there in the open and flooded in sunshine stood the ancient dwelling. She was not particularly grandiose, a simple house with a stone fireplace at each end, basically a one story pink rectangular box nearly covered in vine and sporting weathered pale blue shutters. Some of the stucco had worn away revealing white lime cement in patches, and on the roof red clay shingles were missing. The caretaker, Guy, had been a good enough fellow in the times I could remember dealing with him, but it appeared we all might need to pay him a bit better wage to take care of this place. It also occurred to me that Guy was around when my mother was alive and so he must be pushing into senility now.

In spite of the maintenance issue, if you squint a bit, the house looked like a pretty postcard of the old fashioned country life in Provence. Perhaps two hundred years ago this had been the grand daddy on the block and now she was just a faint reminder of life on this hill before the millionaires invaded, but it did feel a little bit like something delightful from my memory, and even a bit like coming home.

I parked the BMW and stood with my son quietly staring at the house. He looked at me with a questioning expression, rather saying ‘what the hell are we doing here, daddy?’ I took the skeleton key ring to the front door which looked all of its two hundred years and yet solid as steel. The only key that fit would not turn, then it got stuck.

“ Doesn’t look like anyone has been here in years,” Isaac piped in. “ Must be full of rust. You need some WD40.”

“ Cub Scouts teach you that?”

“ ‘This Old House’. You think maybe we should stay at a hotel? This place is probably

full of bugs.”

“ Your ancestors lived here. Think of this as a kind of fancy camping trip.”

“ Does it even have a bathroom and running water?”

“ I don’t know. Well, there is a guy who checks on the place once in awhile. I kind of gave him late notice that we were coming and I might need to call him again. My sisters were here last, but it might have been two years ago, I think.”

Isaac took a turn trying the key, actually got it unstuck and played with it in the lock.  
Click.

“ Yeah, well, I get credit for whatever you do right. You’ve got my genes, you know?”

“ What are genes? Like pants. Your pants are too big for me.”

“ No, something else to do with chromosomes. I can explain it when you get older or I get smarter. Kind of means you are kind of like me.”

The inside of the house was surprisingly in decent shape. No cobwebs, the wide plank floor swept clean, even a stack of towels and sheets piled on top of an uncomfortable appearing ancient burlap and gilt sofa. The room had a few rickety country chairs at one end circling a stone fireplace. At the other end of the room was an oak cabinet that I recalled was filled with cups and plates, and another massive wooden, maybe French chestnut, contraption once used as a sink, now stacked with old paperback novels. Around the corner was the kitchen which looked like something out of a Middle Ages museum and even had its own fireplace large enough to cook a horse in. Must have been used for such at one time, although I could not recall my great aunt cooking horse here. She had surreptitiously cooked rabbits that my sisters and I played with and had become too friendly toward. Even years later when we were told the story of where our

pet rabbits had disappeared, and some of the fish in the well ponds for that matter, it felt queasily unforgivable.

I tried the faucet at the kitchen sink. Water ran and it was even clear.

We grabbed the suitcases and took them through the house to the bedroom which faced the sea. The door in the dark hall was locked and I searched through several keys on the loop until I found the right one. This room, too, was dark with just streaks of light getting through cracks in the shutters and landing like knives on a wooden floor covered with an old needlepoint rug. I opened the two windows and unlatched the shutters. When I pushed these open it almost blinded the two of us and most likely terrified any spiders and cockroaches lurking in the corners. I could hear the creatures hissing at me.

Transformation. Electrifying. Maybe they are not the right word. I was in a state of bliss, of harmony, of peace and cheerfulness. In the distance down the hill above a forest of green was the glorious blue sea. Only a glimpse of it perhaps. And it was so quiet here, the only thing missing was the sound of the Cigales -- the male insect's shrill drumming love song of summer that I could remember would drive us nuts. But I could actually hear the waves.

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The far past

On Rue du Marche Forville directly across from the city market there is a row of cafes and shops. One sells Italian goods -- olive oil in large tins, foot long salamis hanging from the

ceiling, massive wheels of cheese, straw basket Chianti and while many shops had closed because of the war, the market itself half empty, this one was overflowing with goods. Of course, it helped that the Italian Army was in full display in Cannes, the road to Italy open, and rumor was that Mussolini wished to annex this corner of France. Spoils of war.

Two of her soldiers were standing next to Bastille at the cafe bar, rather relaxed and chatting away with their rifles nonchalantly leaned against the wall. Bastille, his basket full at his feet, sipped a double espresso and watched as rain began to fall. A drizzle at first and then harder, tat tat tat on the canopy over the front of the cafe -- reminded him of Verdun, shooting out at nothing simply to kill time. He hadn't thought about that in ages, that lonely sound in between nightmares, maybe in his dreams, he never slept well anyway. And yet, 6 AM was too early for such thoughts. In order to buy what he needed for the restaurant he had to be here when the fisherman arrived with their daily haul. He had considered an Aioli today as his typical customers rather liked boiled bland food. No, he had bought two kilo of red rascasse, and a kilo each of dorade, mostelle, and Saint-Pierre, and special to Cannes, an assortment of unnamed tiny colorful fish. Garlic, saffron, cayenne for rouille, fennel. Yes, damn, they would not like something with a bit of spice. The stews he was so proud of were drawing a wrong crowd and so he had determined a plan to attract locals with food they might appreciate. Bouillabaisse, 'the reason God made fish', Côte D'Azur style in particular. Odette had the recipe. She would not give it to him, but he had coaxed the gist of it from her son, Charles.

“Of all the bastards in all the world I run into you in Cannes.”

Henri had to look twice at the young woman who had come in from the rain. Blond, long hair, tiny, hidden under a large cotton bag of goods held over her head which had hardly

protected her from the downpour. She was almost drenched and a puddle of water dripped to her feet.

“Merde, you are truly a bastard. You don’t even recognize who I am,” she accused him.

“Of course. Josette. You startled me, is all. Why would you be in Cannes?”

“Why would you be in Cannes?”

“I live here now. Aix is quite far from here.”

“I’m not in Aix any more but you wouldn’t know that, would you?” She picked up Bastille’s espresso and poured it at his feet. “Better into your face but I’m not so vicious as you.”

The same damn girl. Firecracker, wicked, luscious. Before the war he had been on the road selling dresses, another of his harebrained ideas that did not lead to riches. Her parents owned a dress shop in Aix and he’d made many extra trips there even that they were not buying much of anything.

“Violeur! Cochen!” she continued cursing him, smiling incongruently even as she said the words.

The two Italian soldiers turned around to observe the interaction, but seemed more amused than anything else.

In a fit of passion he had promised the girl ridiculous things -- like they might run off together or something of that nature.

“Your parent’s threatened to have me castrated,” he explained to her. Not an exaggeration. “Your boyfriend, remember, he threatened to kill me twice over as well.” That boy was hardly threatening, just a teenager, as was the girl at the time, and then again he was

quite a lot younger than as well.

“ Martin was protecting my honor.”

“ A little bit of a sissy, as I recall.”

“ We are married now.”

“ I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“ Not like you were ever in the picture. In a million years I would not have gone off with a connard like you. Thank God.”

“ I might have been if you ... well, it was kind of foolish to react the way you did ... I’m married now, too, you know.” He actually had regretted running away from a situation. The parents thought him a class beneath, the threatening boy’s parents also had money. Bastille had not been one for a settled life but, of course, here he was.

“ You were a coward.”

Rain, pounding, almost a hurricane, beautiful distraction.

“ Why are you in Cannes?” he asked, looked at her now with a hint of that ache which he had not felt in so long a time. She had become more than pretty, rather gorgeous in fact, sparkle, zest.

“ Martin is an officer in L’Etat Francais. His commander is your mayor.”

“ Colonel Cocteau and his army of Hitler lovers? A bunch of stooges!”

“ You prefer that the Italians and Germans bring another million of their soldiers into our country? At least this way we can police ourselves.”

“ They are all scoundrels and murderers. Cocteau wears a chest full of medals and I am told he never fought in a battle to defend France, never even fired his gun. What battles has

Martin fought? Another Vichy coward I am certain.”

The girl’s eyes were teared up. Surprisingly she didn’t retort at this. Maybe Bastille had pushed too far.

“ His parents own a restaurant in Montsegur, a village near Carcassonne. I am the cook, the head chef, actually.”

“ Long way to come.”

“ Martin’s being promoted. There is a ceremony. I thought I would buy some spices that are not available in our region. Why didn’t you come back for me, Henri?”

Something in her eyes. Something delicate and precious and there was a hint of something damaged. Clearly the road she had taken was not majestic. He wanted to put a hand on her shoulder. Perhaps they had both taken the wrong road.

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The present

My aunt had not given a coherent explanation for why she wished this task, this adventure, on Isaac and I, well, me, actually, as I was the one dragging my son along. Getting the ancient box could best and quickest have been accomplished through the mail service. The request was not entirely surprising to me, though, as illogical cerebral gymnastics were a trait common in my family gene pool, and the juxtapositioning of fairly spectacular talent on one hand and comical air headedness on the other did feel familiar. In addition, these directions she

had given to a particular house in the hinterland of Cannes were convoluted, did not jive with the GPS, and we had been turning in what seemed like a circle going nowhere for over an hour. Finally I threw the damn instructions on the floor. Not out the window, as that would have been a step too far. The address had not come up precisely on the GPS but did direct me to a road I remembered and I could recall a massive iron gate at the entrance. In this less affluent and rougher patch of Cannes there might not be so many private gates out here.

“ You have to go. It’s your family,” she had implored.

“ I’ll buy you a ticket, Danielle. I actually have a real job and money these days. I can pay your way.”

“ No, you have to go. I’m too old and this will be very easy for you. Your sisters all have families to take care of.”

“ The Metropolitan wants to put up a show of my work. This is sort of a difficult time to get away.”

“ He was your grandfather. Your mother loved him. You have to go, you have to go.” A bit of crackle sounding in her voice, was she crying?

I do love my aunt. Graced with an artist’s sort of inebriated ability to jumble all things uncomplicated, she could usually do so with a carefree charm and buoyant spirit that brightened anyone who encountered her. That the mundane of life could be made so colorful, whether the music was in sync or not, made most of my encounters with Danielle feel like glorious excursions into a festive balmy beach party. All of that delight had been absent here, and I suspected general old age setting in, that kind of battiness talking, but I knew she hadn’t gotten along so well with her father.

This Charles, my grandfather's old friend, I had met many times as a kid, once at this house which we were trying to find. He appeared wealthy, an impressive handsome gentleman, stories of extravagant spending and dubious behavior, my mother and her sister were the ones I remember speculating this way. Now the cousin was dead, and a box found hidden in a closet at his estate addressed to my mother and from my granddad, so, early on a crisp sunny morning, we were off to pick up some kind of nefarious treasure.

April in Cannes is unpredictable, often rain and even cold -- not always Bahamas weather -- but at around seventy five Fahrenheit and a crystal sky spotted with a few wispy streaks of white and you could understand why the Cote D'Azur has attracted the 'Jet Set' for the past century. I opened the windows of our rented car and inhaled the fragrance of French pine and tangerine. Briefly my conundrum with directions dissipated.

There were no house signs that I could notice with numbers on them. How the hell did the mailman do his job? We were lost.

"Sorry, Isaac," I apologized after a particularly foul burst of profanity. I do attempt to avoid the anatomy cuss words.

"Mom doesn't talk this way," he informs me.

"Well, your mommy's a gentle peach and I am an uncouth orange, sour peal and all, but inside I am actually sweet as hell."

"Neither does Harold."

The MF prick who now has my son brainwashed. I hope I did not say this aloud. I hope my son could not read my expression.

"The thing is, you see, if one keeps all their frustration inside they get high blood

pressure and have a stroke or a heart attack. I stay healthy by expressing myself and releasing all these demons. You wouldn't want me to have a stroke?"

“ What is a stroke? What is this ‘mother cock’ thing you keep saying?”

Yes, probably did say these foul words at least once, twice? Never really thought about the imagery it involved. Something to do with your mother and some kind of bisexual deviancy? One of my favorite sounding expletives and I damn well ought not to put such words in front of my own son. I am sure he was hearing worse from his friends. Maybe not ten year olds?

“ I won't use that one again. That doesn't mean anything, just like damn or Gesundheit or baloney. They are ridiculous words, really. Don't think about what it means.”

Concentrate on the road. As a kid there had been a party at this mansion we were searching for now and Charles had cooked red peppers and a leg of lamb covered in rosemary on a large outdoor grill. Yes, I could sort of remember this neighborhood -- the working class area in the back streets behind Cannes La Bocca, full of narrow one way lanes and overgrown untrimmed bushes, tree branches jutting out into the street, no hotels, no sign of the tourist traps everywhere else in Cannes. The city had changed dramatically -- on the beach were a plethora of new spectacular huge hotels, shopping centers, the hills covered in palatial chateaus, monstrous luxury apartment buildings -- but here on these back roads there were stone walls covered in ivy, quaint pink stucco, and olive trees, felt like a journey back in time.

We arrived at an actual road sign, a true marked intersection. Rue George Lazure, the road I needed, was marked by a blue enameled rusted sign post. At the dead end of this road stood the stone pillared iron gate, once grand workmanship, but now nearly crumbling in disrepair. We entered down the driveway through several hectares of overgrown fields lined on

both sides by massive Plane trees.

“ These trees are supposed to get a haircut every year,” I informed my son. “ This same type of tree was used to build the Trojan horse.” He looked at me with an indeterminate expression. I’d heard my cousin say this, might not be a true story, so I didn’t elaborate.

At the end of the drive was a mammoth pastel limestone house. Not exactly Versailles, run down like the stone gate in fact, but the place must have had 20 or 30 rooms. How do you differentiate a chateau from just another giant house? I think they call the country mansion a ‘bastide’. The French, of any people in the world, would have strict rules for differentiating such an honor as chateau, but this would be my estimation of a Premier Grand Chateau. Three stories tall and several stone chimneys poking through a red shingled roof lined with emerald green copper gutters, horribly weathered limestone with streaks of black from where the gutters failed and dirty water washed over. I suspected it would take a million euros to spiff up the place for lifestyles of the rich and famous, as it was obvious that the rich had departed here long ago. Roof tiles were broken and missing, long cracks extended through the limestone, wooden window trim noticeably rotted, and untended vines crawled up to the roof in haphazard fashion like prehistoric giant snakes. I had heard Charles had been in a nursing home for several years with dementia and the house must have been lain empty all that time.

A Mercedes sedan was parked in the circular drive near the front door. The door was open and Bernadette stood there waving at us. She must be in her eighties, nineties?, now but she had hardly changed at all. Pure Francais in a glorious fifties kind of fashion, dressed in an immaculate long white dress with red trim hints and a flowery chapeau, the kind you might see at holiday festivals or weddings or horse races a generation or two ago -- she appeared like from a

higher class, nobility really. In fact she had been married to a governor of one of France's south Pacific colonies. She had always gone to enormous effort to make me feel welcome in the past, and, of course, there was her cooking. I am certain there have lived only two other people on this planet who were so gifted in the art of food - my mother and my aunt. When I see her memories flood back. Perhaps it is the water, or the mimosa or the hibiscus on the Croix de Garde hill, but the Gods had conspired to create three women who were better cooks than any of the finest restaurants I had ever visited. And women, not men. As I was pondering the thought she came and hugged me, the French way, three real kisses to the cheeks and one prolonged squeeze. Then she saw Isaac getting out of the car. Poor kid, he would never have been embraced by a woman like this before.

Bernadette had every hair in place, every button buttoned and polished, a dark tan on a perfectly quaffed face, in spite that this was eight in the morning.

“ Vous m'avez trouvez.”

“ Pas grande problem,” I lied. “ Un jour beautiful comme ca,” my French was gone and I switched to English, “with the sun greeting us brilliantly, what could be wrong with a little extra driving and a few wrong turns in paradise?”

“ Oh Isaac!” she burst out and hugged my son again. Kissed him on the cheeks again.

“ Un grande bisou! Your trip, your flight, all went well?”

“ No problems, we got in last night. I apologize to drag you out so early. Danielle was insistent that I take this box off your hands. I am sorry about Charles.”

“ Oh, il était malade les dernier annees,” Bernadette said, a hint of tears appearing at the corner of her eyes. She wiped them, composed herself and smiled. “ He was not well for many

years, maybe, they say -- Alzheimer's. Eighty nine years -- one can not ask God for much more than that.”

“ I remember a party at this house when I was a child – the stone barbecue out in the yard, a hundred people, maybe my first glass of wine. I think I was about ten years old. How is Angelina?” I remembered Charles’s daughter, a gorgeous redheaded girl about two years older than me and the first girl I ever had a secret crush.

Bernadette’s smile subtly froze, a faint hint of distress or sadness.

I shouldn’t have asked. I knew some of the story.

“ Pas bien. She did not come to the funeral. This is her house now, but I am left to handle all the affairs of her father.”

I heard she had become a successful lawyer, but then there had been problems with drinking.

“ What a magnificent house.”

“ Oui, elle peut être belle. She was a fixer upper when he bought her but I don't think he ever did the fixing up part. I don’t know. And you, a famous man now?”

“ A little bit of luck recently is all.”

“ Oh, Danielle tells me all about your success. Art runs in our family, you know, we are cousins after all. Monet was my cousin and Picasso lived in Grasse and would come to Riviera Plage and drink with your grandfather. Tu est a Cannes combien de temps?”

“ One week, une semaine, seulement. Isaac has this week off from school for spring break.”

“ Isaac– tu est beau! ” She held him by the shoulders admiring him. He was nearly as

tall as her but just a beanpole and disappeared in her arms as she hugged him one more time. “Do you like France?”

“ I think so,” he answered, then thought a bit and said “Tres belle.”

“ You are real French. Your grandmother and I grew up together and we survived the war together.”

“ Oui,” he answered and gave her his half smile shrug kind of look. Then stood back from her as he feared another wild hug.

“ He tells people he is half French and half human.”

“ Dad! “ he yells at me and punches me on the shoulder.

“ Well, I heard you say that once when you were about three years old,” I informed him for the fiftieth time.

“ I did not. You don’t have to just embarrass people.”

“ Oh, hell, this is something to be proud of and almost accurate. Half French, half Yugoslav, and maybe a direct descendant of Genghis Khan, who most people would not consider much of a human, more likely a space alien.”

“ Mom says you should not be telling people we are related to him.”

“ Your mother has always been much smarter than I am.”

We followed Bernadette inside into a grand hallway. There were giant spider webs in the corners and all the windows. Wallpaper was peeling. The few pieces of furniture in adjoining rooms were covered with dusty white sheets. We followed Bernadette to a closet where there were a stack of boxes.

“ J’ai trouvé ça qui est adresser a votre mere.” She picked up a small box. “ I do not know

what is inside. I did not open it.”

I held the box in my hands, twice the size of a shoe box, very light, the cardboard cracked with age and the tape closing it peeling off in patches. The writing was barely legible, to an address in the USA, the return name was Henri Bastille.

“ My grandfather. You know I never met him,” I stated absently.

“ Il n’etais pas toujours gentil,” Bernadette said and then seemed to think twice about the comment, perhaps doubting the propriety of criticizing someone to family who never knew him.

“ Formidable, very tough and strong. I think maybe he wasn’t so good to your mother and Danielle, all his money spent on other women, but all that was very long ago. ”

“ Perhaps we should open it here,” I said. “ Maybe it is filled with gold coins,” I looked at my son and smiled, shook the box. Much too light for that.

“ Non, c’est pour votre famille. J’ai assez des choses de ma frère que je dois regardez and dispensez. But, I want you to come to dinner. What do you think, Thursday?”

“We would love to, not in a million years would I miss a dinner with you.” The heck with the box, dinner at Bernadette’s would be worth more than any bucket of gold. And she knew so many stories about my family and maybe I needed to let my son know a little about his ancestors.

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The far past

The sun had been hidden all day behind dark clouds. Rain pouring on and off. Wind at times pounding the glass walls, threatening the security of the small space. Thoroughly miserable day and empty of customers except for a few regulars who had made their brief stop for a midday glass of wine or pastis. Bastille longed for the days before the war when they would have at least one or two tables always occupied from opening to closing, even though many of those customers were the hard core, the town drunks, and not a particularly lucrative crowd. But they often did make the day pass with bits of amusement.

He lit a Galloise cigarette and took a deep puff. Generally, he preferred to take a smoke outside but today was not conducive to that and he considered the smell of tobacco made the place feel alive and productive. It occurred to him that there was a bill coming up that he could not pay, a few hundred francs for his stock of liquor. This month he had overestimated and had not sold half the food and drinks he had forecast and so there was not money to pay every bill in full. It might also be a bit too many extraneous expenses as well, buying some drinks for a crowd at Petite Zinc last week, when maybe he'd had too much wine himself and not realized the extravagance, spying on competition had been the thought but then he had gotten carried away. Then there was Odette and the mortgage – that wasn't going to happen this month. This place couldn't pay for itself, in fact an abject financial failure since the war had started.

The door opened. Monsieur Cocteau, the mayor and now head of this district militia. Tall, regal, wearing a grey raincoat and a splendid black Diremi Italian felt top hat. He pulled off his coat and laid it carefully folded on one of the bar chairs. As usual, their mayor was dressed in a pristinely ironed suit and wore a silk tie, quite a change from the sloppy postman from years past. Bastille wondered how the man could afford such extravagance -- no, there was no wonder

to it.

“ Paul,” Bastille stated in greeting when the man sat directly across from him at the bar.

“ Bastille, very pleasant day for a glass of whiskey.”

“ What I have is Macallan or single malt Glenmore.”

“ The Glenmore would do fine. Neat.”

“ No tabs, cash only these days. The war and all, you know.”

“ I pay my bills.”

“ As we all try but until my bills get paid I’ll have to insist.”

Paul Cocteau gave Bastille a slight twist of the face, imperious glare, his mustache standing at an odd disapproving angle.

“ Now,” Paul drew out his large index finger straight and tapped hard on the polished wood bar counter. The man was over six feet tall and large framed, his finger looked like a fat long crooked pickle. “ You can’t tell me with all your shenanigans that you are having any trouble paying your bills, of all of us you have more schemes going on.”

“ What schemes?”

“ It is not like I don’t hear these things. In fact, you should thank me that I have persuaded others that you are a true Frenchman, patriotic and all that.”

Bastille poured the mayor a glass of the whiskey and slid it in front of him.

“ I don’t think I have to prove that to anyone. I served my country in the first war and have the wounds to prove it.”

“ Well, there’s rumor about that you are selling goods to the Germans.”

“ They come to the restaurant and I sell them a beer or two. Would you rather I refuse

and be shot?”

“ No, nothing so banal as that. After all, Bastille none of us want you actually shot,” Paul said rather unconvincingly. He had stopped his tapping and sipped the whiskey, appeared deeply appreciative of its flavor.

The bastard had bamboozled the whole city, his charismatic shtick, hiding odious ambition, had won him election by landslide.

“ The English can do one thing right,” he noted.

“ The Glenmore is Irish,” Bastille corrected him. “ They don’t want anyone confusing them with being ‘skunks’, nor do I appreciated rumors spread behind my back.”

“ I’ve heard about your deals with the German general.”

“What deals?”

“Your art business.”

“ If a few of our fellow citizens wish to sell some of their paintings and I can unload them for a fair price, what is the trouble in that? They get some money and then can pay their taxes so you can buy these fancy hats from Italy. What would that cost, this one you have on today, a week’s pay for me I would guess?”

Paul touched his hat and laid his hands on the bar counter.

“ There was the house as well. Selling the art is a small problem, although it appears it is our Jews you are doing business with. Many of my colleagues think this, on its own, is an act of treason. They want me to have you arrested. In addition, you are colluding with the Germans.”

“ Colluding? You realize what a hypocritical bastard you are? What is this goddamn Vichy government but German minions? You and your damn army of traitors simply enforce

their slave laws.”

“ You’d rather we have a thousand Gestapo among us?”

“ Rather than this damn police force you’ve put together who are more barbaric than our enemy. ”

“ Putain, Henri!”

“ Va te faire foutre, Paul!” Bastille spit out. “ Fuck all of you. I have to feed my family, I have your damn exorbitant taxes. Maybe it explains why I have no customers, you hypocrites who deal with these Krauts every day somehow think you’re above the fray. Well, je m’en fou, and for your information, the Jews are French citizens as well. What is this business I keep hearing about some of them being drug from their homes and their property confiscated by your police? When did we fall so low as that?”

“ They are not true French. You know that as well as I. They’ve always put their religion ahead of their country. A gang of vultures if you ask me.”

Bastille poured himself a heavy dose of the whiskey.

“ I got shot twice at Verdun. I’m as French as any of your fools and so are the Jews.”

Paul stood up and began putting on his coat.

“ It isn’t me you know. I wouldn’t wish an old friend any harm. Rather a statement about what others say and think and I hope a little information to keep you from coming to any harm.”

“ You or any of your henchman try to harm me or my family and I guarantee you will pay an impossible price.”

“ You want to threaten me, Bastille?”

“ Five francs for the drink,” Bastille looked like he would break the man’s neck if he

decided not to pay.

Slowly, reluctantly, the mayor withdrew a five franc note and threw it on the counter.

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The past

“ You’re late!” booming voice of the manager.

Jay glanced at his watch. Like usual he was right on time.

“ I’m pretty sure I get paid for eight hours and since I usually stay late whenever I’m needed, which is unpaid and about every night, in that case I am pretty much on time again.”

This conversation had been had repetitively since the new boss had arrived.

“ Everyone else comes in fifteen minutes early to clock in and get ready to work.”

Klondike was close to six and a half feet tall, must have weighed a ton or two, and was truly appearing more and more like a first class bully. Young, rotund pink cheeks, the man looked like a giant turnip. He’d told people he had been hired by the corporation to shake things up, and the grocery store, part of a regional chain, which had gone public with their stock, must be suddenly inclined to squeeze the hell out of their employees to improve their share price. Squeeze, insult, demean. The result had been to run off some very good employees. Not much more than minimum wage but some of these folk had been here for years, took their jobs seriously, raised kids on this pay even. The matter was perhaps comical as Jay thought about it

-- pride at being good at something so bland as stocking shelves, mopping a floor, working a cash register, knowing all the regulars by name. Hell, he, too, had been here a few years now, and although the money definitely sucked he had gotten to know the people he worked with, felt like part of a community, and that made some difference even when his own house rent came and he couldn't easily pay it.

The bully followed him to the back of the store to the employee lounge where Jay hung up his coat.

“ You need to straighten out aisles eleven and twelve. They're all understocked and there are a hundred boxes in the back to put up.”

“ Shouldn't have fired Melrose,” Jay shot back as he put a store coat with his name tag badge on. Melrose was a wonder at stocking and there was a limit to how many jobs Jay could be assigned.

“ You damn college boy think you can tell me how to do my job?”

“ I'm not sure what being a college graduate has to do with anything.”

“ Means you think you're smarter than I am. Damn funny thing is you get paid about half of what I make and if you don't listen to me when I tell you to do something then you're gonna get your ass kicked right out on the street just like your loser friend, Melrose.”

Melrose did his job well, a quiet guy, just didn't like being insulted, and this fellow seemed quite talented in such regard. Melrose had talked back, rather mildly from what Jay had heard, but it was enough to be gone.

“ Thing is, Klondike, I actually have a long list of my regular aisles to stock and then I help out with the bagging when they need me, and there are boxes of produce to set out twice a

day. Regardless of what you have heard I do not take siestas and I actually am kind of good at my job. Of course, you could get rid of everybody and then do all the work yourself. In fact, since you get paid twice what I make I imagine you ought to do twice as good a job as me. That little bit of wisdom is on account of my studying math in college. I did okay with that by the way.”

Red rosy cheeks. Steam seemed to emanate from speckled brown unkempt hair. Maybe just dandruff and lice popping up to escape the inferno. The big boy appeared to kind of shiver, a bloody mass of sizzling dynamite, and, actually, the sight of his fury was impressive in its way. Here was a human volcano probably about to erupt and Jay would have a front row seat. Why tonight had he had chosen to speak back to the retarded turnip? Normally, well, every time before, he had just shut his mouth and went on with whatever bullshit came -- there are bills to pay he told himself. Must be obsessive compulsion to stick with a thing even when the thing, like such a low paying mindless job, was more or less a dead end street. But here, today, was this little annoying tickle in his head, maybe triggered by thinking that his friend Melrose had been around only a week ago and they had worked together for a long time, and the damn place didn't feel kosher anymore. His friend Melrose should not have been fired.

“ College fucking bastard, get your ass to work now, god damn it! This is my new name for you, college twit.”

Klondike moved right up into his face. He was too close. Jay could taste breath of stale tobacco and onions. There were ribbons of saliva running out the corners of his mouth, salivating with an orgasm of rancid power.

“ Maybe it is time to do something else,” Jay whispered under his breath. He might have

other options. Recession and all, not even hamburger flipping jobs were easy to come by.

“ You fucking call me a name?” The bully shoved Jay on the shoulder.

Jay tried to walk pass him, and although thoughts of freedom from this obnoxious tyranny sounded really good, truth was that he had been here a long time, maybe he was a coward, and he just wanted to walk away from confrontation. He knew how to do this job. Not exactly astronaut work, maybe, but he was good at it. What the hell else was he able to do? There was no money in the art business. Too many years since he had tried to get a job with his math background. Susanna would be furious if he gets fired now when they were barely getting by.

“ You need to fucking apologize to me!” the towering turnip said in an ice cold screechy voice. Another shove to the shoulder.

“ I didn’t call you a name. Let me just get on with my work and I’ll fix those two other aisles.”

“ Faggot boy. I’ve heard them talk about you being a cock-sucking artist, like you think you’re better than us.”

Still blocking the door. Klondike had lost his cool and his mind. How can one be jealous about a guy being a starving artist, well, that was gloriously funny. Again Jay just tried to move around the elephant to the door and as he did so a blubbery hand grabbed hold of his shoulder.

Perhaps having seen such a thing a few times in a movie subconsciously teaches you expertise. Never done it before. And where did this meanness come from but Jay maybe had been saving it all up all of a lifetime because his next maneuver was perfected with scintillating precision and effect. A smash of his right knee into the groin of the store manager created this luscious sound like the bursting of one of those plastic air bubble wrappings one uses for

packing, and a deep sucking in of air from the beast -- there was no screaming voice, but this long whistling agonizing hiss and finally the satisfying rumble of a conquered misanthrope crumpling on the floor.

The consequences were fairly easy to deduce. Jay hung up his store coat and badge, grabbed his own jacket, and walked out.

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The far past

“Merde,” Bastille threw the clutch into reverse and backed out of the mud puddle, or tried without success. Went back about a foot, stuck again, forward a foot or so, and tried rocking the jalopy several times to gain some traction. He and Charles got out of the truck and took two boards from the back and put them under the rear wheels. This was the fourth time today they had had to do this as the thunderstorm and half melted snow had turned this mountain dirt road through the Luberon into a series of hellacious mud puddles. The exertion was beating the crap out of both of them.

“We should’ve taken the highway. This route is good for donkeys only,” Charles suggested lamely.

Bastille’s response was a gruff wave of his hand and a fleeting glance at the rear cargo. They pushed on in silence for an hour or so along what was once an ancient Roman horse trail, today used by tractors maybe, and certainly not a road for fussy vehicles. The bright spot was

that they did not encounter any other cars or farmers or goats, and especially no police or Germans. When the snows in the higher elevations all thawed, when the puddles were dry and gone, maybe then the goats and herders might return. Bastille had trusted Charles's father, who had hunted wild boar here, that this alpine route skirting Castellet would be empty this time of year, that even the Milice were ignorant of this passage. There had been four trips already this winter to Barcelona, not nearly so profitable because they had been stopped on each of those trips, all on proper roads near the coast, twice having to pay bribes to the Milice -- the so called 'French police', once even to the Marquis -- country bandits who some called 'The Resistance', and, once stopped by the German army, who appeared to be looking for weapons and did not care about the perfume he carried or even demand a passage fee. The police, true traitors, had also taken a bottle of the cargo on the last trip.

“ Did you ever come out here hunting with your father?”

Rogan, who ran a profitable factory of recycled metal along the beach in Cannes La Bocca and another outside of Grasse, was not a bad sort, really, especially as he had Odette to endure. In league with Rothstein he had encouraged Bastille into this particular black business, suggesting this would be a safe secret passage through the haute Alps and then the Pyrenees where deer and boar still roamed. The two must have considered him expendable as this business had its dangers, but Rogan had actually shoved his boy as well on Bastille to help.

“ I think we killed a rabbit once. I told you we wouldn't make it on this road,” Charles answered.

The sixteen year old, a near miscreant, had dropped out of school early without his Baccalaureate, and the real problem was this playboy reputation he was after, spending his time

on the beach and at bars entertaining a bevy of women. The boy was adult sized at an early age, too good looking, muscular like his father, yet he was most unlike his father in the category of hard work. In fact, the boy had been bragging about how little real work he actually did at his father's factory, how he could sit in an office and order men twice his age around like they were slaves. Bastille had let him work behind the bar at the restaurant and that had its advantages as he seemed to attract many of Cannes young set, even some with money. Certainly his parents wanted to get the boy away from the women and the beach and laziness, and at the time, bringing him along seemed hardly a problem to Bastille. He could use a hand on the road, especially when the truck got stuck in such a place, but he didn't realize how much he would come to dislike the mouth of this arrogant young twit when there was no one else to talk to.

Ten large bottles of essence of perfume, 1000 francs per bottle, to be delivered to a particular warehouse in Barcelona. Even with much of the revenue spent on bribes there remained a remarkable amount of money to be made in a three day round trip journey, equal to what he had made in his best weeks at Riviera Plage before the war. This 'crème de la crème' perfume, considered by wealthy elegant women around the world as indispensable as breathing air, was about equivalent to carrying gold.

"What does your father think of Cocteau's new tax?" Bastille asked the boy. The mayor had come up with another local war tax on top of the 'National Duty' tax. Cannes la Boca's goons worked for Charles's father and there were rumors of other sub rosa business Rogan was involved in and Bastille doubted the mayor could push the old man too far.

"He's not a traitor."

"Well, it's not a tax like we are going to use to buy arms to fight these Germans, more

like a tax so our Mayor and his crowd can enrich themselves. Camille told me that your father was sick last week and saw a doctor. She said maybe these city guys were turning his stomach.”

“ What do you care? You seem to get along with all of them quite perfectly, especially the Italian and German soldiers,” Charles said with a rather defiant smirk.

“ No one else buys a drink these days.”

“ My mother says you are friends with Cocteau and that you helped the Mayor steal Count Polinard’s house and sell it to the Gestapo.”

“ General Gersdorff is actually regular German Army and not Gestapo.” There might not be much of a distinction, Bastille realized. “ I did the Count a favor, in fact, and helped him -- one of his non-Jewish friends will keep title to his mansion.” And so what if he might make a little money on the side?

“ You and half the town are quite swell in bed with these bastards.”

“ Your father understands that if one wishes to survive in a war you have to find ways to pay the bills and the bribes. Our guests are not leaving us soon and that has not a damn thing to do with me.”

“ I hear people call you a Bosch whore, kind of like a favorite little piece of ass to this German General. A cretin Bosche twat!”

Bastille slammed on the brakes and the truck veered hard to the left. The loud crack of a broken bottle. Somehow the truck did not flip over on the muddy path as Bastille’s hand gripped the steering wheel so hard his hands turned blue and his fingers were locked on it. He glared with a murderous fury at the young kid beside him. One hand came off the wheel, clenched in a fist, and he waved it toward Charles.

A third Bastille's age and the giant boy had at least a thirty kilo advantage in weight -- he must have held the delusion of physical superiority as he was actually grinning. The smile disappeared abruptly when Bastille flashed out violently with the palm of his hand and smashed Charles's head hard against the truck window. 'Thunk!!' -- surprising that the window did not break. After a moment of stunned open mouthed daze the kid punched out with his right fist in an amateurish fashion toward Bastille but the older man easily caught the wrist and then held it like a steel vise. He twisted the boy's arm as if the overgrown kid was nothing more than an emaciated Lilliputian. One more millimeter twist and the arm might dislocate from its socket if not rip off altogether. The mouthy relative could not have imagined his in law cousin's strength, did not know that Bastille had destroyed far more formidable foes.

"I speak German because of where I grew up we had to speak German to survive. I was never a fucking German and I am not their little cunt as you have malignantly accused me. Three of my years were spent living in a trench, shooting bullets at these bastards and killing every goddamned one I could in the defense of your fucking France. Can you fucking understand me you 'spece de con' little piece of shit?"

Right at the edge of control and wanting to tear the boy into pieces, blood boiling, the helplessness of this damn war would be wrought on somebody, anybody, even if just a non blood worthless punk nephew. Tears started to mask the kid's face and Bastille suddenly realized how close he was to permanently destroying the young man's arm. Maybe the boy had done him a favor explaining how some in Cannes might consider wrongly his German background. He was the foreigner as far as they were concerned, not from Provence, and no blood family here, and no one to vouch for any patriotic past or moral character. The people of Cannes, rather backwoods

sort, truly provincial as the German had stated, might like to lynch anybody not of their ilk these days. It would be easy for them to imagine treasonous business this outsider might cook up with the Germans - he spoke German, he served them at the bar, he had damn well rented the Jew's house to them. All for a pitifully small bit of money.

“ They come to Riviera Plage because I speak German. I didn't have a damn thing to do with these Jews losing their house -- they lost it when we lost the goddamn war.” He let go of the boy's hand. “ And maybe I serve Alsatian food which reminds them of their home. My parents were French. I am French.”

“ Their money will cut out your poisoned tongue one day,” the boy whispered as he rubbed his shoulder and slunk away against the truck door.

“ Just as well. A starving man doesn't particularly need a damn tongue anyway and we're all going out in that fashion soon. Your mother fucking tongue makes too much noise.”

He considered telling the boy about the other box he was carrying, more valuable cargo from the endangered Israelites. Prickly business, really, and even a greater risk than a few contraband perfume bottles. The black market business was all over the place, just a part of the war. But when you start doing the Jew's business, that was different and that was something they hang you for.

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The present

“Let’s open it, Dad,” Isaac implored as we drove up Boulevard Leader to the house. A winding steep hill, I recalled with some pride that I would walk, sometimes run, this route several times daily to downtown Cannes and the beach, often just for a baguette of French bread at the patisserie near the railroad tracks. My poor son was now stuck with a man who might find such a climb on the difficult side. Of course, on this trip, I could afford to rent a car.

“What could be so important in this box?” Too much gambling and slot machines in Vegas had made my aunt daffy.

“Maybe some presents for us?”

“Old ones. Well, it is like a time capsule, like they bury at your school and somebody reopens it 100 years later. Your great grandfather died in 1964.”

“You told Bernadette it might be full of gold coins,” Isaac added. “Didn’t you say you found some Roman coins at our house, maybe they’re Roman coins?”

“I found a roman coin, one coin, in the field down the hill below this house. That was back in a summer I spent with my aunt when half this hill was a mimosa plantation. Two hundred acres of fruit trees, cisterns filled with goldfish, rabbit and chicken pens -- I got to clean them up.”

“Let’s go there and look for more coins.”

“I thought I’d found an English penny with odd writing on it, it was big like their old pennies. Later I was told it was a Sestertius of the Roman Empire.” How many times in our little stories had I regaled the boy with exaggerated descriptions of my archaeological adventures, promised him too many times that we would dig for treasure one day, but I know that here he would be in for a letdown. Teddy Bear stories always turned out with a good ending.

I lifted the box again for the tenth time. Shook it again. No coins. Maybe there was a store in town where I could buy a few ancient coins and plant them in the ground first. This might actually do permanent damage to his future understanding of how the real world works where such quests do not usually end up gloriously.

Down the driveway. Through the trees you could see downtown Cannes and the sea, the two little islands half a mile out into the water. Used to go fishing there with my cousins and I ought to look into renting a rowboat and take Isaac out there – that kind of trip would be real treasure.

“ Well, can I open it dad?” My son set the box down on the kitchen table.

“ I’ve been thinking a lot about this and decided maybe we should simply put the box in the mail and send it to my aunt. After all, she is the one so excited about this malarkey.”

“ What? What does malarkey mean?” Major disappointment flaming at me.

“ The old guy packed it and meant to send it in the mail to his daughters. Look at the way the box is marked.” Yes, it does occur to me that such behavior ought to be unlawful, teasing a poor child in such fashion. Also, I damn well didn’t come all the way here to just put the damn box in the mail.

“ You’ve got to be kidding. I thought he was sending it to your mother?” Isaac groaned.

“ He was your grandfather.”

“ It’s a joke Isaac. I’m joking.” My curiosity was as great as my son’s, although I suspected we would find a sixty year old gift of gloves or whatnots. “ I want to open this bottle of wine first. How about a glass of orange juice?”

“ Sure.”

I poured the juice, myself a tall glass of red wine and pulled a butcher knife from one of the drawers and proceeded to slice the cardboard carefully so not to damage the ancient socks or smelly underwear. I did recall a little round box with a painting of a woman's face that I had hidden somewhere at home. Something my mother had gotten from her father who had claimed the box was several hundred years old and had been painted by Leonardo Da Vinci. That made no sense to any of us as the thing did look that old but the painting was not particularly well executed. I remembered her stories about her father traveling throughout France buying and selling art. Danielle had a napkin that her father had gotten at a restaurant in Paris during the war -- an abstract drawing of a face with the signature of a famous artist, Raoul Dufy. She had taken it to Christie's auction house in Los Angeles to have it appraised, but they did not believe the thing was authentic. We did not even bother with the box.

"A toast to your great grandfather." I held up my glass of wine and clinked it to my son's orange juice glass. Couldn't think of anything more profound to say, good or bad, one way or another -- this all was about to be done with and we could get on with real vacation.

Inside the box was a stack of letters, a small wooden box filled with stamps, and a velvet covered jewelry box. Inside the jewelry box were two military medals of some sort, a collapsible metal pen which looked sort of like a tiny telescope, and a large bizarre key -- must fit a drawer on an ancient piece of furniture as I had never seen a key quite like that, and a folded up newspaper clipping from 1950 about the murder of a prominent Cannois politician. No gemstones, no precious jewelry, no damn gold coins. I picked up one of the medals.

"What is it?" Isaac asked, trying to take it from my hands.

"A military medal, I guess from World War two." Made of bronze and circular, attached

to a red and black stripe ribbon, the medal itself showed a double cross on one side and ‘Patria Non Immemor’ on the other, with a worn faint inscription chiseled on the back. The ribbon was yellowed and frayed. I let my son hold it.

“ You should be careful.” My instruction was not necessary as he held the metal as if this were our precious gold. “ Not so much treasure, I guess.” I added.

“ The metal is pretty cool. I’d call it treasure.”

Of course, I had envisioned something more exotic and exciting – stacks of old bonds, diamond rings. I knew Henri Bastille had died a pauper and had left nothing to his two daughters except bills to pay. Here were a bunch of old letters, looked to be letters from his daughters, mostly from my mother. But there was one sheet folded in half and not in an envelope. My French was not good. These were instructions of some kind.

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The far past

“ When I see you, Bastille, I see a man consumed with making money no matter the cost.”

Bastille took a puff on his cigarette, ignored the comment. Cool, pleasant day with a nice sun, there was really no need for nonsense today, he thought. Click click click click .... a bit of wind coming through the Rideaux de Porte (ventilated curtain door made of lengths of wood strung together like string and which keep the insects out as well as providing a bit of music with

the breeze).

“ I dropped the bottles off in Barcelona.” Bastille handed George an envelope of francs. “One of the bottles was shattered in a little road incident.” He got up to leave. The bar was empty of other people. George Rousso sat alone at a table with a bottle of Pastis.

“ You take that off your cut.”

“ No, I don’t think so. The risk I take is worth a few of your francs.” He was certain that the foreman of Rothstein’s perfume factory and proprietor of a successful pub in the back streets of Mougins, did not have so many others willing to risk death for a few francs, and, regardless of that, few were capable of the job.

“ Money, like I said, is all that matters to certain men.” Rousso, full gray beard, grizzled, gaunt, formidable in all ways except for one peg leg attained in the first war, put his hand on Bastille’s shoulder in a fatherly way although they were of similar age and not really on friendly terms. Rumors abounded about the man’s status before this war as head of the regional communist party and even more nefarious activity. The bar was located in the industrial section of Mougins and notorious for a shady crowd. At this time of day there was just the two of them and a waiter, who was also family to Rousso. A chalkboard by the door announced what had been the special of the day -- Foie de veau en persillade avec pomme de terres ( calf’s liver with parsley and fried potatoes).

Rousso got up and got a small glass for Bastille and poured out a healthy dose of the green liquor.

“ I want you to expand your horizon.”

“ Your business is none of my business,” Bastille said. He ought to leave. He had heard

whispers of George organizing a band of pretend warriors and he had no wish to get involved in these affairs. He and Rogan, yes, he knew of their reputation. But, damn amateur winos would get slaughtered by the Germans. He sipped the French national drink, the stuff made for a country of muddled fools.

“ You are a Frenchman. Do you think it’s OK that we have these pricks telling us what to do?” Rousso asked.

“ The war is over. The Germans are clearly the better army.”

“ The Germans are not our only enemy. That mayor of yours, Cocteau, now runs the whole damn district and requires me to pay a quarter of my revenue for some fucking new liquor license! He sends a group of thugs to insure I am punctual and accurate in my payment. This is the same group of clowns who threw me in jail before the war for selling a bit of bootleg on the side. Pricks are all around us Bastille.”

“ They threw you in jail because they know you are a communist. These politics make everyone sick. I don’t like fucking communists. In fact, what is it to you that we pay more taxes, isn’t that what you bastards are after?”

“ Not to enrich one fucking prick and his fucking goons.”

“ There is always the taxman.”

“ I hear things. You know, some people think you are one of these collaborators. They say the Mayor is easy on you because you are in league with them. Do anything it takes, steal from your wife’s family, sleep with the devil, whatever it takes. That’s what will go on your tombstone, Bastille!”

Bastille looked at his cigarette, held it up in the sunlight just staring at it and considered

putting its fire out in the eye of this son of a bitch. Must've been a hell of a tough guy in his day, but he was most likely slow and limp now. This was too much, really, all these damn assholes accusing him of treason.

“Keep your temper under control,” George said as he could see fury building in Bastille's eyes. “I am only pointing out to you what people say, not what I believe. The enemy has adopted your bar and it gives such an appearance.”

“As if I have much say about that?” Bastille crushed the cigarette on the floor. Pitiful to waste half a cigarette, he thought, but anger had got the best of him.

“We heard about your damn pass. The whole damn town knows about your damn pass.”

This document which the German general had given him to take paintings to Paris, he'd not told anyone he had this pass, and how did George know this?

“You realize, of course, that without such a piece of paper I might not so easily reach Spain. They've stopped us multiple times and maybe I'd be shot by now without that damned piece of paper. You would be several thousands of francs poorer.”

“Yes, in that sense your collaboration works out to our mutual benefit.”

“Putant! Don't fucking use that word about me. There is no money to be made in Cannes and I am not a goddamn Kraut lover.”

“All of this is not just about money you realize. Not like I am eating lobster every day. What we need to fight the bastards costs money. This is where you can be useful in another matter, one that may make you a goddamn patriot.”

“A dead fucking patriot! I'm not interested in this damn war, my friend. I spent four years in a hole fighting for my goddamned France – and it was all pointless bull shit. Even after

the war you fucking French put me in a prison cell for two months thinking I was still somehow German. Four years in a trench killing Germans and then they accuse me of being a German spy at the end of the war!" he spit on the floor. " We are a country of bastards. You are a country of bastards, and all of you can shit yourselves."

" The war will end and there comes a judgment. Life, liberty, fraternity, honor -- you've heard these words, I suspect?"

" Add survival. Maybe I am only an uneducated son of a bitch, but I know that fucking word."

" You told me a story once about how they treated you in Alsace. Does it matter to you now that these Krauts own everything?"

" Cannes will always be filled with foreigners -- Italians, Germans, the English. And you know what -- I fucking hate the Germans as much as I hate you fucking French."

" Now you are getting personal. Our mayor and his cronies will do whatever they wish. They won't be so kind to you and I. Eventually they kill people like us. You see, there are a few souls willing to do something about this mess, but we don't have the means, no guns, no explosives, nothing but ancient hunting rifles. We need to get weapons to people who can make a difference. You can bring them in from Spain. Maybe we can fuck up a few of these bastards."

" I fought enough. You know I even tried to join up at the beginning of this fiasco and they told me I was not fit. Communists, thieves -- I wouldn't want your misfits in charge anymore than the damn Germans."

George picked up his glass of wine and held it in the air as if to make a toast but he said nothing and placidly stared at Bastille.

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The past

“ Susanna, this God is not only unfair but he is also schizophrenic. I who was born with a compulsion to hit a rock with my hammer and chisel over and over and over for hours at a time truly believes that this is my gift, but my gift can be completely pointless and dysfunctional if it is not accompanied by some measure of commercial appreciation.” An apology, yes, that was what was needed here, but Jay’s head was still spinning and the whole roadmap seemed a mess.

“ The point is that you should make something others would like to see. You have another gift called a brain that you might want to use on occasion.”

“ Yes, that’s a good point, but my dream isn’t necessarily or obviously anything to do with the here and now. In fact, if I don’t go my own way in making what I am imagining I want to make than I am no longer something special or distinct in this world, didn’t you say something to that effect to me once, if your soul doesn’t breath you are no more than an ant? I don’t want my art to become like one of these ancient Indian or Egyptian sculptors who would simply copy the same design over and over verbatim their whole life.”

“ They got good at it and I guess they got paid.”

“ You see, the thing is, I want to be the one who comes up with the design in the first place. He’s the artist, the others after him may have been technically genius and improved it all

but creativity wise -- they are a massive zero.” The paper in front of Jay was fussy, really hard to concentrate and finish out the information. Here he is talking about the artist he wishes to become and here this is, a bit of paper required to enter a different world of dollars and cents.

“ I married you. That means, somehow, I must be attracted to such madness.” Susanna stated, measure in her tone.

“ You are so practical in every other way. My good looks fooled you and made you walk away from intelligence. I don’t think I ever hid my ambitions.”

A hint of a smile, a hint of agreement. They were in the living room, Jay at a table writing up this resume, Susanna on the couch grading school papers.

“ I figured you’d grow up,” she explained.

“ Only children can dream?”

“ There is such a thing as reasonable compromise. When I have my ten year olds divided up into group projects much of my time is spent teaching them to listen to each other and make proper choices. I think the same lesson is about life. We experience what works and what does not, listen to our failures and learn how to manage getting on in the world.”

“ Well, that’s the thing I’m not really into – this getting on business. I’ve got this place I’m after -- I guess it’s kind of my Shangri-La sort of dream.”

“ And your so called ‘Shangri-La’ includes me?”

“ Of course, without the love of my life such a journey would be empty of everything of value, or any iota of joy.” Jay looked over at his wife, the resume was quite limited, not even a page long, this condensation of a life, well, the thing is they would not be interested in his expert fine motor skills, would they? -- overall, this effort was excruciatingly depressing. “ Do you

have any idea how pretty you are? I figure maybe it is not so important in the ultimate scheme of existence whether one is good looking or not, not like a person has a whole lot of control over bone structure and genetics and all that, but I often look at you and wonder if you know, if you can see that you are really gorgeous?"

"I'm guessing this is your way of thanking me you for bailing you out of jail?"

"Maybe you should have let me rot for a while longer."

Her anger had settled down. Wretchedly furious at the time and rightfully so. He had no job now and she would be the only breadwinner for probably a long time. Who hires brutal beasts who beat up their boss? Of course, there was a McDonald's a block or two away and that was actually fine with him and not even much of a pay cut. But something in his head had actually taken notice of this dead end road he was on and he understood, her screaming helped it along, and, yes, he had agreed to apply for jobs which might actually require his college degree and might even pay a living wage. This unfortunate business of kicking a mother fucker in the balls had actually temporarily exposed him to unnatural amorous advances in the clink, which he had, luckily, successfully fended off, but the unexpected physical prowess he had exhibited might splendidly backwash into a brilliant career move. At least his wife was determined to see it that way.

"I suppose I am too attracted to you and this love business distracts from understanding the certain madness you possess. The chasing rainbows stuff I don't always understand." Her smile was ambiguous.

"Oh, yes, the love thing. Damn, God was kind in such matters. Can't give me the talent to obtain my coveted greatness but he does give me a body you lust for."

“ And that is a problem?”

“ Not even a smidgen.”

Jay went over to the couch and pulled Susanna close to him and put the tips of his fingers gently to her cheek.

“ I would be happy if I never had anything else but you -- no money, nobody buying my sculptures, not even if I never make another one -- just you in my life, living our lives together. That is enough dream to last forever.”

She kissed him softly and pulled his head back to gaze into his eyes.

“ I don't believe I am going to change you, you know? I kind of get it that you are going to be giving up a lot to get a real job now. But the time has come. Reality, you know? You dreamers ...” she stopped there and quietly stared at him, maybe searching for some hint as to where their future together would now lead. “ Maybe I should withhold my lust in a practical sense, until you actually prove you mean to get serious.”

“ I said I would and I will. Matter of fact I go in the morning to this long list of places who could use my accounting skills -- heck I took the right classes, top of my class, wasn't I, as a matter of fact?”

She didn't say anything for a long bit, must have seen the hesitation and something not quite conceded in his eyes, “You could teach like I do,” she said, finally.

“ Sculpture?”

“ That or art or even math. School teachers have the summers off and then you can still do art stuff.”

“ The real question is will we be able to pay the heating bill this winter? Guess it really is

time to put my big boy pants on and join the civilized world. Beacon Hill here we come.

Compromise is it? I promise to study that word in all its intricacies and get some sense about this responsibility malarkey most humans obsess with. I will rein in egotistical obsessions.”

“ We could afford a child.”

He paused, not quite expecting that comment. “ My old me is going to is going to be packed away to become a new man. You do realize that the kid part will take some heavy practicing?”

“ Yes, and that little thing is not the thing to pack away.”

“ Not so little I’ll have you know.”

She put her hand at Jay’s zipper and began pulling the zipper down.

“ If you are a good boy ...”

“ You don’t have to bribe me. You have already won,” Jay gazed at his wife and thought God had at least gotten this part of his life perfect. He ran his hand along the curve of her shoulder and caressed her neck. Ecstatic electricity of a libidinous sort flood through him, luxurious, paradise. She was soft and wonderful.

Susanna kissed him with a fervor, maybe forgetting their conversation. This part they had always had, such a brilliant attraction. This aspect of their life was exquisite, stable, and when they made love she acted like nothing in forever could bring her more pleasure, as if this could be forever and he was all she would ever want.

To Jay, nothing he had ever known was so incredible.

He began to disrobe her. He ran his fingers over an exposed breast, a glorious and divine touch, the erect nipple and pinched surrounding skin of the areola looking like the sun’s rays

surrounding engaging heaven, the breast plump and perfect as a melon whose bottom just begins to fold over slightly onto a muscular torso nectar of visual bliss. An artist understands such perfection. In the throes of passion his mind drifted to how terribly impossible and incredibly magnificent it would be to recreate this contour in stone. Susanna must have sensed his distraction and paused, maybe realizing that the essence of her lover could not be so easily transformed. She pulled his head up and kissed him and grabbed his enthusiastic member. Constructed thought evaporated into furious engagement. Nothing in forever, nothing anyone could ever explain in words, ever imagine, ever dream, ever sculpt, could be so perfect and, yet, as so many lovers experience, as so many former forever vows fall into ruin, as hard as it is to envisage, this, too, ultimately ethereal.

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The present

“ Hi, Danielle, how are you?” The connection was not good, too much static on the line.

“ Oh, I’m fine. So you and Isaac got there okay?”

“ Air France did its part and the weather has cooperated – eighty degrees today, beautiful ocean, your old house is fine. I’m thinking it is almost warm enough to swim. You working today?” My aunt, in spite the geriatric status, was the top salesperson at a little jewelry gift shop at The Tropicana in Las Vegas.

“ No, I’m on vacation for the day.”

“ When do you expect to retire?”

“ Oh, you know, it’s fun. I meet people, get to talk to people, it isn’t even like work.”

“ I wanted to tell you that I got the box from Bernadette. Charles’s house must be three hundred years old and have twenty rooms, absolutely amazing.”

“ Well, you know where he got his money?”

“ I’ve heard the stories.”

“ He was a gangster. He sold my grandparent’s land which was half ours, your mother’s and mine. You know that?”

I’d heard stories the about Charles. I’d heard the same stories about her father. As for her stolen inheritance, for me it was history and an intriguing feeling knowing your family once owned land that might be would be worth many millions of dollars today. The thing is she had grown up poor and this was not a romantic dream.

“ Bernadette was wonderful. She is cooking dinner for us tonight. I got the box, hardly more than a shoebox. Some old pens, a watch, a big fancy key, a few military medals, a few letters and news clippings -- they are in French. I’ll bring them back to you.”

“ No, let Isaac have the medals and the trinkets, burn the letters and newspaper.”

“ I looked up the medal on the internet. One was given to Resistance heroes, and the other dates back to World War I.”

“ He fought at Verdun.”

“ There is also a piece of paper addressed to my mother but doesn’t make a lot of sense. My French is not so good anymore and the computer makes a gibberish translation. Your father talks about a lady named Josette, something about telling my mother she must see the lady on

Rue Lavelle if he were to die before she gets to France.”

“ Of course Josette is dead now, ” Danielle said with a discernible qualm in her voice.

There was a pause. I wondered if we’d lost connection.

“ Rue Lavelle doesn’t exist on the GPS,” I added.

“ It was in Cannes la Bocca. They tore down the building when Charles sold his factory and all the land he owned. The whole area was turned into one gigantic apartment complex.”

Another longer pause. The connection hadn’t died. I could hear her breathing.

“ Who was she?”

“ My father’s girlfriend. The one he spent our money on. Read me the letter.”

I read her the translation. She asked me to read her the French version. My pronunciation was poor and I had to spell and repeat several of the words.

“ One letter that tells you he’s going to write another letter, and this one tells you to go talk to someone who is dead. What could he have been afraid of?” The letters did seem rather nonsensical and self-important.

“ My father was never afraid of anything or anyone. More likely he is, was, a ‘connard,’ asshole in English. This is the way he treated us – hiding what he was up to, always bragging about some fantastic business he was involved in which would lead to riches for all of us. Of course, none of that ever came to be. The man lived like a king and spent all of his money on this Josette. He never paid the bills, never helped us with anything that cost a franc. Even his business on the beach would have failed miserably if he hadn’t had the free labor of my sister and I. He lost the beach restaurant, you know, and, now he leaves us a box of worthless trinkets.”

“ I kind of know you were not quite fond of him.”

“ You guess?” Fifty years of separation had apparently not dimmed the disquiet.

“ I suppose the trail is dead if Josette is no longer alive?”

“ She was never mean to us and I don’t blame her for his debauchery. For all I know, at the beginning, I doubt she even knew he was married.”

“ Why do you want me to destroy these letters?”

There was no answer.

“ Well, the trail is over. Isaac and I will enjoy our vacation and the box of stuff is yours when you want it.” A letdown, really, not that I wasn’t happy to get away from this errand, but I had expected more than such fizzle considering all her consternation.

“ There were rumors about what he was doing after the war. People told me terrible things about him and it is better to leave all of that alone. You know what is a ‘voyou’? People called him this. A thug! These things, those things he did, don’t just disappear.”

From my mother I had heard scuttle like this, but about Charles, not her father. When I’d been to France on my year off from college Charles had taken me to a restaurant in Theoule-sur-Mer, a place you couldn’t drive to, rather hidden half a mile down a path along the cliff by the sea. The view of Cannes across the bay was beyond spectacular and at this extraordinary private oasis they treated him like royalty, and me, just a young kid then, they even treated me like a prince.

“ Josette had a daughter. She was a little girl when my father died, but he took more interest in her than his own blood. We imagined she might be our half sister, but he claimed she was not.”

“ How old would she be?”

“ She was a cute little baby that played on the beach when Josette brought her to Riviera Plage. Josette was half my father’s age. Can you imagine what people thought in those days? Her name was Isabella. Isabella Bretton. Maybe Bernadette would know how to reach her, but what is the point, what could she tell you about a silly thing that my father said to her mother so many years ago?”

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The far past

" It is intolerable," Charles snapped.

" And what is that?" Bastille woke from his revelry. A warm morning on the beach, a few moments ignoring all the problems.

" The life of cowardice. This capricious existence that is no better than death, worse as a matter of fact."

" Capricious? What the hell does that mean?"

" Care less."

" Here, and I thought you were an idiot."

" And I thought you had a spine. All this talk of how terrible these Germans are and you do nothing. Rousso wants you to carry guns and you refuse him."

" You are young and full of piss. What good is that? What good is death?"

" Honor." The boy persisted. Rude glaring eyes.

" Starving is worse – it's fine to be honorable when you are not starving."

The waves were wonderful this afternoon. Perhaps a storm off the coast of North Africa as the waves were ranging up to eight feet and crashing like thunder. And here, away from the storm under blue skies and warmth in the south of France could make up for most anything. The two men sat at a table outside the bar on the sand. No business, no one manning the bar, it didn't matter. A bottle of red wine sat on the table. The second bottle already and it was early.

Charles had an intensity that Bastille figured would only lead to trouble. Constantly pushing him and advising battles that could only come out badly. He got up and turned on the used Victrola he had bought at the flea market in Antibes. 'L'Accordeoniste' sung by the 'little sparrow' Piaf who he had heard sing on the streets of Pigalle in Paris. Maybe such French music might keep the Germans away.

The boy's mother arrived at the bar with a bundle of flowers. She began clattering away through the cabinets, must be looking for some wine bucket to put the flowers in water. Usually his girls brought the flowers from the farm and it was clearly nasty news for Odette to show up.

Big boned, stout and stronger than most men Bastille suspected, but there was something about her feral fierceness that was elusively attractive, and, rumor was that her husband had someone else on the side, so what the hell. It was not in Bastille's nature to let fertile soil lay fallow.

He walked to the bar -- hardly even a grunt of acknowledgement from his wife's sister. Bastille opened a cabinet and pulled out a shiny metal champagne bucket. He put the bundle of flowers, wonderful pink and orange roses, into the bucket and poured some water. Later, for the

dinner crowd, he would separate them out into individual small displays.

Odette, in her cotton Provencal dress whose fluff hid all the curves, and she had extra on top of that, watched him with no attempt to hide disdain.

Bastille approached and put a peck kiss on her cheek before she could move away, then placed his hand on the plump cheek of her buttock.

Wap!! She smacked him as hard as she could with the palm of her hand directly on his nose causing Bastille to almost fall over and bounce his head against the edge of the bar cabinet.

“ You vulgar pig!! Espece de con!!” she screamed.

Bastille slowly came to his senses and held his nose trying to figure out where he was, wondering if he was gushing blood. The nose felt broken and the room was changing places.

“ Damn, you could just politely say no,” he finally was able to enunciate, more like a whimper.

“ You are married to my sister.” Utter indignation and violence glowing from the sister in law.

“ And you know how wonderful that is. Why didn’t she just marry the other damn fool instead of me?”

“ Because she is a stupider fool. Anyone would have to be a colossal imbecile to marry a moronic ass like you. Connard!”

Bastille walked outside back to the table and his wine and the music. He avoided Charles’s gaze as the boy must have heard the commotion and ignored it all. Odette followed Bastille outside and stood above the table like a gargantuan fiend glaring at the two of them.

“ Merde, bastardes, you sit here drinking in the middle of the day. I’ll blame you Bastille

when my son dies a bum. He should be with his father at the factory.”

“ There’s no business. They didn’t need me,” Charles piped up, not particularly perturbed one way or another by the anger of his mother.

“ By the way, Bastille, the city has raised my taxes and so I am raising your payment to me,” Odette announced.

“ Like I can pay anything unless things change somehow?”

“ Then we sell the place.”

“ Who has money to buy?”

“ You are a lazy good for nothing bum who just takes advantage of us all.”

“ And you are a sour faced cockroach.”

" There’s a plan to run off Cocteau," Charles injected, interrupting the name calling.

Their former mailman, now, more or less, governor of the whole region, had connived his way to owning the finest mansion downtown - of course, a Jew’s property. He and his surrounding cronies were profiting mightily from the war on one hand, and claiming on the other to be leading the Resistance, which was pure rubbish. Though they were not technically Vichy his group were the power in this region and there were not enough ‘testicules’ in Cannes to disrupt them. To Bastille the answer was pragmatism, just figure out a way to exist and outlast them.

" He is a simpleton. What can he do?" Bastille noted.

“ He’ll bleed us all until we sell everything for nothing and he owns every bit of us,” Odette said and turned to leave. “And you,” her fleshy wiggling finger pointed near Charles’s eye, “ you’ll go back to work for your father if all you do here is drink wine with this imbecile,”

a final knife-like vicious glare. She began to leave and then turned back.

“ By the way, there is some more cargo for you to take to Spain. Some of our neighbors need to get away from here. You know this. They are going with the two of you.”

“ Is there anyone else in this town who wants to order me around?” Bastille asked with not an ounce of fiber in his voice.

The two of them watched her stridently go through the bar and up to the street.

“ What is she talking about?” Bastille asked her son, though he didn't know why he would ask him anything. The boy was good enough at drinking and not much else.

" Eli Mandel disappeared with his whole family. He went to school with me, you know. A good kid and he never even wore a yamaka. The city is starting to round up all the French Jews, and not just to take away their property.”

“ They have money. They can buy their way out.”

“ Their money isn't good enough anymore. We can kill some of these bastards. You think you are saving your ass by selling paintings to the Germans. There's talk, you know, all over the place about what you are up to. You are getting rich while others are bleeding.”

The whole damn town always knew his business.

“ I'm helping Rothstein and his friends get something. Otherwise they lose it all. Don't you get it? They haven't a pot to piss in anymore and that's nothing to do with me. Killing someone, what do you know about killing? Like it is so easy to cut a man's throat or shoot him in the head and watch him die?”

“ I wouldn't be surprised if you even work for the Milice.”

Cocteau, Rousso and Odette and Charles -- hell, the Germans were a damn better crowd.

Bastille regarded the waves. No tang of intellectual rubbish here, no philosophical conundrums, simply the repetitive hypnotic sound, varying intensity, varying mood in different phases of content and discontent, but mostly it was the roaring sound, mesmerizing, and this smell of the sea, this taste of fish in the mist, maybe it might help drift him away from intruding vexation.

“ Accuse me again of being a friend to these bastards and I’ll break every bone in your body for fun. Do you understand me?”

“Like my mother broke your nose for putting your hand on her butt? Am I supposed to be afraid of a puff like you?”

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The present

The sea in Cannes is water like anywhere else in the world I suppose, no more spectacular or grand than any other as long as it is clean looking and empty of trash, and, yet, depending the time of day, the light, your mood, when the color changes, something rather glorious exudes here. Today the water is merely a murky greenish froth and I found that to be wonder enough.

“ Did we have to?”

“ Well, you know what, it is just a fun thing to do.”

“ We could have gone to a movie.”

“ How good is your French?”

“ They don’t have any movies in English?”

“ We’re in France, Bub.” ‘Bub’ was his mother’s endearing term for my son.

Isaac picked up a pebble and skipped it into the waves.

“ We came here yesterday. Are we going to do this every morning?” he asked.

“ Extraordinary enticement, I would say. Such a pleasure to wake up in the morning and see paradise, come out here with a cup of coffee.”

“ I don’t drink coffee.”

My cup made at the house was cold now, no thermos to put it in. No matter.

“ Well, we can bring a glass of milk next time. When I was a kid I would spend the whole day on the beach doing nothing but staring at and listening to the waves, tasting the glorious air, imbibing it like a magical elixir.”

“ I think you told me it was warm and there were lots of other people on the beach and you could go in the water. What is it now, about a hundred degrees below zero? I’m surprised there aren’t icebergs in the water.”

It was cold. Not quite that cold.

“ I would have liked to play in the waves. Why could we not have waited until summer?”

“ Excellent question.”

“ How about breakfast? We didn’t even eat any breakfast. Mom, would never have forgotten that. Dads aren’t supposed to forget that kind of thing.”

“ Well, you know, we’ll eat a big lunch.” He was talking at least, complaining was an improvement.

At the beach between Cannes and La Bocca is a breakwater row of giant boulders

that extend about a quarter mile into the sea. I intended to walk to the end, but Isaac was throwing pebbles and now I had found a rather comfortable flat rock on which to sit and sip my homemade coffee. To the west along the sea was a ridge of mountains and I could sort of make out the slip of beach where I had gone with Charles for lunch so many years ago. In retrospect it did seem outlandish to think of him as some kind of king gangster -- he had never been anything but a gentle soul in my memory.

“ Why couldn’t we have come in the summer?”

“ Because Danielle called me and asked for help and this seemed like a good time to take you on a vacation with me. I live in New York , I don’t see you so often and you’re growing big real fast, and I miss you.”

“ You didn’t have to leave us,” Isaac said and stared at me for a brief hard moment, then resumed his rock throwing. Second time he’d said it, I guess. Maybe we should talk the matter over.

“ I cooked hamburgers and then I bagged groceries.” I started out to explain. How do you answer these questions? Tell him that I had an affair with someone other than his mother? Explain to him that most marriages don’t end well and we were lucky, more or less, to get out of it without too much destruction. “ For a long time. Then I got a job helping a business keep its books in order.”

“ What kind of books?”

“ Well, taxes mostly. They call it accounting. I was good at math but I didn’t like doing that kind of thing, or making hamburgers, or putting cans of food in grocery bags for old ladies for that matter. Then I got a chance to make a career doing something I really love. The thing is,

life isn't always a picnic. I ... I needed to do this artwork, follow my dream and it made me not a good husband."

"Dad, you've made a ton of money. Mom said so. More than you can fill up a truck, she says. Maybe you can come home now?"

He was still too young to hear any true or proper explanations. I am too wrought to be clear about any rational excuse. Damn it, you are his Daddy, part time maybe, and you sure as hell need to act like one. Where is the book for this stuff?

"Your mom's got another husband, Isaac. They love you. I would be in their way if I lived up in Boston and I want you guys, all of you, to be happy."

He'd taken off his shoes and was touching the edge of the surf. Perhaps it was not all that cold. Soon he was up to his knees.

"Look at this piece." He held up a smoothed shard of green glass. "Come in the water, they're hidden in the stones about one foot deep."

"It's cold."

"Tough luck. You brought me and it's not that cold."

I played with him for about an hour actually getting our clothes soaked and we survived and even collected a full coffee cup worth of polished blue and green and red and golden glass pebbles. I sat back on the sand, in the sun, it was warming now, and I watched him. I thought of last night at Bernadette's house.

Pissaladiere -- a pizza of anchovy, onion and black olive -- how my friends would complain about anchovies but they are deludedly wrong. Grilled sardines with tomato and lemon. Petit Farcis -- zucchini stuffed with sausage and herbs. Certainly, I had tried these dishes

before, of course, pretty standard Provencal fare, but never had it tasted so wonderful. The wine she served might have helped a bit -- two bottles of a Premier Cru picked out by someone who actually knows wine. And then there was an incredible selection of cheese, and French bread, always perfect, and a framboise cake with vanilla ice cream that I think my son will never forget. All of this while sitting on a glorious terrace with a splendid view of the sea.

Such a wonderful evening made me feel guilty when I asked her about Charles. She told me a story.

Some men had bought up land further down the beach toward Mandelieu in the seventies. They were part of rich group trying to buy a vast area and redevelop it. Of course there were communities that had been living there for generations and were not so inclined to give up their homes for a bit of money. Sometimes old fashioned folk actually love their homes more than gold. But the rich fellows got rough and started harassing those who would not sell to them, started by breaking some windows and threats and then even hiring goons to break bones. Got out of hand pretty quickly but these developers had money and bought off the town officials and the police. Some of the people went to Charles, or so Bernadette heard later, and asked for his help. Stories about men disappearing. Nothing else. No bodies found, no blood, no arrests, but the hired goons were suddenly gone and soon the developers as well simply quit the effort. People whispered about Charles to her, how he had learned to kill during the war, how he and her uncle Bastille had never stopped, they had a violent streak, said they were something like heroes.

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The far past

The 1932 two ton Renault truck strained, grumbled, and complained bitterly as it inched up the 'Col les Cluses' beyond Carcassonne. Ahead of them a man appeared suddenly in the middle of the road and waved them to pull over. He was pointing a rifle in their direction. As soon as Bastille stopped the truck they were confronted by half a dozen more men all sporting blue berets and hunting rifles.

“Milice or Maquis?” Charles, fidgeting next to Bastille, asked.

“Maquis most likely,” Bastille said without certainty. The French resistance controlled much of the rural territory in western France, and these men were carrying country rifles, not the military issue that many Milice were supplied. Maybe they were simple cambrioleurs (bandits), of which Provence was notorious.

“Get out,” the oldest looking of the men yelled. He sported a grizzled beard, dirty and torn jacket. None of them had any semblance of a uniform and some of the men seemed nervous and unaccustomed to such activity. “What are you carrying?” Two of the men began pulling up the canvas over the rear bed of the truck.

“Just a few bottles of perfume, chemicals from Grasse, not even the real perfume.”

“Where are you taking it?”

“Who are you to demand?”

“Damn you, I asked a question!” and the old man smashed the butt of his rifle hard against Bastille’s shoulder knocking him to the ground.

Bastille sat there on the ground rubbing his shoulder and wondering if he had made a mistake. Milice? Use Rousso's name, but if he were wrong more trouble then, but there was nothing he could do as his own rifle was behind the seat.

“Marseille, we hope. You know some of us still have to make a living.”

“I'm not a fucking fool. This is no road to Marseille.”

Bastille pulled his wallet out and started taking out some bills. The old man made to grab it from his hands and Bastille slapped the arm away roughly. Waited for another smash of the rifle.

“Shoot me if you want! You fucking bastards,” Bastille yelled at him and held up his fist.

The others inched closer surrounding Bastille, surprised by his lack of respect for the old man and their guns.

A yell from one of the men who had started searching inside the truck. He was poking around and had pulled the driver's seat forward.

“This ain't right. I know this model has a seat back here.”

“What else is in your truck?”

“Nothing.” Bastille should have gotten a proper ferronnier (iron smith), knowing they would now find the space.

The old man opened the other door and pulled the seat forward as far as it would go. There were canvas covered boards built in with a hiding space in the rear.

“More perfume,” Bastille stated.

“How much do you get for all of this?”

“Hardly anything after paying the thieves on these roads.”

“How much did you pay the Bosch?”

“If we wanted to pay the Bosch we wouldn’t be coming through these mother-fucking back roads.”

The man proceeded to try to pry one of the boards out, seemed stuck and he motioned to two of his men to force it out.

“Le Bon Dieu endormi when he made you,” laughing as he stood back and admired the guise.

“Why don’t you let me pay you and let us on our way? You are French, I’m French, just a bit of business I’m doing.” Bastille was standing now with his hands out and attempting a look of suppliance.

They ripped off one of the boards exposing the tiny compartment with two people crouched there.

“Well, damn, see what we have here – Jew traffickers.”

Bastille shook his head, looked at Charles who was white in the face. If they were Milice they would surely turn them over to the Germans, or, worse, just shoot all of them right now.

“Get out!” The old man yelled at the elderly couple, who scrambled out of the car quickly. “Who are you?”

After struggling to get their legs working again, Count Polinard introduced himself and his wife.

“Why are they carrying you this way? Are you prisoners?”

“Monsieur Bastille and Monsieur Jouselet are taking us to Spain. It is preferable to what

I have heard the Germans wish to do to us.” The Count pulled out a stack of francs and handed it to the old man.

“ Eh beh, why didn’t you tell us you had such royalty?” The man’s attention was on counting the francs.

“ We thought you were Milice, but I guess you’re just some goddamn rotten thieves. I work for Rousso.” Bastille spit at his feet.

The old man made to a move to smash again with his rifle and hesitated. He smiled.

“ Rousso? Tell the bastard I’m glad to kill all the Bosch I can get my hands on,” he said and spit back at the feet of Bastille. “ But tell him we aren’t in the business of helping Jews. Get the fuck on your way.”

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The present

“ Where does this guy live, Dad?” Isaac asked.

We had slept late. This time I’d fed him a baguette of bread with butter and jam, the typical French breakfast, an amazing whole loaf of bread for one euro from the patisserie halfway down the hill from the house, a cup of their excellent coffee for me, and we loaded ourselves into the car.

“ Oh, around a few corners down the other side of the hill and then up another hill and near the autoroute to Nice.”

“ Why can't we go to the beach?”

“ You got mad at me yesterday when I took you there for the second day in a row.”

“ We found that glass, you know, there's tons of it and nobody else is looking for it. I want to find another red piece.”

All morning in the sun, and I liked it well enough, but the water was actually cold.

“ We'll go back. Something different today, maybe even productive. You can meet my old friend.”

“ The beach was fun, all of your old friends are too old.”

“ I suspect that seems the case because you are a little squirt.” I reached across and tried to tickle him.

“ No, Bernadette must be a hundred years old.”

“ One can learn quite much about living from people who have walked around the block.”

“ Walked around what block?”

“ It's a figure of speech. Smart people who are on this planet for long enough learn certain tricks that help them survive and they make good friends. Sort of like that wise guy in your Star Wars Wii game, what is his name, Obiwan?”

“ Obi- Wan Kenobi.”

I wasn't sure if my 'old' friend was even around as we had exchanged letters only every few years. The last was back when I was still in Boston, and yet, getting his phone number might not have been so difficult, but being a guy, more or less, one figures you can drop in and say hello even if it has been a blue moon. That may not be the protocol here in France, they have

their ideas after all. I had first found Monsieur Medaine while wandering on the back roads near Charles's scrap metal yard, rode my bike over those hills a hundred times, but there had been a lot of building in Mougins since then, new roads, maybe I would not remember the way back.

Starts out as a fabulous drive from our house up the hill along this narrow twisting path past vistas of magnificent sea views and peeks of the most expensive real estate in Europe. You can't really see many of the houses but I knew about the Perrier mansion, where Grace Kelly's last movie -- To Catch a Thief, was filmed, the Villa Rothschild, and at the top of the hill, a gargantuan monstrosity built by an infamous arms trafficker. Through the bushes this place looks like the Parthenon but larger and more ornate, and I had read that the mansion was on the market for over a hundred million euros. Next to it, here at the top of the hill, is a vast city park with a concrete bunker where German soldiers controlled guns overlooking the Bay of Cannes during the war, where I played as a boy, although on my last visits the park was primarily a hangout for young amorous couples. On the way down the back side of La Croix des Gardes the road gets dicier, if such is possible, too narrow in spots for two cars and with steep drop offs and no guardrail. I drove at a snail's pace, on the wimpish side perhaps, but easier to avoid the idiots as their little Citroens and Renaults zipped past in NASCAR fashion. I had to concede that many in the country of my mother had been denied a full coconut.

Honked the horn. The car was screaming toward us and couldn't see that we'd meet at the narrowest section and hit each other, as if I am the one obligated to slam on my breaks. Comes a point where you just can't be the sissy all the time. The car kept coming. I lost my nerve and the front wheel slipped off the edge of the asphalt, into soft dirt and a foot from flipping over the side, and I twisted hard on the wheel just pulling the car back on the road and

then clipping the fellow's rear bumper. I pulled the car to a stop and sat there cursing a storm.

“Dad, you know you are not supposed to use those words.”

I looked back at my son and glared, then got out of the car and walked to the front bumper, luckily not more than a scratch. As it was a rented car the MasterCard would pay for that. The Frenchman had stopped his car as well and was looking at his own bumper that had been partially dislodged. He was screaming French obscenities and walking toward me. I didn't understand half the words he was saying, but enough that I could tell he blamed me for this fiasco. “Fils de pute!” over and over. I sized him up -- this maniac looked to be a bit stouter than me, large for a Euro guy, and clearly out of control. Not that I was not. When he got up to my face and hurled his vulgar words I could feel the spittle splatter on my nose. Now the words were something about being a foreign pussy who can't drive.

For a moment I stood there and took it, half expecting him to bite my neck as his face was three inches from mine and displayed true rabid evil in its twisted incantation. This actually felt sort of New Yorkish -- where one can virtually annihilate anyone with excoriating verbiage and not expect touching to come into play -- testosterone etiquette in those parts. But this was not fucking New York and I am more of a Boston kind of fellow. I grabbed the lout by the collar of his pressed shirt and began pushing him backwards.

“You MF fucking fish face, you flew around that corner like a cock sucking dunce. What did you expect was going to happen? You ran me off the road and nearly wrecked my car with my son in it. Can you damn fucking see in this car – I have a ten year old boy with me?! ”

I directed his body toward my car and allowed him a moment to see my son poking his head out the window. Truly fully intended to break this frog's face in two and he was clearly not

going to lift a finger to defend himself. In fact, he looked to be crying and that surprised me. This curiosity gave me pause to reconsider my actions as spending time in a French jail was not on my bucket list. But, I did walk him right to the edge of the road. The fellow was trembling, terrified. There was about a five foot fall which my car had almost plunged down. He being thrown down there would probably not even break bones. Two cars pulled up behind my car as we were blocking the road. Those in the cars appeared content to watch the entertainment.

“Dad, don’t do something stupid,” Isaac yelled at me.

“Voulez vous que je construire une autre orifice pour votre merde, vous pièce de con?”

This was about the best I can do in French and it felt particularly pleasurable saying such ungentlemanly words. I lifted his collar up a bit, still terribly tempted to throw him over the side. This bloke was not objecting one iota. Shaking badly, a tremble in his lips. Frozen terror in his eyes.

“Your fault. C’est vous qui avez faites ca!” I said finally and released him. Lifted my cocked fist perhaps to cement the fact that I am not a pussy.

I walked back to my car, got in and slammed the door. Drove off before the man got his wits together and came back at me or wrote down my license plate. All I needed was wasting the rest of our vacation with the French flic.

“Dad, you have a bad temper,” my son finally announced.

“My father was worse. You will be a sweet mellow fellow if we continue at this pace.

The thing is the bastard ran us off the road and almost killed us.”

“I thought you were about to turn him into one of your sculptures.”

“A good lesson to you then, how to control your anger and not do something foolish in

the heat of passion.”

“Dad?”

“What?!”

“Nothing.”

The back roads between Cannes and Mougins were deliberately obtuse, maybe just ancient paths asphalted over, remnants of the day of horse and buggies without any concern for symmetry or reason, or maybe I was in a particularly foul mood and couldn't concentrate a damn. Here there were occasionally signs to the next village, and sometimes even to a bigger city like Vallauris or Antibes, but I could rarely find names of the road or numbers marked. If you are French you memorize the route, and if a tourist like us, you must have a great deal of extra time to spend admiring the countryside.

Big white blocks of marble stood at the front of the driveway. There are not many corners you can turn without seeing something of artistic elegance in this world of Van Gogh and Picasso and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Down the driveway were more big rocks of various colors and larger pieces than I remembered. At the end was the stone building – and at the corner of that building was the glass enclosed studio. I parked next to a beat-up blue Peugeot and saw my teacher, elderly, humped back, sparkling white hair, sitting on a stool and holding a chisel -- a sculpture himself. He turned slowly to gaze at the unannounced visitors.

I waved and he seemed to recognize me.

“Mon ami, mais c'est quelques années, n'est pas? So many years,” he said when he opened the door.

“I apologize for disappearing. I think of you often and saw one of your sculptures in

New York recently – a giant purple winged construction you titled ‘Le Fins du Monde.’ As beautiful as anything they have and in a perfect location in the grand hall of MOMA.”

“ Le success, elle arrive trop tard. By this moment the body is used up, the heart is weary, and the acclaim is more like kissing your sister than a true lover. Then again, de voir mon étudiant qui est venue vraiment fameux -- ca c’est quelque choses de magnifique. My God, to be young and have the world begging for your work is a different affair. I’ve read so much about your success.”

“ I suspect you had quite something to do with getting me into this blasted business.”

“ Yes, I remember the little runt come to my studio and ask to sweep the floors in exchange for a bit of teaching. I thought ‘crazy American’ but something ‘different’ about you even then, rather une artiste esprit, vraiment.”

“ I will always be grateful.”

“ Come in. Your son?” He bent over and took Isaac’s hand in his gnarled fingers. “ Les mains de Hercules. You look very powerful, jeune homme.”

Isaac simply smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Medaine led us across the room to a round work table with chairs. The table was splattered with multiple layers of colorful paint and marble dust, same one that was here when I was last here.

“ I don’t want to interrupt your work,” I told him.

“ Of course you do or you would not have knocked on the door like le brash Americain! And of course I would wish to be interrupted. I have some juice for Isaac, something with a bit more kick for you, Monsieur Jay. Absinthe, yes, you’ve tried it?”

“ Isn’t that the brew that made Van Gogh go crazy?”

“ Or perhaps lent him a bit of inspiration on the other hand. No, this is only a hint of the true Absinthe from his day – then it did have some poisonous resin apparently leading to cutting off ears and terrorizing your friends. Today, this is something like your Kentucky bourbon is all.”

We sat at the table smeared with bits of dried paint and he pulled out flute glasses and the bottle of liquor. In fact, there was a picture of Van Gogh on the bottle. As I watched my teacher serve us with his arthritic deformed hands it occurred to me that he must be about ninety years old. Finally his work was getting recognition across the world but I could remember when a sculpture I had helped him with a small bit was sold for a seemingly pitiful amount and that itself had been occasion for celebration.

My son was fascinated by his rock sculptures. Blazing swirling patterns, different types of marble appearing melded together in a way I'd never seen before. A lot of twisted forms evoking, I don't know – presumably abstract and he never told me otherwise, while mine looked abstract but were patterned after some human form or angle I found inviting. While I was after imitating what I could not achieve, he just liked his shapes. I liked them as well.

“ You mind if we walk around and look at your work?”

“ No, of course not. Maybe I'll sell you one and you can carry it home on the plane with you.”

John Gabriel looked at him and laughed. These sculptures were huge, man size and more.

“ Jeune homme, peut être tu serrez une artiste, aussi. Maybe you'll follow in success like your dad?”

“ Maybe.” Isaac smiled and gave his wonderful shrug.

“ Over my dead rotting soul,” I intoned. “This business is too daunting a life for so long and almost, for most, unrequited.”

“ The heart follows its road or she dies,” my teacher explained.

“ The Absinthe has already gotten to you.”

“ This daunting road, as you say, the importance is the journey, trial with interludes of charm. Everything else, the baggage we accumulate in the end is illusion and dust.”

“ Spoken like a true master. I’ll order a case of this beguiling stuff. Wonderful stuff, Professor Medaine.”

“ Jules, my name is Jules.”

As Isaac and I walked through the studio the bright Provencal light streamed in through the glass walls, the illuminated polished marble shouting and screaming its veins and streaks of color, unashamedly brash and explicit constructions. Medaine clearly did not steer away from imperfections in the stone as blemishes which I could never suffer acted as points of attraction like one would display a tattoo. For my creations too much color and unpolished streaks seemed to diminish the form I was attempting, whilst here it appeared natural and quite all right.

I let my son wander and I sat next to my teacher.

“ You knew my grandfather?”

“ Henri Bastille? Oui, bien sur. Of course.”

“ He owned a restaurant on the beach – Riviera Plage.”

“ Everyone knew everyone. Why would I hire a boy who knew nothing about art, nothing at all about sculpture or how to even begin to think to create a tableau. No, of course I knew your

family, it's why I hired you."

The comment surprised me. The man had never said anything quite like that back then.

"I imagined you really could use someone to sweep your floors. That's all you let me do for the longest time."

"*Petit à petit, l'oiseau fait son nid.* Little by little, the bird makes his nest. And then I saw something in you. Passion may be the correct word. You had this thing an artist must know, must breathe. Maybe even I taught you something, no?"

"You gave me know how and permission to dream and I can never thank you enough for that."

"You help someone else someday. When you see such a spark you jump in and you help the fire to burn. There was another man who lived out his life near here. I'd go to his studio and have a glass of wine and he'd let me watch him work sometimes. Of course, I was young as you then, and I knew nothing. He didn't mind. His name was Picasso. He made sculptures also, clay mostly. And anything he made felt alive and special.

"It is he who introduced me to your grandfather, Bastille. 'Camille's Husband' Picasso would call him, and teased him piteously, I believe, as I think she had left him long ago. Bastille was a most powerful man in Cannes and I think a good man. You could be afraid of him and you would love him as well. People would come to his bar while we were drinking and you might have thought he walked on water. So, one day this grandson shows up at my studio and offers to sweep my floor. How can I say no?"

"Just yesterday I was given a box of his things that were left at a house of his friend who died." Maybe the professor could help me with this mystery if he knew his grandfather. "The

box was meant to be given to my mother more than fifty years ago but it was lost until now. Nothing much, really, but some souvenirs, two old war medals, a big funny key, and a letter that tells my mother to see a lady named Josette. My aunt says she was her father's girlfriend. Did you know her?"

"I met her a few times at Riviera Plage. Very pretty."

"Is she dead?"

"I don't know. I know her granddaughter, Amelie. She is an artist as well and she works in a shop on Rue Saint-Antoine in Le Vieux Port. Very nice work she does."

Medaine refilled the glasses with the strong liquor. He seemed lost in thought for a long moment.

"You know the story about Martin Gareche?"

Jay just stared. He took a sip of the modern absinthe. One could get used to this, he thought. More kick than Jack Daniels and odd alluring flavor.

"Those who displeased the Germans in Provence would disappear and Gareche and his men were notorious to do such work. It was rumored that Bastille and your uncle killed him and several of his men near the border to Spain. The true Vichy stooges accused Bastille of murder and being a traitor and after the war threw him in a prison cell, worse then that, I heard. The famous Josephine came all the way from Paris to get him out of jail and it was Josette herself who defended Bastille's actions to a judge. You see, the thing was, Josette was Martin Gareche's wife. Stories later came out about what Bastille did for the Resistance."

I pulled from my pocket one of the metals I'd found in the box. A tattered red cloth was attached to the tarnished bronze rectangular disc with a double metal cross.

Medaine examined it closely and smiled.

“ Mon Dieu, I haven't seen such a thing in years. La Croix de la Libération .... A dedication by De Gaulle himself on the back of this,” his knobby fingers held the medal like a prized jewel, “.... a high honor to those who fought for the Resistance. There is a monument in Le Grand Jas Cemetery on a hill above Cannes. No one goes there anymore, just a forgotten granite obelisk with names of those who fought for the Resistance carved at the base. Bastille's name should be there.”

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The far past

Bastille backed his truck up to the rear door of George Rousso's cafe. In Cannes there was no trouble finding reprobate French gleeful to not only enforce the new German laws but to enforce their own Mafioso tariffs as well. But here in Mougins, where everyone knew everyone, where there are hills and gullies and caves to hide, and often take revenge, a semblance of the old France could still live on. The only decent thing Bastille could think about Rousso is that the Germans and the Vichy did not frequent his cafe.

A light appeared inside the building. The door opened. The bull limped out and walked over to the truck.

" I expected you hours ago," he bellowed.

" They say Mussolini has the trains running on time. Well, we aren't in Italy and I'm not

a goddamn chronograph." Bastille spat on the floor when he got out of the truck.

"Don't spit on my damn floor!"

"I have this bad taste of your stinking comrades still in my mouth, can't get fucking rid of it. They robbed us above Carcassonne."

"Theole? Harmless brute. Pussycat, really. Did he cut anything off? I've heard he likes that kind of perversion, nothing pertinent usually, a pinky maybe if you make him mad."

Charles exited the other side and opened the rear hatch of the truck. Rousso went over and slapped the boy on the back.

"You survived anyway. Another year and we'll get you to Britain to join De Gaulle," George said to the boy. "They say he's forming an army to kick these bastards back to hell, and I don't mean just the German bastards. How old are you Charles? Sixteen now, I think? Hell, I was seventeen when I went to Verdun with Henri and your grandfather, the poor bastard. We were all poor bastards but he got the privilege of getting buried there with a million other damn soldiers. They took my leg, son. I'm going to take more than their fucking legs. Can you believe that we'd ever go through this insanity again, Henri? Guess we can't quite learn. Lay down like cowards. If I were younger, if I had two legs..."

"You talk too much. We need to get moving, George."

The old man helped Charles and Bastille pull out two long boxes from the truck and hide them inside.

"And the four barrels I asked for?" Bastille asked.

"It's done. It's lunacy, no one will survive a trip in a barrel."

"We make stops. Your bastards tore up my hiding spot -- maybe they won't check too

close a barrel of manure if you've made them correctly with the breathing holes.”

“ You'll end up with dead bodies. Can't be so many Jews left. A train with a few hundred left yesterday for somewhere near the German border.”

“ You don't give a shit about them,” Bastille answered.

Rouso busied himself with opening one the boxes. Twenty pristine scoped Lee-Enfield rifles. Rouso directed the two inside the cafe through the Rideau de porte.

“ I haven't got time.”

The older man kept walking to a room beyond the kitchen. No, choice, as Bastille needed him to pay for the boxes. A storage room with one table in the middle. Rouso lit a candle.

“ We have to talk. And, something special before you head out again. Hell, who knows if you ever make it back. You are a fucking hero, you know that Bastille?" he said, laughing. “ Who could have guessed a swine like you would turn into a bonafide hero?"

George placed a plate of food on the table. “ Sausage de Sangliers -- they still make it in Arles.” He sliced the wild pig salami and handed a chunk to Charles with a hunk of bread. Then he opened a bottle of golden liquid. Like a jewel he held it up to the ceiling light. “ Not quite like the old stuff but one hell of a kick. You taking another trip to Paris this week to sell some paintings to the Germans?"

“ How come you know my schedule so well?" Of course Rothstein was his boss as well.

“ Oh, it pays to know everything around here.”

“ The Jews who are left need money to get out, to start all over. They can't sell anything themselves. To make some money. For them,” Bastille added, realizing how all of this sounded.

“ A lot of good that will do now. At least I might get a few more to Spain before they all get

locked up or hung, or whatever they are doing to them. You know your pricks almost shot us. The French hate the Jews more than the Germans and they don't fucking like me."

" My friends in Draguignan want to split you in half. I think you spit at one of them. It took some convincing for me to persuade them that you are actually a patriot like one of us. Yes, they are all sure you are a spy. But with this, these guns will help your reputation and maybe you'll live through to the end of the year. In the end I can tell them all you were a good man."

Rouso poured out portions into three small heavy glass tumblers.

" Tchín Tchín!"

" To your connard assholes!" Bastille added.

" Brings me to the business at hand. This famous artist used to come to Mougín before the war and we got to know each other. Oddly, for all his wealth and success the fellow is a bit like me at heart and quite anti-fascist. He introduced me to a lady friend of his, another very famous lady, who lives in Paris and can freely travel out of France. She is on our side. You need to get her a bit of information."

" What information?"

" Someday soon De Gaulle will bring his army across the sea and they will need to know some things that we know. Prepare the ground for an invasion, so to say. Where are the German bases? Where are the roads and the bridges? They have a list."

" Yes, and my cut throat when the police search me, which they do each trip. My dead body will help you exactly how?"

" Normalement, my suggestion is for you hide the information in a proper place or, even better, memorize it, although you are not skilled in the affairs of the brain."

“ Taking Jews to Spain and your damn rifles is enough to get me killed several times over. Now you want me to defeat the whole damn German army all by myself? What the fuck are your men doing other than screwing with me and stealing from me?”

" I've counted up the money you've made. Soon you'll be richer than Rothstein himself."

" You haven't counted the goddamn bribes I have to pay to the Milice, and worst of all, to these friends of yours -- all scoundrels.”

" When the time comes you will understand their patriotism. Anyway, we need the money, there's only so much we can do by scavenging -- bullets, gunpowder, proper rifles and equipment to blow up bridges cost money, and, you know, not a damn thing is getting in from England. By the way, I don't trust that you are actually giving me my cut for the perfume?"

Rousso's eyes were getting bloodshot.

Bastille raised his glass in a toast. " Morceau de merde, I am not a thief.”

" To all of us thieves, for the glory of France," Rousso raised his glass.

Charles drank the liquid and then coughed hard.

" Really rotten shit,” Rousso noted, looking at his glass quizzically. “ But it does make a man of you, Charles.”

" It might kill me first," Charles answered as he put the glass on the table and pushed it away from him.

" Not so easy to get proper Pernod these days, so a friend makes this for me. Looks good, tastes like shit. Be a man. No matter, good looking as you are you can fully occupy yourself with many women. Bastille and I have only eyes to appreciate their delicacies, and such a strong drink can help us forget that once we could stay hard for hours, days even. In any case we have

become much too hideous for women to enjoy us.”

" Rousso, you are upset because women comment on the small apparatus?" Bastille answered and filled his glass again.

" What does Camille see in an oaf like you, broken nose and all? It is obvious you could never satisfy a woman who is so perfect. I'll be glad to share with her my impressive apparatus while you are in Paris. She has eyes for me.”

" If you were not a one legged impotent cripple I would ...” the homemade brew was hitting him, “ pound you to the ground right this fucking second and show you what is a real man, broken nose and all.”

“ You know what, I am even going to raise your rank to Lieutenant Bastille. Hell, what were you in the first war, corporal, damn, I am sure that you never made it beyond private. Still, a true patriot of France. By the way I have another box for you to take to Aix. The fellows there won't cut you up so badly if you do this last thing.”

" I'm not in your damn army and I'm not carrying any more goddamn boxes for you.”

" A few nice shining Lugers have come to us by way of the brilliant Italian army in Nice. They seem to have some trouble keeping track of their accouterments as they indulge themselves in our delightful Nicoise whores – really, these girls have become our most fruitful partisans.”

" George, I can make up some bullshit story or another about the perfume. Bastards on both sides understand the meaning of money. But these guns, we've done enough -- the Germans will do worse than kill us. Charles is a boy, you understand? A one time delivery is what you promised.”

“ I'm not afraid. We're not all cowards,” Charles piped in.

" The trick is don't get caught," was Rousso's answer. " Incidentally, we are always in search of a good martyr. We will celebrate your sacrifice with gusto!"

Bastille poured another found. This paysan cognac made the absurd almost exciting. After all, they were so damn deep in merde already he did not care what the future held. Rousso was right, the worst that could happen was that his young nephew and he might go out in a glorious fusillade of gunfire and he would no longer have to be concerned about what the fucking German general wanted him to cook, or why Odette did not appreciate a simple playful advance, or even ever again pay the damn taxman his exorbitant toll. What better way to die than with your feet planted squarely on the ground. He would surely take a few snakes with him when the moment came. Glory be to fucking France.

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The past

A dank, unpleasant load of unmitigated gloom flooded Jay's mood as he calculated how far behind they were on the bills. The stack of paper demands sat in an uneven pile on the desk in front of him, his yellow ledger pad showing the exact totality of misery. A few pencil tips were broken next to it. Not a damn thing to do. Of course there was something he could do, always was. Work more hours, turned out there was plenty of demand for uncertified accounting skills and with a bit more overtime and he could eliminate this pile of misery.

The thing is, in his view, they had taken an unnecessary leap into a frivolous luxury last year. The one hundred year old cottage with less than a tenth of an acre yard had been their jump into keeping up with the Jones. The mortgage for such a bungalow in upper class Arlington was twice the rent for similar homes in the proletarian countryside north of Boston. Susie argued that the cost in gas to go to and fro to work, better schools for their child, was really an investment, evened out the extra expenditure, and, of course, he was making a lot more money now. She also explained, charmingly it did seem at the time, that he could create his sculptures without time wasted driving in gridlock out to the boondocks. Well, they did have a child and they needed that extra bedroom now and it was a safe neighborhood, ect., ect.

On the wall across from the desk sitting on a shelf next to a stack of paperback books was a vinyl blue folder held together by rubber bands. Thick as a bible it contained a history of submissions for art shows, to galleries, to agents, as well as letters to well heeled so called art patrons -- all of whom Jay had once religiously and regularly sent photos and carefully worded descriptions of his work. He had not counted in detail but imagined there to be in the order of one hundred such efforts, and almost all, when any response was even returned, included the typical generic rejection statement. Add to that, yes, many of the art shows had actually also required a submission fee -- that bit in itself accounted into thousands of dollars down the drain. The rare shows to which his work had been accepted had been anonymous forgotten busts. Not sold a damn thing. He did understand it was a pointless and silly habit to preserve such record of failure, but like the meticulous repetitive knocking of his hammer and chisel, and being stuck with a brain that worked in obsessive fashion, he tended to take equal diligence in the paper trail of a pursuit, like a badge of courage in a sense, and maybe a smite still clinging to some illogical

faith he had predestination to the promised land of art gods. But now sixty hours a week at a damn office playing with numbers, and now there were weeks when he never even picked up a hammer.

“ I can put in a little more extra work,” Jay announced as Susanna walked into the room. She saw the stack of bills. Not much more she could do to rectify the debt as she was a full time school teacher, unless it were summer, which it was not, and she always got a summer job anyway. Add to that that she didn't like the daycare and really wanted to take care of their son full time.

“ You should have taken that job at H and R Block. The pay at Johnny's is indefensible.” Ironically, the store which had fired him as stock boy had rehired him to their back office. When he had heard that the turnip had been kicked out, he sent them his resume and was hired spot on. Of course there was better pay in downtown Boston, but since Johnny's offices were just around the corner he had figured, wrongly, that he might have a few extra hours to work on the thing he liked doing.

“ These guys hardly pay you more than you were making before.”

“ We talked about it. There is still my career. It takes time to make a name for yourself, just like starting any business.”

“ Ten years is not exactly a business. My friend's husband is a licensed accountant and makes three figures.”

“ I'd have to take the CPA exam. Not sure I'm ready for that.” A test he could probably pass and he wouldn't be somebody's assistant and the pay would be far better -- and yet further down the road away from all he had been after.

No comment. Their bohemian hippy life felt distant memory. Freedom from keeping up with the Jones mentality, freedom to appreciate picnics and camping trips and bargain bins had its attributes. Back then there was no new car, no dreaming of holidays in Europe and they did not even know what the hell was being served at Durgin Park. Now, even though he actually made more money than she did, had bought this fancier house to boot, the sense was that nothing was ever going to be good enough. Where had his romantic cheerleader disappeared? Isaac was crying in his crib.

“ This afternoon I’ll go to Dunkin Doughnuts.”

“ How much is \$5.00 an hour going to get us? H and R offered you twice your salary right off the bat. So what if it is a bit of a commute and you have to take an exam?”

“ It wouldn’t be selling donuts. The owner asked for some help doing their books as well. With the two jobs we’ll get by and pay off this crap.” He lifted a few of the bills. “Not sure what you want of me.”

A weariness defeated glow appeared to emanate from Susanna’s expression as she stood over him and glared at their paper stack from hell. The ground was shifting, cracks in the wall -- not their real house wall, the cottage was built well enough, no, it was the road less traveled which had gotten them damn lost and brought them square back to wanting what everybody else wanted. Pedestrian dreams, vulgar retreat into survival mode. The joy of adding another life had felt ebullient at first, and it would, of course, be like the greatest achievement one could ever hope but then starts the worrying, and yes, he knew well she was the one doing most of the worrying. Still, it felt like he had woken up one day and all of a sudden there is this monotonous colorless responsibility full blast upon you. You are a goddamn adult. Sometimes overwhelming.

Sometimes suffocating. Did the real world people really enjoy all this shit, dream of this, was there nothing more to a life? Get on with it boy. He picked up the pencil. He had promised her he would put the 'Big Boy Pants' on. He could do it, he was doing it, but today this damn type of pants did not seem to be in his wardrobe.

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The present

Le Vieux Port has been continuously inhabited since the time of the Greeks when the city was a miniscule fisherman's village. I was lucky to find parking on the backside of the hill near the post office as this area was mostly narrow pedestrian only lanes, and crawling with tourists.

“ Do we have to walk? Can't we just keep driving?” Isaac asked.

“ The purpose today is sort of to take a walk to get some exercise and see a bit of Cannes.”

“ We can see it pretty well from the car and then just go on to the beach.”

“ The water is still cold, hasn't warmed a wit. Look at the sky, it might rain.”

“ I don't care. We could have just watched a movie about France without coming here.”

“ We could watch a movie about other people's lives instead of living this one ourselves.

Someday the whole world will be virtual reality where you can plunk down on a sofa and do whatever you want, not spend even one calorie.”

“ That sounds completely cool.” Isaac looked at me with a wink of amusement.

“ I’m kind of guessing you know that becoming a beached whale is not a good thing? You get that, right?”

“ I get it, Dad.”

My plan was to make it to the top of this hill walking up a series of steep stairs and switchbacks, to the Cannes historical museum where I could ask about the military medals, maybe they had information about my grandfather, and what kind of lock the ancient skeleton key might fit. There was also the route downhill, on the main cobbled narrow pedestrian alley, Rue Saint-Antoine leading toward the old port, where we might find Josette’s granddaughter. The easier route was lined by a multitude of restaurants, jewelry boutiques, noisy and touristy, but downhill. I could drive to the top of the hill later. Maybe Isaac would thank me but it was primarily my own feet I was worried about.

At the top of alley are the restaurants and cafes frequented by locals, likely a bit far up the steep path for most tourists to amble from the five star hotels along the beachfront and the dock where they arrive from giant cruise ships often thousands a day. As you go further down toward the village port the restaurants become increasingly expensive, several with Michelin stars. This is the route I used to take with my great aunt on the way toward the downtown market and I could recall browsing the extravagantly expensive menus -- dreaming, just dreaming. There had been something wonderful about such imagination, anticipating what life might become, before the dreaming part fades.

We passed Richards, a French Algerian cafe restaurant once known for the best Couscous in town. Affordable food, actually. A cadre of swarthy old men sat on outdoor chairs sipping coffee and puffing away at cigarettes and the repugnant odor indicated cheap French tobacco.

Inside was dull white tile wall, linoleum topped tables, and out of sorts with what the neighborhood had become.

“ I used to eat here by myself.” I touched Isaac on the shoulder and nodded toward the couscous joint. “About the only place I could afford when I was a student living in Cannes. Maybe we can come back here for lunch. They make merguez, this amazing garlic sausage that looks like it’s made of pure blood. Actually much better than true blood sausage, boudin, which smells like dirty socks.”

“ I don't want to eat any blood or dirty socks.”

“ You can't see or taste the blood when it's cooked.”

“ Makes you kind of like a zombie if you eat blood.”

“ Vampire actually. What do you know about zombies?”

“ That ‘Walking Dead’ show on TV.”

“ It is pretty violent. Does Mom know you watch that stuff?”

“ You going to tell her?”

He gave me a look of a ten year old's ennui. We stopped at each of the art galleries, Medaine hadn't been able to tell me precisely where the place was, didn't know her last name or the name of her shop. But then a metal sign hanging out front a subterranean door -- Amelie's. Peaked inside. Black walls with silver light fixtures in the ceiling casting spotlights onto a series of small portraits. The walls were painted brick and the floors were large worn flagstone giving the place the feel of an ancient dungeon. One of the paintings caught my eye - an elderly woman with white hair and one dangling glittering diamond earring. Photo-realistic style but with exaggerated glistening colors in her hair and the earring. I noticed all the paintings appeared to

be the same woman at different stages of her life. The expression on each were similarly disconcerting, a suggestion of something broken, dispirited eyes. A lady approached us. She looked a hint similar to the lady in the paintings and yet much younger. Dark long hair, black silk skirt, libidinous low cut blouse, unnaturally high heels, pleasant enough smile.

“ C’est vous l’artiste?” I was sure. Sales clerks don’t dress like this.

“ Mais oui. Comment vous trouvez mes tableaux?”

“ Charmant. You are certainly happier in person.” I switched to English -- something about lovely French women make it difficult to think of the correct French words.

“ Thank you, but these are not of me.”

I noticed her green eyes.

“ All of them are the same lady, I am thinking. She becomes more sad as she ages.”

“ My mother was not pleased with these but it is cathartic for me, is that the word in English? An artist gets to transfer difficulty to canvas and walk away a fresh. My mother could not. Why don't you take one home with you?”

The price listed as one thousand euro. Rather a lot for a tableau less than ten inches square. I did know an artist with a huge gallery in Soho who had no talent but an ego the size of Texas, and he put extraordinary prices on his work but I could not imagine anyone would buy his junk. Here was certainly talent. One can fake modern and abstract, but a face so precise, the shadows and the anatomy, also implied significant training.

“ Where did you study? “

“ The Ecole des Beaux arts in Aix en Provence.”

“ Jules Medaine sent us here.”

“ Bien sur, he was one of my professors. I love his work.”

“ My teacher as well, of course that was long before you.”

She looked at me half askance, calculating my age.

“ You are an artist? “ she asked.

“ My dad is a stone sculpture,” Isaac piped in. “ My mom says his work sells for too much money.”

I looked at my son with a pained discomfort. I wondered what conversation that had come from.

“ Hello, my name is Jay Lucus and this is Isaac,” I introduced the two of us and shook her hand.

“ Amelie Bretton. I know your name.” A moment to gaze at his face. “ The Guinness Book of World Records for a living artist. My guess is you can afford to buy one of my paintings.”

“ I lost that claim to an Englishman at a Christie's auction last month. Come down the street and have a glass of wine with my son and I and I'll buy this lovely lady here.” I pointed out the youngest version on the wall.

“ My day is just starting.” She looked at me with a healthy dose of hesitation.

“ You see I was planning on stopping at the Petite Zinc at the bottom of the hill and having one glass of red. Back in another time I could get a glass for about a franc - back when Medaine was my teacher, well, that has been a while.”

“ Le Petite Zinc is long gone. Now it is Le Petite Line.”

“ Dad, what am I going to do there?” Isaac asked.

“ Sit down with a couple of artists and we can all talk about life.”

“ This is the best time of day for me to be in my shop. They have ice cream, though,” the French lady stated. “ I'd rather you buy the painting only because you appreciate my work.”

“ I do, I wouldn't make such a thing up.” I was not sure completely that certain attraction was not taking its toll. Loveliness can make the difference, and she had it in spades, although it did seem silly to pay so much for a painting and at the same moment search out the cheapest wine bar in the south of France. “ I do have some shame and won't lie about my craft.”

A hint of a smile but more hesitation.

“ One of your relatives knew my grandfather. Monsieur Mondaine knew her and told me where to find you.”

“ Who was your grandfather?”

“ Henri Bastille.”

Transient shutter, maybe not even real, but a suggestion of disquiet.

“ We were hoping you might tell us how we might meet Josette, your grandmother.”

“ Give me a minute. I have to lock up.” She went to the back of her shop and disappeared through a doorway.

“ Do you have to pick up every girl you see?” Isaac asked me when she left us.

I wondered if he even understood what these words mean.

“ I'm not going to lift her up or anything. Did you see me do that?”

“ You talk funny to every girl we see, you try to get them all to go on dates with you.”

“ This isn't a date. This is business. What do you know about dates?”

“ I watch TV and movies. I'm not a little kid anymore.”

“ Not even eleven years old. Do you know a girl that you like?”

“ Ughh!”

“ One day and you will probably be much like me.”

“ I hope not. Why don't you like mommy?”

“ Of course I do. Jerry doesn't yell at her does he?”

“ No, nothing like you.”

“ See that. She is happy and she does not need to listen to my yelling.”

“ So you're in the book?”

“ What book?”

“ The Guinness Book.”

“ I was for a brief while.”

Amelie arrived, sans high heels and covered quaintly in a pink wool sweater. We walked together to Le Petite Line only another few hundred feet down the road. Red awning and nothing much changed from what I could recall except the name. Empty tables out front. Inside was a smoke filled room with three people standing at the bar counter in the far back, each holding a glass of wine. We sat at one of the outside tables and I ordered two house red and a bowl of vanilla ice cream. Two euros for a glass of the house wine.

“ I suppose Monsieur Medaine is part to blame for what I have become,” I explained to the young artist lady. “ Truth is I had a pretty good gig lined up to become an accountant or maybe even a computer scientist, just about done with my degree and then I run into this complicated man who shows me how wonderful it is to find character in a rock.”

“ What is character in a rock?” she asked.

“ Essence, meaning, a ‘raison d’etre’. Rocks, I learned, are endowed with personality. I guess you know Medaine, he does not talk so much but he is absorbed and truly in love with his metier.”

“ And you?”

“ Picasso said ‘the purpose of life is washing the dust of daily life off our souls.’ I actually think it might be that rock sculptors inhale so much dust it fries our brains. I am pretty sure that some of us have no other choice. You must be doing quite well to have a gallery on this street.”

“ My mother painted,” a long hesitation, like she were weighing her words. “ Never professionally and she never sold anything or even tried, but it was her passion and I was lucky to have enough talent that she encouraged me and sent me to the right schools. Sometimes lucky, but most weeks I don’t sell a thing -- and the tourist trade is fickle. Still, when I have to, I can paint little yachts in the harbor and they sell like -- what is the word you use in English -- like pancakes.”

“ Hotcakes, actually. In my case it was not painting yachts but cooking hamburgers for quite a long time. You do what you have to do. Someone once did ask me to carve bears for his store in the mountains and I damn did say no to that nonsense.”

“ People here they make a lot of money making hamburgers. Across from my gallery is a restaurant called American Express -- they make giant fancy hamburgers and chili and are more busy than any other restaurant in Cannes.”

“ Americans make everything bigger and better.”

Something divine about the features of a French woman’s face. The bone structure was

perfection. A bit of chemical elixir in the crepes or the croissant or the baguettes or the Mediterranean air itself and I could become deliriously enchanted by the opportunity to be so close to such beauty, but now she was looking back at me in a puzzled fashion, maybe even angry.

“ I was just joking,” I told her. Must have hit a raw nerve. I had had no experience with French women. When I had been a student I figured they were too expensive to pursue, and kind of like cats, very difficult to figure out. Well, that is true about most any woman.

“ Why do you want to see my grandmother?” she asked. The tone was hard now.

“ Sort of complicated. My son and I came to France to pick up this box of my grandfather’s effects and you know he died, what, fifty or something years ago, and, well, Bastille had a girlfriend, Josette, and there is a letter in this box that tells my mother to speak to her. My grandfather is dead, my mother is dead. Doesn’t make a lot of sense and this has put us on a complicated goose chase.”

“ A fifty year old box with a letter in it?”

“ A few other trinkets. The pursuit does lend us something else to do other than play in the waves and collect sea glass and visit art galleries. Although today has been a veritable success meeting such a beautiful young artist.”

“ You’ll have to speak with my mother. I only heard stories about your Henri Bastille.”

“ Good or bad?”

“ I really didn’t expect this.”

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### The far past

The heavy bond paper had an embossed seal of the NAZI symbol at the bottom over Bastille's photo and description. This letter was written in both German and French and was signed by Generalleutnant von Gersdorff and Reichsminister Hermann Göring. It allowed him travel throughout France, both Vichy and occupied France, and had no specified end date. That must have been a mistake! Remarkable! Reprobate art, of all things, had brought this about. Of course, seen by the wrong eyes, perhaps the eyes of a true Frenchman, this paper would consign him as a traitor. Perhaps one could even burn or hang for possession of such a document. But it had worked like a charm when stopped by Germans and even the Milice. He folded the 'pass' and carefully slid it down into his sock.

The train rocked gently somewhat like the waves of the sea. He sat alone in a Pullman car with his valise resting on a metal grill over his head. The Nice to Paris night train seemed exceptionally empty, nothing like back in the days of selling women's clothing from town to town. Why had he given it up? Rather successful in retrospect and the women, oh, they were fine and plentiful then. But there were difficulties, the last trip was a third class ticket and he had stood half the voyage in the hallway, sweating and miserable and all about for nothing, hardly a sale on that trip.

Two men dressed in unremarkable dark suits, except for the fact that they were wearing

suits and were clean shaven which was a sign of police generally, came into his room and sat on the bench across from Bastille. No humor in their eyes and they regarded him and his lone bag with pedantic scrutiny.

“Monsieur, can you please tell me the purpose of your voyage?” the older of the fellows asked.

The train master had already come through the car and clipped his ticket. These men were French, not German, and gave no introduction.

“You know, I use to take these trips weekly before the war. There is a store, do you know Mimi’s Womens Apparel on Border street in downtown Cannes? I am their buyer. Of course, there is no money now, no business, so these trips are rare. What business is it of yours in any case?”

The inquisitor did not answer. The other man, a bit rougher looking, heavily built, pulled out a badge of some sort, really just a small piece of paper with typed words. The thing said something about railroad security detective.

“We recognize the businessmen who travel on the train. You, we have not seen.”

“As I said, there is not business enough for me to travel very often. I suppose our German brothers and you guys who kiss their asses are to blame for that.”

“Watch your damn tongue!”

“I gave the conductor my ticket. I don’t need to prove anything to anyone else.”

The heavysset man took a flat metal stick about a foot long from underneath his coat and waved it at Bastille.

“When did the French become Gestapo?” Bastille asked him and stood up to him.

The man swatted the weapon at Bastille's head and Bastille caught it with one hand, with the other he grabbed the man's wrist and twisted it backwards, a loud cracking noise, and the fellow flipped over onto his back on the floor. Bastille's shoe went to the fellow's neck to hold him there and his hand picked up the rod from the floor, expecting any minute to be shot by the other old man, but maybe they don't give French police guns anymore. The big heavysset guy was crying and clutching his damaged wrist. The other man seemed particularly surprised by the action and backed toward the door to escape. He pulled out a whistle and began blowing it furiously. Within half a minute two German soldiers appeared with machine guns and pointed them at Bastille. They were followed by an officer barking orders and waving his own pistol. Bastille slowly set the rod on the wooden seat and held his hands up. He spoke in German and told them that these two French queers were attempting to assault him but were like all French pussies and rather incompetent at the job. The soldiers appeared puzzled by the comment and the fluent German and even lowered their weapons before the officer yelled at them. The man with a whistle ordered the Germans to shoot Bastille, shouting hysterically in French that they had been the ones assaulted by the man, and he was clearly someone who must be a criminal or with the Resistance.

Bastille told the German officer that he had a pass that would explain his travel, that it was in his sock and he requested permission to pull it out. Nerves all around but it must be unusual to hear a civilian speak German in these parts. The officer told one of the soldiers to search him and he came out with the document. The officer held the paper to the light and examined it, incredulous, kept looking from the paper to Bastille's face.

“ What is this about?” The officer asked him in German.

“ I think you will need to contact Herr Goring for that information, as my business is with him. Of course you should know that there will be consequences for any delay that I encounter.”

The officer looked at the document again, considered his options. He handed Bastille the piece of paper, clicked his heels and nodded his head. He ordered the soldiers out of the car and assisted the injured man to as feet. He turned to Bastille with one last question.

“ You could have shown these men your pass and avoided all this nonsense.”

“ If you were me and a Frenchman treated you with such disrespect could you hold your tongue? How was I to know that there were proper military on this train. Otherwise, I would have had to kill these French jackals.”

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The past

A cold breeze swept through the field. At six in the morning the sun was just peaking out on the surface of the ocean, a gorgeous red rim outlining the horizon and scattered clouds in the far sky were tinted in gold crimson fire. Jay was alone on the grass field with papers of instruction in his hands, the flashlight no longer necessary, trying to discern which space was his unique square to place his sculptures on. Now he could see that they had chalked the grass into squares, but he couldn't find the numbers, and there were clearly numbered spaces on the piece of paper and he was supposed to set up on space twenty five. The frustration of getting here so early to do this and now he was more or less lost. Didn't matter actually, as he marvelled at what

a magnificent place this was for an art show -- huge farmer's field along a rocky shore and with the sound of waves crashing and the smell of a vast ocean at sunrise -- what was not to enjoy, and he did have it all to himself.

This would be the first show in years and actually quite a coup for him to be invited to the Cape Cod Beach Biannual. Rarely, never, had such a prestigious group deemed him worthy. There was Harry's coffee shop, and there was this small gallery in Porpoise Cove, Maine, which was a quite gorgeous place as well to display a sculpture, but they had never sold anything, and that sculpture was actually covered in snow about eight months of the year.

He took a sip of coffee from his thermos bottle. Reminded him of camping and waking early, the first cup of coffee in true blue wild, cool luxurious breaking light of day, everything washed clean to start new again. The fact that he hadn't done anything like this in, well, almost forever, that he had been able to finagle a day off from work -- all added up to pure unmitigated glory.

Another car pulled onto the field and parked next to his truck. Out jumps a pretty girl in shorts and tie-dyed kind of Jamaica colored tee shirt who now invades his space. Clearly she would soon be frozen as her long rouge hair, neon cherry colored really, was thrashing in the biting breeze that had started up. She began lifting long large paintings from the hatch of her ancient Pinto, struggling with the awkward sized canvas against the wind.

"Let me be of assistance," Jay announced nobly as he grabbed one end of the large piece and helped her set it on the ground.

"How do you know this is your space?" he asked her.

She walked about ten feet behind the car and pointed out at little flags with numbers

which were planted at the corners of the chalked squares. The flags must have been invisible earlier but were obvious now.

The girl had six paintings, maybe each 6 feet by 3 feet, and able to fit in the car through the hatch because the backseat had been removed. Her car had rusting spots and dings and peeling paint and would benefit from a mercy killing. Clearly this would be an artist kind of car. On the roof were tied a batch of wooden easels.

“What space is yours?” she asked.

“Twenty five.”

She pointed to the far corner of the field. Nothing oceanfront about that spot and quite a distance from this pretty girl. He untied the easels and pulled them off the roof for her. She couldn't be more than twenty years old. A colorful tattoo of a peacock peaked out on one arm, a bevy of large dangle earrings weighed down both ears, and a little golden loop in her left eyebrow glinted in the sunlight -- splendidly cute and hippy kind of girl whom Jay would have drooled over if he were ten years younger, and he were not otherwise entangled. Yes, he was drooling anyway.

He took off his jacket and tried to hand it to her. “You'll freeze.”

“In ten minutes it will be warm.”

“I would think you are going to need to anchor the easels to the ground and tie your paintings to them or they'll just blow away in this wind.”

She pulled a box of twine and tent stakes from the front seat of the Pinto.

“I live around here,” she explained. “The wind whips up in bursts. Feels good doesn't it?” she asked. Gorgeous smile, big bright teeth and the look of a rosy exuberance which only the

young can display.

“ You’re not cold?” He did notice lovely curves.

“ Maybe a smidge. After the long hot summer this is welcome weather. Are you a painter?”

“ Sculptures.”

“ A sculptor?”

“ Stone for that matter. Bad news, I suspect?”

“ This show doesn’t usually have much sculpture.”

“ You’ve shown work here before?”

“ Third trip.”

“ Damn, I must be talking to some kind of prodigy.”

“ Not hardly. It makes a difference that I grew up in Crosby down the road, and maybe more likely because my parents contribute money to the art guild that promotes the show. It always helps to have supportive parents.”

“ Yes, that would have been useful. This is my first.”

“ Wow, a virgin.”

Jay laughed. He could not stop staring at her -- when had he last engaged in a conversation with such an exquisitely bewitching young woman?

“ Where is your work?”

“ Still in my truck. I was listening to the ocean, lost in the ambience of this wonderland. Actually, I couldn’t figure out where I’m supposed to be and hate to piss off another artist by taking their space. Artist types can be a pretty rough group when you get them riled up, not that

they put a fight or anything, but they tend to make irritating whining noises. Sorry, that is uncalled for discrimination. But ,then, all of a sudden, this enchanting gorgeous mirage drifts in and everything changes.”

“ What is that?”

“ Well, you as a matter of fact,” Jay said. When was the last time he had seen Susanna smile like this during a conversation with him? When was the last time he had actually told Susanna that she was pretty?

“ Yeah? Well, thank you for the thought. What can I do to help you now that you’ve got me up and ready for the show?”

“ My stuff is heavy.” Other cars and trucks were coming onto the field and Jay guessed he would need to move soon. Each sculpture weighed about one hundred pounds and he had built five wooden table bases which were bulky and heavy as well.

“ Can I see them?”

They walked over to his truck and he pulled off the canvas cover.

“ Dang it! “ she said, staring at the pile of tables in the truck bed with an impressed disbelief. “ What possessed you?”

The tables were particularly bright and gaudy primary colors -- luminous orange and yellow with ruby red and cobalt blue trim. This had been a last minute kind of idea to draw attention if the stone work didn’t do the trick. The sculptures were all wrapped in burlap.

“ No one is going to see your sculpture,” she noted.

“ Kind of over the top,” the idea of distraction had not occurred to him, but hell, he figured the point is to get your foot in the door, any door, and then at least you have the

opportunity to sell yourself. He unwrapped one of the rock sculptures. This one had a long nose, upturned mouth, most of the work had been turning the scalp into something like a mountain range with chunks of various colored alabaster embedded and glued and then carved. All of it was highly polished and so the colors of the different rocks stood out like glistening bubbles in this outdoor light.

“ Kind of freaky” she commented. “ He sort of goes well with your tables.”

This was not exactly the sentiment he had wished to impart.

“ Maybe not the stuff they are used to here, I suppose. Thing is, I am attracted to loud bold pronouncements – sort of like your shirt. Matter of fact, those tattooed birds of yours are beguiling.” One was peeking out at her chest.

“ Very nice of you to notice.” She pulled up shirt. Jay’s eyes were too obvious even as he shifted them to the wonderful peacock on her arm.

He knew better.

“ I think you’ve got some kind of statement,” she went on, “ but I don’t know what it is. Clearly different. You’ll need a special collector.”

“ To be honest I was aiming toward a Michelangelo thing but I always get distracted, and I forget you need Michelangelo’s talent as well.”

“ Maybe if you could hide the hair part?”

He looked at this chunk of the sculpture, had been meant as a newish playful idea.

“ Perhaps I’ll find a hat to put on him.”

“ Good luck with your show.” She walked away back to her car. Jay sipped the last of his coffee.

Not a brilliant idea to stare at a young girl's tits, and, worse than that, let her know that you are staring at her beautiful tits. She did, of course, actually put these spectacular tattoos out there to the world and the wind was helpful to display the whole matter. What can an impressionable fellow do? Regardless, that was surely over, but the girl might have a point about this sculpture's hair -- did it look on the clownish side? Must be a hat hidden in his truck somewhere.

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The present

The coffee I'd made this morning had not done the trick. Instant of all things in a place like France where they make wonderful fresh ground and brewed and I should have waited and bought a cup here at Cafe du Commerce, and although it was not like I could not get another, two cups would get my heart jumping. The thing is I had woken with this vague apparition, no, not even vague at all, that I had been on a ship and got blown off course and damn crashed. I was spending time with my son, thrilled with that, but it occurred to me that this interlude would last only a few more days. Tomorrow comes too quickly, back to the way it was, and part of that was actually miserable ... buck up and act like a Dad I need to tell myself. At the minimum like a grown up, and yet, these feelings are harder to deal with than anything I have encountered. My little fellow is so much fun to be around. Perhaps this is Something like being homesick and it reminded me of mistakes.

We did have a plan for the day.

There is a farmers market in Cannes la Bocca which may be smaller and less colorful, but at the downtown market parking is atrocious. Even now well before the heaviest of the tourist season these festivals, actually that is what they feel like, become crowded with the locals. To be able to buy fresh items of the highest quality was fine in itself, but for me it was the opportunity to wander and observe the cacophony of babushka wearing true Provençals haggling for every centime, euro penny, with the rugged earthy country vendors, although today, interspersed, much more than I remembered, were an elegant wealthy type. These rich had not been so common before on the working class side of Cannes, and I suspect their invasion was responsible for the plethora of gourmet tables selling homemade foie gras and pickled truffles and fancy tapenades and one fellow with a table of very expensive perfect tomatoes labeled 'Pomme d'amour'.

At the far end are the flower vendors selling, depending the season, tulips, a million varieties of roses, bundles of lilac and lavender, iris, orchids, and my favorite -- the giant purplish pivoines (peony in English) -- and these folk even bargain with you and one can buy a dozen long stem roses for five euros. There was every vegetable and fruit flavor known in France including the most exquisite and expensive chanterelles, tables of melon -- those of Cavaillon looking particularly enticing -- a section where they sell fish, locally caught only, such as tiny brilliantly colored beauties we might call tropical fish back in Boston and not typically eaten by Americans if only because of the cost, but they were only a few euro per kilo here, and I myself had caught them by the bucket hardly fifty yards off shore right in front of the Carlton Hotel with my cousin. In fact, I am certain, these tiny fellows are the reason Soupe de Poisson 'de Cannes' is the best in the world.

Isaac was gazing at a giant pig's head inside a glass butcher's display cabinet, La Charcuterie du Marche. This was another thing not so often seen in American grocery stores. Notably this particular mammal appeared to be pickled and stuffed with types of cheese or was that actually his brains? The pig's eyes were luminescent.

“ Why don't we try a slice?” I ask my son.

“ I think not.” He looks at me with your typical ‘yeah, Dad, and why don't we just jump off a cliff’ rebuff.

“ My favorite -- wild pig.” There were several types for sale -- noisette, fenouil, St.Nectaire, ail -- all looking like heaven to a gourmand carnivore. “ Un demi kilo de saucisson sanglier, s'il vous plait?” I spoke to the butcher.

“ Dad, you are going to make us both ill.”

The man took four mini salamis and wrapped them in paper.

“Merci.” I handed him a ten euro note and he handed me some coins.

I pointed to a table laden with bright orange mushrooms – Lactarius delicious. “ You eat them and your urine looks like blood.” I don't think he believes me.

“ We ought to start going to the restaurant.” I look at my watch.

“ Why?”

“ Amelie told me that her mother works there. We're to meet her there.”

“ Are you going to marry her?”

“ Who?”

“ Amelie. I saw it in a movie. You go to see somebody's parents and then you get married.”

“ I don’t think that’s in the cards, Isaac. We are going to a couscous restaurant near where Charles’s old factory used to be, he’s the guy who died. You will certainly love this food. The stew is simmered for hours -- squash, turnip, carrot, onion, bits of lamb with a hint of cinnamon and cumin and cayenne -- a flavor which is difficult to describe how wonderful and enticing.”

The restaurant’s name was Isabella and looked like a fanciful bistro on the outside, with green benches, dark wood framed big glass windows and a red awning covering the entry. Inside was fancier than I expected, white tablecloths, elaborate silverware settings, even orchids sitting on the window sills, and rather too many ornate mirrors on the wall. The additional Middle Eastern touch was Moroccan style colorful hanging lamps. We appeared to be their only customers.

An attractive older lady came out from the kitchen dressed in an embroidered floor length kaftan dress and wore a yellow silk scarf over her head. She had a delicate refined smile and manner that hinted at some aristocratic past. I couldn’t recall when the north African colonies had gained freedom from the French, but perhaps she had escaped the flames. I knew a fellow named Pierre, sort of boyfriend to my sister once, whose family had lost everything when the French were ousted from Algeria, then they had lived for many years in the ethnic slums of Marseilles. This beautiful restaurant had nothing slum about it.

“ Bonjour. Vous pouvez choisir n’importe table que vous voulez.”

I broke out of my reverie to answer her.

“ Peut-être un table pour trois persons.”

“ Americain?” she asked.

“ Parlez vous Anglais?”

“ A little.”

“ My mother grew up here in Cannes. My son is half French and half alien.” I got kicked in the shin quite hard this time and the lady must have understood it an English style of joke.

“ Welcome. So nice that you would visit us this evening. Our special tonight is Couscous Royale which includes lamb, merguez, chicken and a salad Tunisian and is half price on Mondays. The quiet has its advantages. You will have my husband’s full attention. He cooks in the Fayez style.” She looked at Isaac. “ Very much food, I think one order is enough for two. Where are you from in America?”

“ New York City,” I look at my son, “ and Boston. How did you guess we are Americans? I suppose my French accent is not perfect,” of course half of my French words are usually wrong.

“ You look too content with life. This is not the French way. We hide our enthusiasm with a grim mask.” She smiled.

“ Well, your particular mask is quite charming. French women are so lovely.” She did look sort of familiar. Another kick in the shin. Damn that little boy!

Amelie appeared at the door. The lady left us and went to hug the artist.

“ This is the third member of our party,” I said.

“ You’ve met my mother?”

I looked again at the lady. She was the lady of the paintings. “ This is your mother?”

“ I should have told you this is my parent’s restaurant. I meant it to be a surprise but I was late.”

The lady appeared confused by the introduction.

“Mama, Monsieur Jay et son fils sont liés à Monsieur Henri Bastille, Mimi’s bon ami. Jay est the petit fils de Monsieur Bastille.”

The lady’s friendly demeanor gazed at me as if she had known me for years, but then there was a slight catch and frozen look in her eye.

“Madame, Monsieur Medaine, told me that your mother was his close friend many years ago and I have an old letter, well, it is a complicated story, but I was hoping I might find your mother to speak with her.”

“Henri Bastille qui possédait Riviera Plage?”

“Yes. His friend, Charles Jouselet, died recently and a box of my grandfather’s things were found at his house. Nothing dramatic really except an ancient letter asking my mother to speak with your mother, Josette. I don’t know what that’s about, to tell you the truth.” Jay spoke too quickly. Probably she did not understand.

“Let’s sit down and I’ll bring an aperitif. All that, so long ago, yes, of course I remember Bastille.” Now she regarded Jay with a measured smile, but said no more.

There is something special about a meal in a restaurant when you are entertained by the owner. She treated us like family and the food was as magnificent as I could dream and her husband certainly deserved a James Beard award or at least a few Michelin stars. It turned out that his father had been a general in the French Algerian army and they had fled that country in 1962.

“I suppose you are too young to have ever met your grandfather?” Isabella asked me.

“My parents had a plan for us all to go there one summer, but then he got sick with a brain tumor and only my mother went. He was dead by the time she arrived in Cannes.”

“ You know that your mother and Danielle would babysit me at your grandfather’s beach restaurant. Then one day they leave for the USA, one fallen in love with an American Naval Officer and the other a Spanish millionaire. This was all I could do to not dream of such adventure for the rest of my life.” She smiles at her husband, the chef, who was sitting at the table with us and sharing a cup of coffee, but he did not speak English. “ Charles, I suspect many people came to his funeral, perhaps some to be sure he was dead.”

“ Mama!” Amelie intervened, “ Il n’est pas juste de parler mal des morts.”

“ Et lui, tu sait tout ce qu’il avais fait? Bastille, il avais un coeur, Charles, rien de tout.”

“ Des rumeurs seulement. Jay is an artist, I did not tell you? He is a grande artiste, mondialement célèbre, c’est vrais, his sculptures are in museums.”

“ Grande artiste is going too far. Monsieur Medaine is a true master. I’ve got this kind of ten minutes of fame and new kid on the block heat going, and I’m hoping to prove it isn’t all hullabaloo. ”

“ Ballyhoo?” Isaac asked. I realized he was here and actually following the conversation.

“ Hype. I mean to say that one day I dream of being considered a humongously incredibly great artist, but just selling something for a lot of money does not prove that at all.” I turn to Isabella. “ Can we see your mother?”

“ She lives in a village far in the mountains. She is old and frail. Maybe not so good idea.”

“ My grandfather told her something, something to tell my mother. Really ridiculous, I am certain, this being so many years ago, but it is the main reason we came to France.”

She stared at Jay, quietly pondering the statement, then she looked at her daughter and

something changed.

“ My mother loved him,” she answered, turned to Jay. Seemed to be pondering the question. “ She doesn’t talk anymore. Elle a la demence, Alzheimer's maybe you say in English.”

Well, it was over.

“ She did love him. Then so much drinking.... She would say Bastille avait une partie de lui qui etait formidable -- he had a beautiful heart at one time. I don’t know.”

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The far past

The Avenue des Champs Elyseés was considered the most beautiful boulevard in the world to any Frenchman worth his foie gras. Fabulous rococo ornate buildings flanked by precise massive French chestnut trees lined both sides of the road, and café after café with glittering lights and brightly colored parasols to protect the upper class from winter sun. Between the cafes were shops once filled with diamonds and gold and Louis Quatorze antiques. Now, with the war and occupation, most were closed for business indefinitely. For Henri there had never been money to visit such shops on previous trips to Paris but when it came to being allowed to sit and sip a coffee the French were democratic in this regard. One could dream all day long at a table next to a prince, huddling over a single espresso, and not get jostled out. The outside tables and chairs, usually filled to capacity, had few customers today. Waiters stood like

zealous cadavers pining an end to the war and the return of the native gilded class.

Bastille sat down at an outside table at Le Fouquet's on the corner of George V and the Champs Elysées. Bright red awnings extended from the glass walls of the café to cover half the sidewalk, in this case blocking the sun and what warmth there was on a winter day. He ordered a double espresso and waited, clutching his wool coat tightly around his neck. Just one other outside table occupied, a man in a heavy black coat was shivering as well and somehow even drinking a large mug of beer. Too early and cold for that, Bastille thought, and in any case he ought to keep his wits about him. The previous trips to deliver paintings had been simple enough, just drop them off to a desk at the Jeu de Paume in exchange for an envelope of francs, exactly the amount Von Gersdorff had told him he would receive -- sublime 'maudit Fritz' efficiency. This time on arrival to the museum he had been directed instead to the German consulate and after two hours waiting on a wooden bench he had been given further instructions that the art collector wanted to meet him at this cafe on the Champs Elysées, an art collector who was playing games and probably aggravating him just because he could. Bastille had the desire to get up and go back to Cannes, money or no money, maybe he could sell the paintings when the war was over. Why was he helping these Jews anyway, all of them hiding, all of them trusting him like fools? But then there was the business with Rousso and speaking to some lady and not until the morning -- at least if he got a bit of money in his pocket he would be able to splurge on a nice Parisian meal and more than the fleabag hotel where he was staying.

A convoy of German military vehicles pulled in front of the café flanked by two heavily armored jeeps was an exquisite black Daimler staff car polished to perfection and glistening in the late afternoon light.

A cadre of armed soldiers jumped out from the jeeps and surrounded the passenger in the limousine, the obvious bull of the group. This man walked directly over to Bastille, his minions attempting to keep up with him, and then he waved them back as he sat down across from the Frenchman. How did he know who he was, Henri wondered. This fellow was a big guy, as thick as the monsters he used to box from across the river in Strasbourg, but even with his magnificent white wool coat with mink fur collar one could tell that the man's weight was centered all at the waist. Von Gersdorff had mentioned that the art collector was a general but this man was decked out like he was emperor of the world. Underneath the military jacket peeking out from the fur was the emblematic iron cross and gaudy gold epaulets.

“ You dropped some paintings off last month at the museum.” He spoke in guttural French almost impossible to understand but Bastille felt no need to inform him that he did, also, speak German. As it was he had enough people accusing him of fraternization, and another German friend would be too much. “ I need to tell you what I want. My assistants obviously do not understand art.”

He barked out a question that was too garbled, something about von Gersdorff and liking a Sissily but the Fragonard was ‘shit.’ “ He promised me you have something reasonable this time to present.” A wave of waiters tried to approach the table but were shooed back by the soldiers who had taken position ten feet away.

Bastille opened his suitcase and took out two smallish canvases. He removed a thick rubber band holding them together and handed one to the German.

Goring spread the canvas out on the metal table and held it open, stared at it for a few minutes without saying anything. His expression showed only piercing scrutiny.

“ A good Picasso,” finally, he said with some hint of admiration. “ And the other?”

Bastille handed it to him.

Again the general laid the painting open on the table, on top of the other. His plump hands felt the texture touching the painting as if he were caressing a woman. This one was a splash of wild colors, maybe a vineyard and some trees but it didn't look like much of anything to Bastille.

“ A later piece, I think after his insanity began.”

Bastille simply regarded the man without betraying his ignorance on such matters.

“ The price is too much,” the general declared and took out an envelope from his pocket. He removed a few bills from the envelope and handed the rest to Bastille.

“ Where do you get these? Your Judenscheisse friends? They are not allowed to own art anymore you realize? My friend says the south is crawling with these rich vermin.”

Bastille wondered how much he had taken from the envelope. Of course the man could simply confiscate the art without payment and throw Bastille in a cell for working with Jews. Nothing he could do. No more art from him, of course.

The general rolled up the two canvases together.

“ Although Paris at one time was quite the place to see masterpieces it appears your countrymen have absconded with anything of value and this place is otherwise just another dusty slum of whores and drunks. You French drink too much, you know, and it is mild recompense that you have some beautiful women.”

Bastille smiled. What else would be expected from a German? They mouthed the same drivel. He pocketed the envelope.

“ What else can you bring me?”

“ As you say, the Jews can not own anything and I suspect more and more of our whores and drunks will find it to their benefit to part with everything short of their spleens and livers. I can only bring what these degenerates have.” Bastille thought of the man’s name - Goring – such a bitter, hard, nasty sound to it. Surprising that such a man would have an appreciation for art.

“ I visited Paris before this war began and some foolish Jew kicked me out of his gallery. Guess he did not know how great the cost would become for such poor hospitality. You, too, must wish a visit to Birkinau. Very splendid place, I have heard.”

The general stood up.

“ I expect you to return with work of similar quality. Surprise me. Insolence should be avoided in the future. I don’t particularly dislike a dash of humor and I appreciate results, rather demand them. But be very careful, Monsieur.” He stared at Bastille for a long moment. A twist of humor colored his lips but the eyes were dead and dark, like a hawk, this the king of predators sizing up his prey.

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The past

“ I realize I wasn’t very complimentary of your work.”

Jay was sitting in a canvas captain’s chair, actually he had been asleep. He opened his eyes and saw the tattoo girl standing in front of him, rubbed his eyes, maybe half heard what she

had said.

“ You were fine,” I mumbled. Was this a dream?

“ Carol, I never introduced myself.” She put her hand out to him.

It had been a long day. A few thousand people milling about the field and quite a number had actually taken notice of his work. He had not imagined how tiring it can be to tell people what your sculpture is all about when he did not, in fact, know what it was all about -- no particular philosophy driving him, and it takes much effort to create fabrication about intelligent intent. What did help, and in addition assisted in forming the long nap he had now taken, was the cooler of beer he had brought, and after one or two of these the bullshit flowed more easily. Now the crowds were gone, the nonsense erudition over, and his brief nap had been serene.

“ You have some kind of gift.” She was walking around his sculptures, even touching them. “ I felt bad all day, you know like dissing your work and I’m just a neophyte and all. You are the professional.”

Jay stood up and walked over to her. Her hand was on one the misshapen faces and maybe she somehow expected it to transmit some ebb of soulful vibe, maybe she was one of these crystal worshiping fools. Didn’t matter if that were the case as she was too attractive for little things like that to matter.

“ I don’t recall any diss of my work. You were proper and respectful. I would have overdosed on valium long ago if I were one to worry about the laudative aspect of this business. By the way, I came by and looked at your paintings. In the Cape Cod sunlight they are magnificent.”

“ I didn’t see you.” She had her hand on the head of another of his sculptures, maybe an

old man. This one was truly abstract and he had forgotten the initial inspiration.

“ You were busy talking to some people. Your paintings, well, it’s obvious you have a gift for subtle colors and capturing the play of light.” Jay opened up the other canvas chair he had brought with him. “ Have a beer with me. Blue ribbon, first place, \$5000. You hit the jackpot.”

The ribbon had been hanging on one of her paintings.

“ You sell anything?” she asked.

“ Nada. Rather didn’t expect to. The experience of showing my work and talking to people was good enough for now. You?”

“ I feel guilty. Every one but two. How much taxes do you pay on \$10,000? I guess I’ll have to pay taxes this year. They report this to the IRS?”

“ I never actually have had such a problem to know.”

“ Maybe I should quit now while I’m at the top and tell everyone I’m champion of the Cape Cod Biannual.”

Carol took one of the beers from his cooler and sat down next to him on the chair.

Jay noticed her eyes. Big mischievous eyes and intense. They began talking and she told him about the old Victorian mansion where she lived in south Boston, where she rented a small room .....a college girl, her dream about supporting herself as an artist. Jay told her about his job, jobs, for so long a bag boy at the grocery store, and now the accounting gig. He told her about not quite being able to give up on his own dreaming. Maybe he couldn’t sell anything but just a few hours carving a rock was more enjoyable than any paycheck he would ever receive, he was certain. This was the cosmos that made his blood sizzle, if that made any sense, made him

feel actually alive, and even if he could not easily explain what he was after to anyone who asked him today when they were looking at his work, something inside him knew, something he could not put into words pushed and made doing the sculpting feel like creating heaven. He tried to explain, he even believed, he was getting somewhere with all of it. They got into talking a bit of philosophy and what is life all about kind of silliness. Not religion as he was not that sort, the kind of talk you do when you are young and have a world ahead of you and haven't fallen completely on your face yet, or don't know how painful these falls can be as the dreaming part starts to slip and disappear. Yes, he did know all of that rugged junk, but now with this youth soul speaking to him, this exuberance and joyful spark, all caused dreaming again.

“ You are supposed to get your head on straight and follow the dotted line,” he went on, “ nose to the grindstone and practical pertinacity in the face of overwhelming evidence and all that. I recall reading an essay by Stephen King who said that after about a hundred rejections one should use common sense and get on with another life. Yeah, he had been talking about wanna be writers but the same message can be applied to wanna be artists as well, but, damn, I am not ready to admit the death of my heart. I think King is an ass.” Was it the beer talking? Was this girl so damn gorgeous and he so full of hypnotized air that he could not keep from acting totally foolish?

They were the last to leave the field and it was dark when he helped her pack up her car.

“ I have an idea that if I had a model like you to look at while I make my sculptures they would turn out one hell of a lot more attractive and I might even make something worthwhile.”

“ How much do you pay your models?”

“ I've never actually used one. This must be kind of obvious, isn't it?”

“ I don’t think I would want that kind of hair on my head?” she motioned toward the wrapped up clownish figure in his truck bed. “ And, your bald guy style doesn’t suit me.”

“ The really beautiful thing is your face, I mean I really like your face, not that I could do it justice or anything,” Jay was stammering. He had proposed the model idea mostly as a joke, and yet he did want to meet Carol again.

“ You’re in Arlington, right? Not like we’re so far away from each other. I had fun, Jay.”

“ Like, yeah, man,” he called out as she drove away. The silly damn stammering was the best he could do.

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The present

Saint-Vallier-de-Thiey is a village about an hour from Cannes along the Route Napoleon. A lot of old people, not much in the way of jobs, the sort of place which you drive through on the way toward somewhere else. This is small exaggeration as just about anywhere in France appears exotic and sophisticated to an American tourist who is used to the same old fast food joints and pharmacies in every corner of our own country. France was rapidly adopting such homogeneity in that sense but many of the remote towns still retained historic flavor and multiplicity that feels absent even in a place like Arlington, Massachusetts where Paul Revere had ridden his horse and started our Revolution -- sure it has Dunkin Doughnuts, which actually counts for a plus, but as you eat your doughnut and have a good coffee you can look out the window to see a mishmash of newish brutally ugly structures there, virtually everything of an

age has been removed, as opposed to here where even the youngest of these buildings are likely to be two or more centuries old and built to last forever and always cared for with devotion.

There must be a law against decrepit rot in France.

The highway narrows to two lanes, snaking through the sleepy town and just past the town center is a giant grassy field where children gather to kick soccer balls or simply run around in a loud and buoyant fashion. The park field is rimmed with several benches shaded by massive Chestnut trees, a boule court, and plenty of parking.

There is the typical French boulangerie and charcuterie, mini supermarche, brasserie and cafe, an Indian Pizzeria, actually that is what the sign says, and even a spice shop, but how much Herbe de Provence and Ras el Hanout and turmeric can one sell to the geriatric crowd? We had arrived an hour before the rendez-vous. Unintended, actually, simply no traffic on the highway, and I wished something more than simply sit at a cafe and wait. I don't know what I was expecting -- a 'Village Perche's' or at minimum a walled medieval village filled with artist galleries and stores that sell olive wood bowls, maybe an antique shop, something more like St. Paul de Vence and throw in a Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie, that pretty lady particularly. Such beau monde abounded in the Alpes Maritime, but this was the real belly of France where tourists did not dominate.

Amelie was our savior. She walked toward us with a bag of goods.

“ Why'd we have to bring her?” Isaac asked me.

“ It is her grandmother we've come to meet.”

“ You like her. I can tell.”

“ She is nice lady and obviously pretty.”

“ They all are to you, Dad.”

I most likely could have navigated our way up here without the young lady, but I suppose speaking to another artist appealed to me. The accent, the cute dimples, something about her enthusiasm, these are the words I would prefer to use.

“ No more baguettes,” Amelie announced, “ but there is a wonderful huge thick crusted Pain de Campagne, too much for us, but I bought it anyway. Local goat cheese, a block of pate en croute made with Armagnac and venison -- I suspected goose liver might be a mistake for Americans? A bit of tapenade...” She looked at us, eyes askance, “ ... a bottle of ice cold mineral water, and a bottle of vin rose. I hope I did not spend too much of your money. One really can’t have a picnic without vino.”

The day was classically spring brilliant - translucent ink blue sky, sunlight dappled through the trees, crisp breeze, the gentle tang scent of sage and morning dew. Birds were yapping everywhere, mostly pigeons. The soccer field was covered in an expanse of new growth emerald grass with patches of ochre colored dirt. We sat on one of the benches at what would be about the twenty yard line on an American football field. A couple across the way were sipping coffee, but otherwise we had the place to ourselves.

“ Will you make me a sandwich with just cheese, please, Dad?” Isaac asked. “ I don’t want any pate. What is pate?” He stared ominously at the speckled grey block laid out among the other food on the bench.

“ The French make this ground up meat and spices almost as good as our Spam – you will be denying yourself a treasure.”

“ Just the bread and cheese, Dad. A big piece of the cheese.”

“ I am guessing you will change your mind when you hear this story. During the Second World War our soldiers took thousands of tons of canned Spam with them to the Pacific islands, you know back when we were fighting for our lives against the Japanese. Cannibals, ever heard of cannibals? The soldiers shared their food with the natives trying to win their support. By God, if these folks actually grew to love this stuff -- said it tasted just like human meat and this is how we white men broke them of their eating people habits.”

“ You made that up.”

“ Not at all. I saw it on the National Geographic channel.”

Amelie looks at me as if I have blasphemed and then smiles.

I broke off a slab of the bread then took out my Swiss knife. Amelie had also bought a huge wedge of Camembert and I knew Isaac liked this from our experience at Pascal’s restaurant.

“ You are truly a cutie pie,” I note as I hand him a chunk.

“ Will you stop that? And tell Mom to stop calling me that word.”

“ The girls will start calling you even more atrocious names.”

I hear a grumble – it was his favorite word.

Amelie hands me a paper cup filled with the Rose wine and Isaac some water. She put together a sandwich for me and tapenade (black olive, capers, anchovy, tuna, olive oil, mustard and some cognac make for perfection in this Provencal concoction) on a triangle of bread.

On this day, at this park, with this delectable weather and a splendid girl making my lunch, altogether reminds me of a line in a movie, the words spoken by Jack Nicholson’s character. I think he may have meant this in a rather negative fashion initially, “ What if this is

as good as it gets?” If such were the case, such would be quite okay with me.

My son had run off into the field and seemed to be gathering a crowd of pigeons while he ate his food.

“ I read a book by a fellow, John Ehle, who spent a year travelling the countryside of France and England talking to old people who were still making cheese by the old recipes, gathered their knowledge and notes on a bit of drinking wine and liquors thrown it. I think that is what I should do if I had the talent.”

“ Make cheese and wine?” Amelie asked.

“ Writing. No, that might be real work, the travel through your country and meet people and drink a lot would be my forte. My impression is that the writer did have a marvelous time with the research.”

“ No more sculpting?”

“ Could you live without painting?”

“ Absolutment non. She is my passion. But then again I struggle to keep my studio, my shop.”

“ Another sculptor friend of mine told me that creating art is more important than breathing -- it is the only possibility certain of us have to feed our soul. We were both dead broke at the time and I am pretty sure he used drugs.”

“ A bit far.”

“ One can go overboard in this business and lose track that you are maybe not going to become another Gerhard Richter and at worst a Van Gogh, meaning dying ignominiously obscure and penniless with unknown brilliance. Funny thing is I might have broke the mold with

success in the art world when this was my overwhelming aspiration. The unfortunate part is my narcissism died at the same time as I broke up with Isaac's mother and I realize that this success does not feel so spectacular anymore."

"You are divorced? Why?"

"Well, like I said, my goals were selfish, and I, you know men. Love does not always run without bumps in the roads. The French have it right -- just don't ask and don't tell and then everything can work out."

"An affair? Always is. That's not love. That is not all French who think such things."

"Humans do. You must be the romantic type?"

"Honest type, I hope."

My son was throwing pieces of bread on the ground and now had gathered a massive army of pigeons. I got up from the bench with Amelie and we walked over to the bird battle.

"Look at this, Dad. You break off a piece about the size of a walnut, squish it into a round shape. None of them can keep it for more than a second or two and it gets kicked around like a game."

In fact, he was about right. The big pieces were too large to swallow, they didn't have time to break off a tiny piece and so it was like rugby, one player running down the field with the treasure sticking in his beak until a more determined brute knocked it away, multiple kicks and handoffs until finally a lucky bird was strong enough to fly off with the prize. There were a hundred of these feral beasts competing and we had plenty of bread to keep them busy.

"Pigeon soccer," Isaac pronounced.

Eventually, we made it across the field to a restored grand stone building, Romanesque

with a rotunda and vaulted doors. On the street side of the building the French flag flew over the portal and each window of the three story building had flower boxes overflowing with multicolored tulips. Not a typical nursing home.

“ She should be ready for us,” Amelie said as we entered. “ I didn’t want to affect her normal schedule.”

“ She knows we are coming?”

“ I told the staff. My mother told you that she rarely talks anymore. I am not sure she can understand what we say. She seems happy enough, I guess, but I am afraid you will not find what you search in this place.”

Antiques everywhere and gold framed paintings on the walls. An attendant recognized Amelie and they discussed her grandmother’s health, which other than the mental part, was described as remarkable for someone in her nineties. We were taken to a large room with sofas and chairs, a fireplace which had a blaze going. There we found a tiny lady sitting in a wheelchair wrapped with a blue wool shawl over her shoulders. She did not seem to notice as we approached. The attendant helped bring chairs around.

Amelie hugged her grandmother and introduced us as family to Henri Bastille. The lady looked at her granddaughter, even tried to smile but she was clearly off in another world. Her granddaughter tried to explain who we were and that we had come from America, were looking into some history about my grandfather, Henri Bastille. Did she remember him? Amelie told her that the man had owned Riviera Plage and they had been close at one time.

The old lady said something very soft and just a word or two, the voice appearing slurred. She was looking at Isaac and there emerged a brightening in her eyes, something pleasant

suddenly occupying her thoughts.

She began talking in sentences. Amelie was surprised. The name Henri several times, and Victoria, my mother's name. I could not understand her French, the accent, rushed words, and she was not slowing down to let it be translated.

Heat in the room from the wood fire. Crackling noise. A tone that seemed at times ebullient and then taciturn. But she kept speaking, a switch had turned alive and woken memory u.

“ Le guerre” -- something about the war. “ Il a essaye d'aider.” “Il est devenu souldard.” Tears rolling from her eyes. “Le Cle” - something about a key - “la cimetiére” - cemetery - “A cote Le Monument a la Résistance Francais.” “ Il la caché pour Victoria et Danielle.”

I understood the last part. He left something for my mother and her sister.

“ Il est mort subitement. Il était mon ange.”

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The far past

Damn breakfast of bread, just a quarter baguette and some white slime substitute for butter, the coffee utterly poisonous and sour. Bastille yelled at the Maitre d'hotel for real coffee and was rudely advised to visit Les Trois Cochons down the block near the Louvre, 'the one filled with German officers' where for ten francs he might find a 'real' cup but here they served whatever they could get and he was damn lucky as there was nothing most days.

“ I paid you fifteen francs for the room and a proper breakfast,” Bastille argued. The room, four stories up, was more like a closet, the mattress hard, soiled and foul. He doubted the place even washed sheets once a month.

“ Yes and you’ve got your sleep and petit dejeuner. A war going on, you realize that, right?” the words were spit out. This hotel owner was a sloven overweight sleaze who last night had been all smiles and promising a ‘true French’ breakfast and hot water bath in the morning. That bath had consisted of one bucket of tepid water dropped outside his room.

‘ It is with a heavy heart that I tell you today that we must stop fighting’ -- with those words Marshal Petain had surrendered France without a bullet fired in Paris. There should have been some bullets fired at these gutless bastard French.

Time to get going in any case.

He was a block from Les Halles market and he headed in that direction toward Montmartre. Bright sunlight at six in the morning but cold as icicles. The streets were actually crowded with a disheveled crew of cheerless folk milling about seemingly aimlessly, pointlessly, their arms empty of packages, their grim eyes eagerly searching for what they could not afford. Perhaps just seeing the bins of food reminded them of time before the war when they did not go hungry, perhaps it was not simply improvident torture. The market itself was a ghost of what it had been -- before the war the glass and steel skeleton buildings would be filled table after table, by the hundreds, towers of fruit and vegetable precisely stacked and aligned, overflowing with activity and color, and certainly looking then like there was enough to feed an entire country. No fancy displays now and pitiful bounty of discolored apples and pears and wilted greens, ninety percent of the space empty. At the live meat market there were a few cages of scrawny chickens,

emaciated rabbits and a handful of runt goats, and almost no exchange of money and goods. Where there used to be rows of hanging carcasses of horse and beef and brawny butchers wielding massive chopping knives there were empty steel hooks hanging from racks that hung from the ceiling. The cacophony of commerce with horse trade screams and bloody cleaves was faint memory. One seller sat on a chair next to a sole carcass hooked and dripping blood onto the icy cobblestone ground, so quiet you could hear the individual drops of blood hit the floor and sizzle frozen, the butcher with tattooed biceps wearing a clean apron and appeared depressingly disengaged. Half a cigarette dangled from his lips and he wore a distant gaze, perhaps imagining the girl he once had had money to entertain. He didn't even look up when Bastille passed by.

After the last war, after three months in a reconditioning camp for Alsatian soldiers who France could no longer trust, although they had damn well trusted them to die by the thousands, their dead bodies an obstacle to German advancement, Bastille had come to Paris looking for work. He'd been employed carrying quarter sides of beef, up to 100 kg, from the trucks into Les Halles Building Number 3. Backbreaking work and the pay was barely subsistence.

He headed down rue Montmartre past Les Folies Bergere and on to a cellar bar across from Le Sphinx -- a notorious bordello for the wealthy. The whole red light district of Paris was still asleep, even the boulangeries and patisseries where shop owners normally would be open for business by six in the morning -- maybe there wasn't any bread for them to sell, certainly no fancy cream for Millefeuille or eclairs, and maybe no customers to sell to regardless. Even the prostitutes were 'a dormir', the German soldiers their only customers, and half the Parisians had eloped to the countryside or, from what he had heard, many to these particularly nasty German 'education' camps.

Le Meridien, a hovel with a cellar entrance, had a long wooden counter with a few rough characters camped out and clutching their drinks, black eyed, greasy haired, typical gang types silently appraised Bastille as he walked in, no doubt discerning whether he would be worth the effort to rob. Across from the far end of the bar counter was a table against rough brick wall and a couple sitting there. The lady was with a smallish bald headed dour faced man, near them at the bar was a humongous fellow, this guy with hands the size of melons. She was black as night and even in the dark, he could tell, extraordinarily beautiful. Bastille walked over and stood at the bar nearer the bald man. The rough giant stood up and moved toward him.

“ There are plenty of seats down the row,” the mammoth said and waved his cantaloupe hand at Bastille like a sledgehammer threatening to slap him away.

“ You get that finger in my face again and I’ll break it off and shove it up your ass. I want a beer!” Bastille yelled to the bartender who was already taking his siesta far down the counter.

The big man was open mouthed, hesitant, but getting ready to attack.

“ You own this fucking bar? Not that I wouldn’t love to kick your face in but I am here to see a lady,” Bastille advised the dumb beast.

The black lady, wearing a full length mink fur coat, gloriously out of place in this dump, seemed not unwilling to watch her gentleman guardian pummel the intruder.

“ Miss Baker,” Bastille announced.

She finally shooed the monster away.

Bastille extended his hand. “ ‘The red rooster has provided ten eggs’,” he stated. A silly phrase and made no sense at all, in fact he was surprised how he could remember such words, but this was the code he had been told to use. Rousso had explained that the lady, Josephine

Baker, was a Negro and beautiful like nothing he had seen before, and there were few Negroes in Paris. She shook his hand and asked him to sit next to the older man.

“ They say you are selling my paintings to ‘Der Dicke.’” the old man said and did not have an amused expression. “ I don’t want the Germans to have any of my fucking paintings.”

“ They are not your fucking paintings. The fucking paintings are owned by my friends in Cannes.”

“ Jews?”

“ What difference does it make?”

“ We have no Jews left in Paris. They’ve all been taken to the camps. You steal them?”

Bastille went to the bar to get his mug of beer. When he returned he handed the lady an envelope. Last night he had copied down what he had memorized.

“ How do you know who I sell anything to?” Bastille did not like this presumptuous fellow with his unblinking piercing dark eyes.

“ You think they haven’t been hounding me? ” The man got up from his chair to leave and the lady held his hand to stop him.

“ My friend is particular about who owns his work and does not like the German General who has been pestering him incessantly. As for the paintings, the lady at the Jeu de Paume is one of our own. Pablo, you should understand that our friend here has risked his life to come to Paris.” She held up the envelope. “ You know what happened to Misek. He did what you now do,” she stated with a beholden tone. “And so we must go.” She stood up. “ Be careful, my friend.”

“ Rothstein. How is he?” the artist asked.

“ He’s having to hide like all the other bastards.”

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The present

On the front patio of the old house facing the sea, a distant view across the lush valley to the blue water, my son was sitting on a wooden bench fascinated with a colony of ants. They were ubiquitous here and built towering red dirt mounds in between the ancient flagstone and I could remember sitting on the same bench and playing with the ants for hours on end when I was close to his age. Maybe this is a boy thing. My great aunt expressed worry that I was “off”, meaning retarded, and informed such notion to my mother.

A large scorpion dashed across the stone ground and up the wall of the house. Isaac made as if he might try to catch the thing.

“ Leave it alone. The yellow ones are poisonous.”

He had finished building a Lego set I had bought him yesterday, a French version of some elaborate starship with 400 plus little pieces, the fanciest one they had at the store near the old port. I suspect this might be a waste of money for all the little time it took him to build the toy, and the ants and scorpions were actually free, but now I knew that my little fellow was obviously gifted at something -- I had tried helping him and was completely befuddled by the task. Yes, he was exceptionally brilliant, although I could remember how my own grandmother had bragged endlessly that her ‘little Jesus’ would someday do great staggeringly spectacular

wonders for the world. In retrospect she might probably have had early dementia, and maybe I am misremembering some details of her praise, and yet, there is a point to this -- it is truly amazing what delusional encouragement can do for a man. Everyone needs a cheerleader. Occasionally, I am a realist and can crouch my megalomaniac moments and recognize the edge of the cliff in such audacity, but not for my child, no, actually I do believe he will one day accomplish miracles.

I reread the brief note we had found in the box.

‘ Do you remember the picnic we had together the day before you left for America? Find Josette and talk to her, she knows what I was up to, what I tried to do. My great regret is that my drunken foolishness chased her away. Still, I believed she loves me and will help you. This key will open a lock. There is an unfinished matter for which I will ask your help.’

Short and simple, more enigma.

Danielle had left for the States two years before my mother and did not have an idea where this picnic might have taken place. Bernadette supposed somewhere along the beach, maybe that stretch out at Mandelieu where there was a secluded walk along the water to a cluster of massive rocks and a magnificent view of Cannes across the bay, a favorite place for Canoise to picnic, and where I had been with Bernadette’s brother years ago. But Josette’s words -- who would picnic at a graveyard? Near the monument to the Resistance. I had read that less than a few thousand French actually fought in the Resistance, which would equate to maybe a dozen or so in Cannes. Of course these were the type who must know how to keep secrets.

“ Let’s go.”

“ Where are we going now?” he asked me.

“ To finally solve our this mystery.” I helped him find some proper clothes and we headed out the door to the car.

“ What mystery?”

“ Well, the reason we came to France is what we are going to look for today. The box has this odd key and the key opens to something your grandfather was trying to give to my mother. Let’s find out what it is.”

“ Why did he hide it? Why didn’t he just give it to her?”

“ People do dumb things when they get old. They also are convinced that whatever they are up to is the only business going on, the most important thing in the world. Beats the hell out of me why old people do stupid things.” I could remember my mother angry and arguing with my father many times about wanting to go back to France to see her family, take us all for a vacation. They had no money in those days and we could not afford a trip to Niagara Falls, much less Europe. If she had gone earlier, if she had met him, if all of that was done and over, then maybe now I would not have such a cryptogram on my hands, or, actually, the chance to spend some time with my son. Serendipity, perhaps, I should thank God and Bastille for this. “ Your grandfather didn’t expect to die of brain cancer so soon. Who suspects such tragedy?”

“ Why didn’t he just tell her where this thing is in the letter? Do adults always have to play games like this? Seems if you want to give something to someone maybe you should just tell them where to find it or send it to them in the mail.”

“ That would be reasonable. Anyway, should we go finish this business and find the damn thing or should we talk the damn thing to death?”

“ Let’s talk the damn thing to death.” A cute and startling chuckle.

“ You shouldn’t cuss.”

“ You started it. You are the teacher.”

“ I speak three languages – English, French and cussing, and then there is meanness on top of that. You copy me with the last, that means the foul language bit, and you can expect many spankings and the world will think you are a devil.”

Isaac smiled.

“ Where is this place?” he asked.

“ There is cemetery is on top of a hill with a view of all of Cannes. It’s where they buried Charles and my relatives.”

“ Are we going to look at his dead body?”

“ I kind of doubt we’ll see any dead bodies or bones. The graves we have in the United States are underground and don’t have keys, so I am not really sure what she was talking about but why don’t we try to find out.”

This time the GPS worked. Winding narrow roads up high above the town. I parked the car on a very steep road near the gate to the Cimetiere du Grande Jas. This did not look like your typical cemetery in the USA where everyone had their individual stones in a grassy field, these were little houses, many looking like massive stone casket buildings, flush next to one another, each an impressive sculpture in itself and much more elaborate and expensive than anyone would make today. My understanding is that these odd buildings can hold multiple bodies, maybe only their ashes, maybe many generations for all I knew. Some were almost two stories high and many had locked doors at their base. Having never seen one open I imagined the underground tunnels of Paris where there would be hallways leading deep into the earth with recessed spaces

each holding decayed bodies or piles of bones and skulls. This cemetery was spread over about two football fields sloping over the top of the hill and then back down toward the sea, myriad serpentine paths kind of like a medieval city. We were alone. I led Isaac down the one path I recognized, having visited once many years back with my mother.

We came to the mausoleum with the name Jouselet. Next to it was the granite obelisk dedicated to Resistance fighters. On the base of this was a simple inscription - "To those who died in service to their country." A list of names were carved at the base including Henri Bastille -- the last one -- but there was nothing with a door or lock.

I took the key out and tried it on the Jouselet door -- didn't work.

"Well, it seems to fit right but doesn't turn."

"Maybe it needs WD40."

I sat on the curb in front of Jouselet's grave. Isaac took the key from me and tried it himself and then began trying all the neighboring tombs. I spat out a few choice words under my breath feeling more less defeated now.

Quiet up here. Splendid view but not my cup of tea for a place to enjoy a Pan Bagnat sandwich and a beer. I could not imagine why the old fellow spent his last breath devising such a roundabout effort to deliver a gift to my mother, and, yet, as I looked at the granite obelisk I could vaguely envision the duplicitous world of occupied France where everyone was afraid of even their neighbor. In that war sixty million lives had been extinguished because of some maniac who could not accept the fact that he was really an ungifted artist and most probably a blood Hebrew as well. Yes, there was the business of wanting to conquer the world like Alexander the Great, but this was likely subterfuge, no, this monster just couldn't live in his own

skin. ‘If you tell a big enough lie and you tell it frequently enough, it will be believed,’ was one of his wonderful quotes. Somehow he had convinced millions to engage in evil. Something good flows through me as I fancy that my kin might have had a little to do with destroying that malignancy.

A yell. I could make out my son about fifty yards away where there was a clutch of palm trees.

“Dad! Dad!”

Somebody must have grabbed him. Probably a police officer thinking we are grave robbers. Hell, I’d given him the key and he was trying to open private tombs. I ran.

He stood at a beautiful little spot with a bench and a plot of grass underneath some palm trees and not at all a bad view out to the Islands. If you can ignore the dead people vibe this certainly was on par with a perfect beach. Huge smile on his face. Thank God he was not being arrested and there were no cops around. I could see he had put the key into a mausoleum door.

“It clicked open,” he said.

“Just a broken lock, I bet.”

‘De Salvy’. My mother’s maiden name. Yes, this was where I had come with her and maybe it was dark and I did not notice the incredible view. No, it was not a broken lock.

My son swung the door wide open. Dust an inch thick, cobwebs, a musty smell like you would imagine a dungeon, and I hoped no poisonous air. It seemed pretty obvious that no one had entered here in decades.

“This is the tomb for my mother’s ancestors.”

Inside was a narrow room with engraved names on each square on the walls. Otherwise

the place was empty except for a glass jar. Inside it was a folded envelope. The paper was yellowed and had the word 'Victoria' written on the outside.

I twisted the jar lid. Wouldn't turn. Looked at my son, a bit of that WD40 would likely do the job. I broke the glass jar on the cement floor. Picked up the brittle paper and opened it. A black and white photo fell out. In the picture were five people, four adults and a little boy standing in front of a spectacular pink marble mansion, all smiling, and dressed in clothes that I guessed were from well before I was born. Maybe the nineteen thirties? The writing was scribbled and nearly unintelligible, and in French, of course. I tried to translate out loud, had to use my phone for some of the words.

' In the Valley of the English next to the spring where there used to be a Roman house, you will need to dig. There was a family I could not save. I took seventy one Jews to Spain during the war... but the one man who helped us truly, saved us all, Edward Rothstein, was taken by the Germans and neither he nor anyone in his family has ever come back to Cannes. Their little boy is in this photo -- he is the only one who I could get out to Barcelona. His true name is Jakub Rothstein, but in the fake papers we gave him the name Nigel Livingstone, thinking if we got stopped they might not send a Christian English boy to the furnaces. I have tried and never been able to find him since the war. I have hidden here what is theirs and I have left something for you and your sister that Mr. Rothstein gave to me. Yes, I sold the beach restaurant and I used the money for good purpose, maybe someday you will understand, but he told me this is worth much more. And they say I drink too much and so Josette and the girl have left me. I apologize to be so foolish with my life, and foolish to always hide things, but there are bastards still in France who would do you harm if they knew. I will always love you.'

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## The past

A yellow ribbon - hadn't sold a damn thing but the show had sent Jay the ribbon in the mail - maybe felt guilty about their abhorrence of stone sculptors - and it looked rather fine taped on the blue steatite rock, a baseball player's head, well, it was only a baseball player because that was the hat he had on hand at the time out in that park and it fit the rock and that was good enough. The face carving itself may not be much to brag about, but there was this open mouth, some wicked teeth, and a semi scream contenance which leant a flare to the creature. Also, hardly worth mentioning, there had only been three sculptors in the field on that wonderful day and the other two were repeat contestants and he was the new boy on the block. Jay kind of understood that the yellow ribbon meant third place out of three in the sculpture division, but this detail should not be necessary to explain. On his resume, in his quest to find a real gallery and representation, they might assume that he had competed with a bevy of the greatest artists in the world. He returned from the distraction.

Carol sat on the stool like a real pro, moving occasionally but remarkably relaxed. Two hours of sitting there in his converted garage studio and she was not complaining. He had not worked with models -- after all you generally have to pay them. The fast food and grocery jobs had not allowed such luxury, but with half an accountant's salary now he could afford a little indulgence. The damn trade off was that he rarely had time for such work anymore.

In spite that there wasn't a whole lot of money he could pay to the girl she must have felt sympathetic to another artist. A few more whacks at the stone with his Sears brand hammer and chisel and he had formed a rudimentary outline of what he wanted. The stone weighed over one hundred pounds, the bust would be double life size. It sat on a large burlap bag filled with sand, and was a struggle to position it where he wanted at the correct angles.

“ You know, I hope that is not me,” Carol announced from her perch. This was her first break from the code of a correct silent stone sculpture model.

Jay sat back and observed what he had chipped away so far. The big lump of rock looked like a bunch of grey balloons sort of plopped next to each other. He knew the colors of the stone when polished and how a slight variation in the grey was actually a deep green and there were yellow streaks and even some hint of pink patches -- crimson in the end. All of this would require a massive amount of smoothing the rough edges, corrections to the main contours, make the bubbles truly round and like floating on each other, but the gist of it, what he was after, seemed to be coming out superbly. He imagined the final coloring could be gorgeous. This was about the third time with this style he had experimented and he particularly liked the sense of these bulbous concoctions, even though the first two efforts, neophyte compared to this particular splendid specimen, had not even stirred a nerve at the Cape Cod show. A mood of interesting lines, if there is such a thing as mood in abstract art, and, well, he knew what he wanted, knew what he liked, and was thrilled in getting the thing going. Glorious help with a real person in front of him to use as a guide. The bother was, then what would happen? If no one sees what he sees, no one recognizes this hint of existential brilliance, what is the point? Creating art in darkness is like kissing a rotting fish.

Now Carol really broke decorum and got up from her stool and walked over to the artist space to stare down at the work. Her expression was half disbelief and a general comical circumspection.

“ Do you really need a model for this? I don't see even a hint of me in your sculpture. Matter of fact I don't see one iota of anything that remotely resembles a human face at all, not even an alien or a monster or an insect. With all that intensity of you looking at me and chipping away at the rock I thought you were taking this business seriously.”

Jay felt kind of floored, didn't quite know what to say. Yes, this was different, not exactly like most of what he usually concocted, all of that earlier effort nearing, as close as he could, the realistic spectrum of art. But this minimalist direction, after all it was the subtle lines of her face he was after, felt particularly intriguing, rather spot on perfect even and having she, this gloriously beautiful model, no matter the obvious fact that she was practically right in what she observed now, did in fact make all the difference.

“ There is something about you here in this, believe me.”

“ I love modern art. But I oddly didn't figure you needed a model for that sort of thing. My best guess is you figured out a way to get me to come here and see you. I did tell you I'm in a relationship and I don't appreciate the deception.” Her expression and tone were about on the edge of anger.

Jay put down the hammer. He looked around the studio space that was empty of any of his other work except for the baseball player. The old stuff were all stacked away in corners in the house, which was where he did not want to take her even though his wife was off teaching at school, and he had sort of mentioned he had hired a model today. He'd been toying with the idea

of breaking away from conventional and predictable work. Maybe it was the hippy vibe Carol exuded, this daringly spunky energy that was contagious and spurred the new creativity.

“ This isn't anything at all like that,” he explained. “ Maybe it seems ridiculous from the outside looking in but there is something intriguing in certain curves of your face that I think I am capturing in the sculpture. There are these special edges and angles that a human has and they have a kind of beauty to them. This real model stuff is helping me enormously. You've got to admit I have been a perfect gentleman and brought you here solely for art's sake only.”

“ I kind of don't trust you.” She did stand at a little safe distance from Jay.

“ My intentions are the best. It is not my fault that you are too attractive and I like to look at you.”

“ This work doesn't look anything remotely human.” She walked around the sculpture, the tone leveling a level less harsh. Maybe it was in her eyes, maybe just the light hitting her so, but there appeared an inkling of appreciation for what she was looking at.

“ When I clean up the edges and get my contours right - you'll see what I mean.” He gazed at his sculpture, wondered about it. Why this obsession running through his brain? Maybe there was a broken wire somewhere. What was he actually thinking? More or less this was crap like every other damn thing he had done. “ Sometimes I am convinced that what I am doing is clearly out of this world perfect and stupendous. Of course that has usually been invisible to everyone else. Actually, kind of like always. But in some moments I can imagine myself as gifted as a Rodin and when I am at it with my damn hammer and really fucking do believe for a brief while, especially when I'm in the middle of some experimental work like this, god, it feels so wondrous. Haven't you ever felt that way when you paint? A grand curse of comical delusion,

I suppose, and now with this new job I have, luckily, I won't have as much time to delude myself. The art life, she does get kind of difficult when, you know, well, you wouldn't would you, when you can't make it work right and nobody cares to look at what you make, much less buy it."

"I didn't mean to knock you down." Carol touched Jay on the shoulder. "I often think of myself in the same way, you know, not sure anyone sees what I am after. But isn't it what we are all about, artists, believe this vision of what you can create no matter who else can see the beauty. Not much point otherwise, is there?"

She was close to him. She was mesmerizingly attractive. It had been foolish, of course, to invite her here. Yes, he wanted to be near someone so full of enthusiasm and life who seemed to like to talk to him. How do you blame a guy for that. And, yes, he'd been the gentleman.

"The food part, the oil to warm the house, a change of clothes occasionally, now that all does make a bit of difference in one's perspective but I'll have you know I got pretty damn good at cooking hamburgers and I was pretty happy before I got my accounting job. The problem is I like hitting rocks a hell of a lot more than I like money."

She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead.

Jay stared at her, surprised. Hadn't dared dream of this sort of closeness. And now he could not push the urge away where he needed to, get her back into her model seat and get on with the sculpture work. Two hours of her exquisite eyes and nose and lips all to himself and he was certainly drunk on her splendid beauty.

"Do you realize that a girl as spectacular as you can completely overwhelm a rogue like me..." He stopped talking. She wasn't backing away from him. She needed to quickly go back

to her safe perch but she wasn't going. She needed to look away but her eyes gazed straight at him with a softness and gentleness he had not encountered in too long a time.

A different person took over, reckless, possessed. He kissed her full on the lips. Absolutely like perfect. Could there be a finer simple kiss? Magnificence and trepidation in one indescribable sensation as he put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her to him and she kissed him back as if he and she had melted into gloriously in love. A dream it must be. Madness really, utter and complete madness.

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The far past

In the Garden of the English the war and occupation and scrambling for a franc felt far away and temporarily forgotten. One hears birds singing and can smell the long grass and the wild jasmine and heather that grow here prodigiously. The southern French sun soaks the trees and foliage with some kind of mystic brew producing an explosion of lush verdure. Everything feels overgrown and yet embracing and soothing, or so thought Bastille as he sat on a fallen log next to the spring that bubbled out from the side of the hill. He had learned that this was a proper place to escape to when all else was going to hell.

The isolated section of the farm, a hidden little valley of the Croix Des Gardes, had a path that forked up to either Rothstein's chateau or down toward the beach past a monstrosity called 'The Villa' where English royalty had vacationed in the 1800's, Queen Victoria even.

Supposedly the English had used this field to grow the royal wine grapes. Now their ancient building was boarded up, perhaps abandoned by the owners fifty years ago, but the English, in any case, were not welcome in France these days .

His wife's family would refer to this bit of heaven, no, no one else ever came down here or thought of it that way, as the 'Garden of the English,' in honor of those foreigners perhaps, or maybe because this was not proper French style, such a wild and rarely tended terrain, the field cut maybe once every few years for hay. Although difficult to climb down the steep path to the field it was a perfect oasis to hide from a sister in law who yelled constantly and a wife who was oblivious to him. Today, rather than simply a mental escape for Bastille, Rothstein had asked to meet down here instead of his chateau. Downtown Cannes, and even the beach restaurant, were no longer safe for a Jew.

As Bastille waited he began ruminating about his own damage, and even a pristine sanctuary could not calm him. That damn agreement. The quiet blackmail. Yes, he had gotten what he asked for, a place on the beach, and such a spectacularly perfect woman they all say, elegant, even submissive once in a very blue moon, quite the opposite of her sister. Oh, he could love her, make love to her well enough, but he could tell that she was not his, never would be, and who wants to faire l'amour with a listless mate. He had not even been in Cannes when all those shenanigans had transpired, but he had bought into the deal, been bribed into it. Those who knew the secret, seemed to be many, must call him words behind his back whenever he walked the streets. A man should never admit that this could be acceptable to him and then still consider himself a man, certainly never let on to anyone else that he was aware of such polyandry. All a fucking pickle. Here Bastille, a simple fellow with no proud lineage, minimal prospects otherwise,

no ambition other than to make a little money, to get by, to enjoy the days, as they were, and he should not complain too bitterly when there might be a bit of a rotten price to pay. Must be worse things in life, and the older girl, damn it all, she was wonderful, and he would always treat her like his own.

He thought of the camp of Gypsies on the road to Grasse, passed by them a hundred times, always festive and cooking barbecues outside their outlandish wagons, and they would hang out on the boardwalk at the Croisette usually begging money or up to some scheme or another trying to trick the tourists. Colorful scenery, relatively harmless, and at his own beach they would move on when he asked them to. Yesterday he had noticed that the camp was gone and he'd heard a rumor that the whole troop had been transported by force to the 'reception camp' like they were off on a vacation. Drancy is what he had heard, and then there was this place called Auschwitz. Whispers of something terrible there.

His life could surely be worse.

The afternoon light filtered through leaves of a walnut tree to rest softly on his brow and the warmth of the sun felt luscious. Now he could hear trickling water down the side of the hill sounding a steady beat accompanied by the chirps of a boisterous Robbin and a grumbling squirrel high above him in the trees. He wished he had brought a damn bottle, even a bit of cheap Armagnac would be right cheerful for the occasion of self pity.

He heard the crunch of footsteps coming down the hill and saw the well dressed Rothstein appear, surprisingly, at the far end of the field, as his chateau was actually straight up the path from where Bastille sat. Must have followed him down from Odette's maison.

“ Thank you for waiting here,” Rothstein announced, a little out of breath. “ I'm late.

Would've liked to have met you at your beach, but those delights are on hold for some of us."

"I figured you'd come down the here path." He pointed up the hill.

"Persona non grata in my own house. The Germans have taken it over. All Jewish property belongs to the state now, well, what our own masters don't grab for themselves. But I did plan it out beforehand and so there is another reason we are down here." He sat on the log next to Bastille, took out a cigarette, offered one to Bastille, Lucky Strike, an American brand, and not often seen these days. "Fellow at the port used to bring them to me from Italy. I have a stash. Little lost pleasures are so wonderful when you are close to the edge."

"I hear you are leaving Cannes." The government had confiscated his restaurant, his gallery, his store, maybe even the perfume factory.

"I hope, God willing."

"Where will you go?"

"My cousins are in Poland and one can't even communicate with them since the war began. I would imagine that going there might be rather foolish. You've taken several of my friends to Spain and now I'll ask you to do the same for me and the family. I pray that God will reward you in spades someday. Still, I had thought I might survive here if I paid enough money to the right people, but it looks like money won't do it for any of us anymore. There are five -- my wife and I, my daughter and her husband and our little grandson. How many can you carry in your truck?"

"Two or three at a time, usually, if I need to hide them."

"Even some of our neighbors of thirty years are only too happy to help the special police - Milice -- perfect word, really -- means evil spirit in Greek -- round us up. Not much time, you

know? No place to hide now.”

“ I can rearrange some things, just a little tighter for you.”

“ You’ve heard of Drancy? Word is there is a reservation for us at this place.”

“ I heard the gypsies were taken there yesterday.”

“ They claim it is a pleasant resettlement community away from all you good Catholics and there is need to separate the authentic French is the idea. Our infectious blood will otherwise destroy your civilization.”

“ It’s not my civilization. I’ve gone down the wrong road a few times, but I don’t understand the craziness of turning in a fellow Frenchman to the Germans, taking away everything that is clearly his property. Without you helping us my family would have suffered horribly. And I’m certainly not a ‘good’ fucking Catholic.”

Catholic by birth, he knew, but church was for when someone died or got married, and all the rest pretty much hypocritical nonsense. Those who’d had too much to drink at the bar, so many of his pious fellow citizens, churchgoers all, eagerly proclaimed how the Germans were doing a great service to France by removing ‘Jesus hating Jids.’

He asked Rothstein for another cigarette.

“ Not you personally, Bastille. Without the few like you we’d have been taken by now. But so many have turned against us.” He paused. Stern eyes, obviously struggling to compose himself. “ Down here below your house in this field there was a Roman outpost,” Rothstein turned his eyes to the section of the hill where they sat.

“ It’s not my house, Camille pushed me out. She does whatever her sister tells her to do.”

“ But do you still have access to getting back down to this place?”

“ If I need to.”

“ I always thought Odette was a fine judge of character. Rumors, Bastille, that you are too friendly with the ladies and that can always lead to all sorts of trouble for a young man.”

“ Is that so?” Bastille laughed. “ The thing is I am not so young and rarely are ladies prone to lending temptation,” he added.

“ Does not matter. Camille is ... well, you do what you must. In this field is a stone that has a Latin inscription stating the exact distance from Rome, the information was used by the Roman armies that marched through here. Such markers were placed precisely along many of their roads and it shows the precision of their ways. When the Romans built a structure it would last for centuries, and even such a jungle like this might hide their work but not destroy it. The Germans are a group a bit like those Romans and I admire their perfection, but not their desertion of morality or their godlessness. Roman rule did not survive, nor will the Germans for that matter. There must be justice in this world and payment for doing terrible deeds. Do you believe in God?”

“ Of all people, you can't really still believe in that gibberish? I think I lost him in the last war.”

“ Where I stand, there is nothing else worthy to believe in. This world, this life we have? You must have faith in something? Otherwise, why bother at all?”

“ My own two hands. Protecting my daughters, my friends.”

“ Would you consider me one of your friends?”

“ You have always been good to me.”

“ Then there is another job I have for you, a bit more risk of course. There is no one else I

can ask. My options have all run out very suddenly. Well, two jobs, first get my family out of here, and the other, well, -- let me show you.”

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### The present

An orange sun morning, cool, clean air, fresh smell of oleander and mimosa, the wisp of sea mist intruding gently. All quiet on an early morning Sunday which would seem to be the best time for this particular endeavor, not that we had much choice as our flight was to leave tomorrow morning. We doused ourselves with mosquito spray, wore long trousers and long sleeves in spite of the warmth the day would bring. Isaac carried a big shovel. I had a pickaxe and a hand shovel, as well as a long screwdriver and a long bladed brush sword, and we proceeded down the path into the Valley of the English.

“Nobody comes here anymore,” I say to Isaac. He grumbled something about the difficulty climbing down. Forty-five degree incline at the top, the steps made of rocks, many of them tumbled away and washed down the hill. When we came to the flat patch the brush was excruciatingly thick, mostly a prickly wild rose type forest.

“This was the path we would walk to the beach when I was a kid. We went there almost every day about half a mile and all downhill.” Now the only route was an extra half mile and uphill as you have to go up the steep driveway to Boulevard Cointet and then loop back down Boulevard Leader, all concrete and not nearly so enchanting. “My great aunt did not have a car.

Nobody walks here anymore. They all drive and then they have to find parking at the beach. In the summer that is a nightmare.”

“ Well, maybe they are smarter than us. Can’t we drive to this place?” Isaac pronounces decisively.

I did get his point. This endroit was not nearly civilized, a French version of jungle with massive overgrown cherry trees and plum trees all surrounded by god awful brambles -- at least the yellow mimosa were all in bloom. As I hacked our way through I could remember the tended orchard from my youth when Tata still hired a gardener to help take care of the place. They had stopped selling mimosa decades ago and no one pruned these fruit trees or cut out the prickly brush or moved the hay field.

“Let me do that,” Isaac said and grabbed the machete from me. The trail had leveled and we were walking the ancient path, inching, along a small fenced plot of land. Slow going hacking our way through but this kind of work seemed to please my son. He was now the leader in our treacherous endeavor. Hidden behind the fence was a small brick building completely encased in massive vines.

“ When I was your age a hermit lady lived in this house by herself. She never did talk to any of us, always dressed in black and stared at us with fierce eyes as we passed her property. Reminded me of the wicked witch of the West. I think she had no relatives - and it doesn't look like anyone's gone to her house in half a century.”

“ Maybe her body is in there and ghosts live here now. Where are we going anyway?”

“ The trail turns to the left at the end of her fence and then there is a big field and at the far end of that field is a creek. We’ll follow the creek part up the hill to its source --a spring

coming from a cluster of rocks in the side of the hill.”

“ You sure this is the right place?”

“ I know where there is a spring in the side of the hill. That’s what the letter said.”

I picked a ripe plum from the tree and handed it to Isaac.

“ Is it safe to eat?”

“ Looks okay to me.”

“ You eat one first.”

“ What, like you're the king and I am the official food taster?”

“ That works for me.”

“ When I was your age my sisters and I would spend all day wandering around down here eating these fruit, playing in the creek, yelling across the valley to a house up on the hill where some English kids lived. Their father wrote books about World War 2 -- The Guns of Navarone was my favorite. Tell you what, if you get sick eating this plum I won't make you eat your dinner tonight.”

He bit into the fruit. “ It is good.”

We made it to the corner of the fence. Here was an enormous erosion of the path, and a rock gully heading down at a steep incline, trees were now grown up in the middle of the path.

“ How long since you've been down here?”

“ Back before you were born. There used to be another English couple I got to know who lived in what we called the Swiss house further down toward the beach and I could always manage to get here without too much trouble. The Robinsons, like Swiss Family Robinson, as a matter of fact --he was a journalist in London and would come to Cannes with his wife on

vacations, getting away from the cold. There's a big wall, in any case, way on down put up by one of the new apartment buildings to block anyone continuing up the path or crossing their property."

"Why?"

"People are afraid of the boogeyman or burglars coming to their apartment and robbing them or whatever. There are only rich people around here now and they all want their cocoon. Funny thing is those folks haven't a clue how beautiful this place used to be, could be, still is for that matter."

"You think the Robinson's are dead?"

"They were in their 90's when last I saw them."

"Did they know about this Roman house?"

"I never heard anyone talk about it, not even my mother or her sister or my aunt."

"Then how do you know?"

"Because my sisters and I spent a lot of our time down here when we weren't at the beach playing. We didn't have a TV or Xbox or computers or whatever you guys have these days, and we actually played outside. I'd catch salamanders in the creek and I found a bunch of stone blocks in the brush next to where the spring comes out of the mountain. The note your great grandfather wrote reminded me and I found something else. You've seen it before."

"What?"

"My good luck charm. I've carried it in my wallet for quite a lot of years."

"The coin?"

I pulled my wallet out and took the piece of bronze out. It had turned a beautiful emerald

green patina from being next to leather for so many years. The size was about that of a half dollar, the face worn but still a distinctive nose and on the reverse you can make out the silhouette of a lady, she looked something like the Statue of Liberty.

“ This fellow is Nero, the emperor of Rome and this is a Sestertius. Would have been about one day's pay for a soldier in the Roman army at the time of Jesus's death, round about 2,000 years ago. I actually found this coin in the ground next to the spring where we are going.”

“ Maybe there are more coins here.”

“ Why do you think we brought shovels. If nothing else we might get lucky and find a treasure chest of these.”

Isaac started hacking through the briars with a fury. I should have thought of the story earlier.

“ You didn't tell anyone where you found the coin? Maybe they've come down here and dug it all up.”

“ My mother and Charles. Charles told me there was a Roman road through here, but he didn't care much about a coin. His factory had a contract to melt down the old French coins for scrap metal when they changed to ‘new’ francs in France. There were buckets of the old change scattered on the grounds at his factory and in the driveway of his house in downtown Cannes, copper and aluminum coins, some with round holes in them. They were worthless as pebbles to him, but they were like gold to me. ”

“ Why don't we go to his house and let me look for those?”

“ The factory is long gone and he sold that house to move to the countryside where we met Bernadette.”

“ Why would Romans put a road in the middle of a hill up here? Wouldn't it make better sense to build it next to the sea?”

“ It could have been not much more than a goat path. My aunt had goats and they had no trouble getting and up and down here. People used to be made of sterner stuff.”

“ The Romans rode goats?”

“ Maybe horses.”

I sat down on the thick field grass to take a rest. The sun was on us now that we were about out of the brambles. This seemed the perfect moment to rest my hurting feet.

“ You okay, Dad?”

“ I'm not a pup like you. I think I'm going to close my eyes for a minute and take a nap.”

“ I don't take naps anymore.”

“ Good for you.”

“ Dr. Peterson takes naps but he's a lot older than you are and he's not as much fun as this. I'm glad you brought me here, Dad.”

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The past            a dream

On the edge of the chair, a hammer in hand, the half finished sculpture on the bag of sand, horrible quiet on a late afternoon. Feet propped up on the table. At this certain time of day direct sunlight beams in forcefully through the one window of the garage and this heat is

soothing and as eyes close troubled thoughts invade.

Thou art such a fool to tempt the gods and welcome in the crashing of the walls. There comes a feeling over you, through you, involving every fiber of your senses and it is absolutely mesmerizing and catastrophic at the same moment. Maybe when you are young and have yet to learn much of life experience such feelings are predictable and even regular day recurrences that lead to rather embarrassing escapades like anonymous love letters, repetitive phone calls hanging up when the phone is answered, endless drives along the street where a girl lives in hopes of some ridiculous improbable encounter. For those of us who had no machismo in those days we were doomed to relive the amorous fantasies over and over without ever venturing forth and realizing in a real encounter how fantastically flawed our daydreaming might really be, that the object of our desperate and unquenchable infatuation was just a person after all, kind of like us, kind of full of irrational confusions as well. I suspect that this cocoon of distant unrequited love would be hardly unique and that others might have known this devil is comforting. That one can re enter such torment when they are no longer children is disquieting.

Generally, you go on, grow away from irrational angst, that flow of blood to the brutally boiling section of your brain that can light up your soul like a thousand stars -- we drift our eyes into the mirror as the train rolls along its course and you get on with sensible pursuit. The business of actually surviving gains hold of your attention and you study and you work and you stay on the train until memory of those bouts of glorious galaxy of heat fades dark and hardly even a shadow. As a character in Zorba the Greek proclaims -- you eat life, you become a man and you face responsibility, you do what they say you need to do to become a good man, a good husband, a good father. Love has not a damn thing to do with it.

And so it goes down that track, quietly mundane, progressively more complacent, but a comfortable road to drive and escape from further passions and dreams that only bring despair when you were finally able to realize that you are not the smartest cookie around, neither are you close to God's gift, nor are you particularly even slightly special among our species. The whole wonderful thing about being young and clueless is that you are clueless and can really believe in chasing dreams, fortune, true love, getting to some place like Eden on this trip called life. Believing in rainbows, chasing them, in spite of all the failure, up to a point, did feel an elixir kind of like a roaringly enjoyable ride down a raging river. The rest, protracted denouement, evolving like the doldrums, slowly becomes a gentle comfortable roll down the mountain to earth and banal unperturbed slumber.

Damn it all. One day you see this face, you hear this voice, you get jolted to a place you visited so many eons ago. Something lights up again inside your being and you would give up everything you are, everything you have, everything you ever dreamt, to just hold on to the glorious lullaby here, regardless the risk, the terrible insanity really. The devil himself has invaded your slumber and tempts with a potion that is the most beautiful, the most beguiling offer on earth.

Nothing will be at all promised. Walk into this phantasm and what will you lose? She is just a phantom after all and crazy imagination built her into a goddess and fools you into believing such exquisite exuberance might last forever, when most likely she, too, will soon realize that you are no more than a simple man, not anyone's gift at all, and she will walk away and you will have given up serenity, the best seat on the train of rational life for the fleeting kiss of an illusion. But, damn, this delusion feels like heaven itself and opens up an epiphany of

orgasmic splendor.

Get your feet on the ground, grown up folk are too intelligent to indulge in crazy utterly damaging passion. But here I am and I wish to hold this rainbow, this inamorata again, feel her arm's entwine around my soul. I want to dive into the abyss and take irrational infatuation to wherever it goes. I want to feel my soul on fire again and again and again. I want this lover in my arms just to be able to sing to her how extraordinary she is and that nothing I have known before ... and, yes, a part of me knows it is recklessly wrong. Oh, God, to tempt fate and rage into the unknown. To grow young and fearless one more time.

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The present

Beyond the eroded path, which had been more like a wicked torture at a diabolical fair where if you succeed you get a big stuffed animal or failure some unpleasant scratches or even a broken leg, we did avoid the broken leg part, there is our field of maybe three acres overgrown with magnificent tall grass interspersed with pink and gold and silvery flowers. On the fringe are ancient cherry trees with pink blossoms, but, mostly there are flies and mosquitoes in abundance. Luckily a swash of insect spray does its job and they avoid the sweaty humans. This lush green landscape feels like an extravagant dream, and I wonder how such beauty can lay hidden in the midst of some of the most expensive real estate in the world, quite obvious that nothing but small creatures had run through here in ages.

I make sculptures because I find pleasure in creating lines and shapes that stimulate the simple brain neurons of mine. If I had a gift to paint there would be little question that I should try to recreate this place, its colors and explosion of exuberant life and passion. The Valley of the English is fully in blossom and awakens my memories as a boy, summers with my great aunt and the times we would walk through here on the path toward town for nothing more than a baguette of bread, perhaps my aunt also simply wanting to enjoy this slice of paradise.

“Dad, where to now?” Isaac is talking.

Cool down here, so soft on the grass I have smoothed out like a pillow, the air clean and the sky painfully blue. I wish that I could breathe in and hold on to the sensation.

“Dad!” he yells again. He nudges my shoulder with his hand.

“Yeah? I know. I kind of took a trip back to when I was a little poke like you and what it was like to live completely for fun.”

“Where are we going to do the digging? You slept for hours.”

Minutes maybe.

“Ok, somewhere across this field we’ll find the little creek and we’ll follow it up the hill. But I go first. Maybe there are snakes.”

“Oh great!” He sounds disheartened. “I’m not going.”

“I’m almost certain there aren’t any poisonous snakes in this part of the world.”

“But snakes bite, right?”

“We are bigger than they are and if one makes noise -- I saw a movie once where these two little girls and their father knocked two sticks together as they walk through the woods - it’s supposed to scare them away.” I pick up a long broken tree branch from the ground, brake it in

half. “ I’ll go first through the grass. You follow me and if you see a long wiggling things then scream like a pansy and run like hell.”

“ Yeah, right.”

“ No, I might hit him on the head with the stick.”

“ Why don't we just use the machete?”

“ We wouldn't want to kill the poor creature, just scare the fellow away.”

We begin across the field. The life of a man is hopefully filled with many pleasures. Obviously falling in love, which I had started well and failed miserably, sitting under a tree with friends and sharing a wonderful meal and libations, relaxing on a leather recliner and listening to your favorite music, riding a boat out to sea on a cold autumn morning to fish for grouper and red snapper and then munching greasy hamburgers when you don't catch a thing, all of these moments absolutely splendid, but true perfection is spending time with a child who is a part of you. The familiar in the way he acts, the way he talks, the way he looks, all of which meshes a galaxy of mundane into tranquility. Looking now at my son I realize how great a loss it is that we have had so few times together like this.

He found the creek. Not much more than a few foot wide stony rivulet of water almost hidden in the tall grass.

“ Be careful not to step on the Salamanders.”

I can hear the water splashing over pebbles. He is attempting to walk from rock to rock up the creek and I follow, both of us slipping a few times and soaking our shoes. The water is cold.

We cross the field to the steep hill and there is a mini waterfall. I point my index finger

up the hill and tap Isaac on the shoulder.

“ About a quarter way up is a flatish area. That’s where I found the coin. If we could dam this up we could sell the water for a fortune. Imagine pure spring water from the Cote d’Azur -- we could call it ‘ Isaac’s billionaire Meditarrainian spring water.’

I tried to help him up the steep part but it was not necessary, he scampered up like a monkey. I was the one who could use help.

“ What are we looking for?”

“ I remember a pile of rocks. There used to be a path up this hill to the Jewish house and there was a pile of the rocks near the opening of the spring.” Theses hills had been terrassed long ago, and once were all filled with flowers and fruit trees and fish tanks and rabbit cages and bamboo forest. Above us, around us, now replaced with ultra luxurious apartment buildings and their fancy swimming pools and manicured gardens, except for this endroit, and none of the wealthy dared venture down into the hidden valley. “ Straight up this way was an old mansion with an incredible view of the sea, you could see for a million miles up and down the coast, maybe the greatest view in all of Cannes.”

“ Who lives there?”

“ Oh, it is gone now. A new apartment building that blocks some of our view to the sea. A Jewish family lived there and disappeared during the war and no one ever came back to claim the property. Finally the city took the land and auctioned it off to a developer. They destroyed the old chateau.”

“ Where did the Jewish family go?”

“ My great aunt said they were deported by the Nazis during the war to Germany and

killed in concentration camps.”

“ Gassed?”

“ You've read about the Holocaust in school?”

“ I saw it on the History Channel.”

“ During the war their house was occupied by German officers who were in charge of southern France. My sisters and I found all sorts of broken plates with gold trim, one almost intact teapot, and a ton of empty German wine bottles.”

We find the flat area and try to clear away the brush. I suspect the task will be virtually impossible now, too many years and too much growth. Of course, with the prospect of finding an ancient coin in the ground, this did not seem so daunting a task to my son. He is making remarkable progress with the machete.

He uncovers a pile of rocks and screams. These are squarish stones intermixed with soil and weeds and probably spiders.

“ Put your gloves on.” I don't tell him about the spiders or I might be stuck doing all the work myself. Damn, it is nice to have a helpful little worker.

“ Be careful of the spiders,” I do finally announce. I would actually feel pretty rotten if he were to get bit by one of these buggers and I hadn't said a thing. “ I don't think they ought to be poisonous.”

He looks at me for a long moment, contemplating the risks involved, then quickly resumes moving the stones.

I insist that we stack them neatly off to the side which takes more time. Some look to be nearly perfect hand carved limestone but most are broken and eroded. Soon we have a big pile of

the rocks and not much else.

“Where did you find the coin?”

“Next to the stream actually.”

He moves closer to the water and starts picking the stones out there.

I am getting tired of all this digging even though I am not doing much. I still believe this a wild goose chase. We must have moved about one hundred rocks, twice as much in weeds and dirt.

“Maybe I'll just go buy you a Roman coin, Isaac.”

“Buying something at a store isn't the same thing.”

After all these years? If there is another damn box buried here it will certainly be eroded and destroyed by water now.

“Did you inherit part of your grandfather's brain?” Isaac asks.

“Some of his DNA, I suppose.”

“And I've got some of your brain in me?”

“I suppose so. Maybe. Why?”

“I think maybe I'm doomed. I think he was crazy.”

“You got lucky and inherited your mother's DNA.”

We resume the work. Cool in the shade when I sit back and watch, but getting damn hot when I pitch in. And, yes, I do take too many little breaks and sip the spring water, my excuse, true enough, that being out of shape people like me dehydrate easily. Should have brought snacks, but it had not occurred to me that we would be down here for hours playing in mud.

“They teach you to be prepared when you're in the Boy Scouts. Didn't your mother tell

me that you had become a Cub Scout?”

“ Yeah, why?”

“ Well, you should have reminded me to bring some drinks and a snack. And a chair for me would have been a good idea.”

“ Mom says that you were a Boy Scout. That's why I wanted to be a Cub Scout.”

“ I must have forgotten the part about being prepared. You doing okay with your mom?”

“ Yeah.”

“ I miss you, you know.”

“ How can you miss me, I'm here? Come and see us more often.”

“ I don't want to get in the way.”

“ Why did you leave?”

How do you explain it? Don't say things that he cannot understand at this age.

“ People make mistakes. Now your mother has a good man to help you guys out.”

“ He's not my father.”

“ No, I am and I always will love you, you know that, right, Isaac?”

“ I love you, too, Dad.”

The look in his eyes, the honesty, the trust, knowing that he still thought of me as his father. So wonderful, so painful. I turn away so he can not see the tears in my eyes.

“ Hey, Dad. Knock knock.”

“Who's there?”

“Cow's go.”

“Cow's go where?”

“No, Cow’s go moo!”

We keep digging and move back to where the pile of rocks were, actually a few feet into the side of the mountain where we are removing something like a wall. Then we find a stone floor.

“ Looks like we're getting somewhere,” I mention.

“ You see some coins?”

“ No, but a flat surface and maybe it's the floor of a room.”

The rocks are loose here and easy to remove. I am tired, sweating like a pig, the cool morning long past and the mosquitoes finally ignoring our evaporated bug spray. I sit back with my back leaning on the rocks and contemplate the situation. We have a flight back to the states in twenty hours. We would need to leave the apartment by nine to drop the rental car at Alamo and give myself time to negotiate the roads and what I remember to be a schizophrenic airport. There will be no time to do any more digging here tomorrow.

Isaac brushes the floor and wall of rocks we had cleared. He hums a song to himself, oblivious to my discontent and does not appear tired or disheartened.

“ Damn, Mother of God!” he yells.

“ What did you say? Where did you learn to talk like that?”

“ You, Dad. Look what I found.”

There is what looks like a wooden board, wedged in like a small door.

We pull some more stones out, get the board out and dirt falls into what is like a tunnel, an abyss.

“ It’s a room, Dad, a big room and there are a lot of things in here.”

“Damn, Mother of God” is all I can say. I will reschedule our flight.

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The far past

Early in the morning as the sun had just risen was the time to move. At night walking down to the little valley was difficult unless there was a full moon and carrying lights would only expose him to others on the hill who could not be trusted. At the top of the Croix de Gardes was a German bunker with around the clock sentries primarily observing movement in the sea but lights in these fields would likely get their attention. Bastille walked down the path. He had a rendezvous at

6 AM.

He found Rothstein's grandson sitting on a log by the brook. He was crying and shivering although he wore a coat and it was not particularly cold. With him was Simone Bouchard, an elderly widow who lived in a stone house above the mimosa plantation. Maybe she was eighty years old and they were made of different stuff up here but Bastille could not imagine how she and the boy had made their way down here in the dark through the brambles and steep pitches.

“Where is the rest of the family?” Bastille asked her.

“They took them.”

“Who took them?”

“ Cockteau and several police. They broke into my house and they took them. They threatened me as well, but I suppose grabbing an old woman was too much bother.”

Simone’s face was a blank mask, unshaken, as if there was nothing surprising left in this madness.

“ Why not the boy?”

“ He was sleeping in the attic. Maybe they didn’t know about him, maybe, I don’t know. He’s your affair now. I’ve had enough of all of this.”

“ What do you mean, my affair? I had a business with Rothstein and the whole family. That’s over now. I can’t take care of a boy.”

“ You’ll take him to Spain like you were going to take them all.”

“ That’s absurd. You must find someone else to take care of him until his parents are released.”

“ You know that won’t happen.”

“ Of course it will. He’s a wealthy man. ”

“ They are as good as gone. They took the Schumann family as well, and they are as rich as God.”

Bastille looked at the damn lady and wondered what he would do with the damn kid.

“ The Germans will get him and you’ll go to hell. Rothstein paid you to take them all to Spain. I know the whole story. Now he is your business.”

“ How old is he?” Bastille sat next to the boy who seemed frightened beyond measure.

“ Does the boy even talk?”

“ Four years old. Your responsibility, Bastille. All of you bastards are only too happy to

help the Germans get rid of the Jews. They never gave me any trouble. This is beyond hideous.”

The old lady began climbing back up the hill toward the chateau.

Bastille looked at the boy – about three feet tall, thick dark black hair, dark eyes filled with terror. What did the boy understand of this catastrophe?

“Merde!” is all he could say. He looked up the hill, the path the neighbor was taking. He took the boy’s hand and then began walking back across the field.

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The past

“ It’s the toughest damn thing I’ve ever done. ”

The bartender set two pints of Bass ale on the counter in front of them. Eight at night and Cambridge Commons was not yet rocking – another hour and the place would be packed with Harvard and Lesley students jabbering away and the music too loud. Now it was sports on multiple TV’s.

“ We’ve kind of drifted apart,” Jay continued.

“ How much is H & R paying you?”

“ What the hell does that have to do with what I’m talking about?”

“ I got you the job, just want to see what the competition is making? Maybe you owe me a finder’s fee?” Jerry Lee was CFO at a wholesale seafood distributor, an august company in

downtown Boston, and the recommendation from him had made the difference.

“ They started me at sixty. I heard that some guys, five years down, can make twice that.”

“ Just saying, you’ve got money now.” Jerry Lee touched his full out beard, a new look for him which added a flair of rugged New Englander. “ Fuck everything else. Worst case is you can at least afford alimony, hire a nanny, preferably attractive, keep your boy on weekends. I never had a kid to complicate all of that, but the damn splitting up part I am fucking expert on that.”

Being that there was no one else to talk to, and they both liked beer, and this place felt rather familiar from their younger days...

“ I didn’t say we’re getting divorced. You realize that you are a particularly worthless son of a bitch? There is the etiquette of cheering a buddy up, you know?”

“ Just saying, we make choices. Guys have these kind of problems like pretty regular, or I certainly have. Don’t tell Susanna -- that is always the best option. I find that if you don’t tell the girl about the other girl you can buy yourself time to figure out how to get the hell out of it without getting your dick cut off.”

Jerry Lee had been through a bevy of beauties through the years and he was clearly not the sticking type, but Jay had to admit he could not ever recall any heartache blather emanating from his friend’s crumbled experiences. In retrospect, this was a redeeming attribute. A bromidic exchange about sports or politics would be a better way to spend an evening out than acting like a silly teenage crybaby. The miserable infatuation problem he should have kept to himself.

“ It’s about my head, you know. Susanna and I were fine until the financial mess we got ourselves into and we’re pulling out of that now. So, you know, all of that made it difficult to

keep things passionate. I still love her.”

“ Like a sister or like a lover?”

“ You wouldn’t know what this kind of love is like, like you say you’ve never been married.”

“ Kind of maybe why I’m not so anxious to go there. Between you and all the other sorry suckers I know who always seem to fuck up -- hell, this isn’t the first time I’ve heard this splitsville story. Pretty girl smiles at you, makes you think you’re young again and whoop-tee-doo-da! Oh baby, you have such big biceps! Jay you are living a damn predictable fairy tale with an almost inevitable turbulent ending. What is your she-devil’s name?”

“ It doesn’t matter.”

“ Com on big boy, tell me about the tiger girl.”

“ She is young. Pretty. Actually, even beautiful. I can talk to her, that’s all. Susanna and I, well, the thing is I gave up what is important to me and she did seem damn glad about that.”

“ What the hell did you give up?”

“ Time, time to make my art.”

“ Your sculpting? That’s what you gave up?” Infuriating grin. “ Hell, you were about the best math student I ever knew, you could of been making millions on Wall Street by now, but you fancied you were the reincarnation of Michelangelo. Hell, that’s fine enough if you don’t have a family to support, but the thing is that last time I heard you had never sold a goddamn sculpture in your life. Comes a point where people have to grow up. Don’t blame your wife.”

“ You’ve got the goddamn heart of a toad.” Jay stared off at the TV set at the far end of the bar. Baseball game. Didn’t really give a flip about baseball. Music blasting on the jukebox.

All these damn songs sounding off about love lost. Didn't give a flip about music right now either.

“ Maybe normal people think money is the king of everything, but it fucking ain't me.”

Jerry Lee laughed, downed his beer and ordered another round.

“ Proves how screwed up you are in thinking that I might be normal,” Jerry Lee noted, and even seemed a bit apologetic in his expression. “ Go screw the dang girl and get it out of your system. Take Susanna out to some nice restaurants, hell, let her shop and buy whatever she likes with all this money you're gonna make now and she'll never leave you. The Arabs and Mormons got it right -- they understand human nature better than us. Men need a bevy of lovers and women need to buy things.”

“ Carol. Her name is Carol.”

“ Why don't you invite to have a beer with us now?”

“ I ain't going to introduce her to you.”

“ How many times have you seen her?”

“ Doesn't matter. A show in Cape Cod and then we got together for coffee. I had her over at my studio to make a sculpture.”

“ You got to have sex with the girl or this conversation is just a waste of my time. Did you fuck her? Didn't think it was in you, buddy.”

“ It isn't like that.”

“ Heart gets to fluttering and you think she is the damn most perfect broad God ever made, and yeah, it is damn like that. I have known the same interminable disease. They say that chocolate can give you the feeling, too, but for me a spicy dish does the trick, Thai curry or

habanero salsa and I am ready to move on. Somebody ought to invent a pill that does the same damn thing and they'd make a fortune. You got to kill these foolish obsessions that destroy us -- and understand there are so many voluptuous heavenly fish in the sea. You got inflammation in the brain most likely and love is truly an actual perverted disease." Jerry Lee then drifted off into his own world, looking pensive, not sure of himself. After about one beer of silence he turned back to Jay with a rather serious expression now, a different demeanor altogether. " You are gonna screw up your life because you think you're a goddamn kid again. Suck it up, buddy, get your head on straight. You will never find anyone so splendid as this Susanna again. On the other hand -- my tribute to Randy Travis -- your wife is not a fool. She might be screwing another warm body as we talk. A woman can always tell when their lover is cheating."

" Do you want me to fucking punch the shit out of you? Damn it, Jerry Lee, I could really knock some teeth out."

" It was a joke." Jerry Lee backed up, wondering if he must have actually gone too far. " Rare moment of honesty, though. You and I aren't the violent type, more geek and nerd than the average bear. Matter of fact, I think you, being the artist type, if you punched me you would be worse off for your hand than for my face."

" I'm not that kind of artist."

" Both of us are fucked up and we are destined to get utterly destroyed one way or another. Guess maybe you are right and you ought to enjoy life before you are eaten by the worm."

Jay stood up to go home. The part about Suzanna being the best he would ever have really hit home and hurt. The part about her being with someone else, falling in love with

someone else ... was it nonsense?

“ Thank you for an enlightening conversation.”

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The far past

“I don't know, Bastille, I think you are a better man than you think. Goring actually wrote me a note asking specifically that you bring another shipment of paintings. Called you a damn

‘ knallharter Bursche’ and suggested if all French were as you we might have no need for this foolish war. I suppose you didn't tell him you were German?”

“ I'm not German.

The General puffed on a cigar and leaned back in the chair next to the glass wall. As usual, he was impeccably dressed, now in the guise of his recent promotion to Generalleutnant der Infanterie with further embellished gold braided collar and epaulets. Not one white hair out of place, a regal erudite countenance as always, the former aristocrat was a far cry from the rough Germans Bastille had grown up with.

A façade, Bastille understood, his troops were ruthless and someone, perhaps this man, had ordered the torture and murder of almost two hundred men in a place called Vassieux-en-Vercors because a few of them were accused of resistance. The German style, put up a bit of a fight and they will match your bravery with the blood of a thousand. The man's

pseudo breeding hid a propensity for barbarism. And now, damn, the fellow came too often to his bar and even required Bastille to sit with him as if they were buddies. Bastille had at least determined that he would serve only salad and poisson from now on and the damn Germans didn't like fish and healthy food.

" You enjoy your trips to the French capital?"

" I suppose it was civil of your Hitler to not destroy Paris."

" A magnificent city. Your countrymen have created something spectacular there and someday, perhaps, I shall visit again. Have a cigar with me."

"No, I don't smoke."

" I've seen you smoke that awful French tobacco. This is quality, imported from Cuba."

" I don't smoke today."

" Yes, I see, and I who have treated you so well." The General regarded him with a calculated smile. " Maybe I'll visit the Louvre when she opens again. They tell me that all the great works of art have been hidden away by your compatriots. Do you imagine we would steal these things from you? Germany has its own brilliant artists. My friend paid you well, did he not? Even knowing that this money would go to your Jewish friends, and, yes, I am well aware of what you are doing and it is punishable by hanging. We are not all savages, you see? I've treated you and this canton with extraordinary forbearance."

For a minute the General said nothing and stared out the window. Middle of summer, if not for war the beaches would be overflowing and now there were not even native Canoise walking the sand.

" I don't know why Goring wants all this French art. Not all of it is so degenerate, of

course, I think I recall a David and Fragonard who were decent, not near to the talent level of a Durer and even Zeigler, but these Picasso's you sell my friend. I don't see it."

Bastille wondered if he could at least sell one bottle of expensive wine to the General today. Rather unlike the General not to open a bottle on his visits.

" You want some wine?" he pushed.

" Not today. You're not an art lover? Clearly not so French, are you? And thank you by the way for finding us the house on the hill. This is a fabulous location."

" I didn't find you the house. Our mayor has confiscated all the Jews' property on your orders. I simply arranged that Cocteau would not have the pleasure of this place."

" Monsieur Cocteau is not a friend of yours, I take it?"

" Some French are worse than our guests. You, well, you are the victor and perhaps you believe yourselves God like and worthy of the spoil. He, on the other hand, is a rat in the sewer eating on his own flesh and blood, quite content to grovel to a devil."

" Brave words for someone in such a position, Bastille. Yes, I think your blood is up and you must imagine the war will end soon in your favor. The Americans and British are in Normandy, I suppose you know? Our news is that they are badly beaten and thousands dying on the beach in the invasion, but the official word is never completely truth these days. Pity that all of this will certainly end badly for every one of us when the final battle comes."

The sound of waves echoed through the room, a gentle noise that would be the same today as in a thousand years. An expression of contrition seemed to emerge on the General's face.

" I don't agree with this Jewish business. This is a particularly ridiculous waste of our

resources. There are those of us who believe Hitler has made a mistake and diverted too much to this craziness, cost the war for us, really. We could have made peace with the British and Americans, I am sure, without such flawed priorities and foolishness. I imagine it is too late now to undo the damage. Our enemy was the communists -- if anyone wins they win. You ever hear the story of Vlad Tepes?"

Bastille didn't answer, most of these conversations seemed to drone on endlessly, the fellow rambling and he always obligated to listen.

"Of course you know a bit of the story -- the legend of Dracula. Well, it was based on a true historic figure, a Romanian prince who fought the Muslim Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century. He sent his army against the largest invasion ever of our Christian world -- they say he captured half their army and created a forest of twenty thousand impaled prisoners, you know what impaling means? I won't describe it. The Turks ran scampering home. And so we are protecting Europe from the scourge of communism, so many of us believed this, and that is what we should have stuck to."

"I heard of a camp - Auschwitz." Bastille said, not sure he should venture in this direction. "Rumors are that you send our people there and kill them. I've heard terrible rumors about extermination."

"I am told they are well taken care of at a great cost to our country."

"Count Polinard, the man whose house you occupy, never hurt anyone. Other Jews have been good to my family."

"You French have beautiful buildings, beautiful country, but very disorganized intelligence. I think your people do not study basic mathematics and science in school. You

know I spent this morning with your wonderful Mayor Cocteau to simply obtain a few logistical reports, but he accomplishes nothing and makes complicated mountains out of trivial matters. Not that he is not trying, mind you, but it is a question of inadequate brainpower. This country is filled with a most passionate, frivolous sort who do not understand order and process and hard work. Luckily, you, Bastille, are at least part German. The first Napoleon took your Alsace away from us and mixed the pot. Of course he was an exception to the rule and a credit to your country. Do I bore you with my comments?"

Bastille had been gazing away, shouldn't have asked a damn question.

"Your comments are silly."

The general's face changed suddenly to that of a dog about to bite.

"A word from me and my men would make you disappear. You wish so little to see your children again?"

Bastille was tired of everything. The occupation was in the fifth year.

"If you are such a man as that then do what you need to do. Your ridiculous expertise in art and our brain dysfunction is one thing. Killing a good man, his family, that is beyond the pale. Religion, hell, we are men inside. There's only so much kicking I wish to take."

The German laughed.

"Maybe you are not afraid. You are not a Frenchman at all. We are not all monsters, Bastille. When the tide turns, if that ever happens, and you are then the master, remember that I did not use my power unlawfully. This Auschwitz you talk of is not my business and I have told you the affair is utter suicide to our purpose. You do realize it is your government who ordered the confiscation of Jewish property and eviction with great pleasure? I wish to go back to my

family business and get away from all this insanity but you know they would shoot me if I don't follow my duty. We all have our orders to follow. I expect I'll be hung when the war ends."

Bastille looked at the man curiously.

"Open a bottle of your best wine, Bastille. Let's celebrate a small bit before we die. Yes, I quite know this will not end well."

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The past

"I'd like to do it, Jerry, just that I'd rather have a say about what gets shown."

Out of the blue Jay had been called and asked to come to an interview with The Stein Gallery, Boston's competition with New York's Gagosian, literally the pinnacle of contemporary art in America.

"The only thing I'm interested in are these abstract sculptures you do."

"Well, I do other things better. These are the beginnings of an idea, something rather fun to play with. They're not exactly yet what I'm after."

Jerry Stein, tall, lean, wearing a sleek beige suit and orange flame tie, sixty years old or so with a razor crop of grey hair, appeared more the owner of a fancy nightclub than of Boston's conservative signature gallery. Jay vaguely remembered seeing the gentleman walk through his space at the Cape Cod show, didn't know who he was then and didn't talk to him. To have this

gallery request to represent you was an unusual coup as most of his clients were famous or dead or from elsewhere.

“ You see I make these faces, you’ve seen the photos. They are not purely abstract as I play with the contours and I’ve gotten pretty good at carving the stone the way I want. It’s taken me twenty years to get to the point where I can make what I see in my imagination.”

“ Jay, I like your bubbles sculptures. No fucking faces, at least none that look like faces. You’ve got something here. You stick with it and I think I can sell the hell out of you. You fuck it up with bullshit exploration of your soul shit like so many kooky artists -- then we will have no future together. I know what I can sell -- I know how to make a name for you. The problem as I see it is that with even the most talented artists half of what they make is hog crap and they can’t appreciate how that bit stinks to high heaven. So the crap pollutes the brilliant bits and scares the hell out of my audience who demand the absolute best of the best, and they trust me to tell them what perfection is. These clients are the world of blue diamonds and Ferraris and private clubs on Martha’s Vineyard, places most of us will never see the light of day. If I tell you I want a certain style than that is all I want. Hide the damn crap and if you can’t produce what I require than we are not going to do business together. Someone like you, who truly has a gift, needs someone like me who can proofread and make you perform.

“ Last year we sold more than fifty million dollars worth of art. At some point, and I suppose that point is now, you have to park your ego, and understand that you need a conductor. I need a goddamn talented son of a bitch worker like you and the two of us can reach for the glorious stars.”

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The far past

“Take Jakub out of the barrel, Bastille,” Charles insisted. The boy was crying furiously, his terrified screams would do nothing useful if they were stopped.

At the last minute Bastille had decided the fake barrel would work better than hiding him behind their seats in the truck. The boy was little after all, and fit quite nicely in a barrel and they could take him out every few hours when driving a quiet lane and let the boy stretch his legs, even give him adequate food and water. Tape the lips and his hands and he could not even make a noise. But this boy had not cooperated, in fact, somehow managed multiple times to get the tape off and start screaming. There was not much talking to a spoiled little rich kid, as in fact they could not understand a word he said. Hell, the kid was sleeping now on Charles’s lap on the front seat of the truck.

Finally made it to a village west of Carcassonne near the base of the Pyrenees, and an area special to Bastille. Not much trouble so far and it seemed safe enough to go in for a quick meal. The boy could continue sleeping and maybe they could leave him in the truck. Charles objected.

“It’s a ridiculous risk bringing him with us,” Bastille argued.

“He doesn’t talk, or at least nobody can exactly understand what he’s saying. If anyone asks us we’ll just say he’s a retard and your grandson. Not hard to believe that.”

Bastille did not see the joke.

“ I know the owners of this restaurant -- they'll know he's not my grandson.”

“ Then he's my brother or we can go somewhere else.”

“ No, I want to go here. The lady makes the best cassoulet in France.”

“ Another of your women?”

“ Ancient history. Why can't this boy talk correctly? Is he really off?”

“ He is four years old and scared out of his mind. I don't know. Didn't you say his parents are Polish? Maybe he speaks Polish.”

Two days of driving straight through, stopped only once by the Marquis who didn't make too much of a fuss this time, a hundred francs only. Then they dropped the box of lugers at a house on the outskirts of Aix en Provence. The road through the Pyrenees would be treacherous, twisting steep roads, often littered with fallen rocks, and they needed to take a break. Josette may be married to a bastard but she was a true French patriot and somehow was even involved in helping Rousso. At least she might tell them how to avoid trouble on this mountain route.

The hamlet of Montsegur was a pleasant enough distraction from their previous routes through to Spain and into Basque country. The roads nearer the coast were heavily patrolled as the Germans were gearing up for an invasion and going full bore after the resistance. In this hinterland section of France, almost a separate country in itself at one time, the people had a long history of intransigence and battling invaders. Centuries ago this had been a bastion of the Cathars whose interpretation of the Bible had been considered blasphemy by the Catholic church. The Pope had actually ordered their extermination. What some had called the 'Church of Satan' had been wiped out almost eight hundred years ago, villages burned to the ground,

thousands murdered, but remnants of that pertinacious spirit had survived in the inhabitants.

Here was neither Vichy nor German controlled, and not exactly France even in times of peace.

Charles lifted the Rothstein boy out of the barrel and pulled off the tape, hysterical and screaming again. Charles hugged him in his arms trying to calm him.

“ We’re like barbarians,” he said with a hint of tears in his own eyes. “ I think your barrel idea has ruined him.”

“ And you and I will die when our enemies find us because of this shit.”

“ He’s your responsibility.”

“ Oh, what the hell. Let’s go.”

Bastille had parked the truck hidden behind a clump of trees off the road and around the corner from the town’s only restaurant, Le Reve Casse. The building was built of heavy rocks and timbered, an ancient style, and Debiere knew from a previous visit that the bulk of the structure was part of an ancient Cathars church, one of the few still standing remnants.

Inside the restaurant was cavernous and dark and cold. Several rough wooden tables with benches were spread out in the open space and at one end of the room was a large fireplace with some pitiful glowing ashes, the other end a bar counter, basically a massive long wooden plank where a few rough looking men sat on stools. They all glanced over and murmured as the two strangers and the boy sat at one of the tables next to the fireplace. Bastille took some logs from a pile of split wood and set them on the embers.

“ They want to cut our throats,” Charles whispered. The little boy had moved himself close to the fire where flames danced up on the new wood and it began to light up the room in a shimmering light. The vast place did resemble a church with a nave and transept. “This looks

like a meeting place for gangsters, not a restaurant.”

“ You’ll see. Maybe you won’t. Wonderful food is a gift not always appreciated by the young. Cassoulet is the true specialty of France and to do it well requires three days of labor, and very special talent, or I might even try to serve the dish at Riviera Plage. Not that I don’t have the talent, you see.”

“ I’ve had cassoulet at Les Trois Poste. Heavy beans and pieces of fat.”

Les Trois Posts was Cannes’s gourmet bistro near the Carlton Hotel, and once sported a Michelin star. They made a cassoulet which Bastille had sampled but it did not compare to that made by Josette.

“ Their version is a ridiculous fraud, as are most. Your mother, in spite of some very obvious flaws, has done it well, but I have to put up with her insults when I eat and that is not so good for the digestion. Odette, I’m sorry to say, since she is your mother, could’ve been a very successful chef but I would have to cut out her tongue if she worked for me, and, of course, maybe replace her scabrous mug.”

“ It is my mother you are talking about you understand? The same one you keep making passes at?” Charles appraised with without malice and actually a grin.

“ Camille, on the other hand, cannot cook a toast. How can these two be sisters?”

A lady in an apron approached their table. She seemed hesitant at first and then put on a bright smile.

“ It has been ages, Henri.”

“ A little war, you know. One doesn’t get out so much for pleasure these days, Josette.”

He wanted to get up and hug her but did not know where her husband was and did not know the

relations at the bar. He introduced her to Charles and told her the little boy was a cousin. The boy was not talking and contented himself with gazing at the fire.

“ What brings you here now?”

“ Your wonderful smile. I’ve missed it. We’re on a hunting trip.”

“ Martin is in town. You know he won’t be happy to see you you.”

“ Well, that is mutual. Bring us a large platter of your brilliant cassoulet, my dear, and a carafe of good red wine.”

“ She is much too young and pretty for you,” Charles noted when the lady had gone to the kitchen.

“ My friend, Josette, worked in her parents clothing store and bought merchandise from me back when I travelled through Provence. A damn marriage intruded and someone died and so they took over the restaurant. You can make lots of friends when you travel as I did before the war, before Riviera Plage and Camille.”

“ Too many such friends I have heard.”

“ Like you do not like the ladies,” Bastille regarded him with reproof. “ You don’t know a thing about life. I am certain you do not limit yourself when it comes to girls.”

“ And she is much too young for you.”

“ She married an oaf.”

“ So what? You wanted to marry her?”

Josette returned with a baguette and a carafe of ruby red wine.

“ Martin’s uncle buys this from a vineyard in Languedoc. The same family has been making wine since the time of the Romans.”

“ How is my dear friend, Martin? Is he killing all our good French citizens?”

“ Funny you should ask. I’m sure he’ll come by tonight and accuse you of all sorts of foul behavior and in the end I am the one who will pay for it.”

“ Yes, he is a fucking coward. If you were not so beautiful and charming and didn’t have a brain like a fish to marry a scamp like him, who knows, hell, I’d have saved you. By the way, Rousso says to thank you for something.”

“ Don’t mention that name here or we will all be garetted. And who are these wonderful characters you’ve brought along? “ She smiled at the boy who now had just joined them from playing with the fire.

“ Charles is my wife’s nephew, stay away from him, and the little boy, well, he is a poorly behaved miniature runt that we picked up hitchhiking. All in all, it is a perfectly complicated smess of a story that you really do not want to know the details.”

“ Everything is complicated with you. Charles you look like an angel’s dream.”

“ A mother’s nightmare,” Bastille piped in.

She left them again to the kitchen.

Bastille and Charles sipped the wine. Heavy, actually, like Spanish roja, earthy tones and not the delicate flavors of a simple Rhone country wine. But perhaps such powerful flavors should work with the cassoulet. Josette had hinted of running off to Paris the last time he had seen her here, implied that she’d had enough of the bad behavior of her husband.

Maybe he should have proposed to her when he had the opportunity. Maybe he still loved her and that was why he was willing to risk a confrontation with this nasty husband and his band of thugs. What were they exactly -- Vichy, thieves, Milice, Maquis? All of the above? Nothing

fit so simply in this region, in this time. Martin Gareche had broken off with Cocteau's crowd and made a name for himself as some kind of Robin Hood bandit fighting off the Germans, but there were also battles with Rousso's men. And Bastille had lost Josette to a fucker like him? When all turns to hell one must savor a glass of wine and lose yourself in good food and maybe for a moment, perhaps, mistakes can be forgotten.

“Cassoulet, my young friends, is a gift from the gods.” Bastille decided to educate Charles and the boy about this delicacy. The boy looked at him -- didn't understand a damn word. “No mere mortals can do it justice, and it is rumored that in these hills more than five hundred years ago an alcoholic monk came up with the recipe. He needed to make a stew that made soldiers strong enough to withstand a siege, an onslaught from an army ten times their size. They defeated the enemy and swore it was because of this magnificent repast, and then the Catholic Church or maybe it was the Cathars, I don't know which side, rewarded the monk with a sainthood. Well, I'm not quite certain about the details, but, in any case, it has become the specialty of the region and a good reason to put up with the bad fellows who inhabit these hills.”

Little Jakub stared at Bastille as he spoke, giant somber eyes, calm now. Bastille poured a bit of wine into the little boy's glass of water.

“It will make him sick,” Charles objected.

“Like medicine to keep him quiet.”

“You make an awful father.”

“Is that what Victoria and Danielle tell you?”

“Maybe you are not their blood,” Charles stated defiantly and pulled his head back farther away realizing those were particularly ungentlemanly words.

Bastille raised his hand to slap Charles, but held it back. Young, confused punk, what did he know of the convulsions life would throw at him as well. A tumultuous road one has to navigate. So, what the hell, there were rumors out there about he and Camille's situation, and not such a great secret, obviously. They both had their freedom in that regard.

“ That I am a son of a bitch is not in dispute even by me. But you take my children into the picture and you cross a violent line for you. I love them more than I love life.”

“ Sorry,” Charles offered, sheepish look. “ I think you've been good to your daughters. At least one of them might love you.”

Bastille considered the comment. He worked them hard in the restaurant, but never laid a hand on either of them. One was a wild soul and did not seem enamored to him. Just that. The hell with the rest of the story. He finished his glass and poured another. In the end there are better things to do than obsess over this damn life's perverted turns.

“ Jakub, you know your mother and father have asked me to help you meet your family in America. So Charles and I are taking you to Barcelona to get on a ship. I'm told you have a rich uncle in New York and your parents will join you there.” The boy's eyes were looking at him.

“ Where is my mama?” he suddenly said in French.

“ Damn, he understands us,” Charles said.

“ Oh, she'll see you in America.” Bastille doubted that. The people who disappear do not come back. The grandfather had paid transit for five. Now there was one. Precious cargo and a promise.

Josette returned to the table with a huge steaming earthen crock of the cassoulet. She set it in the middle of the table and sat down next to Bastille. The aroma was epicurean nirvana.

“Your friends,” Bastille glanced at the group at the bar who were watching them.” Who are they? They don’t seem happy with us.”

“Nothing I can’t handle. You come for the food only?” She asked.

“No, in France there is a shortage of beautiful smiles these days. I wanted to see yours. Tell Charles and Jakub how you make this dish.”

“That would take a lifetime, and it is a village secret, you know. Martin tells me you would take the recipe to Cannes and make it in your restaurant and we would no longer have to put up with your visits. That would please him greatly.”

“Your boy is much smarter than speaking to him would indicate.”

“He’s not always so terrible. It is not like you gave me a ring.” She looked at Bastille with a lingering admonition. “It is simple enough, white beans slowly cooked with duck and blood sausage and carrots and onions and a white grape wine, the type of grape that only grows at a certain elevation in these hills. We layer it all in a heavy clay dish and bake for hours at the front of the bread oven. Most places make it with the wrong wine and the wrong sausage and maybe they drink too much when they cook.”

“What about coming to Cannes and cook for me, Josette?” Bastille set his hand on hers as it was resting on the table.

At that precise moment a tall heavy set bearded man walked in the door with two other similarly barbarous appearing giants beside him standing like bodyguards. The three were dirty and even at a distance smelled of manure.

“You should’ve taken a bath before coming in, Martin,” Bastille greeted him when the owner of the restaurant and Josette’s husband approached their table. Josette stood up.

Martin didn't answer, walked directly in front of Bastille.

“ I am pretty sure I told you I would castrate you if I ever saw you here again.” His voice sounded like a broken truck motor.

“ If I worried about all those who have threatened my private parts I would surely need to wear a dress. Sit down and have a glass of wine with us, Martin, and stop your damn whining.” Bastille poured himself another glass.

Josette's husband picked up Bastille's glass and threw it in the fireplace – a brief flash of flames lit up the room.

“ A waste of quite acceptable wine that I was enjoying.”

Bastille got up from the bench and walked around it to face his adversary, who was taller and thicker by a yard. He had grown quite a lot since his teenage days. Charles stood up next to Bastille and Martin's two friends closed in as well. The little boy started crying and Josette picked him up.

“ Leave him alone. They're just passing through!” Josette yelled.

“ Sit down, Charles.” Bastille said to the boy and looked at the husband and then motioned to the other two men. “ This is clearly between you and I, is it not? All good meals have a cost but I did not expect such hospitality in such beautiful surroundings. You've done well with your restaurant.”

Martin sneered and waved his friends back and Charles backed up only a step.

“ You think you can waltz in here after fiddling with my wife and you think I am not going to cut you in half?”

“ Your wife and I have done no fiddling, honest to Mary. Although my suspicion is that

you have inadequacy in that department.”

Martin swung his fist in a wide wild looping punch at Bastille’s head that was simple to duck. He then threw a flurry of punches that were awkward and slow and easy to avoid, but they were backing Bastille up to the wall and there he would have to do more than just dance away.

“ We came for a good meal, you know. If you persist in this I will begin to take true offense.”

The bull kept coming at him, throwing unschooled wallops that might do horrible damage if they connected. For an older man Bastille felt like he was moving pretty good. He shot out a straight right hand that easily connected on the notorious bandit’s nose. Blood started pouring. Another right to the chin knocked the amateur to the floor. Martin pulled a knife from his vest and tried to get up. Bastille kicked the knife out of his hand and then kicked the man in the head.

The two friends moved in as if to attack Bastille but then they just grabbed the bleeding semiconscious Martin and drug him over to a chair.

Bastille sat back down at the table and filled his plate with the cassoulet.

“ Maybe we need to get going,” Charles mentioned.

“ He’ll wake up and come at you again, or he’ll shoot you,” Josette implored.

“ I can’t leave you here. He’ll hurt you.”

“ I explained to him if he hits me again I cut off his penis in the middle of the night while he sleeps. He is a coward in truth. He won’t touch me. As you can see he is not very good at fighting.”

“ Your husband’s behavior is abysmal. If I had more time I’d stick around and patch things up with him, a bottle of Pernod, perhaps. Even enemies ought to be civilized. Does he not

understand that he has won everything?” Bastille asked and looked at this woman. He’d never said such words to anyone in his life. He’d never understood what he had lost until now. She was still so much an extraordinary sparkle in his eyes and he wanted her. “ He’ll be rough on you and you don’t deserve that.”

Josette, guileless, simply smiled. She grabbed Bastille’s arm and hurried them all out the door.

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The past

“ Five fucking dollars an hour, you remember that? Ten years of you working part time and me paying most of the bills so you can follow your damn dream. And what did that fucking dream bring us?”

Susanna threw a big bag of hamburger buns onto the picnic table. She kicked one of the chairs. Then she picked up a fork and threw it at Jay. It hit him harmlessly on the shoulder. Her face was the mask of absolute rage.

“ You say I don’t care. Who the hell are you to tell me anything like that?!” she screamed.

“ It’s not like I’ve been sitting on my ass and drinking champagne every day.” He backed away from her. “ Finally a little bit of success and you wanna castrate me. You know what, our son is going to come outside and hear you talking and it’s just going to mess up his

head.”

“ He needs to know what kind of fucking father he has. And I don’t mean it metaphorically.”

Jay stood at the grill and turned over the corn on the cob and hamburgers. Early spring, daffodils blooming too soon, in another hour their guests would arrive, their party under a magnificent warm evening sky with a steel cobalt hue would be all screwed to hell. Supposed to be a celebration for this Jerry Stein gallery who wanted to introduce him to the world. The plan was to cook most of the food before the party started. Other times he would have spent the whole night cooking something complicated, sitting at the grill all night and never have much time to interact with his friends. Today, of course, that might have been the better option. He sipped a Budweiser and plotted some way out of their disastrous conversation. A lie, a puddle of lies, or a whole damn sea of further confabulation would not help him, them, out of this mess.

He flipped the burgers over. Flipped them again with an embellishment even though they didn’t yet need to be flipped. Punched the spatula in the air. Must be some invisible beast somewhere he could destroy and make everything feel, be, better again.

Susanna sat at the picnic table facing him. No words, there were tears, and murderous eyes, those which he had once found so angelic and mesmerizing. Twenty plus years together, she carrying him virtually the whole way, and, finally something spectacular with his art, some truly measurable success for both of them, and what the hell. Bad timing? Failure of judgment? Unquenchable boorish behavior? The cost of this lust had not been properly contemplated.

“ I’ve never touched another man,” she said quietly, her lips trembling.

“ I didn’t plan any of this.”

“ She’s just a little school girl who tells you that you’re a born again gift to the world. And you believe that shit?”

“ It helps to have someone believe in you.”

“ Fuck that! The little cunt never paid any of your fucking bills! You won’t get Isaac. You’re going to regret this bullshit as long as you live.”

Susanna had intercepted a phone call this afternoon from Carol. One thing led to another, Susanna not timid in the least, and she had certainly hashed out the gist of his very brief affair. Of course Jay had not told Carol that he had a wife. Truth did not seem to be the thing to do when you are in the midst of insanity.

There was a finality in her expression. You can tell, he thought, with what little coherent thinking he had going on, that something this intense has staying power. All the king’s men and all the king’s horses would not pull them back together again. Susanna left the table and went inside the house. Jay felt this must be what it is like when a doctor tells you you have cancer and just a few months to live, or there is a comet coming to crash into the earth and only minutes to live. She is the best thing ever in his life, and now it is over, and he will give up his son, and there is nothing to look forward to but carnage. Helpless, stupid imbecilic blunder.

Susanna came back outside holding a letter and tossed it on the ground at Jay’s feet. She sat at the picnic table in front of him, her face dripping with tears.

“ I’ve known. I actually even felt the ridiculous hint of sadness for you. In a bizarre pathetic way it seemed tragic that this girl who you apparently adored did not share your infatuation. But I let it pass and I figured wrongly that she was the last girl.”

The letter was from an Elizabeth explaining that she didn’t feel the same way about Jay

as he did for her, famously that they were not ‘soul mates’. He’d met her so many years ago at one of the few shows that had accepted his work. Not even a real fling, actually. Lost his head for a bit and wrote the damn girl. Why had he kept this foolish record of infatuation and failure as well? Obsession, like everything, every little detail. Yes, he had told her that she had wonderfully perfect features, explained how he would love to make her immortal. It hadn’t felt like bull shit and he’d gone no further than flirting and she had responded that she wasn’t interested. Thought he had hid the damn note well enough. All to hell now.

The hamburgers were burning. He took them off the grill and plucked them sloppily onto a platter. The distraction of imagining his life over and cooking was more than he could handle. They should cancel the party.

“ Kind of a moment that was inevitable.” This was a suddenly more solid tone like Susanna had decided to sweep away anger, go in a different direction. “You love me?”

“Of course I do,” he answered.

“ Not ever like this Elizabeth or this Carol girl?”

“ They were ridiculous escape. I reverted to being an adolescent. You know I’ve been struggling in my head. I’m a human, after all.”

“ You have a son. You had me. You are an adult.”

“ Susanna. I’m sorry.”

“ Honesty is not a value we share. It is clear enough that I am not what you are after on this journey and I have no desire to be anyone’s second fiddle. I won’t forgive you twice.”

“ I can get my act together.”

“ You’ll never be my ‘soulmate’ again, Jay.”

Miserable damn word, he'd written it in the damn letter.

In Susanna's eyes this was different than anger, more than disappointment. Endgame. This would not be a rock he could re-carve. His senses were floating in space, weightless, lifeless, a feather blowing higher and higher in the sky aimlessly on a path toward nothing at all. Here there would not even be sadness, no brain or emotions, no sorting the problem out, no turning back pages and rewinding. You feel the breeze up in the clouds, long straight soft blue horizon in the distance beckons you away from all you are breaking. Drifting on such a cloud and feeling the sun beating down and warming. No control, no way out or around. There would be crying and bleeding, but this is not a fixable thing. All paths from here go badly.

The reverie slipped away. He sipped his beer in real time. Give her a few days and perhaps the debacle will all blow over, no.

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The far past

As the truck neared the Spanish border they past fields of fragrant lavender and rosemary, and winding up the mountain there were clusters of orange jonquils and blue iris, trees

became sparse and the rocky soil had a parched reddish appearance. At two thousand meters not so much would grow and the mountains cast a worn ancient sense to them. Mountain pine and Pyrenean oak trees speckled the rough terrain clinging to steep precipices. The air became cold as they climbed higher and higher, clearly a strain on the old truck's motor. Patches of snow became visible.

"I don't understand you very well," Charles announced after a rather quiet uneventful drive from their encounter with Josette's husband. The boy lay sleeping between them. "My mother constantly says you are a miscreant fool and rotten to the bone. I suspect, at times, that I must agree with her."

"And your point?" Bastille answered, not terribly concerned with anyone's opinion of his nature, certainly not his wife's coarse sister's opinion.

"No point, but Camille is considered by everyone to be the most alluring and splendid creature Provence has ever produced."

"That is your aunt you are talking about and you sound like you're describing a crop of grapes. Maybe you are mistaking her for the flowers they grow on the hill?"

"Well, there are similarities between a fine woman and a fine wine or a gorgeous flower. They are rare and highly sought after."

"And you are how old, Charles?"

"Seventeen next month," Charles pronounced with an air of gasconade.

"An expert on wine and women so early in life?"

"You are infatuated with that woman at the restaurant and you have a spectacular woman as a wife?"

“ The wine and flowers, well, you are French after all, but women ... you have a lot to learn.” He thought for a bit. “ A fine Bordeaux at lunch under the shade of the chestnut tree on a warm summer afternoon, this is something special, but there are different wines for different occasions. Thus one never grows tired of such amusement.”

“ You are married, you know? It must mean something?”

Bastille held up his hand. A gold ring clearly visible. Why did he even wear the damn thing? He waved it in front of his nephew.

“ Call me a beast. At a certain time in your life the ritual sounded noble.”

“ You took an oath to God.”

“ An oath in front of some silly priest who had never known a woman. What could he possibly know what he is making us promise?”

“ You go to hell when you break God’s law.”

“ I bought that splendid ticket long ago. The truth is, and maybe you should know the truth and not forever believe I am a complete monster, the truth is that Camille is quite happy being married to a bastard as long as she does not have to see me or sleep with me or talk to me in more than a perfunctory fashion and at the end of the day can gladly be rid of me. We go our separate ways. Listen to your damn God and have me burn in hell for all I care. Love and life are not so simple. In truth, I can see reason in being a better man, but I do not wish to be. This lady, Josette, well, I knew her long ago and maybe once I fell in love with her. Camille never allowed me to fall in love with her.”

“ You, in love? Speaking of that, look who is following us.”

Bastille looked out the window down the mountain. A Citron Traction Avant was

winding up the hill behind them. It looked to be crowded with the characters from the restaurant and moving quite fast. Their own truck was moving slower than walking.

“ They’ll soon catch us. What do you think their intentions are?” Charles sounded nervous.

“ Martin Gareche is a piece of shit. What in the world do you think their intentions are?”

“ You think they want to kill us? They know we’ve got this little boy with us.”

“ No more fist fights, I’m afraid, not with these guys out here where no one will know who they murder.”

Bastille pulled a pistol from the glove compartment and handed it to Charles.

“ You stay in the car. Look under the seat and hand me my rifle. Make sure it’s loaded. We’ll have the advantage being above them and they probably don’t suspect what a bastard I can become.”

The car was about one hundred meters down the mountain, three hairpin turns away. Bastille stopped the truck above one of the bends and with the cover of a slip of rocks he could target their adversary.

“ You can’t just shoot people this way.” Charles had gotten out of the truck and lay next to Bastille, peaking as well over the rock.

“ Them or us? Not much of a choice here, Charles. The silly jackals are only brave because they always claim the advantage and attack those weaker than themselves. Picked the wrong fucking bastard here.”

Bastille aimed at the car. One shot blew out half the windshield. The car slowed. He took careful aim and blew out one of the front tires.

“ It will be murder.”

“ Short of that it is another fucking battle for the future. Josette will always have hell to pay from this son of a bitch unless I end it now.”

The three men were out of the car, using it as a shield and began shooting up at them. The bullets ricocheted off the rocks. Charles fired his pistol in a haphazard fashion.

“ Stay down, damn it,” Bastille yelled at him.

Only one hundred meters away and their adversaries could get lucky, but for Bastille this was like shooting fish in a barrel. The first was Martin, center of the chest. One of the other men kept up the fire after that and he, too, was an easy target. The last man hid and quit the fight.

Bastille revved the engine and tried to get the truck moving up the hill without success. Once you stop it is a bear on such an incline and they were at the end of a steep turn, another ten feet and they would have been able to move.

“ Move over and grab the damn fucking wheel,” Bastille went out to the back of the truck and started pushing. “Gun the damn thing.” Agonizing sound of grating tearing gears and then rubber burning from the motor. Blood dripped down Bastille’s shirt. He’d been hit in the shoulder and hadn’t felt the bullet. The truck was moving. He let it run and caught up to them half an hour later on a flat section. Getting dark now and Charles was perched behind the truck with his pistol out as if he were ready for further battle. He almost shot Bastille as he trudged around the bend.

“ I didn’t know you could shoot like that.”

“ It helps to have a few years practicing.”

“ They shot you.”

His shirt was covered in blood. The bullet had ripped straight through.

“ They wouldn’t even give me a bandage for this in the old days.”

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The present

We descend from the ferry boat with the Statue of Liberty flush in front of us gazing off toward the entrance to the Hudson River Bay. Surprisingly, it is not so crowded here on a pristine cool morning.

I had called Mr. Livingstone just a moment earlier to let him know that we had arrived on the island and that I would be wearing a Boston Red Sox baseball cap. He asked what does such a cap look like? I told him I would be the one with a ten year old boy, and by the way, what does he look like? An old man, he said, nothing special at all, maybe I would recognize him by his plaid wool jacket and matching Scottish cap and black rim glasses. I spy him immediately, he is a small man sitting on the low brick wall clutching a cell phone tightly in his hand and looking out expectantly at everyone walking past. With the red tweed flap cap and matching tartan leather elbowed jacket he looked anything but ordinary, and there was something about the smile, the voice I had heard on the phone, these all well matched the face, gentle calm and reticent.

Reluctant is the correct word. Perhaps we had spoken three times, I doing the talking generally, rather long conversations and he wanting to make sure that we hadn’t mistaken him

for someone else, to make sure I wasn't going to any great length for him, it was a long time ago, after all, he explained, and he'd gotten used to the life he had lived and wasn't so sure he wanted any complications added on. More or less, I'd told him the whole story in these conversations, all I knew of it anyway -- the bit about him being driven from Cannes to Spain when he was about four years old and given a new identity, that his parents were Polish Jews whose village had been destroyed in the war, and whose parents and grandparents had probably died at Auschwitz. He did not seem surprised that he was Jewish, but somehow suspecting it even as he was raised Christian in a Catholic orphanage in Brooklyn. The only thing he knew about his past was that his family must have perished during the war.

We sat with him. Introduced ourselves. He even hugged my son. Said he had two of his own and ten grandchildren. I bought coffee for the two of us and a coke for my son and we moved to a table and chairs at a little park toward the backside of the Statue.

“ I worked as a physical chemist,” he explains to us, “ just retired a year ago. Worked on paint that absorbs radio wave signals, actually blocks radar as a matter of fact, and so the US government found it in their interest to let me work beyond the typical retirement age and I was quite fond of working. The idea that somewhere in my past there was terrible experience for the family I never knew was incentive enough to make a life in this business. Might make a difference someday for the good guys. I always considered myself lucky that America would have taken me in.”

On the phone I couldn't get him to say much at all, not like he wanted to hang up, just that I was the one explaining my life and our trip and hadn't gotten much out of him. Here he was all excited like we were actually the long lost family he had not known and he couldn't stop

smiling and talking.

“ Oh, and they told me that this name was possibly not a real name and they even contacted Livingstones in Europe and said that none of them could claim me, but I latched onto it, regardless, and amused myself in fancying that I was actually a distant relative to the great Scottish explorer. Gave me a leg up on everyone else, I think, imagining yourself part of a great ancestry, perhaps gave me a bit of courage to go after my dreams. There were other boys I knew at the orphanage that lacked this chutzpah.

“ You know, it is important to have some kind of family to lean back on. Some of these kids did fine in life and maybe it never bothered them, but me, I had to imagine, I had to dream up something grand to hold onto. That is a bit why I was reluctant to know too much about where I came from and who all these people were, maybe they might be incongruent with what I fancied. But truth, your news is much more important than that fear. This is a history I can give to my family now. Your name is Isaac? Beautiful name.” He gazes at my son with a grand smile.

“ Thank you, Sir.”

“ Do you know what it means?”

“ No, Sir.”

“ He who laughs or God smiles on you, something good like that. Your father told me your name on the phone and I looked it up. In the Old Testament Isaac’s brother is Jakub which is what he says I was named once. Now I am Nigel and that is a fine name as well.”

“ We brought something to give you. “ My son sets the package on the table in front of Mr. Livingstone.

“ Turns out your grandfather was an art dealer before the war,” I had not given much in

the way of details about Monsieur Rothstein's prominence. Something told me to be cautious before, but now that I had met this Mr. Nigel Livingstone, he seemed anything but an opportunist.

The old man is looking at the brown paper wrapping with hesitation.

“ Apparently he had an art gallery in Cannes, France. Nothing much I could find out about it except that he primarily sold Impressionist paintings. I called the historical society museum in Cannes and that is about the only information they could give me. And there is this note of my own grandfather describing how Alfred Rothstein, your grandfather, hired him through the war and kept my relatives alive.”

“ Whatever this is, I give it to you. It is enough to know where I am from. Nothing else is necessary.” The old man seems sincere about this.

“ My grandfather was an odd bird,” I went on, “ he was secretive and along with your relative they hid some things from the Germans -- my son and I found the hiding place and found what belongs to you, and two other objects that belong to my mother and her sister. It is a matter of doing what is right now, for you, for your family, for our ancestors.”

The sound here is of the distant crowd of tourists chattering away in a multitude of languages, but there is also a wind today and as it blows through the leaves in the trees and adds to the soft waves beating against the shore a kind of peace reigns.

I look at my son. We had talked about what is the proper thing to do. Pretty obvious, but, after all, not a small decision. I talked with my aunt, and she, too, agreed. Already I had sent her the painting left by Henri Bastille for her. This was a portrait done by Picasso of her when she was a little girl on the beach. Absolutely lovely. She could remember the artist hanging around

her father's beach restaurant, even remembered something about the artist painting her in those days -- had thought the painting was lost forever.

Mr. Livingstone pulls the wrappers open. This painting is of two women sitting on a bench in a park, both wearing large hats covered in flowers. Autumn leaves a flood in the trees, the colors are bright and cheerful and this was of the earliest Impressionist style.

“ The artist is Renoir and it is authentic, I checked with a museum curator here in New York. There are fifty seven more paintings that belong to your family, and a container of your family's treasures.”

I looked at my son. I thanked my grandfather.

The end