

RETURN TO BLÉTANTE

nation of industry

by
Darryl Mockridge

This book is dedicated to the authentic artist—whatever his or her craft—who, adrift in a sea of mind-numbing madness all around, and despite the lack of either recognition or encouragement of any sort, continues to produce. Such quixotic productivity, in the face of an ever-emerging, fad-driven, public indifference, is brave and honorable work.



ESTUARY PUBLICATIONS

Mars Hill, NC USA

ISBN-13: 978-1530339563

ISBN-10: 1530339561

© 2017 estuarypublications.com

cover: "Map of Blétante2" by r. mansfield

CONTENTS

DREAMS of BLÉTANTE	7
DAY ONE	9
GIORGIO	14
A LITTLE STOP ALONG THE WAY	23
THE CAR	27
The GRANDE HOTEL de BLÉTANTE	31
AFTERNOON in the SEA SAW ROOM	41
SOMETHING ABOUT THE FAIRNESS OF LIFE	52
WHAT USED TO BE the PENTHOUSE	53
DAY TWO	60
An Eternity with JACQUES de JACQUES	64
THE WAY THEY DO THINGS in BLÉTANTE	74
THE SAD TALE	81
I READ, I SLEEP, I DREAM	83
DAY THREE	89
BELOW with <i>GUIDANCE FROM ABOVE</i>	97
IRENE, DEAD AND ALIVE	101
AT THE THEATRE	110
The OLD BANDITO TRAIL	124
TENDER CAMPING (Night of Day Three)	131
I HAD A DREAM THAT NIGHT	135
DAY FOUR	139
DAY FIVE	149
More CAMPING	155

DAY SIX (I think)	158
ESCAPING THE BLIND OWL	159
DREAR HOUSE again	162
SOMETHING about ART and HATS	169
SLEEPING the sleep that follows any GOOD discussion	176
THE CONSERVATORY of FLOWERS	179
DR. KINDERSTROM	184
BED and BREAKFAST	189
IRENE SHOWS ME SOME PAINTINGS	192
ELAINE	204
ALL MY QUESTIONS ANSWERED	212
A TALE and a LESSON	215
POOR ME	217
DAY NINE	220
LIFE AS I'VE COME TO KNOW IT	230
DEAD END	231
INCIDENT at The ELF CAFÉ	238
MUCH MUCH LATER	247
MORNING, at any rate	256
FRANK's ADVICE	258
FROM the Elf Café to the Felled Ox	259
DAY (who knows) THE ACTING PROFESSOR	263
AFTERNOON	268
DAY whatever	271
FIRST AND FINAL NOTICE	273
LATE ONE AFTERNOON	277

DAY FOURTEEN	278
That EVENING	282
More CONFUSION at The ELF	285
A METAPHOR for SOMETHING	287
ANOTHER DAY ON WHICH I REALLY WAKE UP	291
That NIGHT	297
DAY SEVENTEEN	298
LUNCH with JUSTICE	306

To find another bird
 No matter how far away
 By song alone
 Is a beautiful thing

from: AWAKE AMID ANCESTRAL DREAMS
 poetry by EMMA MOONSINGER

DREAMS of BLÉTANTE

On January 3, Charles, Dark-Cloud, Bellwether set sail alone from a San Francisco yacht club, headed for Kauai in the 30-foot sailboat ABJURED. Bellwether is a well-seasoned sailor and an excellent pilot. ABJURED was equipped with the best electronics and survival gear available, including life raft, emergency position-indicating radio beacon, flares and satellite phone. The 2138 nautical mile crossing was described by some as “foolhardy at best”. Pilot Wilfred Snard told me, “Attempting to conquer the Pacific Ocean single-handed in a 30-foot sailboat, especially in this season, is both dangerous and delusional.”

Thirteen days out, in heavy winds and high seas, all contact was lost with ABJURED. No distress call was received. For all intents and every purpose the boat had simply vanished, Charles Bellwether along with her. He has not been seen or heard from since.

This demands some explanation of course, but it'll have to wait. It's enough for now to say that, according to some, I may have had a hand in pushing Bellwether over the edge.

The reason we'll have to talk about that later is because the same day I heard that Bellwether was lost at sea I received something in the mail worth mentioning. It was the first thing I can recall *ever* (EVER) having received in the mail that gave me the great joy that mail should deliver every day, to every patient, desperately hopeful, ever-prayerful, well-deserving person on earth, but never does.

It came in a big, flat, pure white envelope and it had the crest and flag of the Island Nation of Blétante printed nicely in the corner.

“Gosh!” That was my immediate thought, “What’s this?”

Inside—printed on some very nice stationary indeed—was an official apology from the Island Nation of Blétante, along with an invitation to return again to their country, as the nation’s ‘Greatly Honored Guest’. It went on to state that, as such, I would be escorted around to all three islands—and one of the prison islands too, if I so wished—and I’d be given the very best accommodations during my stay. For something like two hours I read and re-read that letter with an idiot’s grin plastered upon my face.

In the letter, the Island Nation of Blétante admitted that when they took me out to sea in a boat, 12 nautical miles from shore, placed me alone in a life-raft with 7 days’ provisions and a ½ hp outboard motor, and told me I would never again be welcomed into their country, I had been wrongly treated. Of course, I could have told them that. In fact, I tried to tell them that at the time—several times—but they were too busy hoisting me over the railing and wishing me sayonara to hear my plea.

I will never forget those days adrift—they have marked me for life—but I will not write about it again here. Suffice it to say that it was not an enjoyable experience.

But, things are what they are.

Enough of that, let’s move on.

DAY ONE

Under a warm and welcoming dove-grey overcast sky I walked slowly down the steps of that plane and took in the familiar view. Things had not changed in any way that I could see. As soon as I passed through the doors and into that little one-story concrete building, gateway to fond memories, I found myself smiling so hard that it hurt. The Greatly Honored Guest had arrived.

Inside, a man and a woman, both in uniform tropical garb, sang cheerfully, "Welcome to Blétante!" They started to look through my bag, but stopped; one of them whispered something in the other's ear and they both bowed a little bow and said, very formally, "Welcome back to Blétante, Mr. Mockridge."

"Thank you," I said, and bowed regally in return. "It's good to be back."

The woman stepped around to my side of things and ceremoniously pinned a tiny enameled ship on my lapel. "What's this?" I asked.

"It labels you, Mr. Mockridge, as a Highly Honored Guest of the Island Nation of Blétante."

They both smiled, and I could not help but note the genuine twinkle in their eyes.

"I FEEL highly honored," I said, and I did. "That's a new feeling for me..."

They nodded.

The switch had been handled so adeptly that I didn't even notice my demotion, until much later. Meanwhile, pleased

to be a Guest of the State, at any level, I fondled the pin a bit with one thumb—straining my neck to get a look at it. And I think I may have blushed. In looking back on it now, I believe I may have winked at the female agent as well, which is probably not typical HHG conduct. My guess is that nothing I have ever done would be considered proper, or even acceptable, HHG behavior.

I stepped over toward an old woman sitting behind a worn-out desk, under a sign that read: DEP-DEP HERE.

“Welcome to Blétante,” she said with sparkling eyes and a lovely wrinkly smile, “May I see your visa?”

I showed her my visa.

“Oh!” she gasped and covered her mouth with one hand. “I see that you will be with us as *a guest* of our Island Nation, Mr. Mockridge... *for two weeks*,” she said with emphasis. “Welcome back. I don’t think a deportation deposit will be necessary.”

“But I want to!” I whined. Given past experience, I thought it was the rational thing to do. “I really want to,” I said.

“As our *guest*, I’m sure it would be entirely unnecessary...” She waved to one of the people in uniform, who came over immediately, smiled at me in a nice, but unconvincing manner, and raised his eyebrows to her.

“He wants to make a dep-dep.”

“I know, first-hand, the kind of *problems* not making a dep-dep can cause down the road,” I explained cleverly.

“A dep-dep won’t be necessary, Mr. Mockridge,” he said, gesturing toward the exit. “We hope your stay in Blétante is a pleasant one.”

I don’t know about other HHGs, but this one doesn’t enjoy being given the bum’s rush.

“What if, somehow, I over-stay my visa; who will cover the cost of my deportation back to the US?”

As he pondered that, I could see that he was beginning to think of me less as Mr. Mockridge, the *Highly Honored Guest* and more like that guy, Mockridge, the known trouble-maker.

“I cannot imagine that will be *allowed* to happen again,” he said with some authority and, with a courtly but somewhat impatient gesture, pointed me toward the street door.

“You’re sure? You’re *sure* I don’t have to do this?” I asked.

“Absolutely sure, Mr. Mockridge,” he said, and he took a stand between me and the landing field, as though my next move might be to bolt back out onto the tarmac and commandeer a plane.

Actually, I was considering it. After all, here I was, a *Greatly Honored Guest* of the State upon arrival, reduced to a mere *Highly Honored Guest* before I’d gotten out of the terminal, and now—in the eyes of some—clearly little more than a possibly-insane belligerent who needs careful watching. I’m sure all eyes were on me as I made my way to the front door and out. (It sure felt that way.)

How things can get so weirdly out of whack so quickly I will never understand. It happens to me frequently though and, while thinking about it later, I am never able to reconstruct the steps that led me from a perfectly amiable situation into a nightmarish misunderstanding. In this case, all I wanted was to save the Island Nation of Blétante the embarrassment of taking me 12 nautical miles out to sea and abandoning me in a life-raft—a second time—only to

regret it later, and thus feel the need to apologize—once again. I didn’t want them to leave themselves no recourse other than to beg me to come back and—knowing what I know of such things from both books and movies—insist that I take the throne as their King.

The opening lines of my book were writing themselves. “If someone of authority offers you special consideration, take it. Don’t muddy the waters by asking any stupid questions, just take it. Thank them for their kindness, of course, bow a little bow, smile a little smile, shake their hand, if that’s what seems to be required, and move along.”

Actually, I could not imagine the Island Nation of Blétante ejecting a Greatly Honored Guest such as myself... though I have, wisely I think, removed myself voluntarily from places, on occasion, in a timely and prudential manner.

One time, just as an example, my friend Dean—who has asked that his name never be involved in any of my writing—and I went to see one of the world’s most distinguished, award-winning *vibes* musicians—whose name I forget. The difference between a xylophone and a vibraphone are lost entirely on me, but Dean, my very best friend—who has asked specifically that his name not be mentioned in the telling of this particular tale—told me it would be an almost heroic act for me to override my natural resistance to new and, more likely than not, abhorrent experiences. So, I did, and we went.

Soon, after grabbing a table, I found that I didn’t really, you know, *dig* the *vibes* all that much; they didn’t speak to me.

And, the more I lubricated my mind, in an honest attempt to open myself up to it, the more ridiculous I found the sound. The deepest, most meaningful phrases, which had everybody else in that audience transfixed, had me snickering, stomping my feet, and shaking my head.

Long before the first set was complete I was telling my friend, Dean—who... you know...—that I found the music pretentious and childish all at once. He suggested quietly (but perhaps a little brusquely) that maybe I could try being a little less pretentious and childish myself, and that would allow him to spend more time listening to the music and less time pretending that he didn't know me.

However, with the weight of beer pressing heavily upon the accelerator of my stupidity, I found myself making further observations out loud and, in the traditional drunken moronic manner, loudly. That attracted the attention of those at the table directly next to us.

Do I really need to tell you that every single one of those good folk was either a relative or a close personal friend of the great vibraphonist?

At any rate, we left that place (quietly) during the break.

Though I don't usually cause trouble while sober, the scent of the possibility apparently clings to me. So, I had to admire that guy in uniform, at the Blétante airport, he had pretty good instincts.

GIORGIO

Once outside, and beyond scrutiny, I scanned the cars parked along the curb until I saw one with a handsome man leaning casually against its front fender. He was tall and trim and excruciatingly well-dressed in a fitted suit, and (still) probably the blackest man I have ever seen. My old jaded heart leapt within my chest. He was grinning as widely as I must have been. He held up a big sign with the name *Mockleford* scrawled upon it.

Because I am not a man of great dignity—and hope never to become one—I ran over, shook his hand vigorously, patted him on the back, and gave him a big hug. He returned the gesture with crushing force, nearly lifting me off the ground. Then, we stood back and admired each other for a bit. He looked great; Giorgio is one of those rare men who actually looks good in a suit... (I'm not.)

"Mr. Mockridge," he said, "for me there could be no greater joy than to see you with us again."

"That is precisely how I feel, Giorgio," I declared, and I began to laugh so fully that I couldn't continue. We shook hands again and patted each other on the back (again), and looked into each other's eyes (again). Then, we just stood there nodding and grinning like fools for a while.

"You look good, Giorgio," I said.

"Every girl is crazy for a sharp-dressed man, Mr. Mockridge." He posed.

He took my bag and asked, "Would you like a gun?"

He opened the trunk, tossed the bag inside and slammed the truck lid closed.

"Well... yeah," I said, "That's the whole reason I'm here; honest folk can't get them where I come from."

"You'll have to take the small arms course before you shoot anybody with it..." he cautioned.

"How long will that take?"

"Three weeks."

"Ah, well, I'm only here for two," I said.

"You'll have to depend on me then..." he said dryly.

"There is not a soul on earth I would rather have looking after me, Giorgio," I said.

"Wait!" he suddenly hollered and took off running after a departing car. I watched as he caught up to it and pounded on its trunk. The car stopped, the driver got out and Giorgio pointed to a woman's handbag that had been sitting on the roof of the car. The driver and Giorgio exchanged a few positive words and he started jogging back toward me.

"You're a hero, Giorgio," I said. And I had more to say but was interrupted by a man shouting, "HEY! Buddy..."

The man tossed something toward Giorgio. It glittered as it tumbled in the air between us.

Giorgio snatched it out of the air, looked at it, smiled broadly, saluted the man and shoved the thing into his pocket. I wondered about that, but said nothing. This being Blétante, I knew it must be something good.

I started to climb into the passenger seat and Giorgio said, "Wouldn't you rather sit in the back?"

"No, man, this is Blétante!" I said.

As I climbed in beside him I said, “I’ll be a duck and sit up front just as if we might-could-be equals...”

I’d forgotten how deep and warm Giorgio’s laugh is.

Looking into the backseat, I noticed something though.

“It looks like the backseat is already taken,” I said.

When I first met Molly—the fat brown Labrador—she had already mastered the craft of sitting; now—three years later—it looked like she’d also perfected the art of lying down. Without lifting her head, she looked up at me with her big moist yellow eyes and thumped her tail a few times. “She remembers you, Mr. Mockridge.”

“Molly’s put on a few pounds I think, Giorgio.”

“Well, she’s taken the very good advice of the Queen of England...” he said.

“I see. Never stand when you can sit, never sit when you can lay around in the backseat of a limousine.”

“Click clack, MISTER Mockridge!”

As we started out, Giorgio said, “I think I owe you an apology, Mr. Mockridge.”

I snorted loudly.

“Nonsense! I probably owe you a dozen. Before we get into that though, I have a few questions.”

“HA, I knew you would. And, I’ll be glad to answer them, in order, **before** you even ask, Mr. Mockridge...”

He smiled smugly as we blended into traffic.

“That’ll save us some time...” I admitted.

As I looked around at the city, I slumped back deeply into my seat and felt completely at home.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“The answers, in order, are: Yes; I broke my ankle that night; he’s playing solo, on stage, between sets; AND, it was Mr. Snard’s idea.”

“Well, that’s all pretty interesting. But, first I need to know WHAT was Snard’s idea?”

Giorgio gave me another clue.

“He thought the experience wouldn’t really harm you, and it would give you something interesting to write about.”

I mulled that over.

“He thought the experience wouldn’t harm me *and* it would give me something to write about? I don’t want to think about that. Meanwhile though, I’m glad to hear that *Mr. Hobbs* is still playing cello... and on stage! Wow.”

“Wow indeed. He has a steady gig, playing between sets with one of the local Baroque quartets. He only plays one piece—*Barbara Allen*—but he’s good at it.”

“Hmm. OK. *Yes?* Yes...what? You sprained your ankle that night... *which night?*”

“*Yes*, Evelyn knows you’re back on Blétante, and she’s anxious to see you. And, I *broke* my ankle on the last night you were here. I was in the hospital until long after you were dumped heartlessly into the ocean. Gees, it’s really nice to see you, Mr. Mockridge.”

“I’m really glad to be here, Giorgio. So, now, let’s go back... what’s this about Snard?”

“When Mr. Snard heard about your predicament, he tried to reach me. When he couldn’t reach me, he called Evelyn to ask her where I was. She wanted to bail you out; she begged Mr. Snard to loan her the money, but he insisted that you were in no real danger and splashing around out

there would be an unforgettable, once-in-a-lifetime experience, and you'd probably write a book about it.”
 “I don't think that will ever happen...” I said,
 “Anyway, it was Mr. Snard's idea to allow our guys to cast you like fresh chopped chum into the unforgiving sea.”
 “Huh...” I said. I thought about it in silence for a while.

“Hey, here's something.” I said. “The Captain of the boat that took me out *beyond your territorial waters*, handed me some books—Gulliver's Travels, Candide, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court—and told me they were parting gifts from *you*, Wilfred Snard, and Evelyn.”
 “It was nice of Mr. Snard to include me, as if some day we might-could-be equals; because I was probably, at that time, sedated with pins being inserted into my ankle ...”
 “You'll like this too, Giorgio: he handed me something by Menken, with his request that I deliver it personally to the President of the United States.”
 Giorgio laughed.

“From the way things are going over there, either you forgot, Mr. Mockridge, or your President hasn't read it.”
 “Click clack,” I replied flatly.

Looking out the window, I found myself beaming. I was back in Blétante and pretty much feeling like I owned the joint. I must have looked it too, because Giorgio smiled very broadly, nodded approvingly, and chuckled.

“Hey, Mr. Mockridge,” he said, “I hear that, this trip, you are our Greatly Honored Guest.”

“That's what the invite said. But, it saddens me to say that people have been calling me a HIGHLY Honored Guest.”

"Back in the country for an hour and you've already been down-graded ..."

"I don't even really know when the demotion took place," I said, "or what I did to deserve it."

"Ha," he glanced at me and said. "That lapel pin, trimmed in gold, means you are the *Greatly* Honored Guest of the Island Nation of Blétante. Trimmed in silver, it would mean you are merely a *highly* honored guest. Either way though, you are the most loved as well as the most hated man in these islands right now."

"Most loved *and* most hated? I *am* honored. How did all that come about?"

"Your book."

"Ah, the book-thing."

"Some people saw it as an act of betrayal; others saw it as an act of love."

"It was an act of love..."

"Oh, I know that..."

We drove on in silence for a while.

"I notice that there are no crowds gathering in the street to welcome me back; no parade, no marching bands, no cheering, no fireworks!" I said jokingly.

"You're lucky there's no lynch mob."

"Didn't anybody here read my articles in *Pure Arrogance*?"

"Oh, you mean about the packs of rabid dogs roaming our streets? Sure, we read that, but, your book was another matter... Your book screwed things up around here pretty bad, for quite a while..." he chided.

"Wow... I feel terrible," I said.

And I did.

There was only silence in the car for a time.

“Oh, man” he finally wailed, “I cannot lie to you, Mr. Mockridge. I can’t watch you suffer like this...”

“You mean your entire nation didn’t begin unraveling at the seams when *Two Weeks in Blétante* hit the stands?” Giorgio stopped the car. He looked over at me sadly.

“I don’t think anybody on these islands read your book, Mr. Mockridge; maybe nobody. Well, you know, *we* all did—the people who know you. But, pretty much, around here, you know, if it has the word ‘Blétante’ in the title... we just ignore it.”

“That’s a relief.”

“This was Mr. Snard’s idea. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“Of course. But, what’s with Snard?”

“I don’t know, you know... who knows? Mr. Snard is a complicated man. He wanted me to tell you that, after *T’Weeks* came out, our airport was inundated with mobs of American dullards chanting ‘click-clack’ and—because of what you said in that book—they were buying up all the property they could around here, and—also because of what you said in your book—they picked it up for a song.”

“Wow.”

“Wow indeed. Mr. Snard wanted me to tell you that fat stupid American vulgarians flocked to the American Vista Theatre and *booed*; that they took in glass football games screaming and demanding ‘action’; that they searched every inch of every roadway for potholes, and when they found one—out somewhere where nobody ever goes—posted pictures of it on Facebook with snide remarks.” Every word he spoke made me cringe.

I envisioned classic ugly Americans button-holing every black male over five foot three and asking him if he was *the real Giorgio*.

“He wanted me to tell you that all these fine unwanted ‘guests’ complained about everything that is good or honorable or pure about our country, our culture, our ways... and especially complained about our Wi-Fi.”

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“I don’t either, Mr. Mockridge. It’s not my doing, Mr. Mockridge, click clack?”

“Yeah, I get you. But I don’t get Snard. Why on earth would Wilfred Snard want you to fill my head with nonsense like that?”

“You know, I have no thought about that. But, I’d just ask him about it, you know. I think, after you have a few drinks, you an’ Mr. Snard will work it out.”

I drifted off in thought and just watched the landscape drift by outside my window, for a while.

“Oh, Giorgio, did you know I was dead?”

“You were dead?”

“Yep. Emma Moonsinger and Henry and I were travelling around together, last November, and we were struck by a locomotive in Kansas, and we were all killed.”

“Really?”

“Yep, a freight train slammed into us one afternoon at a railroad crossing near Delphi, Kansas... Someone told Bellwether—our publisher—that we were *all* killed... instantly... apparently.”

“We have a kindly God.”

“Indeed.”

“But, see, this is why you three should never be in the same place at the same time, Mr. Mockridge.”

“I guess so.”

We both thought about things for a while.

“Is this a joke of some kind, Mr. Mockridge?” he asked.

“Nope; no joke. We were, in fact, traveling around together and we were, in fact, stuck by a train. All else is fiction; we abandoned the car before the thing slammed into us.

“Wow.”

“Yeah, ’cept for a few bruises, we all walked away, uninjured. Emma went on to some ‘30 days of silence’ thang on a wild horse farm in Montana; Henry returned home to his very dear and charming wife, and I went on a blues/redneck rock tour throughout the Southeast, which lasted pretty much up until the day Henry called and said, “Are you going to the Estuary Christmas party?”

“Wow.”

“Yeah... wow.”

“So, you’re not dead?”

“Nope.”

“Are you sure? This could be Heaven you know, Mr. Mockridge; Blétante could be Heaven.”

I gazed out the window at all the goodness around us and found myself beaming again.

“Could be...” I admitted.

A LITTLE STOP ALONG THE WAY

“Did you know they no longer accept cash on airplanes?” I said, smacking my dry lips.

Giorgio pulled over, stopped the car, got out and went into a bar. I had no choice, I followed him in.

We each took a seat at the bar—I took a beer, Giorgio, grapefruit juice.

“When I see Snard, I’m gonna wring his neck,” I said.

“You should never say things like that, Mr. Mockridge. You should say, *Boy, that Snard sure makes me mad!*”

“You can’t tell me I need to take care of a thing and then criticize me for the way I choose to take care of it!”

“Of course I can,” he said. “Besides, it’s not my advice, it’s my daughter’s. Celeste says anger and vulgarity are unacceptable and should be replaced with *nice words*, thus making what she calls an A K F A R—an actually, kinda, fairly, acceptable response.”

“Oh, well... sure then; there’s always that option. You get all your wisdom from your kids?”

“I do; I get most of it from them. But, you have some influence on me too, Mr. Mockridge.”

“Ha-ha,” I laughed, “Nonsense. If there is anything I know with a certainty, Giorgio, it is that I have NO influence on anything or anyone in this world.”

In the mirror, I noticed that there was a guy staring at us. He’d been staring at us since we first sat down.

“There’s a man over in that corner who seems to have taken a serious disliking to us, Giorgio,” I said quietly.

“Yeah, I saw him when we came in.”

“He’s been staring at us with what appears to be insatiable disapproval from the moment we got here.”

“Yeah, he despises me.”

“He despises you? I can hardly imagine anyone despising you, my friend.”

“Yeah, well he does.”

“Did you do something to that guy personally to engender such hatred?”

“Yep, a long time ago.”

I took a few moments to drink and dawdle, out of courtesy.

“What did you do?”

“I married his daughter and made her happy.”

I glanced over at the man who was staring fixedly at Giorgio; he was, it seemed, about my age.

“That’s Sandrine’s father?”

“Yep. That man hasn’t said a word to me in 16 years.”

“He hasn’t said a word to you in 16 years? Seriously?”

“Not one word.”

“Wow. What grade is he in?”

“What *grade*?”

“Well that sounds like second or third grade behavior. It’s weird and petty and childish and stupid. It must be pretty painful for Sandrine... and the kids.”

“Ha. Not as much as you might think. He talks to them; he treats the kids just like any normal granddad might treat his grandchildren... He and Sandrine get along fine. I’m not saying laughter fills the air every minute they’re together but, they get along fine. She’s still his baby girl.”

“And he ignores you? But... how does that work? I mean... you’re in a room with all those people, and they’re all carrying on like normal human beings, and... what? You’re excluded?... everyone speaks to you except him?”

"Never says a word. It's as if I don't exist."

"He never addresses you in any way?"

"Not a single word."

I started laughing. I snorted and slapped the counter.

"That is the most peculiar thing I have ever heard, Giorgio.

In what civilized society would such childishness be acceptable? The man's an idiot; I'd just ignore him."

"Yeah... He's an asshole."

"Well, I've never heard you use that word before, Giorgio, but, from what you've just told me, it sounds like it."

"Believe me, he's an asshole."

"OK, I think it's probably fair to say that he is then."

"Mr. Mockridge, you must believe me; I have given it a lot of thought—a LOT of thought—yet I have been unable to come up with a better description of that man."

Though I could, I retreated quickly into my beer.

"A lot of people on this island fear him; they think he's a seething volcano, about to explode... they avoid him, never look him in the eye... that sorta thing. But, he's even worse than they think. They don't know him like I do."

"He sounds pretty vicious to me."

"Oh, he's vicious all right, but I don't fear him. And, that's the problem, Mr. Mockridge. From the beginning, I treated him like I would anyone else... and I expected him to treat me the same. That, apparently, offended him."

He drained his glass.

"The day that son-of-a-bitch drops dead will be the happiest day of my life."

"Giorgio, that is not even *near* being actually, kinda, fairly acceptable. May I suggest you try, *Boy, won't it be a swell day when that rotten son-of-a-bitch drops dead!*"

Giorgio snorted, put the glass to his mouth, discovered it was empty, placed it gently back down upon the counter, and got up to leave. I followed.

As we passed by, the man we'd been talking about focused on something in a distant corner... as if neither one of us existed. What an idiot!

Giorgio Croc is one of the nicest people I have ever had the great good fortune to know in this life. He's a good friend, a loving father to his children, a good and loyal husband; and he's respected by everyone who knows him. He's also good-natured. The only time I'd ever seen him angry was over politics. But, the pain I heard coming from him at that bar, on that afternoon, worried me. Poor Giorgio, it must be unbearable having a vicious prick for a father-in-law.

After we'd gotten under way again I said cheerfully, "Hey, do your kids still use the word *horseless* as their preferred substitute for less acceptable modifiers?"

He shrugged, "Their grandpa's a horseless asshole."

Of course, when someone like Giorgio and someone like his father-in-law are thrown together, it is the nice one who suffers. It's the nice guy who feels the frustration, the confusion, and all the heartache, while the unspeakable bastard glides along, completely unscathed.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

"I'm just dandy, Mr. Mockridge; why do you ask?"

"Because I like you a great deal, Giorgio."

"I'm fine, Mr. Mockridge. Things are what they are."

THE CAR

Putting the thought of that impending train wreck behind me, I started focusing on the music from the radio.

"I like this music," I said, "is it the *Taxi-driver's Mix*?"

"You have an excellent memory, Mr. Mockridge."

"Actually, I do," I said, matter-of-factly. "Is it still all Strauss waltzes, Baroque quartets and cello pieces?"

"Click clack... you *do* have an excellent memory."

"I also know shorthand... but, I bet when Sarah Brightman shows up in the evening, you turn it right off."

"Click clack again. These days they sometimes throw in Ravel in the evening and I shoot myself. I keep a gun in the glove compartment specifically for that purpose."

I laughed. "The only thing worse than Bolero is Rimsky-Korsakov's Flight of the Bumble Bee."

Giorgio laughed so hard he couldn't breathe. Yet somehow he managed to choke out, "Click clack, Mr. Mockridge!"

"Slow down, Giorgio," I shouted, "slow down... slowdown slow down slow down. What's that?"

"Oh...that's *The Car*."

"*The Car* looks like a 1949 Silver Wraith."

"Click and clack both on that, Mr. MOCK-ridge! How did you know that?"

"When I was a kid I was fascinated with British cars; the history of Rolls Royce in particular."

"Really. This is true?"

"Yep. I was an authority of sorts; knew more about British automobiles than any other 12 year-old in my class."

"Why?"

"I was 12 years old, Giorgio."

“But, why British cars?”

“Ha!” I laughed. “For the same reason other 12 year-old males practice tying knots that sailors haven’t used in two hundred years, or memorize the rookie-year batting average of every player in the history of the American League, while another invents a way to make moonshine in his closet, using only shoe polish and powdered sugar, without his mother suspecting a thing...”

“They have not yet discovered girls.”

“HAVE discovered girls, Giorgio; HAVE discovered girls. But don’t know precisely what to do about it.”

Giorgio laughed. “Mr. Mockridge, you are a funny man.”

“That one,” I said, pointing at *The Car* as it slid slowly by, “is a particularly fine example, body by Hooper... probably designed by Osmond Rivers himself. He wanted his body designs to separate themselves out from the old traditional, solemn, staid, and stately Rolls Royce designs.”

“Mr. Mockridge, sir! You do know your stuff.”

“Ha,” I said, “how do *you* know I’m not just making it up?”

“I know you, Mr. Mockridge. I know you as a man who is more likely to admit what he doesn’t know than to let anyone get a glimpse into what he does.”

“Really?”

“No, but I thought that would make up a little for whatever it is that Mr. Snard is putting you through. As a friend... I thought I’d put in a little effort into letting you know that you’re appreciated.”

“Thank you,” I said. “That’s kind of you, Giorgio. I have to say that I really like the sound of that—*a man who is more likely to admit what he doesn’t know than to let anyone get a glimpse into what he does*. I have no idea what it could possibly mean, but I like the sound of it.”

"I have no idea what it means either," he admitted.

I laughed.

"I'm pretty sure I'll find a place for it somewhere in my next book. So, thanks for that too."

"You, Mister Mockridge, sir, are welcome."

"So, who is that riding around like a king, behind those dark, weighty, worn out brocade curtains, Giorgio?"

"I don't know... could be anybody."

I laughed.

"Really? You don't know who that car belongs to? How many 1949 Rolls Royces are there on this island?"

"There's only one car like that anywhere in Blétante, man."

"I suspected that... and..."

"And many people know who's *in* it, at the moment, but nobody knows who *owns* it."

Delighted by the whiff of impending Blétantean insight, I nodded. I watched as that beautiful machine drifted by.

"OK. Spit it out," I said.

"The gentleman, or lady, who owns that extraordinary vehicle—body by Hooper, designed by a man named Brooks, I've been told—"["Rivers", I corrected, "Osmond Rivers."] ...OK, designed by Rivers... holds a lottery about every ten days or so, and some lucky person is chosen to have full use of *The Car*. They can take it anywhere they wish on the Island of Blétante... even over to Tender or Nyla, if they want. Everything is paid for; it comes with a driver. He is at their beck and call as long as the car is theirs."

"That's interesting."

"This is Blétante, Mr. Mockridge."

“How do I enter that lottery?”

“No one knows. You just might be the next winner!”

“Yeah, fat chance. Why do you say it’s a lottery?”

“What else would you call it?”

The idea of winning that lottery had me dumb-founded for a moment, while I dreamed of riding around in that coach. I was delighted at the possibility.

More importantly, I was delirious—damned-near slap-happy—at finding myself back in a country where such things made so much sense. Apparently I looked it too; Giorgio reached over and patted me on the shoulder.

“... WELCOME back to Blétante, Mr. Mockridge! This time you are NOT going to want to leave.”

“I didn’t really want to leave last time, Giorgio.”

As Blétante slid by outside my window, everything I saw out there was agreeable to me.

The GRANDE HOTEL de BLÉTANTE

We arrived at the front of the largest building on the main island of Blétante, the Grande Hotel de Blétante; it stood three storeys high and covered almost the length of the entire block. The doorman, wearing an oversized hat and white gloves, smiled, nodded, and said, "Welcome back, Mr. Mockridge. It is very good to see you again, sir."

"It is a pleasure to see you too," I said, and meant it.

Giorgio got out, popped the trunk, and I took out my bag.

"I'll drop by later to see how you're doing," he said. "Let me know if you would like to have dinner with our family sometime this week; they're all excited about seeing you."

"Yeah," I said, "that would be nice. Let's get together soon. But, I think I'll just stay in tonight and do some thinking."

"We encourage that on Blétante," he said.

I tapped on the window to say goodbye to Molly, who looked up and wagged her tail a bit before returning to repose. Giorgio shook my hand, nodded his head, smiled, got in behind the wheel and drove off.

I walked in, and noticed that the lobby hadn't changed: large and largely empty, elegant, marble everywhere, matching brocade couches, potted palms, polished stairway leading up to the rooms. I was looking forward to a nice, clean, comfortable room, and all the water I might waste while showering and voicing my great delight, somewhat off-key, in impromptu song.

Though last time checking-in wasn't so easy, this time it went more smoothly. The desk clerk was no one I knew, but he seemed to know me.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Mockridge; it is my pleasure to welcome you back to the Grande Hotel. We’ve reserved the Presidential Suite for you; I’m sure you’ll find it to your liking. Just one moment please...”

He touched a little earpiece, turned his back for a bit, spoke a few words, then returned to me smiling.

“Someone will show you to your rooms in just one...”

Instantly, a nice young round-headed kid stepped up behind me and, without instruction of any sort, took my bag and led me quickly toward the stairway.

Arriving on the third floor, we were confronted with a very large oak door marked PRIVATE, which I hadn’t noticed on my last stay. But, naturally, being a Greatly Honored Guest, in we went.

Inside, the young man placed my grubby little bag on a large, elegantly carved, oak luggage rack, smiled, and made a gesture which I took to mean, “All of this... is yours!”

Then he nodded enthusiastically, as if to confirm the fact. “Pretty nice!” I said.

“Mr. Mockridge,” he said, and looked down at the floor before looking up at me again, “I want to say that I read your book.”

“Thanks,” I said, “What did you think?”

“It was kinda political, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that it was kinda political. But, did you find it readable, bearable, a waste of time...?” He looked down at the floor again before speaking.

“I never knew J. R. Mansel was a desk clerk here. Is it true that you slapped him? You actually slapped J. R. Mansel?”

“No. I did not slap... I think you should try to read more carefully,” I said, perhaps a little irritably.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said, handed me the key, turned and left. I was sure I had stepped on that poor kid’s toes.

So, (*noblesse oblige*) I ran out and managed to flag him down somewhere short of the first landing. I thanked him for his help, handed him a nice tip, and said, “If you’d like me to, I’ll slap him again, next time I see him.”

(I have no idea what makes me say these things.)

The kid just stood there looking at me with his mouth open for a long while, before backing away slowly and skittering down the stairs—as if he might be my next victim. As I trudged back up to the Presidential Suite I wondered whatever happened to the usually aloof, surly, cold, insensitive, distracted, discourteous, indifferent, secretly vulgar, openly stupid, traditional hotel staff. I hoped they hadn’t all gone on to become world-famous filmmakers like Jeremy... I’m sorry, I mean J. R. Mansel.

As I plopped down on the huge bed, I hoped they all hadn’t wooed and won the heart of some poor old fool’s great love. I found myself pondering how the intrusion of such a parvenu can leave an old fool feeling embarrassed and awkward and nervous, and anxious for the phone to ring. And, strangely, even as I was poking at that bruise, it did. I lifted the receiver instantly, gulped a deep breath.

“Sick and Lonely Hearts...” I answered.

She still had a lovely laugh; it melted my poor heart.

“Would you like to come down? I’d like you to meet someone,” she said.

“You’re welcome to come up here,” I said, “But, the legal capacity is probably only 6 or 700 guests at a time.”

“Come down, my love; I can’t wait to see you.”

“You’re a married woman...”

“Yes, I am, and I really long to look at you and talk to you. I’d also really like to introduce you to someone.”

“It’s not some every-day award-winning filmmaker, is it?”

“No, he’s in Italy, working. Come down, my love.”

Well, so, you know, a man in his 60s should never allow himself to be filled with such joy...

*I swear to you, Lady,
That the mere thought
Of seeing you again
Takes my breath away.*

And so, down the steps I traipsed.

The last time I saw the lovely Evelyn, the day before I was to leave Blétante, we’d spent the entire day together. Like two dazzled adolescents we explored the wonders of first-love; and throughout that day I was as giddy as a school boy. On that occasion I often gazed at her and thought that a filmmaker, like J. R. Mansel, would be wise to create an entire film based upon her smile, her grace, her femininity.

Apparently Mansel saw it that way too, because he not only captured her on film, he also captured her heart and married her. So, you can imagine how that made me feel. Or maybe you can’t. Either way I can’t describe it... or don’t care to, or won’t.

Several frantic moments later—after skipping down the stairs—I arrived at the lobby, where Evelyn stood smiling. She was not alone.

I gulped, missed a step, and had to recover, before putting on a big phony smile.

“Good afternoon, Evelyn!” I sang, grinning like Death.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Mockridge,” she said, and bowed her head in a lovely courtly gesture.

“This,” she said, “is Sandrine... she’s asleep right now.”

“Oh my gosh,” I said, as she showed me the babe in her arms. “She’s so tiny.”

“Yes, she’s tiny, but she’s got a good pair of lungs, so, don’t wake her.”

Evelyn looked into my eyes and rested her hand upon my arm. “It is so wonderful to see you, my love,” she said. And, you know, at that point there were tears in my eyes. Giorgio’s sister-in-law had broken my poor old heart.

While rocking the baby, she waited nicely for me to recover. “Are you OK?”

“Sure. I mean, of course.”

I looked around at the lobby for a while; the ceiling, the floor, the desk. I forced a big brave smile to appear upon my big fat stupid face before I tried to look at her again.

“You sure?” she asked.

“Of course... of course. I’m just so happy to see you. And to meet your daughter of course,” I said jokingly.

“Maybe we should sit down,” she said.

We sat on one of the couches and she caressed her child’s cheek for a bit.

"I read your book," she said.

"Oh, yeah..."

"I liked it *very* much."

"Yeah, I felt like it turned out OK."

"Giorgio liked it. And Sandrine... we all liked it."

"Well..."

"Now, Celeste *really* wants to be a writer."

"I know how that works." I said, laughing. "She looks at me and thinks, 'If that big moron can write a book, I **KNOW** I can.'"

Evelyn laughed quietly.

"Nooooo. She thinks, 'The very wonderful Mr. Mockridge is **NOT** an alcoholic, and yet he manages to write books.'"
I laughed.

"Not **YET** an alcoholic," I corrected her.

We looked at each other for a while.

"But, Celeste is serious," she said. "She's been struggling her way through Jane Austen, and now she's working on something she calls 'Beef and Abandonment'."

"Beef and Abandonment!" I could not help but smile.

"It's one day in the life of a dog who, fed *unusually well* one morning, spends the rest of the day worried, wondering if he'll ever see his master again."

"Man!" I said, "Why can't I think of a thing like that? All the good stuff comes from the minds of nine year-olds."

"She's 12 now, Mr. Mockridge, and don't forget it."

"Oh, that's right. It's been 3 years, hasn't it?"

"It seems like only yesterday we strolled around our little town, arm-in-arm, my love."

"Ha," I said, "It seems like a thousand years ago to me."

I looked at her for a long time, while she looked down lovingly upon the babe in her arms. I was transfixed by the vision of a mother's love for her child.

"You're really wonderful, Evelyn," I suddenly sputtered.

"And you are wonderful too, my love," she said without looking up.

So, you know, there's really no need to go into that much further. As a kindly doctor once roughly advised me, Evelyn is far too young for me; too intelligent, too good looking, too decent, too dignified, too honorable; much too good for me in every possible imaginable way. And, so be it, you know. Things are what they are. Though, at one time I had asked her to please stop calling me *Mister* Mockridge—assuring her there would be plenty of time for that once we were married—now I would have to ask her to please stop calling me *my love*."

While I was thinking these very thoughts, she placed a hand on my arm, smiled and whispered, "I understand..." Then she kissed one fingertip and tapped me on the nose. We both laughed.

"Thank you," I said.

And as I got up to leave, she gave a little tug upon my sleeve. I stopped, turned and paused to gaze down upon her and her lovely sleeping child. I felt like it might be the last time I would ever see either one of them.

"How about this?" she said. "We'll meet again whenever you're ready."

"That," I said, "is perfect."

And that is how that beautiful/painful meeting ended.

An aside:

Just to clear things up, here's something you may or may not already know about Evelyn's husband, the heart-winning, award-winning filmmaker, J. R. Mansel. Giorgio did, in fact, slap him hard across the face once in my presence. And, I suppose that demands some explanation.

See, the Island Nation of Blétante is—as Giorgio puts it—*still living in the past*. So, if a neighbor, or even a stranger, catches you doing something that does not represent the Nation of Blétante in a good light, it is their duty, as your fellow citizen, to correct your behavior...if they feel that is necessary. They call it a *matter of courtesy*; a MOC. When Giorgio first told me about this, I said, “You ever hear the phrase, *Mind your own business*?” And he replied, “Yeah, we heard that phrase, Mr. Mockridge, but when somebody tries to screw up things for the rest of us on Blétante, that IS our business.”

I actually like that. But, when I laughed, he said, “Laugh all you want, it works.” And who can argue with that? From what I've seen of Blétante, it does work. Click clack, just like that.

My first (and only) experience with a MOC involved then desk clerk/now award-winning heart-thief, filmmaker, husband and new father, Jeremy Mansel. He'd treated me pretty brutally when I checked-in at the hotel... I suppose he had other things on his creative mind. Later, when I mentioned it to Giorgio—just a passing comment—he dragged me downstairs, confirmed that it was Mansel who had rough-handed me, then went outside to gather a small

herd of strangers. They each welcomed me to Blétante, and then confronted Mansel, asking him a series of questions.

They asked him his name. They asked if, when I checked in that afternoon, he had treated me nicely. They asked if he understood that it was their duty, as fellow citizens, to correct his behavior toward visitors, since that did seem necessary. They asked him how old he was and—this I found interesting—they asked him if HE felt that was old enough to know better. More interesting still, he answered ‘Yes.’ They asked him if he had done such a thing before. They asked him how many times. They asked if he had been *called on it*. They asked him if he had been *humiliated* or *given leniency*. Unfortunately for him, he’d been given leniency each time, and so, then a quiet little discussion took place.

He was then asked if he was now aware of his MOC and would he please try to correct it. He responded nicely, stating that he was aware of his tendency to be somewhat discourteous to guests at times, and he would make efforts to change that behavior. He then asked them if he could make an apology.

At that point, Giorgio turned to me and asked me if I would accept an apology.

By my own accounting I said, “Hey, wait...there’s no... I mean, yes, of course I will, but there’s NO need for all this.” (I now realize I should have simply said ‘yes’.) The leader of the MOC then polled the others, “Leniency or humiliation?” There was agreement in the herd, they each said they were sorry, and the leader turned to me.

At a loss, I turned to Giorgio.

He asked me, “Do you want to slap him, or should I?”

Naturally, I protested loudly, calling the event *draconian*. Nevertheless, Giorgio stepped up to the desk, warned the kid—“Don’t ever do that again”—and slapped him hard across the face. REALLY hard. The strangers then brushed the palms of their hands together, turned and wandered off.

That was the only MOC I witnessed during my two week stay in Blétante. For all I knew, MOCs were taking place all over town, but if so, they were kept private.

Either way, the first time I staggered off to the men’s room in a Blétantean blues joint and noticed I *wasn’t* standing in a cold putrefying swamp of ankle-deep piss, I realized how effective that draconian process seems to be. And, at that moment, in my drunken mind, I attributed the dry tile floor beneath my feet to the MOC.

Later on, when I was thoroughly, undeniably sober, and had the time to give the matter some real thought, I still attributed it to the MOC... despite the inscription on the men’s room wall in that blues dive.

To all my siblings
Whom I’ve never met
It’s how little I know of you
That I most regret

AFTERNOON in the SEA SAW ROOM

All alone in the Presidential Suite, alternately pacing the marble floor and sitting on the edge of the unnecessarily ornate monumental bed, I was feeling abandoned and maybe just a little betrayed. I didn't like the idea that Wilfred Snard—my friend—wanted to implant the idea, in my all-too-easily-influenced mind, that I was the most hated man in Blétante. If it was a joke, it was a strange kind of joke. I was anxious to learn what his investment was in making my life miserable.

Eventually, of course, I'd have to face him. So, I took a deep breath, got up on my feet and, after staring at myself coldly in the mirror for a while, went clumping down stairs to the hotel's small lounge, the Sea Saw Room. If I was going to face Snard I needed courage and, for me, that sometimes comes in a bottle.

My friend for life, Phillip, the barkeep, was in there behind the bar when I entered. He nodded but continued filling the sinks with ice, while I slid onto a bar stool. He turned his back to me, touched a little device in his ear, spoke a few words, turned to face me again, grinned, and extended his hand.

"Mr. Mockridge!" he said.

We shook.

Then he cleaned a glass, set it down before me, extracted a key from a hook, and placed a conspiratorial finger across his lips. I looked around the place, so as not to be a witness to what came next.

He unlocked a cabinet and took out a peculiarly shaped, but familiar-looking, bottle.

"I've been instructed to pour you a 'respectable shot' of tequila, Mr. Mockridge. I was *not*, however, told which tequila. I think you'll like this one." He poured.

I lifted the glass to the light and inspected the lovely liquid; I took in its fragrance and, grinning ear to ear, I took a tiny little sip.

"That, Phillip," I said, "is as wonderful as I remember it!"

"It wouldn't be a *re-al* welcome back without a little Don Julio Real, Mr. Mockridge."

"You do not find me ungrateful, my friend." I said. "Here's to you, Phillip."

I took another tiny sip of tequila. And, as I did, I swore a silent sacred vow to lower the level of that lovely liquid... languidly. As if reading my mind, Phillip nodded, smiled, and raised a glass of something less heavenly.

"Do you want to watch 'Now, in the News'?" he asked.

I laughed and said, "You should be ashamed of yourself."

He said, "You're no longer interested in US protest news?"

"I came here to get away from it," I said.

"Very popular show," he said. "Last night they reported that two people were killed in an explosion—a mother and both her children were among the dead."

"Yeah, well..." I said, "I get enough of that at home."

"Are you sure? They always have LIVE taped coverage."

We were immersed in the warmth of unspoken camaraderie when Wilfred Snard entered, walked over to a table in the darkest part of the Sea Saw room and sat.

"See y' later," I said, finished the tequila, tapped the counter as a promise, got up, and went over to join Snard.

Snard looked at me for a long while without saying a single word. Meanwhile I found myself mulling over the fact that—though I'd been away from this place for more than three years—apparently somehow I had still managed to offend the man. I enjoyed Snard, and respected him, but at that moment, it didn't appear to be mutual. I tried to look as innocent as I could while we sat there in silence, looking at each other.

When Phillip brought four glasses of tequila and set them down between us, Snard picked one up. I picked one up. He raised his glass, and I raised mine.

"Mr. Mockridge," he said, "I had been very angry with you for quite some time."

I startled a bit, but said nothing. I waited. When he drank, I drank. When he put his glass down, I did the same.

"Because of the book...?" I asked.

"What?"

"Because of *Two Weeks in Blétante*?"

Snard shook his head and snorted derisively. He slammed the table with the palm of his hand, shook his head violently, and laughed so hard that he started choking.

I just sat there stupefied while all this went on.

When he recovered, he looked at me for a while longer.

"Ha," he laughed dryly. "You must be an idiot."

As is his way, he said it with such aplomb that I found myself, once again, considering the possibility; he could be right. Undeniably, when it comes to dealing with people—either guessing what goes on in their minds or trying to understand the stuff that comes out of their mouths—I have always been at a complete loss.

I certainly had no idea what was going on at that table at that moment. Maybe I am an idiot. Maybe I've always been an idiot. That would certainly explain a lot of things.

"But..." I said, "Why do you say that? I mean, I am not offended because it comes from you, Mr. Snard—I know you to be a keen observer of human nature—but I have no idea what you're talking about."

He looked at me and snorted again.

"It amazes me, Mockridge, that you could possibly believe that your book—and allow me to congratulate you, by the way; I enjoyed it—but, for you to THINK that your book...

Oh, never mind. That's not the point." He chuckled quietly.

"What *is* the point?" I asked. "That's what I want to know."

"Ha," he laughed again. "Oh, Mockridge, you are a hoot.

You have no idea how disarming your innocence can be, my dear addled friend." He drank. "Do you?"

"I don't think of myself as innocent," I said. "But, I admit that I have no idea *whatsoever* what you are talking about."

"Nothing could be clearer." He drank. "A few weeks ago," he said, "I was prepared to come in here and rip you apart; but find now that I enjoy you too much. Such ambivalence is frustrating for us ancients. You're old enough; you ought to understand these things."

I said nothing. I waited.

He smiled knowingly and snickered to himself for a while.

I could not even guess what he was getting at.

"Charles, Dark Cloud, Bellwether," he finally said, "is an old friend of mine, Mockridge. What he did was foolish without question; to attempt a single-handed crossing of the

Pacific in a 30-footer, in any season, is delusional; in winter it is purely suicidal. Have you heard from him?"

"No."

Wilfred Snard drew in a huge volume of air and slowly let out a long sigh.

"All that aside," he said. "I was wrong in ever thinking it was, in any way, your fault."

"My fault?" I said defensively, though perhaps not entirely convincingly.

In truth, for a very long time I had, in fact, believed that jolly old Charles, Dark Cloud, Bellwether *may have* been pushed over the edge by my appearance at the Estuary Publications Christmas party. That idea—that Bellwether's self-imposed exile could have been, even partially, my fault—haunted me from the moment ABJURED motored out of San Francisco Bay. That Wilfred Snard had also considered that same possibility was a horrible revelation.

"DC wrote me, sometime in January, saying that you had orchestrated an elaborate plot—he called it 'a vile and despicable hoax'—which had cost him the ability to hold up his head in public..."

"Orchestrated an elaborate plot...? Me?"

"He sent along several articles, which he himself had penned, concerning the deaths of the three American writers for whom he had been proud benefactor... none of whom were, as it turned out to be, in fact, dead... making him a laughing stock."

"Wait," I said. "Wait, wait wait... just wait." I stood up. Snard looked at me while I bristled for what I felt was an appropriate, somewhat overly-dramatic, time.

Then, feeling awkward and ridiculous, I sat down again.

“This is crap,” I declared, quietly.

“I realize that,” he said, “...and I apologize. I know you better than you think I might, Mockridge—largely from your work—and, I realized that DC was wrong. I also know him of course...”

At that point Phillip appeared with a tray and started to replace our empties with a new round. Snard touched him on the elbow.

“Phillip, tell me something. Mr. Mockridge here seems to have been injured by something I thought wrongly about him, which I have since apologized for. Yet he remains unconvinced and unreasonably on the defensive.”

“The Bellwether thing?” asked Phillip casually.

“My god, are there no secrets on this island?! Yes, the *Bellwether* thing. What do you say...? How do you see it?”

Phillip paused and said, “Ask yourself this. Which of the principles wished most urgently to exact *your* support?”

“Ah...” said Snard.

“That’s key,” said Phillip matter-of-factly. “I have no personal knowledge of that man,” he continued, “but I understand that such men often believe themselves to be above the laws and obligations, both social *and* natural, to which the rest of us must, willingly or otherwise, adhere.”

“Only about 97% or 98% of the time,” I added dryly.

“Well,” said Snard, looking up at the barkeep somewhat startled, “you may have overshot the mark a bit, but we see what you mean. Thank you once again Phillip, it’s always refreshing to get your unique perspective on such matters. And, I have to say that I agree with you. As I once told

Mockridge here, a little excursion at sea might hold a valuable lesson for any man, even one like Bellwether.” I mumbled. “Maybe he’ll discover that pomposity alone will not protect him against Nature’s arbitrary fury.” And, though I thought better of it, I continued. “Now that I know what I know, I wish we HAD staged our deaths, if only to be *rightfully* accused.” Snard paused, looked at me for a long time, looked into his glass, drank the last few drops and nodded. “Well said, Mockridge... very noble of you.” “I wasn’t speaking of you,” I said. “Of course not,” he said quietly. He motioned to Phillip, who went to get us another round.

When he returned Phillip was offered a seat, and he sat. “You’re part of the crew now, Phillip,” said Snard and raised a glass. “We find your unique view indispensable.” Phillip raised a glass. I raised a glass. We drank. “None of us” I said, “—not Henry, not Emma, not myself—was aware that *anyone* even *knew* about our accident.” “You needn’t say anything further,” Snard said... which didn’t stop me from saying what I felt needed to be said.

“None of us,” I continued, “knew that Bellwether, or anyone else, thought we were dead. When we showed up at the Christmas party... it was all a big laugh. Nobody had asked Bellwether to pour his soul out in fervid mawkish accounts of our tragic deaths and his own great personal loss—OR—to use his influence to ram all that pabulum into print in every known publication on earth.”

They sat by, looking into their drinks, while I let it all out.

“When Bellwether left that party we had no idea the man felt humiliated by our presence. Our mere existence isn’t a... a... ‘an orchestrated plot’ against anyone.”

“And, so, let’s be done with it!” declared Snard.

At this point, anyone walking into the Sea Saw Room would have seen three men sitting around a table nodding in complete agreement; discussion of the matter had pretty much reached an end. But then, there’s tequila.

“B’lieve me,” I slurred, “When, Bellwether set sail all by himself, in his stupid little boat...”

“ABJURED,” added Snard.

“Abjured... nursing a self-imposed, prolonged childish snit, headed for... heading for... off for...”

“Kauai...” said Snard.

“... wherever,” I continued, “It had **nothing** whatsoever to do with me, or Henry, or any of us.”

“Amen,” said Phillip.

“I’ll drink to that,” said Snard.

I looked down into at my empty glass.

“Apparently,” I said sadly, “I have already drunk to that.”

As we sat there in silence, I’m fairly sure we were each going over these matters in our minds, and evaluating the state of our friendship (or whatever it is you might call such a thing)... and finding it still, surprisingly sound.

“Oh well,” Snard said at last, “let’s go upstairs. I think you’ll find what I’ve done up there interesting.”

We all pushed our chairs back and forced ourselves somewhat inelegantly to our feet.

“You stay here ‘n’ keep an eye on things, Phil,” said Snard.

He actually patted the barkeep on the back.

“Yeah, you two go on ahead,” our friend the barkeep said, “I’ll just stay here.”

And, though Phillip did not bristle, I did. (I was kinda in a bristling mood about then.)

I have never understood any class system. Why human beings establish such systems naturally, and why the lower echelons in those systems accept them so willingly—if not readily—has always been a complete mystery to me. Even on Blétante, where there are no classes, there are classes. So, when the party moved up to the penthouse, Phillip remained behind, to clean up.

I felt horrible that a guy who had always been so generous with other people’s high-end tequila; whose unique insights were valued highly enough to be declared ‘part of the crew’ one minute, could be, in the very next minute, relegated to tending bar again. Whatever happened to ‘All men are created equal’? If that hotel was *my* joint, I’d have hung up the ‘CLOSED’ sign. Then the three of us—just as if we might-could-be equals—would have made our sloppy way, best we could, to Snard’s secret elevator together. One of us, probably, would have been mumbling a little song.

So, while riding up to the top in that elevator with Snard, I found myself thinking about the unfairness of life, and that led me, once again, to poking at that bruise, Bellwether.

Many times I'd pondered what the hospital must have said to him that led Bellwether to think we were all dead. Eventually, I decided that the phone call must have gone, pretty much, something like this:

Bellwether (booming): This is Charles, Dark-Cloud Bellwether, *Publisher* at Estuary Publications. I understand you have three of my authors there. I expect you to tell me, right now, precisely, what you are doing for them.

Hospital Associate: Are we talking about Henry...

Bellwether (cutting in): Yes, yes, yes-yes, yes. I'm talking about Emma Sarielle Moonsinger, Henry Edward Fool and that Mockridge fellow. How are they?

Hospital Associate: Your friends are no longer...

Bellwether: They're not my *friends*; I'm their *benefactor*.

Hospital Associate: Your *protégés* are no longer with us.

Bellwether: What?! All three?

Hospital Associate: We did what we could for them and...

Bellwether: Are you telling me that all three are gone?

Hospital Associate: SIR... we have limited resources.

Bellwether: You want me to believe that there was *nothing* more you could do for *any* of them?

Hospital Associate: Yes. And they've...

Bellwether: All three are *gone*? Is that what you're saying?

Hospital Associate: SIR...

Bellwether: I want you to tell me, right now, *precisely* ...

Hospital Associate: SIR. You need to listen to me. As I have *already* told you, there was nothing more we could do for your... for them. So, I don't think there is anything more I can do for you either; our resources are stretched to the limit at this moment; you'll have to excuse me."

I won't speculate on what an imposition our apparent deaths must have placed upon poor Charles, Dark-Cloud, Bellwether; it must have been a tremendous inconvenience. Nonetheless, that tragic event also galvanized DC's commitment to publish our work, and with renewed vigor.

At the Christmas party Emma was surprised to hear that a volume she'd been working on—*Certainty*—was in final edit, though it was, by her view, nowhere near completion. Henry discovered that his latest: *EXIT-TAINMENT: Eulogy for a Generation Not Quite Yet Dead*, was also being rushed into print. My own so-called work, *Morons and Lessons*, was slated to be issued in tandem with another unfinished piece, *On Fences and Offenses*, neither of which—I felt—had yet been fully infused with sufficient smugness, cynicism, sarcasm, tedium and grammatical error to reach full predictable turgidity. *Nuisances and Nuances* would apparently have to wait. All that sudden activity clearly indicated how deeply Bellwether had been affected by our synchronized passing. Honestly, I think the son-of-a-bitch *wanted* to believe we were all dead.

Yes, the true victim in that train wreck was not the dead but the aristocratic survivor who, immediately upon hearing of our demise, felt the need to capitalize upon it.

Naturally, such a man might take a bunch of *dead writers* showing up at his Christmas party—healthy as horses and happy as larks—as a personal affront, as well as something of an embarrassment. Apparently, the poor guy mulled over his humiliation for nearly two whole weeks before finally deciding that Life just isn't fair.

SOMETHING ABOUT THE FAIRNESS OF LIFE

It's true, life isn't fair. Things are what they are though, and once in a while, in this particularly indifferent world, some big rich, stupid, childish, self-serving, bilious bastard in a Brioni suit gets a glimmer of what it must be like for all of the rest of us. That can be a frightening experience for any elevated being experiencing it for the first time.

Don't get me wrong; I am not unsympathetic. I understand the skittish urge, as well as the occasional need, to put real distance between yourself and your carefully constructed but troublesome persona. So, given the chance, I might have attempted to comfort that man. Given the chance, I'd have told him that, much more likely than not, nobody'd even read any of his stupid articles. And—from personal experience—I could have assured him that, even if they had, they probably didn't remember his name or a single word of what he had said (...or, at least not correctly.)

For additional assurance, I could have told him that if, at ANY time during the cycle of events that led up to his departure in disgrace, ANY pop celebrity had changed the color of her fingernail polish, NOBODY under the age of 39 would have given a single additional thought to him or his kettle of dead authors now miraculously arisen. They would all be wriggling and writhing in delight, or so deeply immersed in insufferable anguish over that new choice of nail color, that nothing else on earth would matter to them.

WHAT USED TO BE the PENTHOUSE

The last time I'd been *upstairs* at the Grande Hotel de Blétante I was surprised to learn that Snard lived there; I didn't even know there was an apartment on the roof. I was even more surprised to discover that he owned the place; though I had no idea what Snard did for money, I never would have guessed that. He just didn't act the part. As he himself admitted, he isn't the kind of owner who marches around demanding, 'Why wasn't I informed of this?!' Additionally, I never once saw anyone who worked for the man snap-to when he passed by, or bow, or wince, or smile obsequiously, or stammer in his presence. Now, knowing what I know, I suppose it's entirely possible that *they* (the staff) didn't even *know* he owned the hotel. As far as I could recall, when talking about the owner, they simply said, *the owner*.

The last time I'd been upstairs, we took Snard's private elevator, and when the door slid open we were in a large hallway, an anteroom with huge windows giving on to a view of everything below; the city of Blétante, the sky above, the mountains in the distance, and the ocean all around. It was like standing on Chimborazo.

The last time I'd been *upstairs*, I was met by a little shoe-brush of a dog named Sherlock, which Snard called a 'Neether'—neither a Norwich nor a Norfolk, but equal parts both. This time there was no such greeting, and I missed the little fellow.

"What's happened to Sherlock?"

“Oh, he’s around; in my rooms most likely. He is very old and, because he’s much wiser than I am, these days he stays under the bed most of the time.”

“Ah.”

The last time I’d been upstairs, the huge room where we now stood was occupied by book cases, glass display cases, roll-top desks, drawing tables, two large, heavy, over-stuffed chairs and a monstrous leather couch, sitting in the center of the largest ‘Oriental’ carpet I’d ever seen. When I first entered that enormous room I just stood there for minutes, stunned by every aspect of every item in that room... and curious as hell.

Though it was Snard’s private sanctuary, because of its sheer size, the place had the feel of museum, a library, and a public swimming pool all combined. Now, it had been transformed. There were regimented rows of library tables, large, glass-encased, wooden model ships, and eight-foot tall bookshelves crammed with oversized books. What had been strictly private before was now irritatingly public. People were everywhere. I gawked at the unbelievable change of the place.

“Wow! What have you done?” I asked disapprovingly.

“There’s still a cat or two around here,” he said, as if to reassure me.

“But, what’s going on here?”

“It’s being converted into a Nautical Museum and library.”

“How did all these people get up here?”

He pointed to the opposite wall where three glass-enclosed elevators had been installed on the outside of the building.

"I see... So, this is what one does with great wealth..." He snorted. "At a certain point, Mockridge," he instructed me, "*wealth*, as you call it, becomes nothing more than accounting; columns of figures in binders full of spread sheets. At that point, only an idiot would waste a single second of his life trying to engorge those figures."

As a man without a spare penny to his name, I was pleased to hear what he said, and glad to bow to his expertise. I'd always held that view myself, thinking that if I ever could afford a 27,000 sq. ft. mansion I would buy a 860 sq. ft. cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains instead. I'd stick some money in the bank, of course, but it would be my pleasure to give the rest away.

"What happened to your personal library?"

"Those books—including yours—have all gone to a public library on Tender. Look, there's one of the cats now."

I looked but could see no cat anywhere.

"Where?" I asked.

"Where what?" he said as if I had disrupted his thinking.

"Where's the cat? I don't see any cat."

"He's quick, but he's around," he said distractedly, "he doesn't enjoy strangers stepping on his tail."

Now, where there had been large doors leading into another room, there were only more bookshelves. Where there had been desks and tables loaded with charts, there were large ship models. It was as if Snard had brought in a structural engineer and said, 'Remove as much wall as you can without the roof caving in.' In fact, as I was to learn later, that is precisely what he had done. Only the original, huge, wall-to-wall, sky light remained in place, overhead.

Thinking back, I recalled a poem Snard had been working on when I was last up in those rooms.

“Are you still feeling hunted?” I asked.

He stopped, turned and looked at me.

“Hunted?” he asked.

“Hounded, I mean...” I began to recite to him:

Let me tell you frankly, Poor Boar was hounded when in town. And even in the forest, where a Boar could be his boarest, they tried to run him down.”

“No,” he said, “but I hope it will please you to know that I continue to lead a life *of anguish and regret*... what makes you bring up that old thing?”

“I was wondering about what happened to all that stuff.”

“Forget *all that stuff*,” he said. “Look at all this *new stuff*.”

I looked, but I didn’t like what I saw.

“Where do you live now?”

“I have three rooms on the floor below,” he said sharply.

“I’m sorry,” I said. (And I cannot really tell you why.)

“Why are you sorry?” he asked.

“I don’t know... you know... maybe if it was me...”

“Nonsense!” he muttered. “Come over here and look at this French bomb ketch. She’s *la Salamandre*; built in 1752 in Brest. Bombed the hell out of Tripoli at one time.”

“Why?”

“Why?! Mockridge, I’m ashamed of you.” He glared at me.

“If she hadn’t, you’d probably be singing praises to Allah,” he looked at his watch, “right about now.”

“Like most good Americans, I have only the vaguest idea of history... as you yourself have noted; and I’m content.”

“Don’t ignore history, Mockridge,” he scolded. “I have warned you of this before: fundamentalist Muslims yearn to

usher in an end to their miserable existence. AND, as I have informed you, they genuinely, deeply, honestly feel that it is to their glory to send you along ahead of them. While you look at this ship, think about that.”

As instructed, I walked around the ship model and looked through the glass at the meticulous detail.

It was very nicely done, and I said so.

“I like this,” I said.

“I thought you would,” he said.

“Wow,” I said, “it really is amazing.”

Snard snorted, shook his head, and walked away.

When I caught up with him I asked, “Did you, at any time, honestly think that Henry and Emma and I had orchestrated our ‘deaths’ in order to needle Bellwether?”

“Not for a single second.”

“But you were angry with me?”

He sighed. “I was.”

“But, why?”

“Succinctly: an old friend, lost at sea; I couldn’t bring myself to blame him, so, I blamed you... I was wrong.”

He started to walk away.

“Please accept my apology, Mockridge.”

“Of course,” I said.

If there is anything in life I have *repeatedly* pretended to have learned, it is that emotions corrupt judgement.

Epictetus said that the passions make it impossible for us to even listen to reason. Talk to anyone about politics for 7 seconds to prove that theory to your own complete satisfaction. Personally, I would rather spend my limited time here on earth doing things which delight me (things I

can maybe do something about) rather than constantly ranting about things which only irritate me (and about which I can do nothing). You know, for the most part, we can choose between things that are positive, like music, and things which are inherently negative and typically vile, like politics. We can, I believe, pretty much ignore the foul stuff of this world, establish our own terms, and create a fairly satisfying, perhaps even comfortable, alternative existence.

That night, I slept... and I had a real nightmare.

I dreamt that I stood before God, and *He* asked me, “Say, how does it feel dealing with idiots every moment of every day?” I stalled, even though I knew *He* could read my mind, but *He*, employing infinite patience, simply waited. And this I felt was somewhat unfair of *Him*—*He* raised one bushy eyebrow, as if to prod me into responding. I felt that was uncalled for, somewhat unnatural, and an unpleasant thing for any Godly being to do.

“Look,” I finally said, “*You* must know the answer to that already. I mean, *You* must surely know that I am not cut out for dealing with idiots. It’s difficult enough for a laggard like me to get some shoddy version of pseudo-work done.” In response, *He* gave a little all-knowing Godly laugh—it was more of a gentle all-knowing snort than anything else—and, at that moment, I truly felt that *He* understood me... or at least was willing to put up with me a little longer.

I remembered with some delight that, in that dream, I was married to a truly wonderful woman: intelligent, lovely, a pleasure to be with, well-educated, well-traveled, charming,

French—everything that I might have ever wanted in a wife and clearly did not deserve. And, she loved me deeply, with an unreasonable passion. We were both stuck in utterly meaningless jobs, working in a tiny little kingdom for a self-serving, Maladaptive Narcissistic, little king. The feeling that we would never-ever EVER escape that damned situation enshrouded the entire dream like a thick, choking cloud of acrid, smog-colored smoke.

“I realize,” I said to God, “that dealing with idiots every minute of every day of my life is the price I must pay in order to have this great wife... but, Time being what it is, ... could *You*, you know—not for me, but for her—could *You* just kinda leave the cage door open one night?”

“All I’m asking for,” I pleaded, “is a single moment’s Divine distraction. ‘*Oops, I guess I forgot to close that danged cage door again!*’ *You* could shrug it all off, ‘*Oh well... I guess they’re gone.* ... No one would dare question *You.* ... and then, you know, maybe *You* could also just kinda wish us well...”

He appeared to give the matter some thought.

“I,” began God, in a weary (but remarkably forbearing) response...

Then, I woke up with a jolt.

As might be expected, I was deeply disappointed. Yet, I felt that I had come very close, that time, to getting some real answers.

DAY TWO

The Presidential Suite had taken on an unmistakable lair-like quality, despite my few possessions. I suppose what I really mean is that those rooms looked like they were being occupied by someone who, by all rights, as well as natural slovenly inclination, should never have been allowed into such a regal space to begin with.

Last time here, I'd been hired by Pure Arrogance Magazine to cover '*the political and religious practices*' in Blétante. This time around, I was here as the Greatly Honored Guest of the State, and completely untethered. So, on Day Two I arose refreshed and alert, and was feeling kinda good about myself, until I looked in the mirror. Then I discovered, to my utter surprise, that I was *still* an old man in his 60s. (In my mind I am perpetually 39.)

Of course, I really have no one else to blame. It's far too late now; I probably should have done something about this aging-thing years ago. So, I chastised myself quickly before taking a deep breath and—carefully avoiding all mirrors—fled that room.

Last time here, I never left the main island of Blétante—in fact only wandered a few miles beyond the city—this time I planned to poke around on the islands of Tender and Nyla. That demanded some thought. So, I wanted to sit around in the lobby and think about that for a while; I wanted to create an itinerary. Instead, I found myself, sitting around in the lobby, re-thinking the Abjured Affair.

It was certainly something I might write about some day. That thought led me to thinking about the double-edged sword of writing.

Writing books, for me, is a process where I write and write and write and write and write—taking time for occasional flighty thought—until things are such a mess that I cannot possibly go any further without the help of someone with a clearer mind and a solid basic understanding of English grammar. At that point, I send everything I’ve done to an editor who begins the arduous task of removing all unnecessary commas and stabilizing the verb tense within every wavering sentence to an acceptable degree. Then, it’s sent back to me—in a new, more readable form—so that I may begin again re-inserting muddle.

Typically, this process is then repeated—repeatedly—until no editor wants anything more to do with either me or my so-called work and, eyes closed, all noses held, the thing is rammed into print. At this point, usually the publisher makes an appearance, speaks to me briefly, while carefully avoiding the phrase, *it’ll have to do*.

However, after publication of *Two Weeks in Blétante*, I heard nothing from publisher, Charles Dark-Cloud Bellwether. He addressed me not. There were no words spoken; no little notes of congratulations, no ‘thank God that’s finally over’, no ‘What do you plan to do next, m’ lad?’... nothing. It was just as if I had never met the man. Disregard of that sort is always fine with me; I have never had any use for anyone who has no use for me, and—somewhat strangely—even less for those who seem to.

So, as far as I was concerned Charles, Dark-Cloud, Bellwether was a non-entity. His absence made little difference to me. *Before* I'd pitched the Blétante-thing I'd never seen him around the Estuary offices and, after I came back, I didn't see him at all until the night of that fateful Christmas party. Ho-hum, as they say. Things are what they are, Chuckie. Bon Voyage!

Still, I found myself picking at that scab again, but maybe in a somewhat kinder manner. Had I known Bellwether was so sensitive, I think I'd have taken him drunkenly aside—laying one weighty arm across his extraordinarily fine, Italian wool shoulder—and I'd have said, "Look, Dark-Cloud, buddy... you know... so what? OK? Really, man... **SO**... what? You may have said some nice things about me which, now, quite naturally, you regret ...but no reasonable person could have ever possibly believed that you actually meant any of it. So, just forget that. Have another shot of this good tequila."

Had I guessed the man was so simplistic, I'd have sat him down and sternly lectured him, saying: "Whatever you do, Dark-Cloud, dear sensitive soul, promise me you won't go to sea in that stupid little boat of yours, Jurody, or whatever the fuck she's called. OK? Promise me. A life of eternal public embarrassment is *not* motive enough to get all huffy and commit yourself to some silly, supposedly grand, stupid-ass, puerile gesture of self-pity. B'lieve me, it is NOT reason enough to pour yourself into a zillion dollar racing yacht and offer your pallid pampered soul up to the unforgiving gods of the sea—ass first—in some weirdly contrived act of phony-baloney heroic, ritualistic bullshit."

I'm not sure such a pep-talk would have helped him much. But I *am* sure that's pretty close to what I would have said to the guy... given the slightest drunken chance.

In my endless nightmares about the matter, I've often offered such excellent advice, and he has always ignored it. Usually, he just tugs his Captain's cap down a little tighter over his blocky aristocratic head, with his big pink ears sticking out, looks me squarely in the eye, (kinda squinty-like) and bravely says, "Wish me luck." And, somewhat surprisingly, usually I do, I wish him luck.

But, then I wish him to Hell in the following breath... because, frankly, I'm jealous. It has long been a dream of mine to, one day, just snap my bony fingers and simply disappear.

An Eternity with JACQUES de JACQUES

After giving the Abjured Affair the thought it demanded—but no longer deserved—I passed the remainder of the morning in the usual way, drinking coffee and tugging gently on my lower lip in addled thoughtlessness. At one point I felt as if I might have come very close to having an actual thought, but dismissed it when I realized that pursuing it would require effort on my part. Eventually, I got myself up upon my feet, and wandered outside.

Like in a movie, soon I found myself in a part of town I'd never been in before, and hadn't even imagined possible on Blétante. It had the forsaken look of an abandoned Eastern Bloc region, long after being stripped of every last speck and mite of natural resource. Stray dogs were everywhere, as if by my saying so that had come into being—in one of my articles I had mentioned packs of stray dogs, in an awkward attempt to make Blétante repulsive to American tourists. As I was pondering the possibility of that absurd idea, a pup appeared before me.

He was a lovely, goofy little guy, overflowing with that endearing puppy misconception that every living being on earth is his friend. I liked him immediately.

Although I had nowhere to go in particular, I wanted to get there without delay, so I continued on without encouraging him in any way. He stuck with me though, walking along at my side, looking up at me charmingly from time to time, seeking my approval.

Quite naturally—being properly rested and in an excellent mood—I looked down upon him approvingly, and offered a few kind words.

At some point, he stopped in front of me, his head and front paws flat upon the sidewalk, his rump in the air, and his tail wagging in 6/8 time. He wanted to play. So, you know—man with a functioning heart—I bent down to pat him on the head. He dodged the pat, hopped to one side, and—tail still wagging—took the same playful posture. So, then I lunged after him and he ran around me joyfully a few times, before taking the same position, challenging me to catch him. I lunged again and he dodged. We were having a great time until—no longer spry as a pup myself—I stepped on the little guy's paw. He let out a yelp, looked at me as if I'd betrayed him, and went limping off quickly into an alley. Naturally—such is my life—my heartfelt apology died in the wind before me.

I followed him because he continued whimpering, and every whimper was breaking my heart. And, also because I needed him to understand that it was an accident; that I didn't mean to hurt him. More importantly of course, I wanted to see if he was all right. My fear was that—big clumsy ox—I had broken his paw.

I followed him through that miserable part of town—old boarded-up warehouses, collapsing loading docks, stacks of rotten wooden pallets, overflowing dumpsters, cobblestone streets with foul vegetable matter filling the seams—until he limped up the steps and disappear into a dilapidated old house trailer. I ran up to the door and looked in.

There, inside, sitting on a plastic covered couch, was someone I knew. He was holding the poor creature in his lap and cooing comfort to it in French. When he looked up and saw me standing in the doorway he smiled sadly and said, “Ah, Monsieur Mockridge, where have you been?” It was Jacques de Jacques.

I was surprised that the great man remembered my name.

When I first met Jacques de Jacques he was a renowned restaurateur, the finest chef biologique on Blétante, and owner of the world-famous restaurant, Tulipe, on Nyla. At the time, he was in the midst of building another restaurant on the main island, and being followed around by a French film crew, documenting the process. I’d been introduced to the man four or five times, as I recall, but meeting me didn’t seem to mean all that much to the great chef, because it never left a mark. To be fair though, he always seemed genuinely pleased to meet me again, *as if for the first time*. Why he didn’t recall any of our previous introductions was a mystery which I never understood. Why he remembered me this time, after a three-year absence from his life, was a greater mystery still. But, you know, so what.

The last time I saw the man he was—each time—dressed quite elegantly in a perfectly fitted, dove grey silk suit and, when he came strolling into the hotel, everyone on staff took immediate notice. Some of them bowed, some of them scraped, some of them slithered along the floor on their bellies, in order to get close to the great chef. Now, here he sat, in an old house trailer, on a plastic-covered couch, shaven (though I don’t know why), and wearing the same

fine suit, which hadn't seen either cleaning or pressing, or possibly the light of day, since I last saw it.

Jacques de Jacques got up, came to the door, cradling the pup affectionately in his arms and whispering in its ear. "Bonjour," I said instinctively, in what I thought was a good imitation of the joy-filled effervescence of the well-meaning French—both the sane and those who vote. "Bonjour, Monsieur Mockridge," he responded and bowed a little bow. He invited me in with a broad regal gesture.

I entered the trailer cautiously and looked around at what can best be described as a careless accumulation of trash. The floor was four inches deep in discarded newspapers and magazines, and there were dogs curled up, sleeping, all about the place. The air in there was stifling.

This was not the Jacques de Jacques I thought I knew.

He nodded—a gesture which I took to mean, take a seat if you can dig one out—so, I knocked a few things off an old torn, yellow vinyl dinette chair and sat. He returned to the couch and smiled at me without saying a word, for a bit.

"Do you know, Monsieur, that dogs are vitally aware of the little time they have left to live?" he asked, while looking down and scratching the pup's head. "It is as if they have a little clock ticking away within them. They face each minute bravely, with that knowledge."

He spent the next several minutes looking down at the pup and smiling... bravely.

When he opened up again, it came spilling out in French, a language with which I am familiar enough to pretend to understand, but not familiar enough to pretend to speak. Although, at one point in my life I very cleverly—by my own judgment—composed a poem in French saying that *I think I saw the king's geese adrift upon the Loire this evening, why?* Unfortunately, no trace of cleverness could be detected in it by any of the naturally French-speaking people I forced to listen; my proud efforts usually being dismissed with blank incomprehension. The damned thing wasn't even clever enough to irritate them.

While Jacques poured cooing affection down upon the pup, I just sat there looking slap-happy. He was mumbling something—as far as I could determine—about the wonder of dogs. And I believe he called the pup Papeete. During all that, I grinned my best apologetic, dumb-American grin and, in English, said “I didn't mean to step on the poor little guy.”

Jacques responded, in French, in a single word which, to my ear, sounded something like *Ooh*. That word seemed to contain both a mild scolding for me, as well as comforting for the puppy. He looked up. He smiled at me.

“I don't speak French,” I said.

Then he began to rattle off a long tale (in French) which, as far as I could determine, had to do with dogs, radishes, a knife, goose liver, and a man on a horse. I listened and smiled, but he didn't stop chattering until the horse had thrown the rider and the radishes had been properly distributed among the local villagers, who wore no shoes. I smiled like an idiot throughout the telling.

There is an almost universally accepted idea that if a person speaks loudly enough and slowly enough, in a language which another person does not understand, that other person will soon begin to pick up that language. But, as anyone who has ever found himself laying on his back staring up at the ceiling fan in a Tijuana strip club at 4 A M will tell you, it's simply not true. Jacques de Jacques however, seemed to be fully invested in that hope as he chattered on and on and eternally on. I could see it in his eye; he was convinced that, if he only continued speaking to me slowly enough, soon we would be discussing the merits of the various soft cheeses and delving deeply into the evolution of cinema, together, in French, with a lot of *mais oui*, and an occasional, eternally sad *non plus*.

When he took a breath and looked to me for affirmation, asking, "Eh?" I smiled.

"I still don't speak French," I said.

This situation—Jacques chattering away pointlessly and me nodding as if I understood—went on for endless amiable hours. When he smiled, I smiled; when he winced, I winced. When he went silent, I remained mute and waited.

Eventually, it came to a deadlock of sorts with us sitting grinning mindlessly at each other (my god the tedium).

"Monsieur Mockridge," he finally said.

There was a pause.

"Monsieur Jacques," I said.

Then we winced at each other.

Then he sat there in silence, without moving in any way, smiling down upon little Papeete for a very long time.

“Ah, Monsieur Mockridge,” he eventually said, “it is a great pleasure to see you once more. I hope your stay will be a most pleasant one.”

He then returned his attention to Papeete.

From time to time during my self-imposed social ordeal, he became so involved in cooing to the dog that he forgot about me entirely and each time, when he re-surfaced, he appeared startled to see me sitting there. He would then study my face for a while before saying anything. And each time, when I felt we’d come to a natural ending, he began to speak, as though it was only the beginning.

(And in my heart I wept.)

I did not know how to extricate myself from that situation.

“So, Monsieur Mockridge, how are things going for you?”

“How are you, Monsieur?” I asked, genuinely concerned.

“They tell me that you left us last time unwillingly.”

“Ah, well. You know.” I shrugged.

He studied me.

“I will tell you something, but it is with great hesitancy for my English is not so good and because, as you perhaps know, I am a man of few words.”

The man of a few words remained silent for the time it took to take in another breath.

“You must know however, that I am not like a little mouse, suffering in my little place in silence. So, because you are my dear friend I will attempt to describe for you the cruel tragedy of betrayal which has befallen me.”

I waited. Dear friend that I am, I waited.

“Do you understand what an honor it was for me, always, to run Tulipe, the finest restaurant biologique on Blétante? No, I do not think you can have such an understanding. Perhaps you will never know such joy yourself. But, for me, the pleasure to find myself working with 17 sus-chefs, each one who had attended only the finest culinary schools of the world... was always a great pleasure. Each one of them had such genius, such vision and knowledge, such energy. It was an honor for me that they had chosen to work at Tulipe. Oh, Monsieur Mockridge, you cannot know what it was like only to be in their presence. Pride was, each day, beating so loudly, like a little drum, within me.” “I envy you, Monsieur,” I said. And I meant it.

To my mind, Jacques—sad as his state—had it all over any poor miserable person chained to the thankless treadmill of tedious drudgery called *a job*. Anyone who must waste every precious passing moment of their day in mindless labor, performing grueling, absolutely meaningless tasks—every one of which seems purposefully designed to crush the human spirit—while at the same time dealing with dull-eyed grumbling customers—not to mention those dullards we call our *fellow worker*—and who must suffer silently through the dark and ignoble intellectual restraints of the common workplace (breathe here)... deserves all our tears. Unfortunately, tenacity is not enough to free yourself from that hell; most people struggle throughout their entire lives and never manage to escape. Purely through dumb luck I’ve managed to extricate myself, but others accomplish the task through their own cleverness. You have to admire such individuals—even the swindlers, whom any reasonable person praises and despises in the same breath.

“With these sus-chefs at my side the proficient culinary machine that is Tulipe ran always without a flaw,” he said. But, he was clearly avoiding what he had started to say a moment earlier. And I knew it. And, he knew I knew it. But, dear friend that I am, I did not prompt him by asking about *the cruel tragedy of betrayal which had befallen him*. Instead, I waited patiently while he returned his attention to Papeete and gathered his thoughts.

When the man of few words—channeling all martyred French chefs throughout the entire gastronomic history of mankind—sighed—as only a French male coddled by Life throughout every moment of his charmed existence, can sigh—I sighed too.

“Oh, what do I want?” he wailed.

He looked at me.

I had no idea what that man wanted. I’ll tell you what I wanted though. I wanted to get out of that goddamned trailer; it was sweltering in there. I just needed to figure out a way to do that without hurting the man further; clearly the poor guy had suffered enough already.

“I am straining to find a way,” he said, “to begin to tell you what I now know too well of these cruel twins, Duplicity and Deception. Please, Monsieur Mockridge, if you will, give me but a moment.”

He played with the dog for a while more before letting him down gently to the floor. I noticed, with great relief, that when the pup ran outside there was no sign of a limp.

“Of course, my most ardent customers, they must be shielded from even a hint of the treachery which unravels within the pristine kitchens of a fine restaurant biologique.”

"It is unimaginable. And, for you, I think, it is not possible to understand what an unsuspecting gentleman of goodwill might suffer to undergo." He looked at me. "No, you could not possibly know. The sus-chefs too, they see none of it; like you, they are all blind," he said bitterly. "They prepare each dish in silence, their heads down, their eyes fixed upon their blades. Perhaps such perfidy leaves them speechless; they chop chop chop away, stunned, perhaps in wonderment ... I do not know. Their offerings leave the kitchen, like so, like so, like so, with not a hint of the shameful disloyalty that grows within. Oh, but you do not know, they do not know; this is a struggle which I must face alone."

I was sure that somewhere angels were weeping... I was about to begin doing a little weeping of my own.

"Tulipe was marvelous!" he exclaimed, with great sadness. "Though you, of course have never been... Such perfection is nearly unbearable, even in the fog of memory. Alone. I was always alone. However, I was never in despair." Meanwhile, I was getting more desperate by the moment.

"Wasn't there someone... an assistant...?" I began.

"NO!" he snapped, "There was no one."

"I thought that you mentioned someone to me once."

"There was NO one," he said with finality.

After doing all that I could—which was nothing—and having taken much more than any reasonable man could be expected to take, I winced, got quietly up upon my feet, said goodbye, and quickly, without looking back, walked out the door.

The Way THEY DO THINGS in BLÉTANTE

By the time I left Jacques' smelly old trailer it was dark outside, and a similar darkness had settled within me.

I was walking away from that place as quickly as I could and, while observing the miserable state of the district around me, thinking that I had never witnessed any crime while in Blétante. It seemed like the perfect spot for it. Just at that very moment—at that exact instant—I felt a sharp blow to the back of my head. Everything went pure white, there was a high-pitched buzzing in my ears and—I've been told—I went down like a felled ox.

When I came-to I found myself sitting-up on the cold cobblestone street, assisted by a stranger, who was asking me if I was alright. "I think so," I said, and took a second or two to test the circuits. "Yeah," I said, "I think I'm OK." That person—actually it turned out to be three persons—helped me to my feet, apologized to me—as though they might have been the ones who felled me—and said, "You had better go..."

I cut them off saying, "I don't need a doctor."

"No, I was about to say," said the woman—as I finally looked up and got a view of her, and her friends—"you had better go to the police."

"What happened?"

"You've been robbed."

"Did you see it?"

"We saw you go down and we saw a young man go through your pockets and run off."

At the police station, I went in, walked up to a counter and told the (bored) young man in uniform behind that counter, "I think I've been robbed."

He looked at me blankly as I told him everything I just told you and said, "Are you certain you don't want to see a doctor?"

I said, "I feel fine... my knees hurt a little... quite a bit, and I have a headache, but I think I'm basically OK. I think I'm missing my wallet."

"What about your cell phone?"

"Don't have one."

He looked at me strangely for a while. "Don't have one?"

"Nope."

"Huh. Just the wallet then?"

"Just the wallet..."

He was writing things into a tiny computer as someone came up behind him and handed him my wallet.

"Is this the wallet?" he asked.

I gawked. "Yes! That is my wallet," I said, "That's it. How did you get it?"

"That's the way we do things in Blétante," he said.

"But, how did you get it... so soon... I mean..."

"I need you to check to see that everything is in it."

I took the wallet and looked through it.

"Yep, s'all here."

(Actually, I had more cash than I'd remembered.)

He put out his hand and I handed the wallet back to him. I snorted; I *knew* things could not possibly be that simple.

"Now what?" I said sarcastically.

"Now I need you to talk to the man who struck you and took your wallet."

“You want me to talk to the guy who robbed me?”

“That’s the way we do things in Blétante,” he said.

“Do I have to?”

“That’s the way we do things in Blétante,” he repeated.

“What do you expect me to talk to the guy about?”

He sighed. He evaluated my intelligence for a bit.

“There’s only one topic you two have in common, as far as I can determine.”

“You want me to talk to him about how he robbed me...”

“That’s the way we do things in Blétante,” he sighed.

He gestured toward a door where an attractive young woman in uniform smiled and waited to escort me. I walked over to her and she smiled again.

A man, in a lab coat, appeared out of nowhere and gave me a brief physical exam; looking into my eyes with a light, checking my pulse, asking me questions—what was my name, where was I from, where was I staying, name something that is green and begins with the letter ‘L’—before thanking me for my patience and disappearing again. Then the young woman in uniform and I went through a door and down a hallway, and into a small room, where she offered me a seat on, believe this or not... a Windsor-style side chair.

A young man was brought in through another door by a big brute in uniform and seated in another Windsor chair, across a table from me.

“This is Whitney Sull,” said the brute and stepped back.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi,” said Whitney Sull.

And although I could not see them, I somehow knew that, under the table, Whitney Sull was shuffling his feet. I looked to the woman behind me for some direction, and she nodded encouragement.

“So,” I said, “what happened?”

“I needed money,” he said, “I thought you might have some. You looked like you did.”

I laughed. “Sorry to have disappointed you,” I said.

We sat in silence for a while.

“So,” I said. “how’d they catch you so quickly?”

“That’s the way things go on this island,” he said.

“Yeah? I guess so. What happened?”

He blew out a puff of air. “Guns...”

“Someone with a gun stopped you?”

He sneered, “Everybody on this island has a fuckin’ gun.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“You knew that going in, didn’t you?”

He sneered and looked at his hands.

“Good for us poor victims though,” I observed.

“Yeah, good for you.”

We looked at each other for a bit.

“Why’d you need the money? I mean, don’t you have a job? I mean... I thought everybody in Blétante was either employed or given work doing road repair or something.”

“Looks like I’m gonna be doing road repair anyway.”

“What about twabii?” I asked.

“Twabii?... I’m not a monkey! Besides, I got no talent.”

“How much talent does it take to hit someone in the back of the head and rob him?” I asked.

He glared at me. Then he looked around the room before glaring at me some more.

“OK. But, why did you need the money?”

“What do you care?”

“Well, I’m the guy you hit in the back of the head.”

He looked at me while evaluating my claim.

“OK,” he said. “Try this: My wife just had a baby; rent’s due, car’s fucked, baby’s hungry, wife’s screaming, there’s not enough alcohol or drugs in the world to stop the constant pounding torment. I need relief. I needed anything. I needed one fucking break in my life, no matter how small. But, prayer is useless; my folks don’t care. HER folks hate me—they say *we* got ourselves into this mess; it’s our problem. I got a raging rotten tooth, in the back, where I can’t get at it, or I’d yank the fucking thing out myself... and I cannot afford a dentist. I’m bleeding from the ass, the baby has a fever and never stops crying; my wife never stops looking at me as if I should do something—but I DO NOT know, in the name of Christ, I DO NOT KNOW what I am supposed to or can do. I don’t see ANY hope of *ever* escaping the mess we’re in, and I wake up every fuckin’ day desperate, insane, and feeling completely alone.”

He glared at me as if that might all be my fault.

And, to tell you the truth, I wish it were my fault because, if it were, I’d try to do something about it.

“I’m really sorry to hear all that,” I said.

“Yeah, sure,” he said. He pushed away from the table, got up, and was immediately escorted out of the room.

I looked around to the woman in uniform and she invited me outside. She led me down the hallway and back to the desk where the guy behind the counter asked me to sign something and nudged my wallet over the counter toward me. “That’s it?” I asked.

“That’s it,” he said.

I started to walk, then turned and went back.

“What’s gonna happen to that young man?”

“Initially it looks like he’s G. E. T.”

“What’s that?”

“G. E. T. is the Blétantean idea that some people have got enough troubles in their life at the time they commit a crime, and it is not our job, and not in anyone’s interest, to add to them. If we determine that Mr. Sull’s Got Enough Troubles already—qualifies as G E T—we have a legal obligation to consider that fact in how we treat him. Individual consideration is the benchmark of Blétantean society, Mr. Mockridge.”

“That’s what I’ve noticed...” I said.

“Some people belong in jail,” he said. “Others deserve our consideration and our help; and we’ve discovered that, in many cases, it cheaper in the long run to give them; the medical attention, the financial assistance, the personal attention, the training they might need... than to maintain the costs of their incarceration. And, then, basically, there’s the matter of common sense. If you *want* someone to fit into, to join in and to take part in society, separating them out and forcing them into close-proximity housing with real criminals is not the most rational first step toward achieving that goal.”

I was mesmerized by what the man was saying. On the surface he was cold and indifferent—the consummate American TV cop—but it was impossible to ignore the depth or the passion of his belief in the system.

“We’ll be talking to Mr. Sull,” he said, and offered me a small white card, upon which he had scrawled a number.

“You can have this is you want,” he said.

“What is it?”

“It’s a web-address; if you’d like to reach Whitney Sull.”

“Why would I want to reach him?”

“That’s entirely up to you. But, if you find that you would like to talk to him, at least you’ll have a way.”

I shrugged, placed the card in my wallet.

“I can’t think of anything I’d like to talk to him about,” I said. “This whole thing has been pretty weird.”

He laughed, “Yeah, for you, probably. For us: it’s just the way we do things in Blétante.”

I started to walk away again.

“Oh,” I said, turning, “What did he hit me with?”

“See,” he said dryly, “you already have something to talk to him about.”

THE SAD TALE

When I got back to the hotel—though it was too late to be calling anybody—I called my dear married friend, Evelyn, to ask her about Jacques de Jacques.

“Tell me,” I said, “about Jacques’ great downfall.”

“What do you mean, my love?”

“I was wandering around in a part of town where no one should probably be wandering without a gun, and I found the great chef living with a pack of stray dogs, in a trailer.”

“Oh, that.”

“Then, you know that he lives in a trailer?”

“I do. It’s very sad.”

“It’s not only sad, it’s unventilated and dirty and smelly.”

“You went inside?”

“I did. And I spoke with the... I mean, he spoke to me for a very, very, VERY long time; first in French, and then in a language I pretend to have some grasp of, and he told me how much he has always loved his sus-chefs—the same ones, I’m assuming, he reviled last time I was here. He also vehemently denied *ever* having an adoring, fully dedicated kiss-ass hovering around... whose name I cannot recall.”

“Brice,” she said.

“That’s him. I tried to get him to talk about it—he seemed to really want to—but, after a thousand years of dithering, I’d had my fill and left. Am I wrong or did Jacques once believe that... Brice... was as great as Jacques-himself?”

“Monsieur Jacques loved Brice like a son.”

“That’s what I thought. So, what happened?”

“Monsieur Jacques became dependent upon Brice, and minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, Brice insinuated himself more deeply into the business, until he’d

become indispensable; to Jacques, to Tulipe, to the staff, to the customers. Nothing there could function without him; soon Brice became ‘the face’ of Tulipe.”

“I think I’ve heard this story before.”

“Yes, unfortunately, my love, we all have... and too often.”

“Is Jacques senile?”

“No, I don’t believe that. Too trusting, perhaps. Brice saw his opportunity and, I don’t know the details but, about two years ago, Brice coerced... or tricked Monsieur Jacques into signing some papers... and, VIOLA, as the French say, Brice became the new owner of Tulipe.”

“Just like that...?”

“All legal, my love... and poor Monsieur Jacques no longer has the strength, or the inclination, to take up legal battles.”

“And so, dear children,” I mumbled, “by this torturous method Jacques de Jacques discovered that monumental arrogance is no shield against the machinations of a patient charming schemer.”

“Monsieur Jacques is not an arrogant man, my love.”

“Well, not any more he ain’t.” I snorted. “You should see the inside of that place. Still, I guess it’s a valuable lesson.”

“It’s very sad.”

“Yes, it is.”

“It’s very sad.”

“Yes, it is; it’s very sad. I wish Jacques de Jacques well.”

I’m told, Mark Twain said, “It’s easier to fool people than it is to convince them that they have been fooled.” But, we all know that no old folks have *ever* been *taken in* by a young swindler who suddenly appears in their lives and proceeds to gain their love and trust, only to stab them in the back. Off hand, I can only think of a few thousand.

I READ, I SLEEP, I DREAM

Having read and truly enjoyed **HOW TO MAKE YOUR BED WITH YOUR OWN SELF STILL IN IT**, I'd become a big fan of Celeste Croc's writing. Knowing that, Giorgio left me a copy of one his daughter's more recent works, and that night I decided I'd take a look at it. My hope was to get a glimpse into how the honest, unaffected mind handles the slippery craft of writing.

HE ATE SOUP, by Celeste Croc, age 10

He ate soup... while others dined quite fine
 He ate soup... through rain and sleet and shine
 He ate soup... while the rooster crowed at dawn
 He ate soup... and gazed upon a fawn
 While colored leaves drop all around...he ate soup

He ate soup... with rain upon the window panes
 He ate soup... as it rushed, in torrents, down the drains
 He ate soup... under Winter's snowy crown
 He ate soup... during Spring's first appearance
 He ate soup... without thought or interference
 Throughout the dreamy Spring...he ate soup

He ate soup... and listened to the Robins sing
 He ate soup... before a hard day's work ahead
 He ate soup... after day's work, nearly dead
 He ate soup... with no expectation
 He ate soup... and without explanation
 ... through whirlwind, flood and fire
 A nice big bowl of soup remained his sole desire

As all the ships slid out to sea... he ate soup
He ate soup... knowing what must, would surely be
He ate soup... despite impending doom
And ate on ... ignoring canon's distant boom
He ate soup... when the rains of torment fell
He ate soup... despite death's bell's constant knell
While all the armies of the world marched by,
outside his window...
He ate soup...while hope of peace began to dwindle
He ate soup... wishing such silliness would simply cease
... and prayed and prayed for constant peace

But, most of all, most of all, most of all,
And above all else ... he ate soup... because he liked it.

Shortly after reading 'He Ate Soup' (*by Celeste Croc, age 10*) I fell asleep and dreamed a dream.

I was sitting in an excruciatingly uncomfortable pink plastic chair—along with a few other select observers—in what appeared to be a large warehouse. People in the 14 to 37 year-old range were filing in through a door marked 'Obscurity'. They seemed to be quite eager, and somewhat anxious, as they milled around in a mob before us.

For a long while, there seemed to be no end to these young people coming in from out of 'Obscurity'. And, when the place was packed completely full of these kids (for they were all but kids to me), a tall, extraordinarily skinny young black man, named Syl, appeared before us. As he studied them—hand to chin—he paced back and forth squinting, and making disapproving, clucking sounds.

When he paused, the entire crowd of kids took in a great breath. So, whatever was going on, whatever was about to occur, the pressure on these poor kids was tremendous. Clearly they were all filled with a genuine desire to please Syl, but most of them were also overwhelmed; awash in trepidation, pale and panting, trembling, some in tears.

I knew—as one does in dreams—that Syl was known worldwide for being the best in the business and therefore, at once, the most demanding. I heard someone sitting behind me whisper, “Catch Syl’s eye and everyone on earth will fall at your feet.” It was peculiar that, even though I knew I was asleep and dreaming, I found myself thinking, “I have no idea what any of this means.” For a second I considered turning around and asking for an explanation, but at that moment Syl wanted our attention.

“Clap-clap, everyone!” he sang. “Clap-clap.”

When he was sure he had our attention, he continued. “I am so sorry to have to tell you—but at this point it has become unavoidable—so, it would be foolish to go on pretending—that, no matter what mommy has told you, unfortunately, most of you will never—and I suppose it would be more accurate to say—*can* never, be selected.”

I wish I could convey to you the stunned looks on all those faces. The silence in that room was chilling.

“Line up!” he commanded, and the masses began to shuffle around, adjusting themselves into one long row. Looking at them, Syl sighed deeply (poor tortured soul—he carries such a burden).

He took in a deep breath, and—may as well just get it over with—as he strode along slowly in front of them, he pointed at each kid in succession, saying, “No... no...no... *celebrity!* ... not... ab-so-lutely not... *celebrity!*... oh, good heavens, NO... not... not... *celebrity!*... not...”

Each kid declared a *celebrity*—while overwhelmed with joy (of course)—was immediately surrounded by huge bodyguards and whisked out of the room. As they went, every envious eye, of those who remained, was upon them... Those determined *not* to be celebrities, broke down in tears or clenched their fists in rage... or fainted. Others dashed after one of the newly-minted celebrities and, gushing praise, begged to be of service... maybe get them a drink or a sandwich, or something...

From the pamphlet which appeared in my hands, I could see that Syl decisions were final. If you were chosen to be a celebrity you were, and if you were not, you were not; it was that simple.

As I watched all this, I somehow got the crazy idea that declaring every third person between the ages of 14 and 37 a celebrity was, well, you know, perhaps, just a little out of whack. I thought the number of people emerging from Obscurity to become instant celebrities should be, maybe, limited in some way; it occurred to me that they might be selected, not by Syl, but by some criteria. For example, if, in order to become a celebrity you were required to have a skill, or demonstrate talent of some sort, or maybe even possess a pleasing demeanor. That would certainly take a lot of pressure off most of these poor celebrity-hopefuls.

If they knew, going in, that you had to actually DO something to attain celebrity status, perhaps fewer kids would think of it as their birthright; and with fewer misled, there'd be fewer disappointed, fewer bitter, fewer suicidal. Ultimately, I found myself thinking, some of them might even decide to face reality, opting to lead full, simple, normal, happy and healthy lives as mere human beings. That was my silly thinking, anyway. Others, of course, have had similar crazy thoughts.

The Buddha said the pursuit of celebrity is like licking honey off the blade of a very sharp knife. I think, for most of these kids, it was probably more like having mommy toss them into a wood chipper.

I was busy working out the details of a plan to set some of these kids free—had actually started to jot down a few thoughts—when Charles, Dark Cloud, Bellwether appeared before me, like Hamlet's ghost.

He stood high, high above me (as seemed only proper) and hovered in the air, like a desolating angel. He wagged a finger very closely in front of my nose and declared, in a booming (fairly convincing) God-like voice, "It would be wrong to attempt to undo the many years of purely idiotic thought that devoted mommies have implanted in the mind of every child in America for the last three generations." He went on to define the excruciating demands all those dedicated mommies have had to meet over all those years. He painted a fairly ugly picture too.

It had me wondering—but, only briefly—what it must be like to lead a sacrificial life devoted entirely to the minute-by-minute monitoring of the entire expanse of American pop culture, with the sole hope of securing a place in that weird universe for your own god-like off-spring. I think I was just beginning to get a feel for the full emptiness of that sad and utterly miserable experience, when I woke up.

Bewildered and completely at a loss, I lay stunned, staring at the ceiling for a very long time. What could it all mean?

For some reason that dream reminded me so much of a nightmare I'd had earlier that year. There were all these freshmen college kids lined up on the bucolic lawn outside the administration building of a major university. They were waiting to register for their first class. A man—old enough to know better—was standing at the head of the line and, with mechanical precision, as each kid stepped forward he placed a pacifier into their open mouths and said: Welcome to Blogmore.

When one of these future voters arrived before him in tears, he placed a hand gently upon the kid's shoulder and asked, "What's wrong?"

The trembling hopeful said, "I've never been away from home before. I'm frightened and confused, and I don't know what to think."

The man smiled and said soothingly, "Oh, don't worry, little one, we'll tell you what to think."

DAY THREE

When I awoke I knew that, eventually, I would have to extricate myself from my lovely rooms, tumble downstairs, and positioned myself comfortably in the hotel lobby, where I would spend a reasonable repose sipping good Island coffee and purposefully thinking only swell thoughts. But I resisted.

What kept me from doing all that was the idea that after getting up, going downstairs, sipping coffee and thinking swell thoughts for a while, I might find myself considering the possibility of wandering out into the streets again, and recently that had led to physical assault and, much worse: social entrapment. Besides, if I stalled long enough it would be too late to get anything real underway anyway. So, KING of the World, I decided to sit like a lump on the edge of my bed and wait for Giorgio. It was a good decision because Giorgio arrived earlier than expected.

We had plans to dive on the slaver, *Guidance from Above* that morning and, later, I'd check in to a hotel on Tender, charmingly named Drear House.

When Giorgio knocked, I grunted, he came in, and my eyes bugged out. It was the first time I ever saw the man without a suit on. Instead, he was wearing a Bomis Prendin t-shirt, striped shorts and rubbery, periwinkle colored flip flops. "I know you don't swim, Mr. Mockridge," he said, "but, grab your trunks, today we're going to put that negative buoyancy of yours to good use." I was too busy gulping and gawking to respond.

Giorgio knew the reason I don't swim is because my specific gravity won't allow it; I do, in fact, have negative buoyancy. On the other hand, he also knew that diving on the *Guidance from Above* was one of the things I'd promised myself I'd do if I ever got back to Blétante. That's why I had on swimming trunks under my jeans. So, I jumped up upon my feet and, with a cheerfulness that startled both of us, I chirped, "Let's go, Buddy."

Here's what you might need to know:

In 1650, the Portuguese slaver, *Guidance from Above*—bound for Binini, with captain, crew of 34, and a prized cargo of 216 blacks—after several months' struggle against an intolerable headwind—was driven, one dark night, onto an outcropping off the uncharted island of Tender. The 216 were locked-in below but unchained—*some* slave traders had by that time decided that such cargo survived the long voyage in better, more saleable shape unshackled. After months of relentless buffeting by that forbidding wind, *the Guidance*, wracked and loosely held-together, shattered like a walnut and capsized in 30 feet of water.

Most who survived the wreck either treaded water or swam in ever-increasing circles until the sea dragged them down. Or so it was supposed. Those who reached land—by fate or chance or the power of ever-increasingly-more-frantic prayer—were numbered 18 blacks, 2 whites. As the story goes, while standing upon the sandy beach, one of those survivors became hysterical and started wailing about how they were ever going to get back *home*, and the others—exhibiting exemplary good sense—picked him up, carried him out to sea, and dumped him in. "Go!" they shouted.

They'd already decided that they wanted nothing further to do with the place where they'd been captured, caged, and held prisoner until they could be sold to evil men for profit. They were in agreement on these few things: that anyone who sells you into slavery is no friend of yours; that all ties to the past are pretty much severed the moment your bare feet hit the splintered gangplank of a slave ship; and, whether freed by circumstance, Fate, or your own heroic efforts, when it presents itself you grasp Freedom greedily with both hands, and you do not let go.

None of them—even the homesick among them—spent any time bemoaning their sudden freedom. And, in the long run, none of them died unable to find anything better to do with their time than work away senselessly for someone who felt they could easily be replaced with another unit, younger, stronger, and more compliant. Instead they got busy, built a new society.

The survivors of the crash of the *Guidance*—both black and white—were all in agreement that *every* person on that island was of equal importance. On Tender, from day one, hour one, blacks were not slaves, whites were not their superiors; because, to survive at all, they would have to survive together. That commitment to equality, according to one authority (Wil Snard's great grandfather), gave those islanders "a cultural advantage which other emerging settlements in the western hemisphere, at that time, did not have." And, (as Mr. Snard also noted) ... *recognition of equality* proved to be *an excellent first step* for those co-founders of the Island Nation of Blétante.

In time the simple act of *acceptance* had become so deeply ingrained in their society that the idea of ‘equality’ no longer served any real purpose and, since there was no *inequality* to contrast it with, the word disappeared from the island vocabulary entirely. Ask any school child in Blétante today what ‘equality’ means and they’re lost at sea, because that child, whatever his color, has never experienced anything less. The concept has however recently been re-introduced by Islanders facetiously uttering the phrase *as if we might-could-be equals* when dealing with rude tourists flaunting their self-assumed superiority.

And you should probably also know this:

One of the two families that survived the sinking of *Guidance from Above*—mother, father, and a surprisingly stout male child—shrugged off their African names, and took on the family name of Croc. Those good people were my friend Giorgio’s ancestors.

Giorgio didn’t know how eager I was to take that dive. He had no idea that, just the day before, I had studied the model of the *Guidance from Above* in Wilfred Snard’s new Maritime museum. He did not know that I had snagged and nagged some poor docent, assailing her with a relentless barrage of (probably stupid) questions concerning that ship. “You sound like you’re ready,” he observed.

“Of course,” I said cheerfully. “You know how much swimming means to me!”

“I am much surprised, Mr. Mockridge, sir.”

As we walked down the stairs, he continued, “You had a hand-forged doctor’s excuse last time.”

“I’m still nervous,” I confessed. “I don’t want to drown.”

“You’ll be much too interested in what you see down there to drown.”

“OK, but if I drown, it’ll be your fault, Giorgio.”

“Better to go with an active curiosity, under the waves, than to live on forever, bored to death, stuck here on dry land.”

We were in the lobby by then.

“Are you going to tell me what I can expect to find down there, or do I have to ask?”

He stopped and looked at me. “It would make me feel good about myself if you would ask. But, I’ll tell you this much, Mr. Mockridge: it’s something interesting.”

I cleared my throat. I rubbed my unshaven chin.

“Something INTERESTING huh?”

I pondered deeply for a theatrical moment.

“I’ll give you a hint. It not so much what you’ll see as what you won’t see. *Guidance* had two longboats and a cutter on deck,” he said, as if that statement might be somehow meaningful. Then he started walking quickly toward the front door of the hotel.

I mused, as we both got into the car. “What’s a cutter?”

“A cutter,” he said, as we drove off, “is a small boat for getting to and from shore, for example. It’s not large enough to ship anchor. The longboats are; that’s one of their primary uses.”

“How big is a long boat?”

He stopped, pulled over, got out of the car, ran into a store and, emerging a while later, tossed a bag into my lap.

I fished around in it and pulled out a pair of baggy blue swim trunks. He started the engine and we took off again.

"I'm guessing," he said, "that each longboat on *Guidance* accommodated 10 rowers and a tillerman. The cutter probably carried 6 at most."

"Just refresh my memory, Giorgio; how many people survived that catastrophe?"

He looked at me.

"Damn you, Mr. Mockridge," he said. "I wanted you to be surprised."

"I am surprised. I'm surprised that you have, apparently, given more real thought to the sinking of *Guidance* than historians who have written whole books on the subject. I'm also surprised that you may have discovered something *they* apparently had overlooked. AND, I'm really TRULY surprised that you could find the time. It's enough for me just to maintain my position as a surly old malcontent."

He laughed and clapped me on the shoulder.

"Click clack, Mr. Mockridge," he said.

"How many men would it take to get one of these boats turned upside-up and in the water?" I asked.

"Under normal circumstances, *at very least* three, and they'd have to know what they were doing. If the ship had taken on too much water or had listed far enough, it might be impossible."

I thought about that.

"Would African natives, being shipped somewhere far far away, know about the presence of these boats, or how to launch them?"

"THAT is an interesting question, Mr. Mockridge."

"And, so what do you think?"

"They would try very hard to figure it out."

"Me too," I said.

We pulled into a scenic overlook parking lot and took one of the many empty parking spaces.

"You admit, Giorgio, don't you," I said, as we lugged our gear toward a worn dock on the rocky shore, "that it would have been unfair of you to expect me to notice missing boats that I didn't even know existed."

As we tossed all our stuff into a small boat, he said,

"Sure, I will admit that, Mr. Mockridge."

He started shoving the boat away from the dock, and said, "I will admit that, if *you* 'll admit that you studied my model of *Guidance* in Mr. Snard's Maritime Museum."

We were rocking in a small boat, motoring out into the ocean as I shouted, "YOUR model?"

"Yes," he shouted back.

"You built that model?"

"Yes. MY ANCESTORS were on that vessel."

"You amaze me, Giorgio!" I shouted.

Later, when we dropped anchor near the buoy that marks the dive spot, I asked, "Did you build a model of the *Dove* as well?"

"No. It took be seven years to build the *Guidance*."

"But, the *Dove* carried your wife's ancestors... didn't it?"

"Yes, Mr. Mockridge, it did. And Sandrine has had every opportunity to build a model of that ship, but she has shown no interest."

"I did notice those boats in the model," I said, "and I did wonder why there was no mention of their deployment in what little history I've read."

"I wondered the same thing," he said quietly.

“If I were on a ship, and she was going down, I’d be frantic to launch one of those boats. And, I bet it would be pretty easy to recruit others to the task.”

“You know much more than you pretend to know,” he said.

I laughed, “I’m always surprised at how many people seem to think that, Giorgio. But, I’m even more surprised at you. I’ve never known anyone to build anything as magnificent as that ship model; it really is an achievement, my friend.”

“To accomplish something of value is only a bonus, Mr. Mockridge,” he said wisely.

BELOW with *GUIDANCE FROM ABOVE*

Looking at the skeleton of a 400 year-old ship wreck is an interesting experience, and well worth the effort. I would recommend it to anyone. However, I have some advice for anyone who might want to undertake the venture.

Here's my advice: Don't expect to make any sense out of what you see down there—no matter how carefully you may have studied the model of the intact ship as she appeared afloat. But, above all else, remain focused. By that I mean don't allow any large lovely, dreamy-eyed sea-going turtle, who happens to be swimming casually by, lure you into the steel-like grip of a strong outgoing current. That can only end badly. I speak from experience.

One minute I was giddy with delight, gawking in utter amazement at the unbelievably enchanting sub-surface world surrounding me, and the next, I was being dragged out to sea against my will, every instinct awake and on alert within me, helpless and frightened. It happened pretty quickly. We were diving down toward the remains of the *Guidance from Above*—Giorgio was pointing at the wreck and kicking harder to get down to her—when a sea turtle swam between us and blinked at me coquettishly. Why, what a charming creature!

“Grandma, what nice big yellow eyes you have.”

“The better to show you the wonders of the open sea.”

“But, Grandma, what huge fins you have.”

“Yes. See how easy it is to swim along with me.”

“But, Grandma, how quickly you swim.”

“Yes, and you’re in trouble now, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. I’m in real trouble.”

“Oh well. I must be going.”

The evil turtle swam off effortlessly, disappearing into the foggy distance, leaving me to struggle futilely against a massive force, which had me in its grip. I was being shoved steadily out to sea against my will and beginning to panic. Where were Giorgio, the *Guidance*, our boat, our anchor line? How was I going to get out of this? I was completely lost and almost completely hysterical.

While flailing away frantically—no doubt providing raucous entertainment for our ethereal observers—I recalled something I’d once heard: *When trapped in a powerful outgoing current, swim parallel to shore*. I didn’t know where I’d heard that, or if it was good advice; but I was desperate to escape ... With more than a mile between myself and shore, and having no idea where shore even was, I didn’t know how that advice could possibly apply; but I was scared to death and could see no other option. I thought about which way that big under-handed, backstabbing, false-faced turtle-bastard had been heading when last it waved goodbye, then I took a sharp right, and started kicking as hard as I could. And it worked. I was soon free.

Still panicked, I looked around desperately until I spotted Giorgio—a tiny blue speck—in the blue-grey distance poking around in the ruins of a grey rib-like mass. If I had ever been unappreciative of the simple, comforting gift of friendship—I no longer was.

At the sight of that beloved speck my heart flooded and overflowed with joyful thanksgiving. In my mind I began to chant, “Oh thank you. Oh thank you. Oh, Dear God, thank you.” And with every stroke, as I swam toward my very very VERY dear, LIVING friend Giorgio, I repeated that prayer a dozen times.

But allow me to reiterate one thing: (This is important.) Whenever diving on a 400 year-old Portuguese slave ship with a friend, do not (DO NOT) allow *any* large beguiling, deceitful, cunning turtle-charmer—no matter how cute, no matter how innocent looking, no matter how enchanting—look you hypnotically in the eye and convince you that things’ll be simply swell if you follow her. *If*, with her coquettish eyes, she invites you on a lovely little swim, DO NOT go; do not follow that seductress. If you do, things will *not* be just swell; I assure you. If you are foolish enough to trust that conniver, things’ll likely become pretty frightening, pretty damned quickly. Take my word for it. Believe me, I know.

I made that mistake once, and it was no fun at all.

After pulling myself wetly back onboard our little rocking, boat, and shedding my gear, Giorgio patted me on the back. “This really changes things, Mr. Mockridge,” he said. “How does this change things?” I asked sullenly. “Well, now, your interest in our history has a pulse.” “I see what you mean...” I said. (I didn’t need to check to know that mine was still ticking away at about 160 beats per minute.)

“Would you like to spend the night camping with my family on Tender, Mr. Mockridge?” He squinted as if he had doubts.

“Giorgio,” I said, “There is not a single thing on this planet I would rather do.”

“You are impressively flexible, Mr. Mockridge.”

“It isn’t that complicated, Giorgio,” I explained, “I respect your wife, I enjoy your kids tremendously; I am, at this moment, extremely glad just to be alive.”

Giorgio laughed loudly, “Mr. Mockridge, Mr. Mockridge, Mr. Mockridge... I knew that dive would open up a whole new world for you.”

“Oh, it did that alright. Just promise me you won’t mention sea-going turtles, and we’ll have a wonderful evening.”

“OK...” he said while studying me with curiosity. “No mention of turtles. Should I inform the others?”

“Please do. I don’t want to hear a single joyful word about how delightful all those false-faced sea turtles are.”

The man had no idea what I’d just been through.

“Before we go to the campground,” I said, “I’ll need to go by Drear House to deliver a note for Wilfred Snard and check-in at the hotel; they’re expecting me.”

Giorgio looked at his watch.

“After that we’ll go to the Conservatory,” he said, “then, on to the campground.”

IRENE, Dead and Alive

Giorgio drove me up a long winding driveway to a stately old mansion.

"This is Drear House, where Mr. Snard's parents live. You'll be staying on the other side, which is the hotel. Just give the envelope to the maid; I'll wait here," he said.

"I'd like to meet Snard's parents," I said.

"Yes, I'm sure you would, but we should be going. It's late and it's a long trip to the theatre from here."

"Theatre? Aren't we were going to the Conservatory?"

"Either way, Mr. Mockridge, please don't get caught up in the social trap. We need to keep rollin'."

"But, if I'm going to be staying in their hotel, I should at least introduce myself."

"If either one of them sees you, you'll be invited to stay for tea, and then they'll ask you how you got here, then I'll be invited in for tea, and we'll end up staying for dinner, and then they'll want me to stay overnight—and I can't—and it will all be delightful, and almost-unbearably bearable, and we'll be roped in and never get to the... Conservatory. Mr. Snard's parents are very nice, but in a few hours my family will be here; they're gonna set up the tent, and they'll be waiting for me; the kids are looking forward to camping."

"Ok... Giorgio, man... relax. I'll be right back."

I walked across the crunchy driveway and pulled a bell.

A maid opened the door and I handed her the envelope.

"For Mr. Samuel Snard," I said, "from his son."

She nodded and made a motion to come in.

"Uh..." I said nicely, "there's no need for a reply. I'm just dropping it off."

“You can’t do that,” she said.

I looked at her. She smiled a knowing smile.

“It would be rude,” she informed me.

Forty minutes later, after being introduced to Mr. Samuel Snard in his library, I found myself stuck—just as Giorgio had predicted—listening to the nice old fellow talk about the past. My break came when I realized that—mid-sentence—he had fallen asleep. His long, claw-like hands had both fallen limply from the well-worn arms of his leather wingback chair, and his eyes had drifted off toward the gilded ceiling. With both eyes closed, one hand drifted up unconsciously and scratched a bit at his temple. He sighed with apparent satisfaction, an angelic smile upon his old face, and sunk back into the depths of the chair. He was probably exhausted; he’d been chattering about kites since we first locked eyes.

I got up quietly and took the opportunity to wander over to a corner of the room, just to get a closer look at some of his large, nicely-bound old books. I was about to tip-toe out when his wife, escorted by the maid, came into the room. Their appearance somehow stirred old Mr. Snard, and he shuddered awake.

“I,” he said, “would suggest that you speak to my wife about that.”

“Speak to me about what?” asked his wife.

“Oh,” he said, waving a hand as if to dismiss a tiresome thought. “This young man here has been telling me that Irene has been murdered in the other room, and I was suggesting that he speak to you about housekeeping matters.”

He smiled up at his wife as she stood stock-still beside him. "What young man, Mon Ange?" she asked, placing a hand on the back of his chair.

"Oh..." He leaned forward and squinted at the empty chair I'd been sitting in. "He must have departed."

He looked at his wife and studied her face.

"You are a lovely creature, Lilly."

"I'm 86 years old and blind as a bat," she said.

"A lovely creature nonetheless."

I thought it would be rude to interrupt such an intimate conversation, and maybe even a little creepy. So, I stood, unmoving, in the corner, *like an idiot*, and refrained from saying anything (which was awkward and a little creepy). I was stuck, not knowing what to do. Recognizing my predicament, the maid smiled and silently indicated that I should just stay put; she'd be taking them away soon.

"If one were to..." Mr. Snard said, as he leaned forward and took his wife's hand. "If one were to..." he closed his eyes.

"If one were to..?" his wife urged.

He thought. A smile came to his lips. "If one were two, two would be four, presumably. Before what though? We must ask ourselves these things. But, THIS, dear wife, is what we do not know."

"Well, if *one* were *too* clever with words, one's wife might become as confused as her husband," she said sweetly.

"Ah, well, yes, I supposed that's so, but I don't think that will ever happen," he said. "You're too far ahead of me."

He looked at the maid for a bit and turned to his wife.

"She looks just like Irene," he whispered.

“She is Irene, Samuel,” she replied.

He studied the maid.

“It’s extraordinarily clever of you to hire a replacement who looks so much like Irene, but can’t you see—well, of course you can’t—how that implicates you in the murder?”

“Did the young man happen to say *how* Irene was murdered, Samuel?”

He looked at Irene. He looked startled. “Irene was murdered?” He stared at Irene for a very long time. “Have you been murdered, Irene?”

“No, sir. Not that I am aware of, sir.”

“You’re quite sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Still with us?”

“Yes, sir.”

“In more than just spirit, I hope?”

“In every way, sir. Thank you, sir.”

She looked at me, shrugged, and smiled sweetly.

Meanwhile, I had absolutely no idea what was going on.

The wife leaned toward the maid, “Did someone stopped by to tell Mr. Snard that you’d been murdered?”

The maid looked at me; I shrugged. Neither of us had any idea where he had gotten such an idea.

“No... There is... WAS a gentleman who came in to say hello from your son on Blétante proper.”

“I see,” said the wife, and a cane appeared in her hand.

Then her face lit up, “Was it Giorgio?!”

“No, Ma’am; it was someone else.”

“Oh, I wish Giorgio would stop by, and I wish he would bring his wife and those children. We almost never see them anymore. They must be getting quite big.”

"I thought you hated Giorgio, Lilly," said Samuel Snard. As she helped him to his feet, the maid remained silent. He took his wife's arm, and they started walking slowly (excruciatingly slowly) toward the door. The maid turned to smile at me as she followed behind the couple closely, attentively... ready to catch either of them if they fell.

"Oh, Sam, you know that's not true. I love Giorgio; I adore that whole family. I just don't like his politics."

Old Mr. Snard stopped and said, "Well, I'm damned sure he doesn't like ours." They stopped to discuss the matter.

"So, that makes us even," she said. "I do so wish he would stop in with those darling children once in a while."

"I don't know how we'd accommodate them with Irene being murdered in the other room." He laughed.

The maid reached a hand out, and touching the old man on the sleeve, said, "I'm still here, sir."

"Oh," he said, placing a pale white hand to his chest, "I am greatly relieved to hear that, Irene; you're really one of my favorite people."

"And, you sir, are one of mine."

"I was very upset to hear that you had been murdered in the other room, but," he smiled at her, "I am now equally pleased, very pleased indeed, to understand that it isn't so.

To realize that you are still with us is a very nice thing."

"Thank you, sir. I'm pleased to still be here with you."

"We should go, Samuel," said his wife into his ear.

And (slowly) they disappeared into the darkened hallway.

I was left alone, wondering why I hadn't spoken up. Why, I asked myself, didn't I introduce myself, clear my throat, and say something, say anything?

I never have any idea why I do what I do; even less have I ever understood why I don't do what I don't. If I gave it any more thought than that, I suppose it'd be frustrating. I followed them into the hall, slowly, at a distance.

The acoustics in that hallway were remarkable, despite the fact that it was wide and tall and completely wood paneled.

"His name was Mockridge!" said the old man suddenly.

"Yes, and what did Mr. Mockridge say?"

"He had a letter from Johnnie."

"And what did the letter say?"

"That, I can't remember..."

"Was it something bad or something good?"

"THAT escapes me as well. It was nicely thought-out though, precise and to-the-point, and utterly useless."

"Well, that certainly sounds like John alright."

"Maybe it had to do with ellipses or ... I just can't recall."

"Perhaps Irene can go back to the withdrawing room and search for it, once we've settled in our rooms."

"I wonder what happened to poor Mr. Mockridge... He seemed to vanish like... POOF! Maybe *he* was murdered!"

"I'll ask her to search for him as well, while she's in there."

"And please ask her to look for Fenton as well."

"You've lost Fenton again?"

"I know he's in there somewhere, but I can't find him."

"Where have you BEEN, Mr. Mockridge?!" Giorgio reprimanded me as I climbed into the car beside him.

"I was trapped, Giorgio... I think, in a dream."

He laughed knowingly. "Oh man, I know that one!"

"It's too late to go to the Conservatory now," he said,

"Let's go the theatre. I know how you love theatre."

“Gladly,” I said. “Let’s go....”

“Really; can this be true, Mr. Mockridge?” he asked.

“You, of all people Giorgio, *know* how much I enjoy sitting in the most uncomfortable seats ever manufactured by man, for hours on end, in a stifling, airless concert hall, with the guy directly behind me coughing continually on my neck and blowing his nose throughout the entire performance.”

“During your absence you became a theatre-going guy!”

“No, but I realized that what my life lacks is occasional prolonged self-imposed confinement among a herd of cold pretentious aristocratic mummies. I’ll never develop a full appreciation of my fellow man if I don’t dwell, entrapped, in the warm waft of their effluvia from time to time.”

He laughed.

“No, it’s not like that, Mr. Mockridge. I’d like to take you to a comedy club this time. It’s called Doper’s.”

“What’s it like?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, “I’ve never been there before.

I’d read about Doper’s back home, and it just didn’t seem like the kind of place Giorgio would suggest we go to together. On my first trip to Blétante, whenever I wanted to go to a blues dive or a ‘jazz club’—or any other disreputable joint—he simply drove me there, left me at the curb, and met up with me again the following day with a knowing grin upon his face.

On the way to Doper’s I remembered something I wanted to ask Giorgio about.

“Do you remember when you picked me up at the airport... you ran after a car to retrieve a woman’s handbag left on the roof? A guy threw you something...”

“Guy... at the... Oh, yeah... he tossed me a Phenneger.”

“What’s a Phenneger?”

“Do you mean to tell me that you don’t have your pockets loaded down with Phenneger, Mr. Mockridge?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Here, let me show you one.”

He reached in the outside pocket of his jacket, pulled out a silver coin and handed it to me. It was about an inch and a half in diameter and weighed a nice respectable 2 or 3 ounces. I inspected the face of it: ‘One Phenneger’, with the picture of a blooming flower of some sort. I inspected the other side. In the center was square-rigged ship, sails furled, in a tumultuous sea; around the edge were these words: THE ISLAND NATION OF BLÉTANTE THANKS YOU - I THANK YOU - WE ALL THANK YOU.

“Wow,” I said, “what is this?”

“It’s a Phenneger. Are you telling me that, during your last stay, nobody flipped you a Phenneger?”

“Not one. Why would they?”

“If you do something that is an honor to the dignity and reputation of Blétante, and someone sees it, they might flip one to you, as a token of thanks. It’s an old tradition.”

“So, then I should give you a handful, for all the things that you have done for me while I’ve been on your island.”

He laughed.

“No, it doesn’t work that way, man. When someone *you don’t know* does something honorable, you flip them a Phenneger. You don’t go around giving them to friends.”

“...Someone I don’t know?... If I see someone—someone I don’t know—doing something that I think is a clever example of humanity, I flip them a Phenneger?”

“You got it. A *clever example of humanity*...is perfect.”

“Where do I get me some of them Phennegers, Mr. Croc? I’ll probably need a dozen or more; I see people doing things around here all the time that deserve a Phenneger.”

“Ha! That’s the Island Spirit, Mr. Mockridge. And that—carrying around a dozen Phenneger—is called *having a pocketful of Phenneger*. It means you’re a good guy and you have the right attitude.”

“There will be no Phenneger in your future, Giorgio, unless you tell me where I can get some.”

“I’ll take you somewhere. But, first, I need to educate you. You gotta *flip it* to the recipient. You don’t just hand it to them—you never hand it to them—you flip it. You get their attention, you show them the coin, and you flip it to them.”

“Huh... why is that?”

“Because, though you are the one who recognizes the act, the thanks doesn’t come from you, it comes from all of us; it comes from the Island Nation.”

“When I flip a Phenneger to someone I’m acting as an agent... I’m representing the Nation of Blétante?”

“No, Mr. Mockridge. No. When you flip someone a Phenneger, you are telling them that **THEY** represent the Island Nation of Blétante. You’re saying that what they did or said is what Blétante is all about. You’re telling them that they **ARE** Blétante.”

“Oh, man, Giorgio, I learn something wonderful and new about your homeland with every passing day.”

“We all do, Mr. Mockridge. That is why we love our country so much. Someday, I’ll tell you about how this came about. Not now though... There’s much more you should know about this, which I think you’ll like, but not now, we’re late.”

AT THE THEATRE

Giorgio seemed unusually nervous as we arrived at Doper's and drove around (and around and around) the parking lot, looking for a place to park. After parking, he was anxious for us to get out of the car and quickly get ourselves inside. "We're late," he said, "But maybe they haven't started yet," he said with little hope.

"I doubt that a comedy club, called *Doper's*, runs precisely on time, Giorgio." I said.

At the door it became apparent that, despite the name, you couldn't smoke dope in Doper's. There were huge signs stating as much posted prominently on both sides of the entrance. It's not illegal to smoke dope on Blétante but in a place called Doper's—for crying out loud—the practice was forbidden. Why? I do not know. You figure it out. I couldn't; and Giorgio couldn't explain it to me—he'd never been there before.

Of course, on one hand, the combo of weed and stand-up comedy makes perfect sense; on the other, the last thing any truly dedicated doper needs is help finding a way to entertain himself. Nothing about the place made sense.

Giorgio yanked me out of that loop by asking, "Are you ready, Mr. Mockridge?"

"What can I expect?" I asked nervously.

"I don't know," he said, "I've never been here before. But, it probably won't be endless, like plays in the US."

"*Nearly*-endless," I corrected him.

I hadn't smoked dope in something like 40 years, and hadn't really spent much time around anyone who did in all that time. So, I felt quite a bit out of place as we entered. Despite the signs out front, the place reeked of the stuff.

I was somewhat comforted by a flickering neon sign behind the counter, which read, 'BÆÆR'. Cruelly, as I watched, it changed to, 'We DON'T SELL NO', then back to 'BÆÆR'. "Good God, Giorgio," I grumbled, "if that's their idea of humor, these people are sick."
"I wouldn't know, Mr. Mockridge," he said as he dragged me up to the counter, "I've never been here before."

The skinny kid behind the counter looked up, from something much more important than our presence, and said flatly, "You're late."

He took our money, glanced at my lapel pin, and said something into a pin-mic on his collar. Then he led us over to a doorway with heavy worn red velvet curtains and raised one side for us.
"We don't usually let anyone in if they're late," he said.

Inside it was very dark, except for one guy spot-lit on stage. He shielded his eyes, looked directly at Giorgio and me and shouted, "You're late!"

The spotlight swung around to focus on us, and everyone in the audience turned around to get a good look at the late arrivals. We just stood there shielding our eyes from the blinding light and grinning apologetically.

"Sorry," Giorgio mumbled.

I've been carefully avoiding crowds since my last Stones concert (1971, D.C.); so, I was nervous enough already.

The guy on stage certainly didn't help any. He addressed the audience.

"We got ONE rule at Doper's; tell 'em what it is, folks." Everyone in the place squirmed around in their seats again, got a bead on us, and shouted, "DON'T BE LATE!"

"Don't be late," he repeated. "One rule. Don't be late. It's not that difficult, **man!** It applies to all. It doesn't matter if you are a fighter pilot, a Bolivian goatherd on vacation, a *Greatly Honored Guest of the Island Nation of Blétante—like some people*—a psychologically disturbed swimming instructor teaching little girls to float, or a watch maker from outside Zurich. One rule. DON'T BE LATE. Got it?" Giorgio nodded. I gulped and nodded.

"Now—because you're late—you two're gonna have to sit in the corner," he said, and pointed. The kid from outside appeared behind us with a flashlight and showed us to two very comfortable-looking over-stuffed chairs, way in the back, in the darkest corner of the room. We went, we sat. "Not bad..." I started to say.

"NEXT TIME," said the guy on stage, "don't be late, OK?" We nodded.

"So where was I?" he said. "Oh, yeah, I wanted to tell you about the time Donnie caught fire..."

"What do you think is going on here?" I whispered.

The guy on stage cleared his throat and put his hands on his hips. The spotlight swung around onto us again.

"You guys done?"

"Yes," I said.

"You sure?"

“Yes,” I said.

Still, he waited for a bit before starting.

“He seems kinda grumpy,” I whispered.

“Shhhhhhhhhhh!” said a woman, several rows in front of us, as she turned around to glare.

There was complete silence for a short nervous eternity.

The guy on stage looked our way, then began:

“So, like, one time, we were all just sitting around in Donnie’s brother’s car, doin’ a little weed. And I happened to look up and notice that Donnie was on fire. I mean there were like flames and everything, man. Not a lot of smoke though—which was kinda weird. It was a tad unnerving nonetheless.

I nudged Vince and he kinda looked to see what I was lookin’ at, which was directly at Donnie.

“Whoa!” That’s what Vince said.

Kinda like this: “W H O A !”

So, we all laughed about that for a while... even Donnie, though he had *no idea* what me an’ Vince were laughin’ about.

So, then, I said to Donnie, “Hey, Donnie! Hey, Donnie! You’re on fire, man!”

And Donnie looked at me and said, “It IS kinda hot in here, Frank.”

And I said, “That’s because **you’re on fire, man!**”

He kinda laughed and said, “I *FEEL* like I’m on fire, man.”

I said, “THAT’s ‘cause you **ARE**, man!”

“This guy is hilarious!” I whispered. “Why isn’t anybody laughing?” Giorgio just shrugged. “Don’t you think it’s peculiar,” I whispered, “that nobody is laughing?”

The guy on stage cleared his throat, stepped to the front of the stage, and the spotlight swung around onto us again. “I’m workin’ here!” he said. “You two plannin’ on talkin’ through my entire routine?”

“Sorry,” I said.

“You want to come up here and do YOUR material?”

“No,” I said.

He waited.

“You’re sure?”

I nodded, and—after glaring at us for a while—he returned to his routine. “So where was I?” He gave it some thought.

OK, so, right then, me and Vince BOTH shouted, **“You’re on fire, man!”** And, you know, it was kinda funny because we said it at the same time—so we all laughed at that. Even Donnie. So, Vince said to me, “Donnie doesn’t get it, man.”

Throughout all this, Donnie was just kinda slowly, you know, burnin’ away... He’s got not one single clue what we’re laughin’ about. And worse, Donnie’s brother’s car was filling up with smoke, so, we were all coughin’ and stuff... and THAT struck us as kinda funny too. So, then, there we were all coughin’ n’ laughin’ an’ chokin’ an’ laughin’, an’ nobody more than Donnie.

He still didn't get it.

So, I said, "Donnie, really man, Donnie, listen to me, you're like really really actually kinda, you know, in fact, on fire, man. There are flames and stuff. You don't feel it? I cannot believe that you don't feel it. You're on fire, man!"

And Vince said (somewhat irritably, as I recall), "I fail to understand, Donnie, how it is that YOU cannot grasp the simple fucking single fucking fact that you are fucking ON FIRE, Donnie."

"OK, OK," said Donnie, kinda offended-like, "So, what do YOU suggest we DO about it, VINCE?"

"Forget it, man," said Vince, snappishly. "Just forget it. Go ahead an' burn, man, see if I care."

I said, "Vince, look, man, whether Donnie openly acknowledges your offer to help him more fully understand his situation, we should all, really maybe, begin to give some thought to what we're gonna do about it."

And, after some debate, we ALL agreed on that. BUT, nothin' much was done for a while since Donnie seemed to be taking it so well.

So then, I asked Donnie, "You OK, man?"

Donnie said, "Yeah, you know, it's just HOT is all."

"Yeah I bet," said Vince, kind sarcastically.

Donnie said, "And I feel kinda... confined."

I said, "Yeah, well, Donnie, I have ABSOLUTELY NO IDEA what you could possibly mean by that."

Then Vince said “If there was such a word as *WOW*, this would be the ideal place to use it.”
 I said, “*Wow* is a word, Vince.”
 Vince seemed disappointed. “Are you sure? ‘Cause really, man, I’m pretty sure I just invented it.”
 “You didn’t,” I said. “You’re in orbit, man.”
 So, he says, “How long has it been a word?”
 I told him, “I don’t know man; for a long time.”
 He says, “How long; when was it first invented?”
 I said, “I don’t know, man. It goes way back... to like 1963 or something.”
 So then, Vince thought about that, and then he said, “You know what I would do if I was on fire...?”
 At that point, I snapped. I just kinda lost it, ‘cause, whenever we find ourselves in one of these situations, Vince is always anxious to tell us what *he* would do. So, I said, “You’re not on fire, Vince! *Donnie’s* the one who’s on fire, OK?! Get normal.”

So, poor ol’ Vince, man. He took it kinda badly—as anyone might. So then I said, very calmly—VERY calmly— I said, “Vince, I only mean that maybe we should think about doing something about Donnie first. Then, once... you know, once we’re sure that Donnie is *completely out*... we’ll have some time to listen to what you would do, OK?”
 “Alright,” said Vince, kinda pouty-like.
 He can be such a baby at times.
 Meanwhile, Donnie’s still just burnin’ away.

“OK,” I said, “so, we put Donnie out first.”
 Then I thought I better ask Donnie.

"Is that OK with you, Donnie? I mean, you're the one who's on fire, man..."

Donnie said, "I just don't like feeling confined."

I had no idea what he meant by that, but I had to admit that, considering the circumstances, he was still being quite reasonable.

"OK," I said. "then, what are we gonna do?"

"When?" asked Donnie.

"Now, man."

"You said 'then.' You said, '*then*, what are we gonna do.'"

I thought about that for a minute, and there was some logic in it.

"OK, scratch that. *Now*, what are we gonna do?"

"Donnie," I said, "what are *your* thoughts?"

Donnie says, "First, I'd like to say that I'm feeling really *uncomfortable* because, mainly, like, this is *my brother's* car, man. If we burn up my brother's car, my brother is gonna freak the fuck out. He's gonna say, 'Jesus, Donnie! What the fuck, man?! I loan you my car, and THIS is what you do?'"

We all agreed that would be unfortunate.

Donnie added, "He'll probably never let us use his car again, man."

Then Vince jumped in, saying. "US!?... *US*, man? Why did you say 'he'll never let US use his car again, Donnie? You're the one who said, 'Hey, *we* can take my brother's car!' There's no 'us' in 'we' Donnie."

There's no us in we... it was like ancient wisdom or somethin'. And, I think we all realized it.

There's **no** *us*... **in** *we*.
Think about it.

While we pondered that, nobody said nothing. I mean, for quite a while really not a word was spoke. There was only silence in that car... not so much as a sound... Well, you know, kind of a cracklin' noise comin' from the flames an' all, but no conversation. Vince broke the spell, suddenly saying, "Hey, like, maybe Donnie's being on fire means something! "Yeah," I said, "it MEANS if Donnie's brother's CAR burns up, we're gonna be walkin' home."

It was at that point where some guy comes up and starts knockin'—like really loud—on the window of Donnie's brother's car.

"Hey!" I said, "Donnie! Somebody's like knockin' on the window, man."

I think Donnie must have been involved with other thoughts at the moment, so I was forced to repeat myself.

"Hey, Donnie!" I shouted, "Somebody's like knockin' on your brother's car window, man!" And, he snapped right out of it.

"Oh, yeah, thanks," said Donnie, and he rolled down his window, and the guy looked in and said "Jesus Christ, you're on fire!"

So, like, you know, we all cracked up. Man!

What an idiot! I mean, FIRST, it was kinda obvious, you know; it wasn't like we were unaware of it.

And SECOND₂ we were already trying to figure out what to do about it.

So, you know, what can you say to a guy like that? Really, man... what an idiot...

The rest is all firetrucks an' women screamin' an' the shattering of glass and stuff like that.

That's the whole story, man. And I think it woulda gone *better*... if EVERYBODY... had arrived ON TIME ... like the rest of us, steada, comin' in here LATE, and expectin' special TREATMENT!"

There was no applause. Not a single sound came from that audience; which was peculiar, of course. More peculiar still was the fact that, during that entire monologue, nobody in that place had uttered a single sound, not one; no laughter, no clapping, no jeering, no booing, nothing. As he bowed and turned off his mic, the guy pointed at us and shouted, "Next time, don't be late, man!"

Then he wandered off.

The curtain closed, the houselights came up, and nobody moved. They all remained seated, in perfect silence.

Giorgio and I just looked at each other.

"What's going on?" I whispered.

Giorgio said, "I do not know, Mr. Mockridge; I have never been anywhere near this place, or any place like it, before."

The houselights went down again as a skinny old man ('bout my age) dressed like a beatnik, in black beret,

turtleneck sweater, and sporting a beard, came on stage and lowered his chin until it rested upon his chest. After what seemed like a very long time, he raised his head, focused on something high above the rest of us, sighed and said, “The Tear.”

Then he took one small step backward and shook himself like a wet dog emerging from a bathtub.

You turn your face

A-way

And stare

Out the win-dow

With-out a word

Is that

A tear?

I looked at Giorgio, who just shrugged.

“What kind of crap is this?” I whispered.

Giorgio whispered. “I honestly do not know.”

“Do you think he’s serious?” I whispered.

“Apparently.” He paused then said, “Unnecessarily so.”

I laughed out loud and was immediately chastised by a woman and several others, who turned around to glare at us.

Only silence accompanied the old beatnik as, drained of all desire to go on, he was drawn, by some unseen force, off stage.

As he left the kid who had shown us to our seats came bounding on. Manhandling the mic, he glared out into the audience.

“THAT’S IT!” he shouted. “Go home!”

Then people began to get up and slowly wander out.

I looked at Giorgio, and he looked at me in bewilderment.

“Wow...” I whispered.

“Click clack...” he mouthed in silence.

“Did you get the idea those guys were screwing with us?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know... what about the audience?”

“I feel like this entire crowd was screwing with us,” I said.

“The entire crowd...?” he asked quietly.

“They must be,” I said. “There’s no other explanation.

They’re *all* screwin’ with us, Giorgio,” I declared.

And, just as I said that a kid walking by stopped, looked at me, his mouth dropped open, and he wailed, “Aw, come-on man!”

He turned toward the house and shouted, “He knows!”

Someone moaned, “How... HOW could he possibly...?”

Someone else shouted, “What? No way, man!”

Someone mumbled, “Impossible.”

“HE KNOWS,” shouted the kid. “He like figured it out... or somethin’.”

Sounds of disappointment began to fill the theatre.

Laggards, still making their way toward the exits, stopped to shake their heads in disbelief. Those already outside—hearing the sounds from within—stuck their heads back inside and asked, “He knows?”

“Yeah, he figured it out somehow.”

The word quickly got around outside and people started wandering back in. Before long the entire crowd had re-entered the theatre and the houselights came up. People were pressing in on Giorgio and me saying things.

“Good work, man!” and,

“How did you figure it out?” and,

“When did you first guess?” and,

“Man, I almost split a gut holding it in, man.”

“What gave us away?”

As clouds of smoke began to fill the auditorium, the storyteller came back on stage, picked up a mic, looked directly at me, shook his head in apparent admiration, and said, “How did you know, man? How did you know? How could you possibly... like, you know... know?”

Everybody in the place—standing, sitting, rolling a joint, passing one, or taking a hit—was facing us and grinning widely. A lot of them were still shoving their way through the crowd, toward us, to shake our hands.

Meanwhile, I was busy putting things together as fast as I could in my mind, and I didn’t quite believe my own suspicions yet.

“How did you know, man?” repeated the guy on stage.

To be honest with you, I didn’t really fully understand what was going on—so, I decided to wing it.

“Actually,” I began, and Giorgio quickly cut me off.

“It’s exactly the sort of thing *he* would do,” said Giorgio.

I looked at Giorgio and he grinned sheepishly, as the crowd went crazy.

At that moment I began to feel truly at home on Tender—a mind-blowing little island where *an entire town* might get together to plan an event designed merely to mess with the perceptions of a Greatly Honored Guest. That Giorgio had conspired with all of these people—people who did not even know me—with that specific purpose in mind is, quite possibly, the strangest honor I will ever receive.

Think about it... an entire town... man!

While people gathered around—some of them just to look at me quizzically, as though I might have just landed from outer space—Giorgio pushed through the crowd and made his way down the aisle to the apron of the stage. There he flipped something small and silver and flashy to the guy on stage. The man caught it, looked at it, smiled, and held it up for the others to see. Wild applause broke out.

Giorgio and I were both invited to *hang around and get completely wasted*—and in those precise terms—but we had to decline; his family was waiting for us somewhere deep in the mountainous woods of Tender.

THE OLD BANDITO TRAIL

Giorgio took the only road available between Doper's and the campsite, the Old Bandito Trail. And, while we drove he told me this tale.

Early one evening in 1864 (almost 100 years before the invention of the word *Wow*, according to some), a coffee-bean merchant named Cecil Tal was returning to his coffee plantation, at the highest peak on Tender. His little donkey carried two heavy bags containing the coins Tal needed to meet the company payroll. The trail they were on was long and winding and dusty and steep; it was also the only way between that bank and that plantation. On one side of that trail there was a steep cliff which fell in a straight drop into the sea far below, and on the other, heavily snarled growth which was then (as it is today) so thick and entangled that it was damned near impenetrable. The sun had begun to drop below the horizon when Tal stopped to rest himself and his devoted little unassuming donkey.

Suddenly, emerging from the brushy entanglement, there appeared a gang of... you guessed it... banditos. The gang was led by a smarmy ruffian named Ernesto Suarez (you probably didn't guess that). Mr. Suarez stuck a gun in Cecil Tal's face and smiled a clever confident smile. In response, Tal sighed the weary sigh of a man who had, for a very long time, pretty much expected to be robbed at gun-point on that trail, at one time or another. So, actually, in a weird sorta way, it was a relief to finally get it over with. That seemed to be his thinking as he threw up both hands and dropped, with a thump, to his knees in the dirt.

At that very moment something unusual occurred. The land on either side of the trail collapsed around them and fell, a thousand foot drop, into the water below. The little donkey bolted, leapt the gap, and pushed his way—squealing and hawing as he went—into the overgrown greenery. This left the banditos, their leader, Ernesto Suarez, and the weary merchant, Cecil Tal (still on his knees), stranded on a peninsula of sorts, jutting out over the crashing sea below.

The questionable stability of the out-cropping, upon which they then stood, was foremost in the thoughts of every single one of those startled, unnerved human beings. They froze exactly where they were; they did not move a single muscle for a very long time. Long after the sounds of their world crumbling around them, falling and splashing into the water far below, had ceased they remained stock still.

As it was rapidly becoming dark Tal and his bandito friends began to inch their way slowly, backward, away from the cliff edge, until each could clutch a tree, a limb, a branch, a twig, a blade of grass and, from there, make their way carefully to the safety of firmer terra. Once again on solid ground, the banditos went on ahead to their camp, hidden deep in the woods, where, no doubt, they spent the night grumbling bitterly about their rotten luck, thus avoiding any mention of how frightened they'd been.

Cecil Tal and Ernesto Suarez stayed behind, closer to the trail—and closer to the spot where they'd last seen the money—both hoping that donkey would, by instinct or by habit, re-emerge.

Camped out together in a little clearing, these two sat in the dark, under the trees, with a small fire to keep them warm. They sat in silence, alert to any sound that might herald further collapse of the cliff and pretended, as is the way with such men, not to be filled with a lingering jumpiness.

Eventually they began to talk.

“So, tell me... uh...” began Tal in a casual manner.

“Ernesto.”

“So, tell me, Ernesto, what do want all that money for?”

Ernesto Suarez looked at the man to determine if he was being sincere; and when he discovered he was, he laughed.

“What do we want all that money for, Señor? We want all that money to get women and booze and the finest horses.”

Cecil Tal considered that for a bit, while insects chirped in the woods all around them.

The stars looked down upon these two tiny humans in amiable silence while waves of the restless sea shattered upon the rocky shore far below, as it had for centuries.

“You don’t need money to have any of those things, Ernesto,” Tal said good-naturedly. “You do realize that, don’t you?”

Ernesto gaped. “You must be fooling with me, Señor, or you must be trying to fool yourself.”

“I’m not trying to fool anyone, my friend,” said Tal, and poked a bit at the fire.

Tal continued, “In the poorest part of *any* town, *anywhere in this world* the streets are full of women; many of them—no matter how poor they may be—are pregnant. I’ll grant you that some of those women may have gotten that way

with the kindly assistance of an upper-class gentleman; but, most of them got that way by messing around with some piss-poor local rascal. No, you don't need a lot of money to get women, Ernesto..."

Ernesto pondered that for a while.

Tal continued.

"If you really want women, you only need to do two things: you need to listen to them when they talk—or, at very least, you need to pretend to listen—but, above all else, you need to make them laugh."

Ernesto pondered that for a while too. The calmness and sincerity with which Tal spoke was impressive. Ernesto looked at Cecil Tal and nodded. After all, Ernesto Suarez had made MANY women laugh.

"In that same miserable piss-poor part of town," Tal said, "you'll find the taverns full-to-overflowing with amiable drunks. I'll admit that some of those drunks may be rich gentleman with plenty of money to spend, out to see what it's like to revel with the riff-raff; but most of 'em are poor locals, Ernesto. The poorest man, who cannot afford to feed either his family or himself, can always come up with the money he needs for a drink."

"And tobacco, Señor..." added Suarez.

"And tobacco," agreed Tal.

It was true; Ernesto Suarez had never been so poor that he had gone a night without drink. Ernesto gazed at Tal and, while he thought about these things, he nodded and made quiet little grunting sounds.

Then, suddenly, he laughed and said, “What about the horses, Señor? You forgot about all those fine horses.”

Tal laughed in turn, and shook his head.

“What are you laughing about, Señor?”

“You don’t need money for horses, Ernesto. Money would only complicate the process.”

Ernesto pondered that until Tal interrupted his thoughts.

“You’re a *bandit* for gods-sakes! Apply your craft. If a man with your skills wants fine horses... he takes ’em.”

Ernesto thought about that while rubbing his scruffy chin.

Tal was right; Ernesto had never paid for a horse in his life

“You are a wise man, Señor.”

“No, I am *not* a wise man. But, sometimes a man who is uninvolved can see things more clearly.”

“And you consider yourself uninvolved in this, Señor?

Have you forgotten that not too long ago I had the barrel of my gun inserted into your mouth?”

“Well, not too long ago things were definitely different but, at the moment, neither one of us has the money... and that is what we’re both after.”

Ernesto laughed heartily—they seemed to enjoy each other’s company, these two. Talking like this—man to man, as equals—was a pleasant way to spend the night.

“Here’s the other thing, Ernesto,” Cecil Tal said with a great sigh, “if we ever see that donkey again—whether he returns on his own or one of us manages to track him down—if *you* take that coin, you’ll be screwing things up pretty seriously, not only for me, not just for the coffee company, but for the 34 good people who work with me.”

Ernesto laughed. “Work *with* you Señor?”

“Yes, they work for me; but, I work *for* them as well; we’re mutually dependent. And I realize that the time they give up in *their* lives, to bring in the coffee, is as valuable to them as my time is to me. The point is: they work hard, and they deserve to be paid for their good work.”

“Ah, but, Señor, my gang expects to be paid for what they do too.”

“I know they do. I know they do... But, Ernesto, listen to me, if you will. The people who work with me *need* that money; they need to be paid on time, in full. They don’t live like bandits in the woods; they have wives, they have children. Their families are dependent upon that money.”

“I’m sure you get your share though, Señor.”

“Yes, I get my share, but we’re *all* invested in the success of the crop, and we *all* hope to get a good price for it. If you asked any of those good people, I think they would all say they are treated fairly by me as well as by the company. Do you have children, Ernesto?”

“Ha! More than the stars in the sky, Señor.”

“So you must have a wife...”

“I have many more wives than children, Señor.”

“And you care about them...”

Ernesto thought about that as he rubbed his chin again.

“I do, Señor; I care about each and every one of them.”

“That said, we really should get some sleep; I’ll need to get up early and go find that donkey, if I can.”

The next evening, when Cecil Tal returned to the coffee plantation without the donkey—and without the payroll—the workers comforted him. Some of them assured him that the donkey would find his own way home; others thought the animal would never be seen again. But, it didn’t matter.

They were all wrong.

When the donkey next made his appearance at that coffee plantation, he was being led by Ernesto Suarez... and every penny of that payroll was on the animal's back.

Naturally, it would give me tremendous pleasure to tell you that Cecil Tal immediately offered that good bandit a job protecting the payroll from that day forth, and greater pleasure still to say that Ernesto Suarez took that offer. But if he did, Giorgio didn't mention it to me. And I think he would have.

What Giorgio did mention was the fact that the next time Tal went down that trail into town, to collect some funds, he saw Ernesto Suarez riding around proudly on one of the finest horses he had ever seen.

"I took your advice, Señor!" Suarez shouted.

"I can see that," said Tal, "What's a horse like that worth, Ernesto?"

"I have no idea, Señor," Ernesto shouted.

"Well, don't be unreasonable, Mr. Suarez," warned Cecil Tal, "this is a pretty small island."

"This is a pretty fast horse, Señor," said the other.

And laughing like the (sometimes thoughtful/sometimes reckless/always smug) scoundrel he was, Ernesto Suarez rode away at a furious gallop.

TENDER CAMPING (Night of Day Three)

Declining the invitation to stick around and get blasted, allowed us to make it to the campsite just as the sun dropped out of sight beyond the mountains of Blétante proper, and the evening air was taken up with bats. I was feeling anxious because some of the nicest people I have ever known were waiting for us there, next to a fire, under the emerging moon and stars. And, well, what can I say about that? I think I just said it ... some of the nicest people I have ever known were out there, somewhere, waiting for us, and we'd be with them soon.

It was already dark when we started our trek back into the woods, but the moon over Blétante is larger than anywhere else in the world. So, though he had one in hand, Giorgio never turned on his flashlight. But, being in his shadow, I could only follow Giorgio by staying close enough to step on his heels... which I did more than a few times.

As we were making our way through the low-hanging branches, Giorgio asked me, "Have you ever found yourself on the sidelines where a bunch of girls are playing kickball, and when that ball drifts toward you, you kick it away as hard as you can and find yourself surrounded with screaming girls, all pounding on your head and chest and calling you a bastard?"

"Can't say that I have, but it doesn't sound like fun."

"Ah, but it can be great fun, Mr. Mockridge" said Giorgio dreamily. "AND, it can end well too."

"Oh yeah?" I said.

“Yeah. Because, if one of those girls separates herself out of that mob, after the beating ends, it can lead to much better things, Mr. Mockridge.”

“I’ve never seen this side of you before, Giorgio,” I said.

“Well, you know, Mr. Mockridge,” he said as we tromped along the darkened trail, under a massive moon, “we all have our instincts... we all have our ways.”

“Was that girl—the one who separated herself out of the pack, after your deserved beating—named Sandrine?”

“How did you guess that?”

“I had my fingers crossed, but I’m glad to hear it.” I said.

“Me too,” he said, “I have loved that woman from the moment she came running up to me to see if I had survived that pummeling.”

I had been following so closely in Giorgio’s wake that, when we finally arrived at the campsite, his family let out a collective moan of disappointment.

“No, Mr. Mockridge?” Sandrine asked sadly.

Giorgio turned sideways to reveal my presence, and I was immediately overrun, swamped by two squealing kids and a heavily panting dog. The kids were, author, Celeste B. Croc, suddenly aged 12, and the inventor, Henri Croc, (age 10, I think); the dog was Molly, looking much trimmer in the brilliance of Blétante moonlight.

It is always amazing to me how often kids and dogs seem to take a liking to me; the only adults who do are criminals, vagabonds, and the insane. Some animals, other than dogs, seem to put up with me but, beyond the criminal, the lost and the hopeless, most humans recognize me immediately for what I am: not one of them. But, enough about that.

As for those camping days, there's really nothing to report. I spent that first evening under the starry sky talking with five wonderful, intelligent, gentle, delightful and fully entertaining beings. Molly didn't have much to say but she sat right next to me most of the evening, huffing like a steam engine, her tongue lolling and her eyes bright in the firelight. Henri, at 10, was every bit as shy as he had been three years earlier —so he didn't say much either, though he contributed his share of genuine laughter.

Out there, in the trees, under the stars, with those good people, I finally understood the inspiration behind these (lame) lyrics:

Good morning starshine
The earth says hello
You twinkle above us
We twinkle below

It was interesting to discover that some of us people, down here below, remain as fresh and sparkling and benevolent as all those ancient stars twinkling cheerfully overhead.

So, twinkling below the starry expanse, we sat and we talked and we laughed and we had some good hot cocoa and, I had no idea anyone other than my Grandmother could make a blueberry pie like that—but Sandrine did. (And over an open fire too.) I also had no idea hot cocoa and blueberry pie could swing with such harmony.

At one point, I found myself standing before these folks singing 'Old Man River', to everyone's surprise ... including my own.

After the applause had died down, Giorgio said, "Do you remember singing that same song one night in the Sea Saw Room, after you had about three shots of tequila?"

"No, I do not..." I said, "but... did I do a good job of it?"

"Well, we were all startled, but we enjoyed it."

"I'm better with only two shots of tequila in me," I said.

"Maybe it WAS only two shots," he mused—which I took as a compliment. Until that moment I had no idea that 'Old Man River' was my go-to song for showing people how much I enjoy being around them.

It's tempting to contrast that quiet little gathering of delightful innocents huddling together near a crackling fire, in the woods, under the stars, with what went on earlier that day at Doper's, amongst a massive gathering of strangers... However, after giving it some thought, I realized those two events are pretty much the same thing. They both generated the same feeling anyway. If that makes no sense to you, what can I say? Like many aspects of Life—both good and bad—it's either immediately understood or simply cannot be explained... at least by me.

It has taken me a long time, but once I surrendered to that fact, it was the merest leap for me to (finally) understand that things are what they are. Trying to dig any deeper than that is probably a waste of time; time that could be spent lost in wonder.

I HAD A DREAM THAT NIGHT

It seems peculiar to me that sleeping in a large wall-tent like sardines, with a friend, his wife and kids, and an overweight dog, out in the woods, with the sound of waves crashing upon the rocks far away and far below, I should have such a peculiar dream; but I did. I recall it perfectly.

An old woman, wearing a long dark woolly cape with wide flat black ribbons falling on all sides, stood on stage before ‘us’—though I could not tell who ‘us’ was, I knew I was not alone... and thank all the gods for that too.

She began hunched over, wrapped up quietly in the cape, looking something very much like a big sulking crow. A chorus began to chant—though I cannot recall the words—and she began to move, pacing slowly about. And as the chanting escalated, she began to mark time by flapping her arms. And then she began to dance.

It was a dance unlike anything I’d ever seen before. Let me correct that: it was like *nothing* I had *ever* seen before. At the same time—you know how dreams are—it seemed strangely familiar. I thought that I’d actually paid to see it before, maybe even sat in those same uncomfortable seats.

She metamorphosed into a winged creature, fluttering about the room shrieking, all eyes and claws and wings and piercing whelps. She came to rest again, she scuttled across the floor, then poised on one toe; she spun, she leapt, she fell crumpled to the floor. For a fleeting moment I truly believed that I knew what was going on.

She rose again (triumphant) sailed up onto the seat of a heavy chair, where she perched like a bird. Upon landing on the floor again, she skittered a few steps up a stairway before being dragged back down by some mysterious force. It was all very disturbing. I wanted to walk out but, in the same thought, didn't want to offend the performer.

The remarkable thing was that, throughout all of this—the flapping, the flight, the collapse, the rebirth—she sang:

“OH, I dreamed a dream,” she sang,

“I dreamed of one I thought was dead

You know the one I mean!”

She winked at us fiercely.

“He stood right there beside my bed,” she sang.

“And I recall every word he said.

And you know what I mean!”

She pointed an accusing finger directly at me.

Her tone became sweet and childlike as she drifted sleepily across the floor. Then she began to skip and prance as the tune changed into a nursery rhyme of sorts.

“There is a watery world above

Awash in many things

They clump together

Randomly

And fall into our dreams

And fall into our dreams”

I was dumbfounded by this. Literally struck dumb. I tried to speak, but couldn't; I just sat there speechless, confused, empathetic and frightened, staring at this old woman dressed like a crow, prancing around on stage singing.

At the end, she curtsied and blushed deeply, before skittering from the room. I liked the humility of that especially, and joined the others in wild applause—though my enthusiasm was based, in part, on my great relief that the thing was finally over, and at seeing her gone.

“God, she was wonderful,” said an old man sitting next to me, “Wasn’t she?” He looked beatified by what he had just witnessed. “Just wonderful,” he said, “simply wonderful.” “She’s still amazingly spry,” I heard myself say. “In fact,” I thought to myself, “for an old hag, she is almost angelic.” Then, fearing that the old man had heard my thoughts, I said, “Angelically spry.”

“Spry?” he said, taking umbrage. “Christ, she was wonderful!” he bellowed. “Didn’t you see how first she was like some kind of a goddamned evil bird before transforming herself into some kind of goddamned child from some kind of a goddamned nursery rhyme?”

“Well, yes.” I agreed. “Yes, there’s that too.”

He’d described it all perfectly: evil goddamned bird, silly goddamned child, stupid goddamned nursery rhyme.

“Well, for god’s sake!” he protested, “The woman gets no credit for such a remarkable transformation? What the hell is wrong with you kids today? You did see her downstairs when we came in right?”

“Yes.”

“God, she was wonderful.” He said and pushed himself to his feet and, using a cane, slowly left the room. The whole way, he was shaking his head and saying. “Just wonderful.”

Someone whispered to me, “Maybe we should have spent a little more time weeping.”

I said, “I suppose we could spend a little less effort manufacturing sociological excuses for the criminal behavior of young thugs.”

Someone else leaned forward, tapped me on the shoulder and said, “I think you’ve missed the point, Pal.”

It sounded like a threat.

I said, smugly “Where I come from... PAL... we *honor* those who miss the point.”

And the house lights went out.

To lay awake after a dream like that, fitted-in tightly amongst sleeping friends, in a tent, in the woods, with the quiet night-sounds of nature all around, is an experience that Dumas would be incapable of explaining.

(And, he’d probably admit it.)

DAY FOUR

The chill of the morning nearly erased that dream entirely. The pure joy of standing around under the trees shivering, while encouraging Giorgio, through chattering teeth, to get a fire started *quickly*, was the perfect remedy for what my mind had so recently put me through.

It was beautiful out there. We spent our days just tromping up and down trails and, as the sun went down, sitting around campfires talking quietly ... Quieter still, we sat out there, beside an open fire, as the stars winked at us from the heavens so miraculously far away. We spent countless hours saying not a word, just allowing ourselves to absorb the natural world in its every aspect; the air, the wind, the smell of the forest floor, the darkness, the chirping insects... the sudden frightening sounds in the woods that drove us, wide-eyes and grimacing, closer together.

There's nothing I can say about those days. We just lived. We just cooked, we just ate, we just talked, we just slept. We just tromped around in the woods. We just watched birds. We just gazed at the stars. And it was wonderful.

At one point I remember saying, "This could be a dream, Giorgio."
And he said, "All this? That would be quite a dream."

One early afternoon, while the kids were at play inside the tent, Sandrine said to me, "If you don't mind watching the kids, Giorgio and I would like to go off into the woods to frolic."

“To frolic?” I said.

“Yes, we want to take full advantage of this opportunity to go... frolic... for a while, in the woods, without the kids.”

“OK,” I said, and turned my attention quickly to other things. The twinkle in that woman’s eye was... Well, anyway, she took her husband’s hand and they ran off together—a couple that had been married for more than a dozen years—giggling like school kids. There they go, into the woods... eager to frolic.

I was relieved when Henri came out of the tent, came straight up to me and said, “Can you help Cellie with her writing, Mr. Mockruhl?”

“Sure, let’s go see what the problem is.”

I’d heard that Celeste was *dying to* show me her writing, but, despite her mother’s urging and my encouragement, until that moment she’d kept it to herself.

I crawled into the tent on my hands and knees (because that’s the way it’s done) and sat cross-legged near Celeste, and Henri took a seat beside her.

“Let’s see what you got,” I said. I was really looking forward to seeing what she was up to, and told her so.

“They’re just notes,” she said, “—just notes—for a story.”

And this is what she handed me:

A WOMAN NAMED EVELYN, by Celeste B. Croc

Two men—Melvin and Calvin—separated at birth. They each took their own path in life.

Each held many useless jobs before snagging the enviable

position of night manager in separate small, downtown hotels, actually in towns quite near to each other.

Prior to that, they each travelled throughout their world... one (Melvin) had gotten as far as Des Moines! But, due to Life's peculiarity they each settled in small towns not twenty miles apart. More peculiar still, they each drove a used Ford Pinto of the same color, had a Beagle named Alphonse and, strange as this may sound, each married A WOMAN NAMED EVELYN.

What CALVIN & MEVIN DIDN'T KNOW

Calvin and Melvin didn't know about one another. I mean, Calvin didn't know about Melvin and Melvin had no idea WHATSOEVER that anyone like Calvin even existed. Neither one had any idea that, for example, they'd been separated at birth, or that they had each held many useless jobs before landing their dream job as night manager of a small, downtown hotel. Calvin did not know that Melvin had traveled as far as Des Moines. And neither of them knew that, due to Life's peculiarity, they each now lived in small towns not twenty miles away from the other.

Finally, even if they had known of each other's existence—and proximity—neither of them would have guessed that the other drove a beige Ford Pinto, had an overfed Beagle named Alphonse, or had married A WOMAN NAMED EVELYN.

WHAT ELSE CALVIN & MELVIN COULDN'T GUESS

Calvin and Melvin also didn't know, and never could have guessed really, was that they were both married to the same woman: A WOMAN NAMED EVELYN.

THIS is that story.

“Well,” I said, “this is certainly writerly stuff.”

“That’s cause she’s a writer,” said Henri.

“I can see that,” I said.

“I’m NOT a joiner,” Celeste said. “I didn’t even join the Blé-tots—Henri didn’t join Blé-tots either. Mom calls us *stubbornly resistant* to indoctrination of any sort.”

I looked at those kids with genuine admiration.

“You may certainly be a writer then.”

“I am.”

“Maybe, you too, Henri.”

“He’s an inventor,” said Celeste.

“I have no doubts whatsoever, about either one,” I said.

“Tell me how you knew you were a writer, Celeste. I’m curious.”

“I don’t horse around,” she said smugly.

“She don’t,” agreed Henri.

“That’s how you first knew?”

“Yes. When the other kids are horsin’ around I prefer not to. But, really, mostly, I don’t really care to horse around; I’d rather keep an eye on them.”

“Yeah...” I said, “I get that.”

“Yes. When I’m not writing, I’m putting sentences together in my head. Sometimes, if I can’t write it down, if I can’t find a pencil or a pen, that is REALLY so frustrating.”

“I know the feeling.”

“But then, also, I always end up with all these stupid notes and stuff all over the place. They’re everywhere you look. And some of them I can’t even read.”

“Well, with me,” I said, “some notes make no sense when I finally do manage to make out what they say.”

She laughed, “Exactly.”

“OK,” I said, “Henri tells me you have a problem with this piece.”

“Sorta.”

“I’m guessing it’s: How does one woman convince two guys, who live 20 miles apart, that she is...”

“Oh, I have that solved,” she said cutting me off.

“You do?”

“I have a bigger problem than that.”

“Really? You’re sure you have that one solved?”

“I do.”

“Well, I’d be interested in hearing your solution... but, what’s the other problem?”

She leaned toward me and whispered, “I don’t know what ‘separated at birth’ means.”

“You don’t know what it means? It’s in your [I looked] first sentence. The entire story is based on it, and you don’t know what it means...?” I whispered.

“I mean, I *know* what it means, but I don’t really-REALLY know what it means.”

I laughed, “I use phrases like that in my writing all the time.”... but she wasn’t laughing. For Celeste, this was a serious problem.

“What do you *think* it means?”

“I think it means,” she whispered, “that they were, maybe, those poor stuck-together twins. But, I don’t know *why* they got separated, or *how* some other people got one.”

“Oh,” I said, “I see.”

I gave the matter some thought.

“Maybe the parents weren’t expecting twins and they only had room in their house for one baby; or maybe the mom couldn’t care for more than one—maybe she was weak or sick and... could only care for one baby.”

“So, they *took* the other baby and, what... gave her away?”

“Well, maybe it wasn’t so bad. Maybe the mom’s sister raised the other kid... baby, or maybe she went to a very nice home... you know with people who could give her the attention she needed, with a puppy and good food and lots of tickling ... the adoration and devotion she should have.”

“I hope so,” she said.

“Why did you use the phrase, ‘separated at birth’ if you weren’t sure exactly what it meant though?”

“It sounded like a good beginning.”

“HA!!!” I laughed so hard I nearly cracked a rib.

When I recovered, Celeste and her brother were both looking at me wide-eyed and, apparently, a little frightened.

“I do that all the time,” I explained. “If I stuck all my good beginnings together it would make an impressive looking, completely senseless book, about 8 inches thick. Besides, I heard that you were working on something called Beef and Abandonment.”

“EVELYN is one of my short ones. Beef and Abandonment is the long one I’m working on.”

“Oh. How many short ones do you have?”

“A LOT.” She rolled her eyes. “A LOT.”

“That’s good. You know, many writers get their first shot at developing a readership by publishing a collection of short stories.”

“I know, but I need to finish Beef and Abandonment first.”

“How long do you think that will take?”

“I don’t know; I get pretty far along and then I start reading it again and things need to be checked and changed; it’s really quite annoying at times how much checking and changing goes into even a short one.”

“Yep. I understand that one. That’s certainly the process as I’ve been finally forced to accept it.”

“How long does it take you to write a book?” she asked.

“Oh, something like a year and a half.”

“I firmly believe that Beef and Abandonment will take me much longer than that. Oh, gosh, I would say, much longer. Writing a real book is a daunting task.”

“But you remain undaunted... I hope.”

“Yes, I remain utterly undaunted. In fact, I look forward to seeing it through no matter how arduous it becomes.”

She was beaming so proudly that her smile lit up the dismal inside of that tent.

“Well, I look forward to reading it, when it comes out.”

“I could give you a copy of the first chapter!” she said.

“I’d like to look at it.”

“Mind you, it’s just the first chapter...”

“I understand.”

“It still needs work.”

“I understand.”

Though I didn't get to it right away, I see no reason to keep you from looking at that first chapter.

BEEF and ABANDONMENT, by Celeste B. Croc

CHAPTER ONE

Of this we can be sure: There is certainly not as much finely chopped steak in this world as there are good dogs who might deserve an occasional taste of it. In fact, one must imagine, far less. So much less that it is a meal rarely tasted by many dogs, except by an extraordinarily lucky few, and never even seen by most. We must suppose that chopped steak is a meal kept almost exclusively for the enjoyment of the 'people' of the house; put away safely, with care or, more likely, unusually well hid, so as to keep it prudentially away from any creature incapable of mastering his baser instincts. This much we know, dogs have prying paws and over-eager noses; and any dog's resolve, be assured, is likely to weaken at the slightest whiff of such a meaty temptation.

From what we have witnessed, the mind of even the mildest beast is capable of elevating any meal to such a level that his world becomes all topsy-turvy when it is placed before him. Fore, when it comes to the enjoyment of food, it would seem that no thought and certainly no discernment is required—so, the arrival of any dish is a grand moment!... eagerly anticipated, always deeply regretted in passing.

From their actions at the bowl, one might suppose that once the thought of a meal enters a dog's mind, it is never far from overtaking the animal's thought entirely, thus becoming his greatest, and perhaps his sole, concern. It is not too much to

suppose then that, even while involved with other matters, this fascination with food hogs [*better word*] a prominent position in the poor creature's priorities. In fact, one might suppose that, below all other thought there dwells, continuously, the hope filled dream of being fed; and the epitome of that dream is a meal consisting solely of glops and glops of finely chopped steak. The allure of finely chopped steak may be of such magnitude, the inspiration of such overwhelming desire, that it separates itself out from all other meals.

The 'master' of a dog makes no such differentiation and, perhaps no differentiation at all, when it comes to feeding their dear pet. These masters, almost universally, take the casual rather than any considerate approach, with no discrimination whatsoever between the good meal and the bad. So much so that even such a dish as finely chopped steak is offered carelessly: being tossed upon an old chipped plate with floral pattern worn by use, for example, or plopped into a battered metal bowl with scratches, dents and dings—and does not, in the mind of the master, necessarily mark an occasion of any particular note.

Alas, not so, however, for the dog.

The thinking of the dog, when such a meal is placed before him, differs from that of his master nearly as much as any two views on any matter might differ. This you can accept as truth. With a certainty, in the mind of the dog, the offer of finely chopped steak carries a very special meaning. Indeed when that fond dish is offered to our dear canine friend, no matter how casually, no matter how freely, nor how carelessly presented, it necessarily marks that moment as glorious, and that day as both particularly rare and noteworthy. And so, with that in place, let us be on with our story.

The particular dog of which I speak now, is Norman, the much loved pet of the Trilobyte family, of Bog-Fenton (a little town on the coast.) Norman, though not particularly sensitive, is a sensitive creature nonetheless; though admittedly some dogs are enormously sensitive, and many, much more sensitive than dear Norman. But, make no mistake, to be sure, Norman is also a thoughtful creature; a fact that will, in time, reveal itself. Add in that he is often ignored while his owners goes about the task of living their complicated human lives, going here and going there, a-times taking Norman with them, a-times not.

While left behind, poor dear Norman often feels quite forlorn. Left alone to dwell in his own curious thoughts—what else does he have to occupy himself?—what may feel, to him, like days or weeks or months—insensitive as he might be—are, in fact, often only minutes. But, whether minutes or months matters not when a trusting creature is crushed under the weight of cruel abandonment, and the passage of time does not reduce his concern but only amplifies it. In such a state, the poor beast's mind reaches back and revisits that moment, earlier in the day, when a special dish was placed before him—perhaps a dish of finely chopped steak—and that special dish is no longer cause for celebration, but now is seen only as cause for concern.

And so it is that one particular morning...

It was right about there that I fell asleep with the first chapter of *Beef and Abandonment* still clutched in my greedy grip. I think it should be said that many is the time Jane Austen, herself, has had that very same effect on me.

MORNING

If I had to guess what Giorgio was to say to me first thing that following morning, it wouldn't have been, "How would you like to meet the Octogenarian Rope-Climbing Champion of Bletante?" And he didn't. But, if he had, I would have gladly gone with him. I told him as much, too. He seemed surprised to hear it.

"Really?"

"Absolutely, I learned long ago, Giorgio, that in order for me to get the most out of Blétante, I should surrender to your guidance. A surprising number of people you've introduced me to make perfect sense to me."

"I often feel like that too," he replied. "You know, I never really knew Mr. Snard before. I mean, I worked for him and I knew others who worked for him, but now I know him and I like him. I'm sure that never would have happened without you."

"We are each a catalyst for the other..." I declared.

"That just might-could be, Mr. Mockridge ..."

"That most-likely could be, Mr. Croc. Because of you I've met people I now think of as friends—including yourself—and people I admire—including your wife—and people I respect—including Wilfred Snard, as well as his uncle—and people I've fallen in love with—including your sister-in-law... and uh..."

"I am glad to be of service, Mr. Mockridge. I am most heartily pleased."

"I think as long as we don't talk politics, we should be alright... our friendship will endure."

“Oh, but why do you say that? I enjoy your company despite your silly pomposity, and I hope when you look at me you see more than just a man who is perfectly clear-thinking and correct in all matters political.”

“I’m not sure what you’re saying, but it sounds insulting.”

“Oh, you know what I’m saying,” he said.

“Click-clack, Mr. Croc”.

After that, I thought I’d take a little walk in the woods alone, and found myself thinking about Walter Dunbar. I’d met him the last time I was in Blétante; he was a US expatriate who had built a 16 foot mahogany speedboat in his basement, way back in 1954. He carried a newspaper article about the project around in his wallet. I was five years old at the time he built that boat—so didn’t really recall hearing about it—but, during my little walk, I found myself wondering why—with more than 60 years under my belt—I didn’t have something of that sort folded up in my own wallet. After digging around in the musty basement of my mind, I came up with nothing worthy of enshrinement.

It took Walter Dunbar three years to build that boat in his basement, and it had cost him half a year’s salary. When he finished, there was no way to get it out of there without dismantling the boat itself or the house it was in. I asked him why he had done that, and he said, “A man has to do something with his time.”

While I wandered around out there I thought about that—what had I done with my time? I could come up with nothing. The fact that I had never built even one stupid boat in any basement of any house, hounded me.

When Walter Dunbar told me about his boat, he also told me of all the misery it had caused him. When it came time to sell the house, none of the potential buyers seemed to understand what a wonderful blessing it would be to have a 16 foot speed boat in the basement of their new home. And, when he eventually found a buyer, Walter was haunted by the nagging idea that the new owner had, more likely than not, destroyed his beloved creation. So, he purposefully stayed clear of that house, lest he discover that was true and ended up strangling the poor guy on his own front porch.

In ending his tale, Mr. Dunbar made me promise that I would NEVER build a boat in my basement. But now, suddenly, I found myself regretting that promise. I was whipping myself pretty seriously over this void in my development—really leaning into every lash—when, for some reason, I recalled finding a wallet one time, while on a similar walk. I went through the thing of course, found the information I needed, called the owner, and—dig this—he demanded that I bring it to him.

After I explained to him that that is not the way things work, he told me he didn't really know when he could make time in his busy schedule to come by my place and pick it up.

"That's OK," I said, "I'll just toss it in the garbage then." When he finally does show up, the guy does not say; 'Thanks' or 'Man, you just saved me a lot of trouble and endless worry', instead he looks at me in an accusatory manner and says, 'How did you get my wallet?' This question alone was enough to galvanize my distaste for all self-assumed American aristocrats throughout eternity.

What gets me is the fact that we were standing practically nose to nose when the stupid bastard said that.

At the time, I was half his age, fully-charged with the venom of on-going disappointment in life, and steeped in Archie Goodwin. So, I replied, “I snuck up behind my dear old grandmother as she was about to descend the stairs, and I tripped her. As she was falling, I snatched her purse and ran off with it. Later on, hunkering down in an alley, while rifling through her purse, I found *your* wallet. There were a lot of other things too; gold watches, rings and bearer bonds—but nothing as valuable as your wallet of course. Boy, Grandma certainly is a Mockridge!”

As I was saying all of this the idiot was ignoring me, busily going through his wallet. He carefully counted the cash and then started inspecting each of his credit cards. “By the time I got it,” I said, “all the cash was missing, of course; you really can’t trust *anybody* anymore, can you?”

He looked up at me, only slightly stunned, and said, “What do you mean?... all my cash is here.” I stepped closer to him, looked him right in the eye and snarled, “THAT should tell you something, Jackass!”

Then I opened the door returned him to the world of politicians, lobbyists, stock brokers, yacht salesmen, contractors and insurance agents, where he belonged.

While going through that (sickening) memory, I realized that I did have at least one other thing that I felt pretty good about; the single act I am most proud of in this life.

This occurred way back, when I was working in a high-end, French restaurant. One evening, before we opened, there was a little French waiter in the back of the dining room. He was poking around in some drawers, looking for something. He found what he was looking for—a cork screw—carried it to the front of the dining room, placed it carefully on a shelf beside some other things of his, and walked out the door.

I happened to be heading that way too, and although I was mere seconds behind him, he seemed unaware of my presence. And as I passed by that shelf, I picked up that cork screw. I followed the waiter out the door and, when he turned right, I turned left and, circulating back through the kitchen, I exited through another door into the dining room again. I ambled to the back, and replaced that cork screw in the very same drawer from which the little French waiter had extracted it just seconds earlier.

But, that isn't the part I'm proud of. The part I'm proud of is that, later that evening, between seatings, when I had the chance to do it a second time, I didn't.

Having gotten that off my mind, I returned to camp a happy man.

I was telling all of this to Sandrine, while Giorgio and the kids were off nature-hiking, and she looked at me and laughed. "You are a strange person, Darryl Mockridge." "It is a little strange, I admit. Still, for those brief moments I felt as though some small portion of Life's goodness was flowing through me... kind of like a screwball samurai."

She laughed again, “Strange...”

“... Yeah... it may be a little screwy,” I agreed.

We sat there for a while, both—I’m guessing—evaluating the state of my sanity.

“Emma Moonsinger says playfulness is an integral part of being a solid human being...” I offered.

She studied me for a bit, in silence.

“Emma says playfulness is the single character trait shared by all the people she’s admired and loved in life...” I mumbled.

“How long have you been this way?” Sandrine asked.

“As long as I can remember,” I admitted sadly.

“Strange...” she said, shaking her head.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said. “But, at least with me, if you lose something, and I find it, you’re bound to get it back.”

More CAMPING

After everyone else had hit the tented-hay, and we were left alone to stir the fire and have a couple warm beers together, Giorgio disrupted the quiet rhythm of the evening by suddenly bursting into laughter.

“Oh, I meant to tell you something, Mr. Mockridge. I wanted to let you know what an enormous impact you’ve had on these islands... because of something you said to me... repeatedly.”

“Oh, yeah? What did I say to you... repeatedly?”

“Every time the MOC was mentioned you’d grumble and snarl, ‘What a bunch of Marin-ites!’”

“I don’t really recall ever saying that.”

“HA! Invariably... every single time the MOC came up you’d snarl, ‘Marin-ites!’”

“I honestly do not recall ever saying that.”

“You don’t?”

“No, I do not. But, if I did, I was probably talking about black shale from the ocean floor.”

“Oh, no; you made it perfectly clear; you were talking about the poor lost neurotic souls of *Marin* County!”

“Well, the good citizenry of Marin County would certainly have no problem adapting the MOC—those people are always ready, eager, and legally armed to stick their aristocratic noses into other people’s business. I just don’t recall ever having said so.”

“Well, you did, Mr. Mockridge, and I liked the sound of it so much that *I* started calling MOCers Marin-ites... Now, anyone who initiates a MOC or takes part in one is called a Marin-ite.”

I felt somewhat embarrassed, and didn’t know what to say.

“Your cynicism has gone viral, Mr. Mockridge!”

“I feel so proud,” I said sarcastically.

“I am absolutely serious,” he said. “Mention the word Marin-ite to anyone in Blétante and they’ll know what you’re talking about.”

“And how are these nouveau-Marin-ites treated?”

Giorgio began to laugh so hard that he could not stop.

Sandrine came crawling outside through the tent flaps, with her finger to her lips, saying quietly, “Do you two have to talk so loudly?”

“I was asking your husband how Marin-ites are treated.”

“For us, the word Marin-ite doesn’t carry all the venom you instilled in it. Reasonable people see both sides of things.”

“Ah,” I said, “*reasonable* people.”

“Reasonable people understand the usefulness of having a few Marin-ites around,” she said.

“It’s an important part of our social tapestry,” said Giorgio, stifling his laughter.

“But, *you* know that, don’t you?” said Sandrine taking a seat on a log beside me.

“I do,” I said. “And I respect the MOC... within limits.”

“Within limits,” she agreed. “We are not a bunch of squealers, Mr. Mockridge; we handle things outside of authority whenever we possibly can; and authority on Blétante is completely in favor of that,” she said. “But, why is it always politics with you two? Enough politics.”

I agreed, and we went back to observing life outside of, and far beyond, the suffocating sphere of what Giorgio calls the *arbitrary self-appointed tyrannical oversight of an otherwise free people*.

“Why are you guys whispering?” asked Celeste, her head and hands suddenly appearing outside the tent flaps. Her mother patted the log besides herself and Celeste crawled the rest of the way out, over to us, and took a seat.

Then I suppose we all just stared up at the sky with our mouths wide open, like contented fools, for a while.

“OH LOOK,” shouted Henri suddenly, “a shooting star!” He was resting, his elbows on the ground, face in his hands, just outside the tent.

“The draw of the wild,” someone said quietly.

“Sandrine was born on this island,” Giorgio said.

“You were?”

“Sure was; I know every rock and tree.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Where were you born, Mr. Mockridge?”

“I was born in Gary, Indiana.”

“That’s interesting.”

“How about you Giorgio?” I said.

Giorgio smiled. “I was born on a little boat about half way between this island and Blétante.”

“Now, see, THAT IS interesting,” I said, and everybody laughed.

“I was born on Blétante,” said Celeste chirpily.

“Me too,” said Henry. “But, I don’t really remember it that well. Molly was born in the broom closet.”

DAY SIX (I think)

As night fell on Day Six, I was sorry to be leaving. But I was slated to spend some time at Drear House and, as a Greatly Honored Guest of the State, I felt the obligation. So, we said our goodbyes and there was a lot of hugging, before Giorgio and I began the long trek, through the ever-vindictive woods, back to the car. I found myself following Giorgio closely because I was having trouble seeing again. But, this time, it wasn't the dark that had me blinded ... there was something in my eyes.

"You know," he said over his shoulder as we stomped along. "You really need to stop counting the days you have left here, Mr. Mockridge."

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Giorgio," I said, unconvincingly.

"Oh, I think you do," he said. "You get up every day and say, 'Well, here it is Day Whatever already.'"

"I'm not doing that to irritate you, Giorgio."

"It's not for me, Mr. Mockridge; it's for your own good. You should stop counting the days, for yourself. Let me worry about that. Have some fun, forget about your departure date. I'll let you know a few days before you're due to leave and, I can assure you, you WILL be on that plane. I promise."

I felt like that would be the solution to one of my many problems, so I agreed. For the solution to all my other problems, I asked Giorgio to drive me to the nearest bar.

So he could get back to his waiting family, I asked him to drop me off; I'd make it to Drear House on my own. He, however, insisted that he'd pick me up later.

ESCAPING THE BLIND OWL

When I was a teenager—enamored with European cars—I went to the near-by park every Sunday and watched the Auto Cross races, where the Sunbeam Tigers ate up everything in sight. And, whenever someone pulled up with a Lotus in tow and began to off-load it, all the Mustangs were quickly trailered and quietly slipped away. Still, in those days, European cars were considered inferior to anything built in Detroit. Consequently, I spent those years slumping around feeling misunderstood and abused, because nobody really cared about that particular injustice.

My one and only friend was a skinny, freckle-faced kid with glasses, an expert on Hispano-Suizas. He understood.

Actually, he understood more than I did; knew more about mechanics than I did, and a great deal more about things like horse-power and gear-ratios, than I did. My great passion was the history of Rolls Royce. So, while I spent my time alone, in my room, pawing through Hemmings Motor News, my friend spent his, on his back, in overalls, on a creeper, wrestling with a rusty old Hispano-Suiza which the previous owner had *paid him* to tow away.

Only years later was I capable of admitting that almost anybody was better informed than I on almost any other matter, and that many people were better informed than I was concerning Rolls Royce. At that age, I sensed it; just couldn't admit it. These days I admit, almost ecstatically, that I don't know a thing about anything; though, like everybody else, I reserved the right to posture and snort.

I was thinking about that in the Blind Owl Tavern that night, when a kid—he must have been about 36—appeared out of nowhere and sat down beside me, disrupting my thoughts. He then proceeded to tell me every thought that had gone through his head from the time he hit puberty until the very minute he sat down next to me. When he started to theorize about his future I got up and, pretending to go to the bathroom, slipped through the crowd and on outside. I knew that if I returned he would still be there, so I sat down on the curb, with my head in my hands, and cooled my scalded ears for a while.

Naturally (and of course), he came out looking for me, found me, and sat down on the curb right beside me.

“Hey! Where’d you go?” he asked.

“... get some air,” I mumbled.

“I thought I lost you!” he said. He patted me on the back and threw an arm around my shoulder.

“Yeah, I thought you had too,” I said coldly.

I got up and started to walk away, heading anywhere but there, and he followed.

“I really thought I’d lost you, man.”

“It’d been better for you if you had,” I said.

“No. No,” he said. “You’re my buddy.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked without interest.

“Because you are, man! You’re my buddy.”

“Why would you want anyone like me to be your buddy?”

“Because you’re interesting, man; you’re, uh, interesting.”

I snorted. “I’m a mediocre man with a mediocre mind.”

“But you tell a good tale.”

“A mediocre man with a mediocre tale to tell.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” he said gregariously. Then, he patted me on the back again. (Which I took pretty well, for a man who doesn’t like being touched.)

“I also think you’re an honest man.”

“Really?” I took a staggering half-step backward and eyed him. “What gives you that idea?”

“I hear it in your voice,” he said. “I sensed it right away, because I’m basically honest too.”

“Basically honest, huh?” I snorted.

“I recognize the symptoms,” he said, wagging a finger.

“Basically honest...?” I laughed. “It sounds like the opening line of a bad joke. *Two basically honest guys meet in a bar...*”

He pondered out loud, “There’s a joke that begins, ‘Two honest guys meet in a bar?’”

“Not that I know of; why don’t you see if you can create one,” I suggested. I continued plodding up the street.

When Giorgio appeared ahead of us, I practically ran to him and threw myself into his arms.

“Oh, man, Giorgio, I am so glad to see you,” I whispered in his ear. “GET... me... out... of...HERE.”

“What’s going on?” Giorgio asked, laughing.

“I have no idea, but I want it to end. Can you make it end?”

Giorgio—after he stopped laughing—walked me in a big endless circle for a thousand dizzying years before finally pouring me into his car, and we were on our way.

I have no idea who that kid was, or why he latched onto me. But, if I ever see him again, I don’t think I’ll recognize him. In fairness, he probably won’t recognize me either. And on that glorious day, the sun will rise and set as usual.

DREAR HOUSE again

Now, in the moonlight, Drear House looked, sadly, like any other ancient mansion; once-noble, now humbled by time and human indifference. Without a single light on, I had doubts that they were still expecting me. After all, I was arriving two or three nights later than expected.

I was standing on the driveway feeling awkward, with my bag in my hand... "Giorgio," I began. "Just ring the bell, Mr. Mockridge," he said, through the driver's side window. "Mr. Snard will let you in. I have to scoot; my wife and kids are probably sitting around a cold campfire." With that, he rolled up his window and sped off. At the sound of his tires crunching in the driveway, lights on either side of the door came on and, just as they did, a heavy rain began to fall. I walked up the steps and waited.

The door was opened by a man who appeared to be even older than Samuel Snard—if such a thing were possible—but looked quite a bit like him.

"Mockridge?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Where's your driver? Where's he staying?"

"Giorgio's staying with his wife and kids at a campsite up top somewhere."

The man stepped out into the rain and stood beside me, looking into the dark distance where Giorgio and the car had disappeared.

"That was Giorgio? Why didn't he stop to say hello?"

I shook my head.

"He wanted to get back to the camp."

“Giorgio’s a very interesting fellow; gets a little overly involved in matters he cannot change, but he’s honest and kind... and impressively well-read. His wife—she has all the smarts though—she keeps getting elected to Council. Whenever they can legally re-elect her, they do. The young lady, Celeste wants to be a writer, and I hear she’s getting to be pretty good at it.” He turned and walked toward the door but stopped. He looked me over.

“I understand you want to write a book. I wish you luck with that; it ain’t as easy as it looks. But, who knows?” He evaluated me and found the likelihood of my success as a writer doubtful. “You’re kinda old to be starting a new career, aren’t you?”

“I guess.”

“Let me give you some advice: Stick with what you know and what you’re good at.”

“If I knew what I was good at, I would,” I said.

“If it doesn’t work out, maybe it just wasn’t in you.”

He looked me in the eye, raised an eyebrow, and spit.

We stood there in the pouring rain, both getting soaked for a while, before his thoughts returned to Giorgio’s family.

“The little fellow, Henry thinks my name is *Smart*.” He laughed. “Apparently he thinks I have the brains to go with it. One time, a few years back, he came in, walked right up to me and asked, ‘Mr. Smart, do you think half-a-brick is a solution?’ I asked him, ‘A solution for what?’ and he just said, ‘Never mind,’ and walked away. Funny little kid. I could tell he wanted me to say *yes*, but I had no idea what he was talking about. Still calls me Mr. Smart, even though, by now, he must surely have been told that I am the black sheep of the Snard family.”

“That boy’s become quite an archer too,” he said.

“An archer?” I shouted... because the rain was coming down pretty hard by then.

“Yes,” he shouted, “that’s one of our pass-times on Tender. There are archery ranges all over this island.”

“I haven’t noticed...”

He studied me for a bit then shook his head.

“You want to be a writer?” he said. “You must be blind. I don’t know how in blazes you could have missed them all. My god,” he said to himself. “...wants to be a writer.”

He pushed open the large, heavy, etched glass-paneled door. “Come in,” he said. No sense standing around in the rain. Let me have your coat.”

“I don’t have a coat.”

“You don’t have a coat? In this weather?”

“It’s in my bag,” I said showing him the bag.

“Lot of good it does you in that bag!”

“It wasn’t raining when I left the tavern.”

He shook his head in confusion or disgust, or possibly (well, probably) both.

“Giorgio had to abandon his family, in the rain, to drive you up here?” he asked, judging me pretty severely.

“We arranged for him to pick me up at the tavern, at midnight. I wanted to spend some time thinking. ”

“Thinking? You didn’t *think* you could walk 6 measly miles from town?”

“Well, you know... what can I say?” I mumbled.

“I’ve covered those 6 miles on my hands and knees, in worse weather than this—even when I was a drunk as you seem to be—and far more times than anyone can count.”

He looked at me for a response, but I had none to offer.

“Your room is upstairs,” he said.

We began our walk up a wide set of beautiful old marble stairs, which curved around counter-clockwise and disappeared at a landing above.

“Ignore her,” he said to me over his shoulder.

“Ignore who?” I asked as I stepped upon the marble tread.

“Her,” he said, and continued his weary ascent up the staircase. I looked around and saw no one, and so, started trudging along behind him.

After a few steps, I grabbed onto the railing in order to catch my breath and shake off a bucket or two of water.

With my head hanging below the rail, I looked around and saw her... white hair, long gray dress, floor-length leather apron. She was standing in the lobby, in front of an open door with her hands on her hips, glaring at us.

“Mom?” she said plaintively.

Her eyes were fixed on me.

I was transfixed; she looked so much like the woman I’d dreamed of a night or two before. I didn’t know what a GHG would be expected to do; I was too tired (or too unnerved or too drunk) to wave, so I smiled a little smile and began tugging my way up the steps again.

“Ignore her,” he said over his shoulder and continued slowly, maybe a little painfully, up the worn marble steps.

“Don’t you ignore me, Mom!” she warned.

He kept climbing, slowly, steadily.

“Mom!” she snapped loudly.

“Ignore that woman,” he said flatly.

“Did she call you Mom?” I asked.

“She calls me Mom. Just ignore her,” he said.

As we made the turn around the first landing, I looked down, and she was still there, glaring up at me, shaking her head in apparent disapproval.

Mr. Snard was already on the third floor. I caught up to him as he withdrew an old key from the ancient lock. The door said '3B, PRIVATE'.

"Who was that?" I asked, still breathing heavily.

"Ignore her," he said, opening the door into another world.

Inside, it was spacious and 19th Century in every aspect. The room was filled to the brim with books and lamps and tapestries and paintings and sculptures. Two comfortable chairs occupied a large carpet in the middle of the room—which reminded me of Wilfred Snard's penthouse before it had been transformed into a nautical library.

"This is our finest suite," he said.

"You must be related to Wilfred Snard," I observed.

"He is related to *me*," he said, "He's my brother's son."

"And, your brother is...?"

"Samuel Snard. I believe you've already met the honorable, socially-acceptable, side of the family."

He looked at me, then crossed the large room and rested one palm upon the William Morris print wallpaper.

"If you were to punch your way through this wall, you'd find yourself in their private residence," he sighed. "Please don't do that," he added.

"Ah," I said, and began to gnaw on that. "But, wait... they live on the first floor... don't they?"

"Our lovely palace is built upon an extreme slope; third floor in this hotel is ground floor up-side."

So, then, I began to gnaw on that.

“Trust me,” he said, “my brother’s withdrawing room is directly on the other side of this wall.” He patted the wall again. “Promise me you’ll make no attempt to prove that for yourself.”

“I promise,” I said.

“On the table there,” he pointed, “you’ll find a bottle of Don Julio, a gift from the Island Nation of Blétante. You also have a cello,” he pointed to an elegant instrument sitting patiently upon a stand in one corner, “as well as an oo-koo-lay-lay.” He pointed to a hard-shell case leaning up against the back of a Louis IV side chair.

“How did you know?” I asked.

“The letter,” he said.

He took a folded letter from the inside of his jacket pocket and offered it to me.

I scanned it.

Mockridge... Greatly Honored Guest... Every courtesy... extreme deference... meeting every expectation... provided immediately, without hesitation... your most luxurious accommodation... transportation, attire, etc. for this guest’s needs... at no cost whatsoever to him... justly and generously compensated... representing the Island Nation of Blétante with dignity... his personal wishes, include: Don Julio Real (a tequila), our best Island coffee (the gentleman prefers dark roast), our finest Island chocolates (the gentleman prefers dark, with nuts), one performance level cello, a baritone ukulele of similar quality, a small library of American humor of a sarcastic or cynical bent. The Island Nation thanks you for your most careful attention to all matters concerning this G H G’s comfort and delight, during his stay with us.

“Oh,” I said aloud, “Greatly Honored Guest...”

I held my chin up just a bit more.

Old Mr. Snard then did something I'd seen his nephew do a hundred times; he snorted and shook his head derisively. I laughed. I knew it to be a good natured dismissal.

He then turned and started walking toward the door.

"You'll have to forgive me, any enthusiasm I may have once had by finding myself in the glorious presence of yet another invader into our demesne, has long since perished."

"Had your fill of people, huh?"

"Oh, I've had *much more* than my allotment. I'd already realized what dullards they all are by the time I was 50... You can imagine what the last 50 have been like for me."

He shook his head. "All imbeciles; every damned last one of them. He stopped, looked at me. "... not you of course."

I smiled.

"If you need anything..." he said, "it will have to wait until morning. I'm going to bed."

As he started to open the door, I cleared my throat.

"Would you like a little nip?" I asked quietly.

SOMETHING about ART and HATS

Three hours later, we were each sprawled in our own big comfortable, squeaky old leather chair, facing each other at little more than arm's length, discussing the definition of 'art' (for some reason).

I slurred out my definition: "If it cannot be anything else, it must be Art," I said with great satisfaction.

He considered that for a bit and then told me his.

"Art is any *thing*..." he began.

"Any *thing*?" I asked.

"You interrupted me. Please don't do that."

"OK."

"I'm very old and that causes me consternation."

"OK. I'm sorry."

"No need to 'be sorry'. You asked me about Art and I'll be glad to inform you, if you keep your trap shut."

"OK."

He squinted at me for a bit before beginning again.

"Art is any *thing*—a thought, a word, a movement, an object, singular or in series—which, *by its presence*, offers the observer *the possibility to consider* the parameters of the basic aesthetic construct of the world in which we live."

"Offers the possibility?"

"You're interrupting again."

"I..."

He raised a hand and warned me with another squint.

"All Art," he continued, "offers, to the *willing* viewer, *the opportunity* to consider the full range of that aesthetic."

I nodded.

“Some art,” he continued, “*asks* that you consider it, *great art* only falls short of demanding that, in order to observe it, you must first have an understanding—more than a mere appreciation—of the fundamental underlying aesthetic construct upon which all that surrounds us is...”

“Built?” I ventured.

He glared at me.

“...upon which it is all... *pinioned*,” he said dryly.

“Oh. Well Ok,” I said. I drank and pondered.

“I accept that definition,” I said, “I’ll have to give it some additional thought, but it sounds correct.”

“Give it all the thought you want. I’m 98 years old and have *given it thought* since I first opened my eyes.”

“You make it sound like a religious experience.”

“Not so. Religion asks that you focus on, attempt to understand and, at very least, pretend to appreciate the meaning of things unproven, *beyond* this world; Art suggests that you might first focus upon, and attempt to understand, the aesthetic meaning behind the construct of natural things *in* this world. Art is like Love but without the whirling madness.”

“And what do y...”

“If you can somehow manage to restrain yourself, I will.”

He waited.

I waited. I smiled (though it seemed to have no real effect.)

“In Love, genuine Love—either eros or agape—you have no choice; you are driven to focus strictly—nearly to the point of exclusivity—upon the madness of that love. Even in the thralls of puppy love—Love on training wheels — you find yourself deprived of any choice in the matter;

you're thrown into madness whether you wish to go or not. Art, on the other hand, merely *suggests* that you *throw yourself in*; you have the choice; you choose to immerse yourself or not; you look or not; you observe or not; you think or not. Most people take a look and, unaffected, simply go along their stupid way."

He looked at me. "... not you of course."

I smiled.

He continued.

"In the whirlwind madness of Love those very same people joyfully, eagerly, anxiously, desperately surrender to mindless involvement. Like mooncalves, they spend every waking moment hoping that their madness will be reciprocated. Whereas Love exploits your weakness and uses it to overthrow your intelligence, Art *recognizes* your intellect, then asks that you consciously *surrender* it, in order to *allow* weakness to guide your experience."

"Wow," I said. Then, I shook my head and said it again.

He said nothing. Instead, he handed me the beaten cover of an old booklet, which he withdrew from the inside of his jacket. It featured a sculpture, which might be described as a very large, rudely carved, egg-shaped monolith, wearing a pizza box shaped wooden hat. I looked carefully at the photo. Clearly it was a large piece—in the picture, a man stood beside it, up on his toes, yet unable to touch the underside brim of that 'hat'. Detailed shots, on the back cover, showed each of the four sides of the 'hat' decorated in petro-glyph-like silhouettes: one side sea-going creatures, another, mammals, the third, birds, and the last—to my surprise and confusion—bicycles.

"When was this taken?"

“1934.”

“1934?”

“Yes.”

“And that, I’m guessing,” I tapped the cover, “is you.”

“Yes.”

“So, then... that is your piece?”

“It was.”

“Was?... Where is it; where can I see it?”

“HA!” he declared. “Greatest sculptor of our time! Come witness this unsurpassed achievement! The world at my feet! I was so proud. Such foolishness!”

I waited for him to continue.

“The Conservatory of Flowers was under construction at the time. There were plans for an impressive sculpture garden, with my *unsurpassed achievement* front and center. They were moving the thing into place. There was a gargantuan crane with straps and chains and men with flags, and art critics and museum bigwigs, photographers and reporters, and a crowd of curious gawkers, held at bay by velvet ropes. You see?”

He looked at me and I nodded.

“And, as they began to raise my *unsurpassed achievement* a pad or a pod... a foot at any rate... of that crane gave way, or sank into the sediment, and the other pad or pod lifted slowly off the ground and the crane lost stability. This all occurred before our eyes in slow motion. As the thing began to tilt... do you know what a trebuchet is?”

“Yes.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. Well I didn’t know what it was until after this event; but that crane, as it collapsed onto its side, like a trebuchet, took my great work of art, and cast it into the hungry sea.”

“Wow,” I said.

“Yes. So much for my career as a GREAT sculptor.”

“Wow,” I repeated quietly. “Any chance of recovery?”

“What would be the point? The gods had sent me a fairly unambiguous message.”

“You think the gods care that much about what we do?”

“Oh no. I think the gods cared that little about what we do.”

“Gods aside, did you...”

“Wait.”

I waited.

“Contemplate Fatality—you’re old enough that you should be doing that without my urging. Entertain, for a moment, all the billions of people who have walked this earth, have lived, and have died. Think about everything they produced in their lives and thought was of significant, lasting value.” Then because of the way he sighed and rolled his old eyes heavenward, I diverted.

“I’m guessing,” I said quickly, “you must have had some appreciation for Jean Arp.” I smiled.

“PAH!” he snorted, “Arp didn’t possess the skills necessary to piss into his own hat.”

I laughed so hard I almost dropped the tequila bottle.

“Really?”

“Any ambulating being selected *at random* from a crowd of passing *ninnies* could have produced finer work,” he said.

I mulled over that for a bit, drank, thought about someone pissing into their own hat, and drank again.

“Why,” I asked, “would anyone—Jean Arp included—want to piss into their own hat?”

“I can give you 20 reasons why a perfectly reasonable person might want to piss into his own hat,” he said.

I reached over and poured him another shot of tequila.

I poured one for myself and tabled the bottle.

“Let’s hear just one,” I said, and sat back glowing in smugness. I closed my eyes. “I’m a-listenin’.”

“To fend off the thought of an imminent Post-Babylonian invasion and the long siege that would inevitably follow.”

I thought about that for a bit.

“OK,” I said, “that’s one.”

“In order to re-shape the thing so that, once dry again, it would take on a jauntier form and lend a heightened sense of dignity to a man of low or recently defiled self-esteem.”

“Well, OK,” I said, “that’s two.”

“In order to relieve yourself where you stand, in the forest, without at once destroying a plant with a particular sensitivity to uric acid, which, by chance, you discover, only at that urgent moment, flowering innocently directly below your belly.”

I envisioned that.

He smiled. “Should I go on?”

“No need,” I said. “I think you’ve made your point.”

We sat for a while in swampy drunken silence.

“I need to ask you somethin’,” I ventured.

“Bout Art?”

“Nope.”

“Bout Love?”

“Nope.”

“Bout what then?”

“Bout that woman downstairs callin’ you Mom.”

“She thinks I’m lazy.”

“How does that lead to Mom?”

“Well Sloth is supposedly the Mother of all Vices.”

“Really? Sloth is the Mother of all Vices?”

“Far as I know.”

“Huh...” I said, and rubbed my chin. “...never heard that.”

“The guy who built this house was named Drear,” he said, “now it’s owned by a guy named Snard...” He gazed at his glass before draining it. “...not much of an improvement.”

I eyed the bottle for a moment, but concluded that we’d both probably had enough.

SLEEPING the sleep that ALWAYS follows any GOOD discussion of Art

I fell asleep. I don't know when. Late though.

I fell asleep and had an interesting dream; it seemed to have three parts to it; it was a holy trinity of a dream.

I often fly in dreams... and no one passing by on the ground below ever seems to notice. But in this one, with lush green hills rolling like waves ahead of me, I rose a few scant inches above the ground, and hovered there only briefly before settling down again, gently, upon the grass. The important thing is that, while I was up there—hovering inches above the muck of common existence—my vision had been elevated. I could see beyond the hills and beyond all the distraction, and I saw clearly, in very precise terms, what lay ahead, not just for me, but for all of us. I'd been blessed with a vision, and my duty was perfectly clear: I was to go forth and tell the world. I turned to relate what I had just seen to people passing by, but they didn't seem to either hear me or see me or really care.

So, well, OK, I returned to my little room, in a small two-room house of mud, with a single open window. I felt somewhat forlorn as I lay down upon my simple bed and slept. During that sleep, my ears picked up a distant sound: a tock, tock, tock. I had no idea what it was until, suddenly jolting awake, I *knew* I was late. I sat on the edge of the bed, quickly pulled on my shoes, and ran out the door. I began chanting to myself, "I hope I'm not too late. I am so sorry. I hope I'm not too late. I am so sorry."

Returning to the spot where I had risen above the ground and had seen beyond the rolling hills, I now saw, in the distance, upon the highest hill, *the Lord God* hanging from a cross. At that moment I realized that the tock, tock, tock had been the sound of spikes being driven through his wrists. Why had I slept, when I should have stayed alert? “Oh, Lord,” I wailed, “I am so sorry. I am so very sorry.” With crushing shame—tears running down my face—I turned and began slowly walking away.

I was standing in a cold, unlit, cavernous room. In front of me, on a throne, was a large, round-headed daemon with fiery-red eyes. His sharpened fingernails rested casually upon the arms of the throne; his scaly fingers were heavily bejeweled. His attire—his robes, his crown, his slippers—were fully-encrusted with jewels as well. He seemed quite pleased with himself. He smirked at me, as if bemused, and chuckled at my insignificance. And that I understood.

I was drawn close to this creature and driven to my knees by some unseen force. It hurt to fall so far. From my position on the cold cobblestone floor I observed him with revulsion. A tiny fetal pig hung by a short gold chain from the septum of his nose; he licked at it continually. The poor tiny creature seemed to be alive. The daemon took hearty delight in seeing how much this act disgusted me.

He eyed me directly for a while, laughed, and then, with a wave of his hand, dismissed me.

Immediately, I stood again upon the spot where I had seen the crucifixion...

But, now, there was no indication that anything had taken place there. Yearning to regain my original vision, I tried to elevate myself, but looking down I saw that my feet were encased in rough-cast blocks of cold iron.

I wasn't going anywhere.

I felt helpless and foolish and awash in shame.

I looked around at the empty landscape, and at the passing people; I tried to speak but could not form any recognizable words. Blackened leaves fell from the trees.

I woke up drenched completely in sweat and more than just a little frightened. I said a quick prayer, genuinely thankful to be awake, and, because you can't erase a thing like that from your mind by sitting still, I got up, dressed quickly, made my way downstairs, outdoors, and into the pure cold blessing of the open air.

THE CONSERVATORY of FLOWERS

That morning—or *morning* as I usually first experience it—I wandered out onto the property and spied Irene observing the sea below. I approached her.

“Irene...”

“Off to the Conservatory, Mr. Mockridge?”

“No, I thought I’d acclimatize for a day or so.”

“Oh-ho, Mr. Mockridge, do my ears deceive me? Would’st thou delay the pleasure of taking in our proudest landmark? The Conservatory of Flowers is recognized throughout the known world as our most remarkable achievement.”

“I know. I’ve been told. And I intend to go there.”

“Oh-ho, Mr. Mockridge! You, a writer and a Guest of the State, should feel a desire as well as an obligation to go.

Any writer worth his oats would want to, and especially you, if only to slander the glorious praises of others with snide dismissal. As a Guest of this Island Nation, it would be wrong for you not to make a showing, I would think.”

“That’s what you think, is it?”

“My unrestrained thought; madcap, brazen, and honest.”

“Well, I like what you’ve said, and I think you’re right.

Why don’t you go with me and show me around.”

“Oh, Mr. Mockridge, there is nothing I would prefer to do, but, I am needed here for the while. Personal desire must, a’ times, bow to responsibility.”

So, I went alone. And let me tell you this:

A motorcycle gang leader, a cupcake baker, a Russian ballerina-in-training, an Iranian interpreter at the (so-called) United Nations, a bride’s maid in a Mexican wedding, a one-eyed director of pornographic films, a wildly

successful, though somewhat overweight, writer of serial science-fiction novels, a part-time discount shoe salesman, a Buddhist monk, a tattoo artist, a 92 year-old butterfly collector, a tow-truck driver, an entomologist (whichever of the two that may be), a child with no friends, a hostess in a Japanese teahouse, a professional bowler, a former farmer, an active alcoholic, a mathematician or astrophysicist, a desk clerk in a small privately-owned French hotel, would all enjoy the place. And, those are just some of the people who would. Most of them might also (probably would) be surprised to discover how much the Conservatory of Flowers has to offer. I was.

So, you can count me among them.

Whoever you are, whatever you do and whatever your mood; whether irate, hopeful, sullen, nervous, hopped-up, suicidal, finally relaxed after years of trying, thankless labor, momentarily distracted by matters of the heart, with arthritis or other minor physical impairment, you will be impressed. I cannot imagine anyone who would not be.

The Conservatory of Flowers on Tender, in brief, is cool.

It is a massive structure, the glass façade of which takes up, what in the United States would be, an entire city block. All that glass overlooks a sheer drop to the ocean far below. Once inside—and there are countless unobstructed ways to enter—you find yourself outside again, facing the hillside. As far as you can see there is only natural landscape; birds and flowers and trees and rocks and waterfalls and ponds and stunned people walking around with their mouths wide open, as if in a dream.

There are also dozens of Conservatory ‘Members’ around, smiling, answering any questions you might have. They are courteous and pleasant and impressively well-informed.

I asked one, “This is all... what... orchestrated?”

“Yes and no. It is tended; it is cared for. It is protected. And, yes, it is orchestrated, but minimally. We have 37 micro-climates within the Conservatory, and plants are brought in which best prosper in each. The birds seem to arrive naturally and gravitate toward the place that suits them. The Conservatory covers over 160 acres and is the home to thousands of varieties of birds and many hundreds of small mammals, and sweet-water fish as well.”

“Huh,” I said.

“If you’re interested, I would be pleased to take you on a small tour... OR, you can just wander around by yourself.”

I wandered around by myself for about three hours before stopping another Conservatory Member with another silly question. It had been nagging me all day.

“Have you ever heard of a guy named Kinderstrom?”

“Of course.”

“You have.”

“Yes, of course; everybody knows Dr. Kinderstrom.”

“Do you know where I can find him?”

“Well, I do, but, he really doesn’t like to be... he doesn’t like to be... Maybe you shouldn’t... I don’t think... uh.”

He seemed nervous.

“I know him personally,” I said, smiling my best imitation convincing smile. “It’ll be fine,” I assured him.

“OK. But, if you know him personally, why don’t you know where to find him?”

“That’s a reasonable question,” I said.

“And... ?”

“And the reasonable answer is that I knew him three years ago, when I was last here, and I met him in the Sea Saw Room in the Grande Hotel on Blétante proper.”

“Still, I don’t know. Dr. Kinderstrom would be furious with anyone that told anyone where they could...”

“He drinks only green tea,” I said suddenly.

“Has a beard?”

“Did, three years ago.”

“Walks with a limp?”

“Not that I ever noticed.”

The kind and clever Conservatory Member eyed me for a moment before positioning himself beside me, so as not to look at me directly as he spoke.

“As I was saying: Dr. Kinderstrom would be furious with anyone that told anyone else that there is an overgrown path near the end of Section 12, on the west side of the waterfall, with a vine-covered iron gate, with a rusty padlock on it, and a cow bell, which you might ring merely out of curiosity, not knowing that anyone in particular might be in there avoiding all human contact and nursing some very peculiar and unique tropical fruit trees, and wishing to remain undisturbed. So, I will not, out of respect for the Doctor’s privacy, tell you that. BUT, if you should, by chance, on your own, discover it for yourself; you won’t remember anyone who looks like me ever telling you that.”

“Wait, what exactly was it that no one has told me?”

“Section 12, west of the waterfall, vine-covered, padlock, cowbell.”

I nodded.

“Is there anything else I might do for you?” he asked.

“Well, I’ve heard so many good things about Section 12.”

“Actually,” he said, I was just heading up that way; let me take you.” He gestured toward a golf cart. I climbed on board next to him as he switched the thing on.

“I see that you are a Greatly Honored Guest,” he said.

“How did...?”

“Your lapel pin.”

“Oh. It really works.”

“Without that pin, Sir, you would not be riding in this cart at this moment; of that I can assure you.”

DR. KINDERSTROM

Dr. Kinderstrom did not respond to the cow bell until I'd rung it (with great trepidation) a third time. Then he came charging down that path like an enraged bull. He stopped on the other side of the iron gate, looked at me, ran his beard through his hand, said, "Mockridge. Someone warned me you were in town. How did you find me?"

"Instinct," I said.

"Well, you might as well come in, since you've disrupted my record keeping."

I hesitated. The gate was secured with a large chain and a much larger rusty padlock.

"The padlock's not real," he said over his shoulder and began marching quickly down the path and out of sight.

I found the lock, as he said, real enough but merely a prop. I began following him down the path. For a big man, he moved quite quickly.

As I broke through the endless encroaching, exactly eye-level, vicious branches, I wondered if the man had given up on his quest to find a cure for cancer. And, since I had no green tea to offer, I wondered why he had invited me in. He was way ahead of me and increasing the distance between us. I couldn't see where I was going because of all the over-growth, and the trek seemed to go on and on.

"Doctor Kinderstrom!" I shouted, "Please slow down."

"Keep up!" he shouted.

When we reached a clearing, he sat down at a large wooden table, wrote something in a journal, closed it, and, lifting a huge large-mouth jar said, "Green tea?"

“How have you been?” I asked.

“How do I look?” he asked bitterly.

“I’m no judge,” I said.

“Well, don’t I look like a man eager to welcome every intruder who comes bursting into his private gardens, disrupting his thoughts and screwing up his record keeping?”

“Not really.” I gave him my most apologetic smile.

Kinderstrom looked at me for a bit, shook his head, and asked, “Do you remember the last time we spoke? You approached me saying, ‘Do you mind if I sit down?’”

“I remember.”

“On that occasion, did anything I say or do give you the impression that I wished you to hound me from one island to the next?” He nudged a glass over toward me, and said, “Drink up. This is the good stuff.”

I drank.

He stared at me while I sipped green tea in innocence.

“Just this morning,” he said, “I was pruning a delio—do you know what a delio is?”

“No.”

“Well, then it certainly raises the question, What the Hell are YOU doing here, Darryl Mockridge? It IS Darryl isn’t it? I’m sure it’s Mockridge; not so sure about Darryl.”

“It is... Darryl...”

“Am I making this difficult for you, Darryl? The reason I ask is because, you keep popping up and making my life difficult for me. I would rather spend the time I’m wasting with you, going over pollination records.”

“You’re really are an unbearable son-of-a-bitch,” I said.

He looked at me for a while, then laughed. “That I am.”

As I said before, he has a good deep, heartfelt laugh. It really is the slightly edgy laugh of begrudging acceptance.

"I told you more than you'll ever need to know about me, in the first round. So, what brings you back for more?"

"There are some benefits to associating with some people some of the time." I suggested.

"Clocks are pick-pockets, calendars, kidnappers..."

"I know, but clocks pick all pockets and, admit it or not, we're all bound and struggling helplessly in that calendar's basement."

"Hmmm... it's not perfect, but, I'll accept it."

"I'm here willingly," I said.

"That," he said, "by definition, is entirely *your* choice."

We sat there for a very long time in complete silence, while he waited for me to complete the thought. (He wanted me to admit that it was not also *his* choice, to have me there.) Instead, I pushed on.

"You're not going to make this easy for me are you?" I asked.

"I don't understand what it is you're after. But, look," he said, "have some tea, and shut up for a while. I'm doing the best I can with your presence which, beyond its peculiar nature, is something I neither want nor need. Usually, I repel intruders vigorously, but, you've come here for a reason and I'm curious about what it could possibly be."

"You let me in," I said.

"Yes, and I'm about to toss you out. GET to it."

Clearing my throat, I said, "I, who have attempted very little in life, and have accomplished absolutely nothing, would like to get a glimpse into the mind of someone who's attempted a shot at curing cancer."

He sneered, "... and accomplished the cross-pollination of 32 varieties of, near-extinct, edible, fruit-bearing, sub-tropical plants."

"That's more than I've done. It's axiological, I guess."

"Axiology is what?" he asked, fixing me with his eyes.

"Values... you know, ethics."

"Yeah," he said, "that's not what I'm doing."

"What *are* you doing?"

"I do not know. I'll tell you this much however—and it's something others seem incapable of either guessing or accepting—it has nothing to do with virtue."

"Thank you," I said, "Can you tell me about your vision of this world? I mean, would you?"

He laughed.

"My *VISION* of the world?" he laughed again. "Why? Or, better yet, why now? Better still, why do you persist?"

"Because, on the personal level, I have to admit that right now I am having some difficulty digesting the idea that nothing I have done—as a so-called writer—has any real value in this world. I cannot imagine what that crisis must feel like to someone who has something of real value to offer. In brief, I'm intrigued by your predicament."

Kinderstrom sipped tea and looked over the rim of his cup at me, without saying a word.

"... intrigued enough," I continued, "that your continual, complete-pain-in-the-ass grumpiness does not put me off." He shrugged.

I continued, "Courtesy demands that you..."

"Courtesy?" he said dryly. "You, an intruder into my privacy and into my garden, lecture me on courtesy?"

I knew I was defeated. I was also disgusted. So, I finished my tea, took out the notebook which I always carry, wrote something on a page, tore it off, and dropped it on the table. "That," I said, "was all I wanted, Dr. Kinderstrom." Then I got up, leaving the man to his miserable records.

Sure, Kinderstrom is a genius and, admittedly, I am not. However, I am every bit as morose and every bit the cynic he is. And, whether he might gain something from my perspective or not... I was eager to glean everything I could from him. Forget etiquette; Time being what it is, I guess I had hoped for a little intellectual noblesse oblige.

For the record, this is what I scrawled on that paper:
"Pass the salt."

BED and BREAKFAST

Later, I was sitting alone in a café at the Conservatory of Flowers, working on a cup of coffee and a tartine of raclette, when a man came in and he sat down across the table from me. We exchanged nods in silence. I'd never met the man before that I could recall, and he hadn't spoken a single word before I found myself liking him. I cannot tell you why but, from the minute he sat down, I liked the man.

"Writer?" he asked.

I eyed him a bit cautiously. "Along with every other human being on earth," I replied. "And, I'm either guessing you're the cleverest person I've ever met or someone who reads the local paper."

"Neither one," he said. "I saw you jot something down on a scrap of paper while you were waiting to place your order, then watched you fish it out of your pocket to edit the thought, twice, before your coffee was ready."

"Huh..." I said. "Yep, that's the process as I know it. What do you do?"

"You know anything about run-away corporations?"

"I once slept with a young woman in Managua—about 30 or 40 years ago—who claimed to be an expert in the matter."

"Oh, really; what was her name?"

"Anna Bonardi."

"The political reporter?"

"The very one. She called what we did 'copulation'."

"Sound like the move to politics was the right move for her then. You could not find a more perfect preparation for a career in politics. In dealing with run-away corporations, someone is always about to get screwed, there is no simpler term for the process."

"What part do you play in that process?"

“I am proud to say that I have nothing whatsoever to do with the screwing; my task is to defend the screw-ee. If that fails, I do what I can to prepare them for a soft landing when they’re defenestrated by the board of directors, thus depriving the poor lost soul of future access to the plush surroundings on the 40th floor.” He sipped his coffee. “And, I’m pretty good at it.”

“That sounds interesting,” I said.

“What do you write about?”

“Oh, you know... stuff.”

We sat without saying anything more for a while, until he finally said, “Here’s some stuff for you to write about...”

He began telling me about a ‘bed and breakfast’ establishment on a small island near Blétante. He described the place and asked me if I’d ever been there. I told him I hadn’t.

He talked a bit about the business and how it had changed over the years. He told me about the boat that brought guests there—a beautiful little 60 foot launch, built in the 1930s. Then he talked about the owners—a married couple—and what their life must be like. He explained that it was a small place, that the husband was a quiet man, and that the wife was attractive and intelligent.

I told him I had the picture.

“I want you to think about the husband for a minute,” he said. “The poor guy’s stuck out there on a small island with an attractive, intelligent wife, and there’s a continual influx of strangers—many of them males—coming and going. Imagine what that poor man’s mind must be like. Every evening he stands out there on the dock, watching as the boat arrives, loaded with new, and returning, male guests.”

I thought about that.

“I’d guess,” I said, “that, after a few years on that island, that husband might begin to develop a distrusting view of any man, married or single, arriving on that damned boat.”

“Did you say *distrusting* or *disturbing*?” he asked, as if waking from a dream. “Oh, well, never mind.”

The monologue continued, and lasted maybe fifteen minutes, maybe twenty. I was completely enthralled; he painted a pretty good picture. I listened with considerable interest as he fleshed out the couple’s life together, on that island... and described the relentless micro-drama surrounding the daily arrival of that beautiful little 60 foot launch.

When he’d finished, I said, “Well, clearly, you’ve given this matter *a lot* of thought.”

“Huh.” he said, distractedly, “No, actually, I haven’t given it much thought in years.”

At that moment, however, he seemed to be giving it plenty of thought. I watched him carefully as a wide array of emotions played across his face.

After a while he rose and said, “It’s been *helpful* talking to you. I’m glad we met.”

At that point, I could think of nothing else but what he’d just told me. What was the punch line to that tale? Was our little chat merely a beautiful example of simple communication between two human beings—as I truly hoped—or something more? It was certainly humanity at some depth.

For a while, I found myself thinking that I might pick up the newspaper the next morning and discover that some expert on runaway corporations had just murdered his ex-wife on an island somewhere near Blétante.

THE NEXT MORNING

She was out there, under the falling moon, in the chill of the near-dawn morning air.

"Irene?" I whispered as I approached, and she jumped a mile. She smacked me on the arm.

"Good god what's wrong with you? Don't you have better sense than to sneak up on somebody like that?"

She laughed and placed a hand on my arm. "You scared the devil out of me, Mr. Mockridge."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You should be..." She placed one finger to her lips.

"Shhhhhh..." she said. "Let me show you something."

She led me back inside, down a hallway, and into a nice-sized, dark, wood-paneled room. She turned on the lights and we found ourselves surrounded with 14 or so of the most beautiful landscape paintings I have ever seen. They hung on three of the four walls; on both sides of the door, where we had entered, there were stacks of the things, leaning against the wall, unframed—maybe an additional hundred paintings.

"Gosh!" I said. "*This* is unbelievable, Irene."

"Why do you keep calling me Irene?"

"Isn't that your name?"

"My name is Elaine... the Snards call me Irene, but my name is Elaine."

"Huh..." I said.

"They're both hard of hearing... you're not, I assume."

"Well, whatever your name is, thanks for showing me this stuff; this is quite a collection."

"Yes," she agreed, "it is pretty impressive, isn't it?"

“Gosh...” I said again. I went up to look at one in detail. It was so masterfully done and so pleasing to gaze upon... as if the thing itself was conscious of being looked at.

Each of those paintings was exquisitely framed, as suitable for such remarkable work, and perfectly lit. They each bore the same honest simplicity. But, they weren’t indifferent. By that I mean they didn’t have that cold, flat, *life-looked-at-from-a-foggy-distance* aspect to that so many landscapes seem to have. They were welcoming.

“Guess who,” she said.

“If you tell me that sweet old woman, Mrs. Snard, did this work and then went blind, it’ll break my heart,” I said. She pointed, and I looked at the tiny signature in one corner: Samuel Snard.

“This is ALL his work? I mean, it’s obvious that it’s the work of a single artist, but... man, this is a *lot* of work.”

“There are dozens more in the basement,” she said.

“Unbelievable,” I said as I walked around the room admiring each powerful little vision. “He’s great,” I mumbled. “This is way too much to take in correctly.”

“Let me show you something,” she said and slid a heavy wood panel aside on the wall.

“Come here and look at this,” she urged.

Though it was just then dawn, I was nearly blinded by the light that poured in through the window that panel had concealed. Side by side, we squinted out the window together.

“Look at that tree...” she said, pointing. “See the bend in that branch? ...as if it grew resting upon a set of stairs...” I looked.

"That's strange," I admitted. "I've never seen any tree grow like that before. I wonder what caused that."

"Look at the hills and the cliffs beyond," she said.

As I did that, a strange feeling came over me. It all seemed somehow familiar; as if I'd stood there looking out that window before. She closed the panel and latched it.

While our eyes readjusted to the darkness of the room, she stood beside me and I felt her warmth. As my vision cleared, the painting that hung on that panel *became* the scene we'd just looked at together through that window. The hills, the cliffs beyond, the tree with the peculiar branch—though younger and smaller—were all there. They had been captured perfectly.

"My God," I said, "the man is *truly* a great painter."

"Never sold a painting in his life," she said.

"I can't believe that... collectors must be..."

"He doesn't sell them."

"This stuff should be in galleries all over the world."

"These paintings have never left this room. Not one piece has ever been in any gallery; he's never had a show. He gives away pieces on occasion," she said. "I have two."

"I'd really like to see them."

[I am pleased to report that when I said that—though she did look at me as if she might—she did not respond, 'If you play your cards right, Mister, you may get that chance.']

"As far as I know, no one in the Art World even knows that Samuel Snard, the painter, exists," she said.

"Or cares probably," I mused. "That's the shame."

"I agree."

"THAT," I said, "is a crime..."

"Oh, it is a horrible crime, Mr. Mockridge."

“It is sad, she said, “and it is absolutely wonderful at the same time. Now,” she said, leading me toward the door and turning off the light, “I had better take you in to see the Artist; he’s expecting you to say hello.”

During our little gallery tour—I cannot tell you when—things had changed for me. I’d gone into that room with a domestic working in an old mansion—a pleasant enough woman with an unassuming demeanor—and, by the time we were ready to leave, I was completely under her spell. I’d been snared by her sparkling eyes. I’d been entangled, captivated, overthrown by her intelligence. Her femininity; her composure, her voice, the way she moved, had me feeling giddy. That’s why, as we left that gallery heading I honestly did not really care where, I followed her like a lambkin. Completely enchanted, I was awash in the desire just to remain near her. (These things sometimes happen.)

So, down the hallway we went, a fascinating woman leading a besotted old fool.

I passed on into that library unwillingly, because I longed to spend more time alone with Elaine. I wanted to talk with her, listen to her, look, for just a little while longer, into her eyes. I wanted to know what working in that big mansion meant to her, and what she did when she wasn’t working in that big mansion. I wondered what her interests were, of course... but what I really wanted to know, what I yearned to know, what I was aching to know, was what it would be like to hold her in my arms.

But, Mr. Samuel Snard was waiting, and I was his guest.

He was sitting in the same well-worn leather wingback chair he'd occupied the last time I'd seen him. There was an open book in his lap and his eyes were focused on the gilded ceiling overhead, when we entered.

"Mr. Mockridge is here, Mr. Snard," Elaine said quietly. Samuel Snard smiled, scratched his temple and sighed.

"Thank you, Irene. Welcome Mr. Mockridge; please have a seat across from me, where I can get a look at you. We rarely have the opportunity any more... uh... the pleasure of having a Highly Honored Guest of the Nation of Blétante in our home."

I sat. GREATLY Honored Guests never quibble.

"I understand that you are a friend of my son, Wil's."

(I was pleased to hear that.) I nodded.

"I guess I am," I said.

"We call him Johnnie," he said, "which is confusing to a lot of well-meaning people. Springs full-grown from the brow of a literary joke which, I'm afraid, no one here any longer is capable of recalling." He snickered quietly and shook his head. "Maybe you can ask him about that, next time you meet, and ask him to get in touch with us; we'd certainly like to be re-informed about the slightest touch of any previous cleverness we may have batted around proudly in our giddy, comparatively arrogant youth." He chuckled.

I nodded. "Will do."

"Now, I understand that you are staying in the other wing. There's no need for that, if you wish to stay here, with us, it would be our pleasure to have you. I'd insist, but I have no way to enforce such a demand."

He sighed; he drummed his bony fingers on the arm of the chair. He looked at me directly.

“It’s your choice—cold and heartless, or otherwise, if that makes sense... look around... make your decision.”

I opened my mouth and started to speak.

“No need to decide this very moment, of course,” he said.

He sat there nodding for quite a while. Then his eyes began to drift off, moving around, looking at various sections of the room, trying to focus. There was nothing but silence for a very long time. I looked to Elaine, who was standing by, near the door; she shrugged and smiled at me.
(She really did have a lovely smile.)

“I... I walked into a room full of your paintings... by accident... and.

“And...”

“You are a great painter, Sir.”

He glared at me.

“Oh is that what YOU think?!” he snapped critically.

I was startled, but continued.

“Your paintings are... really... well, quite beautiful. They should be in a gallery where people can look at them, admire them, have the chance to maybe... own one...”

“I wish I could agree with your thinking on that. Although I consider myself a realist, I am also a purist when it comes to those particular paintings. Sales is a sordid activity, Mr. Mockridge. It lies in direct conflict with the artistic process. The idea of flaunting my work with the hope of selling it is entirely foreign to me; it doesn’t even enter my thinking. In fact, I find the idea repugnant. I have never produced anything with the intention of selling it, you understand.”
I nodded.

“I’m not so sure you do ...” he said, somewhat sadly.

He cleared his throat, looked down at his hand—drumming impatiently on the arm of the chair—and seemed surprised.

He continued, “Tangentially, I have never been foolish enough to confuse personal passion with Providence. A man either does what he does or he doesn’t do what he claims he might have. It’s that simple, Mr. Mockridge.” He cleared his throat again—and it took some doing this time. When he looked at me again, he nodded for a very long time before speaking.

“I am not one of those,” he said, “suffering the burden of *attempting* to convince myself that... I should struggle with ...” He paused, he thought, he brushed it all aside with a gesture. “...whatever it is that nobler men claim, publicly, to struggle with. It is enough for me to do the work. I’ve never needed the approval of others or outside confirmation of the work’s usefulness. Ultimately of course, everything we do is to no avail. If it serves any purpose at all, it would be difficult to say what that purpose might be.”

“I actually understand that,” I said.

He looked at me as if he doubted it.

“With the writing you mean...” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

He grunted.

Then, he stared at me for a very long time.

“I don’t know if you are, in fact, a fool, Mr. Mockridge. If it affords you any comfort, I’ve always been unable to determine that same thing about myself.”

I had sudden urge to tell him that I also write under the name, Henry Edward Fool, but stifled the urge. Things were already complicated enough.

“Others have no difficulty convincing themselves of the value of their work; but, whether I’ve done my job or not is something which I seem incapable of yet determining.”

“Me too,” I said.

He looked at me as if weighing the verity of that.

“Look here,” he said, “the work *requires* an audience. An artist—a writer too, I suppose—produces, constructs, hammers out, spews forth what he must in order that others might see it. Do you agree?”

“I could not agree with anything more,” I said.

He looked at me in doubt.

“Without the viewer, there is no point; the work falls short of any *definition of success* that the man might contrive. Short of attaining that basic success, in order to comfort himself I suppose, an ‘artist’ falls back upon thinking of himself as an honest man. I’m being sarcastic of course. That’s all just so much thumb-sucking....”

He looked at me and I nodded. But I was completely lost. I looked to Elaine and she nodded with encouragement. She seemed to think I was doing OK, though I was having real difficulty keeping up.

“I have an excellent wife,” he said. “I married a blind woman, Mr. Mockridge. She has never seen those paintings that you seem so much to admire. My efforts mean nothing to her. That damnable fact haunts me by the minute. And now, I am going blind myself. Can you think of anything more absurd? Yet, the idea that my work must meet the criteria... Yet... I don’t fully understand why I should bother talking to you about this.”

I said nothing. I smiled. I squirmed in my chair and smiled.

“To quote Masaccio: *What you do is who you are*. I have to agree with that; but any man who speaks of his own silly success, as if he has somehow earned it—a concept with which I am all-too sickeningly familiar—is incapable of being honest with himself. Do you consider yourself a successful man, Mr. Mockridge?”

“I would be a fool to say yes.”

“Indeed... certainly at this moment... So, it is then a reasonable surmise, on my part, that you cannot gleefully accept the casual thinking of those who do not know what they are talking about, yet are invariably thought of, by the sheep, as authorities. Good for you, then.”

“Thank you, I think. But, your paintings are magnificent.” He glared at me for a very long time.

“I am at a loss as to how to speak to you more plainly, Mr. Mockridge. For me, your insight into this issue is altogether unwelcome; *you* have *no say* in the matter. Do you not understand me?”

“It’s just my way of wishing you well...”

“Wish me well or wish me damnation, it carries the same weight,” he grumbled. He waved me away. “We can discuss this ad tedium at some other time. I prefer not.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Be sorry if you must, but please leave me.”

I had no idea how things had turned so nasty.

Elaine, pale as a ghost, quickly stepped forward. He looked up at her as she arrived and bent toward him.

“Oh, Irene. You’re still here. Thank you for saving me.”

“Yes, Sir. Are you feeling tired, Mr. Snard?”

He seemed startled. “Me? No... I... Oh, I see; was I being cranky again?

“Perhaps a little.”

“Well, I don’t appreciate having an endless parade of sideshow barkers traipsing through these room—not a single one of whom knows a single damned thing about me or what I’m up to—and every one of which insists that I hawk those blasted paintings.”

“I understand.”

“I know you do, Irene. So, if I must turn a little sour in order to maintain an infinitesimal particle of dignity within my own home, it’s well worth the cost. At my age I believe that I have earned that right.”

“Yes, Sir. Let me help you up.”

“I’d like to be more genial, if only to set an example, but I haven’t the patience.”

“Yes, Sir. Let me help you.”

As she assisted him to his feet—a process that was so very slow and so very awkward, and apparently painful for both of them from the sound of it—I was tempted, several times, to involve myself. One sideways glance from her however, and that urge was quashed.

As he got up, got turned and headed in the right direction, old Mr. Snard began to speak.

“You know, when I was a child,” he said joyfully, “we used to make kites out of two sticks bound with twine and an old newspaper. It was a wonderful thing to see in flight.”

He beamed at her.

She smiled back.

He went on about kites, while I stood by awkwardly and watched the woman I would have married, if I were thirty years younger, guide him with the gentle patience I would expect from any potential wife of mine. He smiled, looking straight ahead as they moved, and continued with great enthusiasm.

“If you get the tail right, long enough to create the correct drag—bows are the answer—and you work it high enough—work it, work it—up, up, UP into the silky sky, you achieve the great pleasure of just tying it off and walking away... Tie her to any anchor—a rock, a bench, a sleeping dog’s tail—and up it sails, way up there, left to struggle in the draft for days.”

“Did you do that?”

“The sleeping dog?”

“Yes; tell me the truth now.”

“I might have... I might have. Or, it might have been my brother. You know what a scoundrel he has always been.”

“And what happened?”

“Nothing. Nothing eventful. We untied the mutt and used our usual bench as an anchor. THAT’s the way I like to do it. Get her up there so high that the steady course believes it can take her; then we tie her off and walk away, smug as an aristocrat. Days later, we come back to find her still up there, struggling to be free.”

“It sounds like fun.”

“I don’t know why I still find such amusement in the thought of those kites.”

A smile came upon his old face.

“From now on, I’ll certainly have a greater appreciation of kites,” she said.

“HA!” he said, “Then my goal has been achieved!”

With apparent satisfaction he shuffled along beside her, slowly down the hallway, into the darkness of its depths.

“Oh, Irene, if you go back, please look for Fenton.”

“You’ve lost Fenton again?”

“I suppose I have; I reached for him and, as usual, he’s simply not there.”

ELAINE

Samuel Snard had disappeared and Elaine had re-appeared.

She came right up to me and... boy, did she have a lovely smile. I was trying to determine how old she was—which is one of the very few things I'm any good at—but, couldn't. My best guess: 39.

"Where did you take him?" I asked.

"I took him back to what they call their 'little rooms'; their private residence: a large bedroom, a small sitting room, an attached sunroom overlooking the cliffs."

She smiled again, "And now I'm free," she said and, like a ballerina, did a little spin.

The twinkle in her eye encouraged me to ask, "How old are you?"

"I'm 46," she said.

"And what does your husband do?" (Too obvious...?)

She laughed. "My *non-existent* husband rides forever upon a white horse... and doesn't ask a lot of silly questions."

"Would it be way off target for me to note that you are 20 years younger than I am?"

"Nope. That would be right on target. The question is, did you learn anything in those 20 years?"

She smiled again, and I think we both may have blushed.

I also gulped.

"I feel like I can keep up with you though," she said.

"Oh, I'm sure you can," I said.

"But can you keep up with me?" she asked.

"I'll try. Where are we going?"

“Up to the observatory!” she said and took off up a curved iron staircase two steps at a time.

“How far is it?” I asked when we hit the first landing, each holding the railing and gasping for breath.

“Third floor!” she shouted and took off again.

While I was huffing and puffing, and clinging to the railing, she waited for me on the next landing.

“When we get to the top I’ll tell you something interesting,” she said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Better tell me now...” I said between gasps. “I’m not sure I’ll make it that far.”

“Oh, yes you will!” she said and took off again.

I took in a bushel of air, closed my eyes tightly, said a quick prayer, and started pulling myself up the stairs again.

At the top, a large heavy oak door was open and I placed both hands on my knees and desperately took in air for a while before entering. In the dark, unlit, perfectly round room, she was sitting in what appeared to be an antique barber’s chair—heavy carved oak, brass fittings, deep velvet cushions—beaming at me. She made a regal gesture toward a matching chair next to her, and I took it.

“There’s a lot of this two-comfortable-chairs-in-close-proximity thing going on with the Snards,” I observed.

“Yes there is,” she said, “And I like it.”

“I like it too,” I said.

There was a small table between us with a tray; on the tray, two small glasses and a bottle of excellent port.

“Ah,” I said, taking up the bottle and inspecting the label.

“the good stuff.” I looked around. “Weird room...”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet,” she said.

“Look up!” she said and, pulling a lever at her side, her chair reclined.

I followed her example and was surprised to find myself looking through a huge glass dome, into the darkening sky overhead. It couldn’t be evening already. Maybe it was a thunderstorm rolling in.

“Now, would be a good time for a little porto,” she said.

“You are SO right,” I said, pulling myself upright again and pouring a couple small glasses of port.

I stretched out my arm, handed her one of the glasses, pulled the lever to recline again and took up the other glass.

We sat there sipping port and gazing up at the dark and threatening sky, until the storm hit. Thunder startled us and lightning strikes amazed us for about an hour before it all blew over. Then the sky cleared, as if nothing at all had occurred.

“Oh,” I said, suddenly remembering, “you promised to tell me something interesting if I survived the horse race.”

“Mrs. Snard has never seen this room.”

“Because she’s blind...”

“Yes, but how she got that way is what’s interesting.”

“I’m mostly ears,” I said with my eyes locked upon her.

“Yes, it’s quite a view, isn’t it?” she said, without noticing me. “I think I’m the only one who ever comes up here anymore.”

We sat there, laid back, sipping port, gazing at the sky until a second storm began to roll in overhead, bringing much louder, more frightening thunder and more frequent and much more impressive lightning.

It too cleared in time.

“Oh, you know—somewhat heroically—I looked for the Snards’ cat but didn’t see him anywhere.”

“Oh, Mr. Mockridge, I must confess—*somewhat confusedly*—that I genuinely have no idea what cat you could possibly be talking about.”

“Fenton,” I said, “I looked all over that room, with the hopes of finding him and presenting him to you when you returned, and could not find him anywhere.”

Her lovely bell-like laughter filled that room from floor to domed ceiling. It took her a while to regain her breath, and when she did, tears were in her eyes as she gazed at me.

“Oh, Mr. Mockridge,” she said, “Fenton is not a cat; Fenton is a pair of reading glasses.”

“He calls his reading glasses Fenton?”

“He does.”

I didn’t ask why.

“Oh, well, then...” I said. I felt like an old idiot.

She turned onto one side and smiled at me lovingly for a while. It made me feel kinda nervous. (60 years old/kinda nervous. Life is both weird and interesting kinda nervous.)

“Tell me about Madame Snard’s blindness,” I said.

“OK. Well, HE took her out one evening, near where the Conservatory of Flowers now sits, with the idea that he would—first—impress her with his archery skills and—then—once thoroughly impressed, he’d bring her back here to show her this room, offer her all the stars above, and propose marriage. That was the plan.”

“Oh no...” I said.

“Yeah, it was horrible... of course, there isn’t a hospital for miles. But, if you’re stupid enough, or so very much in love, that you shoot an arrow into the air... “

"It doesn't matter what *your* plans are," I said.

"The wind has its own cruel agenda," she said.

"Oh, man. So much for romance."

"It was not as gruesome as we can't help but imagine it probably was; it just kinda smacked her on the side of her head; but, it caused enough damage that she lost sight in that eye. Her other eye has failed since, many years later. We have pictures around here, in the library somewhere, with her on her wedding day, white gown, a sweet bunch of posies in her white lace-gloved hands, a black patch over one eye."

"She married the guy who blinded her."

"Yes; so, it was no different than any other marriage."

I laughed.

"There's a lot going on in that head of yours, isn't there?"

I found myself saying quietly.

"Oh-ho, Mr. Mockridge," she said, "you should talk."

I laughed. I felt so comfortable talking to the woman.

"Here's something sorta obliquely related," she said, "but completely unrelated. There's a woman on the main island of Blétante, who WAS blind, and one day..."

"Should I guess?"

"No, let me tell it. One day she was out walking with her cane—as blind women are wont to do—and she... Well, there were these window washers outside the Grand Hotel... they had that scaffold thing... I forget what they call it..."

"Catwalk."

"Thank you. Their catwalk was hanging down above the sidewalk; they were loading it with window cleaning stuff, buckets ... whatever the profession requires; so, it—the

catwalk—was hanging there, minding its own business, at about chest height... while they prepared things, getting ready to go up. And that woman walked right into it.”

“A cane is useless detecting anything above ground level.”

“Right. So, she walked into the end of that... catwalk... with such force that it knocked her off her feet.”

“So, now, can I guess?”

“Go ahead.”

“She re-gained her eyesight.”

“She did! She did, she regained her eyesight! Can you imagine?!”

“And,” I said, “I’m still guessing... now, she runs a small café across the street from the Grande Hotel... and I can almost picture... Wait, I’m getting something... Her name begins with an ‘A’...”

“You goose! You’ve heard this story before?”

“Nope. But, I’ve had coffee in Amy’s café.”

“OK, so let’s just look at the sky for a while,” she said. And we did that, as time unraveled all around us.

After a short blissful eternity, and half a bottle of good port, she turned to me languidly and said, “I feel like I’m about to ask you something. I mean, I need to ask you something and it’s not an easy thing for me to ask. But I have to—because I hope that you will understand—and I hope even more that you’ll say yes; though if you say no, I understand and I’ll accept that.”

“OK,” I laughed.

Shamefully, I must admit that I thought she was going to ask me if I would take her with me when I left Blétante.

I only mean, I could not envision *myself* stuck in that place, serving ancient aristocrats every moment of every day, until the end of time.

"First," I said, "let me ask you this: Are you happy here?" She laughed, "I'm here willingly. Why do you ask that?"

There was a long silence while I sat there red-faced, feeling like a fool. It was quite a while before she spoke again.

"I really want to ask you something," she said, "It's more than just a little awkward and also quite embarrassing."

"OK."

"I haven't really... I don't usually... ask every man I meet. It's kinda unusual... maybe... but..."

"Why don't you just ask me and we'll see where it goes?"

"OK. But, it's difficult for me to say it... and I'm afraid you'll... that you won't understand..."

"Let's give it a try..." I said.

She thought about it for a very long time and sighed a great deal before taking a deep breath and saying, "Would you sleep with me? I don't mean *sleep with me*, sleep with me, you know, but just lie in my bed beside me, so I can feel the warmth of another person beside me... again...?"

I started to speak, but she had more to say.

"It's been so very long, and I miss that feeling so much at times and, you won't have to *do* anything, I promise. I'm only asking for one night... if maybe you would just let me nestle behind you and take in your fragrance and feel the heat of your presence... and maybe let me kiss your back or nuzzle your neck.... Would you be willing to do that?" She looked at me for the first time since diving in.

This is how the dull reptilian mind works: For one zillionth of a second I considered asking, ‘Am I the only man under the age of 90 you’ve seen around here for a while?’ In that very same instant I also recognized it as precisely the kind of quip that might hurt her, so I refrained. Still, I wondered why Elaine—intelligent, attractive, entertaining, desirable in every way—was left saying these things to an old man with bad teeth, thinning hair and, worst of all, not slated to be in the neighborhood much longer.

“I was doing everything I could to avoid the word *snuggle*,” she said.

“I could see that,” I said... “and, thank you.”

“So...?” she said.

“Of course I will,” I said.

It would have been nice if I could have stopped right there, but I found myself sputtering, “I have been *aching* to hold you in my arms from the *moment* I first set eyes on you.” We both sat there just breathing for a while.

“Seriously,” I said, “the moment you opened the door, I had the strongest urge to just pick you up and hug you. But, thinking that might be improper behavior for a Greatly Honored Guest of the State, I quashed that temptation. Still, I have wondered what it would be like.”

“Well, now, dear lucky fellow,” she replied, “you will have an opportunity to find out.”

“My god,” I said, “that would be a dream-come-true.”

And it was. Every gentle breath on my neck was like a blessing from an angel.

DAY EIGHT (I believe)

ALL MY QUESTIONS ANSWERED

In the morning, as I started to leave her room, I stepped on an envelope with my name scrawled carefully upon it. I picked it up, opened it, and extracted a folded note on fine stationary. I read it in silence:

Mr. Mockridge,

As Greatly Honored Guest of the Island Nation of Blétante, my wife and I were pleased to offer you a place to stay in our home. However, that offer did not include an invitation to sleep ~~with~~ in the room of any of our devoted staff.

Unfortunately, it has become my duty to ask you to remove yourself from our home. You may, of course, stay in the hotel for as long as you might wish to avail yourself of the offer. They are expecting you and will welcome you appropriately at any time you should choose to check-in there.

*This is not a matter of virtue, merely a matter of decorum. I'm sure you understand,
Samuel P. Sward*

I sighed. I folded the thing and stuck it in my back pocket. "Elaine," I said.

She came over to me quickly and placed the palms of her hands flat upon my chest.

"Yes," she said.

"I have a quest..."

“The answer is yes,” she said.

“But, you don’t even know what...”

“Yes,” she hissed. “Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.”

“But, I’m serious, and I have to...”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, YES, and yes,” she said, smiling wildly. “Yes.”

“What do you think I’m going to ask you?” I said, looking down into her lovely sparkling eyes.

She leaned back and took a step away from me. She looked at the floor. She looked up at me again. She looked helpless for just a moment, before steeling herself.

She said, “Do I understand that what we did probably meant nothing to you? Yes. Do you understand that it meant something dear to me? Yes. Do I understand that you will be going away soon? Yes. Do you know that I will miss you? Yes. Will I carry the thought of you around with me, possibly for years? Yes. Will I cherish the thought of how lovingly you have treated me? Yes. Do I wish it could have been more meaningful for you? Yes. Do I wish it would have lasted longer? Yes. Am I happy, knowing that we had something wonderful for a moment? Yes. When your next book comes out, will I buy it? Yes. Will I look eagerly through its pages, searching for any mention of me? Yes, I must admit... I probably will. Will I be disappointed if there’s no mention of me in there? Yes... But, will I understand? Yes. Will I admire you and adore you and always think of you as a kind and loving man, Mr. Mockridge? And will I think of you often? And will my silly heart be filled with joy whenever I do? YES.”

“Wow,” I said, “that’s quite a list.

“As you said, there’s a lot going on in here.” She tapped her forehead. “I suppose I’ve answered any and all silly questions you might have, in there.” She tapped my head. She leaned back from me and laughed a little laugh. I observed her for a bit, and my heart just crumpled.

“You’re a truly remarkable woman, Elaine.”

“Well... I have no way of knowing that,” she said quietly.

“But, I know,” I said. “Believe me... I know.”

“I bet you do,” she said playfully. “Now, if all your questions have been answered, you had better go.”

She opened the door for me.

I hesitated.

I touched the note in my back pocket.

“Please go,” she said, and quickly turned her back on me.

What I wish I had told Elaine at that moment—but didn’t, because it sounded so phony—was how wonderful she is. I wanted to tell her that nothing else in the entire world even existed while we were together... which may be the very definition of *love*. It’s certainly love, as I understand it.

So, will I think of her often? Yes. Of course, I will. And will my old heart be filled with joy whenever I do? Yes. Mixed with regret.

A TALE and a LESSON

Samuel Snard was madly in love with Lilly Bellicote-Gun. He was 32 at the time and she was 21. And, for reasons that cannot be explained, he wanted to impress her with his archery skills. Above all though, he wanted to marry her. You know how men are; he thought the latter was dependent upon the first. What he didn't know was that her attraction to him had *nothing* to do with his skills as an archer. Her fondness for the man was based entirely upon his ability to entertain her and make her laugh; until that afternoon, she didn't even know he owned a bow.

Snard also possessed great financial wealth; which also meant nothing to her. It was his gentle nature, his cleverness and his intelligence which she admired. She had no idea that he had an observatory on the top floor of the family mansion, where he planned to take her with the sole purpose of offering her all the stars in the heavens above. She had no idea of his plan to profess, at last, the agonizing love he held for her, or to ask her for her hand in marriage.

Well, so... Upon that particularly blustery, Fall-like evening, he shot an arrow into the air... which anyone with any sense would say might prove his stupidity more than whatever he may have thought it might prove. (Someone said he was shooting at a kite.) Who knows what goes through the mind of a young man wildly in love?

Actually, I understood, because I once boasted about my ability to pick up an apple from the ground and knock another apple off a tree at thirty paces.

Having accomplished the task, in a single shot, I turned around to discover that the object of my affection had also turned, and had walked away. She'd missed the heroic act completely... but, at least she retained her eyesight.

For some reason, recalling that got me thinking about a warehouse worker from Tender who once told me that Blétante is a conservative nation. When I asked him to define conservative, he said, "We don't like bullshit. That's what conservative means." He was an interesting fellow.

In that same conversation, he also told me about a massive storm which had hit Blétante and knocked out the power on all three islands for several days. According to him, the way women responded to that outage was unforgettable. As he put it, "Somethin' about bein' without electric power spoke to the female spirit and everybody got laid that first night." Later, I asked Giorgio about that storm, and he remembered it distinctly; it was during that storm that his son, Henri was conceived.

Previously I had absolutely no idea what that warehouse worker—or Giorgio, for that matter—was talking about. Now, I kinda felt like I did, and I began to wonder if, possibly, very recently, I had actually experienced that effect. If so—for those investigating the phenomenon—my thought is that it doesn't have to do with the *absence* of electricity so much as with the *presence* of lightening.

POOR ME

Weep with me now

After leaving Elaine, I walked out the front door of Drear House, down the steps, followed the driveway downhill, around the property, until I came to the hotel entrance. And for the remainder of that day and evening I tried to slaughter the miserable beast of time, without success.

I played the cello (sadly); I played the ukulele (pensively); I paced the floor (theatrically), but only for a while—after all, there was no audience for such a noble display. I sat around holding my head in my hands and sighing for a while. Yes, there was some of that. Then, I played the cello some more ... valiantly I played on. For hours, I played. Oh, what bravery!

During every dragging, hour-long minute, I considered these few things: Elaine didn't need me hanging around complicating things further. Samuel Snard certainly didn't want me there—he thought I was a philanderer. His wife—who had never seen me—wouldn't notice my absence. That woman at the bottom of the steps, who called my new drinking buddy 'Mom'... well, and him too... they'd both probably be glad to have the place to themselves again. When I finally admitted that there really was no problem—that I was free—I sat around stunned by that realization for a while, feeling sorry for myself.

I fell asleep trying to convince myself that I am not what I probably, pretty much, unquestionably am: insignificant. And I dreamed of the Sea Saw Room.

I dreamed that I was poking around in there, inspecting a painting of a square-rigged ship in huge tumultuous seas, when I realized that I was aboard that vessel. And as I thought things through—Where was I? How had I gotten there?—I realized that my very life was in danger. I was sure I'd be swept overboard and carried away. Awash in fear, I clung with all my strength to the slippery rail.

Over my shoulder a bar-keep appeared and pointed to his watch. "It's not time yet," he said.

Greatly relieved, I wobbled over to take a seat at the bar. "Which do you think is better, courtly love or breaking a trusting woman's heart?" I asked, as he poured me a shot. He shrugged.

"Ask yourself this: Are you in it for her or are you in it for your own selfish passing gratification?"

He turned his back on me, transformed into an albatross, took flight, and sailed out over the ocean.

I missed him immediately.

"What time is it?" I shouted, over the roaring tumult.

Returning to his normal self, the barkeep said, "Time to have some more tequila." He poured me another shot.

"I'm ashamed of myself," I said, in utter dismay.

"Yeah, well... you should be," he replied.

He leaned over the bar toward me, "Such carelessness, with other people's possessions, is vile and unforgivable."

"I know," I said. "I suppose everyone around here knows what a horseless criminal I am."

"We do," he said.

"Everyone?" I asked, feeling dismal and defeated.

"All of us," came the shout from an unseen crowd.

He went back to whistling and doing bar-keep things, and I went back to avoiding thought of anything by pretending to study the oily surface of my tequila.

“If you have any friends left,” he said, “they should tell you to kick yourself more often.”

“What would that accomplish?” I asked.

“Knowing you as I do, not a damned thing,” he said, and he began laughing.

I got to my feet and headed toward the door.

“Not a damned thing!” he shouted at my back.

“Yeah, I get it,” I said bitterly, as the shifting deck of the ship rocked suddenly beneath my feet.

I could still hear his laughter as I stepped over the rail and dropped feet-first into the cold tumultuous sea.

When I woke up, I called Giorgio and said, “Look, Giorgio, you gotta get me out of here, man. I need to leave here, and I need to leave here now.”

DAY NINE

When Giorgio arrived, he asked, “Where would you like to go, Mr. Mockridge?”

I replied, “Take me anywhere I might find some comfort.”

I thought that was a pretty clear request for a ride to the closest bar, but Giorgio, dedicated friend, took me instead, back to the campground.

“You really are a good friend, Giorgio,” I said as soon as I realized where we were heading. “And, I need this cure.”

“Since we almost might-could be friends, Mr. Mockridge, your happiness is my concern. Also, you know, it will make others happy to see you again.”

“Well, it’s already wasted eight days, and all I’ve done is screw things up; I’ve had my heart broken twice, and I was almost dragged out to sea—all due to my own stubbornness of course. I have less than a week left here.”

“You promised you’d stop that, Mr. Mockridge.”

“I plan to.”

“You should stop right now. No more counting the days. Let me do that for you. Just have fun, forget about your departure date. *Rejoice in the things that are present; all else is beyond thee.*”

“Your best hope is to inspire me with Montaigne?”

“*I quote others only in order to better express myself.*”

“Please stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Quoting Montaigne.”

“I will if you quit counting the days. I’ll let you know; a few days before you’re due to leave, I’ll remind you.

Believe me, this time I want you on that plane...”

“It wasn’t me that messed up, last time. *Not being able to govern events, I govern myself...* But there is *nothing* I can do to govern others, like your sister-in-law’s vile husband.”

“But, it was *you* who trusted people you shouldn’t have.”

“Yep, I guess I did.”

“This time, put your trust in someone who knows you, who cares about you, and who won’t let you down.”

“You must really want to get rid of me badly...”

“Not at all, Mr. Mockridge, we want to secure you’re future in order to make sure you’ll be welcomed back.”

On our way through the woods, I said, “Aren’t you going to ask me what happened back there?”

“At Drear House?”

“Yes... at Drear House.”

“I figured, if you wanted to tell me, you would. I did not think you’d try to manipulate me into prying it out of you.”

So, as it turned out, I didn’t get the chance to unburden my conscience by telling Giorgio about Elaine. But, if he had asked—like any normal, decent, genuine friend would have done—I’d have told him that she was GREAT... there were no expectations, no demands, no pressure of any sort... have some good porto, look at those clouds... Did you see that moon last night?that sort of thing... but, all so beautifully done. Her very nature; intelligent, gentle, kind. A wonderful human being; far too good for me in every single imaginable way. But, he didn’t ask.

And so, we walked on in a weird kind of silence.

There was a lot of hugging going on when we arrived in the campground, but if there were tears in my eyes I won't admit it here. That evening there were tears; I cannot deny it. And those tears came when we were all sitting around a very smoky campfire, after an open fire cooked meal of what they called 'pan-bread', roasted chicken, potatoes, carrots and herbs, and hot apple cider. Then, the kids started chanting: "Tweeks! Tweeks! Tweeks!"

Sandrine crawled into the tent and emerged with a copy of TWO WEEKS in BLÉTANTE in her hands. What followed was possibly the greatest moment of my life.

"We sometimes read a little T'Weeks to the kids on SPECIAL occasions," she said. "Not every single word, of course, and not every story."

"But the good parts," Giorgio added, cryptically.

I said, "How long has this been goin on?"

She held up the book for me to see; it was a battered mess with dozens of bits of paper marking various pages.

I have never been more delighted, nor more humbled.

Sandrine picked the first marked page and began to read:

"GIORGIO," she began.

The kids laughed and clapped their hands.

"This is one of their *absolute most favorite* parts," she said, winking at her offspring. Then she began to read:

*Once beyond customs and outside again, I was greeted enthusiastically by my guide, **Giorgio!***

The kids laughed and clapped wildly.

She continued:

*He was **tall and trim** and very probably the blackest man I have ever seen. He wore a **nicely-fitted white silk suit with a purple shirt** [Remember? That's the shirt you guys bought him for his birthday that year.]... and held up a big sign with my name on it, spelled **almost perfectly**.*

The kids looked at each other and repeated the phrase, "ALMOST perfectly!"

Their mother continued:

*He raised his eyebrows in hope when he saw me coming, and produced **a blinding smile**. It really was as if there could be no greater joy on earth than for me to appear before him at that very moment.*

"Let's see that blinding smile, Giorgio!" she said and, to everyone's delight, her husband allowed us to witness one.

"Now you, Daddy..." said Celeste.

The kids were mesmerized—as was I—by the magic of reading a silly book in the light of the flickering campfire.

"I can hardly see," admitted Giorgio.

And I think all of us were disappointed to hear that.

"We could go inside," suggested Celeste quietly.

"Yes!" shouted Henri with great joy.

"OK, ok, ok... Let's all go into the tent."

Once inside, Sandrine took the book and pointed out his part to her husband. "Start here."

"Welcome to BLÉTANTE!" shouted Giorgio. "Would you like a gun?"

The kids giggled.

Now it was my turn. Giorgio offered me the book.

“That’s Ok, I’ll wing it.” I said. “A GUN!?” I said, as if surprised by the suggestion. “A g-g-g-gun?” I stammered. “Yes,” said Giorgio with gusto, “We **know** how much you Americans LOVE your guns!”

“But...but, but, but, “I said, shaking nervously, “do you think I’ll n-n-n-need... a... GUN?”

And everybody cracked up.

(Among people I love I can be quite a ham at times.)

“Nope, but **I have one for you**, if you want it,” read Giorgio. The kids seemed mesmerized by this play.

“Do m-m-most people on Blétante c-carry a gun?” I asked.

“Some do. It’s **legal** to carry a gun here—I know you guys have a never-ending debate about that *over there*.”

“He opened the trunk!” shouted the kids. “And tossed Mr. Mockridge’s bags inside”

“On Blétante, we’ve solved that problem,” Giorgio said.

“Yeah, what did you do?” I asked.

“We made it illegal for *criminals* to have guns!”

He laughed, and the rest of his family applauded.

Henri mimicked his father, “...We made it *illegal* for **CRIMINALS**... to have guns.”

“OK, enough for one night,” said Sandrine, turning out the lantern, and the kids turned over in their sleeping bags.

It was quiet in the dark of the tent until Henry spoke up.

“Can we sing Mister Lobster?” he asked meekly.

“One round,” said Giorgio.

“One round, and then we get some sleep,” said their mom.

And, in the dark of that tent, in the still of that night, the kids quietly began to sing.

Mr. Lobster, we adore you

We’ve prepared some butter for you

We honor you because
We love you tail and claws
Mr. Lobster, you're delicious
Better than most any fish is
We can hardly wait
To show you to your plate

Mr. Lobster, we admire you
Beyond all that though, we desire you
We only wish to serve you
Whether bisque or just hors d'oeuvre you

While Giorgio remained in the tent trying to wear out the kids by singing Mr. Lobster, Sandrine and I went out and sat on the communal log and talked.
“Tell me how you two met,” I urged.

“I’ll tell you more than that,” she said. “My Dad has always been extremely suspicious of any young man who was either foolish enough or had enough nerve to even ask for his permission to take me out on a date.”

“Dads can be that way.”

“And, my Dad was no exception. He is not really a big man, but people have always found him intimidating. He has that unmistakable aura about him. Nobody in their right mind messes with my Dad. I think the fact that he raised me by himself heightened his protective nature.”

“Ah...” I said.

“When poor, sweet, timid, Giorgio showed up at our door, with a tiny bunch of pretty flowers, to take me out to a picnic, Dad didn’t say a thing. Well, you know, he didn’t have to. We all understood the arrangement.”

I nodded.

“However, as we were leaving, before we stepped out the door, Dad took Giorgio aside and said something to him in private. Giorgio was completely silent on our way to his car. He was shaken, literally; his hands were actually trembling as we drove away.”

“I’m listening.”

“After we had gotten away from the house I asked, ‘What did Daddy say to you?’ Dear sweet Giorgio said, ‘He told me: Whatever you do to my daughter, I’m gonna do to your mother.’”

“Oh, my god... I’d be scared to death.”

“He was; we were both nervous the whole time we were together.”

“Your father sounds like a frightening guy.”

“He is, but only if you have reason to fear him. However, Mr. Mockridge, in a peculiar way, that really worked out well, because, Giorgio married me... and...”

I waited for more—because I’m dense—and she waited nicely, while I caught up. (It took a while.)

“*Your father married Giorgio’s mother?!?*”

“You got it!”

“You’re kidding me. So, you two are... what? Step-brother and sister?”

“Something like that I suppose, but, after-the-fact.”

“That’s certainly unusual. What about Giorgio’s father?”

“I think you’ll find that more intriguing still. There was a tribe of folks in the mountains of Peru being systematically exterminated by the regional government. Government, over there—as you must know—is whoever has a uniform and a gun. Giorgio’s father, Aaron Croc, somehow heard

about those poor people—I do not know how—and his heart went out to them. He felt he had to do something about it. He left his wife and children in Blétante and ran off to defend Indians in the mountains of Peru. Of course, some people here thought he was...”

“Crazy?”

“No, inventing an excuse to disappear... making it all up.”

“He left everything to go to Peru, to fight on behalf of a tribe of people that no one here had even heard of before?”

“Yep, he died with a gun in his hand.”

“That IS interesting.”

“We like to say that he expected to return to Blétante...”

“Of course. What were the circumstances, do you know?”

“We do. A ‘soldier’ was dragging some poor woman from her house by the arm—while clinging to her child with the other—and Aaron Croc intervened.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, but, it’s not like in the movies, Mr. Mockridge; that soldier did not take the opportunity to engage Aaron Croc in clever repartee or pause to issue any meaningful political statements, he simply shot Aaron Croc dead on the spot.”

“...Holy-Moly...”

“Holy-Moly indeed. Aaron Croc is a National Hero, like Hubert Oopey; I think you’ve heard of him from Giorgio.”

“So, that’s where Giorgio gets his politics.”

“I would say so, yes.”

“His father is a National hero and Giorgio never mentioned the fact to me.”

“My husband, Mr. Mockridge, is anything but a braggart.”

“And this certainly proves it.”

“Well, you know Giorgio...”

“Wow... shot dead, somewhere in the mountains of Peru.”

“There’s a painting—a LARGE painting in the Fiction and Historical Studies Library—of Aaron Croc, gun in hand, bravely defending a Peruvian mother, babe clutched to her breast, as a soldier takes aim at the child. So, we do have our romantic side here on Blétante, Mr. Mockridge.”

“I find every aspect of these islands romantic, Sandrine; almost unbelievably romantic.”

“We know you do. That’s what we like about you.”

“I try to keep it hidden.”

“It’s not buried as deeply in you as you seem to think, dear Mr. Mockridge. The kids saw it in you immediately. And so did Molly. Why do Americans always want to come across as such hard... pardon me... such hard asses?”

“I don’t know,” I sighed, “but, I’m not entirely convinced that things would be better if we didn’t.”

“It requires constant effort to maintain that tough-guy image, does it not?”

“Oh, man...” I said. “I’m worn out just pretending *not to be* a hard ass.”

Sandrine laughed and placed a hand on my shoulder.

We stared at the sky for a while and listened to the kids droning on sleepily about Mr. Lobster, inside the tent. “You must have some tales of heroism to tell,” she said. I thought long and I thought hard, until I came up with something.

“One time,” I said, “I swindled a truly lovely, trusting, young French woman out of a hundred dollars.”

Sandrine laughed.

“I’d certainly like to hear about that,” she said.

“I bet her that a French furniture maker, who had built a cabinet for her, could not manage to place drawer pulls on that, otherwise finished, cabinet within a year of its completion.”

Sandrine laughed.

“Laugh all you want. Being French herself, she should have known better but, as a matter of national pride, she took the wager. On the day a year had rolled by—and still no drawer pulls—I put out my hand, and she placed 5 crisp twenties in it. I was careful not to beam... of course. I said ‘thanks.’ I may have also said, ‘I hope you’ve learned your lesson, young lady.’ By now, I hope she’s forgiven me.”

Later, Sandrine and I were quietly discussing Brice and his deception and betrayal of Jacques de Jacques, when Henri stuck his head out of the tent.

“What are you still doing up, Mister?” she scolded gently.

“I have an idea,” said Henri.

“What’s your idea, Sweetie?”

“I would write a sign: BIG LIAR, and stick it on that bad man’s restaurant. Then I would get a robot to SMASH in the front door. And then, that robot would go right past all the eaters and SMASH in the kitchen door. Then that robot would SMASH all the plates.”

“The robot would smash *all* the plates?” his mother asked.

“Yes. Every plate... SMASHED to bits.”

“Well that would certainly teach him,” she said. “But, where would you get such a robot?”

“Oh, it can be done,” Henri assured us, and crawled back into the tent.

“We like our Justice on Blétante!” Sandrine declare quietly.

LIFE, AS I'VE COME TO KNOW IT

One time, in a bar, on the main island of Blétante, a man approached me saying, "You probably won't remember me because we never met, but I read your book and I feel like we *could* get to know each other."

"OK," I said.

"I wanted to see if you agree with me on this. There's slow-input and fast input and, basically, slow-input is better in every way."

"OK—not that I don't agree with you—but, why?"

"I'll tell you why... heartbeat."

"Heartbeat?"

"Four-four time is the rate at which the human heart beats."

"I am listening."

"It's also the basic time signature for most blues."

"Yep."

"Because you understand blues you already know where this is heading, don't you?"

"I have an inkling. But, please, continue."

"I think I've already said enough." He looked at me in a conspiratorial manner. "It's a beautiful thought, isn't it?"

"It is a beautiful thought," I admitted.

"You're welcome to steal that thought, OK?"

"If I didn't think it was beautiful, I wouldn't bother to steal it," I assured him.

He replied, "If I didn't think it was beautiful, I wouldn't have bothered to make it up." He winked at me and wandered away.

And, you know, that little encounter pretty much defines one of the best aspects of Life, as I've come to know it.

DEAD END

The Old Bandito Trail is the only road on the west coast of Tender that runs north to south along the length of the island. On one end of that road, at its highest point, sits Drear House; as the trail wanders downhill, beside the cliffs all the way, the next stop is the Conservatory of Flowers, followed by the Science and Faith Library, the Art and Math Library, the Fiction and Historical Studies Library. Those last three buildings were built by funds donated by an anonymous donor (some say Samuel Snard). The campground, where we spent those magical days, is found a bit further inland; and 26 miles further on still, the Old Bandito Trail comes to an abrupt end.

At that point there is only a steep cliff where the road ends, far above the crashing waves, under a large sign saying: DEAD END. Turn Back. These cliffs are DANGEROUS. Giorgio pulled the nose of his car right up against that sign and hopped out.

“Get out, Mr. Mockridge!” he shouted. “And you better take your bag.”

“Why do I need my bag? There’s no place to go.”

I looked out at the steep crumbling cliff beyond the sign, the crashing surf below, the impenetrable forest that occupied the unclimbable shale covered slope on my side, and said, “I think we’ve gone as far as anyone can.”

“Not so,” said Giorgio. “Get out.”

“Where are we?” I said, getting out of the car.

“Dead End!” he sang. “You belong here.”

“You may be right,” I said, smacking the sign. “I don’t know why I’ve wasted so much effort trying to avoid it.”

“Ha! No, man,” he said, “We’re not really there yet.” He placed a small square yellow placard under the windshield wiper of the car, and said, “Follow me, stay close, and pay attention, Mr. Mockridge. I am going to take you somewhere I believe you will really enjoy.” Sheepish by nature, and always obedient, I followed.

And I soon discovered that if you ignore the huge sign—like we did—abandon your car—like we did—climb up the crumbling slippery hillside and pull yourself into the tall scrub—as we did—and then spend an hour or so walking, very carefully along a narrow winding footpath, downhill, through an endless series of cliffside switchbacks, you could—as we did by that means—arrive at a little town, on a hidden cove, which the locals call Dead End.

Alternatively, you could, as most civilized people do, simply arrive there by boat—there’s a harbor and a little boat yard there. Civilized folk know the place as Wilfred’s Point Landing.

After our treacherous trek through the undergrowth, the ‘town’ appeared in miniature, below us. It was composed of eight or ten small warehouse-like buildings, a handful of small grey houses, a rooming house or two, an antique shop, a tavern or two, a café—from its sign: the Elf—and a dockside luxury restaurant with patio—Voilà La Belle. (I asked Giorgio, and he said it was expensive but good.)

There is much more to Dead End than first meets the eye of course, but I wasn’t seeing it. To be honest, I was nervous about how we were going to get back to the car.

At some point in our stroll Giorgio had gotten my bag, but I hadn't notice the exchange. That's how nervous I was.

"Where's my bag?" I said frantically.

"I have it, Mr. Mockridge. Don't worry so much."

"How did you get my bag?"

"You gave it to me at one of the climbs, remember? What's in this bag anyway; it weighs nothing?"

What was in that bag was one change of pants, shirt and socks, two small digital recording devices, batteries for those things, two notebooks full of notes in shorthand, a dozen pens, which all work (I have never seen any reason to keep a pen around that refuses to work), a cell phone which Giorgio had given to me, and a pair of reading glasses in an expensive hard-shell case, which doesn't seem to protect them in any way.

After sliding down the final slope of our foolish/dangerous hike, Giorgio turned to me and said, "I can see that Frank is open, let's go there first; we'll get some food later. I think you'll like Frank."

"Yeah, knowing how much I adore meeting new friends I'm sure I will, but what makes you think so?"

"He's your kind of person, Mr. Mockridge."

"And what kind of person is that?"

"You'll see."

The junk shop had an old wooden sign out front saying "NEVER AGAIN, Only the Highest Quality Junque".

I might have laughed, but, after a long, arduous and nerve-wracking tromp through the woods, I chose to find no humor in anything.

"How are we going to get back, Giorgio?" I asked.

“Get back?”

“You know, return to the car.”

“My bet is that you’ll want to stay here,” he said, “I’m going to be taking a boat back to Blétante.”

“What about the car? You’re just gonna abandon it at the end of the Old Bandito?”

“Someone will take it back.”

“Who?”

“It doesn’t matter; on this island we have an arrangement. That car’s available to anyone who wants to use it.”

“Anyone?”

“We don’t want that car anymore, Mr. Mockridge; forget that car. Let’s go in here. I think you’ll like it.”

Once inside, I could see immediately that everything in there was, undeniably, junk of the highest quality. The place was packed stem to stern with items of every possible sort, and every single thing appeared to be ‘crafted with care’ or ‘a noble survivor from a more discerning time long gone.’ There was no furniture per se; some stick chairs hung from racks high-up on one wall. There were paintings of course, but few larger than two feet in any direction. The most notable exception was a large portrait that looked like a John Singer Sargent, which stood floor to ceiling on one wall; an intelligent woman with a cat in her lap, gazing calmly, regally, only slightly judgmentally, down upon us. There were also some large, very fine paintings of ships at sea, and a dozen or so landscapes—not one of which looked nearly as inviting as Mr. Samuel Snard’s work.

When we walked into the shop the owner ignored us; he was involved with a man wearing a porkpie hat.

“OK, so, how much do you really want for the lamp?”

“It’s marked: \$3200.”

“I don’t know; seems like a lot. Would you take 2500?”

“Now, it’s \$3600.”

“Would you take \$2700...?”

“I’ll take \$3600. If you open your mouth again, it’ll be \$3900.” The owner gazed casually at the man.

“Now you’re asking \$3600?”

“Listen, that lamp was designed by Sabine Lambert and carefully assembled by her devoted husband, who certainly has better things to do with his time. It’s both original and unique; there is not another lamp like that one anywhere in the world—I wish I could get more of her work. If you want that lamp it will cost you \$3600. It’s entirely up to you, but, it’s no longer subject to negotiation.”

“A couple minutes ago you wanted \$3200. What would you say if I offered you that now?”

“Then I would say, ‘That lamp is no longer for sale.’”

The man in the porkpie hat just stood there, stunned, with his mouth wide open.

“In fact,” said the owner, “nothing in this shop is available to you. You’re wasting your time in here. Get out.”

The man in the porkpie hat looked at the shop owner in complete bewilderment.

“That’s fine with me,” he sputtered, “You don’t recognize who you’re dealing with.” Then he turned and walked out. My god, I almost cheered.

The owner then turned to me. “What do you want?”

“I want to talk to you about what you just did,” I said.

“Oh yeah? You want to give me advice about how to run my business?”

“Nope,” I said, “I admire what you just did. I think it’s great.” This guy was a hero.

Giorgio poked me on the shoulder and whispered, “I’m going across the street to the Elf, I’ll see you there.”

“Well, this is Blétante,” the man said gruffly. “We don’t screw around with idiots. I don’t ask ridiculous prices in the hope that someone’ll be dumb enough to pay ’em. I don’t start out with some inflated price and negotiate down to the price I’m willing to take. Screw that crap.”

He glared at me and started walking away.

“I hear every word you are saying,” I said, following him through his shop like a lost puppy.

He turned toward me again, evaluated me, and snorted.

Going behind a glass counter and placing both palms on the surface, he began to philosophize about trade.

“Selling something is not a competition in which the seller and the buyer are both trying to out-swindle the other. For Christ’s sake, where’s the dignity in that? I ask a legitimate price; the buyer can either take it or leave it; that’s the arrangement.” He glared at me before continuing. “I say what something is worth to me; you decide if it’s worth that to you. That way, I show respect for your intelligence, and you show respect for the quality of the items I offer in my shop. No groveling, no manipulation, no bullshit, nobody is putting anything over on anybody else. That’s the way it’s done in this shop.”

He turned and started walking away again.

“That’s the way we do it in Blétante...” he grumbled over his shoulder, “or at least that’s the way we do it in this town. Everyone is treated fairly.”

“I like that,” I said.

‘Good, ‘cause that’s the way it is.’

‘I like that a lot,’ I said. ‘Do you mind if I look around?’

‘What the hell are you doing in here otherwise? Look around all you like. Everything is marked—that’s the price.’ He began to walk toward the door.

‘I understand,’ I said meekly.

‘If you see something you want; I’ll be over in the café across the street.’

Without a second glance he simply abandoned me there, alone, in his shop, full of only the highest quality junk.

As it turned out I did find something. Not one of the two extremely rare Sabine Lambert lamps (I got a passel of them already at home), but a tiny carved skull with a little goat perched placidly on top, for \$360. Of course, I didn’t know what that skull was made from, and wouldn’t ask, but—from what I’d seen—I was certain that \$360 was the best price I was likely to get.

The ELF CAFE

When I entered the Elf Café the owner of that shop and Giorgio and, to my surprise, the fellah with the porkpie hat were all sitting around a table talking. When he saw me coming, porkpie hat looked at his watch, got up and said, "I gotta get going."

"Where're you from?" asked Giorgio.

"New Jersey," said the man.

"No need to apologize," said the antique shop owner.

The gentlemen from New Jersey said, 'excuse me' as he squeezed by me and went quickly out the door.

I took the chair he'd just vacated and Giorgio introduced me formally to Frank, the owner of the fine junque shop.

"You find anything?" Frank asked, with what seemed to be complete disinterest.

"Yeah. I want that little carved skull with the goat on top."

"That's a nice piece," he nodded. "I'll set it aside for you. You can pick it up later."

Giorgio said to Frank, "This is my... friend, Darryl Mockridge, the writer..."

"Yeah, I know who he is," Frank replied.

Then Giorgio took out a once crisp, clean, cream-colored envelope and handed it to Frank. Frank opened it, extracted a letter, read it, snorted derisively, tore the letter in half and tossed it on the table. (I assume it was the one that said:

...Greatly Honored Guest... Every courtesy... extreme deference... meeting every expectation... provided immediately, without hesitation... at no cost whatsoever to him... etc.)

He looked at me and said, "You're the one causing all the trouble."

“All the trouble?” I said.

“Didn’t you tell him?” he asked Giorgio.

Giorgio explained. “The people on Tender feel slighted. You hardly mentioned them.”

“You didn’t say anything about the Conservatory either,” said a waitress who appeared suddenly at my side. “What can I get you?”

“Island coffee... thanks.”

“Tender is the backbone of the Nation of Blétante,” added Frank. “Nothing happens in or on Blétante that doesn’t get its start right here on Tender. Even those stupid bastards on Nyla understand that. They know Tender is the heart of these islands. I do most of my business with the people on Nyla, and—just so you don’t start feeling too comfortable—if they were even aware of your little book, they’d probably feel slighted too.”

“I never made it to Tender or Nyla,” I said apologetically.

“So your little book seemed to indicate.”

“Why do you keep calling it my *little book*?”

“Well, for god’s sake, man. A book ain’t worth the effort of reading unless it runs, at minimum, 8 hundred pages.”

“But, you seem to have read my *little book*.”

“There’s not much else to do out here at times.”

“What did you think of it?”

“I thought,” he said, looking me in the eye, “My God, this is the work of a guy who is completely unsure of himself.”

“Really? That’s the way it comes across?”

“I thought to myself, If this schlub ever shows up here at Dead End, first thing he’ll want to know is how everybody ‘felt’ about his goddamned stupid picayune little book.”

Giorgio smiled at me. Frank looked at Giorgio and winked.

Then Frank turned in his chair, looked straight at me, and while quivering mockingly, imitated my voice, saying, "You saw my shop? Really? What did you think of it?" (It wasn't the best imitation of me I'd ever heard, but pretty good nonetheless; a little whiney, maybe a little too nasal.) I came back at him boldly, "Yeah, I wandered into your stupid picayune little shop but, there's not much else to do if you're stuck here in Dead End."

For effect I slammed my fist down upon the table.

"You need to practice your withering glare," he said.

And, laughing loudly, I think we reached an understanding.

Just for something to say, I said, "So, where are all these dogs, Snard told me about?"

"Look again," said Frank, and suddenly the place was crawling with 'em.

"S funny, I mention dogs and they appear."

"Yeah, we noticed the absence of dogs while you were away, Mr. Mockridge," said Giorgio. "My kids kept saying, 'Daddy, when is Mr. Mockridge coming back? We miss our doggies.'"

"Very nicely done, Giorgio," I said.

A man who had been staring at me from across the room—whom I had been consciously trying to ignore—suddenly got up and came stomping over to our table.

"I read your book, man."

He made it sound like a threat. So, (wisely, I think) I said nothing. I offered a faint smile, nodded, and turned my back to him, in the hope that he'd just go away.

"You think *Blétante* needs *your* advice about how we should run *our* country?"

“Nope,” I said, “You got it wrong. I never...”

“We keep authority in its place, Mockridge,” he said.

“I don’t doubt that...”

“Our guys *know* their power is *given* to them by *us*. I read your book and, let me tell you somethin’, we don’t need any *advice* from anyone; not you or your country.”

“You read my book?”

“I sure did.”

“Well,” I said, “You didn’t read it very carefully. If you...”

I didn’t get to finish that thought because the guy lunged at me before I could. And the next few weird minutes were spent with me knocking over chairs and tables while dodging the guy, Giorgio grabbing him by one arm, Frank standing up and putting himself between those two, and me trying to pry the guy’s fingers from my throat. As said, some chairs were knocked over, plates and glasses shattered on the floor, some gasps were heard. The waitress appeared with a determined look upon her face—though I’m not sure she even knew what she could have done—and the guy was eventually surrounded and led from the café, with Frank talking into his ear steadily as they went.

A couple additional brutes, who I hadn’t even noticed before, also attended and partook in the ejection ceremony. Outside a gathering took place with people saying, “Why?”

[For the record:

In *Two Weeks in Blétante* my praise for the politics of the Island Nation of Blétante was shamefully gushing and almost universal. If, in that book, I suggested that any nation could learn from any other nation, it was that the US could possibly learn a thing or two from Blétante, not the other way around. Naturally, I’d also

made it undeniably clear how much I love the U.S., flawed as she may be. So, I really have no idea what book that idiot had read, but it sure wasn't *Two Weeks in Blétante*.]

When Frank and the others returned, we straightened all the chairs and tables and helped the café crew sweep up shards of porcelain and shattered glass. I thanked all of them openly, and they apologized to me, though I do not know why. In time, everyone regained their former places and an awkward silence engulfed the place. After we regrouped at our table, there was some clearing of throats and some looking down at our hands. I was sweating and shaken but *tried to pretend* not to be either.

"Dead End seems to have more dogs than people," I said.

"Very observant," said Giorgio.

There were some awkward smiles and some nods.

I was still shaking as I looked down and discovered a dog looking up at me. He had his tail between his legs and seemed to need assurance that all the hub-bub was over.

"Why is this particular dog staring at me in such a saintly manner?" I asked.

"Now, see that *is* observant," said Frank.

"On Tender all dogs are named after saints," said Giorgio.

"Really? Why would that be?"

"It's always been that way," said Giorgio.

Frank added, "Long as I can remember it has."

"Really?" I said. "So, if a dog's called Christopher, do you call him, Christopher, St. Christopher or merely Chris?"

"The saintly-title is implied..."

"Oh. I see. And which saint do I have the honor of staring at me at this moment?"

“That’s Sebastian,” said Frank.
 I petted Sebastian on his little rock-hard head.
 “It’ll be OK,” I told him, and he wagged his tail.

“On Nyla they tag their dogs with royal titles,” said Giorgio, with obvious venom, “Duke, Count, Empress, like American jazz musicians in the 40’s...”

“And why is that?”

“Because they’re a bunch of pretentious moronic assholes,” muttered Frank.

“Oh,” I said. “I see you share Giorgio’s opinion of the good people of Nyla.”

“It’s not an opinion, it’s a fact,” said Frank and spit on the floor.

“I thought you said you do most of your business with the people of Nyla?”

“That’s how I know,” he said.

(For the telling of this tale, I’d really like to have him spit on the floor again, but he didn’t.)

While we were discussing this, someone put a song on the juke box which began: “*Yes, we know who you are, Yes, you drive a fancy car, You’re a fucking idiot, Yet still, you’ve gone quite far...*”

The second verse offered this sweet brotherly sentiment: “*My arrogant Nyla friend, You’ll be here ‘til the end. But, please, let’s not pretend, I like that.*”

I raised both eyebrows in question.

“Coincidence?”

“Local band,” Frank said.

“Song’s called ‘My Dear Nyla Friend’,” Giorgio added.

“How pleasant,” I said.

"It's their theme song," said the waitress, handing me a plastic bag filled with ice. "You need this," she said. "He got you pretty good," said someone at another table. "There seems to be an awful lot of resentment toward Nyla...why is that?" I asked, applying the bag to my neck. They snorted in synchronized dismissal of the obvious.

"A *friend of mine*," I began, "once explained *his* problem with Nyla to me, but I suppose everybody on Tender doesn't have a sister trapped in a cult-like monetary scam." Frank looked down at one of the saints and petted him on the head.

"Nope. I have no sister involved in anything. But, since you asked, here's why," he said. He drew a box in the air.

"Picture any person from Tender and what do you see? You see an honest, hard-working human being; back bowed, hands dirty, face sweaty, a laborer. Puts in an honest day's work, earns an honest wage, and is, *consequently*, content." He looked at me, and I nodded.

"No one on this island is ashamed of that image, or the reality behind it."

"Got it," I said.

"Now, picture someone from Nyla," He drew another box in the air. "... and what do you see? You see some smarmy self-satisfied swindler standing around posturing on a yacht, drinking and laughing loudly with all his smug friends... and *they* are not ashamed of *that* image."

He looked at me as if that closed the book on the subject. I nodded. "Things are what they are," I mumbled.

"The reality behind each of those images is probably quite different from the symbol; I suppose you know that." I said.

They both snorted.

“Not by much,” said Frank.

Giorgio mumbled, ‘Bullshit!’ Then he got up from the table, nearly knocking over his chair, and left the cafe.

“I guess that was a mistake,” I said.

Having nothing better to say, I asked, “You guys got a theme song for the good people of Tender as well?”

“We do,” Frank said, and shouted, “Play #31, someone.”

(Naturally, it was a Country tune.)

“Hey, Billy, you wanta go with us and have a few drinks?”

“Thanks fellahs, but I think I’ll just...”

Go home

Eat dinner

Relax and

Watch TV

After a hard day’s work, my friends,

That’s enough for me

(I’m gonna)

Go home

Eat dinner

Relax and

Watch TV

It was good enough for my old Dad,

An’ it’s good enough for me

(So I’ll just)

Go home

Eat dinner

Relax and

Watch TV

*That's this worker's biggest dream,
An' how it oughta be
(I think I'll)
Go home
Eat dinner
Relax and
Watch TV*

"I like that song," I said. "I wish I could live like that."
"Ha! I bet you don't do anything you don't want to do."
"Ha!" I said. "What nonsense. Almost everything I do is something I don't want to do."

What I wanted to do right then was to track down Giorgio, apologize—though I do not know why—find a bar, and buy my friend a drink.

MUCH MUCH LATER

**Have you ever done something that was REALLY STUPID
and ended up CARING for a STRANGER?**

If any further proof is needed that I am whatever it is that I have become—with every typically male weaknesses alert and ever-active within me—look no further than that night.

Giorgio had tried to get me to take the boat back to the other side of the island but that was the last thing I wanted. I told him I wanted to wander around a bit instead. I invited him to stay and have a drink with me, but he declined.

“I need to get back to my family, Mr. Mockridge; but, you should stay on if that’s what you want. On Blétante, we realized long ago that Greatly Honored Guests have their needs, click clack?”

“I’m not staying here with the hope of getting laid,” I said.

“OK,” he said.

“I’m not,” I insisted.

“OK,” he said, “but this won’t hurt.” He tapped my GHG lapel pin with his fingernail a couple times, patted me on the back, and wished me luck. It was his way of saying goodbye. It was also something of an indicator of how well he knew me.

Left alone, I walked over and looked into the nearest bar I could find, which happened to be called the Felled Ox.

Before going in I recalled evenings at the Grande Hotel de Blétante. The Sea Saw Room was a nice quiet little lounge with a large impressive bar along the entire length of one wall, and long dark velvet curtains hanging to the floor.

It was a pleasant little lounge with no music and no distractions; a place for serious drinking. I remember feeling at home there almost immediately. The Felled Ox was the opposite of the Sea Saw Room in almost every aspect, except that it too was a place for serious drinking. And, not surprisingly at all, I felt at home in the mayhem almost immediately.

So, somehow (tequila) I hadn't left Dead End when I planned to that evening; somehow (tequila) I'd missed the last boat out, and somehow (tequila) I found myself outside debating whether I should enter the Felled Ox (again), while still capable of making such a decision. By that time, I had shrugged off any public display of my proper Indiana up-bringing, and had begun to thoroughly enjoy the possibilities offered by simply being my (drunken) self. So, I went back in. And, though no one seemed to have missed me, maybe, I thought—as I gazed around the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd with glazed eyeballs—one of these loud, obnoxious, foul-mouthed, drunken women will want to go home with someone old and smelly and thoroughly drunk, like me.

It seemed reasonable.

I didn't even consider, at that moment, that I had no home to go to—or, rather, that my resting place was miles and miles away at Drear House and I had no transportation to get there. (In fact, that only occurs to me now, upon writing about that evening.) An hour later, when every possibility had been crushed by the heartless law of probability, after all hope had surrendered and died in my warm beer, the spark that never dies in any male was rekindled.

I was looking at my wrinkly old face in the back-bar mirror and wondering where all the years had gone, when her image caught my eye. She was moving toward me—carrying a tray full of empties—and I was mesmerized.

I really liked the way she slid, unjostled, through the crowd; the way she balanced that tray full of bottles and glasses. Miraculously, she took the seat beside me for a second, while waiting for one of the barkeeps to be free, and I took the opportunity.

“Wow,” I began.

“Wow what?” she asked.

Then I realized that I hadn’t really thought beyond that. “Just, WOW,” I said, and I guess I eyed her a little bit—I may have eyed her more than a little bit; I mean I really kinda eyed her quite a bit, maybe a little heavily, a little leeringly, a little suggestively. [Insert here whatever lame excuse you can contrive for such behavior; I have none.] At any rate, the eyeing was too obvious and just plain uncalled for and clearly unwelcome. And, honestly, that act was not a fair representation of just how very far advance I have become in matters of the socio-inebriatic sort.

She sat there stiffly, looking straight ahead—which was anywhere but at me—ordered her drinks, got them, thanked the barkeep, turned and started to walk away, all without addressing the situation. Then she decided that she did have something to say to me after all; she stopped, turned, came back and leaned in toward my ear.

“I’m not just dumb, you know!” she hissed.

And, at that moment, I felt so bad. I knew there was probably a lot more to her than *just dumb*.

I followed her image in the mirror for a while as she made her way around the room, placing bottles on tables, making change and charming customers with a genuinely cheerful smile. And, I found myself admiring her. There was certainly a whole lot more to her than *just dumb*.

Not *just stupid* myself—still harboring a few remaining deeply-ingrained socially acceptable tendencies—I was feeling sorry for that woman; she probably had to put up with jerks like me every night of her life.

So, here's the way the drunken mind works, I had the urge to get up, track her down, and tell her that I understood. I wanted to explain... something... to her. However, I've lived long enough to know, precisely, the multitudinous ways such a noble gesture could go wrong. So, instead, I got up and sailed for the door, dignity in tatters, but still loosely lashed to the mast.

I had damn near escaped when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned, and it was her.

"In case you didn't notice," she said, "YOU'RE OLD!"

I nodded. Nothing could be more obvious.

"I have noticed," I said quietly. "Once though," I sighed, "it wasn't so."

"In, like, forever ago, maybe!" she snarled.

She was right of course; whatever charms I may have once had, have long since abandoned me. These days, for most purposes, I am virtually non-existent. Game, set, and match, justifiably over-reactive young lady; embarrassment to mankind, Darryl Mockridge, finds himself driven from the field in well-deserved humiliation.

After, once again abandoning all hope of ever gleaming even the most basic understanding of this *weird world* or the totally unpredictable people that occupy it, I was sitting on a bench outside the front door of that fine establishment, looking down at a small saintly black dog. He seemed as depressed as I probably was underneath the artifice of temporary drunken delight in all things stable and unmoving. More honest about his feelings than I could ever be about mine, he was laying there with his head flat on the ground and whimpering. I reached down and petted the poor forlorn creature.

“I know EX-aggly what you’re feelin’, Saint,” I said. He rolled his yellow eyes up at me and whimpered again. I nodded my head in agreement. “Eggs-ackly,” I said. “I could NOT agree with you more. We are both opposite coins of the same side.”

A couple people came out, looked at me. One said, “*Why*,” bitterly; they both shook their heads and walked away. “Why, what?” I wondered. I returned my attention to the pooch.

Two women came stumbling out of the bar arm-in-arm, and one of them fell, SPLAT, right on her face, in front of me. As her friend began to help her up, from on her knees the fallen one looked at me, pointed, smiled a sloppy smile, and said, “Hey, I know you.”

She looked familiar to me too, but I couldn’t place her. “Oh, yeah?” I said, “How do you supposed to know me?” And even as those words were leaving my mouth I knew; I’d met her at The Jazz-Cat. It was a club I’d visited on Blétante one shameful desperate night, on my last visit.

“You’re... Sharon, aren’t you?” I said. “How are you?”

Her friend was holding her up by one elbow as she wavered in front of me.

“I’m drunk, that’s how I am. Very very very very’d runk.”

“Oh, that explains it,” I said.

“Explains what?”

“Explains how drunk you are.”

She looked at me quizzically for a bit. Then she smiled.

“Yes,” she said with a twinkle in her drunken eye, “it explains HOW drunk I am but it does NOT—does NOT—explain WHY drunk I am.”

And who could argue with that?

“But,” she said, offering me hope, “you’re a clever fellow and I’m sure you’ve got your surmises.”

“Let’s go, Shar...” her friend said, and started to lead her away by the elbow. Sharon shook her off and said, “I need to do this, Madge.” She looked at me and said, “That is my friend, Madge... she becomes over-attentive at times.”

“I’m Margaret,” said the friend, smiling a little crumpled smile and rolling her eyes about apologetically.

“Darryl,” I said.

Sharon put a heavy hand on my shoulder for stability.

“You can go on home now, Madge; Darryl an’ me are old friends. Also, he interviews people like me for a living so, it’ll be OK; he can handle it. Go’ head,” she said, “Move along.”

“Are you sure?” her friend asked me.

I nodded.

Sharon said, “I’m ‘pletely sure. Me an’ him are old friends. Go on home t’ your cats or birds or whatever they are.”

To my surprise, Margaret did in fact abandon her friend into my care and walked off down the street alone, without looking back. I immediately stood up to assist Sharon. “Let’s sit down,” I suggested, and we took a seat beside each other on the bench, outside the Felled Ox.

“You always were the sensitive sort, Darryl,” she said, and immediately bent in two and threw up at my feet.

She looked at me startled and said, “Oh, I am so sor...”, and threw up again.

I asked her if she was done and, when she nodded, I suggested that we should maybe find another place to sit. I helped her over to a bench in the small park across the street, and we sat there for a while; her, looking up at the branches of the tree that hung above us, me, wondering what I was to do with the poor woman.

“I’m not really a drunk,” she explained, “just impersonating a drunk I saw once.”

“And doin’ a convincing job of it,” I said.

“It’s a lot easier than it looks, having seen it done before. You may notice that I, on th’ other hand, don’t even use foul language... or am promiscuously sexuante.”

“Promiscuous sexuation is overrated anyway.”

“One day, Darryl,” she said distractedly, “my daughter came home from pre-school—not even in Kindergarten yet—and asked me what I did for a living. Can you believe it? Four. She ’as four. Not yet in kindergarten!”

“Uh-huh,” I said.

“So, I told her, ‘I’m in between jobs at the moment, Sweetie.’ And, right at that moment, that precise, exact moment, I decided to vacate Blétante and move over here to Tender and get a job.”

“Uh-huh.”

"It was at that precise moment upon which I decided I would do ANY-thing—anything that I could t' look my daughter in the eye and say... Uh..."

She paused and looked up at the sky above for a moment.

"So, off we came. An' I got a job right away, working in a small shoe factory. What do you do for a living, Mommie? AH-ha! I work in a small shoe factory, Darling daughter. Your Mommie works in a small shoe factory. Tell all your friends. And tell all your snot-nosed teachers too."

She paused, stifled another upheaval.

"That was close," she admitted. "We'll be running out of benches soon," she observed, snorted, shook her head, looked up at the sky for a bit, and then, began fighting back tears. Even in that night-sky lighting, sitting in the dark, under a tree, I could see that she was holding back tears.

"We've all seen those weeping mothers on the TV wailing, 'I only turned my back for just a moment'... you know? 'I only turned my back for *just a moment*'...those ones."

I nodded, though I had no idea what she was talking about.

"That's true, Darryl. It applies. I know myself because I turned *my* back for only just a moment once. And..."

She began to sob heavily. "And, when... See, I turned my back for just one second... I never should have..."

The poor woman began gasping for breath and sobbing so violently that her entire frame shook.

Out of some long-lost caring instinct I placed my arm around her and pulled her in to me. I held her tightly and rocked her and mumbled into her ear, "There there. There there."

“I was frantic,” she mumbled.

“There there,” I said.

“I looked everywhere. I looked in the trees. I looked in the sky, Darryl. I looked EVERYWHERE. She wasn’t there. She was no longer there.”

She began convulsing so heavily that I was afraid I could not hold her.

“Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God...” she kept saying.

We sat like that for a very long time; her rocking and sobbing in great gulping, desperate whelps; me holding her as tightly as I could, whispering into her sweaty matted hair, “There there. There there. There there.”

As we rocked, I looked down and discovered that same forlorn little black dog, still at our feet. He looked concerned too.

MORNING, at any rate

I woke up on a thin cotton mat on someone's kitchen floor. (For god's sakes!) I'm more than 60 years-old and I find myself curled up, freezing cold, dressed in the clothes I wore the night before, on some stranger's cold, dirty, ugly and worn-out green linoleum floor. I thought I'd gotten past that stage in my life 40 years ago.

I sat up and looked around, only to discover that things did not look any more inviting in the other room, where a woman I didn't recognize slept, mouth agape, on a saggy old couch. On the floor beside her was a small black dog that looked vaguely familiar. Oh my god, was this any way for a Greatly Honored Guest of the Island Nation of Blétante to conduct himself? I rolled onto my other bruised hip, curled up, and slept some more.

Later, she came in looking disheveled, confused, and completely adorable (a combination apparently that only men are able to perceive) and looked at me quizzically for a moment, before her attention was drawn to something on the floor. She rushed over and looked down at some muddy boots.

"My boots—how did they get home?"

"The same way you did probably," I said, "on your feet. But, I'm just guessing."

"You say, on my *feet*, but how did *they* get here?"

"Homing instinct I suppose. Drunks develop the ability."

"Are you, whoever you are, calling me a ... wait... Darryl isn't it?" I nodded. "Oh!" she said, "I think I remember some stuff."

“Ha!” I laughed, “I’m trying to forget that same stuff.”
(Unfortunately, I have an excellent memory, in all states.)
She put one hand to her forehead, turned around and left the room. From the other room I heard her.
“Oh, my god...” she said.

I rolled over on the linoleum, adjusted my aching hips to an acceptable level of discomfort, and went back to sleep yet again. When you can do nothing else, get some sleep.

Later on, I opened my eyes and found her sitting in a chair in the kitchen, her knees pulled up under her chin, in tears. She looked at me and said, “I’m disinclined to continue.” I sat up. “To continue..?” I asked casually, but with very real trepidation.

“I am disinclined to continue living,” she said flatly.
That was exactly what I had feared. And, though I knew there was nothing I could say to that, I tried.
“Please don’t say that,” I said.
“But, it’s true,” she said.

And I understood it. I understood the feeling.

We live in a world almost perfectly designed to crush innocence.

FRANK'S ADVICE

Later that day, while hanging around in Never Again—center of the known world—I was telling Frank the tale of the sulking husband trapped in a bed and breakfast on a small island. I concluded by saying, “It’s the usual progression from an advanced degree in economics to unsuspected wife killer. He seemed remarkably intelligent, maintaining a perfectly calm demeanor. Despite years of entrapment he appeared to have no compulsion to either protest or to free himself. The man was unaffected by his own invisibility, with no thought of putting up any defense against Life’s indifference.”

Frank looked up from the book he was reading and said, “What does that mean?”

“What part don’t you understand?”

“I don’t understand any of it. But, let’s start with ‘putting up a defense against Life’s indifference’—let’s start with that. What is that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look,” he said, putting the book down. “I don’t mind you coming in here and hangin around; that doesn’t bother me. And I don’t mind you blabbering while I’m trying to read, if you feel you must. But, if you’re gonna stand around here blabbering like that, it has to have a point. OK?”

“Well, but, that would leave me with nothing to say.”

“I suspected as much. Let me give you some advice. When you got nothing to say, say nothing—YOU said that yourself, in your own little book.”

Of course, there was nothing I could say to that.

So, you know...

FROM the Elf Café to the Felled Ox

I saw a guy I'd met years ago in the Sea Saw Room, sitting alone in the Elf Café, but he seemed pre-occupied. So, I just sat there and ate my eggs. But, when I stumbled across him again later, in the Felled Ox, I thought I'd give him a nudge.

"Larry," I said, "remember me?"

He looked up, studied me for half a second.

"Nope."

"You don't remember meeting me in the Sea Saw Room about three years ago?"

He looked at me again.

"Nope."

"You *are* Larry, aren't you?"

"Nope."

"Oh, I'm sorry. You look almost exactly like him."

"That's because he's my brother."

"That explains it."

"Yep, probably does."

"Oh. So. Well, uh... sorry to have bothered you," I said.

"No bother. Have a seat, if you want."

I sat, he made a motion, and when two beers arrived he nudged one toward me.

"Thanks," I said, "...?"

"Charlie."

"Thanks, Charlie. I'm Darryl."

"Yeah I know. You're a GHG. Everybody here at Dead End knows who you are, and we all look forward to pissing on your grave."

"What?!" I said laughing.

"We're all jealous, man" he said and offered his hand.

We shook.

"You don't know what I had to go through to earn that GHG," I said.

"Actually," he said, "I do."

"Yeah?"

"We all do."

"Really?"

"Must have been 3 or 4 ragged copies of that book changing hands around here for a couple months."

"Huh..."

"I skipped through all the political crap; only read the last couple chapters—about the time you spent in the life raft."

"And..?"

"We all talked about it."

"Really?"

"Small town," he shrugged, "Drunks like to gossip."

After two beers, I occasionally find myself strangely chatty.

"You know Frank?" I asked.

"I do."

"Frank told me that he honestly does not know if rudeness is the foundation of his anti-social behavior or his anti-social behavior is the foundation for his rudeness."

"I can't believe Frank told you that."

"Well, he didn't really say that in so many words, but I'm sure the thought must have gone through his mind at one time or another."

"I wouldn't bet on it."

"Yeah I guess the fact that, for him, they're both natural tendencies probably prevents such a thought."

"Probably doesn't help."

After another round Sharon somehow became the topic.

“So, what can you tell me?” I asked the bartender.

“There’s a reason behind what she’s doing,” he said.

“And the reason is..?”

“The reason is, she’s crazier than Hell; that’s the reason.”

I sat. I thought. I took a drink. I thought some more.

“What’s the real reason?” I wondered aloud.

“Around here, we don’t spend a lot of time poking at other people’s bruised psyches.”

He turned his back and found something more meaningful to do, involving a towel and a glass.

“I guess if anyone knows it’d be Margaret,” Charlie said,

“but you’d have to pry it out of her.”

“Around here,” said the bartender without looking up from what he was doing, “we don’t spend a lot of time *talking* about other people’s psychosis.”

“But you gossip...” I said.

He turned, faced me, and fixed me with his eyes. Then he leaned on the bar, leveled his eyes so that he was looking directly, unwaveringly, into mine. “Yes, we do,” he said quietly.

Somehow it seemed like a warning.

I turned to Charlie. He shrugged.

“I think you probably know everything I do,” said Charlie.

“She showed up here maybe a year ago... maybe two... somethin’ like that... I’m no good with time-frames.

Margaret found her homeless and took her in. Has a dog that follows her around, which she ignores. Making Herculean efforts to destroy some memory, but nobody knows what.”

“... or cares,” said the barkeep. “We all got our own lives.”

"I thought someone just told me drunks like to gossip."

Charlie looked at me for a while, then explained.

"Drunks talk about people they resent or despise, not some poor lost woman deserving of our pity."

I thought about that.

"You don't know anything else about her?"

"I know that YOU picked her up the other night and have been sleeping on her kitchen floor since then."

"Wow! How on earth do you know that?"

"Small town," he said, staring down at his glass.

"Thanks, Charlie," I said and got up to leave.

"I thought you should know," he said without looking up.

As I was walking by, a grey-haired old woman sitting at a table with a friend, said, "I know somethin'."

"You can tell me something about Sharon?"

I stopped and took a seat beside her.

"I can tell you something about her," said someone hidden in a nearby booth. "She's a lousy drunk, just like I am."

The grey-haired old woman said, "She certainly is not!"

"Yeah, well, fuck you then," said the person in the booth.

"What can you tell me?" I asked the grey-haired woman.

"She lost her daughter somehow, the child died tragically; she never talks about it. She is *not* just another drunk."

"I know a story like that..." said the woman sitting at the table with her. "Turned her back, the daughter's gone."

"That's her."

"That's her?"

"That's the same one."

"Oh—the nice one?"

"Yes, that's who we're talking about."

"Oh, I am so sorry to hear that. That poor child."

DAY (who knows)

THE ACTING PROFESSOR

In the NEVER AGAIN Quality Junque shop—center of all things inspirational—I bumped into Professor Kashka Adish, who I'd seen perform once at the American Vista Theatre, in a show called I KNOW WHAT I'M TALKIN' ABOUT (y' know what I'm sayin'?)

At first, I couldn't place him. I knew that I'd seen the man before—he had a stately presence which few men possess any more, and he moved in a particularly studied way, as if he were sure people were watching him—but I had no idea where I had seen him. As I went about the shop looking at things I wasn't really seeing any of them; I was busy in my mind, wondering where I had seen that man before. When he asked Frank for a pen, saying he wanted to write something down, I remembered.

I stood behind him until he'd completed writing the note, folded it neatly, placed it in his breast pocket, returned the pen to Frank and thanked him.

"Professor!" I said.

"I'm sorry, you must have me confused with..."

"Aren't you Professor Adish?"

He looked at me, thought for a second, and a broad smile exploded upon his face.

"Professor Kashka Adish! Yes, yes, I was at one time; that was a good gig. You saw the show...?"

"Saw your performance at American Vista Theatre."

“Man, that was so many years ago,” he said, rubbing his chin. “But it had a long run, and I enjoyed that part.”

“You were very convincing, AND very frightening.”

“You can certainly *write that down*,” he said. “Derek Crandle,” he said and extended his hand.

“Darryl Mockridge,” I said, and we shook.

“Mockridge? Are you the writer?”

“Writer, Manqué,” I corrected him, and he laughed.

“Well, as an actor I can relate to your struggle,” he said.

“Did you see the You Tube bit?”

“You did a You Tube version?”

“No, someone in the audience posted it online, without comment, and no one in the US thought for a moment that it was a play.”

“We no longer recognize farce.”

“Nor ridicule. I’ve been praised as a Black American hero. AND—I think you’ll love this, Mr. Mockridge— I’ve also been invited to speak at more than one *Ivy League* college.”

“Amazing.”

“Indeed. Naturally I had to decline, and did so with a great joy. I was tempted, mind you. I must say, Mr. Mockridge, that you people have lost all sense of direction in that crazy country of yours. A culture which can no longer separate parody from reality is a culture in serious decline.”

“Oh, Professor, it’s worse than you think.”

“I bet it is, I bet it is. And, please call me Derek.”

“Of course, I’m sorry... Derek. You made a great Professor Adish though.”

“Ha-ha. Thank you.”

Then, Derek Crandle became Professor Adish right before my eyes.

“This course is called ‘Sub-Verbal Offenses, part one’

I am your instructor, Professor Kashka Adish. The text for this course is ‘Sub-Verbal Offenses, volume one, by Professor Kashka Adish’. If you *must* speak to me, at any time during our adventure here together, you will address me as Professor Adish; any other salutation will get no response from me.”

“Beautiful!” I said, “Can I buy you a drink?”

“You know, I would be delighted to do that, Mr. Mockridge, but I’m meeting some friends on Nyla this evening and I’m scheduled to hop the 4:30 ferry.”

“Ah, well... But, I just wanted you to know that I think you’re a great actor.”

“Thank you. I’m sure we would have had a mad time together. I only wish I had the time to spare.”

“Witless Verbal Assault,” I declared.

“Oh? Really?” he said, “Of what type?”

I mulled. I pried at the heavy lid that seals off my brain from the dark and rusty chamber of recall.

“Now, I wish I’d have written it down...”

He drummed his fingers upon a counter and waited.

“In the previous course,” he began, “Witless Verbal Assault, we listened *carefully* as the head of Human Resources—a white male—squirmed while making an awkward attempt to explain his thinking...”

“*Sub-Verbal Offenses...*” I struggled to recall other terms.

“Excessive pseudo-courtesy!” I declared, with some pride.

He laughed, “Excellent. I’m impressed with your memory.

I played that part thrice a week for more than four years and I would be hard pressed to do what you just did.”

“I do have a good memory, I always carry a recorder... and learning shorthand when I was 12 hasn’t ever hurt me any.”

“Wait,” I said, “wasn’t another one ‘casual disregard’?”

“Ah, yes. Now it comes to me: ‘reserved approval, banal rebuff, faux-fawning, excessive pseudo-courtesy, implied indifference, and tacit superiority of every imaginable sort’ I will teach you,” he said, taking a professorial stance, “to uncover every affront, though it be hidden in the assailant’s body language; a look, a gesture, a nod, a stance, a glance, especially feigned amenity.”

“The *more silent* the assault, the *more insulting* it is,” I quoted.

“Honestly I tell you,” he continued, “I do not know which is the worst offense, cowering obsequiousness or forced over-attentiveness!” He laughed. “Lord above, what the hell is wrong with you people? Is that sort of thing still going on?”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “and it’s only gotten worse.”

“You know,” he said, taking a good look at me, “I believe I’d really get a kick out of having that drink with you, Mr. Mockridge; if the invitation’s still open.”

“Of course—me too—but, what about your friends waiting for you on Nyla?”

“Screw ‘em.”

I laughed.

He said, “I’ll give ‘em a call. It’s not that important; they’ll be around. I have to assume that you’re not going to be here forever, from what I’ve heard of your last departure.”

As we were leaving the antique shop I said, “Did you read my book?”

“No, sir, I did not.”

“That’ll make things easier,” I admitted.

“After you, sir,” he said and bowed deeply.

Bowing more deeply, I said, “No-no, Professor, after you.”

That was the beginning of a pretty good evening. I've allowed myself to forget most of the details; but, it was a great surprise it was to find another human being tromping around on the surface of planet earth who admires Walter Kerr as much as I do. We must have talked about Kerr for a fully-animated hour or two.

I also recall, at one point, pulling the old rabbit out of the hat and saying, with great dignity, "I am going to tell you, *Derek*, word-for-word, what you are about to say." "Word for word?!" he said, "Word for bestial word?" "Well, perhaps not," I said, "...with that attitude!"

We spent a great deal of time that evening laughing the laughter of those who really know how to laugh and have no real reason not to. It was glorious. And, when I knew it was time to go, I raised my glass, drained it with noble finality, stood up, somewhat awkwardly, to depart... sat down again and ordered another round.

At some point the Professor and I parted company, and I must have stayed or gone on to another bar. Maybe both.

Who really knows? I don't seem to.

AFTERNOON

We were sitting at a small round wooden table, across from each other drinking some horrible hot liquid made from roasted barley—or so I was told—and she was talking quite calmly... almost as if in a trance.

“We were looking over at the Island of Blétante, and I was saying to her, ‘Do you remember when we used to live there?’ And she said, ‘No.’ And I said, ‘You don’t remember when we used to live on Blétante?’ And she said, ‘No, Mommie.’ Of course—I’m such an idiot—she wasn’t quite 4 when we left.”

She looked into her cup.

“You don’t have to hear this... I mean, it’s very nice of you to... What did you say your name was again?”

“Darryl.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m sorry, I keep forgetting. Why did you...? I mean, how did you...?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said.

She looked at me, evaluated me, smiled the saddest smile I have ever seen, and sniffed back tears, before continuing.

“We were standing at the railing... Is it OK if I do this?”

“Sure; of course.”

“I haven’t really been able to... but Margaret tells me I need to say it.”

“OK.”

“We were... We were... standing at the railing, and a little bird landed right beside her. I whispered, ‘Look at the pretty little bird, Tracie.’ And when she turned, the bird flew off and landed in a tree behind us. I turned and said, ‘Tracie, look at the pretty little bird. Look he’s right behind us.’ And when I turned again, she was gone.”

Sharon said nothing for a very long while, just placed both palms on her chest and closed her eyes tightly. Her chest was heaving so hard, I thought her heart would burst right through. We were both in tears. I didn't know what to say. I just watched her as she shook her head and trembled.

After a while, she gulped a few times and began again. "There was a woman... There was a woman...with her... daughter... standing there...uh... and, when I turned back, they both had their hands over their mouths." She stirred the liquid in her cup for a while. "Can you imagine? They both had their hands over their mouths... The woman and her daughter, you know, both hand their hands over their mouths. And their eyes were wide open, staring at me. And I knew. I just knew." She looked at me, and I had to close my eyes to her.

"I started screaming for her. I ran over to the woman and I said, 'Have you seen my little girl?' But she said nothing. She just stared at me. I wanted to grab her and shake sense into her. 'Have you seen my daughter?!' I screamed, and that woman's daughter buried her face in her mother's side. I began frantically looking for her. I looked everywhere, hoping she had wandered off. I looked for her in the trees. I looked for her in the sky, hoping that she had taken flight. I looked EVERYWHERE ... except over the edge of that cliff. I have never prayed so hard in my life. I have *never* PRAYED so HARD in my life."

She rocked forward, clutching her stomach, then, sat up straight and tall, stared fixedly at the ceiling and trembled, as tears streamed down her face.

“I will tell you this:” she said quietly, “No true GOD would ever allow an innocent little girl to fall to her death.”
And there was nothing I could say to that.

I had to agree with her; it’s absolutely, undeniably true. No decent human being would even allow such a thing to occur; why would *God* allow it?

That any being would be instilled with greater compassion than its Creator has always struck me as peculiar.

FIRST AND FINAL NOTICE

I was stumbling out of my favorite local bar—whichever one that might have been at the moment—when I looked up and saw a familiar face.

“Giorgio! Dear Friend,” I mumbled.

“Tomorrow,” he began, and waited for my full attention.

“... is your last full day here.”

“Then what?”

“You can spend tonight here if you wish, and tomorrow night wherever you wish. I will pick you up at 11 AM the following morning and drag you over to Blétante in time to shove you onto a 4:30 flight back to wherever people like you come from, Mr. Mockridge.”

“Oh, man, you gotta give me some warning, Giorgio!”

“It would be warning enough if you were sober.”

“But, I am not sober, Giorgio,” I spun in a circle for him.

“... as you, yourself, can, no doubt, plainly see.”

“Tonight: sleep here,” he said. “Call me tomorrow to tell me where you’ll be staying tomorrow night, and I’ll drop by at 11 AM, next day, to pick you up.”

“My GOD,” I said, “Giorgio, I believe that I have been lost in the whirlwind of time. Tell me this though, why do you show up here in the middle of the night to track me down like a wounded beast only to deliver such a proclamation?”

“You’re a hard man to find, Mr. Mockridge, and you never turn your phone on.”

“S’prolly on; just lost it.”

“Well, use any phone you want, but please call me tomorrow and let me know where I’ll find you at 11 AM the following morning, OK?”

“Why, Giorgio, do you speak to me so harshly?”

"I'm not being harsh; I am being stern," he corrected me.

"OK, sternly then. Why?"

"I want you OFF this island and in the AIR on a regularly scheduled flight, not adrift at sea on a rubber raft provided by the state. It's for your own good."

"Oh, Giorgio, you care too much."

"Where are you staying? Maybe I can see you there."

"Where are *you* staying?" I said.

"I'm going back in a few minutes; I have a boat."

"Oh, OK. Then, I'll be staying with a friend."

"I've heard. How is she doing?"

"Not so good. And, in less than two days you want me to kick the crutch out from under her and abandon her."

"Well, that's not entirely true, but we'll talk about it later.

It's cold out here and I have to get back to Blétante."

"Oh. Ok. Well, if you must. G'night, old friend!"

"Call me tomorrow."

"Got it, Faithful Companion."

"Call me, Mr. Mockridge."

"Got it, got it, got it, got it."

I watched Giorgio as he headed toward the pier. I could not help but notice how well he looked in a suit, even in the dark of night, even in stride, from behind; a suit just seems so natural on the man. I pondered the Great Suit Mystery once more: Why do suits look so good on so very few of us, and so crummy on all the rest of us?

"Why?" I asked myself.

Then, suddenly inspired, I called his name and I began running after him.

"Hey, Giorgio," I said putting a heavy arm across his shoulder and bending in two to catch my breath.

“Wait a sec...”

When I had recovered enough to speak I said, “I got a question for you. Everywhere I go I keep hearing people say, *Why. Why. Why.* What is that about?”

“Mr. Mockridge, I have no idea what you mean.”

“I mean, a guy attacks me in a café—you were there—and, as they haul him out the door and toss him into the street like a sack of potatoes, people are standing around saying, *Why. Why. Why.*”

“I don’t... Oh, when we threw that jerk out of the Elf, people were chanting ‘Why’?—I didn’t notice. But, they weren’t saying ‘why’, Mr. Mockridge, they were saying *wai*... It may sound like ‘why’, but they were probably saying *wai*; spelled WAI. It stands for ‘What An Idiot’. It’s a sign of general disapproval, kind of the opposite of flipping someone a Phenneger.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

I thought about that for a moment.

“My god, Giorgio,” I said, “I LOVE this place.”

He laughed and patted me on the back.

“We know you do, Mr. Mockridge. Now, go home, get some sleep.”

LATE ONE AFTERNOON

“Tomorrow,” she said, “will be her birthday. She would have been six. Tracie... my child, would have been six.” She was trying not to cry, but, since I’d begun first, we cried together for a while.

“I gave her a puppy for her birthday,” she sobbed. I looked down at the saintly dog curled up at our feet.

Many dogs seem perpetually forlorn—apparently regretting mistakes they’d made in a former life—but, this poor little creature seemed focused entirely upon this life. When he looked up at me I could see that he was dreadfully aware of the awkward position he was in.

“This is not going to be easy for any of us,” I told him.

DAY whatever

I was standing around in the Never Again Junque shop—center of all things human—when a tall, unnecessarily well-dressed, undeniably handsome gentleman entered. He nodded to Frank and went right over to an old ceremonial axe, hanging on the wall. I knew the guy. I'd met him before. It was D. C. Bellwether's friend, serial scam artist, multi-level marketing jackass billionaire, nemesis to my friend, Giorgio, no friend of mine, ever-aristocratically downward gazing, Justin General.

"Good afternoon," General said coolly to Frank.

"Perhaps; what can I do for you, Mr. General?"

"What is the provenance of this item?"

"It's an axe of some sort."

"Yes, I can see that. Where is it from?"

"I don't know; somewhere in the distant islands I suppose."

"Do you know anything else about it?"

"Not a thing."

"If I told you that it was a ritual instrument used in a sacred heathen ceremony, from an island that can no longer be found on any map, would you believe that?"

Frank nodded. "That seems reasonable."

"I'll take it. Have it sent."

"Right."

"Is there anything else in here that you think I might be interested in, Frank?"

Frank looked in my direction, and winked.

I was standing in front of an old carved sea-chest, looking at a small porcelain vase, lined with gold, hand-painted with ivy, flowers and birds on one side.

"I think that chest might serve your purpose," he said. As they came over toward me I smiled at Justin General, and he nodded, saying, "Would you mind stepping aside; I'd like to look at this chest."

I stepped aside and continued poking around; looking at things of no interest, while monitoring their exchange.

"What can you tell me about it?"

"Not much. You could say anything you might about it, and people would have to believe you."

"Well, OK; I'll take that too. Have it sent with the other."

"Let's go back to the counter and settle up," suggested Frank. "Say," he said matter-of-factly, "have you ever heard of an American writer named Mockridge?"

"Darnell Mockridge? Sure. I think I may have met him a few times, here and there. Why do you ask?"

"He has a new book out."

"I've never read a thing he's written. But, he's attended several of my lectures; he's somewhat of a devotee of the Birth Marque movement. My close personal friend, the publisher, Dark-Cloud Bellwether and Darnell Mockridge are good friends. DC published his first book—you know, gave him that first all-important shot, to get him started."

"I was wondering if I should bother with his new book."

"I wouldn't. Like I said, I've met the man; he's much too full of himself. Writing, of the sort he does, is nothing more than a desperate way to draw attention to himself."

"Why are writers so needy?" asked Frank. "There was one in the Elf the other day; and someone said something which he didn't like, about one of his books, and it ended up in a fistfight."

"What an idiot! Writers think they're a special breed."

“You can’t throw an orange down an alley anywhere in this world anymore without hitting a **dozen** *so-called* writers,” Frank said, quoting Anna Bonardi.

“Those writer-types all yearn for a devoted following. Wil Snard—an old yachting friend of mine—apparently knows that Mockridge fellow. He told me Mockridge is all politics and bullshit.”

“I figured as much,” said Frank laughing.

“He’s certainly not one of us,” Justin General said and, like a king, strolled out through the door and into the street. Frank asked me, “What do you think of that?”

I said, “That Darnell Mockford guy sounds kinda nice.”

“Let me tell you something,” Frank said.

My eyes must have lit up because, by then, I knew Frank to be a man of few words. I waited in joyful anticipation.

“I was walking the dog along a path in the woods which we take on a regular basis,” he began. “And when we came to a tree where you can go around through a narrow passage, or go around through a wide, open passage, he chose the narrow route, as he always does.”

He looked at me to see if I was with him. I nodded.

He continued.

“And I wondered about that. I began to think about it—

Why did he always choose the narrow route? When we got back here, I thought about that for a long time, considering everything I know about dogs, and everything I know about my dog in particular. Then, suddenly I realized something.” I was ready; I couldn’t wait. “What did you realize?”

“... I realized that I have absolutely no idea why he takes the narrow way. And, in that same instant, I also realized that I’m probably incapable of ever understanding it.”

According to Giorgio,
DAY FOURTEEN

By Giorgio's calculations this was the morning of my final day, and I was supposed to get a boat back to Blétante, climb onto a private jet supplied by the Island Nation of Blétante, and depart for home. But, you know how things can be. I managed to get up, grab my bag, and say a somewhat dignified goodbye to Sharon—and she assured me that she would be alright. (I asked her many more times than twice.) And I managed to walk the 200 yards to the dock, where the ferry waited for me, without looking back.

And I walked on board and sat down. And when we docked at the main island of Blétante, I managed to get up on my feet again and, with some dignity, walk off that ferry.

But, then, as I walked along the pier toward shore, things began to change in weird and unpredictable ways; and all of that weird change was taking place within me.

Up on the top of a grassy slope was a welcoming party—well, a departure party. Giorgio was there, as expected, but—somewhat unexpected—there were others; his kids, Wilfred Snard, looking aristocratic with a walking stick, some official looking people I did not recognize, and cellist, retired newspaperman, Prentiss Hobbs. They were all smiling and waving, and it sounded like some were even cheering. It was all very strange. Strangest of all was the presence of *The Car* and its driver, dressed in livery (as would be proper, I suppose). Giorgio came running down the slope and took my bag. He was smiling broadly.

“You made it!” he said, as if it was the last thing on earth he’d ever expected to witness.

But even as those words left his mouth, I balked. I could not go up that slope. Giorgio, who was already half way up, turned, signaled me to come on. When I did not move, he came sliding back down to me.

“What’s up, Mr. Mockridge?”

“I can’t go, Giorgio.”

“What do you mean? Mr. Mockridge, you gotta go, man.”

“I can’t.”

“You gotta go. Here, give me your arm...”

“I can’t.”

“Oh, man... Tell me this is not true, Mr. Mockridge. You got all those people up there waiting to see you and say goodbye...”

“You did your job, Giorgio.” I told him.

“No. I have not done my job until you are on that plane.”

I know firsthand that Giorgio has the ability to rise up in a rage and become pretty damned frightening, but he didn’t. Instead, he softened. He dropped my bag, he looked me in the eyes—and when he saw that I was determined—he shook his weary head, and moaned quietly.

“Oh, man, Mr. Mockridge, not again. They are never going to let you back into this country EVER again.”

“One time,” I said, “you told me that you don’t always like your job, but you do it... Well, you’ve done your job here. Now I have to do mine.”

I picked up the bag, turned and began walking quickly down the pier toward the ferry I had just gotten off. And, I did not look back.

Because he had already cast off and was about to get underway, the captain offered me a hand up.

"D' you forget something?" he shouted.

"Yeah, I almost forgot my humanity," I shouted back.

"I bet you left it at Sharon's place."

After we were fully underway, the captain turned over operations to another man, came back inside with two cups of coffee, and sat at a picnic table with me. We drank in silence. He spoke first.

"We've all been really concerned about her, since she showed up, but no one here really knew what to do."

"What did you do?"

"Kept an eye on her mostly, and stayed out of her way. If she looked up for anything more than a second, we'd give her a nod or a little smile, but that wasn't very often. We were glad that you came along when you did; she was beginning to spin out of control; drinking until she passed out; she needed to be carried home more than once. You certainly have turned things around for her, poor kid."

"I haven't done much."

"Oh, well, you may not think so, but we see the change. We've been really worried. That kid isn't one of those who just talks about offin' herself, most of us are convinced, given the right impetus, she'd do it... one day, one of us would find her dead."

"I've had that same fear."

"If you don't like that coffee, you can have a beer. And I'll give you half of my sandwich, if you want. You do like liverwurst, don't you?"

"Done right, I do."

"Thick slice, fresh chopped onion, pepper and mustard."

“I’ll take it. Thanks.”

“When you’re in the business of helping others, you gotta stay properly nourished,” he said, as he got up to get the beer and sandwich.

“I’m not really in that business,” I said.

He smiled and shook his head.

“You are now.”

That EVENING

We were sitting on the ratty old couch together—opposite each other, her at one end, me at the other.

“I can’t face this alone,” she said. “Please don’t leave me, Mr. Mockridge.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I assured her.

“I feel so empty.”

I leaned toward her and whispered, “Maybe you... should eat... more lettuce.”

I honestly cannot tell you why I said that. It was something she’d said to me one night, under different circumstances.

On that night I was feeling desperately lonely.

She pulled back, got a better look at me and smiled, just perceptively. Then she laughed weakly, and I detected the brief flash of a distant sparkle in her eyes.

“You’re a strange man,” she said, but very nicely.

“Yeah, I think you’ve told me that before.”

She laughed again.

“You know, a publisher once advised me, ‘If you don’t take yourself seriously, Mockridge, you can’t expect others to take you seriously.’ And, I said, ‘Well, there you go.’”

She leaned back to get another look at me, and smiled.

Then, for the first time I can recall, she reached down and, unconsciously, patted that poor dog on the head.

After a few awkward moments, she placed her hand along the back of the couch and I did the same. We just sat there, looking into each other’s eyes.

“We sure have cried a lot together,” she said.

“Yes, we have,” I said.

“For all the good it’s done,” she said.

“Well, if anyone has the right to cry, it’s us.”

That night I dreamt I was standing on a battlefield after the battle had ended, and there was nothing but devastation all around. There were the bodies of men and dying horses; arrow shafts standing in the ground everywhere I looked. Everything was covered in deep, rich, greasy, black soot.

I was standing next to a general on a hill in the midst of it all. He held a scroll in his hand, unrolled it, looked at it, rolled it back up and tucked it under his arm.

“I see you had a little battle here,” I said.

“We did,” he said.

“And, did we win or lose?” I asked.

“Won.”

“How can you tell?”

“We’re still here, aren’t we?” he said.

“This is what victory looks like then?” I asked.

“Yep.”

“Huh...” I pondered that. “Are you sure?”

In my hand, I held half of a blueberry pie that I had made; simply wrapped. It was gift to the victor—whoever it might have been. I considered it a generous gift, not just because it requires quite a bit of effort, and some real skill, to make a good pie in the middle of a battlefield, but also because I’d much rather eat any pie I’ve made than give it away. But I handed it to him, and he took it.

Then he said, “Better hurry back to your kitchen.”

The statement needed no explanation. Though I was thoroughly exhausted, the war was far from over.

“This is not the last battle,” he said, scanning the horizon with the cold grey eyes of experience. “There are gonna be many more like this ahead. We’re gonna need lots of pie.” “Oh don’t I know it,” I said, and woke up instantly.

I found myself wondering—yet again—if I was even capable of helping Sharon. One time, years ago, I tried to get a woman to quit smoking. For months I tried everything; I joked, I whined, I pleaded, I talked good sense, I talked nonsense. Because I cared about her, I begged her to quit. I yelled at her, but that didn’t work. Nothing worked. I threatened to leave and, eventually, I finally did. That woman would neither be led nor driven to quit smoking. Ultimately, I was forced to accept the undeniable fact that she just plain, pie-in-the-face, did not want to quit smoking.

Naturally, I was sickened to find myself thinking about Sharon in that same light.

If you can’t be honest in your dreams, good luck in the wakeful state.

CONFUSION at The ELF

Sometime later, still bothered by it, I was telling that dream to a kid (well, a young man in his mid 30s) in the Elf café, and he said, “Hey, I had a dream like that once.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, it wasn’t just like that one, but it reminded me of this dream I had.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah; I was on a train or about to get on a train or had been on that train or was thinking about a train... and I had my cat—Hayes—in my arms... he had just died.”

“Who names a cat Hayes anymore?” I said wryly.

“Yeah, right.”

“There was probably a time in History when every cat in America was named Hayes...” I observed.

“And every cat on this island too.”

We pondered that for a bit.

“So, I was on this train, talking to a veterinarian chick-type-woman, and she looked at Hayes; you know, kinda checked out his body, and looked in his mouth and stuff. And she said, ‘Black from head to tail; every paw black ’cept one, I guess you could say that Hayes is a black cat.’ And I said, ‘I guess anyone would have to agree with your assessment, Doctor.’ And, she assured me that she knew what she was talking about. And, I kinda forget what happened next.”

“So, that was the dream?”

“What I can remember of it. I remembered more of the details, right after I just woke up, of course.”

“That was the dream you were reminded of by the one I just told you about?”

“Yep.”

“... the battlefield, the dead, the blueberry pie?”

“Yeah... it reminded me of Hayes immediately. It was like—POW—there I was with Hayes in my arms again... on a train... and that chick-doctor looking at his paws.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “In what way does the dream I told you about remind you of that?”

He looked at me and snarled, “Screw you, old man; it was dream wasn’t it?”

Then he pushed back his chair, got up and walked away without saying another word.

Later, I walked home and found her missing.

A METAPHOR FOR SOMETHING

When I entered the Breath of the Dog Tavern everyone in the place looked up, then immediately returned to what they had been doing before I'd walked in.

When I entered the Felled Ox, a few minutes later, everyone in the place looked up and pointed or nodded toward the back of the room. Then, they returned to what they had been doing before I'd walked in.

As I made my way through the crowd, I noticed some people shaking their heads, some laughing, some nodding as if they understood. Someone patted me on the back; more than one woman smiled encouragingly at me, and one guy put out his cigarette, blew a smoke ring, and wished me good luck.

She was sitting in the last booth in the darkest corner of that tavern. After I'd stood at the edge of the table for a while she looked up at me with challenge in her eyes.

"Is this a metaphor for something?" I asked.

"What? This... a metaphor?" She looked around. "I wish it was only a metaphor."

I sat across from her.

"I'm not a sullen drunk," she said, "I'm not pouting."

"I can see that," I said.

"I'm not an angry drunk; I'm not going to smash this bottle and start throwing things."

"I wouldn't expect that of you."

"...not a giddy drunk; I don't find any humor in this."

"I don't either."

"I know you don't," she said. "I can tell you this much too: I'm not a thoughtful drunk; the last thing I want is to think about anything." She shook her head. "I just don't know... I honestly cannot figure out what I'm doing here; why do I continue to live? I'm completely lost, no longer care, and I wish I was dead."

She looked at me as if I might supply an answer, but I couldn't. I'd seen that look before though; as if the last drop of desperation had been drained from her. In a strange way, it was brave of her to make another attempt at trying to understand what was going on.

One time, when I was just starting college, an old wino asked me directly if I had the answer to his dilemma. "I'm only a kid," I told him, "I don't know anything." Now, here I was, with an additional 40 years of life experience behind me, and I still didn't know a damned thing.

"So, here's what we got," she said, "Not sullen, not angry, not giddy; god knows not erudite, lost-er than lost."

I nodded.

"So," she said, "what the hell are you doing here, Darryl?"

"Well, I wanted to see how *you* were doing."

"Welp... Darryl... I'm not doing so well," she said and took a drink. "Not... so well. Thing is," she said, looking at me, "I've been better." She thought about things for a bit and took a drink from an empty glass. "Need to work on my drinking skills. I'm not a very good drunk."

"Well," I said, "You gave it your best shot."

"I did. And it came up bupkus."

"Would you like to go with me?" I asked. "We could go out and get some air."

“Sure,” she said, “why not? I don’t really seem to be accomplishing all that I had hoped for in here.”

I helped her to her feet, looked around at the barkeep—who put up both palms as if to say ‘forget it’—took her gently by the elbow and got her pointed toward the door. Together we started making our awkward three-legged way slowly through the parting crowd. This time I was recipient of the same treatment I’d had coming in; shaking heads, smiles, a pat on the back, and someone wished us good luck again. She waved to the crowd as we departed.

“S’long, dear frens,” she muttered.

We stumbled together into the open air and took a seat on the bench where I first sat with her, and she first threw up. She looked around, “Déjà vu?” she asked.

A guy followed us out—one carefully placed foot in front of the other—and staggered over. Shifting from one foot to the other, as if he were standing on the deck of a rocking boat, he stood looking down upon me. He sighed heavily. Then he leaned over and, placing both hands on his knees, whispered loudly into my left ear.

“Look,” he said, “**two** things. One: YOU should keep your granddaughter out of there. She doesn’t belong in the Ox.” “I know that,” I said.

“She’s not a drunk; not like the rest of ‘em in there. OK?”

“OK” I said.

“And the other one,” he said. “That’s the crucial point; the other one. OK?”

“OK.”

“The other one is mainly the crucial point. OK?”

“OK.”

“OK then.”

He stood up, and still shifting from one foot to the other, he looked down upon her sadly for a long time. He patted me on the shoulder with the benevolence of a fatherly drunk. "It's not that I wish to hurt you... either one. It's just that my love is such. OK?"

"OK."

Then, it was as if a huge invisible shepard's crook had come out the door of the Felled Ox, snagged him by the neck, and dragged him back inside against his will.

"Thanks whole bunches," she sneered.

"The gentleman was expressing concern for us," I said.

"Ha. Yeah, gentleman... from the waist up."

"What do you have against that man?" I asked.

"Nada. We are all hoping he has a pleasant evening," she said. Then she whispered, "I'm joking of course; we hold no such hope."

"What is it about him you don't like?" I asked.

"I feel sorry for him; I think he must suffer from bi-lateral micro-cardial ephasia..." she said.

"What's that?"

"I do not know; I just made it up."

"Here's something I wrote down for you, Darryl," she said, handing me a folded paper. "THIS splains everything."

I looked at it: *Struck, Captured, Invest, Value?, Spirit, Art, Wisdom, Admonitions, Clap-trap.*

"It's obvious AND obscene, isn't it?" She laughed. "I'm offering YOU, Darryl P., something of enduring value... I meant enduring quality. And yet... you know... and yet, you, DAR-RYL, will not listen. You just won't. Oh, Darryl, WHAT am I to do with you?" she said, and fell asleep at that very instant, in my arms.

ANOTHER DAY

ON WHICH I came very close to WAKING UP

I woke up and found her gone.

It didn't even require any thought; I pulled on my pants, shod myself, and ran out the door. I looked into the Felled Ox and she was not in there, so, I went to the Breath of the Dog, and there she was. She was the only one in the place besides the barkeep who, in typical barkeep tradition, was fully occupied, leaning in a corner, thoroughly bored. I took the barstool beside her and waved the barkeep off; which was OK with him, he had other things to do.

"What are you doing in here? It's not even eight o'clock."

"That's wrong," she said without looking at me.

"What's wrong?"

"You shouldn't say, 'it's not *eight* o'clock' you should say; it's not HAVE EATEN a clock..."

"What?"

"It's wrong to say 'ate a clock'...should be 'have EATEN' a clock."

"OK, fine, but, grammar aside, you should make an effort to stay out of here..." I noticed that the barkeep rolled his eyes, shook his head, and laughed to himself.

"I would never, EVER correct your Grandma," she said dryly. "I would never correct anyone's Grandma."

I sighed, realizing for the fourth time in my life that it is impossible to save anyone who does not want to be saved. But, I felt I had not yet determined whether she wanted to

be saved or not. Surrender to misery is often self-inflicted; nothing more than an act; a peculiar arbitrary commitment to a tragic/romantic illusion.

“You know,” she said, looking at me steadily. “If you *have* eaten a clock, you should tell me. I would like to know how it was prepared. Was it deep fried? Was it filleted? Was it done up in a rich thick cream sauce, in an attempt to hide something, in the high French manner?” She looked at me drunken-clever for a while, as if demanding a response. I gave her none.

This was not the first time I had serious doubts that I was really cut out for the job of helping her.

Here’s why:

You know that thing where someone steps on the prongs of a rake and the handle springs up and hits ‘em in the face? I actually did that, INTENTIONALLY. Somehow, I’d convinced myself that I was quick enough to catch the handle before it could hit me. And, when that proved to be painfully untrue, convinced that I *could* catch that handle if I only tried harder, I stepped on the thing again. To my credit (I guess) I only needed to be smacked in the face twice before I was completely convinced that I WAS NOT as quick as I thought I was. It raises the question though: Am I really the right guy to help anyone put an end to dangerous and foolish behavior?

We sat in silence for a while, before she raised her glass and the barkeep came over immediately and filled it.

"I keep tellin' her it'd be a whole lot easier, for all of us, if she just moved in upstairs," he said flatly, and withdrew. "I'm not trying to make drinking more convenient for her," I said sharply, "I'm trying to help her put an end to it."

"Awww," she said. "See, now that's what I like about you, Mockridge, Darryl, P. YOU, SIR... appear to care. I mean you have the appearance of someone who might."

"Where do you get this Darryl P. stuff?"

"SEE! Again. That's what I like about you, P.; you know how to play the game." She drank. "Darryl P. Mockridge; born somewhere, died somewhere, wrote some stuff, had no off-spring otherwise... *that we know of*..." She winked at me. "... remained a mystery to all and asunder what the P. stood for. I, Mr. P., suspect it stands for Palsy-Wellsy. Darryl, Palsy-Wellsy, Mock-whatever. Have I got it right?"

"Man," I said, playing the game, "You be *truly* blasted."

"Yes," she said, "I be so."

"Why?"

"Why? Cause, like a lemac I must drink a lot in order to survive my torturous trek through the endless tresed."

"A lemac?" I asked.

"A lemac," she said with finality. "A *backward* lemac."

I gave it some thought.

"Are you the cup-backed lemac or the two-cup variety?"

"I don't really know. All I know is, I mus' seem to keep drinkin' in order for me to make it through this tresed."

"If I told you I would help you through... the tresed... but you have to get up and go with me, right now, outside, what would you say?"

She said nothing; just looked down at her glass.

"What would you say?" I repeated.

She nodded. She looked at me, she lifted her glass, drank, slammed the glass down on the counter smartly and declared, "My work is done here!"

She slid backward off the barstool, put a hand on my shoulder and slurred, "Let's go, P., ol' pal."

We went out into the blinding light of day and wandered over to a bench, in the same small park we'd occupied once before. We sat for a while; her, looking up at the branches of the tree that hung over us; me, wondering (once again / still) if I was being any help at all to the poor woman.

While we sat there I noticed a couple arriving, on the other side of the park, with a dog on a long leash. The man was about my age; she a dozen years younger and too good for him in every way. I watched as they tied the dog to a tree, before returning my focus to Sharon. She was holding her head up, bravely holding back tears. When silent little sobs began to shake her frame, she turned away from me and buried her face in her hands. I leaned forward, placed my elbows on my knees, and looked steadily at the ground while my heart flooded with a terrible compassion.

After a while a sound caught my attention—a hollow kind of pock, pock, pock. I looked up to observe the couple hitting a badminton birdie back and forth... no net, just fun. The dog, completely disinterested, was lying in the grass with his head on his paws.

I watched as they played.

And I enjoyed what I saw.

It was fascinating to observe.

POCK, there it goes. The trajectory of the thing in flight was genuinely pleasing somehow, and there was something wonderful about the sound of it as well. POCK, here it comes, falling nicely out of the sky. POCK, there it goes again. Can she get to it? POCK, nice save, young lady! She got great loft on it. POCK, his return is pretty good. POCK, she almost missed that one... POCK, wow, a nice recovery by the old man! See the bird on high. POCK, nicely done. POCK, here it comes. POCK, there it goes. It climbs, it clings to the air for a beat, it drops so innocently. Then, POCK, and there it goes again. The way these people played together was truly beautiful. Once in a while they would both stop and laugh simultaneously, as if sharing a private little badminton joke. They were a lovely couple.

I found myself smiling as I watched them bat that thing back and forth. And, when I looked at her, I saw that Sharon was taking it all in as well. She had tears in her eyes and a crumpled smile on her face.

“What do you think?” I stammered.

“It’s nice,” she said.

“I like it too,” I said.

“I think Tracie would have loved that game,” she said.

We sat there, smiling, with tears running down our faces, while they played. Pock... pock... pock.

After a while, she spoke.

“This world is meaningless and cruel,” she said looking straight ahead. Then she looked at me, fixed me with her eyes, challenging me to refute the statement. I said nothing, of course; there was nothing I could say.

Back at her place, we talked.

“I cannot understand why I don’t just die,” she said. “Being trapped in this world is madness, and worse than death.”

That was a very rough day, and eventually, after hours of talk and gallons of tears, she just fell asleep in a chair.

Like a movie hero, I carried her into her room and tucked her in. I gazed down upon her lovingly, poor innocent abandoned soul. Then, I went out, chewed my way slowly, thoughtfully, through a meal at Voilà La Belle and, like every weakling portrayed in every movie ever made, fell in at the Breath of the Dog, to wash it all down with whiskey.

Later, when I emerged, there were some friends outside, waiting to greet me.

That NIGHT

... I spent in a holding cell, sleeping on a clean but otherwise unaccommodating cot, behind a thick, locked, steel door, no longer greatly honored but still a guest of the Island Nation of Blétante.

From that day forward, all thought of; food, friends, the Guidance from Above, sea-going turtles, bars, politics, religion, the Flower Conservatory on Tender—which I was glad to have finally taken in—the Old Bandito Trail, Giorgio and his wife and family, Samuel Snard, His wife, his son, Irene, Elaine, Doper's, that poor puppy-dog and what may lay ahead for Jacques de Jacques, were wiped entirely from my mind. I wasn't worried about myself, I was worried about Sharon. Nothing else was important. I felt no other need.

There was no one else I wanted to speak to, or wanted to speak to me. Whether adrift at sea or anywhere else on earth, I would find myself as miserable, as desperate, as worried, as prayerful... and feeling as helpless, if I could not know, with certainty, that she was safe.

So, on that night, I was all of that—miserable, desperate, worried, prayerful, nearly insane not knowing—as I spent every frantic minute of the rest of that evening trying to convince myself that she would be OK without me. I truly wanted to believe that. I told myself a thousand times that she'd be OK.

But it didn't really work.

DAY SEVENTEEN

Morning

It looked like a TV courtroom, but smaller... all done up in dark, exotic hardwood paneling. There were two tables, the judge's bench with a witness stand to one side, an empty jury box, a bar separating us from an equally unoccupied public gallery. I was brought in and offered a seat, alone, behind one of the tables. The man who had escorted me in went over and stood behind the other table; the judge came in. I was relieved to see that the judge was a woman... I cannot really say why.

She stood at her bench and spoke directly to me.

"You look nervous, Mr. Mockridge. There's no reason to be... but let me explain things to you. This gentleman," she indicated the guy who'd brought me in, "represents the Island Nation of Blétante. As is our way, you may represent yourself. I—indifferent to the desires of either—represent Justice. What is about to transpire in this courtroom is not so much a matter of Law as it is a matter of Justice. And although that may be a difficult differentiation for you to make as a US citizen, you should take some comfort in the fact." She smiled at me. "Now, it is customary that you rise and you bow to Justice."

I got to my feet and—while watching the other guy out of the corner of my eye, to see how he did it—bowed.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Mockridge," she said. She turned her attention to the (I guess) prosecutor and said, "Blétante, what do you have to say?"

“Your Honor, this is a case of an *over-stay*. And, we would not be here today except for the fact that, Mr. Mockridge has done this before.”

The judge’s eyebrows shot up nearly beyond her brow-line. “How is that possible, Blétante?” She shuffled through some papers looking for an explanation.

“Indeed.” He coughed, he bowed his head, and he blushed a little. “Mr. Mockridge was a guest on these islands three years ago and overstayed. When he could not provide the means for civil departure, he was set adrift and asked to never return. He was picked up two days later by a United States Coast Guard cutter.”

“Go on.”

“Mr. Mockridge had been on these islands as a journalist for a general-distribution American glossy magazine: Pure Arrogance. After his departure he had published, in that magazine, three, I think, articles concerning the nature of our political system, as well as a small book of some sort, concerning his trip. The Island Nation became aware of these articles, and the book, sometime after the fact, and was very much pleased by what Mr. Mockridge had said in both, and wished to honor his contribution to the Nation. While looking into the possibility, Blétante discover the overstay and the subsequent deportation.”

“And so...”

“And so, Your Honor, routine inquiries were made, and very shortly we discovered that his overstay was not the result of any negligence on his part, nor of any disregard for our laws. According to Mr. Mockridge, it was the result of a ‘vindictive plot’ perpetrated by two persons who had taken a disliking to him for something he had said.”

“And so...”

“And so, Your Honor, the Island Nation immediately sent Mr. Mockridge an apology, extending an invitation to return as the Nation’s Greatly Honored Guest... And, as you can see, now, he has overstayed again... so, well, here we are.”

“That is the truth as Blétante knows it, without bias?”

“That, Your Honor, is the truth as this the Island Nation of Blétante understands it, without bias.”

He bowed and sat down.

The judge smiled at me.

“Mr. Mockridge, I feel the need to inform you that, unlike things as they are where you come from, in Blétante it is often the wisest of men who chooses to be his own counsel. That stance is not strictly enforced, but it is one of several reasonable and often recommended courses. And, I can see that you have so chosen. True?”

I nodded.

“Justice,” she continued, “as I have informed you, is not a matter of Law but a matter of Truth. So, now it’s your turn. I advise you to tell me the truth, if you can, without bias. If you are merely a deceiver, you might as well admit it up front; things will take much less time that way. I’m sure there are better things we would all prefer to be doing.”

She raised an eyebrow, asking me if I got it.

I nodded.

“So, tell me what happened. How did you manage, as a Greatly Honored Guest of the Island Nation of Blétante, to overstay your visa and embarrass both the Island Nation and yourself... a second time?”

I thought about it briefly, and then I said this: “Tequila.”

She looked at me, smiled and said, “I hope it was good tequila, Mr. Mockridge.”

“Don Julio Real, Your Honor.”

“How many shots did you have?”

“I...”

“I see. So, now Mr. Mockridge, you have not only embarrassed this Nation as well as yourself, you have, apparently, shown tremendous disrespect for a truly fine tequila. Fortunately for you, Mr. Mockridge, we are not French, and the penalty for a passing moment’s discourtesy toward us is not for us to be discourteous to you throughout the remainder of Eternity.” She smiled.

“And—good for you again—we are not America, where the penalty for a broken taillight is, on occasion, death.”

She smiled again.

“Further good news for you, Mr. Mockridge, is the fact that in the Island Nation of Blétante we believe that *individual consideration* is the benchmark of civilization AND that Justice *can only be served* with that in constant view.”

She smiled a third time.

“Consequently, I’d like to hear about your first overstay; how did that come about? Was that a matter of tequila as well?”

“Tequila was present—it was a farewell celebration of sorts—but tequila had no hand in what happened...”

“Continue.”

“A desk clerk, where I was staying, *took a disliking to me* because of a MOC and the fact that a woman he was in love with allowed me to believe that it was OK for me to fall in love with her too, while strolling around town.”

“I’m sorry...what?”

“She... wait. Can I start over?”

“That might prove helpful.”

“On my arrival, a desk clerk was, well, an exceptionally rude kind of... well, he was rude. And when I told my guide about it—just as something to talk about—he declared a MOC and the desk clerk was slapped, and he kinda took a real *disliking to me*, even though I wanted NOTHING to do with the MOC. I didn’t even know what a MOC was.”

She waited for me to take a breath. Then she asked, “And what was this about the woman he was in love with?”

“Oh, so see, I liked her and she liked me, and we spent a little time together one afternoon. That’s all.”

“Then, as he saw it, he had additional motivation...”

“Yes.”

I looked at the judge and she nodded to continue.

“So, there was this celebrity news chick who bedded me twice but failed to win my eternal devotion, and those two—her and the desk clerk—got together to delete my wake-up call, get me drunk, steal my wallet and convince two good friends—each who wanted to take me to the airport on time—that the other was going to do it. So, then, I woke up late, shook hands with a couple officials as they were about to break down my door, waved bye-bye to the two grinning connivers as I was ushered out the hotel door, and thrown, but nicely, into a holding pen not unlike the one I spent last night in, and kindly allowed to make as many calls for help as I wished, but had no one to call. That is the whole story, as best as I can recall it... Your Honor.”

“Blétante?”

“This is the truth as we know it, Your Honor.”

“OK, Mr. Mockridge. I believe I have a somewhat sketchy but, nonetheless realistic understanding of that over-stay. Now, on to this one. You were the Greatly Honored Guest of this Island Nation and you decided to offend the state at the very last possible moment by not showing up for your flight home—WHY?”

“Something came up.”

“Did you notice a sign posted in any of the drinking establishments you habituated, saying, in large blue, block letters: ‘D A Y W, DBU’?”

“I did. And I wondered about that. I know that DBU means don’t be unreasonable.”

“And what did you suppose D A Y W conveyed?”

“I wanted to ask, but forgot,” I said. Then, I began to laugh. She waited for me to return, and raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, see... I just suddenly remembered... being so, you know... drunk... one night that I thought that sign was addressing me directly. I thought it had spoken to me, with a childish lisp, saying, ‘Dayw, don’t be unwee-sonable!’”

“You’re not proud of that, I suppose.”

“No, ma’am.”

“Good. So, let me tell you what it actually stands for. In the vernacular it means, Drink All You Want, Don’t Be Unreasonable.”

“Huh.” I nodded.

“I can see that you took the first part to heart, but you fell, perhaps, just a little short on the unreasonable part.”

I nodded.

“Would you like to tell me why?”

“What would be the difference?”

“The difference could be considerable. Tell me what happened to you in Dead End; I’ll need to hear that.”

I looked at her; she seemed sincere, I took a deep breath.

“It’s a long story...”

“Justice is rarely swift, Mr. Mockridge.”

“Well, I guess it was bout four days ago... let me think ...yeah, about four days ago... maybe five. At any rate, one night recently... I was leaving a bar at Dead End, on Tender —after having consumed some tequila...”

“Don Julio.”

“No, something of lesser nobility, which is a story unto itself... and two women came stumbling out of the bar while I was getting my coordinates... and, you know how these things are... I spent some time with one of them and woke up the following morning curled up in a frozen fetal position on her kitchen floor.”

“So, you are a gentleman, Mr. Mockridge.”

“Thank you, Your Honor... though I make no such claim. So, later... day or so later, we talked and I discovered that that poor woman...”

At that point my eyes began to tear up and I began to sob, thinking of Sharon. And, it took what felt like an hour of coaxing from the judge to get the entire story out. It ended with me saying, “So, you know, the day I was supposed to depart was her daughter’s birthday—as Life would have it—and I just simply could *not* leave that woman, on that day. I could not leave her there, to face things alone.”

“Mr. Mockridge,” said the judge, “you are a good man, and perhaps even an honest one, and I wish you well. I will now rule. It is appropriate for you, Mr. Mockridge to rise.”

I rose. I stood there with my hands folded in front of me and tears rolling down my stupid old cheeks.

“You, Mr. Mockridge, will restrain your enthusiasm for drink this evening.” She addressed the ‘prosecutor’,
“Blétante, this gentleman is your Greatly Honored Guest; when it is time for him to depart, you will see that he is up and on his feet in time, and that he arrives at the airport in time, to catch his flight home. So be it!”

She slammed a stone of some sort down upon something, with a resounding clack. ‘Blétante’ came over to me and said, “I’ll be by with your limo at 8:30 this evening, Sir. Please be prepared to leave.”

For a while I felt entirely lost. I didn’t know what to do. I was standing there looking stupid when the judge said to me. “I’d like to speak to you further about this, Mr. Mockridge; would you care to have lunch with me?”

LUNCH with JUSTICE

To my surprise, when I arrived at the restaurant, Blétante was represented at the table along with Justice.

"I was just explaining to Blétante that the day of your departure has not yet been determined," she said. "I will rule on that after we've spoken."

She dismissed him, and he nodded to me before leaving.

"Clearly you are made of tougher stuff, Mr. Mockridge, but, not so well-hidden, beneath all the bluster you have a sympathetic heart. We appreciate that around here. Once, because you failed to leave our islands on time, we placed you in a raft, in the water, and wished you a bon voyage. At that time, you were asked never to return again to Blétante. When we realized that we had made a mistake, we invited you back. Now, I believe it would be a mistake to allow you to leave Blétante."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means that you will be returning to Wilfred's Point Landing, and that you will see to your friend's emotional needs until that time at which you have determined, to your mutual satisfaction, that she can withstand your departure. I leave it entirely up to you to make that determination." She sipped water and looked at me.

"When that time comes, you will contact me, and we'll discuss necessary arrangements for your departure from these islands. In the meantime, if you need anything, not just for your protégé, but for yourself as well, the Island Nation of Blétante will be pleased to provide it. If you wish to extract that poor woman from Wilfred's Point Landing

and find, for her, a... nicer... situation in which to reside, contact me and I will see that the move is made. I believe the Nation of Blétante would be pleased to fund that move. Any questions you might have concerning this arrangement may be addressed to me directly. Here is all the information you might need for now.”

She handed me a piece of folded paper.

“That’s it,” she said. “You are welcome to stay and have lunch with me; you are welcome to leave; as is our way, it’s entirely up to you.”

“Is there someone who can take me back?”

“He’s waiting for you outside.”

“I feel like I’d better...”

“I understand.”

I looked at her in utter amazement.

“Mr. Mockridge,” she said, “we hope you have enjoyed your stay in Blétante. Fortunately, it is my duty, as well as my genuine pleasure, to inform you that, because of your kindness toward our citizens, on behalf of our Island Nation, I must ask you to overstay your visa.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“You are most welcome,” she said.

I laughed. “Thank you,” I sang, and I started making my way quickly toward the door.

“Mr. Mockridge!” she cried.

I stopped.

I turned.

And, Justice flipped me a Phenneger.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Things are what they are.

ORDER ADDITIONAL COPIES
of this little book through EstuaryPublications.com

Books available from Estuary Publications

TWO WEEKS in BLÉTANTE by Darryl Mockridge (FICTION)
Concerning politics as seen from an apolitical POV

WHEN I WAS A LOW-LIFE: An American Education by Henry Edward Fool The culmination of nearly 50 years of writing, as well as occasional thought, concerning 4 college years in Richmond, Virginia, beginning 1967.

TRIAL BY GUEST: An Accurate Accounting of the Various Reasons I Should Be Hung by Henry Edward Fool Concerning 12 years working in a small privately owned French Hotel, in San Francisco, beginning 1999.

AMERICAN RACONTEUR: Real American Writin' for Real American Readin' by Henry Edward Fool Excerpts from the blog of that same title, concerning the 18 years prior to, and the nearly 40 years after the events recorded in *Low-Life*

LOST IN THE DIN: Why Your Opinion on Politics and Religion Means NOTHING, and Mine Means Even Less by Henry Edward Fool Concerning politics as seen from an a-political POV

REFINEMENT: How a Good Marriage Can Nudge an Unwary Man in the Direction of Civility by Henry Edward Fool Concerning (I'm as surprised as you are) marriage.

AWAKE AMID ANCESTRAL DREAMS (poetry)
by Emma Moonsinger

WORDS FOR THIS CANNOT BE FOUND (more poetry)
by Henry Edward Fool

EARWIG, also includes Jack Nicholson IS Santa Claus
both adapted from screenplays by Darryl Mockridge

LIKE A RABBIT

In the park I sat down on a bench
Next to an old man with a cane
He was smiling, laughing openly
Watching a young child running
In crazy circles upon the grassy sunlit knoll

“Like a rabbit, she runs,” he remarked
His laughter was warm and deep and genuine
And, gosh, I liked him immediately

“Is that your granddaughter?” I asked
“No, but her happiness makes me happy
Just as if she was,” he said
“Like a rabbit, she runs!”

I watched the child run like a rabbit for a while
Until her mother caught her up in her arms and
Carried her away

So, there we were
In the very heart of life
She enjoyed running
He enjoyed her enjoyment
And I enjoyed his

I like to think that
Somewhere, undetected and undetectable
We are being watched
And our enjoyment
Brings enjoyment to others
As we run around down here in crazy circles

Until someone who loves us deeply
Comes along, scoops us up
And carries us away

Emma Moonsinger