

THEORADIĆ



THEOPHANY



PRELUDE, FUGUE,  
RAINDANCE

Volume II

**Excerpt 4**

**LA FILLE AUX CHEVEUX DE LIN**  
**(The Girl with the Flaxen Hair)**

*Retorno... ¿adónde? ¿de qué? ¿para qué?*  
*(I return... to where? from what? for what?)*  
– Juan Ramón Jiménez, *Platero y Yo*

The city of grimaces welcomed me back into its cacophony. It was the middle of summer, blistering hot, and I wandered in a daze along the Promenade des Anglais, uncertain of what my next move would be. But things work themselves out unaided at times, and so, with the help of the law student, Daniel, I was able to move into a tiny closet-like room at 16, Boulevard Gambetta, one of the most heavily trafficked arteries of Nice. I asked Daniel if he had any news of Anatole, and he told me rather glumly that Anatole had gone to Brussels with Laure and didn't know if he was back yet. I could see that he really had his heart set on marrying Laure (but all's fair in love and waure). The landlady knew Daniel and gave me the room on credit, for which I was extremely grateful. Otherwise, I would have had to join the numerous *clochards* sleeping on park benches or on the pebbly beach. One young derelict slept on the beach regularly in front of the luxurious Hôtel Negresco, a sinewy, tanned deaf-mute. On the entire Côte d'Azur I had not seen a freer soul. He could be seen in the marketplace silently gesturing that he wanted scraps of food, not hearing the vendor's rude,

– Va-t'en!

He was always barefoot and totally independent, carrying a net bag with him wherever he went in case there was some edible commodity he could toss into it. If he indeed could talk, Diogenes'

words would have fit well in his mouth: "I learned from the mice how to get along: no rent, no taxes, no grocery bill." When not scavenging for food, the tanned young deaf man spent the entire day on the beach in front of the expensive Hôtel Negresco, where he was getting as brown as a negresco in the intense heat and light, *sans six sous, san souci*. Goethe admitted that a cynic ("dog-like") philosopher would consider life in his northern climate intolerable, that nature invited the cynic to live in the South. Here, a ragged and hungry philosopher like Diogenes can exist in utmost poverty and still have fun, whereas in the north, the cold dark winters demand that the finest days and best hours be given over to dull, calculating industriousness and not to play. According to Goethe, that is why the nordic races are not playful and also why a fine sense of humor is so tragically rare among them. My own life at this point was, as in Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, "fairly severe poverty", but at least not as severe as the young *clochard*. I saw him sitting on the beach every day, alone in the thick crowd of sweating tourists, in his own world, free. Skinny, brown and weather-beaten, I nonetheless could imagine that his independence was worth living such a hard life.

Another old *clochard* slept on the same bench in Jardins Alsace Lorraine for many years, and I even saw him there two months ago when I was last in Nice. The two Russian *clochards* I had seen that day in front of the cathedral still wore their fur caps and cossack boots even in the summer heat. They could be seen all over town, and when I stopped to talk to them their clothes emanated an odor of wine and urine. They both had the fine hands of musicians, however, and one, the fiddler, was of African descent. On closer examination I noticed that their cossack boots were actually only the leather tops which hid beneath them very ordinary shoes – like a lawyer might wear – since the original

soles had been worn out long ago. (Anatole's cossack boots must have been quite worn out by now. I would have to tell him about this trick.) The dark one had a sense of humor and a devilish sparkle in his eye, while the other one was silent and introverted. I will never forget that day when I saw the African cossack in the Jardin Albert Premier alone, playing his violin like a jazz-Paganini. It was a public holiday and he was serenading a prudish little woman on a park bench with a barking poodle in her lap. The more the little dog barked at the fiddler, the more inspired was his playing, all the while that he made faces at the shocked pair of little animals. He played a piece composed by the gypsy guitarist Django Rheinhardt for Stephane Grappelli's jazz violin, and the little woman was scandalized. The poodle lunged yapping at the mad fiddler, but the dark one danced as he played, coming even closer to them, playing even more ecstatically. The woman seemed ready to have a heart attack as she hurriedly picked up her barking poodle and hurried out of the park. There were several other *clochards* in the city of grimaces whom I talked to, since they were the friendliest people around.

I lived in the back courtyard of 16, Boulevard Gambetta and for that reason, I was fortunate enough to hear the ungodly din on the boulevard as only a muffled rumble. Painting was impossible in the cramped little room, and the days at the Foundation appeared to have been nothing more than a brief reprieve in my dog-like (*cynic*) existence. I lay on my bed lost in daydreams about the one thing which could make my fragmented life complete: a woman. But the pressing needs of daily life took my mind off such longing. I had to find a job. It was imperative.

I had tried unsuccessfully for a year to get a work permit from the bureaucrats at police headquarters – to no avail. I spent painful moments endlessly waiting in a smoke-filled corridor of the Préfecture, sitting on a hard bench with Arabs and Africans

who had the same problem as I. No work permit. No money. Sitting in that miserable lineup I felt as if we were waiting to be shipped off to some concentration camp somewhere. The policemen did not hide the fact that they detested dark-skinned foreigners, and by now I too had become as brown as a negresco. It seemed as if I would have to wait until doomsday for the bureaucrat to call my name, so I went over to the tiny counter-window with its wooden shutter half closed to see what was taking so long. Peeking into the small opening I encountered yet one more of those unpleasant little rodents with foul breath and an air of regal importance called *fonctionnaire*. He immediately made it quite clear to me that I WAS TAKING UP HIS VERY PRECIOUS TIME! I crouched down and peered into the tiny opening in the wall where he lurked in his dark cubby-hole like a badger, trying to keep his attention for two seconds straight. He bared his yellow fangs at me each time I asked about a work permit, and made it clear that if it was up to him such riff-raff as me and my dark-skinned companions ought to be taken out behind the police headquarters, lined up against a wall and machine-gunned. *Nom de dieu!* Did I think that a work permit was had just like that? You would think he was handing out Nobel prizes instead of a scrap of paper allowing me to dig ditches or scrub pots!

(I do not write "machine-gunned" lightly. On October 17, 1961, at the time of the war in Algeria, the Parisian police massacred at least two hundred unarmed Algerian residents of Paris. The police chief at the time, Maurice Papon, had already gotten away with mass-murder by deporting one thousand French Jews to the German death camps during World War II. His war crimes were overlooked and he was made a part of the French government. Later he became police chief in Paris, when he again was responsible for mass-murder. When the Algerians gathered at a

metro station to protest the torturing and persecution of their countrymen by Parisian policemen, Papon gave his subordinates carte blanche, and the massacre was a fact. Having condoned torture and summary executions routinely in Algeria, the French officials continued to use the same methods in the middle of Paris, one decade before my ordeal at the Préfecture of Nice. Far too late, Papon was condemned for his deportation of Jews. But for the mass-murder of 200 Algerian residents in Paris, no one to this day has been held accountable. Those involved are still being given immunity by the French government.)

Understandably frustrated, I stood up after trying to reason with the miserable *fonctionnaire* through the tiny opening and noticed that the door to his office was ajar. Since it was idiotic to crouch and talk to him through that little opening, I opened the door and stuck my head in telling the rodent to his face that it was my right to work just as it was my right to eat and just what was the problem? But before I could finish he attacked me viciously like Pierrot, the emasculated dog, and told me that the “law” forbid me to speak to him from the doorway, and that the same “law” made it mandatory that I speak to him THROUGH THE COUNTER WINDOW! It was against the “law” for a *fonctionnaire* of his standing to speak to me face to face. He pushed questionnaires and forms out the opening toward me like a rat cleaning out its hole, snarling at me to go away.

After dealing with similar creatures for two years and wearing my saint-like patience threadbare, I was nonetheless *never* granted a work permit in Nice. Vive la France! How was I to get a job? The prospect of a life as a *clochard* was becoming more and more an option. But one day a French girl who followed me around said that she had found me a job as a dishwasher in a restaurant in Vieux Nice, a “black job” requiring no work permit, but with a beggar’s pittance as salary. I told her I would take the job, and she

went to inform the employer. By this time Anatole had returned alone from Brussels. Evidently, he had broken off with Laure, who had stayed behind with her family. After a while, he began flirting with the French girl (who was a bit of a *folle*) and soon she was following him instead of me, and I was glad of that. She was only interested in making love, but she didn't arouse my interest in the way Marisol had done.

My prudence proved to be well-founded, since not long after that Anatole caught a "French disease" from his *folle*, and had the greatest difficulty ungluing himself from her. My *cher maître* was infected as Candide's *cher maître* Pangloss was infected by the sweet but poisonous Paquette, who caught it from a rope-maker who got it from an old countess who got it from... all the way back to culprits in the Americas and Christopher Columbus himself. But with the wonders of modern medicine Anatole fared much better than Pangloss, who was covered with sores as his nose rotted away. As far as Anatole's *maladie honteuse* was concerned, several things were strictly secreted. He did not know whether he suffered from

*A pipple on the panis, two claps on the cansill, or  
three pock pocks cassey knocked on the postern!*  
– Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

The restaurant in which I had found a job was named La Grilladière, a tourist trap in the old town run by a typical grimacing *Niçois*. He paid me slave wages with impunity because he knew that I had no other choice. (After all, he had taken a "risk" in hiring me without a work permit!) La Grilladière lay opposite a house in which Napoleon had slept, and I can use its actual name without fear of a lawsuit because like the little *empereur*, it soon went bankrupt and is the site of a sleazy discothèque today. A huge brick oven filled the center of the

kitchen, blazing day and night with a wood fire for baking pizzas, lasagnas and *escargots*. It was the hottest month of the year and the heat in the kitchen was unbearable. The cook was a young simpleton who liked to lord it over his dishwasher and assistant cook. He tired me with what seemed his only joke, asking me to ask him if he had seen Monte Carlo, and so I did:

– Tu as vu Monte Carlo?

– Je n’ ai vu monté personne! Ha ha! \*

How sick I was to become of this silly pun! The assistant cook was an Algerian who was constantly exchanging curses and threats with the Jewish waiter. The *pizzaïolo* was a young sexually obsessed brute who was newly married, constantly boasting of his infidelities and his brawls. Indeed, this love of brawling has roots in the folk traditions of the *Niçois*, for among their yearly *fêtes* is the one known in their patois as *Lou Cepoun*. On a hot afternoon of August 16th, it was the custom for the bachelors and married men of Nice to clash in a free-for-all to the sound of a tambourine, fighting for possession of an enormous block of wood – *lou cepoun*. It was usually a battle with bare fists that degenerated into a general *mêlée* lasting an entire hour, with pauses now and then for drinking a glass of wine with the adversary as *bons amis* before resuming the brawl in earnest. There are strict rules to this sport as in soccer, where the arch soccer rivals Nice and Bastia (Corsica) as well slug it out. *Lou Cepoun* comes to an end with a married man dancing a farandole holding a halberd in his fist. The kitchen of La Grilladière was also a sort of free-for-all where forks and spoons replaced the halberd.

I gritted my teeth and decided to work four months in this inferno, save up every centime, and then find a quiet place in which to lick my wounds, paint, read and meditate. Solitude. The

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\* "Have you seen Monte Carlo" can also be understood as "Did you see Carlo go upstairs?" followed by the punchline: "I didn't see anyone go upstairs!"



most expensive commodity. Those four months next to the brick furnace of La Grilladière would prove to be my greatest trial yet. Such physical and spiritual anguish I hope I shall never have to endure again. (Dårhus Restaurant is heaven when compared to La Grilladière.)

And so my heroic trial began. Like Herakles with his apron on, I began to wash endless dishes in a tiny sink, walking back and forth along the Promenade des Anglais between the restaurant in Old Nice and my tiny cubby-hole at 16, Boulevard Gambetta in the blazing heat of summer, overcome with despair. I washed dishes and pots morning noon and night in a tiny metal sink. I was never fast enough for the *patron*. Fridays and Saturdays required an athletic feat of stamina of which I didn't think myself capable. In this frenzy one night my eye glasses fell to the floor and one lense broke in two. I was devastated, for without my glasses I am nearly helpless. I taped the lense back together with clear plastic tape and continued my trial. All this obscene waste of my vital energy, and, slave that I was (and am), I went along with it, prompted by a stingy promise of a few wrinkled bills at the end of the month. It was a nightmare. I slowly turned into a zombie, a dead man walking back and forth on the sunny Promenade as if risen from the grave. A somber ghost among cheerful vacationers, I felt the sun's rays on my skin as a personal insult, an ironic humiliation. How dare it shine! My whole being had become

*A frown upon the atmosphere  
That hath no business to appear  
When skies are blue and earth is gay.*  
– Byron, *The Prisoner of Chillon*

The giant wood-burning furnace blazed behind me, my chaffed hands scrubbed grime from a burnt pot, and the Jewish waiter ran into the kitchen screaming,

– More forks!

as if Judgment Day had come. I crept down into a cavern in my coal-black soul and hated everything I beheld. In the midst of burning pizzas and my misery, I thought of the 16th-century troubador Bonaventure des Periers (1510-1544) who, after being condemned by the state, committed suicide at the age of thirty-three. The most modest request that the poet makes of society is denied him, the simple but unattainable request expressed in des Periers' *La Devise du Poète*:

*Loisir et liberté*

*C'est bien son seul désir.*

As my torment continued, Anatole's family arrived from New York, crowded into his tiny room on the other side of town. On my day-off I went and said hello. Henry was there, smiling and beaming with health. It was his time to be above ground. It was I who was the zombie now. Natalie, Anatole's sister, had also made the adventurous trip, and Pyotr and Maria were quite confused, not understanding anything that was said in this foreign country. I hid my despair as best as I was able, and even managed to joke with Henry. I was glad to see him doing so well. He still had a lot of his insurance money left, and so Anatole suggested that they all should take a train to Paris and see the famous capital. S. was invited along, although he had no money for the train ticket. Henry would pay his way. Of course, I was invited to come along as well, but I had my job to think of. At least I wouldn't have to hear Anatole jeering at me as I made my daily death marches back and forth between my room and the restaurant.

They all left on a merry lark to Paris and I returned to my greasy pots and pans next to the blazing pizza furnace. On my daily treks along the Promenade des Anglais, I would stop a few minutes in front of Ruhl Plage with all the other *badauds* (rubber-

necks) looking at the bare-breasted girls languishing on beach mattresses. (Only a few years before, gendarmes arrested women who dared take off their bikini tops. Today, women exult in partial nudity on the Mediterranean coasts, even in prudish catholic Spain.) The sight of those womanly mounds stirred me from my deathly stupor, but only for an instant. Looking through the taped lense of my glasses at the soft hemispheres gleaming with sun-tan oil in the bright sun, their nipples erect in the Mediterranean breeze, I waited for something to happen with all the other gawking *badauds*. But nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. And so I turned and trod off to La Grilladière to the tempo of a funeral march. For four excruciating months I spent most of my waking hours in La Grilladière, peeling potatoes, mopping floors, scouring pots, washing dishes – all in the most primitive conditions. (There was no electronic “Betsy” here with push-buttons and multiple rinse-cycles!) I was often obliged to listen to the *pizzaiolo*’s boasts of his sexual prowess the previous night, with all the details of his excremental fixations and cacaphagia. It was always with someone other than his wife, but he made it clear that if she ever took similar liberties he had a gun and would use it on her. (How quaintly *niçois*, I thought.) Suddenly there came the familiar cry, as if World War III was beginning:

– Forks! More forks!

I would wash forks as if my life depended on it. I became obsessed with doing a good job, and was determined to get through four months (not one day less!) with my impeccable spirit intact, my inborn cheerfulness only strengthened by the suffering. Never in my life had I been able to tolerate a “job” for more than three months. Now I was going to break my record under the worst possible conditions. The morning shift started at nine o’clock and finished at two in the afternoon, when I had a four-

hour break until the evening shift, which lasted past midnight. In between the two shifts, I collapsed on the hot pebbles of the beach like a dead seal. My numerous trips back and forth on the Promenade blurred in my mind into one single round-trip. I lived in an uninterrupted dream-state, maintained by my unrelenting willpower. Four months! Not one day less! To survive, I mentally transformed one hundred and five days of torment into one. I put myself to the test and predicted a victorious future. The sun was burning fiercely over sleepy tourists sprawled on the beach.

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Predict the future? That blond girl over there... of all the faces in the murmuring crowd, it was hers which secretly spoke to me. I lay on Neptune Plage in a hazy dream, watching her emerge from the water like a goddess and walk back to her towel. I fell immediately in love with the yellow-haired girl. A certain radiance in her face made me the most miserable man on earth knowing that she was not mine. And yet, my shyness prevented me from going over to her that first day, even though I had been looking for her for years...

*Quand le monde sera réduit en...  
une plage pour deux enfants fidèles,...  
je vous trouverai.  
(When the world will be reduced to  
one beach for two faithful children,  
I will find you.)  
– Rimbaud, "Phrases"*

When she left the beach, I was in despair. Would she come back tomorrow? She must come back tomorrow! I left the beach and walked up Boulevard Gambetta to my room, to take my daily

siesta before the evening shift at La Grilladière. I walked through the elaborate art-nouveau facade of number sixteen situated between a *charcuterie* and a *supermarché*. I crossed the cement courtyard, opened the shabby door of the inner building, walked up one and a half flights of stairs, and with a huge iron key I unlocked the tiny door to my tiny room. The bed took up one third of the space and a gigantic oak closet took up another third. It was completely empty in its wooden heaviness, except for a few pairs of socks in the top drawer. Its lumbering heaviness was a motionless demon filling up one third of my soul, like the one third of my ecstatic young life daily stolen from me for six francs an hour. Oh! The great things I could do with that time! The great things I could do with the time I sacrifice washing Sweden's dirty dishes today, as I sip my tea and forge my curses, here on the Street of the Sour Well! Time that I will never be able to replace! Wrinkled, soiled bills! That is all they give me for my pillaged youth. *Pauvre mon talent!*

An electric hot-plate stood near the window with the remnants of the rice I had prepared the day before, on my day-off. (At least I was eating fine meals now, although the restaurant owner deducted them from my salary.) Between the bed and the oak closet there remained only the narrowest space left to move about in, which amounted to two giant steps. Home. For a while at least. A waiting room for the train of my uncertain future. Was the yellow-haired girl on the beach part of my future? I was filled with happiness just thinking about her. The haughty sun of the Midi screamed into the courtyard outside my window, but was thwarted by high walls, which made cool shadows on the concrete. The insane, cloudless sky arched over my siesta. Stretched out on the bed I entered deeper into the odd semi-sleep which reigns over my life even in waking. (Very few know what the state of true wakefulness is. Buddha knows.) I dallied in some

sort of half-lit grotto, my dream-thoughts turning around a female voice whispering up to her lover in the courtyard below:

– Michel!

Although only a faint whisper, the voice is emphatic. There is a tiny creature in the courtyard, gaping beneath the terrible blue sky. The voice hops and struggles up the steep walls like an ant caught in the sand funnel under which an ant-lion is buried, sabotaging ascents. In the cool shadows beneath the row of cypress trees behind the house on Blake Street – next to the abandoned chicken sheds on the Klein place which are such a fire hazard – there is where I watched the ant-lion toying with his prey. I saw the many ant shells scattered around the funnel of sand, external skeletons jettisoned after the ant-lion had sucked all the fluids from the ant's body. After a season devoted to eating, the ant-lion, no longer a larva, climbs out of its pit as a long-winged dragonfly. Now its purpose is no longer to eat, but to mate.

– Michel!

Eternally unanswered. Brazenly displaying its impotence in that open pit of cement. The ant-lion lies buried in the sky, toying with the struggling ant-voice. In the shade of the cypress trees. I, Teddy, am watching the ant scurry up the steep slopes as the buried ant-lion pulls the grains of sand from beneath its six frantic feet. The Santa Ana wind is blowing. The Mistral is blowing. Margaret, my dog, doesn't even see the struggling ant. The voice is ever-present and alone beneath the assassin sky. It has lost meaning. A sound. A desperate whisper.

– Mmeescha!

Barren dreams. The voice cannot escape the hollow sky where the ant-lion is buried. White sun-lion sucks out its fluids. So much darkness! Darkness behind the light sky. It is darker than on a starless night. A horrible pit of darkness behind that deceptively

bright blue sky. Eternal night deceives us with a lie: day. A pinpoint of light in everlasting darkness.

– Mmmeesscchhaaa!

The sound. A furious whisper? Wind in eucalyptus leaves? The creek in Big Sur? My mother's singing? The waves of the Pacific? If so, my bed is aligned north and south and my face points eastward. Huntington Beach. Third Street. Four blocks from the pier. A north swell. I paddle into the wave. A dark cold dream. Humboldt stream. Wind blows Chinese glass chimes in the summer leaves. Tinkling glass cutting through foliage. A cubist painting. Soquel, California. Under the tree, that vicious dog is tied up. Right next to the entrance of the garage, where my bicycle is parked. The landlady's dog. Stupid mutt! I ought to bash him with a rock! Let me get at my bicycle! Dogs! Dogs and grimacing humans! Here Fido! A nice igneous rock right in the chops! All I want is my bicycle! What's the landlady screaming? He won't hurt me? He doesn't bite? What about those bared fangs, lady? What about those carnivorous instincts of his? What about these teeth marks on my arm, lady? He won't hurt me? Is that your learned opinion, madame? The political platform on which you stand? Mrs. Forbes didn't have dogs in her paradise. Only quiet cats. And some earthworms and things. Mrs. Forbes won't like that I left the pitchfork outside leaning against the tool shed. It's bad for the tools. The metal rusts. The wood cracks.

– Mmmeesscchhaaa!

Yavi, wind-that-makes-things-dry-up, rushes through Cajon Pass. No houses or people in the valley. No freeways or power lines. No people. Guachama purified once more. If I lie on my bed facing east, then Joat (Mount Baldy) is behind me and the sun rises over my face, over Jamiwu (Mount San Jacinto), home of Taqwus the Cannibal. Uh oh. Bill has taken a switch from the elm tree. Nice and green. He takes out his pocket knife and whittles off the

shoots. He swishes the air with it two times. Ssswweesscchhaaa!  
Ssswweesscchhaaa!

– Mmmeesscchhaaa!

He tells me to take off my shirt. The elm switch stings my skin. Bill rejoices as he whips me. There is more injury done with a wire coat-hanger, so he gives me twice as many lashes as I got in that motel in Las Vegas. That sound... the furious whisper. Footsteps on dry leaves? Waves breaking breaking on Huntington pier? A rough “hush!”?

– Mshh!

Footsteps on crisp snow? Children playing? Which? Where? Washington Avenue. My sister Mary bounces her head on he pillow. Can I have a drink of water Mom? My mother’s shape enters the room, making unseen demons flee from squeaking floorboards. She brings the glass of water. I take a long cold sloshing drink. She gives Mary a drink. You two turn over, face the wall and go to sleep. There they were before me – the same scratches and holes in the painted wall next to my Gambetta bed as my Washington Avenue bed. I stared at them whenever she said, “Turn over, face the wall and go to sleep.” The same scratched wall. A lion... no, it has a hippopotamus body. A bird of prey. A face that looks like all creation. A monstrous face. A blooming face. A cancerous face. Just above this menagerie of scratches I wrote “Teddy” on the upper bunkbed’s frame. Tony sleeps with his tinder box full of flints under his pillow. Mary renamed me Ted. Sounds more grown-up, she said. The sound...

– Mmschl!

Her voice. Her windlike voice calling me home from play as she hung sheets on the line. Calling my name, blowing it among shimmering eucalyptus leaves. Southern light. South. That’s where I am. In the south. Which south? Which sound? Which bed? Which body? Mary dared to hold earthworms in her hands! Not



me! They were too slimy! The whispering sound. Tiny plaintive voice of a frail and wounded animal.

– Mschscha!

I am in a strange place. A new place. An ancient place. An eternal place. Beneath me, beyond the thin earth which supports me so precariously, gapes the abyss of all that I fear and love. Vacancy. Emptiness. A longing to be filled. A longing to fill. Bony catacombs in which the wind of madness whistles. Wisdom's plasma. Nuance. The sound. The voice. The word. Theophany. Cacophony. Silence. Raspy breathing through nostrils plugged up by hayfever. Mscha... mscha... achoo! Murmuring forest up Old Mill Road. Danny Buttons and I. Our footsteps muffled by mossy ground. Lycergic acid trance in Limerick greens. Sun glowing greenly through broad summer leaves. The joy! The silence! For rest. Forest. The stream fills the labyrinth with its rushing. Its gushing. Millions of words. Many mouths babbling at the same time in the student-restaurant at *la faculté de medecine* in Nice. Talking, babbling, clinking forks on ceramic plates, breaking bread, striking matches. A huge murmur. The day of the soccer match between the arch rivals, Nice and Bastia. Future doctors in a brutish furor over a soccer match and the *Niçois* murdered by a Corsican. (Or was it a Corsican murdered by a *Niçois*?) Incoherent chatter. Pseudo-language. It sweeps me in its current beyond time. One liquid babbling mass in the student restaurant, in the forest, at the Metropolitan Opera before the overture begins. The noise of time. In the zillion spaces between the threads of this tapestry of sound... terrible holes. The real silence. The primal vacuum. Death intermingling with my atoms. Colliding. Boiling. Little bubbles like the eyes of fishes swimming on the surface. (The tea water is almost ready for brewing.) Death marries my atoms, which belong to nothingness more than to me. Zut! My fickle matter. Mater. Mut. My atoms were once part of a defunct super nova, dying

stars. They have been around the universe Mukat only knows how many times, and know the deepest recesses of space. My will fondles them like the flesh of a cosmic mistress it will never fully possess. The yellow-haired girl on the beach. Neptune Plage. She must be there tomorrow! She must! The faint voice evaporates into the lying blue sky:

– Michel!

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I was paid on the last day of each month at La Grilladière, past midnight, after the owner had shown the last dinner guest to the door. The *patron* seemed to have glue on his fingers when it came time to handing me the few wrinkled bills which represented the theft of one month from my young life. Obscene stinginess! *À la française!* After all my torment in the blazing kitchen, the wretched man wanted me to believe that he was doing me a favor by handing over my salary. After all, he had been generous enough to hire me without a work permit! He had taken a “risk”. How bold of him! Such prodigious kindness! Amen! There! In my hand! Finally! The cash! A tiny grubstake for my painterly retreat! Down payment on solitude! A high price to pay for Art. What is worse, this very same loathsome stinginess is at the core of western economy, be it France, Sweden or the USA. It is the very same stinginess and greed which transformed the paradise Guachama (“plenty-to-eat”) into San Bernardino (“plenty-stingy”).

The next day after my first shift I went directly to Neptune Plage and was overjoyed to see that the yellow-haired girl was there. But I was still too shy to approach her. I cursed myself. What if I never saw her again? But she was there the next day. And the next. And the next. And I still hadn’t approached her. I was horrified that she might leave Nice before I mustered the courage to say something. I was utterly bewitched. Her lovely

shape emanated grace and sensuality. I walked briskly along the Promenade in the hot sun, zig-zagging in the crowd, on my way to the evening shift at La Grilladière. By chance I turned around and saw her approach from behind. I said “bonjour” as she passed, on her way to the shower on the adjacent beach. She said “bonjour” impatiently and hurried on. Her bikini enhanced her splendid womanhood. I was filled with desire as I had never been before and as I have never been again. She had undoubtedly received many “bonjour’s” during her stay in Nice, and saw me as just one more dark-haired lusty male, which in truth, I was. No, a simple “bonjour” would not be enough. I lovingly watched her walk down the steps to the public shower on the beach. Turning away like a condemned man, my scuffed shoes carried me unwillingly away from her to my pizzeria inferno. My love had grown greater each day I saw her until I thought I would explode. Even the cook noticed a change and as I was scouring a pot he mockingly asked me,

– Tu es amoureux, toi?

It was none of his damn business! I had unexpectedly come to a calm moment in the endless battles which are my life, like a hungry coyote, poised before a mesquite bush, ready to pounce on the quail hidden inside, when all of a sudden the hot wind brings him a message of love from a coyotess. Stopping in his tracks, forgetting the hunt, forgetting his hunger, he thinks instead of winning himself a mate. So it was with me. I had watched the sunny girl for four days, loving her smile, her grace her inviting young body. I was frantic at the thought of losing her forever. I decided to commit myself to subtle action. I went to visit Caroline, the painter from Hong Kong, at her studio on rue Dante. Hers was the ideal studio that all artists desire – spacious, calm, atmospheric, and equipped with a skylight, a bit like the stage set for *La Bohème*. Diffused northern light filled the studio as I

fabricated a brazen lie outloud for Caroline. I told her that I had met a young woman, a special young woman, and that I would like to introduce her to Caroline the next day. She lit up. Now I had to act. What if the girl on the beach left today? How ironic that would be! I was nervous during the whole first shift that fifth day. What if she was not there? What if it was my sorrow never to see her again? Then I would tell Caroline I was lying. A trick I played on myself. When two o'clock came around I took off my apron and walked off toward Neptune Plage. Never have I been so nimble-footed as on that day! (Not even on the day that Kutyai, the fire-wind, blew the clothes off the line and bewitched my blue corduroy pants!) Hurrying with a lover's haste along the sunny Promenade des Anglais, I looked down among the tourists sun bathing on Neptune Plage. She was there! She was walking over the hot pebbles toward the water. I had my speedo swimsuit on under my clothes. I undressed quickly and walked toward the water, diving into the bubbles in her wake. She swam peacefully as I stealthily approached like a playful sea-otter, a Californian Proteus. I dog-paddled in place and watched her for a while, making sure that she knew I was watching her. Then, for lack of a better thing to say, I asked,

– Avez-vous l'heure?

No, she didn't have the time, and what a funny question! Her voice was so sweet that I forgot to dog-paddle and swallowed a mouthful of salt water. We talked dog-paddling, and then she swam slowly to shore and walked back to her towel. I followed her and sat down beside her. I put on my glasses, the cracked lense still held in with clear tape, and asked from what country she came. Guess! I guessed German and was wrong. Swedish! What was her occupation? Guess again! School teacher? I was right. She taught English and French in Stockholm, and could also speak German and a little Russian. I don't remember if she

guessed that I was an artist. I think she did. We talked a while and then she said she had to go. We could meet tomorrow again, here on Neptune Plage. Alright. I was filled with happiness watching her walk away. We met every day and spent the following two weeks together, and so it has been for thirty-five years now. More than any other place in Europe, Neptune Plage in Nice is for me the place of Beginnings.

The next day I hurriedly took off my apron and ran out of La Grilladière to join her on Neptune Plage. We sat in the sun, near the stone wall of the Promenade. All of a sudden three shadows fell over us from above. It was Anatole, Henry and S. standing on the edge of the Promenade. They had just returned from Paris. Anatole hopped over the railing onto the pebbles next to us like a cossack dismounting. Squatting on his well-worn Ukrainian dancing boots, he began to make small-talk. I had no patience with his nervous chit-chat. Couldn't he see that I was wooing a mate? Henry and S. stood waiting on the pavement of the Promenade above, smiling at me devilishly. Finally, an oriental instinct for propriety moved S. to gesture to Anatole that he should leave us in peace.

The days with her were spent mostly on the beach or walking in Nice, but we also took short excursions by train along the Côte d'Azur. It was a sunny day when we took the train to Eze-sur-mer. We wandered along a zigzagging path up the flowering hillside which sloped to meet Eze-village and the Fragonard perfume factory. We stopped beside the wood railing holding hands, looking down into the bushy gorge, and the flickering Mediterranean beyond. A small lonely cloud drifted in the empty sky. It neared us, standing in the sunlight on the hilly path. Her radiant face lit up with a smile and the lonely cloud let loose a handful of raindrops, glimmering like fairies in the summer sky. Alone again in Nice, I continued my reading of Jacques Prévert's

*La Pluie et le Beau Temps*, and was surprised to see the very image of that day on the path leading to Eze-village in a serene *poème*:

*Et puis elle eut un grand sourire  
et la pluie se mit à tomber*

We made the short train ride to Antibes and walked to the Picasso museum. I asked the man at the entrance how much it cost to come in. He smiled and said “rien”, saying that we had the appearance of a high tide:

– Vous avez l’air de la haute marée...

On the way out, she bought a reproduction of a portrait of Theo(dora) Marković (Dora Maar). It is framed now and hangs in our home.

At Juan-les-Pins, alone on the stone jetty, I first kissed her, hoping she wouldn’t think me too brazen in my young orgiastic shyness. When we strolled in Vence hand-in-hand, Jacques Courtecuisse looked at me for once as if I were more than a menial slave-laborer. This beauty of mine, with a viking heritage in which women (like Leif Eriksson’s sister Freydis) were warriors, suddenly had given my life *éclat*, making turn even dull little Courtecuisse’s head. She was the veritable *filles aux cheveux de lin*, the girl with the flaxen hair in Mallarmé’s poem, with the serenity and sweetness of Debussy’s pianissimo melody. Love surprised us in an instant. Never had the sky over the Côte d’Azur been so blue, nor the sun so white. We spoke in French as if continuing a conversation from a few minutes ago, as if we had known each other for years.

When she had asked my name on that first day I told her that my friends called me Ted but my original name was Theodore, which meant, I added boastfully, “gift of the gods” in Greek. She said that Theo sounded much nicer than Ted. And so for the third time in my life a woman had bestowed me with blessings and a

name. My nickname, by the strangest coincidence, means "God". The Cahuilla people of southern California also had the custom of changing their names when a vital change had occurred in their lives. And so it was with me. I shed my name like a snake shedding its skin and went on to the next initiation of my parthenogenesis. I had encountered Love incarnate.

Those were happy days on the Côte d'Azur with her. We had intimate dinners in Vieux nice, and her table manners were as correct as those of the prioress in *Canterbury Tales*, who also taught French and who "ne wette hir fingres in hir sauce depe." We drank *vin mousseux* in Biot, watched men playing *petanque* in Cagnes-sur-mer, and tango dancers in Nice. That evening we sat on a park bench opposite the bandstand where a tinny orchestra tried to make music. It was the Quatorze Juillet and we had just seen the fireworks display over the dark Baie des Anges. We had strolled hand in hand among festive crowds until we came to our bench in a less noisy corner of the botanical garden. The municipal orchestra was still playing tangos and waltzes for dancing couples as the sounds and perfumes turned in the evening air – *les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*. (Baudelaire) The fragrance of flowers vibrating on their stems evaporated into the evening, mingling with the fragrance of her young body. I sat in bliss with her on that park bench as we watched passers-by emerge from behind palm trees like figures in a dream. She nestled next to me, our bare arms touching, and drew my attention to a young man sauntering by with the numeral "1" printed in day-glo red on his T-shirt. We chuckled to ourselves. The egoist! More people strolled past our gazes. I watched a tall young man wearing glasses and an untrimmed moustache emerge from behind a palm tree and walk toward us. It was Ted. I was walking alone in the crowd, an ephemeral passenger riding in scuffed shoes, approaching the park bench where I sat with my arms around the



yellow-haired girl. I looked at my dream-body, out for a stroll in the city of grimaces, and silently greeted him from my lover's delirium:

– Bonsoir, Monsieur Drôle-de-Tête! Monsieur Drôle-de-Ted!

It was Ted's ghost wandering in a neophyte's Limbo. I had killed the poor boy with a four-lettered word. How glum he was! Much too serious, much too somber. Ted strolled off toward the Promenade des Anglais and disappeared in the dark crowd as I, Theo, held my happiness in my arms. From behind the same palm tree from which Ted's ghost had appeared, three other figures strolled on the lamp-lit sidewalk and stopped in front of our park bench. It was Anatole, Henry and S. out having a night on the town. They were on their way to Lou Pastrouil café to meet Caroline (who had been promptly introduced to my Scandinavian on the day I promised, thus expiating my white-lie). I said a warm hello to them and introduced my new friend. Henry was looking healthy and fit, his eyes lit up with mischievous humor. He told me that he was soon to depart for New York with his parents, who were presently bickering in Ukrainian in Anatole's room across town. Henry was going to start college in the fall and I wished him success, secretly wondering if the phantom Eugene, the Well-born, would pull him into Hades again this coming winter.

Anatole talked with my fragrant nymph, who so bewitched him that he sat down in the middle of the sidewalk in front of the park bench, forcing passers-by to tramp in the flower beds to get around him. As usual, S. said very little. His silence was a subtler form of communication than Anatole's exuberant words. The entire enigma of the occidental mind confronting the oriental mind was the silence of *mon ami* S. from Tokyo. It was again S.'s oriental sense of propriety which made him suggest that the three of them leave us alone. I watched them stroll off toward Place Massena to mingle with the dream figures drifting in the night



shadows of the city of grimaces.

Holding her I felt the long-neglected pangs of sexual desire surge in me like a storm. How soft was her skin! How fragrant! We had remained chaste for an entire week and now we both knew that the moment had arrived. We walked back to my little room at 16, Boulevard Gambetta hand in hand without saying a word. After all those shy hesitations of the past week, we were finally yielding to each other in a nocturnal rite of mutual immolation. First beholding her lovely nudity was epiphanic. The valley of her being sloped beside me down to the abyss of one foot between our four. Delirious energy was unleashed in the night's Dark Ages where Love's victims were immolated in shadows...

*But bashfulness must still in me prevail,  
And over this whole hour I draw a veil.*  
– Lermontov, *Sashka*

Beneath her refined and civilized exterior hid a passionate she-viking in whose soul is buried the primitive health of vibrant Scandinavian pagans. (How dull are their modern descendants, alas!) We slept like fetal twins coiled in the womb, or two blind puppies nuzzled softly on each other. Soon sunlight crossed our pillowed arena and the clock talked methodic elegies in the two-faced dawn. The valley of her being sloped down beside me and the *cloches* rang out the hour. We hugged each other and slowly got dressed. The tiny room was in a furious confusion. A sheet hung from the opened top drawer of the huge oak closet. The mattress was halfway off the bed frame. A sauce pan had been knocked to the floor. I groped for my glasses under the bed and put them on. Peering through them, I beheld a hazy universe, clouded over by the smudges her lips left on the lenses. Our clothes were scattered everywhere, hiding from us in the most unlikely crinks and crannies. Looking at the cramped little interior

as we got dressed I smiled and said,

– Quel désastre!

and we both laughed like lovers as the morning sun streamed in obliquely from the courtyard. We went directly to Neptune Plage after taking a *café au lait*. I eventually learned that she was living with a man in Stockholm, an operatic singer. She only had a few more days in Nice before she would take the train and join him in Florence. No matter. I knew that she was mine. When I later learned her language and discovered her nation's poetry, I too could exclaim like Dan Andersson (1888-1920):

*Jag väntar på en kvinna från färdvägar vida –  
Den käraste, den käraste med ögon blå. [...]  
Välkommen du, som väntas i ensamma år!*

*(I wait for a woman from wide traveled roads –  
Most beloved, most beloved with eyes of blue. [...]  
Welcome, you whom I have awaited for lonely years!)*

Hundreds of thousands of female faces had passed before my eyes since puberty. Every day as I walked along the Promenade to the restaurant, I had seen the faces of thousands of women in the sunlight of the Midi. My vigilant gaze roamed over all these myriad female faces until it finally stopped before her radiant face, the face which mirrors my own soul. It was destined to be. But my greatest dilemma was how to convince *her* that it was destined that we spend our lives together? She thought it foolish of me to want to come to Stockholm. Life was dull and too expensive there, and artists were not respected at all. I would suffer and be miserable there. (She was quite right about that.) I didn't insist, although my plans for the future were already forming in my head. I saw her off at the train station on a windy day in late July. On a pencil drawing done in my sketch-pad that day I wrote the

date and this: *une journée de grand vent*. From that day to the present one, here on the Street of the Street of the Sour Well where I sit writing my *ode to her*, she has never been out of my thoughts, even now as a little cloud hangs over our love.

I left the Nice train station feeling unusual and walked dreamily down Boulevard Gambetta to my little room. Opening the tiny door with the huge iron key, I looked inside. The room had changed. Everything in it appeared completely different. My paint brushes in their jars, my drawings and watercolors pinned to the wall, my clothes, my books, my cup, all had been magically transformed, as if the room belonged to someone other than me. In fact, it did. It belonged to Ted. But now I was Theo, He-Who-Loves. The thought of her consumed me. I was sick with love. I could think of nothing but her. Where I had been restrained before, my whole spirit now beamed forth, flowing outwards into the dream of worlds toward the smiling blue-eyed young woman traveling on the train to Florence. She had given me my third name. The three givers-of-names – Mother, Sister, Lover – are unaware of the degree to which they have augmented my power. It was there for the taking and all I did was to stoop and pick it up. Teddy-Ted-Theo, the quantum leaps of my spirit. The Tao of Theo. How enchanting: theosophists, theologians, theophobists, theocrats, theonomists and theodicists will now focus on my prefix. Why did no other “Theodore” come up with this idea? It is a simple matter of following the theocentric rule “know thyself” beyond all taboos, as did Théodore Géricault. And the Theodore of whom Montaigne wrote, who believed (like Lao Tzu) that a sage should not sacrifice himself for the empire, or risk sacrificing wisdom to the insane. Theo has let a name go to his head!

But there was much more to becoming Theo than simply being given a new name. I had to prove myself worthy of it. As the train took her to Florence the third stage of my life was beginning. At

this point in my pilgrimage, my guide to higher spiritual realms would still be, as before, Woman. Entry into these realms is granted to men who have learned tenderness, care for the body as well as for the mind, impeccability (called *chung* by Confucius), and a coming to terms with one's own female energy (called *shakti* by the hindus and *yin* by the taoists.) The tai chi circle of yin and yang is complete with Woman, the hard joined with the soft, the dark with the light. Only through Woman can a man achieve wholeness. Winning her is an art that few men really know *à fond*. The greatest obstacle to genuine maleness in our times is the common man's inability to come to terms with his own femininity. To know how to do this is to understand the essence of the word "harmony". Once a man has accomplished this through rigorous self-discipline, an unlimited source of power becomes available to him.

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And so, I continued my daily treks along the Promenade des Anglais to La Grilladière and back. I could now go back to scouring pots and washing dishes next to the giant brick oven in a state of sublime cheerfulness. The August heat-spell, the blazing wood fire, the constant noise and the grimacing restaurant owner, none of this discouraged me any more. I was still determined to get through four months unscathed. Henry and his parents had flown back to New York, leaving Anatole a little of his insurance money to live on. We saw little of each other during the four months of my herculean trial. The fact that I was fettered by apron strings was a source of amusement for him. While I was trekking back and forth on the hot pavement each day, Anatole was having a merry time on the beach, going to the cinema and sitting idly in cafés with S. and Caroline. (His sojourn in Brussels with Laure had been a fiasco.) When I passed him by chance on the way to my