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## Of Spanish Cows, Wild Boars, Unpredictable Weather, And Other Oddities

Lydia Sanchez  
*University of Central Florida*



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OF SPANISH COWS, WILD BOARS, UNPREDICTABLE WEATHER,  
AND OTHER ODDITIES

by

LYDIA SANCHEZ  
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2006

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, FL

Spring Term  
2009

## ABSTRACT

In this collection of connected stories, the inhabitants of the imaginary Mediterranean village of Marcenac struggle with daily situations that often take allures of a farce, simply because they occur in Marcenac.

The stories explore the influence southern France's Roussillon region has on people, the way the proximity of the Spanish border and the Mediterranean shapes the inhabitants of Marcenac's daily lives, and the influence of the climate. Often, the Tramontane, the region's predominant wind, becomes a character. While some of the stories are told from a collective point of view, others reveal the inner thoughts of children and adults, male and female.

Because the stories are connected, characters visit different stories and help tell the collective tale of Marcenac. Even though the stories stand on their own, they form cohesion, united by the progression of the seasons and the underlying theme of death. Each story reveals a particularity of the region's weather and culture.

Some stories are entertaining and lighthearted. Others are serious. Each invites the reader to share the most intimate thoughts of the characters as they seek solace from various degrees of grief and frustration. Some characters are gauche, naïve, some tender, others bitter, but all are resilient and amicable.

The characters' speech and the narrative are often peppered with French, which makes for humorous situations and takes the reader deep within a foreign culture without giving the feeling of an anthropology lesson. As a result, the characters become cultural guides as they ruminate over the past or go about their daily lives. They give the reader a unique insight into the habits and values of the region.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I thank Toni Jensen for her patience and guidance, and for giving me the confidence I lacked through this thesis process.

I also thank the members of my committee: Pat Rushin, for steering me in the right direction through many workshops, and Judith Hemschemeyer for her enthusiasm and editing eye.

Thank you to my parents, Danièle and Fulgencio Sanchez for their eager involvement in finding the anecdotes that have fueled my stories.

At last, thank you to the Writing Group (Jessica Ryan, Pamela Baker, Matt Bryan and Diego Rincón), for their sense of humor and encouragements.

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## DESPERATE MEASURES

### The Priest

The morning the priest ran down the street in the torrential rain, his wiry frame flying over puddles, hair drooping like a clump of wet hay, neck bent forward and arms flapping, looking like a cross between a scarecrow and a vulture attempting a takeoff, weighted down by his robe soaked to the knees, the mayor was about to sit at the breakfast table in front of a steaming bowl of *café au lait* and *tartines* made of two halves of an entire *baguette* and apricot jam.

But the mayor was distracted. He stood frowning by the window and gazed at the water gushing down the street. It had been raining steadily for the past three days without hope for sun, and the rains that began violently that August were weighing on everybody's minds. The grapes in the surrounding hills were nearly ripe but the harvest might be lost soon. The hamlet of Marcenac depended on the wine the families produced as a community and a bad harvest had repercussions that could be felt for years. The 1940 flood, although more than half a century ago, was still held as the standard of disaster. A locomotive and an entire village had vanished in that terrible summer. Should the Languedoc Roussillon be at the mercy of flash-floods again, Marcenac might not survive.

“Remi *chéri*,” the mayor's wife said, sitting in front of her own steaming bowl, “*allez*, drink while it's hot.”

A sudden pounding at the side door caused them to jump.

“Sweet Jesus mother of God, what the hell?” the mayor’s wife said, eyes wide as the mayor leaped to the door and yanked it open.

The priest, who stood, fist raised in mid-action, stumbled into the kitchen and grabbed the table to steady himself. He leaned over it, panting like a man who had just broken the speed record of the 400 meter dash.

“It’s sliding—” he said, oblivious to how his hair dripped on the mayor’s *tartines*.

“What is sliding?” the mayor asked, still standing by the open door, a hand on the handle.

“The cemetery.” The priest plopped down on the chair the mayor’s wife pulled out for him. He looked twice his twenty-five years. She darted to the living room.

The mayor peeked outside before closing the door as his wife returned with three glasses and a bottle of Muscat. Without a word, she poured a full glass for the priest and two fingers for themselves. The priest nodded and drank half of it in one gulp while the mayor and his wife exchanged stunned looks.

“Now,” the mayor said, sitting at the table, “about the cemetery—”

“It’s sliding.” The priest seemed about to faint.

They were interrupted by a commotion, a growing murmur of voices and feet on the pavement and the lighter, faster feet of children running ahead of the brouhaha.

“Monsieur Mayor, monsieur Mayor!” a child’s voice screamed.

### George

What seemed like half the population of Marcenac was approaching, some under umbrellas, others bareheaded. Children led the way, full of the importance of the moment, followed by dogs thrilled by a break in the monotony of the past few days. The children made

room for an old man whose white eyebrows kept his corduroy hat from sliding on his nose.

Marcenac stood like a crowd on the Place de la Bastille waiting for an execution by guillotine. A dog sat and scratched furiously. Children sniffled. The man stepped forward, and after a glance at the crowd, took a deep breath and said:

“Because everything’s so wet, I thought to myself, ‘George, old boy, you might as well go for snails. So I got my basket from the shed and— ’”

“Come on, get to the point,” the mayor said.

“Well, Mr. Mayor, the point is: it’s happening. It fell.”

Some shook their heads. An old woman made the sign of the cross. In the kitchen, the priest was ashen.

“The cemetery?”

“No no no, not yet. Not yet.” George paused, aware of his moment of glory. He looked at his audience and, encouraged by the nods and the silence, said: “A chunk of land did.”

“How close?” the mayor asked.

“Oh, the tombs are next, I tell you. There’s a few meters left before they fall in the sea. They’re next, I tell you.”

### The Man

In the newest house in Marcenac, a villa perched as far from the hamlet as reason allowed, a man stood at his bedroom window, staring at the Mediterranean. “I might be the first to break the law,” he thought, wondering about the irony of the diagnostic he had received from the hospital in Perpignan. He needed to contact Bertrand. Maybe his nephew would be happy to inherit a villa in this corner of the world. The man leaned his forehead on the window thinking



about the emaciated bodies he had seen in the beds and knew that he would bypass the hospital and go on his own terms. Or at least as much on his terms as possible. A man had little dignity in the time of death and he knew he was only giving himself the illusion of a decision.

Too bad, he thought. All this and finally owning a piece of paradise, only to hand it to a relative he barely knew. Too bad.

The man walked to his desk and sat, staring at the window. Slowly, he reached for a pad of paper, tore a page, selected a pen from a cup, a souvenir from a trip to Barcelona, and wrote. He reflected that he would need to drive to Collioure and convince the pharmacist to let him have his prescription all at once. He didn't want a confrontation with the village's pharmacist. He also made a mental note to check about a biodegradable container.

### Marcenac

After a stubborn draught that lasted the better part of three years, the August rains came violently, ripping across the Pyrénées, only to hover, it seemed, in a thick mass above Marcenac, as if unable to decide whether to pelt the Mediterranean and move on towards Corsica and on to Italy, or take a sharp right-turn in the general direction of North Africa. Even the Tramontane, roaring from inland, had not only failed to chase the clouds at sea, but had been defeated. That in itself was cause for concern, since for the first time in as long as most inhabitants of the region could remember, the mighty Tramontane, the people's beloved wind, had abated for five consecutive days. Three days of calm was the known record and the stillness that hung over the Roussillon beyond that drove people to whistle in the streets or sing in their homes to mask the oppressive silence. Conversations at the *épicerie* or the *pharmacie* were deafening and out of place, as people who grew up shouting over the wind hadn't learned to tame their vocal cords in

five days. The soil was a coarse stone-littered clay from whose clutches only vines could be extracted. It had dried to the point of flaking and could not contain the onslaught of water that now gushed in muddy sinews towards the fishing village of Collioure, below, at the edge of the Mediterranean sea. With the drought, the usually sparse tuft of grass that sprouted between the vine stocks had long disappeared, and nothing held the earth together. Marcenac kept a few scrawny sheep and goats more as a way to cling to a disappearing way of life than for good business sense. The cattle had resorted to eating vine leaves and vegetables from the occasional gardens. No one had seen a hare since last September and there were talks of releasing caged rabbits for the sake of practice and accuracy if no wildlife was to be found for the opening of hunting season, only a month away.

The soil, unable to resist the assault of the rains, was slowly giving way. A chunk of land near the gates of the cemetery had folded over itself and slid downhill. It was threatening to send the entire graveyard plunging below in the Mediterranean. It was unheard of. Flash floods were a normal part of summer life in the South-west of France. The Midi was famous for its rugged landscape—some say tame compared to the coarseness of some of its inhabitants and those of Marcenac were no exception. The sheer strength of its local winds and torrential rains helped sculpt the renowned landscape. But a landslide... There was something insulting about a slice of land being reclaimed by nature.

### The Council

After the morning spent examining the land around the cemetery, looking below at the Mediterranean now as grey as the skies, the mayor called the council for an emergency meeting. The priest, the doctor who doubled as a veterinarian when needed, and Serat, an informal

scientist sat in the mayor's kitchen, their usual meeting place to debate the matters of Marcenac. Serat was often called upon to help with difficult questions because despite his propensity to dabble with dangerous chemicals, electrical devices and complicated if not useless machineries, he had managed to survive spectacular basement explosions, electrical fires and daring experiments. He had, after all, built and launched a rocket with his granddaughter and succeeded in not killing anyone or setting anything on fire. Too, he was designing the plans of a vine press that was supposed to increase wine production. The council sessions were often held in the mayor's kitchen and his wife's Muscat served as a reason for her husband to call an impromptu meeting at aperitif time but today, faces were stern and the matter grave. Still, the weight of the decision wasn't enough to dampen the council's appetite.

First there was the aperitif with Muscat and *pastis*, sunflower seeds and cockles. And the olives from Serat's first much-anticipated crop since half his trees caught on fire during the previous Bastille Day fireworks. But hearts were heavy. The conversation skirted around the weather, the nearing time for the *vendanges* and the possibility of not having any grapes to harvest. The prospect of a year without producing wine was inconceivable. The mayor's wife, sensitive to the men's mood, brought a heaping plate of couscous complete with raisins and mint leaves and a generous helping of mutton. Her Tunisian origins played a part in her culinary skills, skills that some said, had more than a little influenced the mayor's rise into politics. On cue, the mayor uncorked a bottle of *Garnacha*.

"Say, *à la vôtre*," he said raising his glass.

They lifted their glasses and mumbled an answer, eyes already scanning the dish.

"Please, don't wait," the mayor's wife said.

They didn't. The only sounds for the next few minutes were of mastication and appreciative grunts. Outside, the rain fell steadily, punctuated by an occasional burst of thunder.

"So," the mayor began.

The doctor scratched his throat and wiped his lips. The priest looked towards the ceiling for support. Serat took another helping of couscous.

"Gentlemen, I propose to move the cemetery."

"Say what, move what?" The priest reach for his glass but let his hand drop.

"But what about the graves?" the doctor asked.

"That's the whole point, my friend," Serat said, his mouth full. "If the cemetery's inaccessible, we can't bury the dead."

"Ah?" The priest seemed about to vomit.

"But what about the dead? The already dead?"

"The dead, doctor, we move them with the cemetery."

"We do?" the priest asked.

The mayor leaned back, hands on his stomach. "Gentlemen, if the land onto which the cemetery is built is threatening to slide down into the sea, the cemetery becomes not only unusable, but also dangerous and cannot therefore be used to bury our dead."

"But where do we bury the dead?"

"We don't." The mayor stared at his glass.

"We don't!" The doctor opened his mouth and closed it again.

"We don't?" The priest's mouth froze in an "o."

"So where do we move it?" Serat asked.

"That, *Messieurs*, is the question," the mayor said.

“Sweet Mary, full of grace, what have we come to?” the priest said.

The mayor’s wife refilled his glass and patted him on the shoulder.

“Are you out of your mind?” The doctor stood and started pacing. “There will be diseases, epidemics, cholera, famines and—”

“And I will be impeached,” the mayor said, throwing his napkin on the floor.

“Thank you, God,” the priest said, looking sideways at the mayor. “For helping us reflect.”

The mayor frowned. He took a deep breath. “That’s it, then. Nobody’s allowed to die.” The determination in his eyes kept the crowd from questioning him.

“But that’s not up to you!” The priest was on his feet, eyes wild.

But, in the absence of a stronger argument, the council voted almost unanimously that dying was forbidden until the cemetery was either safe or moved, whichever came first, or until a proper burial place could be readied.

That’s when the council began worrying about the Père Michaux.

At seventy-nine, he was the village elder, and therefore the next logical candidate to be claimed to heaven—a disputed destination depending on who you asked—but the fact was he probably wouldn’t make it until after Marcenac had a proper burial place. The council, after a late night meeting in the mayor’s kitchen, vowed to watch over him.

The Père Michaux became their cause célèbre.

Marcenac established a watch system in order to rush him to the hospital or assist him if needed. The council had debated keeping their plan a secret and decided not to alert the old man, fearing the pressure of staying alive might kill him. But the problem with the Père Michaux was

that he was as agile and reckless as a teenager. He was also fiercely independent, having never married, and few dared venture to his house on the upmost part of Marcenac where only a few goats climbed; given the garlic stench his body emanated at the occasional evening card games he attended at the *Chez Gustave* bar, no one felt compelled to get better acquainted with him. All people knew about him was that he kept himself alive and needed no one. Some said he used to be a spy in Russia and that after retiring, he was haunted by memories and that the demons that lurked in the corners of his mind were all the company he wanted. Perhaps his Ural 650, an alleged gift from a Russian double-agent, gave weight to his past. The old man barreling down the street on his rusty motorcycle was a weekly occurrence only the occasional British and German tourists that wandered in Marcenac smiled about. But the council took to worrying as soon as the bike's backfire sent birds flying when the Père Michaux left for his weekly ride across the Spanish border. Why the man couldn't stay on the French side became an annoyance. The general feeling was that he could travel the same hour and find equally interesting sites in France. Marcenac suspected he had a Spanish girlfriend. Why else would an old geezer go cavorting during a deluge? What if he had an accident in Spanish Catalonia? Someone would have to take care of the repatriation of his body and most of the villagers spoke Spanish but not Catalan, as they opposed the independence of Catalonia. They refused to learn Catalan and clung to Castilian if they absolutely had to speak Spanish.

### The Young Man

The council searched for someone who could trail the Père Michaux, speak Catalan, and not mind getting soaked. They enlisted the help of a young man from the neighboring fishing village of Port-Vendres, the son of a fisherman who was grateful for the opportunity to follow an

old man on the treacherous mountain roads along the Mediterranean rather than help clean and gut the mackerels his father sold to the local restaurants. Of course, he'd make sure nothing happened to the man—how difficult could it be? But one day playing the old man's guardian angel proved too stressful for the youth.

“The grandpa's killing me, man, killing me,” he announced on Sunday. “First, he drives 40 km an hour. There's fifty cars behind my bike, trying to pass and he's put-putting along on the middle of the road. How the hell am I supposed to hide? Then, he stops at the same damn bar in Porbou, orders the same drinks and talks for hours to the same fucking old men and it's all the way back again only this time it's twenty miles an hour and—”

That was the end of the trail. The council deliberated over a carafe of *pastis* and wondered if perhaps God was allowing a seventy-nine year-old man to ride a Russian motorcycle across the Pyrenees and return safely with more drinks in his stomach than gas in the tank, they might be worrying about the wrong man.

“The wrong man?” the doctor asked. “The wrong man, but we're all healthy as an ox, so if not the eldest, then who?”

“Surely there's a weak one somewhere, doctor,” the mayor said.

“We're all potential clients,” Serat said. “What we need is a way to scare them all into holding on.”

### Marcenac

The next morning, Marcenac woke to posters plastered on the walls of the *place du village*: THE CEMETERY IS OFFICIALLY CLOSED. NO DYING ALLOWED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

“Under penalty of death?” a woman asked, brandishing a baguette as she stormed out of the *boulangerie*.

By noon, the *boucherie* had closed; the butcher, his wife and their three employees were leading a protest in the streets. Since the other *boucherie* had closed for the month-long summer holidays and was not scheduled to re-open until September, Marcenac went on strike, more for fear of the prospect of angering the sole meat provider than for solidarity. The *éboueurs* threatened to let the garbage pile in the streets and gathered at *Chez Gustave* to deliberate the matter over a few glasses of *pastis*, and Marcenac worried about the stench of decomposing waste without hope of dry sky to burn excess garbage. Children remembered their history lessons: the Black Death had spread through filth and fleas; they searched for reassurance in the eyes of the adults who made mental calculations about their state of health and furtive speculation about who might fall first.

### Marcenac

The rain stopped on the seventh day. By then, Marcenac had begun believing that perhaps their ancestors the Gauls’ fear that the sky would one day fall on their head might materialize after all. Three days without sun in the South of France was abnormal and the dominating topic of conversation. But a week? With little to do before the grapes were ripe for the September harvest, August was usually a time for lengthy games of *pétanque* after the afternoon *sieste*—the only way to wait out the summer heat—and for interminable evening conversation on folding chairs by the front door, a *digestif* in hand.

If the rain had stopped, the Tramontane and with it the sun still hadn’t reappeared and the tension hadn’t entirely lifted. Marcenac consulted ancient almanacs for references of times when



their beloved wind had gone on strike; people called family up north or in Spain and inquired about the weather and if anyone had noticed an increase of wind in their area; some considered asking Serat about an artificial wind maker. If anyone could pull it off, it was the village's eccentric inventor.

On the seventh day, the fever broke, even if the Tramontane hadn't returned yet. Sheets appeared on the balustrades of balconies, rugs were shaken from windows, dogs and children poured into the street, their nose up, feeling the air, free at last; neighbors remembered they needed to borrow a handful of olives or a few centiliters of olive oil; they returned a garden tool; they listened for the scraping of straw broom on the sidewalk, an invitation to sweep theirs and catch up with gossip. A general euphoria filled the air. By evening, the cemetery and the strike were forgotten. *Chez Marcel* became an impromptu meeting place. After seven days of sequestration, there were stories to share, frustrations to vent and a simple need to sit outside.

That's when Serat's grand-daughter came barreling down the street trailed by most of the village's children.

*"Papi! Papi!"*

Serat, immediately thought about his wife, because why else would his granddaughter call for him with such distress lumped in her throat? Each man and woman reached for a husband's hand, a wife's knee, a lover's gaze before turning to the child with expectation and perhaps glee, knowing theirs were safe.

*"Papi. It's the new dog."* She caught her breath. *"He's by the Man's house. Waiting and scratching the door and no one's letting him in and something's wrong I know it. He always lets it in."*

Because the man was a bit of a recluse, he was not well liked. Marcenac found his habit of avoiding people frustrating. He only came out to go to the butcher's and the bakery, growing his own vegetable and barely saying a word to anyone. They couldn't claim him a spy since they already had the Père Michaux so they made him a former war criminal, but he was too young. They settled on a retired academic in need of rest, but they were working on an alternate possibility, as well. They stopped short of claiming him insane.

There was a general brouhaha, an opportunity for a new story, a sudden sense of excitement. Like wolves excited by the smell of blood, Marcenac was roused. But they first tried to reason themselves.

"Lots of dogs sleep outside," someone said.

"It's early still, not even nine."

"He could be busy, Hell, he could be on the crapper."

They laughed.

"But he always keeps the dog inside."

"So what? Maybe he's on the phone."

"But he's all alone."

"Maybe he's hurt."

"We should go see."

They went as a group, ten or so, out of curiosity more than neighborly duty. The others claimed tiredness, or children to get ready for bed. Some said it wasn't right to go intrude on somebody like that just because his dog was locked out.

They found the dog leaning against the door, an Afghan Greyhound, not a dog for the region. They petted him and called out.

“*Ohé Monsieur! Monsieur!*”

There was no answer. The lights were out so they deliberated. The dog scratched at the door, whining. They threw pebbles at the windows, banged at the door. The dog whimpered and hid. The man’s car was parked in the courtyard, so they rammed the door. They found him upstairs next to the note.

The council had a new mission.

“Who would have thought about something like that,” the doctor said.

“It’s God’s way to put us in our place,” the priest said barely able to repress a smile.

“Yeah, well at least he had it all planned,” the mayor said.

“Not a bad guy after all,” Serat said. “Left us decent instructions. Considerate, given the circumstances.”

Marcenac set out to follow the man’s instructions. They borrowed from the father of the young man who trailed the Père Michaux a *barque catalane*, a traditional fishing boat only used along this part of the Mediterranean coast, and wondered how much the man knew about such boats. They contacted the cremation services of the funeral home and marveled at the possibility of a biodegradable container the size of a large can of soup. They diligently called the nephew and already knew not to expect him for the ceremony. They closed the villa’s shutters and adopted the man’s Afghan Greyhound. They waited to carry out the last of the man’s instructions.

Marcenac

On the eighth day, the Tramontane whispered. The priest mistook the sound for God's breath; he had become so accustomed to the silence that left the leaves undisturbed on the vine stocks. The mayor watched the notes of his speech quiver on the terrace table. He did not pounce on the manuscript, as those who grow-up in the Midi learn to do at the slightest breeze. Serat, contemplating the possibility of another day without wind, felt his hat flutter and wondered if the answer to a prayer was no more than Man's intense desire and capacity for focus.

On the eighth day, children and dogs ran the streets of Marcenac like bulls in Pamplona, drunk on intuition and adrenaline.

On the eighth day, it appeared that the cemetery would not slide into the sea after all. The clay the rains had not taken had coagulated, revealing underneath a rocky mass, the skeleton of the hill that held Marcenac. The village would live.

That the ceremony was to take place the day the Tramontane returned seemed more than a coincidence, according to Serat. The priest smiled enigmatically. He looked younger than he had in years. The mayor reflected on the consideration the man had had to coordinate the dispatching of his body with the inconvenience of the village's situation; but the doctor did not feel inclined to reach a conclusion. It would be the topic of conversation for a period of lull, when the Tramontane howled in winter, slammed shutters and doors, shafted exposed skin, and forced people to huddle indoors.

The council and a few curious people clambered aboard the *barque catalane* moored in Collioure and set out several hundred meters from the village's trademark Arabian tower. The young man steered, aware of the importance of his mission. His father had never trusted him with the boat before. The mayor held tight to the wooden coffer that housed the man's ashes in

the biodegradable container he had insisted on in his written instructions. When the boat stopped, he thought about the offensiveness of the circumstance that put a man's raw matter in the hands of strangers. At least, Serat thought, the container was biodegradable and they would not have to watch the ashes tumble from a vulgar box before melting in the Mediterranean, thus preserving the man's decency. But when the priest opened the wooden box and pulled out the container, the prayer he was about to recite remained lodged in his throat. The container was metallic and sealed.

“Anyone have a can opener?” someone asked.

The doctor passed a Swiss Army knife to the priest. The metal was thick and it took several attempts before yielding. There were whispers about the quality of the metal. Someone coughed. At last the priest stood at the edge of the boat. He took a deep breath, before unfurling the prayer from his throat, and held the container with both hands at eye level. With eyes closed in contemplation, he poured the man's remains in the sea, oblivious to the Tramontane that, at that very moment, had regained its strength. The wind caught the ashes and suspended them in the air. Marcenac held its breath. The Tramontane flung the man's remain at the priest, who had forgotten the primal reflex of never facing the wind in the Rousillon unless empty-handed.

Above, what began as a murmur matched the ripple on the surface of the Mediterranean and spread through the streets, swelled to a yell that sprung from doors and windows flung opened. Dogs barked and children laughed. Marcenac was alive. The Tramontane had returned. Life would go on.

## SNAILS AND KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

On the seventh day of the downpour, Albert knew he stood little chance of saving the snails. They came in droves under the incessant rains, reproducing at lightning speed—he had yet to understand how such sluggish creatures could multiply faster than his mother’s caged rabbits—and crept beyond the vineyards right into the streets of Marcenac. There were so many that they had lost their prized status as a delicacy and became instead the targets of the village’s bullies who ran in zigzag on the sidewalk to crush as many helpless creatures as they could. What if the rains didn’t stop?

The adults in Marcenac still talked about the 1940 floods as if they expected torrents to gush from the Pyrénées and flood the coast before mixing with the salty waters of the Mediterranean—there were old black and white pictures in the mayor’s house and Albert knew the stories by heart. But never mind flooding, the *escargots* needed him.

They could become extinct if it didn’t stop raining or if the Tramontane didn’t return in mighty gusts to blow the rain out to sea. But what if the wind had abandoned Marcenac? In his eight years, Albert had never seen the sky pour so much water at once. He stared, mouth agape, at the ropes of rain that hit the kitchen window and let out a moan.

“Albert, *mon chéri*,” his mother said, “what’s the matter, darling?”

“Nothing.” He couldn’t tell her about the mission. It was his secret. He closed his eyes and saw thousands of defenseless creatures picked up by the cruel hands of Marcenac’s villagers, people who were not even hungry. He wanted to weep. He closed his eyes and saw thousands

upon thousands of *escargots* dumped in baskets, then left to starve in fridges for weeks and weeks, slowly disgorging the contents of their stomachs, *escargots* ripped from their shell, macerated in all sorts of ignoble paste and sauces before being thrown on a grill. He had to act. He needed help and he knew exactly where to get it. Monsieur Serat, who had all the answers, would know what to do. He wasn't the village's inventor for nothing after all. And Albert hadn't seen Sam in a week because of the rain. He missed her. This was his chance.

Albert's mother was used to her son's peculiar moods and so she reached for the saucepan of milk on the stove to add half a bowlful to her chicory and smiled as Albert sat on the hallway floor to slip on his rubber boots.

"Make sure to cover the *baguette* with the plastic bag, *chéri*, as soon as you leave the *boulangerie*. We don't want soggy bread."

"You know, *Maman*, they sell bread in plastic bags in America. Already sliced."

"Don't be silly."

"But it's true. Square bread. I saw it in a movie."

"Albert, that's enough, now."

"Okay." He reached for his raincoat. No need to argue now and get grounded.

Once outside, Albert glanced over his shoulder and ran to the shed as soon as he saw the curtains at the kitchen window dropped. His mother rarely went to the shed as she had entrusted him with the upkeep of the *potager* for the summer vacation, a task he had taken over with pride. It wasn't often that the priest told mothers their sons did a wonderful job not only growing vegetables but also keeping vermin away. Thanks to Albert, the priest had added, market days were glorious days: the boy was feeding Marcenac. He was making his mother proud and it pleased Albert because he knew she worried about her son. "Don't worry, *Maman*," he told her,

“I’ll never die of hunger. I know how to grow vegetables.” And he could tell a poisonous mushroom from a safe one, he could shoot a hare and a quail almost as well as any man, and he was a good hand in the vineyards thanks to Monsieur Serat, who treated him like a grandson.

He pushed the shed door open and let his eyes adjust to the darkness and his nose to the rank smell, hoping to catch the furtive movement of an elf or a troll hiding behind the wheelbarrow and the garden tools. Why couldn’t the South of France have strange creatures like other countries did? Marcenac was too quiet. A village by the Mediterranean should at the very least have a sea creature, a monster wild with frustration from being trapped in a near-closed sea, raving mad from looking for a passage towards the Atlantic Ocean. He had discussed it with Sam and they had agreed that a sea creature wouldn’t know about the small passage between Andalusia and Morocco. Albert had traced the space with a finger in his father’s atlas. He liked geography, like his father, and knew the borders and treacherous regions of the world, the names of the lakes and seas. Together, they had conquered the peaks of every country, and one day he would scale the Canigou. All 2785 meters. He had touched the white summit from his bedroom window and scaled it in his mind. That day, he would release a *hiboux* from the summit, a good-luck owl, one with pointed ears, to erase the memory of the *chouette* that had waited on the roof the night his father’s heart stopped beating. He could still see the bird’s round, earless head in the darkness, when his father’s heart had stopped beating. It had looked like a skull in the moonlight. *Chouettes* bring bad luck, his mother had explained later. Sam had promised she would climb the summit with him.

When his eyes pierced the dimness of the shed, Albert scanned the shadows for the hundreds of slimy trails on the walls, gleaming, the result of his efforts. He smiled and stood, content, like an artist full of the knowledge that he is part of something larger than himself, yet



something to which he is intricately connected. The walls seemed to undulate, set in motion by hundreds of tiny slithering bodies. Albert grabbed his father's fishing basket, lifted the lids on each side to make sure it was empty and closed the door after a last glance inside the shed. *Bon*, he thought. There's still room for more. He hurried back into the street after a last glance over his shoulder to check if his mother was watching him. She wouldn't understand. He patted his pocket, feeling for the grocery list. She trusted him with the groceries and he couldn't disappoint her. He would stop at the *épicerie* to get the bulk of the groceries and go to the *boulangerie* on the way back. The rain had slowed a little. Perhaps it was as a sign.

As he hopscotched along *Rue des écoliers*, jumping over puddles and snails, Albert sped past the street sign on the wall of the primary school, his way of ignoring the fact that he would never know the tranquil life of a village schoolboy. He didn't like spending the school year away from his mother in Font-Romeu, even if—she reminded him whenever he complained—the mountain air was what kept him alive. It wasn't fair that other children here in Marcenac didn't have to spit throats full of snot in a bowl three times a day to allow room for air in the lungs. Even the name of the disease sounded like spitting: asthma asthma asthma.

Albert ran faster and felt the familiar burning in his chest, the burning that always preceded the wheezing. He looked around to make sure none of the bullies lurked around, the bullies who said he was spitting his brains out in a plastic bowl for breakfast, lunch and dinner. They called him the village idiot, brainless fool. He heard his breath, raspy, embarrassing. A claw clamped his chest and forced him to lean against a plane tree to focus on the breathing exercises the doctor had taught him. He closed his eyes to bring his father's image, his father who, on his death bed had reminded him that he was named after Albert Einstein, and that he

was destined to great things. He willed the weight of his father's reassuring hand on his chest, an invisible presence that helped regulate his breathing. Soon, the oxygen flowed a little better.

His back still against the tree, Albert glared at the street sign and the school. His mother had explained that his lung condition might have played a role in his being a little slower than other children—he had, after all, nearly suffocated at birth—and if he could barely read at eight, it didn't mean he was stupid. He was smart in a different way. He was creative and creative children were a gift to the world, she had said, and as one of them, he needed time to learn to channel the wonders that lay waiting to be discovered. That was why it took a little longer to do what ordinary children did. Those were her words. He lifted his head and let the rain stream on his face. After all, he was named after Albert Einstein, a man who, he liked to remind bullies, was thought to have a learning disability. Maybe the scientist didn't have a lung condition, but they both had an obstacle to overcome.

Albert hadn't been in the street long but already curtains were furtively lifted and dropped and he glared towards the windows. He was the villagers' enemy because he was the *escargots'* friends. They might tell his mother he'd been roaming the streets and the vineyards for the past five days and get him punished. He had carried so many of the tiny creatures to hide them in the shed. He had rinsed his muddy boots in puddles to hide the evidence of his whereabouts. He had lied to his mother and even worse, to the priest who had caught him climbing on a grave. Not only a grave, but an iron cross, in order to hang his basket on a tree before getting caught with a harvest of snails by the butcher who happened to walk by the cemetery. If the rain had slowed the delivery of meat, the butcher might think about selling snails. Then what? But none of the adults understood his mission, not even the priest, who knew

more about death than the hearse driver. Soon, the villagers would brave the rain and roam the outskirts of Marcenac, hunched over, eyes on the ground, filling deep baskets with their bounty. He needed to get to Monsieur Serat, the only man who could help him. And even if some of Mr. Serat's inventions backfired, people still called him for help. There was nothing her grandfather couldn't do, Sam always said.

With his breathing almost back to normal, Albert hurried past the cemetery, towards the vineyards and the hills that marked the foot of the Pyrénées, and stopped dead. The Silviannini family. Them again. With five children—who had ever heard of five children in the twenty-first century? his mother always said—they had an advantage: speed. Between them, and even with Monsieur Silviannini's missing arm, they had thirteen additional hands, which meant 130 extra fingers that curled around the helpless snails, plucked them and dumped them in five baskets, two of them nearly twice the size of his. "Snail torturer," he growled. They were bent, hard at the task at barely ten in the morning. His breathing quickened. They had a plan. They were organized. He was doomed. The children had fanned out ahead of their parents, picking the creatures at rehearsed speed, down to the smallest ones. Even the *petit-gris*, his favorites because of their perfect proportions. All the Silviannini parents had to do then was sweep the snails the children missed. Who had ever heard of a battue with *escargots*? Albert was witnessing history in all its injustice. Maybe he should remind the Silvianninis that the mayor had declared death illegal until the cemetery reopened and that they should be thrown in jail, or even better, in an *oubliette*. But nobody buried *escargots*. People ate them. Who cared if the cemetery was closed? He ran past the Silvianninis.

Serat's house stood apart from the other homes in Marcenac, a good thing according to the majority of Marcenac because of the experiments that occasionally went wrong. One day,

they said, he'll blow himself up in that basement and leave a crater the size of an Olympic pool. Albert's mother thought that, had Serat not been a member of the village council, Marcenac would have signed a petition to exile him deep in Catalonia, and not on the French side at that—on the other side of the Pyrénées. But Sam said that her grandfather wouldn't mind the other side of the border. Serat was teaching them Catalan and they already knew *Canigó*, the traditional song all Catalan children learned in school. Maybe people in Catalonia knew what to do about a missing wind. They shared the Tramontane with Marcenac. Serat would know.

The boy reached Serat's house as lightning cracked. He stood in the rain, mouth agape: the three-story windmill, the latest addition to the Serat home and a replica of one of the windmills from Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, was still, dead. For the first time, the blades didn't creak under the pressure of the Tramontane. Perhaps all this was more than saving snails, after all. If the Tramontane had deserted Marcenac, nothing was right. But who had heard of a wind disappearing? The rain redoubled and lashed Albert's face. He saw the copper bas-relief of a face with filled cheeks about to blow wind that Serat and Sam had made last summer and traced its outline. He felt for a hint of Sam's fingers on the polished cheeks—she believed the Tramontane was lonely and needed to be cared for—and wondered if Serat was powerful enough to help him. Albert rung the bell and blurted his question as soon as Serat opened the door.

“Do what?” Serat stroked his beard and looked down at the boy as if he just had fallen off the moon.

“Stop the rain.”

“How?”

“With a machine.”

Serat's wife stepped in from the kitchen, mumbling something about traumatizing innocent children with stories and infernal machinery. At the kitchen table, Sam was finishing her breakfast, a thick book in front of her. She grinned and stood up to join her grandparents.

"Hand me your raincoat, Albert. And take off your boots, you're dripping everywhere," Mrs. Serat said. Albert sat on the floor to remove his boots. She brought a towel to dry his hair. "Does your mother know you're here?"

"Huh huh."

"Are you sure, Albert?"

He bit his lips. He might get in trouble if he didn't tell the truth and then he wouldn't be allowed to be responsible anymore. He stood with the towel still draped over his head. He needed Sam's help.

"Please, Mrs. Serat, don't tell *maman*." He glanced at Serat. "I'm just taking the long way."

"Tell me, my boy, why are you so interested in meteorology?" Serat asked.

"The long way to what?" Mrs. Serat moved between them.

"I want to know when the rain will stop." Albert kept his eyes down. "Before I go to the *boulangerie*."

"What's bugging you, Albert?" Serat asked. He gave Sam, who stepped in next to Albert, a quizzical look. "Are you worried about flooding?"

"The *boulangerie*? In this weather? And how long ago did you leave?"

"I'll drive him down, Mathilde. I need to test the car's battery anyway." He turned to Albert. "What's bugging you, *mon bonhome*?"

"It's the *escargots*, monsieur," Albert said in a whisper.

“The *escargots*?”

“I don’t know where to put them anymore. They’re too many.”

“Are you collecting them?” Serat looked at Sam. She raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

“I want to save them.”

“From what? The plague?”

Albert glanced at Sam. She bit her lip and examined a spot on the tile.

“Papi,” she said. She slid a hand in her grandfather’s. “Albert wants you to make a machine that stops the rain so people don’t eat the snails.”

“They eat the babies too. The Silvianninis,” Albert said. Mrs. Serat threw her hand over her head and returned to the kitchen.

Serat ran a hand through his hair and looked at Sam, then at Albert.

“And how will the machine help?”

Albert shifted from one foot to the next. “If the rain stops, the snails don’t come out. I don’t have any more room in the shed.”

“Albert, you’re a smart boy, but you’re not making any sense.” Serat ran a hand in his unruly hair and walked to the window. “You can’t change the world,” he said, staring at the rain.

“Please, *Papi*,” Sam said. “You always help him. No one else can. You said we were future inventors, remember?”

“And that inventors build from the ideas of other inventors,” Albert said. He thought he had gone too far but Albert was willing to risk all for the *escargots*. He waited through the long sigh Serat let out. When the man spoke, his eyes were crinkled on the corners.

“You know, Albert,” Serat began, rolling his sleeves, “in the twelfth century, there were men entrusted with saving lives. Knights Templar, there were called. Ever heard of them?”

Albert nodded. Of course he had. They had studied them in history. Mrs. Serat came in with two bowls of hot chocolate on a tray. She handed the children each one. “*Allez, oust*, in the kitchen, all of you. The hallway’s no place for philosophy.” She led them to the table.

“They helped the pilgrims,” Sam said. She pulled out a chair.

Serat leaned forward, elbows on the table. “Like you, Albert, they took their task to heart. Pilgrims walked from all over Europe, Albert, to Santiago de Compostella, in Portugal.”

“It’s a cathedral,” Sam said. “They went to worship a Saint.”

“But why?”

“That, *mon ami*, is one of the mysteries of human stupidity. People have to believe in a superior being no matter. . .”

“George!” Mrs. Serat said.

“All right, all right.” He winked at Sam who was trying not to blow hot chocolate through her nostrils. Albert cradled his bowl and leaned back, a smile creeping onto his face. He was home.

“These pilgrims were Christians. Crusaders,” Serat continued.

Albert nodded but he had flunked a history test and he didn’t like the pilgrims too much. There were too many battles and important dates and names to remember. Too many cathedrals and kings with the same names, only different numbers.

“Good. So you know about the Moors then.”

He glanced at Sam.

“The Arabs?” Albert asked.

She nodded.

“Indeed, Albert, indeed,” Serat said. “As blood-thirsty as the Christians and as wrong.”

He slammed his fist on the table.

“George!”

“*Oui, chérie, oui.*”

“They fought,” Sam said. She leaned towards her grandfather and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “The Moors invaded Spain and France and the Knights Templar protected the pilgrims.”

“Great bloody battles. Killed each other off in the name of some... But never mind that. Sam’s right. These knights protected the pilgrims as they crossed the Pyrénées.”

“But why? There would always be pilgrims,” Albert said.

“Why do you want to save the *escargots*?” Serat leaned closer. “The Knights Templar were killed off, thousands of them, in the end, tortured to death. History turned on them.”

“But they were good,” Albert said. “They protected innocents.”

“They were, and so were the pilgrims. And the Moors.”

“But the Moors—”

“Had a different point of view, that’s all.” He reached and took the boy’s hands in his. “It doesn’t matter if you can stop the rain or not, Albert. Life has to follow its course.”

•

It was the slamming of a shutter that woke him first, or perhaps the creaking, a peculiar sound of metal against metal, like the rusty handle of the village fountain’s water pump. Albert struggled to hold the remaining of a dream, a presence, someone he needed to remember but at



the same time didn't mind forgetting. He heard it again. It couldn't be a shutter, with the Tramontane gone. Nothing stirred anymore in Marcenac. The village had lost its breath. Even the rain had weakened to a drizzle. There was the sound again, a metallic moan. Something that shouldn't have rusted anyway and was slowly decaying after seven days of rain. Albert got out of bed and stumbled to the window, like a moth attracted to the moonlight. The shed. That's what it was. The door was ajar. But how? He reached for his reading flashlight under the bed and crept downstairs, careful to avoid the third step from the top, and he listened for snoring. He nodded. All clear. Sneaking out of his mother's home was nothing compared to creeping out of the *pensionnat* in Font-Romeu. But he was good at it. "Nights are for thinking," Serat had told him once. "A man gets his best ideas in the moonlight." Tonight, something had awakened him, had sought him out. Maybe he would become an inventor too, like Serat, a great man like Einstein.

The hinges of the shed door had aged a century in a few days. But what worried Albert was that the hook had slipped out of the ring—the door was no longer locked. Had his mother uncovered his secret? He peeked inside and understood before his brain could register it the lack of slimy trails on the wall. Albert understood the *escargots* had vanished. Even the babies.

He heard the creaking again, behind him this time, like the sound of the weather vane Serat built with ancient metal pried from the sea, a groan steady like the heavy step of a weary traveler. He was aware of a choice: be afraid or face it. He stood still, waiting for the familiar weight on his chest, the fluttering that always came in moments of tension, but the air didn't grow thick and his lungs didn't burn. He turned around, slowly, aware of the silence, now that both the Tramontane and the rain were quiet. The moon, high enough to illuminate the garden

and most of the street, revealed the vineyard at the edge of the village, as far as the foot of the Pyrénées. A sailboat in the distance drifted, bathed in a halo of light that made the sea sparkle.

In the stillness, in the moonlight, Albert noticed the shadow immediately. It slid on the ground and vanished behind the tortuous mass of a fig tree. He waited for the warning in his chest again and wondered if his father's hand would forever rest on his chest and soothe him. He missed him. But Albert was the man of the family, now. He dashed behind the tree. Nothing. He looked for footprints, weary steps weighed on one side, perhaps by a sword. He scanned the night for a glimpse of a white mantle, for a hint of the red of a cross.

There was the shadow again, elongated in the moonlight, slithering in the weeds towards the *potager*.

In the soft light, hundreds of snails gorged on lettuce and cabbage.

Albert felt the air leave his lungs and before he knew it, he was sitting in the mud. Market day. How would he explain to his mother and the priest who had promised to help with the biggest harvest of his *potager* why all the snails of Marcenac had moved into their garden? No invention could grow back vegetables overnight.

Movement above caught Albert's attention. An owl planed, majestic. Albert stood, between tears and laughter, and watched its shadow glide towards the mountain.

"*Hiboux*," he whispered, "*Hiboux*, wait, wait for me."

Albert ran after the raptor. It was a sign, it had to be. Owls meant wisdom. He had seen the pointed ears against the moon. It wasn't the earless kind that brought bad luck, a *chouette*, like the one he had watched from his bedroom window, the one that flew away the instant the doctor had checked his watch to write down the minutes and even the seconds when his father's heart had stopped beating. And if a *hiboux* had released the snails, because what else could have

happened, if a *hiboux* had woken him, Albert would live up to his name, he knew it. Never mind the snails, the rain, or the Tramontane. Never mind the ruined vegetables, the hundreds of snails to remove from the garden. Never mind the explanations he would have to give his mother. Never mind the hungry people at the market.

A symbol of wisdom, just for him. What would Serat think of that? Albert took a long, slow breath and smiled. He would find a way. He would become the greatest inventor and help people who didn't know what to do. He would work with Sam and her grandfather. He would show the bullies what really came out of his brain. His mother would stop worrying, and his father would be proud, all the way from heaven.

Albert ran through the village, arms extended in newfound wings, oblivious to this new sound, his laughter bouncing against the silence.

## MARCENAC

As soon as he stepped out of the train station, the wind took Bertrand's breath. He arched forward to resist the sheer strength of the Tramontane, surprised by how quickly the old reflex came back. He squinted in the light. September and still so bright. Two years away from the South of France had erased out of his memory the peculiar clearness of the Midi's luminosity. In the distance, the glitter of the Mediterranean flashed between cobblestones covered alleyways and jagged stone walls. The rooftops, from ochre to deep orange, seemed thrown about haphazardly in a pile that rippled from the center of the village to the seashores and the terraced vineyards that snaked towards the mountains and the Spanish border.

Bertrand had forgotten how Collioure revealed itself to unknowing eyes, unabashedly, like a lover stepping over the dress that slid to her feet. It was so much more than the quaint fishing village described in guidebooks and brochures. He craned his neck to see the Arabian tower and the remains of the old ramparts, vestiges of the Château Royal. How many times they had strolled in the *Rue du Miradou*, hand in hand while Emily cavorted ahead, a family, with nothing but the future on their minds. In this terraced street, Maude had talked about a brother for Emily. Bertrand stepped out of the train and searched for the roof of the *Les Templiers* café, where he had fumbled with the engagement ring in his pocket. Two years since the accident. Two years since the mother of his only child left him, flinging at him words that would not fade, words that clawed the memory he diluted in alcohol each night.

“You had no right,” Maude had screamed and then sobbed as her body slid to the floor in slow motion, limp against the wall. She was right. He had no right to survive and come back alone and get up the next day to breathe and see the sun while Emily would never get the chance to.

Bertrand walked towards the taxi line outside the station. On the sidewalk across the street a man was walking with a *boule* under his arm, a loaf of bread the size of a soccer ball; a checkered canvas shopping bag from which leeks and the leafy ends of carrots stuck out dangled from his arm. His grandmother had one just like it, tied to the back of her bicycle, when they’d ride to the market on Saturday mornings.

“Taxi, Monsieur?” a cabbie asked. More people were walking from the direction the man had come, carrying a crate of peaches, bags of provisions in baskets, flowers.

“Later,” Bertrand said.

The Tramontane brought the smell of cattle and honey, of fresh cut flowers and spices, the sounds of church bells in the distance. There were voices, muffled, and the rhythm of the waves. Already, he tasted the sea in the air. He felt it on his skin. He breathed its humidity.

He followed the smells and was assailed by a mess of blue and white tents, yellow and red ones under which clothing, purses, pots and pans, tools, makeup, hair products and children’s toys hung; a jumble of carts and campers and trucks transformed in stalls among which circulated a throng of people: market day.

There were sausages in all shapes, size, and stages of rigor mortis, their taut skin barely able to contain the fleshy mass within, and chorizo that attracted clusters of flies. Entire legs of ham hang from enormous hooks, whole wheels of Camembert and Brie, mountains of fresh cheese of all shades from the crispest whites to the deepest yellows, huge trunk-like slices of

goat cheese, marbled cheese with more herbs and spices than available in an Italian kitchen.

There were Roqueforts and other blue cheeses in various phases of putrefaction; trays and trays of green and purple figs bursting with juice, dates, apricots, jars of fleshy olives—purple ones, green ones with crimson pimentos, green ones with white soft almonds wedged in their center, dark ones, oily and wrinkled—platefuls of peanuts, piñones, pepitas, dry salted corn and seeds of all sorts that would drive an indecisive bird to suicide. Bertrand was transfixed, his eyes darting from one stall to the next, like a fly trapped against a screen door.

He walked, his nose in the air following the smells of churros dangling from the ceilings of stalls; there were pastries sprinkled with sugar, delicious looking lumps of golden dough, chicken cackling in low cages and a toothless old woman dressed in black, her dark head scarf barely containing her mass of frizzy white hair, sat holding and caressing a goose whose legs were tied with rope. There were piglets grunting in a makeshift corral, goats in another one, children about to be terrified by the border collie the shepherd yelled after for chasing a bleating sheep that was desperately trying to rejoin its flock about to cross the street to their designated corral; there were women shrieking, women haranguing potential buyers, teenage girls pretending not to notice the men leaning against their stalls, checking them out when they thought they were not looking, bands of boys strolling, a hand casually on each other's shoulders trying to ignore the exasperated calls of their mothers who needed all the help they could get, old men waiting their turn at the public urinal. The smells, pungent, spicy and sweet all at once, some rising above the warm animal stench, some wafting from the pastry carts, lingering, and mingling with the putrid retch-inducing acidity of the urinal made Bertrand dizzy.

He sat down on the suitcase to catch his breath, aware of life pulsing in him, aware since long ago of the blood coursing in his veins, of the twitching of muscles in his forearm as he

pressed his hands together. Alive. He was, but was it fair, and where was the guilt? The balance was upset, leaning towards elation, somehow. Perhaps death was part of a natural cycle. Perhaps it took his uncle's death to give him back a taste for life. But the guilt. It should be stronger.

•

When the taxi reached Marcenac and pulled in at the *place du village*, the sun was declining behind the Pyrénées. In a few months, the summit of the Canigou would be white. Bertrand had expected a wave of memories flowing back at the sight of the mountain range. But Emily was everywhere. Marcenac looked like any village in the south of France: ochre houses, a few white-washed ones in the Spanish style, others built with ancient stones, all with tile roofs. There were half closed shutters to shield the rooms from the sun, potted geraniums and other sun-resistant flowers on balconies and by the front doors. Bertrand dipped his hand in the fountain and took a sip and wondered if he could be happy here.

There was a movement in the window behind lace curtains. *Pipelette*, he thought. But what else do people have to do on a Sunday afternoon in a village of 150 people at most? He resisted waving at the gossip. On the outskirts of Marcenac, the soil was organized in neat rows of short, stocky vines, their shoots replete with sap, heavy with grapes that soaked up the last rays of sun before the harvest. Soon, the leaves would be on fire, then yellow, then brown, before the Tramontane plucked them and scattered them in the streets. A sound of metal against metal made him turn his head.

“*Allez,*” an old man said, readjusting his straw hat, “my point.”

“*Foutaises*,” another man said. He wore a similar hat and espadrilles and walked as if he just climbed off a horse. “Lies.” He adjusted his hat and waved a hand over his shoulder as if to brush away the thought. He spat on the yellow dirt. “Mine’s closer to the *cochonnet*, see?”

Bertrand had stumbled into the middle of a late afternoon game of *boules*. He smiled, remembering the afternoons practicing the Midi’s favorite “sport” with his grandfather in Perpignan. His grandfather had preferred the name of *pétanque*. “It sounds more professional,” he used to say. Bertrand sat on the ledge of the fountain. On the *boules* court, a few men and children shifted their gaze from the game to Bertrand, then back on the game.

The two old men, now surrounded by a few others, kneeled over the *boules* to measure the distance between each steel ball and the wooden *cochonnet* with a piece of string and were arguing about the validity of the point. Children and dogs ran across the court, nearly toppling the glasses and carafe of *pastis* that stood on a low wall. A young woman knocked her *boules* one against the other, impatient. A few meters away, two boys were engrossed in their own game, already at ease with the required posture, ankles together, knees slightly bent, a *boule* in a scooped hand held loose and slightly behind the hips. There was a general sense of laziness and well-being Bertrand had forgotten about in London. Yes, if he had the right to ever be at peace again, perhaps it would be here.

Another curtain lifted in a stone house next to the church. A door opened in the adjacent house and a middle-aged man marched towards Bertrand, hands clasped over his protruding belly, as if he owned Marcenac.

“Monsieur, you must be Bertrand Rémoulin?” he asked as he extended a hand.

“*Enchanté*,” Bertrand said.



“Fourquet. I’m the mayor.” He patted him on the shoulder. “Please, come inside,” he added, leading him towards the house as he took the suitcase.

“Giselle!” the mayor bellowed as he stepped in after Bertrand. “We have company!”

Giselle, presumably, let the curtain drop and said “You’ll have a glass of Muscat before seeing your new home?” and without waiting for an answer, she opened an ornate antique wooden trunk and pulled a bottle and three glasses.

“*À la vôtre,*” the mayor said, raising his glass. “To your new house.”

A new house he hadn’t seen, not even in pictures. A new house large enough to accommodate a family of four. There would be questions, Bertrand knew, questions he wouldn’t want to answer but perhaps he had arrived and he needed to drop his burden the way a traveler drops a worn bag. He lifted his glass and felt the corner of his eyes crinkle before he realized that the smile on his lips was genuine. A space opened behind his lungs and it felt good. “Thank you,” he said.



In darkness, Bertrand stood by the bedroom window, hypnotized by the black moving mass of the Mediterranean. The sea seemed alive at night, undulating and gliding on the sand, massive and threatening, only to be contained by an invisible force that pulled it back at the last moment. The Tramontane had given way to the Autant wind that blew warm and humid from the sea.

What would life have been, had he not caused his daughter’s death and survived? It was the surviving that was the most painful, the part that Maude had not been able to forgive. They

would be four now. A boy, perhaps, and another, she wanted more, with lips and eyes like Emily's and dimples like her own. A boy with curls like his, curls that defy order, a sign of character, Maude used to say. And a house in the mountain, and hikes in winter, sailing in summer, and sheep too, she wanted sheep. A house of ancient stones, uneven and stacked without cement, stones that kept the Tramontane out but not the freshness of the air. He never understood that but it didn't matter anymore. And what of the dreams of crossings to the Balearic Isles or Corsica, dreams of silence at sea and of the flapping of sails, dreams of driving across the mountain to Spain and all the way to Ceuta to glimpse Africa, dreams drawn at candle light when the future was open?

There was a screech, a bird perhaps, and footsteps echoed in the street, the rustling of wings and the shadow of an owl glided on the pavement. A boy ran in the moonlight, arms extended like wings, head thrown back, laughing, so full of life, he took Bertrand's breath. Bertrand leaned to follow the silhouette of the boy until it vanished in the night. He followed its imaginary track through the vineyards, to the Spanish border, until the mass of the Pyrénées stopped him. So full of life. The sob rose against his throat and he closed his eyes, surprised. It was like a faucet, unclogged at last and allowed to purge. He wanted to run after the boy and look in his eyes, see life pulsing, and the future's promises. He must have been Emily's age. It was becoming difficult to remember Emily's features.

Bertrand looked away from the mountain, towards the stars. There were millions. Perhaps Emily was a guardian angel. Is that what dead children become?

He closed his eyes and he was in the car in the moment when he turned his head back onto the road after watching Emily sleep in the backseat. In an instant he had known the peloton of cyclists that appeared out of nowhere around the bend would not get back to the side of the

road in time and that the only way to avoid them was to swerve. He had forgotten to klaxon in warning that he was approaching a hairpin bend. He saw the startled look of the cyclist who led the pack, his eyes etched in Bertrand's memory. He saw the peloton tumble over each other as the car hovered at the edge of the mountain. In slow motion he saw the first cyclist extend a hand and open his mouth, and then the others crashed behind him, and as if the tremor caused the car to jolt, it plunged into the ravine and landed almost gently a few meters below, against a tree that had grown despite the laws of nature nearly parallel to the road. He played the film in his mind again and again, the nightmare vision of Emily pinned down in the wreckage by a branch, a muscular elbow, crushing her. He saw the questions in her eyes, the innocence that refused to believe. And life gushing out of her, spreading like a shadow on the car seat and watched, fascinated, how fast a body could change from his sleeping, trusting daughter to a cadaver.

Bertrand lay on the bed and extended his hands to touch the stars that were framed by the window. Where do dead children go?

“Do you remember when you were five and you got lost in Cadaqués?” He hadn't spoken to Emily in a long time. It felt good, even if he knew he was only trying to ease the pain, and with it the guilt. “Your mother thought I had you and I thought you went with her.” Where did dead children go? He tried to pluck a star out of the sky between his index and thumb. “We walked all the way down to Port Lligat, calling, screaming your name. We thought you went back up. You liked to run in the narrow streets, your ‘tunnels,’ you called them. Do you remember? And there you were, in the Dali House, waiting between two planters of purple flowers, eating ice cream with the groundskeeper who found you.”

Perhaps your mother has another child, now. He pushed the stars with both hands but they seeped between his fingers. He closed his eyes. Emily's face appeared as if through a veil.

He tried to lift it to see her eyes. He couldn't remember her eyes. He knew her hair, her lips, he could smell the chamomile scent of baby shampoo but he couldn't remember her eyes. They were blue, like her mother's, but what shade exactly? He couldn't remember. He clawed at the veil, he scratched the stars but they shone, indifferent. Two years and he had forgotten his daughter's eyes. Two years. He rolled to his side and curled in a ball. The sockets were bare after two years. The eyes were one of the first things to rot. Cadavers have hair. He rocked and held his shoulders, and rocked, slowly at first. The nose too, would be gone, eaten. He rocked faster, choking on the sobs that were pushing now, tight in his throat, and rocked faster, faster to drown the pain and the guilt, to stop the memories and the guilt, the accusations and the pain, to stop. To stop. In the distance, the boy was laughing again.

Bertrand listened to the voice, crystalline and pure, as it rose in the darkness. It moved in a syncopated rhythm like the wind did even on an empty field where nothing could break its strength. It echoed against the walls and bounced before gaining momentum. Bertrand opened his eyes and felt his breath ease.

## GÉDÉON CULDEPIERRE

Gédéon Culdepierre had been daydreaming lately, sitting by his front door on the white marble block, a former makeshift anchor recovered from his sinking fishing boat. Years ago, he'd thought he would pull through the fright and build another boat, but the stone had made a comfortable bench. And so, Gédéon sat. He liked the warmth of the midday sun on his legs and the mind-numbing shrillness of the cicadas. He liked the crisp smell of the parasol pines along the Mediterranean, a few miles away. He felt worn, used. There had been a time when life had been simpler, he remembered, and then chuckled at the thought: he sounded like his grandfather, sitting on a wooden bench in front of the same door, reminiscing about better years.

But unlike his grandfather, Gédéon didn't know where time went. It was a common ailment, the doctor said, and then the priest, when men lived a full life. But a full life, he hadn't had. In fact, he had wasted sixty-eight years waiting for the woman of his dream. The woman the gypsy girl who told him when he was a boy, would find him, in due time. Had he been older, perhaps twenty instead of ten, he might have been too impatient to wait, but at ten, the idea of an appointed destiny had allures of magic. It was reassuring, like an extension of childhood. Thus, he had waited to be found. Due time had turned into years, a decade and then two; half a century had come, and still no woman. Oh, there had been women, young ones and not so young, pretty things that should have been kept locked in by their fathers—he chuckled: his grandfather, again—and respectable ones who had closed their eyes to imagine the places he'd sworn to show them but never delivered; innocent ones—these, he still didn't feel right about—and a few he

wished he could forget, but, as the priest always said, one must give and take in order to preserve a balance.

And balance he's had in his own way, he felt—he's had his shares of joy and heartbreaks—even though he felt the weights had tilted on his side more than on the women's. But how did a chaste man, celibate by duty more than will (he found it difficult to imagine that a man could resist temptation and not turn into a lunatic, God or no God), how could a man removed from real life understand the inner struggles of an old soul who hadn't led the most righteous life.

Gédéon extended his legs and let the sun soothe his knees through the coarse fabric of his trousers. Sore knees affected his thinking process. He let his gaze rest on the vineyard, at the edge of the village, and followed the ripples of the wind on the emerald of the leaves, so bright and nearly translucent in the Midi sun, until they reached the deeper olive shade of the Pyrénées Mountain, and beyond, Spain. But perhaps his mistakes would be erased, since the woman of his life had not materialized. Perhaps his waiting had atoned him.

But still he wondered: what if she appeared, after all his years of waiting? He raised his eyebrows at the possibility and cocked his head. Certainly, he had a few good years left in him, perhaps decades even, and he could make her happy. They could have ten years, or maybe twenty, with luck. Gédéon sat a little straighter on his marble block. He let his fingers play an invisible keyboard on his knees, a habit he had picked up as a child as a way to concentrate. The fingers drummed slowly at first and then became a blur on the fabric. They stopped. Gédéon smiled. He must ask the doctor about the current state of his health, he thought, and so he stood with effort. His joints were stiff from a life in the vineyard, and ambled down the streets of Marcenac, deserted in the heat. He walked past the cemetery and nodded at his grandfather, who,

after a night of raucous drinking had once waved back from the depths of the stone, he swore; past the primary school from which he had been expelled as a child—the best day of his life; past the church where he often sought the company of the priest out of boredom more than religious fervor; towards *Chez Gustave* where the doctor could always be found at lunchtime between visiting patients and prodding cattle, whichever was in most need of his services. Only the doctor could tell him how many years he had left, and whether waiting for the woman of his life was a reasonable enterprise.

And on the way to the café, he thought about the gypsy girl and the smile on his mother's face, the way she had brushed her hair, and the twinkle in her eyes at the news of a happy future for her only son. Gypsies had a peculiar power, he knew. They were cunning and untrustworthy, ruthless and dangerous, he had seen. But they also had a way with knowing the future. That, he wasn't sure about anymore.

Gédéon stopped by the fountain to splash water in his hair. Walking made him sweat. He wasn't sure at all about the future, and should have had every reason to doubt, except that the fluttering in his stomach, the unexpected lightness his chest, tugged at his consciousness. He was a fool. That's what people would say of him, but he was used to not being taken seriously. He sat on the edge of the fountain and dipped his cupped hand in the water again to wet his forehead. A fool, but a fool with a mission, and that was what separated him from an ordinary fool. He shooed the rooster that hopped on the ledge of the fountain for a drink and reflected further. It was true that no gypsy—to his knowledge, but he was ready to fight in a duel whoever claimed the contrary—had made a mistake in predicting the future; but it was also true that it only took once. The rooster hopped on the stone again and Gédéon let him be. He was too preoccupied to chase fickle birds. What if he, Gédéon Culdepierre, born and raised in the Mediterranean village

of Marcenac, accomplished grape picker and stone carver, keeper of children's secrets (he was not a fool in their eyes and he relived his youth in their company), what if he was the exception that invalidates the rule? The rooster took careful gulps as he bent forwards and walked sideways on the ledge. Gédéon considered pushing the bird in. The rooster's nervous throat clucking was disrupting his concentration. Did roosters swim? He could not remember. Perhaps his mind had started to decay. That would be one more reason to need the woman of his life. He stood and splashed the rooster, who turned to peck at his hand, and lost its balance, crowed like a possessed animal and stopped in mid sentence, blinked twice, and fell in slow motion, with a splash and a cry of distress. He waved at a woman who was walking across the *place du village* towards the pharmacy. She stopped at the sound of the splash.

“That's for waking me before the sun,” Gédéon said to the rooster.

“I didn't know roosters could swim,” the woman said.

“We'll find out at four o'clock, tomorrow morning,” Gédéon said. Satisfied, he continued his quest for the beginning of a new life. Perhaps he was the exception to the rule, but his faith in gypsies was stronger than theorems and hypotheses.

The Tramontane carried the sounds of the *Chez Gustave* terrace before he saw the better part of Marcenac, drinking and dining, with the Mediterranean as a backdrop. It occurred to him that, had the wind abated, he might have walked past his destination, so heightened was his concentration. When he arrived, the terrace was crowded, as could be expected on a weekday between the hours of noon and 2:00 in the afternoon. A dog scratched with such speed under a table that it nearly toppled a carafe of *pastis* and glasses, sending the owners of the drinks into panicked gesticulations and a heated discussion about the necessity of bringing a flea-infested



hound for lunch when the same shade was available under a tractor or a tree—for heaven’s sake, somebody stop this animal—in the vineyard.

“And what if he gets lonely?” the dog owner said.

“*Hé bé*, he can always chase the rooster,” another answered.

“The rooster is taking a bath,” Gédéon said. He pulled a chair and motioned to the waiter for a glass.



In the doctor’s office, Gédéon paced and tried not to look at the charts and drawings of the human body displayed on the walls. Wherever he looked, he was assailed by the rendition of a sliced-open body, hands outstretched as if to beg for mercy, of eyeballs without sockets that followed him as he tried to disappear in a corner, between the examination bed and the fish bowl; there were realistic renditions of broken bones—did people really have that many bones in their feet?—and decayed teeth. He considered giving up sweets but shook the idea out of his mind. He was a grown man and wasn’t about to be intimidated by drawing, no matter how cleverly displayed. He stopped behind the doctor’s desk to examine with interest at first and then disgust the illustration on the page of an opened book: the close up of a pustule-ravaged arm, or was it a leg, in various stages of infection, from benign to mild to postmortem. He swung away from the page and found himself facing the right side of a brain, floating in clear liquid in a jar. He covered his eyes and plopped down on an armchair.

Such details about his innards, what lurked just below the skin, and the thought of the complicated sinews of his blood vessels made him dizzy. A few days ago, the state of his health

was only related to meteorology: a rainy day meant aching joints; a windy, pollen-infested day, watery eyes; a cold day, a toothache. But now, he needed to keep himself in perfectly functioning shape. He was like the tractor the village relied on for the *vendanges*: no tractor, no grape harvest. He resisted the urge to run outside. No functioning body, no woman. It was overwhelming. He didn't want to think about the similarity between people and machinery. He remembered his failed attempt at understanding and treating the mysterious ailments that had overtaken his tractor. His stomach contracted, his kidneys expanded against his lower back, ants crawled under his skin, he was cold and hot at once. Something in his chest thumped erratically, in an area that couldn't be his heart. He was like the tractor, like an engine in dire need of a tune up. He closed his eyes. After a few hours of twisting ratchets and banging of hammer, after a series of grunts and whistles of surprise and exclamations of wonder, his friend Serat had returned the tractor to life, and the harvest resumed. And if his body was as complicated and fascinating as the insides of a tractor's, the doctor would walk in soon with a bright smile and send him on his way to find the woman of his life. The human body was an amazing piece of machinery.

“Well, well,” the doctor said as he walked in. He cleared his throat, slammed the door, and sat on a stool facing Gédéon.

Gédéon jumped to attention, sighed, smiled, relaxed, and stopped at the preoccupied look in the doctor's eyes. He was contemplating him over his thick glasses. Gédéon thought it wiser to sit, lest he should collapse from the bad news that was likely to come. No need to break his neck, he thought, and be useless to the woman of his life, or the *vendanges*.

“Been drinking a lot, lately?” the doctor asked.

“Well—”

“Good. It keeps your spirits up. A man your age shouldn’t let himself go.” The doctor paused and pushed his glasses back to the bridge of his nose. “What worries me,” he said, peering at Gédéon, “is your heart.”

“Well—”

“It’s beating very fast and cannot, in my humble opinion, handle any unnecessary excitement. But at your age, and mind you, I’m not too far behind, at your age, there shouldn’t be any risk of over excitement...”

“Well—”

“Which means total rest for a least a month.” The doctor sat at his desk, ripped a page from a torn, yellowed notebook, and scribbled. “So it means complete and utter avoidance of anything that risks making your heart flutter. Any questions?”

“Well—”

“Yes?”

“What if I do, I mean, get excited?”

“Kaput. You and your heart.”

•

With the sun on his face, Gédéon daydreamed, the tip of a pencil between his lips. He leaned over the folding table he’d placed in front of the marble stone as a makeshift desk, and wrote: *Wanted: a woman, for better or for worse*, and stopped. No. What woman would want a man for worse, even though she might indeed watch him die, after the doctor’s diagnostic. But he shouldn’t yet reveal the most intimate details of his life to her. They would have plenty of

time to grow accustomed to one another. He chuckled. He chewed his pencil and leaned forwards once more: *Wanted: a good woman to*—again, he paused. But a good woman was hard to find. And he didn't want just any good woman. He chewed his pencil. *The woman of my dreams*, he wrote. That was better. He leaned back.

How unfair, to have waited all his life. How unfair to have wasted a strong heart, only to let it atrophy from lack of use. The heart was a muscle, and like any muscle, it would shrivel—or was it harden?—if forgotten. Gédéon's hands crept to his knees and his fingers played a silent, mournful music, gently at first, then at increased speed. He closed his eyes and cocked his head. But if he hadn't used his heart, if he'd never felt the transports of love, the mad racing the books talk about, could it be possible that, instead of having atrophied, his heart had remained in a state of preservation due to absolute lack of use, and what if indeed, he had the heart of a much younger man. And if this was the case, nothing prevented him from pursuing happiness. Gédéon's fingers moved up and down his legs. His body rocked with the immensity of the possibilities. The blood flowed to his brain. There were white spots between his eyes and the sun. A thousand bees buzzed around his ears. He put a hand over his chest for fear his precious heart might leap out from behind his ribs. His eyes snapped open and closed several times, and he clamped his jaws on the pencil with such force that it snapped in two. He wrote:

*Wanted: the woman of my life. Serious inquiries only.*

*Contact Gédéon Culdepierre, Marcenac.*

*PS: I have been waiting for you all my life. You know who you are.*

Satisfied, he walked to the office of the *Marcenac Libre*, the village's gazette, to post his missive in the wanted pages.

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Gédéon sat on his marble stone, holding an envelope with trembling hands. Nearly three weeks had passed since his heart first fluttered at the thought of sharing the remainder of his life with his woman. Since then, he had jumped at the ring of the doorbell—she might forgo the mailman and surprise him in person. He had smiled at the thought of a creative woman, a woman with initiative, and had watched the postman like a child standing guard by the fireplace on Christmas night; since then, he had visited the gazette to inquire about the whereabouts of single-looking women new to the village. Since it was tourist season, he'd been banned from standing within a twenty meter radius of the building, such had been the complaints of sightseers; he'd heeded the doctor's advice and, in order to keep his spirit high, had shattered the record a man could spend at *Chez Gustave* and not die from cirrhosis of the liver. He was exhausted.

At last, a letter had arrived. He lifted the envelope to his nose, took a deep breath, frowned, shook it, and held it to the sun, feeling for the thickness of the letter. His hands trembled so, they refused to open it. He felt faint. The envelope was a faded shade of pink, barely a hue above creamy white, perhaps with a tinge of yellow, as if left in the sun for too long. It had, without a doubt, a woman's touch. It was a calculated move and he loved her for it. The stamp showed two birds—love birds, or perhaps they were pigeons, he could never tell the difference—perched on a branch, heads touching. In the background, leaves and flowers were arranged in the shape of a heart, even though it could also have been a circle: the stamp had a crease, as if the lick had had second thoughts, tried to pull it, realized the mistake and resigned to smooth it again, without much success.

Gédéon waited for his hands to calm down to unveil the love letter—because it was a love letter, there wasn't any doubt—and brought it to his nose again. It smelled of garlic, with perhaps traces of onion and tarragon. He smiled. An accomplished cook... It was getting better. He loved her. He salivated. He couldn't wait to welcome her into his life. His heart thumped against his ribs. He needed to calm down. He needed to rationalize the situation. Perhaps the letter was from someone he knew, but all the people he knew were either dead or within walking distance. And even if some were too lazy to walk to give him a message and would send their grandchildren instead (he kept a supply of mints in a tin can in his linen closet as a reward), none would waste a stamp. And certainly not that kind a stamp. Therefore, it was a love letter. The handwriting was feminine, with elegant curves and a certain upwards energy at the end of each word. He liked her instantly and sighed. A woman with character. It was good. A non-nonsense woman. It would without a doubt require a high level of energy to keep his house in order and care for him. He smiled and held his breath as he slid a carving knife under the seal, but remembered his heart, and, in the event that the doctor might have delivered the correct diagnosis—he made a mental note to have a conversation with the priest, should he be reclaimed by God earlier than expected—he willed his heart to beat steadily and ripped the seal open.

Gédéon scanned the words at breathtaking speed, not recognizing any, such was his excitement. He took a controlled breath, and another. He was so focused on the state of his heart that he could not make sense of the words. He scanned the letter again. Perhaps the words were in Latin; his heart beat to a staccato. An erudite woman... He closed his eyes. She would meet him under a blooming cherry tree, carrying under a pale arm the leather-bound copy of a rare text, perhaps a translation of some classic or another. His legs shook. He made another mental note to brush up on his classics. The priest would know where to begin, even if he didn't say

mass in Latin any longer. But first, he needed to decipher her handwriting. She was full of mystery, she was eluding him, and he loved her for it.

*Dear Gédéon*, the letter began. She was already calling him by his first name. A good start, definitely a good start.

*It is with great pleasure that I have read your name in the Marcenac Libre. My heart raced at the thought of meeting you at last.* She'd been waiting for him too. Gédéon nearly dropped the letter. It was destiny. The thought of a woman, somewhere (where, he wasn't sure but he was also too impatient to interrupt his discovery), waiting for him her entire life was overwhelming. To think they'd wasted all these years made him dizzy. He would need to make arrangements to bring her over as soon as possible. But where was she? He flipped the envelope to read the return address. There was none. How would he find her? She was playing hard to catch.

*Since childhood, I have been told about you.* He fanned himself. They were destined to be together. She was his beloved. The gypsy girl had told the truth. He was the happiest man in the world.

*I grew up with stories* Oh... She liked stories. He would become a storyteller, better yet, a poet. He scratched his head. And how would he do that? The priest might know. He'd said once that preparing a sermon was like composing a poem—or was it a eulogy?—but never mind that, he'd figure it out later.

*... stories of our lives before we were separated.* He read again, and still was baffled. Separated? He laid the letter on his lap to allow his fingers to play their music. Soul mates, that's what she meant, soul mates. How romantic. He loved her already. He felt he'd known her his entire life. They had been living together all along, two entities joined by one heart—that might

be handy, should his give up. He smiled and turned his face to the sun. He was happy, blissfully happy.

*Good bye for now. I hope to meet you soon,*

*Your long lost sister, Estelle.* Gédéon dropped the letter, lunged after it before the Tramontane could sweep it away, sat back, stood again, winced at the pain in his knees, put a hand on his chest, snapped his jaw closed, blinked repeatedly, and wept. He wept for the irony of the situation, for the loneliness he had managed to pretend not to feel for so many years; he wept for the laughs he knew would come from those who'd been listening to his ramblings for the past three weeks, he wept for the unbearable days, weeks, and perhaps years that were to come. He wept for his naïveté.

He crumbled the letter and looked for matches in his pocket, remembered he had a sister, wiped his tears with the back of his sleeve and smoothed the letter.

He thought of the dream that awakened him periodically, the dream of a tiny girl who waved goodbye. They were standing near the primary school and a nun was leading her away. He could see the vineyard in the background. And she was beautiful.



## PARACHUTE

In the ninety-eight seconds it took Mr. Marignan to plunge to his death, he bellowed “IT’S NOT SUICIDE!” five and a half times. Damn it, his wife would say, couldn’t the bastard have waited a little longer? They were to sign the insurance policy the following day. He might have laughed, had he not been plummeting a hundred and twenty miles an hour to an ungraceful end.

But it would have been too easy. Mr. Marignan wasn’t one to get off that simply. He made the wrong decisions. His family was dysfunctional. People pointed him to their children as a warning: “If you don’t change, you’ll end up like that,” they said. Women smiled a little too long in his presence. He was not a threat or a temptation. Men wrapped their hands tighter around their wives, grateful. Teenage boys studied him: if such a loser could score an American wife and jump out of airplanes, there was nothing they couldn’t do.

It wasn’t that he was a daring man. On the contrary. Fifty years of ducking insults will shape a man’s attitude. Mr. Marignan, “M” as he liked to be called to add a bit of dignity to his insignificance, has been labeled a coward, chicken, scaredy-cat, yellow-belly, poltroon, cad, sissy, baby, weakling, dastard, milksop, candy-ass, white liver and who knows what for as long as he remembers interacting with people. He calculated once that he could fill an entire page with the abusive names and expletives flung at him over the years, more for sport than

legitimacy it seems, as he has never found himself in a position to shy from adventure, having never been near it.

M looked like a turtle. With his balding head—his son, when he was very young and still cute had called it a landing strip for flies—and his receding chin swallowed by the flabby mass of flesh squeezed out of his shirt collar, or even more so because of his dull brown eyes nearly devoid of eye lashes, M attracted barely suppressed incredulous looks. But what made the resemblance to a turtle so striking was his annoying habit of ducking when insecure, which was most of the time. As a result, he had grown slightly hunched, and at five feet one and a half inches and nearly two hundred pounds, M was the closest living relation to the Teen-aged Ninja Turtles, again, according to his son, who is now older and less cute.

M took-up parachuting after finding out his wife was having an affair with a scuba diving instructor, a Dive Master, she made sure to point out with a slight upward jerk of the head and a knowing silence to let her audience register the nuance whenever the subject was brought-up in Marcenac. Since it was impossible to keep any attempt at privacy in a sea-side village of a few hundred people, M pretended her actions liberate him. He could be who he wanted to be: a dare-devil. What a way to humor her, he thought at the time he uncovered the affair, that he should become an expert sky diver while she and her Parisian lover explored new depths.

How Belinda scored a Dive master, M could not fathom, given that she was shaped like a beluga whale. Perhaps she had hidden talents. As with most adultery cases, M had been the last to know, and since everyone seemed to side with her—poor woman, having to put up with someone like that, she could have done so much better—he'd found solace in solitude. Yet he remembered the surprise in Marcenac the day the word got out that he, born and raised in the

Roussillon, he who had never ventured across the Pyrénées, never driven west across France towards the Atlantic, never felt the desire to visit his own country beyond Narbonne only a few kilometers away, was about to marry the American woman who had strolled the streets of Marcenac, aiming her camera at every corner of the village, marveling at ancient stone walls and the fountain and the Romanesque church and the *baguettes* and *petit fours* in the *boulangerie*. But what a comedy it had all been. She was not an actress and she didn't live in California, as most people from villages forgotten by time seem to believe when they meet Americans. But she did look glamorous, that first year.

The morning his life shifted, long after the second year dragged into another ten, M was shuffling out of the bathroom, his pale hairy stomach protruding from the towel only large enough to cover half his mid section, when he heard Belinda laugh. The sound sent an electric shock to a part of his brain that had lain dormant through years of stale emotions. His heart slid to a vacant part of his chest and filled it to what he imagined must be what people felt when awakened from a coma. He heard the sound of air as it sipped through his clenched teeth, and he needed to lean against the wall. He listened.

“Yes, yes. Mm. Okay.”

How playful her voice was. There was the laugh again, crystalline, sprinkling out of his wife's throat in sparkling bursts. M peeked into the hallway, his wet posterior leaving an enormous heart-shaped imprint on the wall. Belinda was rubbing the base of her throat with an index finger, her eyes closed, a look of elation in her eyes. Never had he made her feel like that—never. Her hand moved to the nape of her neck. Eyes closed, she caressed her hair as she arched her neck. M felt a mix of sadness and anger swell in his throat, threatening to choke the

words he didn't want to say. But the rising bulge under the towel is what kept him from confronting his wife.

M became an experienced jumper, as he tried to match each of his wife's escapades with a jump. Yet it hadn't been easy in the beginning, convincing the instructors and then himself, that he really meant it, this business about becoming one of the best and as fast as possible at that. He had scores to keep and who knows, perhaps a chance at a victory in the end.

The first day, when he pulled open the door of the skydiving school and peered inside, he tried to slam it back to prevent a sneezing fit, but a man's muscular back blocked his way and the strong scent of musky deodorant made him gag. "SKY" he read. Blue letters on a white t-shirt. The trapezius bulging under the taut fabric moved forward, revealing the rest of the lettering: "SKYDIVING INSTRUCTOR- INTERNATIONAL SOARING SCHOOL." The powerful back pivoted to reveal a tanned bicep that bulged as a sculpted arm reached for the door. M held the sneeze.

"*Désolé, hein*" the man crooned with a Parisian accent, flashing a professionally bleached smile as he waved goodbye to an athletic woman in a track suit. "Sky" looked where he expected a normal size person's head to be, then slowly, incredulously looked down. M blushed, accustomed to the double take and the amused look. He ducked. The woman in the track suit smiled the same condescending smile he noticed on well-meaning people who weren't sure how to acknowledge a mentally retarded person. Wipe that smirk off your face, woman. He smiled back.

He was used to being treated this way. What choice did he have? His first jump had been a mockery, he, flanked by two instructors, Sky of all people and a woman with protruding yellow

teeth and a black mane that clung like tentacles to his sweaty skull as she bent over to help him squeeze into the school's borrowed jumpsuit. He stood, legs and arms tucked inside the neon yellow suit, trying to pull the zipper without attracting too much attention to the fact that he couldn't fit his protruding gut in a double X size suit.

"Oh, *chéri*, I don't think we have a larger size," the donkey said. "Here, let me roll up your pants," she added, kneeling in front of him, arching her neck sideways to avoid his belly.

"*Allez, on y va,*" Sky said, "let's do it." He clapped his hands as he pivoted, Travolta-like on the dance floor.

"Heeehah!" the Donkey brayed, her lips parting as if she expected to be handed an apple.

They were off to the Cessna to throw themselves out into the sky and hopefully not land in the pool of toxic waste near the airfield, a looming danger they had been briefed about during training. Depending on which way the Tramontane blew, parachuting was a dangerous sport in the South of France. But never mind the wind, never mind the gusts that could send the most experienced divers off course. M was trying not to trip on the cuff of his pants, rolling up his sleeves as he practiced taking slow controlled breaths behind the zipper that threatened to burst. Sky stretched his shoulders the way athletes do to loosen overworked muscles before a competition, and the Donkey rearranged her mane inside a beige knitted cap so distended it made her look like a Rasta queen.

"The first jump's the best, *mon ami*, the best," Sky explained before giving a thumbs-up to the pilot and lowering the plane's door. "You've got to conquer this visceral fear of yours, and then it's all downhill, *mon cher.*"

The trouble with that kind of fear is that it lives up to its name. As soon as they jumped, M, despite holding hands with Sky and the Donkey, felt his rear end shoot upwards when he

somehow managed to look down too abruptly. He floated, suspended upside down for a little too long for comfort – Sky told him later that he had never seen anyone throwing down before.

Jumping was a much needed release from his job. Being supervisor was okay, he supposed; it sounded all right on Belinda’s lips until the questions became pressing and she was forced to admit her husband worked in a *hypermarché*, one of these monstrosities modeled after American chain supermarkets. The way she said it, with disgust in her mouth as if trying to spit out a greasy morsel, caused him to recoil. It was a direct attack at the fact that he should have inherited his father’s *épicerie* in Marcenac, but Marignan *Père* had judged it preferable to sell the village grocery store and buy an authentic *péniche* to cruise the rivers of Europe, an impulse Belinda blamed M for. She could not understand why her *beau-père* would trade a business for a river barge, unless to escape the sight of his son, a daily reminder of his failure to produce an adequate offspring.

M would have smiled about the irony of circumstance, were the Pyrénées not rushing to him in a blur; he would have smiled at the irony that made him carry the first draft of a resignation letter in his pocket: *It’s all over. I’ve played this game long enough. I’m signing off*, it began. The following day would have been the first day of his new life as a world traveler. He had convinced a young British couple to let him join them aboard the *Antidote*, their sailboat, as a deck hand on their first crossing to Majorca.

But it would have been too easy. M wasn’t one to get off that simply. The stories that play in his mind were stories that happened to other people; better looking people; people with

their lives in order. His life was dull and difficult to escape. He would die old without any stories to tell.

How many times he had dreamed of harbor-hopping along the Spanish coast, from Collioure, Marcenac's closest fishing village, to Puerto de la Selva where the Pyrénées joined the sea, the only match for the mountain chain's mightiness. How he had dreamt, sitting in the vineyard overlooking the Mediterranean, longing of the flapping of sails, immaculate and like a new beginning. How he had ached for the gentle rocking and silence, to be away from it all. Ah, to smile and retell a particularly trying passage over of the Cap Creous. To be able to talk intimately about this protruding mass of rock was a privilege, a rite of passage; to boast, casually, about the fear of capsizing; about the main sail, reduced to tablecloth size to allow less gripping surface for the Tramontanne; to have seen the true might of the Tramontane at sea, to have tasted her, salty and untamed, to know her intimately, at last. How many times he had dreamt of crossings to the Balearic Isles while strolling along the tortuous streets of Collioure, his steps always returning to the fortifications of Fort-Béart, the last bastion before the blue emptiness. Ah, to dream of being the captain of a 40 foot sloop moored in the bay only meters from the Arabian tower of the church of Notre-Dame-des-Anges. How many times he had smiled at beautiful women, women in flowery dresses, women with an intoxicating scent of lavender and jasmine, women who walked with a purpose, head high, daring him to make eye contact, women whose sandal heels clicked on the cobblestone long after they had disappeared towards the shimmering sea.

But he didn't belong in their world. He was married to a thick woman and his son was dull and oversized. Yet the boy had shown such promise as a baby and then a toddler, round and

wobbly on his stout arched legs, with fat cheeks and eyes alert. But now... At thirteen, with tufts of wiry hair sprouting from his ankles like a caravan of fuzzy insects creeping upwards on thick smooth legs, this boy, teased by thin muscular boys, active boys who played in the streets and excel at sports, boys who mocked his “man boobs” and flaccid stomach; this child he had wanted so much already ducks when confronted and seeks refuge in candies and pastries, his eyes void and glazed, hypnotized by the images on television. Heredity was mean.

There was a time when he hadn't felt bored with his family, especially the boy, when he remembered loving them impulsively and not out of duty. A time when he wasn't ashamed of them and them of him and they had felt cohesion and even bliss, if that's what bliss was; having no reference point, he wouldn't know.

There was a time when he had strolled in the streets of Marcenac and felt pride. He'd been a lover, a husband, and a father. His life had been ahead of him. He had guided Belinda through her new life in a foreign country. She'd been docile; she'd needed him. But the charm of Marcenac had worn off. Belinda needed adventure. Belinda needed challenges. Belinda needed a better man.

The morning of his last jump, before the Cessna reached 10,500 feet, M meticulously checked his main parachute but left it at his feet: he was an old dog then, only rookies wear it from the moment they step in the plane. He re-tied his shoelaces with a double knot, adjusted his goggles, cracked his knuckles and jerked his neck once on each side. He glanced at the young couple next to him, the only other passengers, Laurent, tall and gangly and Charlotte, with an almost translucent skin. She tried to smile but her mouth froze between a smile and a look of



horror as the plane gained altitude. Sky faced them in the “wheelchair seat,” wedged against the dashboard near the pilot.

“This way if we crash I’ll be the one with the snapped neck,” he had joked as they climbed onboard. They sat, crammed in the metallic gut of the Cessna, silent. Laurent patted his girlfriend’s knee.

“It’s all right *chérie*, all right. You have to go solo at some point. You did great on your tandem jumps. And we’re right here with you. You’ll be fine.”

She nodded and tried to swallow.

“Don’t worry,” M told Charlotte. “When you’ve jumped as much as I have...” and lets his voice trailed, grinning. She was impressed, he could tell. He gave her the thumbs-up. She rolled her eyes but he knew she begged for protection. Belinda didn’t need protection. But he could give this girl what she needed. He closed his eyes, a smile of beatitude on his face, and dreamed: he took her in his arms and whispered it’s all right, he won’t let anything happen to her. They were on a trip – skiing or mountaineering. He leaned back and breathed deeply. They were mountain climbing. The weather forced them to seek shelter in a narrow opening in the rock. She shivered so he took her in his arms. He unzipped both their anoraks to share body heat. As an experienced guide, he knew a thing or two about survival. He felt her heart-beat quicken. Her hair smelled like Swiss meadows. She looked up, her eyes half closed, her eyelids flutter. He leaned forward. She was beautiful... Slowly, he held her chin between his thumb and forefinger and brought her face up. He closed his eyes.

Sky jumped off his seat, accustomed to stooping under the low ceiling, and clapped his hands twice, all smiles.

“*Salopard*,” M muttered, “bastard.” Charlotte’s jacket was zipped up to her neck. She was inaccessible behind her helmet and goggles. She hunched under the weight of the parachute on her back and didn’t look at M. Sky gave the couple a thumbs-up with both hands. The girl inhaled and looked at her companion. She seemed to hold back tears. M nodded “don’t worry, love, I’m here,” and gave her that disarming smile, the one he has seen in the commercial, when the guy got out of his Land Rover and opened the trunk and it was full of roses and the woman put both hands over her mouth and her eyes told him she was his. Laurent stood, his lanky body folded at the shoulders against the ceiling of the plane. Sky lifted the Cessna’s door and flashed a smile at Charlotte.

“Ready, girl?” he purred. The wind gushed in, tousling his hair. The skin on M’s skull prickled. Charlotte sucks in her breath. She leaned forward, hypnotized, and stood half way to stare past the gaping hole where the door had once sheltered them from the void outside. Below, thick wooly clouds partly concealed minuscule trees and toy rooftops. Her boyfriend leaned over and kissed her.

“I’ll go first,” he whispered. She didn’t react. Sky nodded and picked up his parachute, casually flexing his muscles. He looked like a leopard ready to pounce. M tucked in his stomach as he readjusted his t-shirt. The girl was ashen. What if she passed out? He’d better get nearer. The wind’s howl partially blocked Sky’s instructions “... to throw the safety chute... catches air... deploys the main...” Laurent leaned outside and stood on the step, dangling from the wing. His thin pants fluttered around his long skinny legs. He looked like an oversized praying mantis, all arms and legs and huge goggles, as he clung for an instant to the wing. Then he was gone. Charlotte gasped. M slid next to her.

“I’ll be right behind you,” he said. She blinked and nodded. Gently, he nudged her forward.

“All you have to do is throw the pilot chute,” Sky yelled over the noise of the engine. He held her shoulders, his eyes planted in hers. “You’ve done it a million times. I’ll be with you the whole time. You’ll be all right, he says.” She took a step towards the door.

M kept his eyes on her. Sky turned to M and gave him the thumbs-up. M lead her to the edge, faces her then quickly grabbed her other hand. He grinned.

“See you at the bottom, *mon ami!*” and they were gone. The wind barely muffled her cry. M. leaned outside. She needed him. Quickly. He promised. He jumped after her.

The wind whooshed, ripping away M’s glasses. By the time he tried to catch them they were a double dot below the Cessna. M spread his arms and smiled; it’s all his: the ridge of the Pyrénées with the snowy cap of the Canigou, the monasteries and feudal castles, Spain in the distance, the Mediterranean, Perpignan, the administrative capital city, with its splash of red tile roofs. How small the city looked, yet how protective, flanked by tiny villages. All this was his, and tomorrow he would leave it behind and return years later as an adventurer. Charlotte and Sky drifted underneath. Their chute would open soon. The praying mantis below was already floating under a yellow and red bubble with the school logo. Hers and Sky’s will open soon. M reached for his safety chute but he could not feel it. The wind must had a hold of the container and keep it away from his body. He reached back again. Damn, just like a rookie. He’d start tumbling if he wasn’t careful. Another explosion of yellow and red a few feet away. Charlotte was safe now. She shot up past him, limp like a puppet. He needed to open his pilot chute—now. He reached for the front handles but the Tramontane blew stronger. He had difficulties bending his arms.

Frantically, he tried to pat his chest afraid to look. The air gushed past his ears, deafening. His lungs narrowed. He would choke, drown in mid-air. His heart thumped against the back of his throat. His hands slowly moved up searching for the straps on his shoulders. He opened his eyes but without his glasses, he was blinded by the wind.

M's life didn't flash before his eyes.

He didn't see the people he loved and those who loved him. Perhaps there weren't any. He didn't claw the air frantically, his eyes wild, his mouth contorted by fear. He didn't scream, at least not immediately. He would panic in a few seconds as the ground rushed at what seemed an increasing speed.

For now, he fell motionless, his inert mass rushing towards the crater his body would soon create. He knew he would look grotesque in death as in life, his kneecaps exploded and the bones sticking up on each side of his ears, his jaw smashed on the grass, his eyes ripped out of their sockets, perhaps still attached by a sticky thread. And his guts splattered on the grass, squeezed out of his anus.

He saw the letter in his pocket, his resignation letter, still unfinished. He saw his salvation plan, interrupted. And Belinda. Belinda who was right, after all. Belinda who would finger the pathetic single page extracted from the rear pocket of his pants, crumbled and not even splattered with blood, Belinda who would cry bitterly because they were due to sign the life insurance policy the following day.

M would cry if he'd had enough time. He would cry over the mockery of his life, his death. He would cry over the irony that made him a poor writer. The letter in his bag looked like a suicide note.

But it would be too easy. M wasn't one to get off that simply. The Tramontane abated. He was able to turn sideways into the wind. The parachute straps flapped against his shoulders and he wondered how he had missed them. He would go home at night to his mediocre life and be a mediocre husband and father. He would forget the letter in his pocket and the dreams of running away. And he would live slowly until he died an old man.

## A LADDER TO THE MOON

Serat sits deep within the terraced vineyard between two vine stocks. He needs the intimacy of the soil, today, the roughness of the earth, the sweet, pungent smell of vine leaves baking in the heat. He likes the view from here: Spain, beyond the mountains and the undulating mass of the Mediterranean ahead, deep green in the fading light. He sighs, eyes closed, and cups a thick hand over his straw hat and rubs the sweat from his neck and forehead. He fans the sleeping child next to him with his hat.

He is old. Too old to raise his son's daughter and convince his wife that a granddaughter is worth living for—it is not a choice to stay alive, but a duty, think of the child, Mathilde, think of the child, before your sorrow. He is too old to go on but he must, he must. Mathilde will not recover, he fears, has known since he lifted Sam from the wreckage and tried not to look at his son's blood splattered on the windows of the van. He looked in Sam's unblinking eyes and wondered why a three-year-old could be tossed around in a vehicle tumbling down a ravine and rest unharmed on top of sacks of figs at the bottom, while her parents lay mangled and lifeless, one dangling from a tree and the other grotesque, contorted, among crumpled metal.

Mathilde has been in a stupor since morning, stunned with grief and questions he could not answer. It isn't right for a mother to lose her only child. But he prefers the stupor to the wailing that lasted a day and a night after the medics brought the bodies back.

Beside him on the blanket, under the shade of grape leaves, Sam sleeps. Serat leans forward to lift the muslin that keeps the bugs away, and is assailed by the scent he has yet to get

used to, talcum powder, or baby shampoo, he isn't sure, or perhaps lotion, and the laundry from freshly washed clothes. His nails are coarse and his fingers stained with tobacco, clay and engine grease. He draws back and rests his head in his hands.

Sam kicks her feet and hiccups. He strokes her hair and her breathing eases. She looks like her mother and he wonders what imprints his son left and if it is up to an old man to encourage the shaping of a child's mind.

Behind him, where the cypress trees grow bent by a lifetime of assault from the Tramontane that blows strong from the West, he will build a windmill straight from the imagination of Don Quixote, build it with laughs and the hope he has yet to discover a grandchild can bring to a man broken with grief; he will erect, next to the garden and near the barn, a shed where he will shape Spanish marble into statues of animals, just to hear a child's bursts of happiness; and to the East, where the sea, docile at night under the whisper of the wind and restless at midday under the sun, he will nail to the fig tree a ladder to the moon. And they will climb it together.

## BLOOD TIES

On her father's tomb, Sam feels at peace. She's been coming to the graves for five years now—that's where she learned to walk at three, late, like her father—and she likes the familiarity of the stone against her calves and the palm of her hands. Rough enough to remind her that it is death she is visiting. Soft too, in patches, like the memories she can only imagine: her parents. All she knows of them is what people who remember say. They are kinder than Mamie, the villagers, at least about her mother. Mamie only has good words about her son, Sam's father. But none about his wife. None at all about Sam's mother, and it is difficult at times.

Mamie sits on her son's tomb next to her granddaughter and looks at her the way she did the morning Sam said she wanted to style her hair in intricate braids like her mother's in the wedding picture.

"You're too young to look like that," Mamie said. "And don't you ever turn like her. Not in my house. And wipe that stuff off your lips."

Sam licked the raspberry jelly from her lips and hid her tears. She moved away from the mirror when she was practicing blowing kisses.

"And don't think you can get away with kissing that boy. You're eight, for God's sake."

Mamie doesn't understand that a girl can have a boy as a best friend and that holding hands at eight and kissing a boy on the cheek doesn't mean what adults think it does.



Sam is trying to get used to the new hardness in Mamie's eyes. She spreads her legs and arms to fill the space on the stone. She wants to be alone with her father. And Papi, Papi who fills the blanks of her memory with images and stories that make her smile in the dark and fall asleep.

Sam's first memory is of spice and vanilla and the roughness of an unshaved chin against her forehead: the sweet smell of Dutch tobacco and Papi's scratchy skin, the day he lifted her from the wreckage. How she survived the accident, Monsieur Chadel, the village doctor, cannot explain. But perhaps, as the circumstances of her rescue suggest, she is meant for great things. What else but destiny would have made Papi give a ride to an off-duty fireman whose motorcycle could not handle the steep mountain climb, Papi has argued since? Why else would chance send on this rarely travelled road a man who kept his calm when the van that carried Papi's life, his blood, his future, careened down the ravine, bounced off the slope and ripped branches of a chestnut tree before smashing against a boulder a hundred meters below?

But logical Mamie believes the burlap sacks of figs and apricots Sam had curled against cushioned Sam's fall. Mamie believes that the gift of a great destiny should not be bestowed upon a child at the expense of her father, Mamie's only son. Mamie's theory has always been a source of disagreement with Papi since Sam's father was found, mangled among the bulging sacks, apparently trying to shield his three-year-old daughter as the van careened over the guardrail. But there were, according to Papi, enough bags to protect a man's body as well, and not only that of a child. So how could Mamie explain their son's twisted frame, a man agile enough to leap from a horse in full gallop? Mamie, though, is certain that her son was the victim of more than circumstances.

It is true that Sam and her father should not have been in the van. They hopped in at the insistence of Sam's mother who wanted company for the long trip up the Pyrénées. It is true that Mamie also believes the child who was growing inside Sam's mother, this adulterous seed as Mamie calls it, was the reason for the accident.

When Sam is eight and old enough, she asks Papi the meaning of the new word, and they look it up in the dictionary. Papi, who has all the answers, teaches her a difficult word a day. But this time Papi gives her an uncomfortable look and pretends not to know, she is sure. After they learn the meaning of the word, Sam kisses Papi on the cheek and runs alone through the streets of Marcenac to the terraced vineyards that border the Mediterranean. She knows the wind can scatter some of the new word's implication over the sea and beyond the mountain chain across the Spanish border, and make it lighter to carry. Only then, and only after she caresses the filled cheeks of the bronze bas-relief's face Papi sculpted—their representation of the wind—is she ready to face Mamie. Sam believes the Tramontane, the region's beloved wind and her favorite among all the winds she knows, is alive and needs tenderness to care for the inhabitants of the region.

Mamie gets the small straw broom from behind her father's cross to sweep the tomb and Sam slides to the edge of the stone. She wants to tell Mamie the Tramontane will blow sand and dust back but it's no use. Mamie is deaf, on her son's grave. As soon as Mamie sweeps a corner, Sam scoots back and Mamie sighs and smacks her tongue, but it's Sam's father and she has the right to be with him too. She closes her eyes and listens to the cicadas in the June heat. She wishes Albert was not away, breathing the mountain air for his health during the school year. There are many unanswered questions, questions that for the first time she does not want to ask

Papi. Questions about her mother and why Mamie refuses to speak about her; questions about the reasons why parents die before their children have time to grow up; and questions about how long grandparents really live. Mamie knows the answers, but she sweeps and whispers to her son.

Sam's second memory, or perhaps her first conscious recollection, is of the velvet of the rose petals on her father's grave. The priest says the dead have the best view in Marcenac, that their home, at the edge of the cliff that overlooks the Mediterranean, is prime real estate.

Sam asked the priest one day how the dead could see, if they were in the ground, and the priest sat with her on an old tomb next to her father's and pointed at the clouds.

"That's where they live," he said.

"In the clouds? But how can they see?"

"They see with their hearts," he said

"But my father's heart was broken," she said. "Mamie said my mother broke his heart. She says he died because of her. How can he see, then?" The priest rubbed his eyes the way people do when they have dust in them. Sam gave him some of the water from her flowers to dab his eyes.

Sam listens to Mamie's whispers as she sweeps the stone before changing the bouquet of roses. She looks old and people in Marcenac say she aged in a day after the accident. They also say Sam's mother was beautiful. Maybe that's why Mamie didn't like her. Mamie is wrinkled and gray but not ugly, and she laughs some days and sings when she hangs the laundry to dry in the wind. Papi is happy, on these days.

Sam holds the rose Mamie gives her against her cheek and inhales the petals until they get stuck inside her nostrils.

“Give me that,” Mamie says. She snatches the flower and puts it in the vase with the others and scowls.

Sam loves the softness of the petals, as smooth as the baby chicks Papi lets her raise. She wonders if a baby’s skin is really as soft as the one in the book Mamie still reads to her when nightmares keep her awake, and if her mother ever kissed her behind the way the mothers in stories do.

Papi doesn’t need to go to the cemetery to remember his son. He says he is in the wind. When the cemetery was sliding and nearly fell off the cliff, Mamie worried about her son’s grave, but Papi didn’t care about dried bones, not even his son’s.

“Mathilde, why do you always have to drag the child to those graves?” Papi asked one day, furious at first, but with Mamie, he knew not to insist.

Sam doesn’t mind the trip to the graves, but she learned all she would about her father from Mamie, and the cemetery conversations are getting old. She knows not to ask about her mother. She also knows not to ask why her mother’s grave always has fresh flowers, the ones Mamie yanks out of the vase and hurls over the cemetery wall.

“Who’s the man,” she asked once, “the man with the flowers?”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Mamie snapped.

The man walked away, looking over his shoulder, scurrying between the tombs with a bouquet in his hands that looked like the flowers on her mother’s tomb.

“Did he know *maman*?”

“More than one man knew your mother.”

Sam watched him get on a motorcycle and speed away.

She wants to ask Papi about the man, but he is happy, and Sam doesn't want to be the one who makes him search the part of his heart where he says sorrows are kept and should be left undisturbed.

Mamie arranges her son's roses in the vase: tall stems in the center and shorter ones around. She brushes the petals and cocks her head before standing back. She looks away in the distance and sees what Sam cannot: memories. Sam makes her own, with Mamie's words and made-up images from Papi's stories, memories of her father holding her against the sky, of her father laughing and holding his wife and daughter by the hand.

She runs a finger on her father's name. That's how she discovered letters before the story books, tracing S-A-M-U-E-L M-A-R-T-I-N over and over, imagining what tracing P-A-P-A would feel like. Once Papi showed her a picture of a boy in America who rubbed the lead of a pencil on a piece of paper across the name of his father who died in a far-away jungle. Papi explained that in America, there was a monument with the name of the soldiers who fell far away from home. She looked at the boy in the photo and wondered if he too shut his eyes at night and made a movie in his head of his father doing what fathers are supposed to do with their sons. But what were fathers supposed to do with their daughters? Papi told her about this traditional game boys in America played with their fathers, a strange game with a smooth stick thicker at one end, a white ball with red stitches that made it look like a wounded tennis ball, and a giant glove. Papi explained about the sound, like the snapping of a dead branch on a windy day, the bat—that's what he had called the stick—made when it hit the ball. He knew about the sound because an American expat—later they looked-up the word in the dictionary—Papi brought home once went

on and on about the strangest details of homesickness and how people remembered the tastes and sounds that crept in their minds without warning. Mamie was sure that Papi's homemade wine, the one with a reputation for loosening tongues, had something to do with the American's memory. But Sam wanted to ask if homesickness was anything like the yearning a child feels about wanting to know a dead parent. The next morning, Sam snuck to the cemetery to trace C-E-C-I-L-E M-A-R-T-I-N, and next to it, she wrote *Maman* in neat handwriting to validate it. Papi showed her a safe place to hide it in the windmill he built to harness the strength of the Tramontane and generate electricity.

“What was *maman* like?” Sam asked Papi. She slid her hand in his, emboldened by the knowledge that she shared a secret with a windmill that was the replica of the one in her favorite Spanish tale. Papi said her mother had been sweet and perhaps too young to be married—but don't tell Mamie that—that she, Sam, had been loved and wanted, that her parents had hoped for a whole colony of kids—imagine that, brothers and sisters, but never mind, she would never know now—and that Papi and Mamie would be here for her until she was old enough to find her way in the world, and long after that.

In the cemetery, Sam feels a peace she doesn't sense anywhere else, not even in the vineyards where she likes to run until her chest burns, and then lay under a vine stock to watch the birds circle in the distance. She sits on the tomb and feels for grains of sand Mamie forgot to sweep. Mamie pulls weeds that grow between the crevices of an old tomb and says no one remembers this dead, a man with a Spanish name that sounds like music. Sam closes her eyes to let the music on the stone come to life. If she presses the heel of her hands over her eyes, the letters dance the flamenco to the sound of the white stars that flash in her brain. Papi says that's

how ideas are born, when the mind plays hide-and-seek with reality but Mamie tells her not to get dirt in her eyes. Sam wonders who she will be like when she grows up.

Papi can spend entire days in his studio, transforming coarse slabs of marble into delicate birds. He says he beats raw material into shape. She watched him once with Albert and laughed at Papi's singing. He banged on great cast iron masses, shirtless and drenched in sweat because of the blue flame of a blow torch. Mamie says his habit of roaring off-key postwar French songs makes him notorious in Marcenac. He is the only man whose voice sends his goats scattering across the vineyards. Mamie believes that's why her cheese never turns out quite right. "The goats are too shaken," she says. "It sours their milk."

Sam's father was a dreamer, Papi says, and that his son would have made a great inventor. He thinks Sam has the gene but Mamie believes that, had her son been more grounded, he would have never fallen for "that woman," and that one inventor per family is more than anyone can handle. Sam thinks the man with the flowers she once saw walking away from her mother's tomb has to do with the "that woman" Mamie throws at Papi's face when they argue. Sam asked Truffle one day, her grandfather's favorite hunting dog, the one she shares secrets with—those she keeps even from Papi—if he knew the truth. The dog is also eight and he was three when her parents died, but in dog years, Truffle is a lot wiser and he should remember them. "Tell me who the man is," she whispered and closed her eyes, partly to keep the tears inside but also to see if it was true that people who were close could hear each other's thoughts. She wasn't sure whose thoughts she would channel, Mamie's, Papi's or Truffle's, but the dog always understood her. She had tested the theory when she'd told him with her eyes to help her look for the rabbit she was supposed to feed but had let escape and the dog had understood, so

maybe it would work. After all, Papi told her that she spoke Dog better than anyone he knew. But there was only love in Truffle's eyes.

Sprawled on her father's tomb, Sam watches Mamie, Mamie who said over breakfast yesterday that she will never forgive "that woman" for the death of her sweet-sweet son, and why should she? That's how she ends the conversations Sam tries to start about her mother.

"Everybody says I have my mother's smile and hair," Sam said. She lingered on the word "mother" and twirled it in her mouth like a lump of sugar, but it felt bitter.

There was silence, and Papi looked at his plate. "You look a lot like her," he said after a moment. "But your father lives in you." Mamie chewed her food as if it might have come back to life and stared at the wall.

Sam wanted to ask more but Papi blinked twice—their secret signal—and she kept quiet. Maybe that's why she was a tomboy, because her father was too strong in her and adults always have the last word, no matter what. Maybe she was supposed to be a boy. She might not have looked as much like her mother then. Albert, her best friend, has his father's curly hair and his long eyelashes. But his mother doesn't hate him even if her husband's death came after he lost her inheritance money in a bad business transaction. Papi explained the situation when the bullies taunted Albert. He thought perhaps Sam could help the boy make peace with his grief.

"And you're starting to act a lot like her, too," Mamie said.

"That's enough, Mathilde," Papi said. He wiped his mouth and put his napkin on the table.



“Sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong. That’s how your mother got...that’s how she ended in the state she was in.” Mamie’s eyes turned black. Sam knew she was truly angry and not pretending to get her to listen and do what children were supposed to do.

Papi’s chair fell back and all of a sudden he was standing. But Mamie wouldn’t stop. Sam kept her eyes down.

“You want to know what she was like?” Mamie was spitting. “You really want to know?”

“Mathilde!”

“A slut, she was. A smile like a porcelain doll. And she knew how to use it, too. *Ah oui*. It worked on your father. It worked on the others too. And don’t you get any ideas like that. See where it took her? She wasn’t that pretty when they got her out of the ravine, I tell you. They found her in a tree. Through the windshield she went. Twisted like a doll and bloody with an eye—”

“Enough!” Papi roared, and he scooped Sam in his arms the way he used to do when she was much younger and they were playing “Monster.”

Sam watches Mamie pull weeds from the man’s tomb and wonders if the same weeds will grow back next Saturday or different ones, and if they are new, then are they the children of the old ones?

“Are new plants connected to the old ones under the earth?” she asks Mamie. Mamie squints and presses her lips together. She looks at the roots between her fingers and smiles. “The new ones aren’t born yet. But yes, I think they are connected. They come from the same earth.”

“So children without parents are like plants, then?” Sam asks.

“How so?” Mamie’s voice is barely a whisper.

“They come from the same place their parents come from.” Sam frowns. This is complicated. “So they are like them, then, right?”

Mamie opens her eyes the way she does when Papi announces he has an idea, at the dinner table. There are the same two vertical wrinkles between her eyes and the same long sigh.

“I mean, if one parent is good, and one less good, then the child is both?” Sam’s voice rises a little higher than she wanted.

Mamie looks at the weed, already wilting in her hand, and pulls Sam close. “The new weeds are connected to the parent weeds, but they are their own selves,” she says. She caresses the roots and hands the weed to Sam. “See how they have individual roots? That’s because they have their own life, too, their own destiny.”

“Even if they look just like the mother weed?” Sam asks.

“Mother weeds are difficult to understand sometimes. But they love their children,” Mamie says. She takes Sam’s chin in both hands. “For that, they are good mothers. And the children weeds are good too.”

“And grandmother weeds?”

Mamie looked down and then deep into Sam’s eyes. “They are worn and tired,” Mamie says. Her eyes are shiny. “And sometimes they become what they don’t want to be. But they love the children weeds. Always. They come from the same soil.”

## I KNOW THE LANGUAGE OF THE WIND

The Tramontane blows strong again and Elodie smiles. Antoine will speak to her tonight. She closes her eyes and sees the rifle against the wall, the rifle she no longer needs. She sits on the rocking chair Antoine made nearly ten years ago with the branches of a chestnut tree, the one that was struck with lightning and that she thought would never be sturdy enough for furniture. She sits and waits on the terrace by the wind chimes. Eight of them. One for each year since Antoine's death. Elodie likes the way the sun lingers on the metallic rods, the way it sends slivers of light towards the vineyards that border the village. Marcenac is beautiful and full of memories, even if Antoine left her to grow old without him. But she is not angry. It is the way things go and she waits for her time. She pulls the blanket around her shoulders. She is cold now, even in spring. The doctor will be here soon and she will no longer feel the chill. She leans back and caresses the largest wind chime, the one she hung from the roof for the first anniversary of his death. It is her favorite, perhaps because it captures a piece of the Mediterranean, and with it Antoine's love for the constant changing of its colors. She sits and waits for him. He rarely says more than a murmur because she hung the chimes in a protected part of the terrace, where the Tramontane can only caress the rods and not fling the metal around. He speaks only to her. He whispers. It is peaceful here and Elodie can breathe, away from the prying eyes of children who watch her, intrigued by the woman who listens to her husband in the wind.

She sits on the rocking chair and waits, eyes closed and thinks it would be alright if her heart stopped just now. It would be alright. There is no one behind her, no one left to miss her.

Like the woman the doctor told her about, the woman who feeds seagulls every day at five, down by the fishing boats below, in Collioure, because her father told her that he would come back as a gull. The fishermen complain about the bird shit on their boats but Elodie smiles. She would like to meet the woman, but the images that play in Elodie's mind are enough.

Enough to keep her waiting for the next shot of morphine. Before the morphine, there was the rifle. Antoine's hunting rifle. It was the priest who found her, sitting at the kitchen table, the rifle taken apart in front of her, the way she remembered Antoine did when he cleaned it before setting out to shoot hares and perhaps a boar if he was lucky.

"A well-oiled gun will not jam," Antoine had told her. "A sure shot."

The priest found her and sat at the table too, his eyes darting between her hands and the gun. She had left her door unlocked so the doctor could remove her body without breaking it. After that, the priest visited her weekly, when he found out about the diagnosis that gave her five months at most, even though it has been eleven now, and more to come, she fears. He always knocks on the door and calls her name and sits with her for a moment. Elodie knows he is making a reconnaissance trip for the doctor, but she likes his shyness. She watched him that day gather the parts of the rifle and put it together. His hands shook even though he was a hunter too. In his youth, he had been a missionary in impossible countries and his memories were raw like the wounds he had seen, she thought. But the day he found her with Antoine's rifle, his hands shook and he avoided her eyes.

It had taken her four days to gather the courage to clean the gun after leaning her chin on the barrel, thinking of ways to pull the trigger with her feet. Four days of looking for a string or a piece of wire she could attach to the trigger and pull, four days of testing her abilities without

bullets in the chamber, only to fall back, exhausted after the effort of pulling and holding the barrel proved too much.

Today, she waits. The doctor promised her two shots. A double. She wants to laugh but she is too tired. Today, she waits for Antoine. She will tell him she is coming soon.

## THE CASE OF THE MISSING SPRING

The day the church bells rang twenty-seven times at 6 am, the priest admitted that Young Henri—as he was known in the Mediterranean village of Marcenac—should seek apprenticeship elsewhere than with the Church. Which was a problem.

The previous month, during a town meeting, the baker had petitioned to banish the young man to the Spanish side of the Pyrénées after the fifth morning of nearly burning down the *boulangerie*, and with it his livelihood.

“He should work in a crematorium,” the baker said.

“Or in Hell,” his wife added. “He had the ovens hot enough to burn an army of infidels.”

“For eternity,” the baker said. “He’s worse than his father if that’s possible.”

“Don’t remind me of his father,” the fire captain yelled. He stood and pointed a finger at the baker. “For twenty years, I’ve been having nightmares. Twenty years.”

His father, Old Henri, had nearly caused the village to burn down when his home had caught on fire. Old Henri had tried to smoke out of the kitchen the rats that had been attracted by the poison he was mixing to eradicate the rodent problem in the basement of the café *Chez Gustave*. In his time, Old Henri had been known for his penchant for creativity when it came to cooking. He added ingredients and spices based on their color rather than taste and their purpose in a meal. Perhaps that had been why the villagers had rived in creating excuses for avoiding his invitations for dinner. Cooking had been more like painting to him, and poison-making, an extension of his culinary experiments: a disaster.

Some said that Young Henri's clumsiness could have been avoided, had his mother not died bringing him to the world—a sign of the young man's effect on people, according to others—and instilled in him a certain grounding creative children often need. But Young Henri didn't agree. The villagers underestimated him. He was going to be famous. He would have his statue on the *place du village*, next to the fountain. If his father had been a calamity, he would be the one to restore the family name by inventing something useful: he would transform Marcenac's natural spring, channeled through the fountain, into the fountain of youth. Only he knew the location of the valve that the Ancients of Marcenac had used to provide water to the village, when Marceanac was only a clump of houses thrown together in haste at the edge of a vineyard.

Legend had it that Old Henri failed to return from hare-hunting when his son was ten. Ten years later, the elders in Marcenac still believed that he daydreamed his way across the Pyrénées, and since he spoke neither Spanish nor Catalan, could not ask for directions. On windy winter nights, some said they heard a voice calling in the distance but no one volunteered to investigate and disturb Marcenac's peace. The Tramontane, the region's beloved wind, had been accused of carrying more than lonely voices. It brought a cloud of locusts once that devastated the vines before the grape harvest. And so the village learned to put up with voices from the past lest their cherished wind carry news of Old Henri—they would have no choice but to bring him back—or disappear for days as it had during the summer, leaving the village vulnerable. No one was willing to speculate and risk offending the Tramontane.

“I propose exile,” the baker said during the town meeting.

There were cheers and a few barely audible gasps that some said were muffled cries of relief. The mayor wondered about the legal repercussions of sending a citizen away on grounds

of clumsiness. The doctor declared him healthy enough for adventure and wrote a prescription for “fresh air and discovery.” The priest gave him map of the region with Marcenac highlighted in yellow.

After deliberation, Marcenac collected enough money to pay for a train ticket across the border, but the word must have spread even beyond the mountain chain. The young man tried unsuccessfully to seek employment in Spanish Catalonia and was promptly returned by officers of the Spanish *Guardia Civil* with strict orders to keep him busy and on French soil.

The priest had been the only option left when Marcenac went on strike after the young man’s return. There had been another village meeting. The butcher would not let Young Henri near anything sharper than a butter knife. The pharmacist, who had been kind enough to give him a chance, nearly went out of business when the mayor’s wife came close to an overdose because Young Henri mistook the dosage of her medication with that of her constipated horse. Since the incident, the doctor hadn’t been able to hear Young Henri’s name without breaking out in a rash. The mayor tried to convince the elementary school principal that perhaps the proximity of young children might instill a sense of responsibility in Young Henri, to no avail. When the mayor turned to the librarian, she uttered one word:

“Flammable,” she said, glaring over her glasses.

The grocer managed to slip out before the meeting ended, and after reflections, the mayor concluded that if a village could be poisoned by vegetables, Young Henri would find a way. Even the Père Michaux, a character in his own right, and not only because of his status as the village elder, had thrown him out of his garden after Young Henri had uprooted the old man’s prized herb garden, which he mistook for wild flowers. Marcenac sympathized despite rumors



that the Père Michaux found comfort in more than the usual medicinal herbs for his tisanes, which might explain—according to the pharmacist—his peculiar moods.

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What to do with Young Henri had been on the priest's mind since he had felt obligated to take the young man in. After all, Marcenac had pointed out the certain advantage a man of cloth had: divine assistance. As he barreled down the streets of Marcenac to exorcise the demon he was sure had taken residence in the belfry—what else would cause the bells to ring twenty-seven times—an idea germinated in the priest's mind: Serat. Only he, and his capacity to extricate the village from its previous crisis, could save them.

The priest's thoughts were interrupted by a cacophony worse than the one emanating from the possessed belfry. At an hour when, on a normal day, the village would only have heard crows from the rooster that took residence on the tip of the fountain, sirens ripped the night. The priest barely had time to flatten himself against the cemetery wall when the village's only fire truck screamed past him. Shutters flew open and slammed against the walls like a row of collapsing dominoes, and sleepy people poked their heads out like cuckoo-clock birds. The priest lifted his robe to run faster, forgetting that he slipped it on over his naked body as soon as he heard the church bells' rant. Later, he would blush under the compliments about the shape of his legs that looked—according to the doctor's wife—far more muscular than those of other middle-aged men.

When the priest arrived at the church, trailed by people of all ages, dogs, a grunting pig and a stray cow, a bewildered Young Henri was dangling from the bells' rope, halfway up the belfry and about to lose his hold. The bells were silent.

"I lost count," he croaked after the fire captain let go of his shirt collar. "So I started over. Twice."

Two *pompier*s rushed to restrain their chief.



"Serat?" the mayor asked later that day.

"Monsieur Mayor, think about it," the priest said. "Only a man as eccentric as Serat can handle Young Henri."

"Wouldn't it be dangerous, two of a kind, working together?" The mayor was used to appeasing exasperated villagers after some of Serat's contraptions backfired. The village inventor had designed an automatic grape-picking machine that had to be chased in the streets as it sprayed purple juice on the facades of buildings.

"Maybe together they could repair the automated bell ringer," the priest said.

"Or design a machine that can harness thunder and keep us all trapped indoors to die of thirst and starvation." The mayor's eyes were red from lack of sleep. Young Henri had been banned from the village of Collioure, barely a few kilometers below, for tangling the nets on the *barque catalane* of the most patient fisherman in the area, and the only one left willing to give the young man one last chance. But it didn't take the mayor long to admit that if anyone could tame such an irrational mind as Young Henri's, it was Serat. After all, the man had built a

windmill—a replica of Don Quixote’s—to harness the power of the Tramontane in order to generate electricity. The mayor had commissioned more windmills, and Marcenac would soon be the first village in the Roussillon and perhaps in the world to operate fully on wind power. As the unofficial resource for anything that needed repaired, calibrated, or invented—whether useful or not—Serat might know how to channel Young Henri’s overactive mind.

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Marcenac woke to profanities yelled in French, Catalan, and Spanish, in that order. The Père Michaux was bent over the fountain, furiously pumping the rusted handle and threatening the sky with retribution for cutting the water supply. After another string of insults, Michaux picked up his two empty buckets and stormed to the mayor’s house.

“Maybe it’s only a blocked pipe,” the mayor said. His wife, very much used to smoothing relations between her husband and exasperated villagers, brought Michaux a glass of Muscat.

“We’re not talking about a clogged toilet here,” Michaux told the mayor. “It’s not like we can squat in the vineyard and move on.” He emptied his glass and smiled at the mayor’s wife.

“We have a gargantuan problem.”

“Not even a trickle?” the mayor asked.

“Nothing.”

That was a problem. The fountain had been built to capture the water from a natural spring that was believed to have healing powers. The water was known to ease the pain of bee stings, clear acne, wash away nightmares, and it added a crisp taste to the worst coffee, which

was necessary at the *chez Gustave* bistro, according to most of the establishment's customers. In addition, it was free.

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Marcenac investigated the disappearance of the natural spring, discretely at first—there was no need to cause more tension in the village: the twenty-seven bell rings had frayed tempers—then forcibly, to no avail. People held vigils at night, when the Tamontane was the quietest, and listened for a trickle of water. There were rumors of sightings, so many that the mayor held a meeting to vote for the creation of a Spring Brigade in charge of patrolling the streets. There was a talent search to locate the finest ears. Hopefuls came from across the Spanish border for interviews. Sheep herders walked from the Pyrénées mountain chain to offer their help, since they prided themselves with acute earing and a sense of orientation, both key to their profession. As a result, Marcenac learned to make an announcement before dumping the used rinse water from their vegetables for fear of being pounced on by the Spring Brigade. Indeed, the sound of water caused fierce reactions to even the mildest inhabitants. Marcenac registered an increase in the frequency of indoor toilets usage by men. The mayor inspected gardens in search of a wet patch of soil, a certain bubbling beneath the first layer of earth, a difficult task since Marcenac's soil wasn't much more than coarse stone-littered clay that absorbed water without leaving a trace.

When the Spring Brigade failed to locate the natural spring, there was a general outrage in the streets. Marcenac organized a peaceful protest: men, women and children marched arm in arm, empty buckets dangling from their hands. They held banners that read “Free the Spring,”

“No Water No Life,” and “Shame on you, Water Thief.” There were talks of conspiracy. Briefings and updates were held every three days on the *place du village*, next to the fountain. Flowers in vases appeared as offerings. The rooster disappeared. Then one day, the doctor sat at the terrace of *Chez Gustave*, a newspaper under his arm. Since most people stayed inside for fear of being accused of suspicious activity, there had been a decrease in injuries, and the doctor found time for an aperitif before his copious lunch.

“There’s a drought in Spain,” the doctor said, opening the newspaper.

“It means nothing,” someone said.

“Damn right,” another said. “There’s a drought every year in Spain.”

“But if there’s a drought across the border, people might be looking for water.

“You mean... they redirected it?” someone said.

The terrace of *Chez Gustave* went silent. Marcenac reflected. Children knew, with the instinct only children have, that the moment was grave. Even the dogs stopped scratching and sniffed the air for bad news. Marcenac sent a delegate to the mayor’s house.

“A pipeline?” the mayor said. He had retreated to his kitchen, unable to bear the sight of Marcenac pouring its venom in the streets at aperitif time, since the villagers had vowed to hold a protest each day until the healing spring was returned to them. He sat dejected, a glass of *Rivesalte ambré* in hand.

“Retribution for the cows,” the doctor said.

The mayor groaned. The mention, let alone the sight of a bovine still gave him night sweats after the fiasco of October: thirsty Spanish cows had wandered across the border in the vineyards, attracted by the full grapes. The mayor still smelled the stench of the cattle’s rotting flesh after the shooting spree that had ensued, as more cows destroyed the harvest. Relations

between the Spanish province of Catalonia and the French side were still tense. Marceanac was in debt. Some said more than monetary debt. The mayor finished his glass with an expert jerk of the neck.

“But how could they steal the spring without anyone noticing?” The mayor rubbed his forehead. Thinking was painful. He could use some of the healing water.

“Never mind that. It’s already done. What we need to worry about is getting it back.” The doctor was methodical. Marceanac would perish without water.

“How do we get a spring back?” the mayor asked.

“Serat,” the doctor said.

“Serat is an inventor. Do you expect him to invent a new source?”

“He’s a *sourcier*,” the doctor said with a grin. “The man could find spring water under the Mediterranean.”



Young Henri was due to begin his training with Serat the following day. He needed an official invention under his belt. It was the only way to impress Serat, and the only way to become famous. They would revere him and erect his bust on the *place du village*. Children would learn about him in school. He would be in history books. He would be known as the man who kept people young. Forever.

But with the Spring Brigade in the streets after dark, he needed to be careful. He dressed in black, down to his socks and shoes and checked his flashlight while waiting for the clouds to cover the moon. He spread the charcoal of the burnt match under his eyes and winced at the pain

from the blisters on the tips of his fingers. Someone had to invent longer matches. Maybe that would be his second invention. He wrote it down on his black notebook.

Tomorrow, Marcenac would wake up rejuvenated. Young Henri smiled in the dark and remembered he hadn't put charcoal on his teeth (it tasted awful), and that it was crucial to remain invisible. He ran in the night, ran until his ears rang and he tasted iron. And when he found the fig tree in the vineyard behind the church, the one he had marked with his initials after performing the incantations on the spring, he stopped. He knelt and dug into the clay, cursing the blisters on his fingertips.

In the dark, he felt for the tile. He had hung onto it one day when he lost his footing cleaning the empty stork's nest from the priest's chimney; it was the tile that hadn't stayed on the roof but had remained intact in his hands as he slid off the ladder and crashed among the hens, causing them to scatter in fright. He had never admitted his responsibility for the sudden decrease of egg production. Young Henri removed the tile from the hole and reached the rusty faucet he had stumbled upon when burying the priest's favorite vase, the one the clergyman's mother had given him on her deathbed, the one with the family history encrypted in symbols only the priest knew how to read. Young Henri had been too afraid to admit he had watched the vase tumble from its pedestal when he sneezed while dusting it. He turned the faucet back on: two and a half turn. *Voila.*

Tomorrow, Marcenac would drink from a natural spring boosted with magical properties, enriched with the incantations he had read from the priest's notebook. In his youth, the priest had been a missionary and had recorded the beliefs of ancient cultures. In the Maghreb, water was precious. The priest had been fascinated with a tribe that believed in the magical powers of a particular spring that was said to come from the center of the earth. Under the fig tree, Young

Henri listened for the gurgling: water was flowing again. But what if he had mispronounced the incantations? Young Henri crouched, overpowered by the weight of his responsibility. He would add dancing to the magical words, and if God was watching, He would certainly understand and guide his steps. Like a druid, Young Henri stood, solemn, scratched his head and picked up a stick, before raising his arms to declaim impressively long formulas in Latin. Suddenly, as if stung by red ants, he leapt and screamed a jumble of Catalan, Spanish and French, all at a vertiginous speed. He turned in mid-air, a dolphin performing a trick, lost his balance, landed awkwardly like a gymnast after a miscalculated somersault, and flung his arms towards the stars, lost the stick, retrieved it, and resumed the pause for a few second. Satisfied, he strolled back towards the fountain, to inspect his work of art, and to look for a favorable place where his statue should be erected.

That's when he heard the sound, shrill and thick at the same time, between a whistle and the crashing of the Mediterranean on the beach, when the Autan wind blows from North Africa, warm and humid. But that alone was impossible: the Tramontane was blowing—from inland—which meant that the waves could not crash with great power on the beach, a few kilometers away. His thoughts were interrupted by the first drops and he wondered how it could rain when the moon was full and the stars so close. But before he could reflect further, water roared from the *place du village* and gushed as high as the Eifel tower. Marcenac erupted. Dogs barked. Children cried. Women screamed. Men ran. All stood, bewildered: the fountain had exploded.

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The streets of Marcenac had never been so clean. Young Henri stared, unable to comprehend why he hadn't noticed a geyser in the center of Marcenac before. People should be in bed. Perhaps they were celebrating him early. He wondered if the effects of the incantations were already working. People were in their pajamas because they couldn't wait. Their youthfulness had pulled them out of bed. He walked through the crowd, flashlight in hand, checking for diminishing wrinkles and hairlines that reclaimed parts of their skulls, plump lips and slender bodies. But all he saw were wet, angry people who should be in the midst of a pleasant dream.

It was a disaster, a calamity. He had done it once more. He would never be trusted again, never be allowed to train with Serat, the greatest inventor in all of Marcenac, his hero. They had already banished him once, and he came back like a boomerang, but they could throw him in the Mediterranean with a weight on his ankles and no one would find him. Perhaps he could fix the spring? He knew where the faucet was and he was the only one. All he had to do it turn it back two and a half turn in the opposite direction. That was it. He would save the village from itself. And they would build him a statue.

## THE INCONVENIENCE OF SNOW ON THE DAY OF A FUNERAL

It wasn't so much the snowstorm, however unusual in the South of France, that was the problem. It was the body. A body could only last so long before decomposition and the hearse driver paced in the church, waiting for the priest and the doctor to return with instructions.

The two days that led to the storm had been unseasonably warm and wet, and the few people still awake after midnight mistook the first flurries for thick, ethereal rain drops. They would later admit that the influence of a few glasses of Muscat might have altered their sense of observation, but it is true that snow being such a rare event along the Mediterranean, the villagers had grounds not to recognize a potential blizzard. The temperature had dropped overnight and the entire Languedoc Roussillon region had awakened to a Siberian landscape, save for the occasional rows of palm trees.

The burial was supposed to take place in the afternoon, but with ten centimeters of snow in the streets of Marcenac and prediction for another ten by morning, the mayor had ordered the hearse off the road: there was no need for another body before arriving at the cemetery. Particularly since, as was the custom in the village, a proper funeral began at *Chez Marcel* around a bottle of Banyuls to toast the memory of the newly departed. Not that there was much to toast about a woman who had spent her days sitting on a rocking chair on her terrace, listening to her dead husband in the wind. Rumor had it that she had tried to kill herself but couldn't figure out how to work the rifle. Some said she got tired of waiting for death, others that she had

enough of listening to her husband speaking to her from beyond, or from outer space, as the children of Marcenac said.

The hearse driver rubbed his forehead. There hadn't been a funeral since summer and he was looking forward to parading the new hearse. It was too bad about the weather. Who could have predicted a snow storm in the South of France, where it snowed once every ten years or so?



Upstairs in the woman's bedroom, the doctor and the priest watched the snow pile in the streets of Marcenac. The unexpected turn in the weather had added lines to their already mature faces. The doctor's usually ruddy complexion had taken a curious shade, between grayish and yellow, like a papyrus behind a glass case. The priest thinning hair looked like dirty straw, the front half upright on his skull, because of his habit of running a hand over his head in times of stress. Beyond the street, a gray wall seemed to obscure everything. The Pyrénées Mountains were invisible, as if the Spanish border had been erased from the landscape. Even the Mediterranean, barely a few kilometers away, was indiscernible.

Outside, children and dogs stood, mesmerized by the silence; the sea, which they had grown up hearing in the background, was silent. A thought grew in the mind of the children, a thought that spread in panic: the sea was missing. They debated the possibility of a body of water as large as the Mediterranean being trapped under a thick layer of snow. Their only hope, they decided, lay in the fact that the Tramontane was still blowing from inland, and that the mighty wind could only blow the snow away and rescue the sea.

In the room, the doctor pressed his forehead on the window, trying to imagine the void if the Mediterranean wasn't there. He pictured an empty field, trees perhaps, and wondered how people could live away from the sea. Even invisible, its presence was reassuring. He heard the priest shift in his chair and remembered the imminent disaster if they didn't find a solution. The hearse wasn't equipped with snow tires. The mayor had sent his intern, a young man named Young Henri door to door to requisition anything that could serve as chains to wrap on a tire, to no avail. Young Henri had reported to the mayor his suspicion that Marcenac was hogging supplies in case of mass evacuation.

Of course, the doctor thought, they could carry the coffin to the cemetery, but the streets were slippery and no one was trained to walk on ice. Two of the strongest men in Marcenac had fallen from the roof of the mayor's house in an attempt to unclog the chimney blocked by the nest storks had left after flying for Africa, and had broken three legs between the two of them. There had been a collision between a woman bearing vegetables and a mooing calf that had watched its mother careen out of control towards the fountain. According to the analysis of the tracks on the snow, the woman and the cow had travelled beyond the speed limit. The doctor, who doubled as a veterinarian when needed, had found it difficult to apply logic during triage.

"She won't last much longer," the doctor said, his forehead still on the window. "We should have taken her out this morning." He turned to the woman on the bed and shook his head. "We can't keep a body in ambient temperature and expect it to wait for the weather to cooperate, without consequences."

"There was no way to know," the priest said. He held the woman's hand as if to comfort her. "We didn't even know she was gone."

“They say it could snow all night and through tomorrow.” The doctor glanced at the snow falling harder outside, as if the wind had begun flinging it against the glass. “What we need is a freezer the size of a coffin to—” he turned to the priest and let out a laugh. He looked like a young man about to play a joke on an unsuspecting victim.

The priest closed his eyes and held his breath. He didn’t like the intonation of the doctor’s laugh. Not again, he thought, not again. The previous summer, when the cemetery was sliding and the mayor had declared death illegal until the cemetery could be moved away from the edge of the cliff overlooking the Mediterranean, the priest had thought that day the worst of his life. And here he was again, the silent witness to another calamity, without a doubt. He braced himself and wondered if other villages in the South of France were plagued by an abundance of overactive imaginations. He reasoned that Marcenac had to be an exception, perhaps a divine experiment. If God had a plan, He needed to let him know soon. A man of the cloth was expected to be the pillar against which a population in distress could lean.

“A freezer,” the doctor said again. “A freezer.” He motioned to the snow that twirled outside the window, and slapped his forehead.

The priest exhaled slowly and wondered what he had done to end up in this village of savages. The doctor’s eyes were shining and the familiar crooked smile the priest had learned to dread was plastered on the man’s face. Not good, the priest thought, not good at all. As a former missionary, the priest had seen his share of aberrations in his youth, and what people could do in the name of God still baffled him. He had struggled to understand what made people kill their neighbors and had worked hard to bring love and peace to the hearts of those who were deemed lost. All to end, at fifty, in a village of madmen, left to spend what should have been the quietest years of his life among people who could not think rationally and who behaved as if they were in

a race against the rest of the world to come up with the most eccentric ideas in the least amount of time. And they were winning.

“A freezer,” the doctor said, and ran out of the room.



The mayor stepped outside his home to feel the temperature of the snow. He wondered if the proximity of the Mediterranean might have some warming effect, even though he vaguely remembered learning in school that snow needed a constant temperature to fall and stick to the ground. Perhaps the sea would warm the soil, perhaps the snow would melt and they would proceed with the funeral. And their lives. It hadn't snowed in at least ten years—his responsibilities seemed lighter then—and if the white summit of the Canigou was an expected sight in winter, a snowstorm that blocked the roads on the mountains between France and Spain and rendered the border impracticable was unusual. The mayor shivered and buried his hands under his armpits. The Tramontane had strengthened since the first flurries, and it was blowing colder by the minute. He went back indoors, dejected. Snow was beautiful in the distance and on post cards, but a major inconvenience on the day of a planned funeral. He had solved problems before, but for the first time, he felt powerless. The village was his responsibility, and he had a body on his hands, and no way to dispose of it.

Throughout the day, the village had listened to the weather forecast, gasping at the tales of people stranded at the border town of Le Perthus. The *Chez Marcel* café had become the unofficial headquarters, as it did anytime an unusual situation developed. Marcenac watched as news of the closing of the border streamed. The situation was grave.

“These poor people,” someone had said. There had been images of lines of cars and trucks stranded at the border.

“I hope they don’t have any wine in the trunk,” another said.

“Can’t you defrost wine?”

“Defrost it, hell, break the bottle and you’ve got the best Popsicle!” someone said.

There had been laughs but the faces had remained grave. Marcenac depended on its wine production for survival. There had been talks of requisitioning blankets to cover the bottles in the basements. People had debated the order of priority of wine, women and children in case of emergency. They had taken a mental inventory of bottles and livestock, and calculated the possible survival rate, based on appetite and body size. Children, who had been learning about the siege of Rome in school, had filled their pockets with the leftovers from the apéritif—peanuts, olives, chorizo, and sunflower seeds would go a long way.

In his kitchen, the mayor wondered about the legality of closing a border for inclement weather. French and Spanish-Catalan *pompiers*, more at ease fighting fires than rescuing stranded motorists in half buried cars, were celebrated as heroes. Marcenac had dispatched two of their five most experienced *pompiers*, keeping three for fear that some of the villagers might set their homes on fire by accident, so little was the village used to such brutal weather. There were also unspoken fears that, since the Tramontane blew from inland towards the sea, the snow would pile up on one side of the village more than on the others, trapping indoors people who lived on the wrong side of the wind. The *pompiers* would be the only ones with a ladder long enough to reach the bedroom windows or, God forbid, the roofs. There was a pounding on the door that could either forebode a disaster or promise a solution to the dilemma of the decomposing body.

“A freezer,” the doctor said as soon as the mayor opened his door. The doctor was disheveled and out of breath, and the seat of his pants was soaked, a characteristic most pedestrians would soon exhibit in Marcenac when the sidewalks turn to glass underneath a fresh layer of snow. His eyes glittered with a mischievous light often found in the eyes of men half his age, men who haven’t begun worrying about the loss of power of their bodies, men who still believed they were invincible.

“It’s full,” the mayor said. “Hunting season was kind to me. But you might as well leave whatever you have outside. It’s cold enough.”

“Exactly.” The doctor was beaming.



Alone in the bedroom with the woman, the priest felt the need to open the window and breathe fresh air. The putridity of the room made thinking difficult. It had been years since he had smelt the rancidness of rotting flesh, and still, he hadn’t been able to completely rid his nostrils of it. Alone with the woman, he found himself at the bedside of another woman, a woman whose death had been a relief from the brutalities of the jungle soldiers. A woman who had made him question his woes and his purpose in life. He turned to the woman in the bedroom, and felt a surge of anger. Was it fair for a woman who had waited nearly eleven years for a reunion with her deceased husband to die on a snowy day in a region ill-equipped for temperatures less than 5 degrees Celsius? Should a woman’s flesh fester until the doctor managed to reach her house too late to begin the embalming rituals? It was true that the doctor was busy consulting patients taken ill at the mere sight of congealed water falling from the sky.



But should a gentle woman be submitted to the indignity—even in death—of becoming an entire village’s problem? The priest yanked the window open. The wind had gained strength. He watched the snow in the streetlight coil, at the mercy of the Tramontane. Each bulb seemed to power mini tornadoes. There would be no way to bury the woman for several more days.

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The mayor stared at the doctor. “A freezer.” he said. He motioned the doctor towards the kitchen table, where most of the important decisions concerning Marcenac were made over a glass of Muscat or Rivesalte, and some of the mayor’s wife’s renowned cuisine. He poured them both a healthy helping and lifted his glass. “To the sun,” he said. The doctor was grinning. So there was the solution to the more imminent problem, the mayor thought. Snow would preserve the body until the streets of Marcenac became practicable again. All they had to do was find a reasonable place to bury the body, perhaps in the woman’s garden. As long as they remembered where they put her, they would proceed with the funeral when the roads were clear. But the priest was another problem, perhaps worse than that of getting rid, no matter how temporarily, of a body. The priest would oppose what he would refer to as the desecrating of the memory of a human being. But then, there was the matter of conventions.

“The hell with conventions,” the doctor said. “It’s a matter of survival.”

“But if the word spreads that we are burying our dead in a hurry under a pile of snow in the garden, what will people think?”

“Since when do we care what people think? How many villages do you think have had to outlaw death because the cemetery threatened to slide into the Mediterranean? What’s one more death-related decision?”

“One too many.”

The doctor stood. “Then think about the consequences of letting this body rot. Do you want to be responsible for an epidemic?”

“Of bad ideas?”

The doctor was pacing. The seat of his pants stuck to his body. “Mothers wailing when the last of their children has to be buried,” he said. “Fathers pounding at your door, calling you an assassin, people contorted with pain in the streets, mass burials, in haste, in the vineyards because the cemetery is full.”

“Ridiculous,” the mayor said.

“Contaminated grapes.”

“The ruin of Marcenac.” The mayor gulped the last of his wine and stared at the window: the Tramontane was flinging snow flurries against the glass. The phrase “silent killer” came to his mind. He wondered if it applied to the snow or to the rotting body.

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Upstairs in the woman’s bedroom, the stench thickened the air, despite the opened window. The priest watched the mayor spread blankets on the floor, but when the doctor walked in with the stained tarp he used to cover his tractor on rainy days, he closed his eyes. Staying in the room made him an accomplice, yet in leaving he was abandoning the woman to these

savages. He stood, debating the possibility that if God had a plan, He might not want to let everybody know, and that perhaps this time, it would be good not to be involved. He felt tired. Two years in Marcenac were more exhausting than ten roaming the jungle. Such a concentration of catastrophes in a village of 150 people must be an anomaly, he was sure. When he heard a thump followed by the crackling of the tarp, the priest decided he had had enough.

By mid-afternoon, Young Henri ran through the streets with reports of blackouts in the fishing village of Collioure, barely a few kilometers away. Marcenac met at *Chez Marcel* to assess the situation. According to the latest weather update, the situation bordered on catastrophic: the weather stations in all of the Languedoc-Rousillon broadcasted a red alert. There were forecasts of 180 to 220 km-per-hour winds, in addition to predictions of more snow. In his youth, the barman had corresponded with a man who had lived in the tropics, a man with stories of uprooted trees slammed against the façades of buildings, of roofs ripped like the top of sardine cans, and of shocked people wandering the streets in search of food and water.

“*Alors*, who cares about looking for water,” someone said. “With all that *cochonerie* piling-up in the streets. We light a fire and *poof*, it’s drinkable.”

“*Bon*, I don’t know about you, but we just stay home and have a few bottles, like civilized people,” another said. “I don’t know why we have to worry about melting snow and all that business.”

“I’ve seen dogs pee in it,” someone added. “And children.”

The lights flickered. A shutter slammed. There was a scraping above, faint and looming, like the shifting of two tectonic plates, then a thud. The window grew smaller, encased in a cottony mass. They held their breaths. A dog howled, or perhaps it was the Tramontane. Because the wind was a natural presence in the region, people only noticed it when it stopped, a rare

occurrence, and for normally no more than three days. There was a certain tension, a thickness of the air, as when too many people share a small space. They remembered the week the Tramontane vanished during the summer. It had brought torrential rains and worries that the world as they knew it would disappear. But now, there was silence at *Chez Marcel*. No one had considered the possibility of an excess of Tramontane. It was unconceivable, like the idea of too much wine.

From the street, the priest was struck by the softness of the light that emanated from *Chez Marcel*. The window glowed. It exuded light, radiated warmth. For an instant, he was a moth; he understood his mother's words, his mother who had told him when he was a young man, that there were no right choices, no wrong decisions, only commitments and the respect of others. He stood in the wind, in the snow, disheveled and shivering under his inadequate coat, and wept. He closed his eyes and he was in the jungle again, serving a purpose. He walked to the light. Inside was his commitment, his life.

Someone brought a rusty radio from behind the counter, a VHF that had been salvaged from a sinking *barque catalane*, one of the colorful fishing sailboats of the region. They scrambled for batteries. They huddled around the voice that seemed to come from the center of the earth. "...*advised to stay indoors...68 knots winds...at your own risk...*" The voice seemed to hesitate a moment, then stopped abruptly. There was a sort of cough, the crackle of static, then nothing. They were silent.

## THE RED BALL

There are Knight Templars in Collioure. Ghosts and apparitions, murmurs in the wind and rumors of horse gallop in the streets late at night. Some say the Tramontane, blowing strong from the mountains, brings echoes of history and long forgotten memories to life. In the Roussillon, the wind is part of the family, revered, feared, and powerful enough to fuel forest fires in summer during the dry season. I grew up hearing of flames leaping from vine stocks, flames that ruined entire families' livelihood in minutes. My grandfather used to say that if winds had enough personality to earn names, we owed them respect, and in the South of France, the Tramontane is part of the family, taken in consideration when making plans, capricious enough to delay a regatta; playful, forcing trees to grow permanently bent; fierce at times, capsizing small boats, and yet silently thanked for drying clothes on a line at record speed or for pushing kids on bicycles.

The seaside village of Collioure was our playground, and the Knight Templar Alexandre and I once saw, our secret. He stood, my brother swore, at the foot of the Arabian tower, at the end of the walkway along the Mediterranean, an apparition straight from our history books. We pursued him, leaped from fantasy horses, spied on an imaginary enemy whose ships we waited for while braving the splashes of the waves that crashed on the walkway that led to the Arabian tower, a vestige of history.

The Tramontane stole a red ball, perhaps from the hands of another boy. Alex saw it first. My grandparents were far behind, strolling. "Look! Look, Arnaud, look." He pointed towards the

walkway. The ball was so bright, shiny and new, bobbing on the sea along the walkway. It would soon skip towards the open waters. I dropped my imaginary sword. The battle cries faded. I wanted it. I should have it. I was the oldest. Alex stood, mesmerized. The silence, unusual in the Roussillon, a region overwhelmed by the constant assault of the wind was eerie. The Tramontane had abated for a moment, trapping the ball between two cracks on the stone wall.

“It’s just a ball,” I said

“It stopped. Let’s get it.” Alex ran. He looked over his shoulder, hesitated, then stopped when he saw that I wasn’t catching up with him. The Tramontane whistled in my ears. “Hurry, before the wind gets it,” he screamed.

My brother could run. He was getting better each year and there would be a time when I would have to admit defeat. But I could swim. I would never let him get better in the water. It was my territory. On land, though, even with the wind in my back, I knew that I wouldn’t catch Alex. He was electrified.

I was the leader by default, as eldest sons are expected to be, but I would have relinquished the responsibility, had I not been pressured to keep an eye on my brother. Alex’s natural diplomatic skills often bailed me out of a poor decision. He did so gracefully and it enraged me. He was precocious and gifted, naturally charming. I envied his charisma. And he was oblivious to my struggle as the unwilling keeper of a force too strong for me: a curse that had followed the firstborn males of my family since a brother watched another die during the Spanish Civil War. But I refused to believe in curses, even though I felt the doubt tug at my resolve: my grandfather and my father were cowards. I was next in line. My mother’s belief that an outside force lay concealed, ready to ambush me caused a rift with my grandmother who blamed her daughter-in-law’s irrational beliefs on her being gypsy, a reasoning she was careful

not to throw in my mother's face, given the mysterious powers attributed to gypsies. I didn't believe in curses.

I wanted the ball. I was too old to play with an inflatable ball, but I had to keep it away from him. I was the eldest and it should be mine.

"Alexandre!" My grandfather's voice jolted me out of my reverie. It bounced back, feeble, against the wind. He looked frail in his thick coat.

"Alexandre... the... Arnaud... him!" The Tramontane muffled his words.

I waved. "It's okay," I mouthed. He was trying to run, leaning against the wind. He turned to my grandmother who motioned for him to go.

Alex stopped before the ball. It was a lot larger than it had seemed at first, a full two feet in diameter, glossy, enticing. The wind had wedged it in a crevice against the thickness of the stone walkway so that the ball looked like an apple with a missing slice, glistening from the water that splashed over it. At the precise spot where the wind had trapped the ball, the walkway angled sharply towards the open sea. There, the ancient stone dipped, eroded by centuries of pounding from the waves that had created a depression about a meter wide before the ball. The stone was slippery and we had only been allowed there alone in the past year. We had heard of a man who'd slipped and broken his leg late one night and had been found drenched and delirious by morning. The Mediterranean had a way of sneaking onto the jagged walkway, lying in wait. I had seen it boil under the power of the Tramontane.

Alex leaned forward, trying to reach the ball without stepping in the pool of water that had filled the gap left by the erosion. I knew he was trying not to get wet, since the memory of the previous week was still fresh in our minds. He had slipped when jumping over a puddle created by a depression on the rocky surface of the walkway, and fallen in slow motion, his eyes

wide, his mouth contorted by the fear of the reprimand he knew would follow, pale after the humiliation and discomfort of spending the rest of the afternoon with wet pants that screamed “I fell in butt first.”

The ball moved slightly.

My grandfather’s steps echoed behind my back. I was surprised by the look in his eyes, by the fear and something else I could not understand. The Tramontane brought my grandmother’s scream of “come back, both of you.”

Alex stretched a little further over the puddle, a look of concentration in his eyes. His hand made contact with the ball that flattened under his weight. Alex turned and grinned like a runner whose chest is first to touch the tape stretched across the finish line. He was beautiful. I hated him. My grandfather almost reached Alex’s jacket. The Tramontane abated for an instant and held its breath. A shadow moved across the sun and I heard the shriek of a seagull. The wind slapped my neck and I felt my grandmother’s primal scream. I still hear it today on windy days, even though I have moved to a country where winds have no names, where the wind doesn’t have a life of its own but is part of an expected pattern of seasonal metrological annoyances.

Rooted to the stone, I watched. I thought of the day my grandfather’s hunting dog pursued a pregnant hare in the vineyard. When he stopped, her belly was ripped and some of the babies were scattered on the dirt, still attached to their mother’s. They were fully formed. I had watched them breathe, watched the steam rise from their heat as their mother’s body cooled, and walked away.

The ball popped out of the crevice with an odd squeak that should not have been audible through the gust of wind, a sort of moan.

My brother disappeared.



Once freed, the ball glided on the crest of the waves, bouncing occasionally as if trying to pick up speed to take flight, part of a mesmerizing ballet, reflecting the sun's light like a disco ball. In seconds it was the size of a tennis ball.

There was a splash, and my grandfather was in the water, struggling against the waves, weighed down by his coat. I think he tried to unbutton it, but the waves were jostling him and the Tramontane was already taking Alex.

I stood, mesmerized. My grandfather wasn't a coward. And if he wasn't, neither was I. If he was in the water, struggling, I should have jumped too.

"Alexandre!" My grandmother's scream brought me back. My brother was thrashing, fighting the water and the wind, impaired by the weight of his jacket and laced, high shoes. He looked so small, his pointy face framed by the bright yellow of his hood. He needed a haircut. His bangs were caked onto his eyes. I was the better swimmer. I had taken a rescue course taught by lifeguards. I was good. But my grandfather was proving them wrong. He would reach Alex soon and it would be over. I smiled. In the distance, the ball had vanished. A wave smacked Alex and he went under. My grandfather thrashed, his hair like a crêpe over the top of his head. His arms were raised and he seemed to pull himself by an invisible rope stretched above his forehead. At the water's edge, my grandmother stepped forward.

"I can't swim," she whispered. "I can't swim." She dropped to her knees.

I was afraid.

"Arnaud!" My grandfather called out, the last part of my name ending in a gargling sound. The Tramontane had taken my brother. All I could see of him was the bright, pointy tip of his hood and his arms, already motionless. His hands were cupped, pale from the cold. His hand had seemed so tanned, framed against the shininess of the ball, only minutes ago. My grandfather

was still fighting. I caught a glimpse of his eyes before the Tramontane pushed him further. I had betrayed him.

Betrayed the man who had raised me as a son. He too, had been trapped between the women of our lives. Together we had escaped to the vineyards that surrounded Marcenac, often with Alex in tow but my brother seemed to sense a deep bond that he instinctively knew to respect. A hand on my shoulder, my grandfather toured his kingdom and handed his secrets to me.

“Can you see the sun, through the skin?” he asked, holding a cluster of grapes in the light.

Against the dense blue-green of the Mediterranean the flesh of the grape seemed to breathe under the translucent skin. I looked at Spain to my right, beyond the Pyrénées, and thought of millions of sun-soaked grapes; I imagined another grandfather, holding a grape, perhaps a Muscatine, sharing secrets in Spanish or Catalan to a boy only a few kilometers away.

“Another week, Arnaud, and we begin the *vendanges*,” he said.

I learned to tell by smell a Muscatine, to gage by the thickness of the fruit’s skin the quality of the wine. I learned to love the harshness of the work that earned us the nickname of sculptors of the mountain. We, growers of the Côte Vermeille, keeper of the tradition of the Vermilion coast were kings of the smallest vineyard in France, a terraced kingdom built by the Knight Templars above the Mediterranean, a kingdom that claimed a piece of rocky land from the clutches of the Pyrénées. How could a man be both cursed and so knowledgeable?

I thought for an instant about making a pact with the force that was supposed to calculate my future. My gypsy grandparents would know what to do. I was half-gypsy myself. I closed my eyes to feel it with my entire body, as if I knew what “it” was supposed to feel like. Perhaps it

was like an electrical current that would rise from my feet to my head, or maybe paralyze me. I waited.

I unlaced my shoes and removed them, one at a time, with a pressure of the toes on the heel of the opposite foot. I stepped in the sea. How cold it felt. I stood, waiting for the curse because I knew now. I was afraid. I stopped when the water reached my waist.

My grandfather was swimming back. Alone. He had abandoned Alex.

I felt the wind on my back, a gentle nudge at first, then a more persistent one. I leaned back against her. She insisted. I resisted. Did I have a choice? A wave splashed over my head, another yanked me sideways. Me? But I was a good swimmer. The wind howled. I felt the sand slide under my feet.

Someone screamed. A man ran as he peeled his clothes, stopping only to throw his shoes on each side before diving. He reached me in a few seconds, as the Tramontane was about to take me. There were people on the walkway, people coming out of the shops and restaurants.

“Grab my hand!” The man yanked me as I was about to slip out of his reach. “Take off your jacket. There. I got you. Take off your jacket. I’ll pull you back.”

“The wind...” I said.

“I got you now. You’re all right.” His eyes swept the sea, searching for the dark shape of my grandfather’s coat and the yellow splatter of my brothers’ hood, as he pulled me to safety. The crowd was thicker and the man handed me to a woman who enveloped me in a soft towel. She was young and pale and stroked my cheek. She pulled a strand of hair from the corner of my eye.

“Poor darling,” she whispered as she pulled me to her.

My grandmother was lead away from the Mediterranean. I avoided her eyes.

## SPANISH COWS

Sam crouched behind a vine stock, as far as she dared to go, past the imaginary line Papi, her grandfather, had told her an eight-year-old should stay. She looked over her shoulder. It was important that no one saw her hiding in the vineyard, or Mamie would ground her. Mamie was different, not like Papi. She didn't understand Sam the way he did. Behind Sam, the ochre rooftops of Marcenac were still visible, and even if she got caught, she could explain her reasoning to Papi. As an inventor, Papi said that if people could use rationale, their choices became more credible, and they had a better chance of convincing others.

Papi would understand why she was too far from the village: like her, he'd cry when the men with the guns had shot the first cow. Silent tears, and he'd wipe them fast, but still, he'd cry. Sam had held his hand the way he held hers when she could not understand the ways of adults, and she knew it'd helped by the way he'd squeezed her fingers. She was good for him, he always said.

They'd watch the cow fall. She'd look surprised, and then just dropped, her head to the side and her eyes to the sky, as if searching for something to hold on to. She'd try to get up once, then closed her eyes. There hadn't been much blood, and the clay soil of the vineyard absorbed it fast, as if to hide the evidence. The wind too, had covered the sound of the gunshot. No one in the village had heard, Sam was sure, because of the direction of the wind. It wasn't like the animals the men and the children of the Marcenac hunted. These were for food and to control overpopulation—Papi explained and she understands now, even if she didn't like to see fluffy

things bleed. Papi had tried to reason with the men when they'd raise the rifle and faced the other cows, but they hadn't listen, hadn't look away from their targets. Too many cows and too much damage, they'd said. The *vendanges* were less than a month away and what's a harvest without grapes?

Papi said it was important to not let people get used to violence, because once they did, they could not turn back. Sam wondered if her village would ever come back, then. She knew people eat beef and that cows died, but the ones the men shot had been left to rot under the August sun for days. The mayor had covered them with a blue tarp until the men with the guns had come back to bury them. With the way the Tramontane blew in the region, people had complained about the smell, even those who wanted the cows dead. Sam didn't understand adults, sometimes.

From her vantage point in the vineyard, Sam held the binoculars the way Papi had taught her. They were old and rusty and not built for her small hands but she had to make sure the new cows were safe. She watched them through Papi's binoculars and concentrated on not breathing too hard. The binoculars were heavy, and without Papi to steady them, the Spanish border on the horizon trembled. Sam lowered them and wondered what would happen if the Pyrénées really shook, and if great boulders tumbled in the Mediterranean below. She would see the Spanish plains of her geography book from her bedroom window, and all of Spain perhaps, all the way to Gibraltar. Papi said on a clear day, it was possible to see the shape of the Tunisian coast. But she could not imagine living away from a border. Papi said that political borders often existed because of natural borders. But the Spanish cows didn't know politics. They only knew hunger and thirst and where to go to satisfy them. The mountain chain was full of holes that let the cows

into France and the terraced vineyard of Marcenac. They were pretty, the cows, white with a few splashes of brown, and some black too, and they didn't know the danger they were walking into.

With Papi's binoculars, Sam saw their eyelashes, soft like the hairy silk-worms her grandfather had taught her to collect delicately, with reverence. Mamie didn't mind the worms as long as Sam left them outside, so Papi had built a miniature enclosure with mosquito netting to keep them from wandering too far and finding their way in the kitchen by accident. Together, they studied them for her school report. Papi said it was important to be aware of small things, and that people should learn from animals, even fuzzy silk-worms. Sam believed that if she could convince the men with the guns that they could learn from the cows, perhaps they would stop the killing.

Crouched behind the cover of the vine stock, Sam searched for the calf. She worried because of the story she read in the paper. People in another village closer to the border had shot a cow and her calf had stayed near his mother's body for an entire day, until some of the villagers had taken him in to raise as their own. She'd told Papi that if the men with the guns returned after they shot the cows to kill another calf's mother, she would adopt him and Papi had smiled.

There were five cows in the binoculars and the baby, too many to keep safe and she wanted to cry, but Papi said crying only helped if it lead to a solution, and she didn't see how she could come up with one before the men with the guns returned. Papi was the inventor, not her. She was still a little girl, even if Papi said she was going to follow in his tracks. She bit her lips and tried to think of something funny to prevent the tears she knew were just behind her eyes, but all she could think about was the calf in the paper. Because of the severe drought in Spain, the paper said, Spanish cows had been set free to wander and eat what they could. Only a few

kilometers separated them from the vineyards in the Roussillon region—the French side of the border—and the vineyards seemed their destination of choice. The paper had talked about politics and money but Sam had only seen the picture of the calf waiting next to his mother's body.

During the village meeting, a woman had said that the Spanish cows were helping prevent fires from spreading across the region. Sam wished she was here now. She could have talked to the men and perhaps find a solution. It was summer and a time of drought, and there were often wildfires, the woman had said, and even if some cows preferred the young shoots and the grapes, most animals were eating the dry, yellow grass that always grew between the vine stocks. And with the Tramontane blowing, if a wildfire started, the vineyard would burn, as it had once before, and the men with the guns would think that the cows were not so bad after all. But the woman was probably arguing with the mayor, now, about the best solution for Marcenac. The entire village had started arguing when the *Père Michaux* had caught the first cow eating grapes and the leaves of the vines. Sam cringed when she thought about the last town meeting. Papi had taken her there so she could understand the killings, but adults always seemed to behave worse than children. Sam thought children were wiser than adults. She got angry when she remembered the meeting, and how no one had agreed. All they'd do had been argue about what hadn't mattered to the cows, and a disease that hadn't made sense:

“*Bon*, And what about the ‘blue tongue’ virus,” someone said, at the meeting. “And what if it spreads to my cows, *hein?*”

“Bovine fever, bovine fever,” another one said. “How do you know they have it?”

“Because they're cows from Southern Catalonia, that's why,” someone shouted from the back of the room. “That's where the virus started.”

“Oh, so it’s a Catalan disease, now?” an old man said.

“Don’t bring Catalonia into this,” someone answered. “We’re talking about cows, not rivalry between French and Spanish Catalonia, now.”

“Order,” the mayor yelled. They were quiet because he surprised everyone by climbing on a table. “We’re trying to find a solution, here, not discuss linguistic superiorities.”

“Superiority, my ass,” someone mumbled.

“Last time I checked, there were bulls, too,” a frail looking woman said.

The room had gone silent before whispers of “bulls” ricocheted on the walls. Someone had proposed anesthesia and transport back to their rightful owners, across the border. Sam had wanted to cry.

Sam liked listening to adults, but she believed people had lost their minds. She missed the way the village was before Marcenac became part of Europe. Because Europe stopped paying cattle owners in Spanish Catalonia, the cows have to find food on their own. She thought it was unfair because cows were just cows and they didn’t understand business. Papi said the cows could eat one hectare of vines in a day. It was a lot of territory, and people were angry because they had to feed their families.

Through the binoculars, she saw the men with the guns. They looked like hunters. They had returned sooner than Sam had wanted them to. She was not afraid of hunters. Papi hunted hares and Mamie made the best *civet de lapin*. Papi even took Sam hunting sometimes, but she’d close her eyes when he told her to pull the trigger. Papi said that it was good to know where food came from, and that a girl should know how to shoot as well as a boy. She shot almost like her best friend Albert. Papi had taught him too, and Papi said Albert could be a sharp-shooter and protect the president one day if he wanted to.



The men with the guns looked like hunters but there were too many and they walked like the men she'd seen at the grape festival. They spoke too loudly and with their hands, and she wonders if they were afraid too. Mamie said that people hid behind their gestures when they were afraid, like peacocks behind their tail. Papi called it a defense mechanism. She wondered what the men had to protect about themselves. Papi said that people and animals were very similar. The men with the guns walked the way older people did when the Tramontane blew hard towards the Mediterranean and the only way to stay standing was to lean against the wind. But they were not that old and frail. She watched them through the binoculars. The men swayed a little and their legs were spread apart, like the fishermen who sold their catch in the harbor of Collioure a few kilometers away. They were getting closer to the cows. She didn't trust the men, and their swaying worried her. She wished Papi were here. People respected him in the village. He was part of the council and the council made the right decisions. But today, even the council was divided. Marcenac was broken and she needed to save the calf. The cows too, but she knew she could only do so much. She was just a little girl with binoculars. Papi had told her that as long as there was life, there was hope. But how could she hope with nothing but binoculars?

Sam stood from behind the vine stock and let the binoculars rest against her chest. The strap was wide and it forced her neck down but she needed to look brave if she wanted to save the calf. Papi said it was important to always look bold when we were afraid, because people were like animals: they read body language and if they knew we were afraid, they would take advantage of the moment. She kept her eyes on the mountains and was careful not to trip on the stones that litter the clay soil of the vineyard. She tried not to imagine more cows on the other side of the Pyrénées, thirsty and hungry, and walking to their death. As she approached, she heard the crunching of the clay under her feet, flaked and cracked. She could barely hear her

steps above the tam-tam of her heart, and she wondered why the men with the guns hadn't turned to face her. Maybe they were waiting for more cows to cross the border. It would be mass murder.

Sam was close enough now, close enough to see the curls on the calf's head. He was cream-white with patches of brown on his face and looked like ice cream. His eye lashes curled like Albert's and she understood why the village bullies said Albert looked like a girl. She was close enough to smell the men, too. They stank of tobacco and something else, acrid, like Papi when he'd spend hours outside working on an invention. But she wasn't afraid of Papi's smell. If the men's smell was that of fear, then perhaps the cows would understand that they were in danger and leave.

The men hadn't seen her yet. The calf turned to look directly at her and the men lifted their rifles. She heard a sound and thought it came from her throat when the men turned to her. They lowered their guns and were silent. Sam spoke but couldn't hear her words. Perhaps she was only thinking. The calf ran to a white cow, probably his mother. The men spat on the clay and shifted their weight from one leg to another. They spat and wiped their foreheads and their necks with the palms of their hands. They spoke to her but she could not understand their words. She knew the meaning of each word but her mind didn't let her make sense of the sentences. She was just a little girl, she wanted to tell them, and children shouldn't see certain things. Maybe she said it, or she screamed, because there was Papi next to her suddenly, out of breath, and the men were looking down. Papi's face was wet and there were dark patches on his back and under his arms. And something in his eyes she hadn't seen before. He put her hand in his and pulled her away. She looked back and the calf was leaning against his mother, watching. The men had not raised their rifles.

## MATHILDE'S SECRET

She knows the woman across the vineyard isn't happy. She's watched her before, standing by her front door, gazing at the Mediterranean. Mathilde is good at reading body language. She always was. She gets it from her mother. Her mother used to say then that an unhappy woman could always spot another. Mathilde never understood then, until now.

She comes to the vineyard when Sam is in school and her husband busy with his inventions. It isn't easy to bring up an eight-year-old and to live with a man who daydreams and spends his days in a shed, inventing what doesn't need to be invented. But Francis loves her, she knows, perhaps not as passionately as he used to but at nearly sixty, it can be expected. She, on the other hand, must have been old since the beginning of their marriage. She smiles and covers her mouth. She never felt love for Francis, really, only tenderness. After Jean, passion was difficult. After Jean, anything was difficult.

Mathilde hasn't thought herself unhappy, until now, not really. Of course, there is the occasional gloom. And certainly, there were tragedies but she has learned to accept those. Tragedies are a normal part of life. That's another thing her mother used to say. But Mathilde feels unhappy, not sad. She feels the unhappiness of a wasted life, of false hope and misplaced yearnings. It took the slight dip of a woman's shoulders, like a mirror of her own, to make her see who she truly was: old, faded, wasted.

She walks to the edge of the vineyard, carved in terraces from the flank of the mountain. She stands under the almond tree where she can see the Mediterranean, below, and the roofs of

isolated houses, deep within the trees at the feet of the Pyrénées. She likes the reassuring shape of the mountain chain, the idea of being at the very end of the country, the last French bastion before the Spanish border. She feels the resilience of the region, here, and draws strength from it. She's been seeking refuge in this rugged landscape since her son's death five years ago. Francis has his inventions and experiments and his granddaughter. She has the mountain. Francis has a connection with Sam that Mathilde envies. Sam is precocious for an eight-year-old. She's beginning to ask questions about her parents but Mathilde cannot go back to the days before the accident that changed their lives, and so Francis has become the connection with the past, the storyteller. He fills the gap with ease, dips in his fertile mind for memories he embellishes, and builds a future for Sam. He thinks Sam will follow in his tracks. "She has vision," he says. Vision. Mathilde shakes her head. She knows Sam will get tired of life in a tiny village, tired of the region and move as soon as she's able and then who will take over? She's seen it too often. No one stays anymore, and when the young realize what they've left behind, it's too late. Foreigners have grabbed the land and renovated farm houses, and the locals have become guests in their own country. Francis says Mathilde thinks too much and that life is to be lived in the moment, and that she needs to focus on what's left ahead, but she's been feeling drawn to the past. Especially lately, with the woman across the vineyard.

She's been watching them, the woman and her husband, since they moved to Marcenac a month ago. They live with abandon, without the reserve of people who grow up on the land. It's a game to them, a life they can leave, and all they have to do is pick up where they left off and file this hiatus as an experiment. They stroll in the streets of the village with the innocence of children. They take photographs of banal objects to be framed and displayed on their rustic walls for their city friends to admire. They want to fit in, they say, adopt the lifestyle, but all they do is

travesty the locals and accentuate their difference and superiority. But Mathilde sees right through them. There's nothing superior about these people. She was one of them, long ago, before Jean fell off a cliff and ended years of bliss. She rips a leaf from the vine and tears in tiny strips.

The woman's husband could be her father. He's old enough. She saw them on the *place du village* during market day, she—her name is Suzanne— was stroking his hair as if she needed some reassurance that she truly belonged to him. Mathilde understands. He's good looking now, Suzanne's husband. Sexy, in a sort of feminine way, but decent to look at nonetheless. She knows how Suzanne feels. It's good at first. The tenderness, the comfort, the feeling of protection. She still has a few years, Suzanne, before she begins to look at men her age a little too long, a little too often. Jean knew before she did. He watched for the signs, he worried. And then encouraged her:

“There'll be a time when I won't satisfy you anymore,” he'd say.

“Jean, we're fine.” He was falling asleep more often, that was all.

“I want you to be happy.” He had this look of concern and sadness and she wanted to kiss him for it. “I want what's best for you.”

“You are.”

“I can close my eyes, darling.”

“Are you encouraging me to have an affair?”

“Not an affair. Sex.”

“Isn't what an affair is about? Sex, lust, the thrill, maybe, an escape.”

“Sex with a younger man, and love with me.”

“Jean, this is ridiculous.”

But he was right. She grew restless. And that's what's looming ahead for Suzanne, and she feels it, already. She's unhappy. There's the doubt, creeping back, this early feeling of what-am-I-doing-the-man-is-older-than-my-father-feeling that she managed to tame; the staring of people who try not to; the shaking of the head, oh, barely perceptible, but there none the less; and then the shame, nagging until it can no longer be contained, and it swells, swells and swallows all other feelings, poisons the love.

That's where Suzanne is, now, battling the doubt that she must have tried to ignore in the beginning the way Mathilde had. She can see it by the way Suzanne holds her shoulders together, a little too low; and the pinch on the corner of her lips, barely perceptible, but a woman who's been in this situation can always spot it. That's what her mother meant, when she clicked her tongue and shook her head. She knew. Mathilde's father died when she was ten. It's a wonder she was born at all. "How'd he do it, keep it up, I mean," she heard the neighbor's wife say, and then the laughs, when Mathilde was too young to understand but old enough to feel the scorn in the woman's voice. She leans against the almond tree and wonders, jaws clenched.

Suzanne's husband is British. She heard him at the *boulangerie* when he was trying to pronounce *baguette* without an accent. Suzanne's French, but not from the region. A city girl too, like him. They think they can come down to the South of France and act like kings. French or not, she's as much a foreigner as he is. They buy old farm houses—where do they get the money to renovate a *mas* like that—and think that's all they need to live off the land. They call themselves farmers. Ha! She wants to laugh. They think it's bohemian. They come and buy the entire region, one *mas* at a time. They go out and get old farm equipment—vintage, they call it—and decorate their walls and herb garden with it. They grow their food and sell it at the market and try to mingle with farmers. But they don't see it, do they, the harm they do.

Birds peck at the few grapes left behind after the harvest. They zoom in precisely where the fruits are, and fly away, satiated. How does it feel like, satiation, complete satisfaction? Francis never knows what she needs, he never knew, even in the beginning. Oh, he's a good man, she knows that, but she wonders what her life would be today, had Jean not died. Here's the doubt again. He would be how old, now, close to a hundred? Poor Suzanne, that's what she's got to look forward to. Mathilde still feels remorse, even though Jean's been dead for thirty five years. She shouldn't have left him, she knows now, but what do you know when you're thirty and you're with a man twenty seven years your elder? She's been thinking too much lately. She wants to speak to Suzanne. Mathilde didn't listen either, when her mother tried to warn her.

"He's older than your father." That's all she heard. And he was, but how dashing. In a clever way, not in your face sort of style like the men she'd seen in restaurants and movie theaters, with pretty women—some only girls, really—men with dyed hair slicked back to hide their baldness; men with pants too tight and with thick-skinned hands weathered as cowhide, hands with protruding veins that seemed so out of place on the smooth-skin girls. Jean was dashing like the heroes of the novels she'd read under the cherry trees when she was sixteen, the men that made her close her eyes and place the book down to catch her breath for a moment before daring to turn the page. He looked so much younger than her father, too. She thought she could trick time and fate. And she did for a while. Seven years. Blissful years of travels and insouciance, years of happiness and ecstasy that failed to prepare her for the brutal end.

Before Jean's accident, they used to take long morning walks on the beach or climb up to the Calanques to escape the bustle of Marseille. The cliffs were a short drive from the city but the change in atmosphere such that they felt renewed. He fell in love with Provence brutally, without warning, and she followed, taken aback at first by the force that drew him to a place she

only saw as such, a place, then willingly. On days when the Mistral blew in gusts, he felt restless and needed altitude to enjoy its full effect. Jean loved the harshness of the landscape, the way the whiteness of the limestone reflects the Mediterranean and how the rocks give the sea its turquoise shade as the sea creeps beneath the waters. He drank his life in full gulps and never stopped to taste it before making a decision. He was fifty-nine then, looking twenty years younger and she thirty-two and feeling her best. They had walked to the calanque of Sugiton where the view is breathtaking, so he could photograph the light bouncing off the rock. The broom flowers were blooming and their thick yellow crescents added to the way the idea of light played in his mind.

“Here,” he said, “perfect,” and put down his tripod in front of his tattered folding stool.

She sat on the other side of the path under a Parasol Pine and watched him, his thick hair a curious blend of ash blond and white ruffled by the strengthening wind, his British complexion an irreparable crimson no matter how thick a layer of sunscreen she forced him to apply. Even with the faded marks of surgically removed skin cancer typical of northern men his generation – men who walked barehead, peeling their shirt at the slightest ray of sun the way a snake would shed its skin—he was stunning.

She closed her eyes, listening to the cicadas’ song intensify as the sun rose higher above the sea. The Mistral howled in the pines, rushed in bursts of unrestrained energy, free from the façades that entrapped it between the narrow streets of the old city. The sound shielded her from the faint bustle of the city below. She felt like a lizard in the sun.

This was paradise.

When she opened her eyes, the stool was gone. She must have dozed off.



“Jean?” The tripod was still in place. The camera was missing “Jean?” He must be looking for a better spot. “Jean!” She rose. He was not on the path. She willed her legs steady as she neared the edge of the cliff. She first saw the orange canvas of the stool hanging from a shrub several feet below. He must have climbed down. He must have walked to get it. Please. Her breath came in shallow bursts. She got on her hands and knees. Her legs no longer supported her weight. The cliff angled sharply inwards and she had to lie flat and drop her head to see the water. The primal scream that began in her heart never rose from her throat. She could not breathe. Below, dangling from a twisted embryonic pine that somehow protruded sideways from the cliff, Jean looked like a discarded rag.

Seven years were shattered in an instant.

She searched for trace of blood, for life flowing out and saw only a trickle around his hairline; she forced her eyes to focus on his chest, willing it to rise slightly, thanking the god she wanted to curse, whispering “darling, don’t move. I’ll get help,” knowing already the bewildered eyes searching for her were the mark of her new life.

It lasted five years, this new life. She went from lover to caretaker in an instant. She took care of Jean, more to prove to her mother she had made the right decision than out of love. Jean turned sixty a week after the accident. He looked eighty. He drooled. He tried to joke but forgot where he was. He rambled, became incontinent.

She moved back to the village, tried to forget, and succeeded for a while, and now this woman has come to remind her of who she’s been all along.

Across the vineyard, Suzanne looks past her husband and waves at Mathilde. A shy smile curves her lips.

## WILD BOARS AND GRAPE HARVEST

It was a splash of sun, out of place in the October dawn, a sliver of light among the vine stocks that made the Père Michaux squeeze the brakes of his Ural 650 motorcycle and nearly wipe out by the gates of the cemetery. Too stunned to cut the engine, he dismounted the old Russian motorcycle, cursed old age, arthritis, and his shrinking frame that made swinging his leg over the seat of the motorcycle more of an adventure each year. He placed his WWII soldier's helmet—that was as close to a regulatory helmet as he would go—on the seat and rubbed his eyes. What was a yellow biplane doing among the vine stocks? He felt for the Swiss Army knife in the pocket of his jeans and approached the plane. You never know, he thought, with a German plane, even sixty-odd years after the end of the war. But the pilot seemed harmless, reading the newspaper, oblivious to the forward tilt of the cockpit and the broken landing gear.

“*Ohé, Bonjour,*” Michaux said.

“*Hullo,*” the man answered. He folded his newspaper and slid his glasses to the tip of his nose.

“Hurt?” Michaux asked, “You need help?”

“Naaahh. Not hurt,” he said and waved. “Waiting for the *gendarmes*. For the report. I keep French police busy. Coffee?” He held a thermos to the window and laughed.

Michaux ignored him and walked around the Albatros.

“We start the *vendanges* today.” He spat and paused, inspecting the uprooted vine stocks and the exploded grapes scattered several meters around the plane. “That’s a lot of lost wine, here. The *Gendarmes* will tow the plane?”

“*Ja*. I pay for broken grapes. No problem.”

Michaux considered the extent of the damage. Like a tree-top flyer, the pilot had skimmed the vine stocks, shaved a surface the length of an airport runway, splattering grapes like pebbles around a skidding car, for at least a kilometer square. The young leaves and sapling were ripped, flung at random across the landscape. It was more than lost grapes and revenue: lost pride, lost dominion of a unique blend of grapes. Knights Templar had established the vineyard during the crusades. It was a disaster.

The wings of the WWI aircraft were mangled, one barely attached to the fuselage. A rainbow of gasoline trickled from the belly of the plane. The pilot would later write in his log that he had attempted to fly over the Pyrénées towards Spain, got lost in the pre-dawn fog and miscalculated the altitude of the mountain range, had run out of gas, and turned around. The vineyard at the edge of Marcenac had seemed a better option than the Mediterranean or the departmental road 914. With its twisted propeller and its wings folded in unnatural places, the plane looked like a fragile dragonfly trying to extricate its mangled body from the vine stocks.

“Flew over from Germany?” Michaux said.

“*Ach nein*. Barcelona and back. But back didn’t work.” He threw his head back and laughed.

“Looks like you need more than coffee,” Michaux said. He walked to the motorcycle and pulled a flask out of the side bag. Below the terraced vineyard, the sea squeezed the sun out of its horizon, reflecting the nascent light’s intensity in the translucent skin of the grapes. Michaux

wiped sweat from his forehead. Too hot for October. The clay crunched under his feet and flaked like the desert he remembered crossing in Andalusia, the year he had ridden his motorcycle across Spain. He shook the flask, paused, shrugged, put it back and reached for another one.

The German poured coffee in the thermos lid and handed it to Michaux, who dumped a healthy portion of Calvados in the thermos, and the rest in the lid.

“*À la vôtre,*” Michaux said and lifted the lid.

“*Prost.*” The German smacked his lips. “*Gut.*”

There was a gunshot in the distance, and another one, closer. The German’s eyes narrowed.

“Boar,” Michaux said. “Wild boars. They come down the mountain and eat vegetables. Grapes too.”

“You hunt them?”

“No. We kill them.”

Another shot, this one close enough to lift a cloud of clay a few centimeters from the plane’s landing gear, caused the German to drop his coffee. A man appeared in the distance. He waved and shouted something that got lost in the wind.

Already, a file of people was approaching with empty green and blue plastic tubs they carried on their backs like hollow backpacks. They wore hats and handkerchiefs around their necks and held thick gloves in their hands. Some wore rubber boots to protect their legs from the aggression of the vines that were reluctant to surrender their fruits. Children held shears and walked with the lassitude of battle-weary soldiers. Another harvest would rob them of their years, until the post-harvest festivities returned their innocence. A handful of dogs weaved in and out of the file. Old men held jugs of wine and women baskets of heaping something under

checkered dishtowels. In the distance, another file of people snaked towards the plane, carrying more empty tubs. At the edge of the vineyard, flat, wooden-bed farm trucks waited for the content of the tubs to be dumped in even larger tubs and crushed by weary feet after a day of backbreaking, finger-numbing work.

The Père Michaux grinned. "Look what I found," he said.

There were exclamations of surprises. A man whistled and another scratched his head. Children regained their youth and ran to the plane, circling it like a herd of hunters. A woman commented on the color of the plane.

"Yellow's too pretty to crash," she said.

There were laughs and whistles as the rest of Macenac approached. The Père Michaux grinned and seemed about to charge admission. The pilot nodded, an amused smile on his lips. The Père Michaux opened the door of the biplane to let the German out but at the sight of blood, a tremor ricocheted on the faces across the vineyard and there was silence. The man tried to close the door but Marcenac had seen.

"We shot him!" someone said.

There was a gasp followed by silence. The German shook his head and tried to speak but Marcenac closed in.

"Get a tourniquet," someone said.

"No," another answered, "it'll cut the circulation."

"*Ah oui*, then they'll have to amputate," another said.

"No, no, he's okay," someone said. "It coagulated."

"*A p'tit cannon*," another one said, "Give the man a glass of Muscat."

"But it's bad for wounds," a child said.

“Alcohol?” someone asked? “Wine? How can it be bad?”

“*Ach, all gut,*” the German said. “Accident. My fault. Not shot.” He made a motion to step out of the plane but Marcenac stepped in and four sets of arms grabbed him. They carried him down the clay path, past the cemetery, across the *place du village*. A woman dipped her handkerchief in the fountain and dabbed the German’s forehead. Children and dogs ran ahead. They knocked on the doctor’s door, but his wife informed them that he was assisting in the delivery of a calf that didn’t want to be born.

They brought the German inside. The leg wound turned out to be just that, a gash caused from the impact at landing, and the bruised chest would give them something to talk about during winter, and about German stoicism too. It wasn’t every day that a WWI biplane fell from the sky, nearly killing its pilot, and on the first day of the harvest at that. They kept the man comfortable until the *gendarmes* reported for the investigation. By then, the pilot was under the influence of French hospitality and a liter of Pastis.

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In his youth, Michaux had been gored by a wild boar and had held a burning contempt for the beasts ever since, even if the scar that zigzagged from his knee to the tender part of his inner thigh had facilitated the many conquests he liked to brag about after a few glasses of Muscat. And so when the mayor’s wife found herself face to face with a forty to fifty kilogram wild boar with tusks as long as carving knives—he weighed at least ninety kilo by the end of the day, and the carving knives had turned to crusaders’ swords—Michaux didn’t hesitate to propose a *battue*.

There had been sightings of wild boars of late, reports of grunting in the dark, tracks of various sizes had been recorded near doorsteps: entire families of wild animals drank in the village's fountain, foraged in the vegetable gardens, and kept dogs, cats, children and gossipers off the streets. Even the rugby field, Marcenac's only patch of grass—a rarity and the mayor's pride in such a dry, windswept climate—had been violated by herds of ruthless animals foraging for worms. Some said there might be truffles under the grass and that perhaps the wild boars were a sign of new wealth for the village, but rugby in the South of France was not to be considered lightly. Whatever delicacy lay under the field, grass was more precious.

Marcenac put up with devoured vegetables, a newfound habit of scanning the streets and gardens before stepping outdoors, and mud at the bottom of the fountain. But when the wild boars took to the vineyards, it was war. Marcenac depended on its production of wine to survive. With wild beasts roaming the vineyards, the *vendanges* were in jeopardy, and with it Marcenac's reputation as the caretaker of an historic patrimony: wine prized by connoisseurs worldwide.

Marcenac rallied behind Michaux. They brought hunting rifles and binoculars, maps and water jugs. Some suggested wine for courage and dry sausages for endurance. Nuts, olives, warm bread and homemade fig and cherry jam were added to the menu. Others offered goat cheese and camembert; dried figs and ripe almonds. After all, the beasts were known for their agility despite their bulk, and a successful hunt depended on a well fed hunter. The beasts were surprisingly fast, as the mayor's wife could attest. They were known to run at least 50 km/h. Despite having been a disciplined runner in her youth—her husband liked to remind his audience whenever possible that he had had to train hard to conquer her—the mayor's wife had dropped the laundry she was hanging in the wind and barely made it to safety.

The mayor joined in the preparations and suggested fitness training and target practice, but with the pressing need to harvest the grapes that hadn't been damaged by a plane crash or rummaging wild boars, they inventoried guns, divided the food, and settled for a midnight battue, which would allow for a safe harvest the following day.

It was agreed that the women and children, the old and the lame would stay behind for the harvest, and that, as soon as the wild boar situation was under control, all would focus on the *vendanges* and try to save the grapes that hadn't been destroyed.

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When the church bells rang midnight, the streets of Marcenac echoed with footsteps, shouts of encouragement from women and children, the clinking of metal from hunting rifles, carving knives, and canteens; the sound of glass bottles, a surprising amount of bottles in backpacks (Muscat for courage, Malaga for endurance, Pastis for recovery, and Champagne for celebration), and the clanking of knives, forks and plates. Hunting dogs and mutts of all sorts, excited by the effervescent mood of their owners, howled, barked and growled, all in deafening dissonance. The cacophony was remarkable.

“*Hé,oh,*” a voice said. “Shine the flashlight to the side. Look for eyes.”

“Then get in front of me with your gun and point,” another voice whispered.

“*Oui,* and in the right direction,” a man yelled as he ducked and shielded his face behind his hands.



In the distance, the plane looked like the skeleton of a prehistoric bird trapped under the moon by the flash of a photographer from a bygone time. The hunting party reached the vineyard.

“*Bon,*” Michaux said. “Group One, follow me. Group Two, behind Monsieur the mayor. We meet under the almond tree.”

“And remember,” the mayor said. “Three shots mean help.”

They separated and fanned in a wide circle towards the mountains, since wild boars came from the cover of the chestnut trees deep in the Pyrénées. They contoured the vineyard, struggled to keep the dogs from breaking their leashes, such was their excitement; they scanned the darkness for movement and wished they were asleep, dreaming of a wild boar hunt; they slipped, fell, got up, panted, begged for a halt, a glass of Muscat for courage and Malaga for endurance, they trudged towards Spain until each group leader announced after a few hours that a collation would strengthen body and mind. With gusto, and each group half a kilometer apart, they partook in a picnic worthy of a last meal and drank more than the priest had years prior, in an attempt to alleviate the anxiety of his first day celebrating mass. Someone commented on the view, another remembered a camping trip as a child; an old man tried to recall the name of the stars. A thin, nervous man suggested they spend the rest of the night here, and that a dark wild boar would stand out much better in daylight. Someone commented on the pertinence and the logic of the remark. Another cleared his throat before nodding and suggesting that perhaps, the cover of darkness might be an illusion, and that it might be worth debating the matter.

That’s when Michaux heard the creaking of a twig. He stopped chewing and nearly spat his wine. He pointed at a tree. His eyes were white in the darkness.

“Impossible,” an old man with bushy eyebrows and a corduroy hat said. “They’re stealthy.”

“Exactly,” a thick man said. He laid the drink down, felt for his rifle and scanned the night.

“What’s your point? What do you mean, ‘exactly’?” corduroy said. “They’re either stealthy and clever and we don’t stand a chance, or they’re stealthy and stupid and they walk right by us, or they’re not stealthy but noisy and we get out of here, or they’re not stealthy and they don’t care because one way or another, they’re a huge mass of flesh and they can run us over in two seconds flat.”

“Exactly,” the thick man said.

“And what exactly do you mean by that,” a young man asked.

Michaux stood, rifle in hand, eyes bulging. “I heard it again,” he said. He looked over his shoulder, scanned left and right, took a step back and two forwards, one sideways and jumped back again. In the process, he stepped on a hand, which triggered an immediate response: an inhuman howl ripped the night. They clambered to their feet; they shot at the moon. There were grunts, growls, barks and yelps followed by a stampede. There was the clinking of glass and a spattering of feet. Men were seen crawling, climbing trees and bumping into each other. Some stood, bewildered, some ran silently. Someone called for his mother. Another prayed faster than a tape played backwards. A dog whimpered, another ran, one sat, another trembled. A pack gave chase to something scurrying in the dark. Michaux stood, immobile.

Half a kilometer away, Group Two waited, unsure of what to make of the panic the Tramontane brought in the dark. There were muffled cries and stifled dogs barks, unrecognizable sounds and unexplained shrieks. Then gunshot.

“Three. Close together. The signal,” a deep voice said.

“No, four. Four,” another said.

“Are you sure?” a high-pitched voice said.

“The fourth shot sounded like an echo,” the deep voice said

“How can it be an echo? There’s nothing it can bounce against,” the high-pitched voice said.

“Against the night?” a dreamy voice said.

“That’s only in stories. In real life, you need a wall, a canyon, something concrete,” a reasonable voice said.

“Maybe it was a sort of stuttering,” the dreamy voice said.

“Stuttering? And how do you get a gunshot to stutter?” the deep voice said.

“They meant three shots but sneezed. So the third one’s longer. Three and a half, maybe, but not four,” a squeaky voice said.

“ Or shook. With fear,” the shy voice said.

“Then it’s danger. They need help,” the high-pitched voice said.

“No, three, is danger,” a trembling voice said.

“Then what’s four?” an impatient voice said.

“A mistake,” the dreamy voice said.

“You don’t mess up counts when you agree that three shots mean danger,” the deep voice said.

“Panic, then?” the shy voice said.

“Panic is the same as danger. Only it might not be,” the squeaky voice said.

“What do you mean?” the deep voice said.

“Well, someone might have thought they were in danger, only they weren’t. Some people get spooked easy,” the squeaky voice said.

“Then they shouldn’t hold guns,” the reasonable voice said.

“But that’s not the point. The point is, they panicked, and we’re trying to assess the situation: did they shoot three times or four? Do they need help or not? Did they panic or not?” the reasonable voice said.

“But what would cause them to panic?” the dreamy voice said.

“Something bad,” the trembling voice said.

“Like something dangerous?” the shy voice said.

“Then it’s even worse than danger,” the trembling voice said.

“How can panic be worse than danger?” the dreamy voice said.

“Think about it. What comes first? Can there be one without the other?” the reasonable voice said.

“Is that a chicken and egg question?” the shy voice said.

“Enough!” the mayor said. He threw his hat on the ground and took a deep breath. He picked his hat, looked at the group and threw it against a tree.

The Tramontane brought more muffled shots, followed by a scream that might have come from a human but sounded more like the scream of a pig about to be butchered. One by one, the stars blinked and vanished as clouds gathered above the men. An owl screeched in the distance. The scream of a small animal was silenced and there was the ruffle of leaves nearby. The wind shook treetops and dropped pinecones that sounded like footsteps.

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When the church bells rang 6:00 am, the streets of Marcenac were once again flooded with the sounds of footsteps and the clinking of bottles, and the smell of fresh baked bread. Small dogs, old and lame ones, left behind, trotted besides their owners, nose high. One by one, women and old men filed to fit on their backs blue and green plastic backpack-like tubs and headed for a long day of grape picking. Children rubbed their swollen eyes, munching on *tartines* of bread and butter. Teenage boys sulked and glared towards the mountains.

With the sun still incandescent over the Mediterranean, the *vendanges* began. From the beach below, the curious sight of hunched backs and posteriors slowly following the rows of vine stocks signaled the changing of season. Soon, leaves would turn from deep vermilion to near purple before shifting to golden, then earth toned. Soon, tourists would flock to the many wine *caves* throughout the region to seek shelter from the heat and taste from gigantic oak barrels the newly arrived wine and the inexhaustible variety of cheeses.

The methodical rhythm of the grape pickers was disrupted by the inconvenience of the plane carcass, like a splinter in the center of the vineyard. In the radiance of the dawn, it looked like a broken toy. The backs straightened to negotiate the extent of the damage. Murmurs turned into scowls and groans that grew as the light revealed the vineyard. It appeared that the wild boars had caused at least as much ravage as the plane. They had eaten a considerable amount of grapes and young leaves. But what was remarkable was the number of holes the beasts had dug in the ground overnight. Some had dug fiercely enough to uproot a disconcerting number of vine stocks.

There was a commotion ahead beyond the trees, and some would later swear they heard grunting and a thud; others believed the thud came first, followed by a scream. All stood and

watched as what they first thought was a freight train crashed its way through the thickets and towards the vineyard. A family of wild boars rushed at them. The young came first, as if in training, followed by grunting, muscular adults. They were surprisingly swift for their stature and tank-like grace.

“To the plane,” someone screamed, “to the plane.”

Those close enough scrambled on the wings and the fuselage, all of which creaked under the excessive weight. A graying boar skidded to a halt, causing the entire herd to stop in mid-gallop. The larger male listened. The others snorted in the clay, upturning rocks and digging. There was a scream and the plane collapsed in slow motion: the upper wings fell on top of the lower ones. People dashed from under the plane. An old man yanked a boy out of the way as the lower wing collapsed. A woman crawled under a vine stock.

The wild boars kept on digging, oblivious.

“Truffles,” an old woman said. “It’s like candy to them.”

“We have candy?” a blond child asked.

From the thickets came another commotion that turned into a stampede. What seemed the entire male population of Marcenac ran towards the grape pickers, followed by a group of ten or so agitated wild boars. There were gunshots. People ducked, threw themselves on the ground, screamed, and whimpered. Saints were invoked, angels and even God. The sound of breaking glass stood out.

“Don’t shoot the wine,” Michaux roared.

Group One barreled from the woods in various phases of panic, exhaustion, anger and bewilderment and sought refuge among the grape pickers.

The second group of wild boars stopped as abruptly as the first had, and rummaged the soil. Soon, the air was filled with low grunts. The wild boars were on a mission to upturn the entire perimeter of the vineyard, centimeter by centimeter. Nothing, not even another commotion coming from the mountain flanks could distract them, as Group Two emerged from the woods.

“*Ohé*,” the mayor said. He brushed his pants and ran a hand over his hair. He inspected the situation, took account of the casualty and said: “Black gold.”

“Oil?” a woman asked.

“No, truffles.” The mayor stroke his chin.

“So we don’t have candy?” the blond child said.

“Who wants candy when we have money growing underground,” his mother said.

“Are they digging seeds from a money tree?” he asked

“Better,” a stout woman said. “We have truffles.”

“No, the wild boars have truffles,” the mayor said.

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Michaux took the wild boar’s affront personally. He felt gored again, this time, to the heart. Not only had the animals refused to let themselves be trap and killed in the mountains, they had come in full view to show the villagers their olfactory superiority *and* interrupt the *vendanges*. That alone was an insult. He wanted revenge. He wanted blood. He needed a plan. But when time came to rally followers, none volunteered. The encounter in the forest had dampened spirits.

“But they’re easy target. Just shoot,” he said. “Like we used to.”

But they looked down, examined the detail on a leaf, shuffled their feet, coughed. And so, wild boar hunting lost its attractiveness.

“We could train them,” the blond child suggested.

Marcenac regrouped. Marcenac marveled at the ingenuity of children. There were debates, arguments and counterarguments, encouraging discussions and disappointing conclusions, progress and setback. Someone said that only sows were able to sniff truffles, that males lacked the ability. There were jokes that female superiority was not reserved for the human world, then. Someone else mentioned the aphrodisiac nature of truffles. A young man looked for the correlation and was seen gazing at the Mediterranean, a half smile forming on his lips. And when the sun sent flares that reverberated on the wings of the biplane, forcing the elderly to seek cooler temperatures under the occasional fig tree and the children to moan about the improbability of a meal, when the *Tramontane* abated and let the leaves hang in the languor of the air, when the cicadas dwarfed the tone of a people accustomed to yell entire conversations from one end of the vineyard to another to compete with the fracas of the wind, even the sharpest minds stalled.

The mayor proposed to open the Champagne for celebration.

“And what are we celebrating?” Michaux asked. “Quadruped superiority? Reversed evolution?”

“They’re not truffles,” the mayor simply said.

“Not truffles?” the question rippled over tired faces.

“So we’re not rich anymore?” the blond child asked.

“Look, males are digging, too. Only females can smell truffles,” the mayor said. “They’re eating mushrooms, or worms.”



“Then let’s shoot them,” Michaux said.

They reflected, considered the damage in the vineyard, thought about the culinary possibilities, and picked up their rifles.

“Not in front of children!” a woman said, stepping between the guns and the beasts.

The wild boars, as if on cue, interrupted their excavations to sniff the air, and grunted. The gray male snorted and took off. The herd followed him back towards the mountains, leaving a trail of ochre dust. The mayor hurled his hat against the plane. Michaux threw his rifle on the ground and snarled a staccato of insults at the beasts. A detonation interrupted his rage. A woman screamed and reached for a child. Men turned away from the mountain and lowered their guns. A young girl pointed at the red blotch, a shade brighter than Merlot, that spread on Michaux’ white shirt. He fell back, eyes wide. His lips were trying to form an interrupted thought. The trigger had hit a stone.

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They held the funeral the following Saturday. The German pilot, bandaged and on crutches, wore Michaux’ WWII helmet. He clutched a child’s drawing of a yellow biplane and a man on a rusty motorcycle. To this day, the people of Marcenac whisper when they mention wild boars. A bronze statue of Michaux, rifle ready and proudly facing a wild boar with enormous tusks was erected by the fountain. The snout of the animal is shiny from being stroked, and the fountain has to be emptied regularly of coins.

It is said that, even though herds are often spotted on the outskirts of Marcenac, none have ventured past the vineyard.

## DEATH BY MUSHROOM

It was after pouring boiling water on his first batch of olives—the most his trees had produced since the grove had caught on fire during the previous year's Bastille Day fireworks—that Serat heard Young Henri's voice.

*“Amanite phalloïde, amanite phalloïde,”* the young man yelled as he ran along the vineyards towards Serat's outdoor workshop, the centerpiece of his modest propriety. As the unofficial inventor and scientist of the Mediterranean village of Marcenac, Serat benefited from the mayor's leniency. The mayor had bent the region's construction code to allow Serat's eclectic edifices and their various contraptions to stand, despite their being an eyesore. Under metallic awnings jutted rusting machineries, bulging boxes and crates, scattered tools and metallic parts that looked like elbows, prosthetic limbs, and the vertebrae of long extinct animals.

Serat shook his head, relieved not to have to supervise such a calamity any longer. Young Henri and venomous mushrooms didn't mix well. In fact, Young Henri and anything didn't mix. In his short life, the boy had caused more damages than his father had—a tour de force in himself—and his father had been held as a standard of clumsiness. To the villagers' distress, Young Henri had risen the bar to the calamitous level, all before his twentieth birthday.

Serat concentrated on spreading his harvest on a handmade colander the size and shape of a satellite dish that might have crashed from outer space. No toxic mushroom was going to deter him from his work. The village depended on his olives for the production of tapenade, and Marcenac prided itself for the best tapenade between Marseilles and Barcelona. Food was a

serious business in the South of France. Serat was known for creating formulas that speed the gestation period of eggs in hens, improve the speed of maturity in vegetable, sharpen the taste of olive oil and goat cheese; he had even invented a suds-free soap that cleaned better than the leading detergent, quite popular with the mayor's wife and the doctor.

"Monsieur Serat, Monsieur Serat!" There was an edge in Young Henri's voice Serat tried to ignore. In his haste, Young Henri couldn't stop in time and landed in the colander. The heat from the olives, barely out of the boiling water, or perhaps the memory of his former mentor's rages, made Young Henri extricate himself from the steaming trap faster than he had fallen in.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Won't happen again." He brushed himself off and blew on his hands.

"*Non de Dieu,*" Serat screamed. "Can't you fall in somebody else's livelihood?"

Young Henri stood with tiny red welts on his arms and palms, shaking his hands to ventilate them and biting his lower lip. Serat sighed and reached for a flask in the back pocket of his pants. "Here," he said, handing it to Young Henri. "Dab some of that on your skin. I get burnt all the time." He watched him almost drop the bottle in his haste to open it and said, "What's all the noise about mushrooms?"

"The doctor's gone, the pharmacist too. They went to a conference on mushroom safety." He was pacing. "The mayor sent me. I was helping him with the preparations, you know, the mushroom festival." He stopped in front of Serat. "I'm going to die," he said.

Serat rolled his eyes and grabbed a side of the satellite dish. He motioned Young Henri to hold the opposite side. "In the bathtub," he said, pointing to the antique tub. They dumped the olives in fresh water and covered the tub with a tarp weighed down by large stones Serat had collected from the terraced vineyards. Satisfied that, should the Tramontane strengthen, it

wouldn't blow the tarp away—the wind was known for uprooting trees—he wiped his hands on the sides of his jeans. He would have to repeat the operation every day for two weeks until the olives lost their bitterness.

“I licked some amanite phalloïdes,” Young Henri said. He was clasping and unclasping his hands and walking in circles. “There was wine on it.”

“Wine on mushrooms?”

“Well, after I knocked over a bottle of Muscat with my elbow. It covered the mushrooms. The bad pile and the good one.”

“Why would anyone keep toxic mushrooms in a pile?”

“For the festival. To teach kids about the deadly ones. There was Muscat on both piles. It's Mrs. Mayor's favorite wine, you know, so I had to hide the evidence. It stained the mushrooms, so I licked them. It wouldn't come off so I scraped them with my teeth. It was the wrong pile.” He sat on the ground and covered his face with his hands. “I'm going to die.”

Serat contemplated the young man he had taken under his wing and failed, he feared, to steer in the right direction. At the time, he thought it possible to harness the boy's inquisitive mind and give him a chance and perhaps change his life. Young Henri reminded him of his son in surprising ways. A man shouldn't grow old to see his child die. Young Henri, he thought, might have filled a gap. His son had been a dreamer, often distracted in mid-sentence by the shape of a cloud, the angle of a ray of light as it penetrated a darkened room, by the twirling dust in the column of sun, the sudden scent of a flower in the wind, the crystalline laugh of a child. Young Henri had the same faraway gaze, at times, a similar yearning for something Serat could not understand, something he had not understood in his son. They were a different breed, sensitive, short tempered, with the innocence of children. But this clumsiness in Young Henri...

He frowned and concentrated to understand the impossible story. “Wine on both piles of mushrooms?” he said.

“I’m going to die.”

Serat considered telling Young Henri that even God might send him back. That an entire village was not enough to babysit him, that when all Marcenacois die of frustration or exhaustion—the latter preferable but unlikely—he would have to be responsible and that he might as well give it a try. Instead, he saw the twitching pupils and the nervous tick on the corner of the boy’s lip.

“No one dies from licking a mushroom,” he said.

“But I—”

“And you wouldn’t know an amanite from a golf ball. Go home and relax.”



Young Henri sat, a book on his lap, in the vineyard that bordered Marcenac, a refuge for lonely hearts, bored children, teenagers in search of privacy, and anyone seeking to escape the gossipy atmosphere of a small Mediterranean village. The vineyard was quiet after the commotion of the harvest, and the fire-colored leaves added to the peaceful atmosphere. In the distance, the sea looked like glass. But Young Henri was oblivious to the beauty of his surroundings. He sat, facing the Spanish border, as he always did: the mountain chain gave him hope, its massive shape the only stable element in his life. Mushroom season was also a time to be cautious, since wild boars were often spotted searching for truffles. A male had been shot the previous week in the streets of Marcenac. The doctor’s wife’s piercing scream had been strident

enough to crack the stained glass of the church, according to the priest, who had been meditating at the time. It had pierced the quietness of the afternoon when she found herself face to face with the beast as she was hanging her laundry in the wind.

In his gloom, Young Henri thought that if he was to die, perhaps a boar might not be a bad way to go. Mushroom season was also a time when people ventured away from marked paths wearing rubber boots and carrying a long stick to ward off snakes. Sitting in the vineyard, he wished for the deadly bite of a viper.

With the doctor and the pharmacist away, he was doomed. Serat had been his only hope. But he had laughed, laughed and sent him away to bother other people and learn the difference between a toxic mushroom and an edible one. But Young Henri knew. They were amanite phaloïdes. He had seen the drawings in the pharmacist's book. Dejected, he took a handful of flaking clay, so dry after summer, and crumbled it between his fingers. He needed a solution. Under the vine stocks lay buried the various indications of his clumsiness: the broken pieces of the priest's cherished vase (the one his mother gave him on her deathbed with inscriptions in a long lost language), the burnt loaves from expensive Spanish flour (evidence of his short-lived apprenticeship with the baker), inedible piles of something from the *Chez Marcel* café (Young Henri carried on his father's tradition of culinary disaster), lotions and potions from mixtures that nearly caused the demise of a few Marcenacois (a time the pharmacist would rather forget), all buried in a hurry with the sole purpose of hiding his inadequacies.

Young Henri opened the doctor's *Great Illustrated Book of Maladies: their Causes and Repercussions* at the Poisoning by Mushroom page, and sighed. He was going to die and no one believed him. Perhaps he should dig his grave in the vineyard, next to the priest's vase. Or maybe next to the rooster he was sure had collapsed of a heart attack when Young Henri had

practiced the trumpet at three a.m. in the barn for the contest that was to announce the first day of the grape harvest. The rooster had been his friend. Life wasn't fair.

Great men had died of fatal amanite ingestion, he read. Charles VI of Austria's death had precipitated Austria into its War of Succession, and had changed Europe's destiny. Perhaps the people of Marcenac would erect Young Henri a statue as an apology for not having believed him, and he would join the lineage of Great Misunderstood Men. He closed his eyes and smiled: he would stand, erect and proud, an amanite phalloïde in his clenched fist raised high above his forehead, a Book of Wisdom held against his chest, and he would lead Marcenac to a future of mushroom safety. Children would wave at him on their way to school, the village poet would dedicate a hymn to his sacrifice; young women would stroke his feet for luck on their way to a first date. He would be celebrated. He would be in history books.

Young Henri read further down the page, to Symptoms and Treatments: according to the book, the amanite had a pleasant taste. He closed his eyes. In his haste to erase the evidence of his knocking over the wine on the piles of mushrooms, he hadn't noticed the taste. He couldn't remember tasting anything but wine, and perhaps a hint of the dirt the mushrooms had been unearthed from. The book said that, in addition to the pleasant taste, the lack of immediate symptoms made the fungus particularly dangerous. He inhaled and repeated the words: particularly dangerous. Not just dangerous. There was something stealthy about a particularly dangerous fungus. He had tasted something dangerous. He had done something daring, daring and reckless. He had taken a risk. All great men, he had read as a child in a history book, took risks. He also remembered the priest's words: "Risking one's life for a cause doesn't make the cause just." The priest had seen in faraway jungles what most people could only imagine—that's what Young Henri had heard the doctor say in Marcenac—and the words of a man as wise as a

former missionary, a man who had tasted adventure, were to be respected. Was his cause worthy? He needed more time to reflect, but with death trailing him, he had to prioritize.

The list of symptoms was impressive. There were primary and secondary symptoms. The primary ones disappeared after a few days, and that alone was enough to propel the fungus to greatness. It was a calculated act, bold and beautiful. A mastery in trickery. If a mushroom could do that, there was no limit to human possibilities.

According to the *Great Illustrated Book of Maladies*, those who ate an amanite phalloïde suffered from abdominal pain, vomiting and diarrhea, which lead to dehydration, rapid heart rate, low blood pressure, with possible fainting. Young Henri stopped reading. He had diarrhea. He was thirsty. He was going to die. His heart raced—tachycardia, one of the primary symptoms—and his stomach felt queasy. Was that an indicator too? The primary symptoms, according to the author, were supposed to disappear after two to three days. Young Henri ripped a leaf from the nearest vine stock and slapped it between two pages as a book mark. He jumped to his feet. Two to three days. He paced, one hand behind his back, another rubbing his chin. It was enough time. Serat, his former mentor, the village's inventor, the greatest man in the village, could invent a way out of destiny. He had listened to deep, metaphysical conversations between the inventor and the doctor, and he believed that Serat was capable of creating machineries that would do more than fix some of Marcenac's concrete problems. Serat must be able to trick death. He had to. Young Henri's was an unusual case, worthy of his attention.

Young Henri was unusual. He had been told more times than he could remember, and if not always in the best of ways, he had also heard the mayor say one afternoon on the terrace of *Chez Marcel* bar, that originality was what made a man unforgettable. There had been a vague reference to women and some laughs and Young Henri had been sent for more drinks. He paced



in small circles around a vine stalk, thinking about originality and the meaning of what separates great men from mediocre ones. He paced, slowly at first, then, faster, thinking, to the point of dizziness. He stopped. Dizziness was not one of the primary symptoms. When he had been the priest's apprentice and rung the church bells, he had felt dizzy, often lost count in the process, and came close to passing out. He frowned. Therefore, dizziness engendered fainting. His malady was gaining grounds. He made a mental note to be as convincing as possible when he asked Serat for help once more. But first, he needed to learn as much as possible about his condition. That's what the doctor had told him when he was still his apprentice:

"A disease is like an enemy," he had said. "Would you fight an advancing army barehanded?" The sun had glowed behind him. The doctor had seemed illuminated.

In awe, Young Henri had closed his eyes and seen millions of microscopic cells advancing, calm, armored, and orderly. A formidable invasion on an unsuspecting body. Beautiful.

"It's like spying," the doctor had added. "You learn everything about the enemy. The most intimate details."

Young Henri had nodded, transfixed.

"And then, you strike." Even the doctor's eyes had glowed.

Young Henri sat on the clay soil of the vineyard and opened the *Great Illustrated Book of Maladies* again to the Symptoms and Treatment page. He would learn about the enemy, and with detailed information, he would go to Serat's for reinforcements. Know thyself, someone had said. Maybe the village poet. Or the priest. It didn't matter. He was a man of action, and he needed to act.

According to the book, the secondary symptoms were alarming. Young Henri inhaled three times. He had noticed people often did that when they interacted with him, and they seemed to grow calmer as a result. He read on: after the initial symptoms, one could expect a serious deterioration. Young Henri took another breath and looked at the Pyrénées Mountains dipping in the Mediterranean, like a dark, giant beast unfolding itself to drink after a battle. The sea seemed speckled with uneven pieces of broken mirrors. Maybe God was clumsy too, he thought. He noticed the sweet, sticky scent of genêts flowers. He remembered German and British tourists in the streets of Marcenac taking photographs after photographs of what until now, had seemed to him, ordinary. He thought about the woman who listened to her dead husband's voice in the wind; she'd told him about the slowing of time around the moment of death, about the heightening of the senses. She would welcome the moment, she had said, when it came. Young Henri wished she was still alive. He took a long, slow breath, and concentrated on the taste of the air in his lungs. If the air was made of molecules, he wondered if perhaps he should feel them grate against the walls of his throat. And if, when he took his last breath, the molecules would thicken and choke him. He willed his finger to follow the lines on the page. According to the book, he could expect jaundice, intense diarrhea, delirium, epilepsy, and finally coma due to liver failure. His kidneys would shut down. Death usually happened six to sixteen days after poisoning.

Young Henri closed his eyes. He had already used the better part of a day. He wondered who would miss him, since his only known relative, his father, had crossed the Spanish border and never returned, leaving him at ten to the care of distant uncle who had died, some say of exhaustion, after caring for him for eight frustrating years.

He read on: there was no known antidote to amanite phalloïde. The only hope to avoid death was a liver transplant. And where would he find a liver? He wondered if a cow liver might work. The doctor's cow was on the verge of death, he had heard. Perhaps he should wait with a knife and a cooler of ice until the poor animal was put to sleep? He knew the doctor didn't have the heart to let her suffer if there was no hope of healing. The doctor, also the village's veterinarian, was said to be more compassionate with Marcenac's bovine population than with some of their owners—that's what the butcher had said, after the doctor had stitched his hand when the knife he was using to slice an entrecote had slipped. Maybe the butcher had a spare liver available without much wait?

According to the book, thirty grams of amanite was enough to cause death in humans. There were probably a few grams still stuck to the inside of his teeth. Young Henri had grown up, as European children do, with mushroom lore and the fear of contamination and accidental ingestion of toxic mushrooms. He remembered the charts plastered on the windows of pharmacies with pictures and descriptions of dangerous fungi. He had watched people lift the cloth that covered the contents of a basket and wait, anxious, for the pharmacist to give his verdict. The danger, he had learned, was that toxic varieties often resembled innocuous ones. As a child, he had secretly asked for the forgiving of his sins before eating a plateful of *girolles* or *trompettes de la mort*, just in case. The amanite phalloïdes looked like many other edible species. And its common name, "the chalice of death" didn't help. It wasn't fair.

That's when he remembered. There were two piles of mushrooms on the table, both with a name scribbled on a piece of cardboard. And two more piles at least in the back, away from the bottles of wine.

"Don't touch the mushrooms," the mayor had said. "We need to label them."

Young Henri had chuckled at the time, about the trick the mayor was about to play on people. The mayor wasn't going to add real amanites for children to touch. He only wanted to scare them about the ones that looked like them. Young Henri let the book slide from his lap. With the sun on his forehead he lay under a vine stock. A leaf brushed his cheek and he smiled. There would be no statue, he would not be celebrated, but it didn't matter. He would live.

## WRITING LIFE ESSAY

Writing about the region where I grew up came to me as a surprise and a relief, a sort of catharsis. I resisted the need to write about “home,” not wanting to be another foreign writer who felt compelled to relate the immigrant experience to a local audience. Yet at the same time, I was plagued by profound homesickness. Out of these contradictory emotions, Marcenac was born, and a writing style that allowed me to divulge raw emotions through the medium of the village’s inhabitants.

Because a majority of Marcenac’s residents morphed into caricatures—sympathetic yet still caricatures—they could take on the responsibility of unveiling their feelings, unabashedly. Children, as well, thanks to their expected naïveté, revealed their most intimate emotions without reserve. And because an inevitable side-effect of homesickness is the idealization of a place left behind, the story of Marcenac took on a romantic turn at times, a style that I tried to balance with a sense of humor.

In fact, writing humor took me quite by surprise. As Marcenac’s first inhabitants took shape, they also became burlesque. “Desperate Measures,” as the first story I wrote before the idea of a collection was born, soon morphed into a farce. I felt such deliverance in writing humor that I lost my original reluctance to indulge in the genre, and embraced it. But I needed a mentor. I turned to Peter Mayle’s *A Year in Provence*, as well as the following books of his series, for guidance. Mayle found a balance between his sincere love for Provence, a mordant way to expose the flaws of the region’s inhabitants, and a foreigner’s view of a local culture, that could only make the reader howl with laughter. I was hooked. I re-read *Clochemerle*, by Maurice

Chevallier, a French classic in comic literature, where the installation of a public urinal on the village square divides the inhabitants. The authors of these books poke fun at local customs through their characters who serve as cultural guides, while at the same time, becoming the butt of a joke they are oblivious to. This is what I strived to do.

Marcel Pagnol, another French writer who relates beautifully the everyday life in the southern French countryside, fuelled my imagination. From my childhood memories of the child narrator's remembrance of his family, Sam and Albert were born.

My stories are driven by their characters, sympathetic anti-heroes like Young Henri, Gédéon Culdepierre, or M, who plunge the reader deep within their personal struggles without losing their charm. Similarly, children like Sam and Albert, who attempt to understand situations they are not ready for, carry the stories they inhabit. In fact, the children of my stories are more mature than most adults, and force the reader to sympathize with their plight.

In order to inhabit my characters' minds as they are born on the page, I like to slow the narrative and let them take over. Virginia Woolf, in Mrs. Dalloway, slows her narrative to the point of breaking each moment into separate segments, allowing for a connection between the characters and their surroundings. I attempt to use this technique to expose my characters' sensitivity. Unaware of being observed, they do not attempt to hide their vulnerability. On the contrary, they reveal themselves in ways that allow me to shift the direction of the story, and explore their inner thoughts further. I want the reader to feel like a voyeur. I strip my characters of all dignity, while still respecting them. John Dufresne, in The Lie That Tells a Truth, writes about learning empathy from Chekov. There is a fine balance between exposing a character's imperfections while respecting them, and looking down on a character, a balance I did not understand when I first wrote "Parachute." It took many revisions and a close look at Chekov's

stories to erase the contempt I felt for a “loser” and replace it with sympathy. M became the precursor of the other anti-heroes.

In addition to creating compelling characters, the musicality of the language is crucial to me. The English language’s malleability lends itself to the stretching of sentences and the shifting of words. These linguistic acrobatics allow for a certain turn of phrase, a sense of authority in the descriptions, this feeling that words glide from one to the next, carrying the exact nuances of scents and shades. This is what I hope to achieve in the future. I look to Nabokov for guidance. His story “Sounds” comes to mind, in which the characters breathe off the page. Nothing much happens on the surface, but the author’s subtlety and his precise language are such that emotions and setting are intertwined and whispered to the reader.

Rhythm is an intrinsic part of storytelling. After reading about DeLillo’s writing process, I understood the driving force of rhythm. I learned from him to change a word to accommodate the rhythm of a sentence, which at times alters its meaning, but I am willing to rearrange the sentence and perhaps let my story take another direction, such is the importance of rhythm to me. I used rhythm in dialogue as well, in an attempt to convey the regional connotations of the speech, in addition to the French language in dialogue.

Because I grew up reading French literature before progressing to translations of mostly Spanish-speaking and other European authors, I have been heavily influenced by thick, lengthy layers of exposition, with very little dialogue. One Hundred years of Solitude, by Gabriel García Márquez, only has a few lines of dialogue, and yet, his characters fill the space with their presence. I find myself writing lengthy passages of descriptions and exposition in the more serious stories. “Marcenac” is an example, where I forced dialogue to comply with what I

imagined my readers would expect, and so is “Spanish Cows,” and yet I still question the effectiveness of the move.

Only in recent years, while reading American literature, have I learned to appreciate the value of conversation. I have looked closely at Hemingway’s mastery of dialogue conventions to learn its use to reveal characters, to provide the necessary background, and to propel the plot forward. In “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” and “Hills Like White Elephants,” the dialogue and the characters carry the story. The effect is brilliant.

I use dialogue in humorous stories far more than in serious ones to showcase the silliness of a situation and advance the plot rather than to divulge the personality of my characters. For example, the boar hunting scene of “Wild Boars and Grape Harvest” where Group Two is trying to understand the meaning of the shots in the dark serves as comic relief, and allows for the story to jump forward. Similarly, in “Desperate Measures,” the dialogue between the members of the council leads to the closure of the cemetery, the turning point of the story.

In addition to literature, the songs I grew up listening to, songs by French *chansonniers*, or singer-songwriters, songs that are more poetry than lyrics and yet often satirical, have shaped the rhythms and themes of my stories. Often, these songs are timeless, still today. Perhaps it is why Marcenac seems suspended in time.



## **APPENDIX: BOOK LIST**

*Novels*

A death in the family by James Agee

A separate Peace by John Knowles

As I Lay Dying William Faulkner

Atonement by Ian McEwen

Beloved, by Toni Morrison

Clochemerle, by Maurice Chevallier

For Whom the Bell Tolls by Ernest Hemingway

Grand Avenue, a Novel in Stories by Greg Sarris

In the Name of Salomé by Julia Alvarez

In the Time of the Butterflies by Julia Alvarez

Jazz by Toni Morrison

Killing Mister Jackson by Peter Matthiessen

l'Assomoir by Émile Zola

La Gloire de mon Père by Marcel Pagnol

Le château de ma Mère by Marcel Pagnol

Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf

Nana by Émile Zola

One Hundred years of Solitude, by Gabriel García Márquez

Sula by Toni Morrison

The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Díaz

The cigar Roller, by Pablo Medina

The Good Earth by Pearl Buck

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

The last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse by Louise Erdrich

The Martian Chronicles by Ray Bradbury

*Short-Story Collections*

Best New American Voices 2008 edited by Richard Bauch

Later, at the Bar, by Rebecca Barry

Stories, by Anton Chekov. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonosky

Tales from the Town of Widows by James Cañón

The Beggar Maid by Alice Monro

The Best American Short Stories 2007 edited by Stephen King

The Best New American Voices 2007 edited by Sue Miller

The Complete Short Stories by Flannery O'Connor

The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway

The O. Henry Prize Stories 2008

The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov

Winesburg, Ohio by Sherwood Anderson,

*Creative Non-Fiction*

A Year in Provence by Peter Mayle

Hiroshima by John Hersey

Out of Africa by Isak Dinesen

When You Are Engulfed in Flame by David Sedaris

*Poetry*

Campos de Castilla by Antonio Machado

*Drama*

Andromaque by Jean Racine

Le Cid by Pierre Corneille.

*Books on Craft*

A Guide to Writing Fiction by John Dufresne

Reading like a Writer by Francine Prose

The Elements of Style by Strunk and White

What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writer by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter

Writing Fiction by Janet Burroway