



P'tit Cadeau

ANEL VIZ

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT P'TIT CADEAU:

“*P’tit Cadeau* is the picturesque, spicy, and unabashed love story of an American artist in Europe and the young Frenchman he befriends and soon cares for. Vivid settings and characters you care about... what's not to love about this story?”

– Ruth Sims, author of *Counterpoint* and *The Phoenix*

P’tit Cadeau is a love story, a dual love story, in fact. The narrator’s love for France, especially rural France, is as deep and abiding as his love for Jean-Yves. For anyone who has ever dreamed of pulling up stakes and moving to France for a season or a year or a lifetime, Ben Brooks’ story will resonate with you. It certainly did with me.

– Ariel Tachna, author of the *Partnership in Blood* series and *All for One*

“More than just a touching and intense love story which cannot help but move you, *P’tit Cadeau* is also a testament to the author's sincere affection for the south of France and his deep familiarity with the region. A beautifully realized and captivating novel.”

– Guitou, owner, BlueMoon m/m reviews (www.bluemoon.fr/)

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DEDICATION

For those boys who've been bullied and abused because
they were gay
or perceived as gay.

It gets better.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wrote most of *P'tit Cadeau* while living in France between August and December 2009. At that time, I posted about half a dozen short passages from my novel-in-progress on the GayFlashFiction Yahoo! group. I would like to thank the many many members of that group for the support and encouragement of my project.

I owe an even greater debt of thanks to my many French friends who advised me on the subtleties of their language and culture, and in particular Ghislaine B., without whose help Jean-Yves would not have been able to circumvent the many regulations of the French educational system and earn his degree after having failed his middle school certificate examinations a decade earlier.

PETIT CADEAU (EUPHEMISM):
the "small gift" French hustlers ask for to let you know they
expect to be paid

PROLOGUE: THE HUSTLER

The bar didn't have the look of a hustlers' hangout —locals mostly, groups of friends, lone men cruising for a date, clean and casual— but some had obviously come to peddle sex, and only those paid me any attention. I suspect they spotted me as American, someone with money and easy prey, to their way of thinking. I didn't realize it until the first who chatted me up mentioned the *p'tit cadeau*. I declined. *Quelle délicatesse, ces Français!* I hadn't heard the expression before, but I understood clearly enough the kind of "little gift" he expected. How many francs would that be? A hundred? Two hundred? Five hundred? No doubt he'd been dropping hints from the start, but my French wasn't good enough to pick up on them.

Nor, evidently, was it good enough to pick up any other type. Perhaps they assumed I was staying at a hotel where I couldn't bring guests —which was true enough— or found my attempts to make contact too evasive or too direct. My grasp of the language didn't allow for subtlety. On the other hand, my grasp of body language told me that every smile and barely perceptible toss of the head directed at me came from someone on the prowl.

I had no experience with the French gay scene. I'd come there to paint in early May, as soon as classes ended.

With my MFA in hand, I'd landed a university position as their token realist. When I received a glowing third-year review, confident of getting tenure and with it a year's sabbatical, I started auditing French classes. By the time my project to spend a year painting in the south of France was approved, I had three years of French under my belt, more than enough to understand and make myself understood, though my vocabulary was limited and my grammar far from perfect.

I painted without interruption until the crush of vacationers crowded me out in mid-July. Then I remembered seeing a picture postcard of Sainte-Énimie, a village nestled among cliffs above a little river in one of the less populated parts of the country. I could work there or somewhere like it for a while. Funny that none of the great artists had discovered it. *La France profonde*. It was the thought of spending the next couple of weeks in a quiet, traditional and, I assumed, ultra-conservative part of the country that brought me to that bar. On the other hand, why go out cruising now? I hadn't taken advantage of the vibrant gay scene in the cities of Provence since I arrived, nor did it occur to me till then that I'd gone almost three months without sex.

I ought to have left the bar then and there. I never intended to pay for sex. Now that I was there, though, my

hormones had begun to stir. One of the hustlers I'd been ignoring, very cute and more respectable looking than the others, caught me staring at him and repeated his come-on signal. I went and sat down at his table.

I expected he'd waste no time getting down to business, but instead he made conversation, as much of a real conversation as my French could handle. He corrected my mistakes, told me about the local scene, warned me away from the *putes*. This was a good place, but you could still run into someone who was just out for the money. They weren't easy to spot. He couldn't get over that I taught art and was a painter myself. He loved paintings. He told me his name and asked for mine, and that was reassuring. Maybe I'd misjudged him.

He waited till we'd left the bar before asking if I had a place. He didn't either, but he knew a cheap hotel that rented out rooms by the hour and wouldn't charge much more if we spent the night. I followed him, but didn't like the look of the neighborhood he led me to or the turn his conversation was taking, a typical hustler's line — how glad he was we'd hooked up, how he'd been attracted to me the moment he saw me, etc. The guy was a *pute* after all.

He brought up the *p'tit cadeau* at the hotel door. I balked.

"Nothing expensive, just a little something to

remember you by."

It wasn't that, I said; it was the hotel. Too dirty, and I could get us a room for less. I had a car (rented for my journey the next day); we could use my credit card at one of those automated motels by the A8. He jumped at the idea.

On our way to the car he dragged me into a sex shop so I could buy him a *string*.

"As your *p'tit cadeau*?"

He snorted. Too *petit*, obviously; he wanted to be paid.

I continued to play dumb in the car. I had my pastels in the trunk. How about if I did his portrait for a *p'tit cadeau*? He looked at me as if I was out of my mind. I told him I charged a hundred fifty bucks for a signed pastel — nine hundred francs— six hundred and up for an oil.

He didn't need his picture painted. Who would he sell it to? We settled on a price a lot less than my tongue-in-cheek offer. By then we had dropped the pretenses and just wanted to fuck and get it over with. Back in the bar I was so enchanted with him I'd have been up for anything, but he'd played me for a sap, and I was determined that *I* would top.

He figured that out when I grabbed his ass as soon as the door closed behind us. That changed everything; his

price doubled. I told him to get out. He threatened to make a scene.

"Go ahead and make a scene."

"You'll be sorry. Your French isn't good enough to talk your way out of it."

"I won't have to. There's no manager on site. I'll just get in my car and drive back."

That sobered him up. "And what am I supposed to do?"

"That's your problem."

I fucked him twice for a third less than we'd bargained for and dropped him off at the edge of town at four in the morning and let him walk the rest of the way.

"*Tu sais, t'es vraiment con,*" he grumbled, then added, smiling, "*mais j'ai pris mon pied.*"

PART I. BROTHER AND SISTER

CHAPTER ONE

I'd got little sleep that night and set out late. I felt annoyed with myself because getting the better of him had given me more pleasure than the two orgasms, which showed that what he'd said by way of goodbye was right — I *had* acted like an asshole. He, at least, had the graciousness to say he enjoyed it. I could have lied and returned the courtesy, or told the truth and complimented him on his gorgeous body, but then he might have pressed for more money. I chalked it up as an object lesson on cross-cultural misunderstanding, though he'd behaved no differently from what I expected when I responded to his signal.

My idea of painting in the interior was as much a miscalculation as cruising for sex. The drive took seven hours, longer than I estimated. Crossing well-touristed Provence at the height of the season went quickly enough, but my road through the Cévennes was winding, steep and narrow, and had a surprising number of cars on it for the emptiest part of the country. My picturesque little village was mobbed, with perhaps one-tenth as many cars in one-fiftieth the road space and backpackers everywhere. It

seemed as if every third store front rented out canoes. I'd have to find another base of operations off the beaten path. A number of gorges cut through the region, most of them wilder and more desolate, and I imagined them all dotted with equally pretty villages.

I took a room in the closest city, Millau, where the gorges come together and open up into a valley, and made it my base for exploration. I'd had the foresight to rent the car for five days and didn't have to drop it off till Monday. Finding a village sufficiently empty and attractive for my purposes took three days. It had no hotel, but a larger village only five kilometers away did. I could handle the uphill trek in the morning and walk back down in the evening when painting had tired me out.

The hotel, the owner told me, was booked solid, but the woman who ran the souvenir shop on the next block had a room in her house outside the village she sometimes rented out.

"How far outside?" I asked. I didn't mean to keep the car.

As luck would have it, it was just about as far in the other direction as the village I was thinking of painting and uphill all the way. I couldn't handle hiking ten kilometers each way every day, and I had no intention of keeping the car. I was tired of looking. Well, maybe where she lived

would be worth painting or I could find a few things to paint in this village after all. He phoned the shop to see if she was in and willing to rent to me and gave me directions.

Ironically, her shop was called *Au Petit Cadeau*. It surprised me to see a good-looking woman in her mid-twenties at the counter.

"C'est pour la chambre, Madame."

"Mademoiselle." Her correction surprised me even more. Surely a young woman who took a single man into her home would set tongues wagging in a village that small.

Bargaining with her reminded me of my hustler of a few days before, except she wanted a week in advance, cash only. (If I paid any other way she'd have to pay taxes. I knew that much already.) She went on: I'd be living there *en pension complète*, of course? Yes, but I'd be gone all day painting and miss the big meal of the day. A sandwich would do. Fine, but in that case I'd want something substantial in the evening, which meant preparing two large meals. Substantial fare wasn't necessary, just something hot. Fine, then she'd bring my supper to my room. It had its own table and chairs, wash basin and bidet with the luxury of running water, and was very spacious, taking up the whole top floor of the house, larger than her or her brother's

room on the floor below. I'd see she kept it spotless. It had a lovely view of the facing cliffs; I could paint them from my window. The little garden in back would make a charming picture too. Unfortunately *les waters* were on the ground floor, along with the living room and kitchen. Did I want a *pot de chambre*? No thank you. Good.

Evidently the presence of a brother removed the scandal of taking a male lodger. She warned me about him. "He's a bit of a simpleton, but he's harmless. You know the type — always daydreaming, wandering off by himself. You probably won't see that much of him, but he can be a real *enquiquineur* sometimes..." (I didn't catch the word, but her meaning was obvious) "...getting in the way, driving you crazy with his senseless chatter. Nothing worse than that. Please be gentle with him. If he bothers you, tell me and I'll keep him out of your hair. Shall I show you the room now? If you like it you can move in right away."

She put a "Back in 15 minutes" sign on the door and we drove up the hill in my car. I did like it. Did I mind driving her back? She couldn't leave the shop closed for long. She'd give me a key, and I could drive back up and unpack. Did I mean to start painting right away or would I wait till tomorrow?

"The day after. Tomorrow I have to go to Millau."

To Millau? Could I take her with me? She could use

some supplies too, needed to stock up now that she had a guest. She only had a moped, very inconvenient for bringing much back with her. She was disappointed that I was going there to return the car. "Then you'll be getting back very late. The bus only runs once a day. There's no stop here, but the driver will let you off in front of my house if you ask him."

"That's good. I need to pick up some supplies."

"But you have everything, surely?"

"If I'm going to paint in the room I'll have to buy a..." I didn't know the word for tarp and had a lot of trouble explaining it to her. Nor did I succeed, for they gave me something entirely different when I asked for what she told me. "Oh, you mean a *bâche*," they said.

* * * *

I was awakened by a knock on my door at six in the morning. I mumbled a groggy "*Oui?*" and my hostess came in carrying my breakfast tray. I always sleep naked. Luckily it had been a cool night and I had the covers over me. Still, she couldn't help but see that I had nothing on underneath them. She appeared to take it in stride and didn't hurry when she laid out the things on the table, making friendly conversation all the while. Coffee, right? Had I

slept well? — Yes, and yourself? — Wasn't the room lovely? It would be a beautiful day, perfect for painting. Too bad I had to go to Millau. I wondered if she were checking me out and used her simpleton brother as a cover for having men in the house. I hadn't seen hide nor hair of him. She was doing a good job of keeping him away from me.

She turned and gave me a big smile. "*Voilà, tout est prêt. Monsieur est servi.*"

"Is breakfast always this early?"

"No, at seven-thirty. But you have a bus to catch. You don't want to miss it."

"I still have the car, remember? That's one of the reasons I'm going to Millau."

"Of course. How stupid of me! Well, *bon appétit*. Bring the tray back down to the kitchen when you're ready to go. I'll have your dinner ready at seven, so have the bus drop you off here. Don't dawdle in the village and walk back up."

Finally she left. I quickly put on my pants in case she came back to see if I needed anything else. Sure enough, a couple of minutes later she popped her head through the door to tell me that the bath was on the floor below, center door, between her room and her brother's. Hers was the door on the right. The hustler had come on to

me more tactfully. Well, I'd have less trouble resisting her. She'd get the message eventually.

I lingered in the room until I heard her moped drive off before going downstairs for a quick bath in a tub too tiny to fit in and so deep it imprisoned my arms and made washing more difficult. Beyond the bathroom door the house was silent. No sign of a brother.

I had till five to return the car, and the bus left at five-thirty. I had all the time in the world to do some sketches of the village first, maybe a quick watercolor. On the way out of the house I poked my head into the kitchen. My hostess had forgotten to make me a sandwich.

Sketchpad in hand, I sat down across from the house on a low wall that ran along the top of the canyon. I immediately saw why no famous artists had come here to paint. The row of houses was made up of a mass of interesting angles and shapes, but I am a colorist. The scene in front of me was monochrome, blending into the rock face behind it, with none of the bright awnings and shop displays of the picture postcard except for a pot of red geraniums on one or two window sills, and the shutters were all a dull gray or brown. A few people in the streets, even an old woman in black, would have broken the visual monotony, but they were empty, so empty I wondered if anyone else lived there. I would have to do landscapes,

which I'm not good at, or abstracts, which I loathe. Time here would pass slowly. That I'd paid for a week in advance and foolishly promised to stay for two more made me feel better about having paid for a fuck the week before. I was sure I'd be starved for another when I got back to Provence.

I went and got my charcoals, made a couple of unsatisfactory sketches, then at eleven-thirty I set out before my hostess returned for lunch. I returned the car right away and spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around Millau and even found a few things I wanted to paint.

My hostess was standing at the foot of the stairs when I got back, blocking my view of the living room and kitchen. "You're lucky," she said. "Fish tonight. My brother caught them this afternoon. Hurry on upstairs and wash up. It's almost ready."

She brought a tray up to my room and stood by and watched while I ate. A salad of wild greens, the sweetest fish I'd ever tasted, a little *tian* of rice, and for dessert Roquefort—a luxury, although it was a local cheese—with dark purple grapes. I moaned over the fish.

"Is it good?"

"It's delicious."

She beamed with pleasure but politely refused the compliment. "That's because it's fresh."

"It isn't easy to prepare fish, even when it's fresh. You're a wonderful cook. I envy the man who marries you."

I regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth, but she merely shrugged and said, "Oh, I'm hopeless in the kitchen. My brother does all the cooking. His only talent."

"But this is excellent. Who taught him?"

"No one. He picked it up by himself."

"He should become a chef."

"He couldn't possibly, Monsieur. You have to study for that *métier*, and my brother doesn't even have his *brevet*. He failed it twice. He's not good at much besides cooking."

"And catching fish."

"That too," she said as she gathered up the tray.

"You'll tell your brother how much I enjoyed the fish, won't you?"

"You're very kind, Monsieur. It will give him much pleasure. You'll be gone painting tomorrow?"

"My day in Millau has tired me out, so I thought I'd start in the garden."

"Then I'll bring your lunch out to you so you can work uninterrupted. *Bonne soirée*."

* * * *

I slept in my briefs that night to avoid the kind of encounter I'd had with my hostess the morning before. She'd been so quick to open the door after knocking that I might not have time to pull a sheet up over me if I kicked off my covers during the night. She knew as well as I that "*Oui?*" is not a synonym for "*Entrez!*" I'd have worn pajamas if I owned a pair.

I had a hard time falling asleep because I'm accustomed to sleeping naked, so at seven-thirty when she came with my breakfast I was not yet awake. She knocked and opened the door before I said anything. I must have I felt uncomfortable in my underwear, since I'd thrown off the covers although the night had not been particularly warm, and they'd slipped onto the floor so I could not pull them up. She could see my morning erection beneath my briefs and kept her eye on it while she set out the breakfast things, all the time pretending not to look. It was not so unduly large as to poke out under the waistband, but I knew it wouldn't subside with her staring at me either. I hoped she would have the tact to get out quickly and not make conversation for the pleasure of checking me out.

"Still asleep? But you went to bed so early! Would you prefer to breakfast at eight? I can't make it any later

than that. I have to get to the store."

"No, seven-thirty is fine. I was just very tired."

"But you're up now, aren't you?"

Suspecting that *éveillé* might have the same connotations in French, I blushed, which may have been what got her to leave.

I brought my sketchpad out to the garden to see what inspiration it had to offer. It was quite small, less than twenty feet wide and perhaps half again as long, enclosed by a ten-foot wall of the same color as the house and only slightly lighter than the ground, a brownish yellow without so much as a blade of grass. A dusty garden table and two filthy chairs lay off to one side. No flowers to speak of, just a couple of scrawny rose bushes by the kitchen door with a few sparse yellow blooms that faded into the wall behind them. Some unidentifiable yellow wildflowers growing close to the ground on my left showed up somewhat better because of the severely pruned, unhealthy-looking grapevines that clung for dear life—that is, *if* they were alive—to the wall behind them. A narrow, doorless shed, clearly once the outdoor latrine, now used to house garden tools, occupied one corner of the far wall. A pear tree grew in the other, surrounded by a small, but carefully tended and prolific vegetable patch I judged to be the domain of her brother the cook, containing rows of cabbage, radishes,

beans, zucchini (more yellow blossoms), assorted lettuces and a variety of cooking herbs. In short, the garden itself inspired me not at all, but the laundry that hung on a line along the right wall was very colorful, and I set out to do a watercolor of it. I finished it off quickly and then did another, a still life of the tool shed.

My hostess examined my work when she returned and set my lunch on the garden table — a thin slice of raw ham between two halves of buttered *baguette*, four small red and orange plums, plain yoghurt with sugar, and a glass of red wine. She evidently felt she should say something about the paintings but could think of nothing. She may have been miffed that with the entire garden to choose from I had made pictures of her washing and a converted outhouse, or perhaps bewildered. I added to her bewilderment by starting a third watercolor, this time of the lunch. She'd wiped down the table and laid out a blue and white cloth before serving me. In all a colorful ensemble, particularly the plums.

"Aren't you going to eat it?"

"Of course. As soon as I finish drawing it."

"But why?"

"Because after I've eaten it it won't be there to draw."

"Will you paint the leftovers too?"

"There won't be any leftovers."

"Did you paint your dinner too?" She must have felt that anyone who painted laundry and outhouses was capable of anything.

"It didn't occur to me. I could have, though. The fish was lovely. Your brother isn't at home?"

"No, I sent him away so he wouldn't annoy you."

Annoy me? Did she think she wasn't? But I only said, "I think I'd know how to get him to leave me alone without hurting his feelings if he's too much of a bother. I'd very much like to meet him."

"Oh, you will eventually, and I wouldn't worry about hurting his feelings." And just the day before she had asked me to be gentle with him!

"Is he off fishing? I hope you remembered to tell him how much I liked his cooking."

"Of course I did. But I have no idea what he's up to. He might be fishing, but it's no less likely that he's just wandering around aimlessly somewhere. Whatever he's doing, you can be sure he's daydreaming."

"Doesn't he work? How old is he?"

"Twenty-two, and no job."

"Unemployed?"

"Unemployable... Now that one I like. Very artistic. Would you do a painting of me?"

I remembered my negotiations with the hustler.

"For you?"

"Yes."

"Oil or watercolor?"

"An oil painting, definitely."

"You understand I'd have to charge you for it."

"You wouldn't do it as a favor?"

"I'd be happy to do you a favor, but painting is my profession. I always get paid for my work."

"Even when you paint your friends?"

"My friends too."

She looked at me as if I was some kind of money-hoarding misanthrope. "It was just a thought," she said, and went into the house.

I went up to my room for a nap after lunch and ended up doing a watercolor of it instead, first moving all the furniture around to get everything I wanted into the frame: bed, window, washbasin and mirror (my toiletries artistically—that is to say, messily—rearranged on the shelf beneath it), a picture on the wall, and one chair. Then I unmade my bed and rolled around in it so it would look slept in to do a second version of the same scene. Finally, I put everything back in its place, remade the bed, sat down on it, and asked myself, "What now?" Remembering my

hostess's question, I decided that I'd do a watercolor of my supper if it was as attractive as the night before.

It was. Her brother had put together a *charcuterie* plate with *cornichons*, tiny tomatoes, and white and purple radishes for the appetizer, a *ragoût* of rabbit with carrots and peas, and an enormous yellow pear and creamy yellow hard cheese for dessert.

"Did your brother hunt the rabbit himself?"

She laughed. "I wouldn't trust my brother with a gun. No, it came from the butcher."

She saw the four watercolors I had done that day lying on the bed. "You've painted the room, then? That's not what your room looks like."

"I know. I moved things around a bit for the picture."

"You don't like how your room is set up?"

"It's lovely, for a room. I was thinking about the composition of the painting."

She noticed that I had taken my pad and was again painting my meal instead of eating it. "I don't understand why you came all the way here to paint and now you're making pictures you could have made anywhere."

"Believe me, I wouldn't find a meal this attractive just anywhere. But that reminds me. I'd like to paint the river. Is there some way to get down to it?"

"From the village, not from here. There's a path in the parking lot across from the café that leads to a flight of stairs. One hundred eighty-two all together, according to my brother. You see what a child he is. He counts steps!"

I thought it not unlikely that he'd counted them when he was little and remembered how many there were, but I was in no mood to contradict her. It would only encourage her to prolong the conversation. "Are they very steep?" I asked.

"No, but they're very uneven. You'll have to watch your step. *I don't go down there. Bon appétit, Monsieur.*"

As she left, she added, "Would it be an inconvenience if I asked you to bring your tray down to the kitchen when you've finished?"

"Not at all."

* * * *

Sooner than lug an easel and a stretched canvas down one hundred eighty-two uneven steps to a spot I might not want to paint once I'd seen it, I brought my sketchpad and watercolors — a wise decision, since it definitely was not worth the work and expense of an oil painting. At that point the river opened to a long, deep pool, the local swimming hole, with a wide dirt and pebble beach

on either shore and very little greenery. I'd hoped to find a tree or two, maybe an old stone bridge, but there was nothing. I could have kicked myself for not bothering to check out anything but the village itself.

At least there were a few village boys between ten and twelve years old splashing noisily about in the water. That gave me a subject. Unlike what I had seen on the beaches on the coast, they wore American-style bathing suits that hung down to their knees. As soon as I started working they came to watch what I was doing, but I figured that by the time I'd filled in the background they'd have got bored and gone back to their play. I had to work fast, for in that open spot the light changed almost too quickly to finish a watercolor.

I was wrong about the boys. They did get bored, but didn't go back in the water; they left and headed up the steps to the village, leaving me with an empty and none too interesting scene to paint. I couldn't face the climb just yet, so I ate my sandwich.

I looked at the fruit of my morning's work. Worthless. I ripped it up. Maybe they'd come back after lunch, and I could explain to them that I wanted to do a picture of kids swimming. In the meantime I had nothing to do — I regretted not having thought to bring a book. So I took off my sneakers, rolled my jeans up to the knee, and

went for a wade, though I hadn't brought a towel either.

The water was icy cold. I couldn't imagine how the kids stayed in it. My feet turned numb within minutes. I stubbed a toe on the rocks in my hurry to get out. I dried my feet with my tee-shirt, then sat on the ground and wrapped it around them and put my shirt over it too, hoping they would thaw quickly. Though my feet were frozen, my bare back and chest felt warm in the hot, humid air. I would have stretched out for a nap, but the beach was too rocky to lie on. I felt bored and disgusted with my idleness.

The boys did not return. At three-thirty I was still the only one at the river. Another day with nothing to show for it. I gathered my things together and trudged wearily up the path to the village. By the time I'd counted eighty-two steps (just one hundred left to climb!), I thought I knew why they hadn't come back: nobody would want to climb those steps more than once a day. But I was wrong. Just a few yards from the parking lot they passed me on their way down.

I was in no condition to tackle the walk up the hill to where I was staying. I crossed the street to the café, collapsed into a chair by one of the sidewalk tables, and ordered a cold beer.

I couldn't sit in the café forever. Passing the

souvenir shop, I thought I'd pop in and say *bonjour* to my hostess as a friendly gesture. It also gave me a fine excuse to put off the trek home a little longer. A melancholy looking boy in his late teens was crouched on the floor, studying the merchandise. He looked up when I entered.

"*Monsieur?*"

"*La patronne?*"

"Marceline's in Millau for the day. Can I help you?"

"No thank you. I just wanted to say hello. I'm renting a room from her for a couple of weeks."

His face lit up and he smiled broadly. "You're the artist? I'm Jean-Yves. I've been wanting to meet you." He held out his hand.

"Ben Brooks. Has she been talking about me, then?"

"You mean telling everyone about you? Not at all. I'm her brother." The surprise must have shown on my face, because he asked, "Didn't she tell you she had a brother?"

"She did. I just expected you to look different."

"How so?"

I hesitated a second and said, "She said you were twenty-two." I couldn't tell him I'd been picturing a half-wit.

"I am twenty-two."

"You look much younger."

"Really? How old do I look?"

"Seventeen, eighteen... Nineteen at most."

He went and looked in the mirror. He had the slim build and narrow shoulders of a boy just out of puberty, no hair on his arms, and a smooth chest beneath his open collar. His straight, fine, light brown hair fell across the olive skin of his forehead to his dark, charcoal gray eyes, a color I've never seen on anyone else. His jaw, not yet squared off, accentuated the oval of his face. His hands, too, large with long fingers, showed me he had more growing ahead of him, for his wrists looked almost fragile. Nineteen was pushing it.

He ran his left hand over his jaw. "No, I don't see it. I have to shave every day. But you must know what you're talking about, since you're an artist."

"And you don't look like your sister."

"Everybody says that."

Marceline had a round face, plump arms, very white skin, and dark curly hair. They acted differently too. I thought her pushy and affected; he seemed genuinely friendly. Nor did he strike me as at all stupid. Stupid people have stupid eyes. He had a slight stammer and there was something shy about his demeanor, although he spoke to me readily enough. That hardly made him a simpleton.

The phone rang and he excused himself to answer it. He spoke haltingly but handled the call efficiently,

scribbling a message on a notepad. So he wasn't too much of a simpleton to be left in charge of the store!

He turned back to me as soon as he'd put down the phone. "I'm so happy I've met you, Monsieur Brooks."

"Ben, please. I've been looking forward to meeting you too, probably for the same reason."

"Why would you want to meet me?"

"One likes to meet the people whose house one's living in."

He looked puzzled. I must have botched the relative pronouns. I tried again. "Don't you want to meet the people you rent to?"

He understood immediately, saw where the sentence had been too difficult for me, and politely offered a correction: "*Chez qui on habite.*" The French will often correct you, but not always this politely. They do it curtly; he sounded genuinely interested in me. A simpleton?

He went on: "But no, I don't. Want to meet all our lodgers, that is. They're outdoorsy types, all alike, and don't stay long. You're an artist."

"You like art?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"Not really. I think they should, of course, but they don't."

"But they all have pictures on their walls."

"To take up space. That's decorating, not art."

He thought about it for a moment. "I think you're right. Most people just put up pictures and never look at them again. I always look at pictures, even when they're not very good, and they hardly ever are. Not like in a museum. An artist would notice that."

No, there was nothing stupid about this kid. "Well, you're one too in a way. That's another reason I've been anxious to meet you."

"You're joking, aren't you?"

"Not at all. I was talking about your cooking. You're an artist in the kitchen. Didn't your sister tell you how much I've enjoyed your meals?" He shook his head. "Well, it's true. I think you should become a chef."

He beamed with pleasure. "I'd love to, but you have to go to school for that."

A burly, well-built man in his late twenties walked into the store. "Where's Marceline?" He ignored me and didn't greet Jean-Yves.

"In Millau."

"When's she coming back?"

"She didn't say."

"Well, tell her I'm looking for her. *A plus, Cadeau.*"

"Gilles! Just a second. This is Monsieur Brooks, the artist who's staying with us."

The man gave me a hard look, nodded a curt "*Enchanté*", and left the shop.

"Not very friendly, is he?" I remarked.

"That was because of you. He knew who you were. I only introduced you to rile him."

"What does he have against me?"

"He's Marceline's fiancé. He thinks you're sleeping with her. He asked me, and I told him you weren't—I'd know, wouldn't I?—but he didn't believe me."

"Why doesn't he just ask her?"

"What for? She wouldn't tell the truth if you were."

So the guy knew he was marrying a man-eater.

"Does she sleep with all your guests?"

"Not at all. They're mostly couples; she's not into that scene. She checks all the men out, though. Didn't you notice?"

He was as critical of his sister as she was of him, only more honest and less malicious.

"He called you Cadeau."

"Cadot with an O-T, my family name. I'm *Cadot le petit*. It's a joke, you understand? — *Petit Cadeau*, like the store. They named it after me. They called me that when I was little."

"He still does."

"Did he say '*petit*'? He does sometimes, because we

were in school together. Gilles was six years ahead of me, but it's a small school." He paused. "Please call me Jean-Yves. I'll be closing soon. Shall we walk back together? I'll carry your things."

"Thanks, but I only have this sketchpad."

"May I see what you drew today?" he asked as he locked the shop behind him.

"Nothing. It turned out all wrong, so I ripped it up. Empty, see? I didn't care for the subject anyway."

"Where did you paint?"

"On the beach by the river. It's not very nice."

"I like our beach. Not for looks — for swimming."

"The water's too cold."

"You get used to it."

"What treat are you planning for supper tonight?"

"I can't do much. There's no time, and I couldn't go shopping. I had to mind the store."

"Won't your sister bring back something from Millau?"

"I doubt it. I was thinking I'd just make omelets."

"Omelets are fine. I bet you make wonderful omelets."

"What do you like in yours?"

"Mushrooms."

"I'm afraid we don't have any. How about ham?"

"Ham's good."

"Now that I know you like mushrooms, I'll go looking for some when I get a chance. Not here —there aren't many mushrooms around here— in the Cévennes. It's not the best time of year for them, but I might find a few *cèpes*. It's all oaks and chestnut trees in the Cévennes. You like *cèpes*? They're my favorite."

"I don't know what the different mushrooms are called in French. But the Cévennes — isn't that awfully far to go for a few mushrooms?"

"It'll get me away from here. I like being alone in the woods. Of course I'd have to take the *mobylette*."

"I like going off alone too."

"You would; you're an artist. Marceline's always saying I should leave you alone, that I'll annoy you. She's right, too."

"I can't imagine you'd annoy me."

"I ask an awful lot of questions."

"I don't mind questions. I'm a teacher, remember? Answering questions is my job."

"That's not how it is here. The teachers ask questions and the kids have to answer them. The sisters used to yell at me all the time for asking questions."

"That wasn't very nice of them."

"They weren't very nice. We all hated them. They used to hit us, especially me."

"For writing with your left hand?"

"How did you know that?"

"Because I noticed you're left handed, but you write with your right." I didn't mention his stammer.

"You artists are very observant, aren't you? But that was just the first couple of years, before I learned to write the way you're supposed to. After that they hit me for giving the wrong answers and for asking questions."

"How're you going to learn if you don't ask questions?"

"They said I asked stupid questions. They called me a jackass. The kids used to laugh at me."

"I'm sure the questions you ask me won't be stupid."

"Just wait. I haven't asked you any yet."

"Well, you can watch me paint and ask all the questions you want, and I'll watch you cook and ask questions about that, and we'll see who asks the stupidest questions."

He laughed. "Don't watch me tonight. Watch when I make something complicated."

"I was only joking." He looked disappointed. "I've seen the kitchen," I explained, "and it's very small. I'd get

in your way. It's a lot bigger in my room...and outside."

I wouldn't have watched him that evening in any case. I needed a bath and wanted to take it before Marceline got home. There was no lock on the bathroom door and I thought her quite capable of finding some excuse to barge in and check me out.

She brought the omelet up to my room. "Don't paint it," she told me. "Eat it while it's hot. I hear you met my brother."

"Yes. He's very nice. Not at all what I expected."

"Did I say he wasn't?"

"Not exactly, but from what you told me about him I thought he'd be..." I couldn't think of a French word, so I finished my sentence in English: "...a pest."

She flared up. "I said nothing of the sort! I wouldn't talk about Jean-Yves that way!"

That wasn't entirely true, but I realized that in French *peste* means 'plague', a much stronger word than I wanted.

"That's not what I meant. Just a minute." I looked in the dictionary. "*Enquiquinant*."

She laughed. "What did I tell you? He's definitely that."

"I didn't think so."

"You'll see. Just wait till he starts asking questions."

Your omelet's getting cold," she said, and went out.

I'd half decided to pack up and leave, even if I had to pay for the second week. Marceline got on my nerves, and it was clear I wouldn't produce anything worthwhile in the area. Meeting Jean-Yves convinced me to stay. He was the first French person I met whom I truly liked—not that I had met many—and he seemed anxious to be my friend. I judged he was lonely, a bright child who'd been pegged for stupid because he was different from the others, and who believed what people said about him. I could take him under my wing for the brief time I'd be there. We both needed companionship, and someone who spent a lot of time wandering the countryside might know of places I'd want to paint. At worst, being with him would improve my French. I enjoyed his conversation, and because of his stammer he spoke slowly. I decided to ask if he'd show me around when I brought my tray down.

It never crossed my mind that we might have a sexual relationship, and if it had I'd have dismissed the thought out of hand. At thirty-four I was in my prime, and a few students had come on to me, male and female. I'd turned them down; a university professor can't let himself get involved with people that age. Jean-Yves looked even younger, was much too vulnerable, and I had no reason to think he was anything but straight. Any number of gay men

would jump at the chance to seduce some naïve kid who seems more than ready to idolize them. Not me. Except with the hustler, sex for power just wasn't my thing.

The more I thought about Jean-Yves, the more I found myself wondering about what his life must be like in a place where no one appreciated his qualities, to the point where he himself thought he had none; what it must be like for him to see his future as a dead end, living with a sister who considered him a perpetual child and a future brother-in-law who would barely notice him. I tried to imagine him growing up in an isolated village where everyone was the same, a non-conformist simply because he didn't know how to conform, picked on by the other kids and ridiculed by his teachers. What had his parents been like, and where were they now? Dead, I supposed. They must have treated him much as Marceline did. She was only following their example.

It was quite late when I snapped out of my reverie, and by the time I brought my tray down the kitchen had been cleaned and all the lights turned off.

* * * *

When Marceline brought my breakfast tray she announced, "Jean-Yves's gone already," as if she knew I was going to ask for him.

"Where to? I had a question for him."

"God only knows. He took off hours ago."

At least that meant she'd leave me alone. Someone had to mind the shop.

"What were you going to ask my brother?"

"If he knew of a place I might like to paint."

"I thought you were going to take my suggestion and paint the view from your room."

"I'll get around to that eventually." Was she jealous of her brother? If so, only I could be the prize. I tried hinting that I knew that, at least in principle, she was unavailable. "I met your fiancé yesterday. He was looking for you."

"I know. Jean-Yves told me. He'll find me if it's all that important. Drink your coffee or it will get cold," she said, as if it was I wasting *her* time with my small talk.

I'd been counting on going with Jean-Yves to find a decent subject. What would I do now? I had no idea what I could paint except that view from my window. I looked again. It looked duller than the first time I'd seen it, not much more than bare cliffs, but it might be worth doing a set of oils —very small ones— as an exercise in catching

the changing light. I got out my equipment and set about building a half-dozen small frames, about two by two-and-a-half feet, to stretch out the canvas.

The sawing and hammering brought Marceline up to my room. "What's all that banging? I was afraid you were doing something to the room."

"Not quite. I'm making a set of frames for some oils. I thought I'd paint the cliffs after all."

"Why don't you buy them? They have them ready made with the canvas already on them. I've seen them for sale in Millau." And she thought Jean-Yves asked stupid questions!

"Too expensive, and this way I can choose the size I want. Besides, it'd be cumbersome to cart a batch of frames up to the village. It's easier to buy a batch of boards and cut them up."

She could see I was building more than one frame. "So many pictures of the cliffs? But maybe it's the château that interests you."

"The château?"

"There, on the ledge right below the crest." She pointed out the window at a low bit of broken wall that except for its disrepair looked no different from the one that ran along the road.

"That's a château?"

"It used to be. Some minister had it torn down sometime in the seventeenth century."

Richelieu, probably. "Does it have a name?"

"It must have, but I don't remember it."

"Well, I got here some three hundred years too late, didn't I?"

She missed the irony and went on talking.

"Sometimes you can see vultures too if there's a wind. They nest in the cliffs."

"Birds in the sky would help."

"Help what?"

"To make a nice picture."

She showed no sign of leaving, so I asked, "Aren't you going to the store today?"

"No, it's closed on Thursday."

I wondered why she hadn't waited for today to go to Millau. As if she'd read my thoughts, she said, "Today I do the laundry. Is there anything you want washed?"

"You don't have to wash my clothes too, Mademoiselle."

"You'll be here for two weeks, and you get dirty doing your kind of work. I have a machine. There's no laundromat in the village."

"Well, thank you. Thank you very much. I just need to gather it up. Do you need them right away?"

"Oh no, I have enough to do for the time being. In an hour or so."

"Then I'll bring them down when I finish these."

She understood that meant goodbye. "Well, just make sure you sweep up the sawdust."

I knew what she meant, but asked her to repeat the word *sciure* so I could learn it. Instead she pointed to the floor and made a brushing motion with her hand. If I was going to learn more French it would have to be from Jean-Yves.

I did not relish spending the day alone with her in the house. Once I'd built the frames I'd walk down to the village and do a few watercolors. Maybe I'd run into Jean-Yves.

When I dropped off my wash she said, "So much in only three days?"

"Four, plus another four while I was looking for a suitable village."

She saw the sketchpad and watercolors in my shoulder bag. "I thought you were going to paint the cliffs."

"Not today. I need to get out and get some air. I'll work in the village. No wind today."

She looked puzzled.

"The vultures."

"But I haven't made your sandwich yet. I thought

you'd be staying in."

"That doesn't matter. I can eat at the café. I don't mind."

I didn't see Jean-Yves, but I passed Gilles. I could tell he remembered me, but he didn't acknowledge me. It comforted me he'd know I wasn't screwing his sister on her day off. I'd had visions of him coming after me with his fists or a knife. (Since I'd spent the morning building the frames I could have screwed her several times already, but I didn't think of that.)

The village, some five blocks long, stretched out along the road above the river. Many of the houses there had shop fronts on the ground floor — a bakery, a greengrocer's, a *boucherie-charcuterie*, a *bar-tabac*, the gas station that also sold Michelin tires, a hardware store with some small appliances in the window, a *mercerie*, Marceline's *Petit Cadeau*. The streets dividing the blocks, too narrow for cars, were little more than alleys. Near the west end the road widened into its main square, where the hotel-café and the post office each occupied a corner across from the parking lot.

I turned into the street between them, wider than the alleys and featuring a real sidewalk. I had no desire to paint the main square, despite its colorful awnings and shop

displays. It offered interesting possibilities for composition, but made for too commonplace a subject. I passed a few more businesses — another grocery, a *Crédit Agricole* and *Caisse d'épargne*, a photocopy store, the typically French combination of keys and shoe repair, etc. Then, after the first block, the road snaked up the hillside into the interior of the village. The sidewalk on the right side abruptly ended one short block later. There the village abutted on the cliffs. A stone arch, which seemed to buttress the rock face rather than the houses, formed a gateway into a narrow cobblestone lane between blank walls interrupted only by closed doors at the level of the street and shuttered windows on the floors above, the houses on the left built into the rock. On the corner just outside the arch, a tiny strip of lawn bordered with flowers set off the *monument aux morts* and the *pissotière* next to it. The memorial consisted of a single metal plaque, green with age, attached to the side of the cliff, listing the names of the men from the village who had died in the World Wars and Indochina. I read through the two dozen plus names and found no Cadots, but I finally learned the name of the village: *A nos glorieux vaincus* ("Our glorious vanquished!" — an odd turn of phrase, to be sure) *l'éternelle gratitude des citoyens de la commune de Sainte-Ripouze*.

I crossed the street and looked over the ads in the

window of a real estate agency. They had dilapidated country villas for sale as well as a couple of farms, and apartments for rent in Millau and more distant cities, especially Montpellier. None of the rentals were in the village.

I continued up the sidewalk on the left. The village ended after another handful of *maisons troglodytes*. Both the way I had taken and the last street that intersected it were marked *voie sans issue*. I would have turned back if I hadn't noticed an arrow nailed to the rock with *jardin public 800 m.* painted under it.

I would not have called the *jardin public* a garden. Nothing grew on the large terrace except a few plane trees, the rest of the space taken up by three *pétanque* courts and a row of metal benches for the spectators, but I was alone there and the view was superb. Seen from above, the village had more color and more character. The number of people out in the street surprised me. I looked down on slate roofs, balconies, the main square with the outdoor tables spilling out from under the red awning of the café, and even a small stretch of river beyond the almost full parking lot. The trees seemed less widely spaced at this distance, and their leaves greener. It was a scene I actually wanted to paint, not some trivial project to justify my having come there.

I started with some sketches because I wanted it to be good, the first good piece of work I'd done since I left Provence, so I'd have something to show for it when I left. I painted until one-thirty, when it hit me that I was getting hungry and might not be able to get more than a sandwich at the café after two, and I was tired of sandwiches. I liked what I had done. I hadn't quite finished, but wouldn't need to be looking at the scene in order to complete the picture. Besides, the light would have changed by the time I got back.

The café served meals without interruption till ten at night. Something told me that because I had complimented his cooking Jean-Yves would prepare something special that evening, so I opted for something ordinary — a *steak-frites*, no entrée, no dessert. I sat there finishing the watercolor over my coffee and headed back to Marceline's. Having finally painted something I liked put me in the mood to work with oils, even just exercise studies of the cliffs.

The light on the cliffs outside my window changed so quickly that I could only paint for about half an hour before I had to start a second canvas, well under a quarter of the time required to produce something more or less complete. I got a little more than halfway through two of them before I stopped to tidy up the room and wash for

dinner.

Jean-Yves had gone all out to prepare an elaborate meal, some kind of game bird —pheasant, I think— in a wine sauce thick with earthy-scented wild mushrooms which I guessed were *cèpes*. Even Marceline described it as *gastronomique*. "I don't know what got into my brother," she said. "He came home shortly after you left and spent the whole day in the kitchen. At least he wasn't prodigal with our food budget. He claims he bought the birds off some hunters for next to nothing."

While I was savoring the pheasant an argument broke out in the kitchen between Jean-Yves and his sister. I assumed they were arguing. I could only hear her voice, which filled the house, echoing up two flights of stairs. I hoped he had told the truth about the hunters and they were not fighting over the cost of the meal, which I knew he had made for my sake. They weren't. When Marceline came for the tray she told me her brother had wanted to come upstairs to ask if I liked what she called *son œuvre*, his "creation".

"Why didn't you let him?"

"And annoy you while you're eating? Once he starts with his dumb questions you can't get him to stop."

That made me angry. "It's perfectly normal to ask if

I'm enjoying my meal, and it's not as if I was working. By all means send him up."

"I can't anymore. He's gone off to his room to pout and left me with a mess to clean up in the kitchen. I'll tell him in the morning if he's in a better mood."

He wasn't. I woke up early to catch the cliffs in the early morning light. Their argument flared up again while I was painting. Doors slammed, and I heard the *mobylette* drive off. When Marceline came with my breakfast, she told me her brother was being a brat and had taken the *mobylette* out of spite. "Now I'll have to walk to the store."

It also meant I wouldn't get to go walking with Jean-Yves. I had no intention of spending my day indoors painting the same cliff over and over. I'd found one thing worth painting; I could find another. I went out to explore, pointedly not putting away my oil paints and leaving a barely begun canvas on the easel and the tarp spread on the floor. I made a point of not bringing my breakfast tray to the kitchen so my hostess would see the mess when she went upstairs to get it. Once again I had no lunch to take with me, but I didn't care. I just wanted to get away from her for as long as possible.

I had no idea where to go. I headed away from the village. I had some vague idea that I'd find my way down to the river and come across a scenic spot, maybe with a little

waterfall. The plateau above the cliffs was dotted with hundreds of caves and underground streams, and I thought that several of them must emerge from the rocks somewhere and tumble, or at least trickle, into the river. I was bound to come across one, provided I could find my way down and hike along the bank.

I kept peering over the wall that bordered the ledge, looking for a path or a spot I'd be able to climb. I'd fit everything I needed for drawing —pencils, charcoals, pastels— into my shoulder bag; both my hands were free. But wherever I looked I only saw a sheer drop hundreds of feet high.

The face of the cliffs curved in and out, and the road followed their contours, winding gently upwards, higher and higher above the river. I came to a spot where a large, wide fissure opened into a broad gully filled with boulders and broken rock. Instead of hugging the cliffs, the road crossed over it. The slope was not too steep. It wouldn't be an easy climb down from the bridge, but I could do it, and from there I'd be able to follow the rockslide to the riverbed.

It was more difficult to reach than I'd thought, and climbing back up to the bridge would be harder. The descent from there wasn't easy either, over loose rock and jagged boulders, and I slid a fair amount of the way. When

I saw a trail or just some place I could get to leading off it, I followed it, always to a dead end. Then, about fifty feet from the bottom the gully opened out on both sides flush with the cliffs, the rocks below held in place by iron netting to prevent another landslide. I could not get down; I'd have to turn back. I sat there for over an hour to regain my strength. I felt too dejected to draw anything — if there had been anything there to draw.

I got home a little after five, sore, dirty and exhausted. Marceline was in the living room, leafing through a magazine. She looked up angrily when the door opened. I expected her to launch into me about the mess I'd left, but when she saw it was me she went back to reading. She was saving her bile for Jean-Yves.

"Has your brother calmed down? Is he back yet?" I asked, though I knew he wasn't.

"No."

"When he returns, please tell him to make me something light tonight. I've been scrambling up and down the ravine looking for something to paint, and I'm exhausted. I just want to get to bed as soon as possible." That message she would deliver.

Of the mess I'd left only the breakfast tray had been cleared away. I threw myself on the bed, where I lay like a corpse until Marceline arrived with my dinner, a medium-

sized *salade niçoise* and a glass of rosé.

"You haven't put anything away, I see," she began.

"You haven't even washed up!"

"I feel wrung out." The salad was a simple affair, the basic tuna, potatoes, hard-boiled egg, beans, tomato and olives on a bed of lettuce, but attractively arranged, Jean-Yves' thoughtful touch. I didn't have the energy to eat. I picked over my meal and went downstairs for a long soak in the tub, leaving the salad half-finished. The tray had been cleared away when I returned. It must have given my hostess a good deal of satisfaction to show Jean-Yves that I had not cleaned my plate.

I unwrapped the towel from my waist, threw myself naked on the bed, and slept like a log.

CHAPTER TWO

I heard the door quietly open and scrambled madly to get my naked body under the sheet.

"I'm so sorry. I thought you were still asleep and didn't want to wake you. It was rude of me not to knock first. I wasn't thinking."

It was Jean-Yves. He stood in the doorway holding my breakfast tray, averting his eyes.

"Think nothing of it," I told him. "I thought you were your sister. It doesn't bother me if *you* see me."

"Marceline isn't feeling well today. A headache or something. Could be women's matters." He looked uncomfortable knowing I was naked under the sheet.

"What are you so embarrassed about? It doesn't upset me. Honest. You're a man too. You know what I look like."

"Still..."

"And what women look like too, I dare say," I added. I thought: *If he blushes, that means he's a virgin.*

He didn't. Instead he thought about it for a moment before answering very seriously, "My sister also knows what men look like." Yes, definitely a virgin.

"Well, I'm glad for the chance to see you again. I wanted to tell you how much I liked the pheasant. The

salade niçoise too. I was just too tired to eat much."

"I know."

"And I was hoping you'd take me around and show me places to paint."

I have seldom said anything that made a person so happy. "I'd love to, but not today. I have to take over for Marceline at the shop. Her headache. I'd better eat my breakfast and get going."

"What time do you open? Not before nine, surely? Why don't you bring your breakfast up here? We can eat together and have a chat."

He looked positively elated. "Really? You don't mind?"

"Mind? I'd like nothing better."

He came back with the coffee pot, a pitcher of milk, a whole stick of butter, and two jars of jam. "Sorry we can't serve you a fresh baguette in the morning, but that would mean going to the village and back. That's why I toast it. I hear Americans like toast."

I realized there was only one chair. "Let's move the table closer to the bed so one of us can sit on it," I suggested.

But his attention was elsewhere. He was looking at my work, and looking closely. "You've started three pictures of the same thing. Why?"

"Can you guess?" He hesitated. "I won't hit you if you get it wrong. I'm not one of the nuns."

"Well, the obvious answer is that you didn't like how they were turning out, but you haven't thrown them away, so that couldn't be right. And why would you try for a third time? I'd just give up and paint something else."

"You're right, that isn't why, and your reasons for thinking so are good. But I'd never throw an oil away. Oils aren't like watercolors; you can paint over them."

"But you haven't, so either you mean to do it later or you like them. Which is it? *Do* you like them?"

"Do you?"

"I'm not sure."

"I agree. It's too soon to tell; they're far from finished. Come, look closer at them. Are they all the same?"

"No."

"How are they different?"

"The colors."

"And why do I use different colors?"

I didn't expect him to know the answer, but he caught on right away. "It's the light, isn't it? As the sun moves across the sky the cliffs change, so you have to start another."

"Bravo!" Marceline, who thought herself so much

smarter, had answered the question for herself and come up with the stupidest possible reason — the château.

He looked again at each of the three paintings and then out the window. "And now you're going to have to start a fourth."

"Right after breakfast. But it clouded over last night. Lucky me."

He understood I meant I'd have a steady light source. The sky was a uniform light gray. "So you'll be able to finish this one?"

"I hope so."

"How many more are you going to do?"

"Just those, maybe one more. Unless I can't find anything else I want to paint."

"It must be frustrating not to be able to finish a picture in one sitting."

"That's only when you paint with oils. Watercolors go much more quickly, and the colors aren't as exact since you don't mix them in advance. And there are places where the light stays the same for most of the day. In Provence, for example, where I was before I came here."

"I can think of places around here where the light doesn't change much."

"So can I."

"The village square, right?"

"Except for the houses behind it."

"And there are others, up on the plateau. The light there is constant except if a cloud passes over, and of course the shadows also move."

"That wouldn't matter if the colors stayed the same."

"There are spots in the bottom of the ravine too. Places that don't get direct sunlight."

"Those are exactly the kinds of places I'm looking for."

"They might not be things you'd want to make a picture of."

"I trust your judgment. You have a good eye. Your figuring out about the color proves it. It also shows that you're intelligent."

He blushed. "I'll take you to the old bridge. There are trees there, and weeds drifting in the water. Not many people know about it, so you can paint in peace."

"But you'll stay there with me, won't you? I can paint and talk at the same time. Just be aware that sometimes I get wrapped up in what I'm doing and I miss what people are saying. Don't let that bother you."

"Of course I'll stay. You'll need help carrying your things up and down. We don't have to talk either. That's where I go fishing... because of the weeds."

"When can we go there?"

"As soon as Marceline feels better. I'll come up here and let you know. But it's twenty to nine already. I have to get all these things down to the kitchen and wash the dishes before I go to the store. I'll be late. And no one's made your sandwich."

"I'll do them for you, and I know how to make a sandwich."

"No. You paint. That's what you're here for."

I set up the easel and prepared my palette and started the canvas shortly before I heard him leave. The knowledge that I was alone in the house with Marceline nagged at me, though if it was her period that caused her indisposition she would probably stay in her room. Still, I felt antsy to get out, but I kept at it because I'd told Jean-Yves that I'd try to finish the study.

I didn't quite finish. The sun came out a little before noon and gave me an excuse to stop. Instead of making a sandwich, I decided to walk down to village and eat at the café. Maybe I could convince Jean-Yves to join me. I gathered up my sketchbook and watercolors and set out.

The shop was closed for lunch. I went on to the café, thinking I might run into him. He wasn't there. I took a sidewalk table so I'd see him if he passed by, and ordered

a *croque-monsieur* and a glass of beer.

I went back to the store after lunch. It had opened again. He'd set a rack of postcards out in front and some shelves on which he'd put the usual jars of local foodstuffs, colorful place mats, straw shopping bags, scented soaps, picture puzzles, trinkets and assorted knick-knacks. I felt embarrassed about going in. What was I doing there, after all? He might think I was pursuing him. In a sense I was, but for no more insidious reason than seeing him made me happy. If my attraction to him had any sexual basis, I was not yet aware of it.

I found a spot across the street and began a watercolor of the *Petit Cadeau*, hoping he would notice me and come out. He noticed me through the window when some customers went into the shop and came over after he'd finished with them.

"Why didn't you stop in and say hello?"

"I was going to after I finished this."

"You're painting our store?"

"For Marceline. A little something to make it up to her. I think she's been angry with me ever since I said I wouldn't paint her portrait."

"I heard about that. She called you a miser."

"Do you think I'm a miser?"

"Not for that. You're an artist. If you make

something for someone they should pay for it."

"But I could be a miser?"

"I haven't seen how free you are with your money."

I laughed — a simpleton's honesty, though he was no simpleton. "What do you think of the picture so far?"

"It's very good."

"It's not bad, but I don't much care for it."

"You shouldn't have asked if you knew the answer. Now you've made me feel stupid. Like the nuns."

"I didn't know the answer."

"Yes, you did. You just said it isn't that good."

"I didn't ask if it was good; I asked what *you* thought of it."

"My sister will like it."

"And you? Did you just say it was good to be polite?" He looked as if he didn't know what to say. "If you're not afraid to tell me that you don't yet know whether or not I'm a miser, why can't you be honest about my painting?"

"If I tell you I don't like it now, you'll think I'm saying it to agree with you."

"Okay then. Leaf through my sketchbook and pick out the things you like."

The pad contained most of the sketches and watercolors I done since I'd come, some of my work from

Provence, and several female nudes. He lingered over the nudes. "That's not the kind of portrait my sister had in mind."

"Of course not. And I wouldn't have done a nude of her even if she agreed to pay me."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't do nudes of acquaintances, only of professional models and very close friends. It's a question of ethics."

"I don't see why it should matter if you..." He stopped, embarrassed at mentioning the things he imagined an artist might do.

I finished his sentence for him. "If I behave professionally. It shouldn't. The problem is what people might think. I should have said 'perceived ethics'. But there's more in there. Do you like looking at naked girls?"

He blushed, and went on to look at the rest. "You painted your dinner!"

"Yes, I thought it was very artistic." He looked pleased. "I'd have painted the fish too, but I didn't think of it till after it was eaten, and the *salade niçoise* except I was too tired."

He finished looking through the sketchbook and then went through it a second time. "I like this best."

"So do I." He had chosen the view of the village

from the public garden.

"Anything else?"

"I like most of them, but this especially."

"Show me some of your other favorites."

He showed me the picture of the clothesline and a couple of watercolors from Provence.

"What about the nudes? Do you like any of them?"

He blushed again. "I was only teasing before. Nudes are one of the most important genres for an artist."

"Have you made oil paintings of nudes?"

"Quite a few."

He showed me a couple of the nudes he liked. "Now it's your turn," he said. "Show me what you like."

"No."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't tell you anything about my taste in art. I'm a good painter, but not a great one. Do you have any art books at home? I'll show you what I think great art is."

He shook his head. "Maybe we can go to a museum sometime. There's one in Millau."

"Maybe. I'd like to show you around a museum."

"Did you finish the painting of the cliffs? I'd like to see it."

"You will. But no, I didn't finish it. Almost, but the sun came out. Someone's gone into the store."

He hurried across the street. I called out goodbye and quickly finished the watercolor.

* * * *

Jean-Yves brought my breakfast tray again the next morning, but this time he knocked. He kept his eyes averted though a sheet covered me from the waist down. He'd brought the coffee pot, the same jam jar and stick of butter as yesterday, and enough toast for two.

"I take it Marceline will be staying home again."

"No, she just didn't want to push it by climbing up and down from the kitchen. We'll be able to go to the old bridge."

"Is it far from here?"

"No, it's quite close, but hard to get to. You can see there used to be a path, but that must have been ages ago. It's been roped off since before I can remember. Most of it has crumbled away, and you have to do some tricky climbing to get there. Be careful."

I threw off the sheet and went to get a pair of briefs from the dresser. He made a point of not looking at me.

"I'm sorry if I'm embarrassing you. We artists are so used to nudity that it's not a sexual thing for us. Modesty isn't one of my vices."

"I didn't think it was sexual." He sounded offended.

"I wasn't implying you did."

"I'm not embarrassed either. It's just not polite to look."

"Well, as long as you're not embarrassed. That's all that matters. Is it all right if I eat in my underwear?"

He looked surprised. "Do people do that in America?"

"I honestly don't know what people do in the privacy of their own homes. I suppose it's pretty rare."

"Here it's considered bad manners."

"Then I'll get dressed first." I took out a pair of hiking shorts.

"Don't wear shorts. I told you it's a stiff climb. You could get scratched up. Wear your jeans."

"What if I want to go wading?"

"Then you can take them off. You're not modest, remember?"

I laughed. "Just so long as I put them back on for lunch, right?"

"When I was in the army some guys did it in the barracks. Eat in their underwear — snacks and things like that. I'm sure they wouldn't have at home."

"We didn't in my family either, but I've become kind of informal living alone."

"You're not married?"

"No. Would I have left my wife for so long if I was?"

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-four."

"Do you want to get married someday?"

"Yes." (I did, with a man — if it ever became legal.)
"What about you?"

"I'd like very much to have kids; I always wanted a little girl. But I don't think it will happen. I don't know how to act around women. I get all flustered. You see how I talk."

"You mean your stammer?" He looked up at me, surprised I had said it so bluntly. "You don't stammer when you speak to me; at least you're not stammering now."

"That's because you're my friend."

"I'm glad you think so. I am. But I wouldn't give up on marriage if I were you. Not all women are looking for guys who are suave or macho. You might meet a girl you feel comfortable with, someone as shy as yourself."

"Not if I live here I won't. We should be going now."

I got my sketchpad and watercolors and put a couple of brushes in my pocket.

"Take your shoulder bag," he said. "You'll need

both hands free to get down to the river. Even I do. I'd carry them for you if I didn't I have to put our lunches and my fishing gear in the backpack."

"Won't you have to carry your pole?"

"It's collapsible. I put it together at the bottom of the gorge."

He set out in the direction of the village with me following.

Some thirty meters down the road he hopped over the wall onto what looked like a narrow shelf of grass with a sheer drop to the river. "Follow me."

A short climb down the rocks brought us to another grassy patch, invisible from the road, the beginning of a dirt path down the side of the cliff. "Watch your step. This is treacherous."

It was — steep and narrow with nothing on the cliff wall to hang on to, overgrown in places, and the dirt was loose and rocky. About a quarter of the way down he said, "Now we climb again. The path ends a few meters further on. This part is the worst of it. Then it gets easier."

I had trouble keeping up with him. The way was familiar to him and I had to feel around for a toehold, sometimes climbing several feet back up to try another route.

"Drop your shoulder bag and let it slide down to

me," he said. "It'll free up your arms."

The descent finally leveled out in a stand of trees where he was waiting for me. "Now you know why I wouldn't let you try it alone."

"I wouldn't want to, not until I'd made the climb half a dozen times. Now what?"

"The stairs. After that a little jump, and we're there."

A flight of steps ran down the slope at an angle, broken and uneven, but a real staircase, and built, not carved into the hill. "How did these get here?"

"People had to get down the gorge somehow, didn't they? There used to be a bridge."

"Used to?"

"Is... Or most of it."

The little jump to the level of the river was one and a half times my height, but I managed it. "How do we get up again?"

"By pulling ourselves up on that tree. So? What do you think of it?"

"It's perfect. Eminently paintable."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"To catch my breath. Is the bridge Roman?"

"You tell me. You teach art."

"It could be, or it could be medieval. The way they built bridges stayed pretty much the same for a long time

except for decorations, and sometimes they added those to the original structure. But it could be. In bigger cities the arches tend to be lower, not a perfect semicircle like this. It's harder to be certain with rustic, single-span bridges, and most of this one's gone."

Less than a quarter of the span remained, and all but the underpinnings had disappeared on the opposite bank. Since the river was low, they stood on dry land at the water's edge, so that the walkway between the bridge and the cliff looked like a piece of thick wall. The presence of a gigantic boulder half submerged in the stream accounted for the broken bridge. On our side six rough-hewn stone steps, only partially visible behind a dense tangle of shrubbery, gave access to the span; between the steps and the water grew a large and very green willow. The path across the bridge, a little over a meter wide, was edged on both sides by an ankle-high wall.

The broken section had landed a few feet upstream, where it formed a shallow, gurgling rapids. Downstream, where we stood, the river widened into a deep pool between two dissimilar shorelines, across from us a wide, flat limestone shelf cracked by the bushes that had secured a foothold in it, and a low, sandy beach on our side, shaped like a *crêpe* folded in half. Some three yards from the bridge, the terrain rose like a step and curved to the foot of

the stairs we'd used for the final part of our descent.

The light there was most unusual, like shadows lit from within. On the beach side, direct sunlight probably never came closer to the water than where the sand began, and the other bank lay in constant shadow. The water looked very dark and very cold, but the sunshine hit the cliffs behind us, and the air around us glowed with reflected light.

"This is one of my favorite spots," Jean-Yves said.

"I can see why. The landscape is at once nineteenth century romantic and very ancient. The light here cries out for an oil painting, but today I'll do a watercolor."

I sat down on a rock halfway down the beach from the bridge, set the open sketchpad on my lap, and began painting. Jean-Yves walked to the broken end of the bridge, took a seat facing me on the raised ledge, got out his pole, and began to fish. We stayed like that a long time, each of us engrossed in his task, while the rapids echoed merrily in the silence.

He caught a fish and brought it over to show me.

"Your dinner," he said. Then, looking at my sketchpad:

"You're painting me fishing!"

"Of course. I'm painting the bridge, and you're on it. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. I won't have to pay you for painting me,

will I?"

"Don't be silly; this isn't a commission. Besides, I'm going to keep it. If anything I should pay you for modeling, except that it's the scene I'm painting and I'm just using you as a figure. No one will be able to tell it's you."

"I'll know it's me."

"And I will too."

"It looks like it'll turn out very good."

"I think it will. I like the composition. This would be a good place to do an oil. I'd like to do a very large one if I could, but there's no way."

"Why not?"

"For one, I don't see how I could get the canvas down here."

"We could wrap it up and lower it down with a rope by stages. Better yet, we could bring it and the wood for the frame down and put it together here."

And this from the boy Marceline called a simpleton! The real test of intelligence is problem solving. Still, I didn't think it would work. "It'd take me more than a day to complete, and another day or two to dry. And what about getting it back up?"

"I didn't think of that."

"Once it dries the frame can be taken apart and the canvas rolled up. The real problem is what do with it until

then."

"But if it's a really large canvas it won't fit in our bags."

"I could tie it to my back. I'd be facing the cliff on the way up."

"Would it be safe?"

"I'm pretty sure it would. The painting would be on the inside of the roll with only the back of the canvas showing. Oil paintings are very sturdy, almost indestructible. Bulletproof. No, the only problem is how long it will take to paint and then waiting for it to dry. I wish I hadn't left my acrylics in Provence. An acrylic would look just about as good, and they dry almost as soon as you get them on the paper."

"Then we'll get some heavy plastic to wrap it up in and put it somewhere safe overnight."

"You can't roll up a wet canvas."

"To cover it, then. And when it's finished we can come down every day and expose it to the air until you think it's dry enough. It would work, wouldn't it? Your smile tells me it will."

"It'll work, all right, but that's not why I'm smiling. I'm smiling because you keep saying 'we'."

"I should have said 'you'. That's what I meant."

"No, 'we' *c'est le mot juste*. I smiled because I was

happy you said it. This will be *our* project."

I almost thought he would hug me. "Would I be in it too?"

"In the painting? I don't know yet. I don't have a clear idea yet of what it would be. I just know I want to do an oil here. So, maybe. But you go back and fish. I need you there to finish the picture. Besides, one fish won't feed three people. You and Marceline have to eat too."

* * * *

The finished watercolor was the best thing I'd yet done in France. Jean-Yves loved it. He asked me on the climb back if I thought I'd be able to make it up to the road with my shoulder bag *and* a rolled canvas tied to my back.

"Definitely."

"Then we can start tomorrow?"

"We need to get the plastic first. Do you think we can find it in the village?"

"Probably not. For sure they'll have it Millau. I have to go there the day after tomorrow. It's market day. I'll pick it up then."

"I'll give you the money for it. So, we can start in three days. That'll give me time to make up my mind about the painting, to sketch in a few ideas from memory and

decide what I want to do. But I really should pay you if you're going to be my assistant."

"Please don't. I'd rather be your friend."

We showed the painting to Marceline. "It's very nice," she said curtly. "Is the boy fishing Jean-Yves?"

"It's just meant to be a boy fishing, but of course it's him. You see he caught fish for all of us."

"I thought so. Who else would it have been?"

Why, then, did she bother asking?

I went back to the public garden the next day where I'd be outdoors and alone to draw the scene from memory and plan an oil. I filled several pages with sketches but couldn't come up with an idea for a painting.

"I'll go back down to the bridge tomorrow while you're in Millau," I told Jean-Yves that evening. "I couldn't come up with an idea. I'll have to see it again."

"Don't," he said. "You could fall and hurt yourself. Nobody would find you there. Stay here and work on the light on the cliffs instead."

"*You* go there alone."

"That's different. Promise me you won't."

"Okay, I promise."

I got up early to work on the oil I'd started of the

cliffs in the morning light but didn't get far with it because Marceline brought my breakfast and by the time I'd eaten the light had changed, so I started a fifth. The painting of the cliffs on a cloudy day would have to wait. By noon the light had changed again. I went to the kitchen and found the sandwich Marceline had left for me, brought it up to my room and ate it.

It was too soon to work on my late afternoon pictures. I did not want to start a sixth, and I'd been indoors all day. The room was stifling, the weather hotter than since I'd arrived. I'd been perspiring and felt sticky. I decided to walk down to the village for a swim. I didn't care how cold the water was.

The village children evidently agreed with me on the weather. The beach was crowded with youngsters, all of them boys. I couldn't imagine where they all came from. The locals must have been inordinately prolific, considering that they must have produced about the same number of girls. There were one or two other adults there, but I was the only one who went in the water, and the boys looked at me like some sort of curiosity. It seemed that swimming (I should say, splashing around) was an activity only males under the age of fifteen indulged in. Don't ask me what girls did for fun there. I concluded that the adults amused themselves by making children, and that they

started at about age sixteen.

I did not stay in the water long. If I had, those parts of me I'd have used to make children (if my tastes ran in that direction) would have frozen solid. My teeth were chattering and I'm sure my lips were blue with cold. I got out quickly and went to have a hot tea with whisky at the café, wishing I had brought a sweater, and maybe gloves and a scarf as well.

On my way up the stairs I was jostled by a group of boys who raced past me —*Pardon, monsieur!*— which caused me to stumble and twist my right ankle. I managed to make it as far as the parking lot by balancing on one toe to keep my weight off the foot. I hobbled across the road to the café and ordered my tea and whisky, then rolled up my pants leg to have a look at my ankle. It had swollen to twice its normal size.

Someone plunked himself down beside me. Jean-Yves, with an enormous piece of heavy, clear plastic folded like a tablecloth under his arm.

"What are you doing here?"

"I saw you limping. What happened?"

"I fell. I've..." I didn't know the word. I made a twisting motion with my hands.

"*Une entorse*. You're sure it isn't broken?"

"Very. Would you please go to the counter and ask

for some ice?"

There had been some miscommunication, either linguistic or cultural. He came back with a small glass of ice cubes.

"Is your tea too hot?"

"For the sprain."

I wrapped them in my napkin and put it against the ankle. He seemed puzzled by this unfamiliar (and inadequate) form of treatment.

"You should go to the pharmacy."

"How would I get there?" I handed him fifty francs. "Take this and buy me a... I suppose nobody here has a French-English dictionary?"

He shook his head. "The pharmacist speaks a little English."

I scribbled "Ace bandage" on a scrap of paper and he ran to the pharmacy. Luckily, it was one of the words she knew.

Walking back to the house was a hopeless cause. Jean-Yves spotted a car coming down the hill and flagged it down. They argued for a few minutes, then he waved to me.

He had not flagged down just any car; it belonged to his future brother-in-law. I hopped over to it with my right arm around Jean-Yves' shoulder, and a scowling Gilles

grudgingly drove us home.

I could never have made it up the stairs without Jean-Yves' help. He arranged the pillows so I could sit up in bed with my leg stretched out in front of me, then went out and came back carrying a chamber pot.

"I won't be needing that," I said. "I can hop up and down the stairs."

"Two whole flights?"

"There's no reason why your sister should have to cart off my bodily wastes and clean up after me."

"I told her I'd take care of it."

"There's no reason for you to either."

"I'll leave it here anyway, just in case."

"I won't use it."

He brought my breakfast every morning. I saw nothing of Marceline. He'd eat with me and hang around to watch me paint. I showed him how I mixed my colors and used different brushes for different effects. Everything I did interested him.

I tried engaging him in conversation while I painted. "Gilles doesn't like me at all, does he?"

"He didn't, but that's over and done with."

"Why? Isn't he jealous anymore?"

"He never was jealous. Just mad. He thought you

had something going with Marceline, so you were horning in on his territory."

"He saw me as a rival?"

"Not exactly a rival. He knew she'd marry him whatever she did with you. But now he can relax since there's nothing between you."

"How does he know that?"

"He can see she doesn't like you. It's she who's jealous, not him. Jealous of me, because you pay attention to me and ignore her. Gilles wasn't entirely wrong. She did want to sleep with you, and you hurt her feelings. You should have heard her go off about the chamber pot. 'Now I'm going to have to clean up his filth too!' She was livid."

"When's the wedding?"

"Early October. But I should go. I'm keeping you from your work."

"No you aren't. Look for yourself: I can paint and talk at the same time. I don't mind the company. What is it?"

"You called me *tu*."

"I'm sorry. Speaking French doesn't come that naturally to me." Our teacher had told us that young people weren't as formal anymore and tended to use the familiar with each other, so that's what he had his students use in class, but I was older and a professor there, so I had to say

vous to everyone.

"Don't be sorry. Is it okay if I use *tu* with you too?"

"Absolutely. And come and talk with me as often as you like. Just don't be offended if I don't answer you right off sometimes. It means I'm concentrating on what I'm doing. I'm still listening."

"What should we talk about?"

"Tell me about yourself. That way I won't have to talk much."

"There's not much to tell."

"Yes, there is. Tell me about what it was like growing up or about your time in the army."

He came in every day to watch me paint. I couldn't work steadily because I'd have to put my foot up when it started hurting, so I'd sit on the bed and listen to him, and bit by bit I found out about his past.

The family came from Dijon. He'd been a disappointment to his politically conservative, working-class parents, who didn't know what to make of this unusual boy, late in speaking, dreamy, frightened of other children. They sent their children to a Catholic elementary school, an experience that turned them both off religion permanently and exacerbated Jean-Yves' introversion. He made no friends, his mind wandered in class, and he did poorly in his studies. There were problems with discipline,

and his parents had to go to the school for conferences almost every other month. At the age of ten he was expelled. His father was mortified. Unable to hold his head up in front of the neighbors, he borrowed heavily to buy out a failing souvenir store sight unseen in a far corner of the Gard and moved his family there. They found a house outside the village, so people would see as little as possible of the son he was ashamed of.

"Marceline resented me for it, being taken away from all her friends and forced to live in the middle of nowhere. She thought it was all my fault. She still does. She hates it here. As far as I was concerned we could have stayed in Dijon, not that I had any friends there. But things were no different here. If anything, they were worse. I was just as dumb in school and the kids picked on me just as much. And there was the school bus too. Forty-five minutes each day with all those screaming kids playing tricks on me and Marceline egging them on."

"Why don't you leave if you both hate it so much?"

"We can't. Legally the house and store still belong to my father. We can't sell them while he's still alive, and he won't sign."

"I thought your parents were dead."

"Only my mother. Cancer. It happened very quickly."

"And your father?"

"He went down hill after *maman* died. Sat around his room all day and moped. This room. It was my parents', hence the double bed. Then he started forgetting things. He became so absent-minded Marceline and I had to take over the shop. He's in a home in Millau. We put him there at about the same time I went into the army."

"Do you see him often?"

"He doesn't want to see me. Marceline goes — another reason to resent me. She doesn't like him much. It's ironic, because I honestly do love him, in spite of all the things he did to me."

"He used to hit you, I take it."

"Before we came here. Then he gave up on me and just ignored me. Except once, when he lost it entirely and came at me like a madman. I thought he was going to murder me. My mother had to pull him off me."

"What did you do that was so awful?"

"I won't tell you. I don't want you to think of me as bad."

"I don't think you're bad. You haven't done it since, have you?"

"No, not anymore."

* * * *

After three days my ankle felt well enough to do more than hobble around the room. There was no way I could climb down to the bridge, but with an Ace bandage I'd be able to walk for an hour or so without too much pain. I needed supplies. I'd brought all the wrong colors with me, and my cliff series with all its grays and dirty browns had just about exhausted my supply of yellow. I couldn't finish the set without it, and would have to replenish them all before tackling a large canvas with the old bridge. I also needed to go to the bank. Paints were expensive in France, and Marceline would want cash for the extra days I stayed with her to finish the canvas. I had to see if they'd transferred my last paycheck to my French account.

I announced I'd be going to Millau for more paints the next day and wanted an early breakfast. I didn't have the car this time, and would have to take the bus.

"Are you sure your leg can handle it?" Jean-Yves asked. "Should I come with you?"

"By tomorrow, yes, and I'll have no trouble managing on my own, but thanks anyway. I can flag down the bus outside the house, can't I? I won't have to walk to the village."

Marceline shrugged. "Sometimes it stops; sometimes it doesn't."

"I'll get his breakfast," Jean-Yves said. "I'm always up early."

"You always get his breakfast," remarked Marceline.

"*This* early?" I asked when he came to my room the next morning. He had to shake me to get me up.

"To get the dishes out of the way so I can walk you to the bus. I promised I'd do inventory this morning."

We chatted on the way down.

"I'm curious — how many people live in your village?"

"In Sainte-Ripouze?"

"No, up here with you and your sister."

"This is part of Sainte-Ripouze. There's just us. The other three houses—"

"There are only four?"

"Count them yourself. They're vacation homes that belong to people in the north — Paris, Lille. They hardly ever come here. Why would they? Instead they try to rent them out by the month, without much luck. There's nothing to do around here."

"You seem to find things to do."

"Yes, nothing, but not everyone likes to do that."

"You're not bored here?"

"Not when I'm alone. The rest of the time I am. It's funny, because everyone thinks it should be the other way around. But I like being alone. I don't make friends easily."

"You made friends with me easily enough. I don't think I've ever made friends with anyone as quickly."

"You're different. I'm always afraid people won't be nice to me, but from the second we met I knew you'd be kind. Then there was what you said when I stupidly walked in on you."

"You seemed more upset about it than I was."

"Precisely. Anyone else would have blown up at me."

He was right about that. "I probably would have made a fuss too if I hadn't been so happy you weren't your sister."

"You don't like Marceline, do you?"

"I don't so much dislike her, as I find her..." I didn't know how to say overbearing in French. "...*de trop*."

"*Trop quoi?*"

"People who act as if they have the right to make decisions for everyone else. Is there a French word for that?"

"There should be. We have plenty of people like that in France. My sister, for one."

"And I don't like the things she says..." I broke off,

thinking I might have gone too far.

"About me? I don't blame her for that. Everyone says them."

"Personally I think your assessment of her is closer to the mark."

"She doesn't mind the way I am, not really, but it embarrasses her."

"She should have more consideration for you and worry less about herself. Don't people have the right to be themselves?"

"Sometimes I think people are all the same and I'm the only one who's different."

There was no despair in his voice, only resignation. I was tempted to lecture him on his melancholy outlook on life, but the bus was waiting. "That shows you're not a clone. We'll talk more about it later. *A plus.*"

I'd checked the phonebook for an art supplies store close to the station. I'd found whatever I wanted in Provence and thought I'd spend a few minutes picking up the oils, stop by the bank, and then take it easy until I had to catch the bus back. If my leg held up, I might take a shortcut through the center of town or perhaps a longer walk to paint the old tannery works built in the middle of

the river. I prefer to use Gamblin colors. They're expensive, but worth it, though some other brands will do in a pinch. The store did not carry them, nor any other brands I'm familiar with. I would not risk getting a full supply of something that I might not like. I've developed a set of tints I use to mix my own colors, and trying to get the shades I want with any others would be a hit or miss affair. The owner phoned around for me and found a store that carried Gamblin. They had a very small selection, barely two-thirds my basic set, and sold the cadmium pale yellow, which I needed immediately, in tubes the size of those sample toothpastes hotel chains set out for their clients. I started making the rounds for acceptable substitutes. One store carried Windsor and Newton, but not their viridian hue, and they were out of Vandyke brown —would you believe?— another vital shade for the cliffs. If I could put in an order it would come in a week.

"Meaning two," I thought.

I gave up on Millau. I'd have to go from store to store putting together an incomplete set made up of different brands, which might not combine as I hoped. It would be a waste of money and a strain on my ankle. All I had accomplished was a trip to the bank.

* * * *

I remembered to ask the bus driver to drop me off at Marceline's and got home at seven. She was sitting with her usual magazine in the living room while Jean-Yves worked in the kitchen.

"I couldn't find what I wanted," I told them. "I'll have to go to a bigger town. What's the quickest city I can get to by train?"

"Rodez," Marceline answered.

"If he can't find what he wants here he won't find it there either," said Jean-Yves. "Go to Montpellier. It's ten times bigger."

"But there are only two trains a day," Marceline objected, "and there's no way he could catch the seven-thirty. He won't get there until seven at night."

"He can take the coach a little before two and change in Béziers."

"He still won't arrive until close to five."

Montpellier was a city I wanted to see. "Then I'll stay overnight," I said. "At least I'm sure to find everything I need in Montpellier. I can stock up. The trip won't be wasted. It makes no sense going to whatever that other city was..."

"Rodez."

"...if they don't have what I'm looking for."

"Could I go too?" Jean-Yves asked.

"And do what?" Marceline wanted to know. "You'll only get in his way."

"If he's going to stock up, he'll need help carrying things. Won't you, Ben? And Ben's never been to Montpellier and I have. I could show him around."

Marceline raised an eyebrow when she heard him use my first name. Between us it was still *Monsieur* and *Mademoiselle*. "When were you in Montpellier?"

"When I was in the army. Once, for three whole days."

"By 'show him around' I suppose you mean things to paint. He's just going to shop."

"I'd like having Jean-Yves along. And I probably will need help with what I buy," I lied. I didn't intend to buy that much.

"If he's going to be your assistant, then you should pay him for it."

Jean-Yves was fuming. To defuse the situation before he lashed out I said, "I'll pay for the hotel and his meals, and I'll buy his train ticket too. Will that do?"

"I can pay for my own ticket," grumbled Jean-Yves. "I have money."

"Then consider it a *petit cadeau*."

Marceline glared at me, I assumed because she

didn't want him to go. "You'll have trouble finding a hotel in Montpellier after five at this time year."

"Then I'll call and reserve a room."

"Call who?"

"Why, the Tourist Office. Who else?"

"It'll be closed now."

"Then I'll call in the morning."

"Tomorrow's Sunday. They'll be closed all day."

"No they won't, not at the height of tourist season, but the stores might be, so we'll go on Monday. I think I'd better stay two nights," I added, just to annoy her.

"Can we get a room with a shower?" Jean-Yves asked. "I like showers."

"When have *you* ever had a shower?" Marceline sneered.

"In the army of course, and at school too. In Dijon."

If it were up to Jean-Yves, I'd have been taking my meals with the family by then, but no doubt Marceline insisted on keeping up the formalities. I was not a friend; I was a lodger. She seemed unhappy when she brought up my dinner.

"I suppose it's too late now to back down on this Montpellier outing," she said.

"Why would I want to back down?"

"Just keep an eye on him, will you?"

"I'm sure Jean-Yves can take care of himself."

"I'm not. But he's infatuated with you, so my guess is he won't go wandering off on his own. I'm relying on you to see he doesn't get into trouble. You have a lot of influence on him. He'll listen to you."

"Infatuated?" I found the other thing she said, the idea of Jean-Yves getting into trouble, too absurd to mention.

"Yes, infatuated. Haven't you noticed? He worships you. You shouldn't encourage it."

"How have I encouraged him? By letting him show me to the old bridge? I was looking for places to paint, and he obliged."

"You shouldn't let him call you Ben." He had yet to address me in the second person in front of her, so she didn't know about the *tutoiement*. I wondered if he'd been avoiding it on purpose.

"Why not?" I asked. "We're much less formal in the States. But now that he does, I can't very well ask him not to, can I?"

"Just take care of him. As for his getting into trouble, you'll see what I mean soon enough. Then again, maybe not. In any case, I think you can handle it."

"I can't imagine anything will go wrong. I've never met a better-brought-up young man."

"We did our best."

We? She was three or four years older than him at most. "He's smarter than you think," I said.

"That's news to me."

How dense can the woman be? I thought. *What else is 'smarter than you think' supposed to mean?* I know it was just an expression, but everything she said got on my nerves. Her low opinion of her brother exasperated me.

PART II. THE MODEL

CHAPTER THREE

Jean-Yves could scarcely contain his excitement when we got on the train. "What's with you?" I asked. "You're as frisky as a puppy."

"I haven't had a chance to get out of the area in almost three years."

"Not since the army?"

"After that. For medical treatments."

"What was wrong with you?"

He made one of those expressive noises the French always use and said, "Even the doctors couldn't figure it out. Marceline brought me home when they couldn't do anything for me."

"But your symptoms?"

"Nothing major. I wasn't sleeping, lost a lot of weight..."

Depression. But the doctors would have diagnosed that easily. Maybe he was ashamed to tell me. Marceline must have said some pretty awful things. I remembered how introverted and melancholy he seemed at our first meeting. Now he was nothing short of exuberant.

* * * *

My eyes almost popped out of my head when we arrived in Béziers. I hadn't heard of its cathedral. The huge fortified structure on its terraced promontory dwarfs the town below.

"Is there time to visit that before our next train?"

"In under an hour? No way."

"On another trip, then."

"You mean it?"

"Of course."

"I'm glad. What I said before about needing to get out of the area, that was only half of it. What makes me happiest is being with you. Nobody's ever been as kind to me as you are."

I made a disparaging gesture.

"I'm serious. You're so patient when you explain things to me, and you don't make fun of me when I ask questions."

"It's a pleasure to explain things when someone's sincerely interested, and your questions are always right on the mark."

"You stand up for me to my sister too. You, a university professor! I can't tell you how good that makes

me feel about myself."

"You deserve to feel good about yourself."

"And this trip, paying for everything... Though I wish you hadn't."

"Look, I enjoy your company. Did it ever occur to you that I might be lonely too? And it's good for my French. I've talked more to you than to anyone else since I arrived in this country."

"You're getting better at it too."

"That's your doing. I'm counting on you to keep me talking till we reach Montpellier."

I'd asked for a hotel in the old city. It took us a fair amount of wandering and back tracking through narrow streets to find it, and when we did the woman at the desk said, "Oh dear, I thought the reservation was for a married couple. I've given you a double bed."

"Don't you have any twin bed rooms?"

"They're all taken."

"Maybe we should go somewhere else," I told Jean-Yves.

"I like this place," he said, "and we might not be able to find another."

"The hotels here are pretty full this time of year," the receptionist agreed.

"I suppose we can at least look at the room," I said.
Jean-Yves loved it. "This is where I want to stay,"
he said.

"You don't mind sharing a bed?"

"No, I want this room. It's perfect. Did you see how
big the shower is? Let's take it and go out and get your
shopping done so we can spend the rest of the time on
vacation."

"Won't stores be closing around now?"

"Not at the Polygone; stores there are open till at
least seven. You'll have no trouble finding everything."

The receptionist agreed.

"You knew that all along, didn't you? I could have
come back the same day."

He gave me a conspiratorial smile. "And miss
Montpellier? I promised to show you this town. What do
you want to see?"

"Are there any good museums? I made a promise
too, remember? — to show you the kind of art I like best."

"Then tomorrow we go to the Musée Fabre. Now
let's go shopping."

Walking in Montpellier is a pleasure. The usual dog
droppings aside, it is cleaner than most French cities, and
outside the maze of the medieval town with its sixteenth
and seventeenth century *hôtels particuliers*, it opens up into

wide public squares and esplanades, many of them reserved for pedestrians. They've surrounded the center with parking ramps to accommodate thousands of vehicles, and you probably see fewer cars there than in any other city its size. It's also a student town, and though classes were not in session, the large concentration of young people in the streets made me feel as if I were back on campus. We passed a fair number of male couples, many of whom looked enough alike to be brothers, but didn't act like it, and I caught many of them eyeing Jean-Yves. Was this what Marceline meant when she asked me to keep him out of trouble? He was naïve enough to get picked up without realizing the other person's intentions. And what was it she said about not encouraging him and my being able to handle it? It hit me that she thought he was gay. It would explain the look she gave me when I made that crack about the *petit cadeau*. All her comments contained some element of innuendo. I remembered Jean-Yves' stories about being picked on in school, about his father's anger, and everything fell into place.

I didn't believe it for a second. I had faith in my ability to spot a gay man, and I'd seen ample evidence that he was straight —the way he avoided looking at me when he came upon me undressed, how the stares of the men who passed us didn't register with him, the fact that despite his

infatuation he had never come on to me— but I could see how people in that small, closed, narrow-minded community would suspect anyone who seemed different from them of being homosexual. He probably knew it too, and it made his life miserable. I resolved to point nothing out nor say anything remotely connected with homosexuality.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"I couldn't begin to explain. A jumble of mixed-up thoughts."

"You look so serious."

"Not serious. As I said, confused."

The Polygone is a shopping mall built on four levels. You can find anything there — except the art supplies I wanted. "We'll check the *Bottin* and get what you need in the morning," said Jean-Yves. "Since we're here, let's do a little *lèche-vitrines* and after that I'll show you Antigone. It's right outside the other end of the mall."

Lèche-vitrines had to mean window shopping.

"What's Antigone?"

"An HLM."

"A housing project? You're kidding!"

"This one's different. It's a whole neighborhood

designed by a famous architect. You'll see."

Shopping malls bore me, but this one enthralled Jean-Yves, and I enjoyed watching him. He dragged me everywhere. In the *Galeries Lafayette*, one story below the level of the pavement, he treated me to a mini-fashion show, trying on outfits without intending to buy any. I offered to buy him something, but he refused outright.

We went out the far end of the store and down the escalator and emerged from a building completely unlike the one we had entered. The west entrance to the Polygone presents a two-story ultramodern façade of glass and steel topped with a shining metal rectangle that frames a long half-cylinder perched on the roof; looking at it from the other side you see a three-story sandstone façade in the style of a Greek temple, with massive, unadorned cylindrical columns sculpted on the wall running to the height of the flat roof. A pair of wide staircases zigzag in two flights to the top floor. On the square on either side of us, bronze castings of the Discobolus and the Belvedere Apollo were mounted on pedestals. Directly across the road a colossal archway connecting two identical buildings in the same cream-yellow sandstone formed the monumental entrance to Antigone. I saw what he meant.

We looked through the archway down a wide, tree-lined, seemingly endless esplanade closed to vehicular

traffic, the buildings on either side perfectly symmetrical, five towering stories in the neo-classical style, the first three each more than twenty feet high, curved to enclose a circular space of Olympian proportions, like an agora for a race of giants. The untextured cream-colored stone was cut in seamless blocks at perfect right angles, unadorned except for the widely-spaced Ionic capitals directly below the straight line of the roofs. The ensemble was obviously well cared for, clean and free of graffiti, and, despite the many people there, uncrowded. It seemed almost impossible to fill so vast a space with teeming humanity. Beyond it the esplanade continued in a straight line for what appeared to be a kilometer or more.

"I want to paint this," I said. "An acrylic would work best, but I don't have any, so it'll have to be an oil. I couldn't capture its solidity with watercolors, and all that pale cream would wash out on the page. Now I'll have to buy a canvas and brushes too."

"Won't the light keep changing?"

"Rapidly, but only in the morning and evening, I think. Then that mass of white will go through a wider range of colors than the cliffs. See how it reflects the sun? The line of shadow will move, but the colors will stay the same, so that won't be a problem. I should be able to finish in four hours. There's not much by way of little details. It

won't be easy, though, with no easel. I'll have to lean the canvas on something and crouch down to paint. Come, let's walk to the end so I can see all of it."

In the enormous first courtyard a casting of the Poseidon holding his arms like a javelin thrower stood in the center of a square of wet stone slabs crisscrossed by gratings — a fountain.

The jets came on for a few minutes then other jets came on, changing the pattern. I watched, fascinated, as the fountain took on other configurations, all of them symmetrical, apparently in random order. At one point a single jet behind the statue shot up some ten meters and came pouring back down on the god as if he were standing under a waterfall.

"It makes me think of that shower back in the hotel," Jean-Yves remarked.

When all the jets were on, the naked god almost disappeared behind a screen of water. "I'm going to paint this — a watercolor."

"You paint naked men too?" He'd only seen a handful of my nude sketches, all of them female.

"Why not? But this isn't a naked man; it's a fountain. I want to do more than one, there's so much variety here. One with the water coming straight down on him—"

"Like in the shower."

"...and maybe two others, I haven't yet decided which."

"It'll take you all day. The fountain keeps changing. There are dozens of designs, and none of them are on for that long."

"I'll have to jump back and forth between them and the oil. I've worked on more than one painting at a time before, though not in different mediums. But you're right — we'll be spending all day tomorrow here."

"And the museum?"

"We'll just have to stay an extra day, won't we?"

He could barely contain his excitement. "We will? What will we tell Marceline?"

"Why not just tell her I want to paint?"

We continued on down the straight line of broad esplanades lined with trees and flower beds that separated the central avenue from the shops and elegant but moderately priced restaurants that occupied the ground floor of the buildings. The esplanades opened onto more plazas, with more fountains and more statues. Then the storefronts came to an end and we reached a gymnasium and Olympic-size indoor pool. From there we could see where it ended, but looking back the entrance was no longer in sight. The entire complex ran just short of a

kilometer.

We started walking back.

"This is very upscale for low income. You're sure people live here?"

"Lower middle." He pointed to the laundry hung out on drying racks behind stone railings on the upper-story balconies.

"Yes, I noticed them too, but it didn't register that meant they're apartments."

"Will we have dinner in one of the restaurants here?" he asked.

"No, we'll see more than enough of this place tomorrow. How about we try that big square we crossed to get to the mall or somewhere around there?"

"La Place de la Comédie? That should work."

We ate at a restaurant a block or two away from it, on the Place Jean Jaurès, a square with streets leading off into the old town and so overrun by restaurants we couldn't tell which one the table we sat down at belonged to until our server brought the menu.

"What're you in the mood to do after dinner?" I asked.

"Nothing, just go back to the hotel. We've done plenty, and I've been thinking about that shower all day."

* * * *

"Is it okay if I shower first?" he asked.

"Go right ahead."

He took his toilet kit and disappeared into the bathroom. He ran the shower for a long time. "This is wonderful!" he called out to me from behind the door.

"Just leave some hot water for me."

He came out drying his hair. He hadn't wrapped a towel around his waist. Naked he looked younger than he did with his clothes on. His belly was absolutely flat, but not muscled, almost sunken, and he had a very narrow waist. His member, hanging flaccid in front of his scrotum, was larger than average, but he had very little and very fine pubic hair, and only the faintest treasure trail.

I had not expected him to expose himself so totally. Till then I hadn't even seen him take off his shirt. He noticed my stare and my astonishment. "See?" he said, "I'm not as shy as all that. If you're not embarrassed, I'm not either."

"But I don't look away."

"Next time I won't either. Could you hand me my comb? In my shirt pocket, there, on the chair... You're still looking at me."

"Don't say I didn't warn you. But I'm looking at you

as a subject. I'm thinking I'd like to do an oil painting of you."

"A nude?"

"No, not a nude, but naked, yes. In the water by the bridge, doing what I'm not sure. Is that okay? You see, you finally inspired me. Turn around and let me see the back of you."

He turned his back to me. "How do I look? You still want to paint me *à poil*?" He had a gorgeous ass.

"Indeed I do."

"Would people be able to tell it's me?"

"Yes. In what I have in mind they would. Are you still game?"

"You won't show it to anyone here, will you?"

"In the village? Not if you don't want me to."

"Will I have to pay for my portrait or do I get modeling fees?"

"It won't be a portrait. Do you want to be paid by the hour?"

"I was only kidding."

"I know, but I would've paid you. That's how much I want to do it. And now I'm going to take my shower."

I wouldn't have dreamed of wrapping a towel around me to go back in the room. I found him sitting up in bed naked, the covers turned down.

"You're not wearing pajamas?"

"You don't."

"No, but that doesn't mean you can't. Sleep however you're used to sleeping. I was going to put on my briefs so you wouldn't feel uncomfortable."

He thought for a second and said, "I'll sleep naked."

He spoke candidly, his tone of voice in every way natural and innocent, yet had he wanted to seduce me, he couldn't have done a better job.

I could see he wanted to say something else but was embarrassed to say it. "What're you thinking?" I asked.

"Your *zizi*." (He used the children's word.) "It's different from mine."

"Because I'm circumcised. If you pull back the skin on yours we'd look the same."

He didn't retract it as I hoped, but merely asked, "Why did you do it?"

"I didn't. My parents had it done when I was born. Most American men are cut. What more do you want to know?"

He turned beet red. "Nothing, not about your..."

"*Ma bite*?"

"You know that word? How did you learn it?"

"I can't remember. What do you want to know about?"

"About the picture. Tell me what it will look like."

"I don't know yet, I just know that it will show you wading by the old bridge."

"Naked."

"Yes, naked. I'll have to do a lot of sketches of you before I work out the composition."

"Naked?"

"You mean the sketches? A few of them; not all. Lots of drawings of different parts of you. Your hands, your feet, your face..."

"Will we start now?"

"No, tomorrow, in the morning light. I want to get some sleep."

Lying beside him in the dark, I finally realized that I desired him. I couldn't fall asleep; I could think of nothing but how much I wanted to make love to him and that I would sooner die than have him find out. I did my best to hide an almost painful erection. Whatever Marceline thought or didn't think, he was straight. His interest in my penis was innocent curiosity. I had no doubt I could get him to go along with anything I wanted. He was so vulnerable. But even if it turned out he was gay, the thought that I'd cultivated his friendship just to have sex with him would have devastated him. I steeled myself. Nothing would happen unless he made the first move.

I could tell by his breathing that he, too, was awake. After several minutes he said, "I was thinking..."

"Yes?"

"My sister will be jealous if she finds out you're painting me after you refused to do her portrait. We shouldn't let her know."

"Then I'll do the sketches here. It'll mean staying on longer, so I'd better do a couple of watercolors of the city to show her as well. I'll knock them off fairly quickly. They don't have to be good. *She* won't know the difference."

"Maybe you should paint her too."

"I don't want to do her portrait. She'll get the picture of her store."

"You think it will satisfy her?"

"It'll have to. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Huh?"

I'd translated the English expression literally. It meant nothing in French. "We'll deal with that later."

"I was also thinking about getting myself circumcised."

"Don't be idiotic. Why would you want to do that?"

"To look like you."

"You're crazy. You're fine just the way you are. Besides, I hear it hurts something awful."

He kept quiet after that, and before long I heard him fall asleep. Marceline was right. There was something childlike about him.

* * * *

I hardly slept at all that night. At one point I dozed off and woke up to find Jean-Yves snuggled up against me. I drew away, for my own peace of mind. When it started to grow light I got up to urinate, as much to bring down my erection as to relieve the pressure on my bladder.

Soon it would be light enough to sketch him. He was sleeping peacefully. I quietly opened the shutters, lifted the sheet and pulled it all the way down, carefully, so as not to wake him. I got into a pair of shorts before sitting down to draw in case looking at him made me hard again. I didn't think it would, since I'd be working, but I didn't want to risk it.

He was marvelously lovely. How could I have gone so long without seeing how beautiful he was? I don't need to see him in front of me to remember exactly what he looked like then. Nor would it help; he changed so much when he got older. Even if we hadn't become lovers I would remember. How could I forget? I made so many dozens of sketches of him and looked at him so intently

when I drew them. If I imagine myself holding a pencil, my hand can feel the contours of his body.

But we didn't become lovers on that trip. That happened later.

He had, as I said, the body of an adolescent, not only for his lack of body hair —his skin was smooth as cream— but also because he looked as if he had just come out of a growth spurt and had yet to fill out. Except for his legs, I saw little trace of hardened muscle. He couldn't have played much sports. Yet he was athletic in his own way. I had seen that he was sure footed and his movements supple when he climbed around the ravine outside his house, scampering up and down the steep rocks as swift and agile as a lizard.

I began with a sketch of all of him, hastily done, then worked on details: his hands, his feet, his ear, his tousled hair, the line of his upper arm pressed against his chest, a calf, his navel, his penis hanging limply over his bent thigh. He moved in his sleep and lay on his back with an arm across his forehead, one knee raised, the sole of his foot resting on the mattress. I drew his half-open mouth and lidded eyes, his ribs, his bent leg from hip to ankle, his thigh merging into the roundness of his buttock, the fine hairs of his armpit. When he moved back onto his side I did another full sketch of him, this time more carefully. The

more I sketched, the more the painting I wanted to do took shape in my mind.

I realized that he'd woken up and had been watching me for some time. "You're up early. Did I drive you out of bed with my kicking? I know I'm a restless sleeper."

"You hardly moved at all. And it's not all that early. It's going on nine."

He sat up and stretched. "How long have you been up? You've been sketching me, haven't you? May I see?"

"Hours. I've done pages and pages. See for yourself."

He studied them all carefully, but lingered over the detailed sketch of his penis, as I knew he would. "You really did look me over, didn't you?"

"You must have known I was going to."

"I said you could. All the same, it's a funny feeling knowing you've been looked at so intently, as if someone's eyes have touched you. I rather like it, but only because it's you."

"Should I have waited for you to wake up?"

"That doesn't matter. You weren't being fair, though. You're dressed."

"I never work naked. I only eat naked... Sometimes."

"Do you want to do more sketches?"

"If you don't get up now we'll miss breakfast."

"We can grab something in a café. Should I pose?"

"Not pose. Get into positions where I can see other parts of you. Your left side — your hip, your shoulder blade." I handed him the sketchpad and a thick pencil.

"Here, why don't you draw something first? Let's see what you can do."

"Me? I can't draw. Sister Firmin said I was hopeless."

"Try anyway. Maybe I can help you. I teach art, after all."

"What should I draw?"

"Draw me."

"That's too hard. Ask for something easier. How about that chair?"

"You'd be surprised how difficult chairs are. Unless you know what you're doing they flatten out on paper and come out looking like bad Picassos."

"I know how to draw a cat."

"No, I want you to draw something you see. Like that tree outside our window."

He began a clumsy line drawing, the kind found in coloring books, but more primitive.

"Sister Firmin was right. You can't draw worth a damn. I wouldn't know where to start teaching you."

"See?"

"You're not offended, are you?"

"Not at all. I'm glad you said so. Now I know that you really meant all the nice things you've said about me."

"Maybe if you tried holding the pencil in your left, the way God intended, your hand would follow your eye more naturally."

But using his left he couldn't even get his fingers around the pencil properly. The nuns had really done a job on him.

I spent another hour and a half drawing details and two full-size nudes, one posed, a frontal view of him standing, the other a quick pencil sketch of him bending over the sink to wash his face. I've kept all the sketches I made of him that morning. I still have them somewhere, but it would take a week of rummaging around and leafing through old drawing pads to locate them.

We left the hotel at about ten-thirty. I took my pencils, charcoals and watercolors with me, but not my sketchpad. Marceline might ask to see what I'd done, and I wasn't about to show her a batch of sketches of her brother in the buff.

The first store we tried had all the oil colors I

wanted. I also chose a new sketchpad, a largish, already stretched canvas, four brushes and, in lieu of an easel, a table stand which I set up at a café in the main square of the complex, beside the chilled apéritif that gave me the right to stay there.

"There're plenty of pages left in your old pad," Jean-Yves objected.

"I'm starting a new one for your sister." I winked at him and whispered, "We'll keep the nudes separate."

"Please stop in again and show me your work," the shop owner said.

Until we reached Antigone I hadn't known what section of the complex I would paint. Seated in bright daylight almost directly below the center of the main archway, a beggar woman in a black coat and red skirt had taken her place on the cream-colored stone, an undersized white plastic cup in her extended hand. Dwarfed by the monumental grandeur of her surroundings and ignored by the people who strolled by her, the shabby incongruity of her presence underscored the wealth it had taken to erect these buildings and gave meaning to the scene. My table at the café a few yards away provided an excellent perspective. I could include the arch four stories above her head, but not the roof above it, and behind her, visible through the archway, part of the façade of the Polygone

across the road and the blue sky above it — the sign for the *Galleries Lafayette*, the triumphal staircase, the cornice below the roof. The difficulty lay in making it immediately clear that a few rough black and red brushstrokes and a tiny white dot represented a beggar woman.

I dropped a few coins in her cup so she would not give up and move on. She mumbled, "*Merci, monsieur*" without looking up.

We borrowed a chair from the café and moved it close to the fountain. I had Jean-Yves sit there to hold my place while I worked on the beggar woman. It meant that all the fountain paintings would be from the same angle, unfortunate but unavoidable, since we could not predict in what order the patterns would reappear.

I cannot remember ever having painted in a more hectic and disorderly fashion. We both agreed that the oil was the more important project, but I had to keep an eye on the changing jets of the fountain. Whenever they took on one of the configurations I was painting, I jumped up and ran to the chair. Then I could have anywhere from three to ten minutes to work on one of the watercolors. I was worried that the beggar woman would leave, but I could not put her in the painting until the archway and the ground below her were nearly complete, and I knew I would have to redo those insignificant but vital brushstrokes many

times before I got them right.

Jean-Yves stood behind me and watched me work on Poseidon with the water cascading down over him. On an impulse, he went and stood in front of the fountain, taking the same pose as the statue.

"Very good. I'll do a pencil sketch of the two of you together. The jets don't matter. I'll fill them in later."

"Shouldn't I be naked too?"

"Here?"

"There's the hotel shower."

"How would you stretch out your arms?"

I worked on the drawing whenever the jets took on a pattern I wasn't using in a watercolor. He had to stand there for over half an hour, though not always with his arms raised, while passers-by looked on, amused at what we were doing. Then I went back to the oil. The jets would resume the patterns I wanted, but the woman might leave, and now I was ready to paint her.

"This will take a while. Go buy yourself an ice cream."

"I'll buy us both ice creams; my treat. Name your flavors."

"Surprise me."

He chose two scoops worthy of a chef and an artist — pear and lavender for me, and for him green apple and a

pinkish-orange peach. Much as I'd been rushing back and forth between fountain and archway before, my hand now switched back and forth between my brush and my spoon.

"Do you always paint this way?"

"This is the first time, and I'm not going to make a habit of it."

"I can't remember having this much fun in my life. I feel so free."

"If you like freedom so much you should get a job and be your own man."

"But then I wouldn't have been free to come here with you."

"There are different kinds of freedom. Having to work ties you down, but it gives you the money you need to be independent."

Despite the difficulty I had trying to focus on so many things at once, everything I did that afternoon turned out splendidly. I asked Jean-Yves how he wanted the jets in the pencil sketch, and we headed for the hotel.

"At least we won't have to lie to Marceline" he said. "You really have painted something. We have all of tomorrow."

"And the next day and the day after that, so I'll paint more anyway. We won't spend all our time shut up in the hotel, will we? I have to wait for this to dry before I take it

on the train."

"Shit! You knew this when you decided to do an oil!"

"I just didn't think of it. I could only think of painting that building." It crossed my mind that forgetting was no accident, but my unconscious wish-fulfillment. "I guess I should've gone with my instincts and bought some acrylics. What's the matter? Are you that anxious to get home?"

"I'd stay forever if I could. I just don't look forward to telling Marceline."

She'd called the hotel and left a message. She wanted to know when we'd be back.

"No point putting it off," I said. "Let's get it over with."

"This isn't going to be fun."

Listening to Jean-Yves' half of the conversation, I could almost see her tone of voice in the tension in his shoulders. "No, not tomorrow. — Not then either. — Because Ben did an oil painting and we can't take it on the train until it dries. — He's not going to do any others. He forgot about the train and didn't realize it until he was half done. — How was I supposed to know? — He's in the shower. — Yes, I'm sure. He promised. — No, I won't let him forget. — Bye. I'm really sorry about this."

He sighed.

"You told her I was in the shower."

"She wanted to speak to you."

"Thanks for sparing me the ordeal."

"I didn't. She wants you to call back. At least you'll have time to prepare yourself."

"I expect she'll scold me."

"I wouldn't worry about it. She's a little afraid of you."

"Not nearly enough."

"What do we do tomorrow?"

"The museum. And laundry. Go take a shower while I speak to her. Then we'll go out for a nice dinner to celebrate the prospect of three more days in Montpellier."

"You need one more than I do."

"I'll enjoy it more once this conversation is out of the way."

She didn't scold; she wanted to know how Jean-Yves was behaving himself and to remind me that I was responsible for him. "Don't you get all wrapped up in your painting and leave him to his own devices."

I promised to watch him intently, enjoying the irony. I'd even have sketches to prove it, though I couldn't show most of them to her.

We ate in the old city that evening. I hadn't noticed many gay couples walking in Antigone or at the tables around us on the Place Jean Jaurès. Now we passed a conspicuous number of them and advertisements for gay happenings posted on the walls as we picked our way through the labyrinth of winding passageways looking for a restaurant. I held to my earlier resolution of not bringing them to Jean-Yves' attention and pretended not to see them. One night of lying in bed with him naked had given me all the proof I needed that he was as straight as he was innocent.

Once in the restaurant, my resolution to say nothing flew out the window. The waiter, a flamboyantly gay young man, couldn't keep his eyes off Jean-Yves, fussed over him when he took our order and served our food, even brushing over his arm as if by accident as he placed it on the table. The open flirtation was embarrassing. Finally, to put Jean-Yves' dessert down in front of him he leaned in against him, rubbing his crotch on his shoulder. I took my napkin from my lap and pretended to wipe the stains off his sleeve.

Jean-Yves laughed out loud, and his tension evaporated. "Thank you," he said. "That was so awkward. I wanted to crawl under the table and die. I couldn't imagine

what you must have been thinking."

"That he was *mal élevé*. Shall we get out of here and have a drink somewhere before going back to the hotel?"

He nodded.

I pointed to a bar down the street, one with an innocuous-sounding name. I expected many of the establishments would be gay and didn't want to take him to one. I saw through the open door that the clientele was nearly all men and the place had a cruisy look. Jean-Yves started in ahead of me. I put a hand on his shoulder and held him back. "Not here."

"Why?"

"See for yourself. You're no fool. Your eyes are good as mine."

"Oh."

"Maybe we should just skip it and go back. Do you mind?"

"That's okay. I'm exhausted anyway."

He was bouncy in bed that night, punching me in the arm and gloating on how we'd put one over on his sister. "We're going to have a blast," he said.

I grabbed him by the shoulders, pinned him to the bed, and shook a finger at him. "You, sleep."

Again I lay in a state of arousal for a long time

before dozing off, and woke up once or twice during the night, my penis rock hard, wanting him, but on the whole I slept better, used to having him next to me.

I rose very early. He, on the other hand, woke up late again. I had time to tiptoe out of the room, go down to the salon, and bring his breakfast up to him. I set it on the table and shook him gently. "What's with you, sleeping in two days in a row? Back home you disappear before anyone else is up."

"I'm calmer here. There I always feel restless, as if I'm trapped in my room. I keep getting up in the middle of night. Then, as soon as it starts getting light, I want out. I think it's because I feel safe with you." He looked sheepishly at me. "That's why I liked the idea of a double bed. But I was afraid I'd kick you."

How could I possibly dream of seducing anyone so trusting!

"I told you, you didn't kick. Breakfast's on the table. It was my turn to get it."

"You spoil me."

He went and sat down at the table.

"Naked? I thought it was impolite to eat without your clothes on."

He laughed. "Don't you want to sketch me?"

"Yes, dressed. I need to draw you doing things."

Eating, walking. I have to learn how your body moves. You'll see. I'll keep you busy and running around. We'll spend the day in the old city and do the sketches there. But first we go to the museum."

"Sounds like fun."

I opened the window before leaving the hotel and asked the receptionist to tell the maid not to close it so the paint would dry quicker.

* * * *

The Musée Fabre houses a stupendous collection of Western European art from the High Renaissance to the present. Its canvases would hold their own on the walls of the Louvre. We came upon a few people making copies of paintings, as one often does in a museum. Jean-Yves wanted to know if I was going to too.

"No, there's too much I want to show you."

"I thought I was showing *you* the museum."

"Not show you what's here, show what there is in what's here, teach you about art. Are you interested?"

"What a question!"

I led him around the museum lecturing on art history, iconography, and how painting is not just a representation of surface reality but an expression of

meaning. How form, color, light and shade elicit emotional reactions; how we should imagine the actions portrayed in the context of a larger story; how angle and perspective draw our attention to the unseen artist; how portraits do not merely show what people look like, but their personality, thoughts and moods. I waxed a bit pedantic, but he hung avidly on my every word.

The ground floor galleries are given over to the Flemish school. Jean-Yves didn't care for the landscapes. "Lousy overcast weather and too much detail. There's nothing to focus on."

"It shows the outdoors as a setting for the activities that make up daily life."

"They're so tiny. It makes them seem unimportant."

"Aren't they?"

I called his attention to a portrait of a girl stringing pearls. "Probably the jeweler's daughter. She how richly she's dressed? Not like a servant or a worker."

"How can you tell she's not an aristocrat doing it for fun?"

"She might be if this were an eighteenth-century French painting, but it's from Holland. Artisans and merchants were the Flemish aristocracy. And they worked."

On the floors above we saw mostly French paintings, arranged historically. The large historical and

mythological canvases from the seventeenth century bored him.

"What about the religious paintings?"

"Most of those I like, but I don't like that I like them."

"On account of the nuns?"

"Them and the whole scene."

"Do you see anything here you like?"

"That portrait of the two women to the right of the door as we came in."

"It isn't a portrait. It's a scene from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* — Pomona and Vertumnus."

"So he took a myth and turned it into a portrait of two women."

"Rather the other way around. He's using the portrait to tell a story. It was fashionable for noble ladies to dress up as nymphs and the like."

"So they were nymphs?"

"Pomona was a dryad. Vertumnus fell in love with her and turned himself into an old woman in order to gain her trust and seduce her. The painter hints at his youth by dressing them in the same colors, except they look darker because the old woman's in the shadows and enveloped in her cape, the darkest color — green."

"She wanted to seduce another woman?" Of course

we'd been speaking French, and he'd taken *Vertumne* for a feminine name.

"*He* did. Vertumnus was the god of the seasons. But why not, even if he was a she? Greek and Roman mythology are filled with all kinds of same-sex activity. Women do it too, you know, not only waiters. Didn't you read any Baudelaire in school?"

"Nothing like that; just *Correspondances* and that *valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige* thing. But then why isn't he... she looking at her? She's eyeing the apple on the table."

"You tell me. What do the colors in the painting remind you of?"

"An apple. Am I right? Pomona's clothes are those same colors, only much brighter, and there's more of the red-orange and less yellow. And her green hairpiece and the ribbons on her shoulders are like the leaves attached to the stem."

"*Exactement.*"

"It's like a puzzle."

"A code, one the artist assumed that the people who saw his painting would know. It wasn't for figuring out."

The eighteenth-century portraits intrigued him.
"They're not just posing like in the other rooms; they're doing things."

"They got that from the Flemish. Remember the girl stringing pearls? This is a true portrait —her name's the title of the painting— and she's an aristocrat, but she's wearing a thimble."

He dismissed the Romantic landscapes as "just like the Flemish, only wilder." He liked the pre-Impressionists most, thought the Fauvists were okay, and hated the moderns.

"Who's this Bruyas character?" he asked, as if out of nowhere.

"Huh?"

"The guy with the red beard who keeps popping up. You couldn't have missed him."

The ubiquitous Alfred Bruyas appeared in over a dozen paintings, both portraits and tableaux — in several Bazilles and surrounded by visitors in Courbet's painting of his atelier, where an introverted Baudelaire sits reading in the corner.

I didn't know any collection in the world had so many Bazilles. He's an underrated artist who died soon after coming into his own. Had he lived longer, today he'd be counted among the most important Impressionists. I remembered his *Baigneurs* and some other male nudes of his from art books. I began to think of doing something along those lines with Jean-Yves.

"So? Who is he?"

"Bruyas? A patron of the arts. I don't know much about him, but he must have taken Bazille under his wing."

"As you have me."

"Sort of, except that I'll be painting you and not vice-versa."

We moved on. The selection of late Impressionists, post-Impressionists, Expressionists, etc. was fairly limited. There weren't even many Cubist or Surrealist works. The closer we got to our own day and age, the more impatient he became with the artwork.

The first part of the twentieth century was mostly represented by the so-called primitive style — motionless figures painted in solid, childish crayon colors without shading or texture. "It looks like what I might turn out if I knew how to paint," he said. "You like this kind of thing?"

"Not particularly."

"I don't like it at all."

The next rooms were worse: large geometrical shapes, white on black or vice versa. Jean-Yves no longer bothered to say anything about the art. Instead he said, "My legs are killing me. I'm not used to standing still for so long."

"You'll have to get used to it if I'm going to paint you."

"This long? Won't you let me take a break occasionally? How long have we been here?"

I looked at my watch. "Nearly all day. Maybe we should head back to the hotel."

"Definitely. This stuff is awful. And I have to get off my feet."

I ran my hand over the oil as soon as we got to the room. "It's dry," I said. "I can take the frame apart and roll it up, and then we can go home."

"Let's put off leaving and go back tomorrow. Do you mind?"

"I was about to suggest it myself. I still have to do those sketches of you. But you'd better call Marceline."

We set out to find a restaurant. On the way we passed a bar with a public phone, and Jean-Yves went inside to ring up his sister. He came back grinning from ear to ear.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"That you don't need her permission."

CHAPTER FOUR

That night I fell asleep easily. Sleeping chastely next to him had by now become second nature. Besides, I was thinking more about the painting than about him, trying to visualize the Bazilles I hadn't looked at in years. My dreams, however, were less chaste, and when I woke up there was a sticky puddle on the sheet between us.

Jean-Yves assumed he was responsible and apologized profusely. He was so upset he began stammering again.

"Don't worry about it. It's a perfectly natural occurrence. Don't tell me it's never happened before. It could have been either of us." I phrased it vaguely enough so it could also mean that on another occasion I might be the one who left his mark, which is how he interpreted it, but I had no doubt whose seed it was.

"Maybe I should have worn pajamas after all. I got it all over your leg."

"I said forget about it. It washes right off. Listen. Going to the museum gave me an idea for the painting."

"A mythological scene, like Pomona?"

"Artists don't paint those anymore, and I wouldn't use you in a kind of painting you didn't like. Besides, all I can think of is Narcissus, and that's not you at all."

"No. Narcissus was very beautiful, wasn't he?"

"You'd do well enough for beautiful. I meant that he was conceited."

I told him about the Bazilles, making a couple of rough sketches from memory so he'd know what I had in mind. "It won't be exactly like that, of course. Not at all, in fact. But it's a classic subject, and one I haven't done before. You wouldn't be swimming, you'd... What's the French word for when you take off your shoes and walk in the water?"

"There is none. We say *marcher dans l'eau*."

"I'd like to give it a French title. How does *Le Marcheur dans l'eau* sound?"

"Not very French. We'd call him a *baigneur*."

"Then I won't give it a French title. Maybe I'll call it 'Boy Wading'."

"What's that mean?"

"*Garçon marchant dans l'eau*."

"Then I'm a boy?"

"After all the drawings I've made of you, I'm sure of it."

"I meant, do you see me as a child?"

"No, you're very much a man, but I want the painting to bring out your boyishness. That's what I'll aim to capture — innocence, vulnerability, pensiveness."

Remember? I told you how a good painting should make a statement about the personality and thoughts of the subject, and not only in portraits. I want "Boy Wading" to do just that. It will all come out in the stillness and purity of the setting, and in your nudity and slenderness. I wish there'd been something in the museum to give you an idea of what I mean."

"No need for that. I understand perfectly. Is that why you want to paint me naked? So you can say something about me?"

"Why else? I always try to say something when I paint. That's why your cliffs are only good for a study. Now let's have breakfast and go out and do some sketches of you."

By the end of the day my hand was sore from holding a brush and charcoals — watercolors of the Place de la Chapelle Neuve, a little rose garden we found tucked away in a back alley and another in the botanical gardens, to prove to Marceline that I'd kept busy painting. But mostly I did numerous pencil and charcoal sketches of Jean-Yves being Jean-Yves: eating an ice-cream cone, playing with a puppy, studying a poster, rummaging through sweaters at the flea market, riding a borrowed skateboard on the Place de la Comédie, imitating a street

mime, swinging from a tree.

"You're attracting a lot of attention," I told him.

"Well, it's you who're making me make a spectacle of myself."

"That's not the kind of attention I meant. I meant the kind of attention you got from the waiter last night."

"Oh, that kind of attention. Montpellier has the reputation of being the gayest city in France. Didn't you know?"

"How should I have known?"

He insisted on seeing every sketch as soon as I'd finished it. He liked them all. "You know, I bet you could make loads of money drawing people, like that girl we saw on the plaza in front of the Polygone. You're a lot better than she is."

I laughed. "I'm glad you think so; hers weren't much more than caricatures. But no one would pay the prices I charge for a portrait."

"I thought you sold a lot of your paintings."

"Those are commissions. And people who've heard of me come to my home to see what I've done and sometimes they'll buy something. Other paintings get sold in galleries. But they wouldn't move on the street. Passers-by are looking for cheaper stuff."

"But I get painted for free."

"And sketched, over and over again."

"Aren't I the lucky one?" He gave me an impulsive hug.

I pulled back from his embrace. I wanted it too much. "Cut it out! People are looking at us."

"So what? They don't care. This is Montpellier!"

"Then why don't you take off your clothes and I'll do another?"

"Because they'd arrest me."

He got back to the hotel hot and sweaty from all the exercise I'd put him through and needed to shower before dinner. I had him get into his underpants to do a couple of sketches of him in what would look like a bathing suit, but they didn't come out very good because my hand was tired. It was still early enough to do some laundry and have it dry enough to pack in the morning, so instead of going out right away we washed our socks and underwear in the bathroom sink. Rather, Jean-Yves did; he insisted on doing mine as well.

"Okay, but put on your pants first."

"Why? They'll get all wet!"

"So I can do another sketch of you — washing clothes."

* * * *

Instead of waking him up, I let him oversleep the direct train to Millau. "Now we can get out at Béziers and walk to the cathedral," I told him. "We can leave the painting in a locker."

We took an indirect route to the train station to stop by the art store since the owner had asked to see my work.

"These are very good," she said. "You're no amateur. The watercolors are lovely, but I prefer the charcoal sketches of your friend here. There's so much life in them."

The train stopped at Agde on the way to Béziers. "Isn't there a nudist colony somewhere around here?" I asked with a twinkle in my eye. I knew there was — the largest in the world. I only said it to tease him.

"At Cap d'Agde, on the sea, a few kilometers away."

"Have you ever been there?"

"Are you kidding? Since when do I go running around naked?"

"I have proof that you do in here," I said, patting my sketchbook.

"You *asked* me to take my clothes off!" he protested.

"I did not. You came out of the bathroom flaunting

it. Only then did I ask to paint you."

"It's still different. We did those drawings indoors."

"But you'll be outside when I do the oil. Will you feel funny about it?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. I feel comfortable with you."

"You can back out if you want."

"I don't want."

The way up to the Cathédrale Saint-Nazaire led through a maze of claustrophobic alleys. The view was breathtaking, stretching for uninterrupted miles to the east at both the north and south ends from the terrace to the faint silvery sparkle of the Mediterranean. To the northwest lay the plateaus I knew to be cut through with tiny rivers, in one of which, far beyond the horizon, nestled Jean-Yves' insignificant village.

I walked to the ledge and looked out over the countryside. He came up behind me and put his right arm on my shoulder, pointing out the places he could identify with his left. "You see the ocean?" he asked. "It isn't far, but it's hard to make out in the haze. That straight line of trees on the other side of the railroad is the Canal du Midi."

"Why did they build the church like a fortress?"

He turned me round to look at it and pulled me

down to sit on the ledge beside him, keeping his arm around my shoulder. "To protect the city. It was pretty much razed to the ground during the Albigensian Crusade. There are others in the region like it. Narbonne, for example." He knew a lot of history for someone who hadn't been able to pass the exams for what in the United States would be a junior high school degree.

His touch was by no means impersonal, but warm and intimate — affectionate without the slightest hint of sexuality. "You're trembling," he said.

"It's the breeze. I must have got overheated on the walk up."

"Come inside and see the rose window."

We took the bus from Millau that would drop us off at the house at seven. We'd have walked up from the village to extend our holiday as much as possible, but we had too much to carry.

On the bus I said to him, "I suppose Marceline will be furious."

"She'll pretend to be, but she was really glad to get rid of us. Gilles will have been spending the night there."

"She could have had him over with me there."

"She could have, but she wouldn't. Appearances."

And at first she was hoping to get you to sleep with her."

"She's given up on that."

"I should say she has! She doesn't even like you."

"Because I wouldn't sleep with her?"

"Because you made me your friend."

Jean-Yves' calculations were right on. When we reached the house Gilles was sitting at the kitchen table in his undershirt waiting for Marceline to finish cooking dinner for the two of them.

"Oh, I see you decided to come back," she said. "I wasn't sure you would, so I didn't make enough to feed you too."

"That's fine. We'll just bring all this gear up to my room and then walk back to the village and eat in the café." I relished the thought of making the holiday last another couple of hours.

"Do I at least get to see this famous oil painting?"

I unrolled it for her.

"Oh, buildings. I don't see why you came here if you wanted to paint buildings. Is that all you did?"

"Far from it. I did plenty in this sketchbook too. I even had to buy another."

She leafed through a few, making a show of disinterest. "Jean-Yves. You could have drawn him here."

"We went to the museum too," Jean-Yves told her.

"We spent the whole day there."

She answered me, as if *I* had said it, giving him the cold shoulder. Gilles ignored us both. "So long as you kept him out of trouble. I hope you were able to find everything you wanted."

"Yes. It took some looking, but we found it in the end."

It was a warm evening. "She didn't even notice the beggar woman," I said to Jean-Yves as we walked down the hill to the village.

"She wouldn't have noticed her if she'd been there when you did the painting. She closes her eyes to things like that."

When we got back to the house Gilles' car was gone and the light was on in Marceline's room. She hadn't tidied up the kitchen.

"She left this mess for me," Jean-Yves said.

"I'll help you with it."

"No, she wants *me* to do it."

"Then I'll have my bath and go straight to bed. I've had it, and I expect you have too."

"No, I'm not at all tired. When I finish, I'm going to sit in the garden and think about everything we've done. Thank you for the best week in my life."

He gave me a friendly hug. I didn't pull away. There

was no one there to see us.

* * * *

I was certain that Marceline wouldn't be bringing me my breakfast anymore, so I went back to sleeping naked and didn't bother to put a sheet over me. I was right. Jean-Yves came up with breakfast for the two of us at the crack of dawn.

"I slept naked too," he said. "I'd never done it before. I like it."

"You're up early, aren't you? It's barely light out."

"I can't wait to get started. I'm really excited about the painting."

"I won't start it today." He looked crestfallen. "Not the oil, I mean. First I have to work out the composition. We'll spend the day at the bridge trying all different things, and tomorrow I should be ready to get to work for real. If not tomorrow, then the day after."

"The whole day? Then I'll make us a picnic." Another thought hit him. "It means I won't have time to shop for dinner. I'll leave a list for Marceline and tell her we'll be back at..."

"Five-thirty."

"We'd better get going now, before Marceline gets

up, or she'll make me do the shopping."

I took my sketchbook and a set of blunt colored pencils.

"Is that all you need?"

"Just this — and you. I told you, this is still the planning stage."

He, usually so talkative, was strangely silent on the climb down. He seemed apprehensive, and I thought a little small talk would put him at ease.

"I'm having a hard time imagining you as a soldier. Did you like being in the army?"

"I didn't mind it. People didn't make fun of me there. And after I came back people treated me more like an adult."

"They'd respect you more if you had a job and weren't so much under Marceline's thumb."

"If I had to work, we couldn't do this painting."

"I didn't mean today. Well, shall we start? This project must be quite a novelty for you. Are you nervous?"

"Not really. Should I take my clothes off now?"

"Most of them. I need to see your contours and how your muscles move. The underpants can stay on."

"Why bother?"

"Yes, come to think of it, take them off too. I may have you wade in up to your waist."

He folded his clothes in a neat pile on the pebbles.

"Where in the water should I stand?"

"Let's have you sitting on that rock first."

The sketch took me all of five minutes. Then I had him shift position on the same rock. He came over to look at what I'd done when I finished the second.

"The colors make no sense," he said.

"Those aren't the colors I'll be using. It's a code for the lights and shadows and how they relate to each other. Now go stand in the water."

"Here?"

"Maybe a bit farther upstream."

"Like this?"

"Like that."

"Can I move around?"

"A little. Just stay where you are."

"How many will you make?"

"Why? Bored already?"

"Just curious."

"I still don't think Gilles likes me," I said as I sketched.

"Who said he likes you? I just said he wasn't angry anymore."

"I honestly don't see what your sister sees in him. He treats her like a servant."

"That's just for appearances. He knuckles under to whatever she wants. He puts on a show of being tough, but she has a lot more backbone than he does."

"Then I understand it even less. I think he's *couillon*."

"Where do you pick up this vocabulary? Do you have any idea how filthy that word is? But you're right; he is *couillon*. He was worse when we were in school. Marceline couldn't stand him. He had a crush on her, and she ignored him."

"I didn't think you'd have all been in school together. Gilles looks so much older."

"He isn't. He was two years ahead of my sister, and she's three years older than me, but I was four years behind her because I had to repeat a year."

"She told me you got left back twice."

"No, only once. But then I failed the *brevet*."

"She said you failed it twice too."

"I didn't. I probably would have, but I only took it once, because my father took me out of school and wouldn't let me try again."

"What did you think of Gilles back then?"

"I hated him. He bullied me more than anyone. He was pretty much the ringleader."

"Is that why your sister didn't like him?"

"That was part of it, but she picked on me too."

"And now she's changed her mind."

"You mean about Gilles? My guess is she's marrying him for the sex. He's really big down there, and he goes at her like a bull."

"She tells you all this?"

"She doesn't have to. I hear them at night. They make a racket."

"But you don't see them. How do you know he's big?"

"From school. It was a small school, and all the boys had gym together. We took showers afterwards. But the whole village knows how big he is. Gilles isn't the kind to keep it a secret."

He could not, any more than I did, have found much to arouse him in our talk about Gilles banging the hell out of a sister he didn't much care for, but the symptoms were unmistakable — his member had begun to swell, and that in spite of walking in frigid water halfway up his calves. I felt sorry for his embarrassment.

"Immerse yourself completely for a second so we can see how you look wet all over and your hair plastered down and dripping." That ought to shrink it.

He came up gasping from the cold. "So?"

"I'll paint you dry."

"Good. I'd freeze to death posing like this."

"But I do want to draw you looking like that."

"Why couldn't you have done that in the shower at Montpellier?"

"You can towel off first. Just your arms and chest — leave your hair as is. Now let's do some more sketches."

Gilles was back at the house when we returned. "He was kind enough to offer to drive me home when he heard how much I'd have to carry," Marceline explained, "so I bought food for him too. The kitchen is too cramped for four, so we'll eat here and you two can eat in Monsieur Brooks' room since you enjoy each other's company so much."

Gilles smirked, as if he thought he'd won. "Out painting all day?" he asked.

"What else? That's why I came here."

"Where did you disappear to?" Marceline wanted to know. "Nobody's seen you all day."

"Down in the gorges, way up out of the way," Jean-Yves answered.

"The bridge again?"

"Yes, there."

"You really do want to get away from everyone,

don't you?" Gilles remarked.

"Why didn't you fish? I wouldn't have had to buy all this food."

"Ben's doing another painting of me."

"Again?"

"Your brother is a wonderful subject."

"I'm renting you a room, not Jean-Yves. If I'd known I'd have charged more."

"You don't own me," Jean-Yves said. "What gives you the right to rent me out?"

Marceline looked ready to explode, but Gilles intervened. "The kid's right. Let them do what they want. Did you intend to keep him on as a servant after we're married? We're getting married in October, did you know that?" he asked me, gloating.

"Jean-Yves told me. I've known since the day I met you in the shop."

Marceline glared at her brother as if it was his fault she didn't get to sleep with me. "You'd better get to work on dinner," she said.

From then until I finished the painting we lived as a *ménage à quatre*, two separate pairs who had hardly anything to do with each other. Gilles ate with Marceline every night, then went straight home, and of course Jean-Yves and I slept in our own rooms, but we had breakfast

and dinner together in my room and picnicked at the bridge every day. We always found things to talk about.

* * * *

I started work on the oil our second day at the bridge. We had a lot to lug down into the ravine — the enormous plastic bag Jean-Yves had brought back from in Millau, the oil paints, my palette, brushes, turpentine, glass jars, canvas, the wood for the frame, hammer and nails for putting it together, staple gun for stretching the canvas, my smock, a towel for Jean-Yves, not to mention our lunch. The easel was most cumbersome.

"This is going to take more than one trip," I said.

"I'll go back to the house and get some rope. Then we can put everything except the easel and jars in the plastic and lower it down in stages."

He started taking off his clothes as soon as we got to the bottom.

"What're you doing? I have something to show you first."

"What's that?"

"How I put the frame together and stretch the canvas on it. Aren't you interested?"

"I'm interested in everything."

"Then I won't just show you. I'll let you help."

"How do you want me to pose?" he asked when everything was ready.

"I still don't know exactly. Try walking back and forth in the water and I'll stop you when I see a pose I like. Not along the beach, over by that grassy shelf."

"It's muddy there."

"You can wash your feet afterward. You can keep your underwear on. I start with just the larger outlines. I'll fill in the details later."

"And my dick is one of the details."

"A minor one."

"Thanks for the compliment. I don't mind taking them off, you know."

"So I've seen. But it isn't necessary. What if someone comes by and sees us?"

"Nobody ever comes here," he answered. But he left them on.

I watched him as he waded to and fro. Suddenly he leaned forward.

"Hold that pose." He stood up. "I told you not to move."

"It won't be easy staying in that position."

"I know. I'll give you lots of breaks while I work on the background. What were you looking at?"

His face lit up. "Crayfish."

"Did one bite you?"

"Crayfish don't bite, they pinch. But I frighten them; they'll leave me alone. We'll bring down more jars tomorrow to put in the water. They'll scurry away and hide in the jars, and I'll catch them. *Quel régal!*"

"Didn't you know there were crayfish?"

"Not this many."

"Get back in your pose."

The next day he brought a half-dozen jars to place in the river. I worked on painting the shore while we waited for the crayfish to come out of hiding so they'd go in the jars when he went back in. As a result I spent more time on background details than I would have otherwise, so I had him hold the pose longer than usual. He lost his balance and fell face forward in the water.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"No, but now I'll have to take these off to let them dry."

"No harm in that. What irks me is that you got your hair wet."

"Isn't that just another minor detail?"

"Come stretch your muscles before you take the pose again, and have a peek to see how it's coming along."

"There's a lot more to do, isn't there?"

"Less than you think. Another two or three days."

"You're putting an awful lot of care into this."

"It means a lot to me. Now back in you go."

He'd been holding the pose about five minutes, naked this time, holding it well, no sign of strain in his expression. Not an easy position to stay in, yet he said he was no good at sports. I thought I heard voices upstream beyond the bridge.

He straightened up, listening. "Someone's coming," I warned.

I tossed him a towel to tie around his waist as he ran out of the water.

"Good thing you didn't fall again."

"Shit! My briefs!" he said, and stashed them in our lunch bag.

It was a small group of hikers, about eight or nine of them, men and women in their late twenties and early thirties. They seemed as surprised to see us as we were to see them.

"*Bonjour*," I said, as if our encounter were the most natural thing in the world.

One or two returned my greeting, some others nodded, and they walked on by paying us no further attention.

As soon as they were out of sight I asked, "Do you mean to leave your briefs in that bag? I was supposed to eat that sandwich!"

"I had to put them somewhere. So much for our secret."

"Why? Do you know them?"

"One of them. He's from around here. Probably their guide."

"What makes you think he'll tell anyone I'm painting you?"

"Painting me naked? Believe me, he'll tell everyone."

"How could he have known you were naked under the towel? They walked right by without looking at the painting."

"Because he has a dirty mind, that's why. They all have dirty minds."

Word that Jean-Yves was posing nude got around sooner than I could have dreamt. Gilles' comment, "Are you two having fun with your painting?" didn't register with me, nor did the look Marceline gave him when he said it, but she came up to my room after dinner and sent Jean-Yves to do the dishes.

"I will, soon."

"Now."

She closed the door and looked at me sternly. "It seems you're having my brother prance around naked while you sit there and paint him."

"He doesn't prance."

"Stand, prance. It's the same thing."

"And how did you find out?"

"I hear things — not that I believe everything they say about my brother. So I looked through your sketchpad to see for myself. I got an eyeful."

"You had no right to go snooping through my things!"

"It's my responsibility to look out for my brother's welfare."

"Jean-Yves is capable of looking out for himself."

"Really? That's not what I get out of those drawings. And as far as rights go, what right do you have to take advantage of him?"

"I haven't taken advantage of him. What do you think we've been up to anyway? Shame on you!"

"That isn't what's upsetting me. I trust my brother more than that. Besides, I saw your drawings of those naked women too. What was I supposed to think, finding out the way I did? Why keep it a secret from me?"

"You never asked about the painting," I lied. "I'd have told you."

"And the drawings? You showed me the others."

"Jean-Yves didn't want you to see them."

"I should say he didn't! He knew how angry I'd be!"

I lied again. "As far as I knew, it was out of
modesty."

"Modesty! He lets you draw him naked as a worm
—very explicit sketches, dozens of them!— and you call
him modest! He's ashamed to let his own sister see him, but
you can make a painting for the whole world to see!"

"The whole world won't recognize him."

"Look, I don't mind that you're doing a painting of
my brother. I just don't see why he has to take his clothes
off for it."

"I'm not the first artist who's painted a nude."

"I don't care about the other artists and I don't give a
damn about the people they paint. I'm talking about my
brother. Just give me one good reason why he has to be
naked."

"It has nothing to do with your brother. It has to do
with the painting."

"And I suppose you think that when I see it I'll
understand that."

"You will if you understand anything at all about
art."

"Whereas my brother understands about art."

"It's amazing how much he picks up on."

"Because he let you talk him out of his clothes?"

"We spent a day in the museum together, that's how I know. And I did *not* talk him into taking off his clothes."

"You expect me to believe that the painting was his idea?"

"No, it's mine. The idea that he'd be nude came from the museum." That was true, if not entirely honest.

"If you were going to paint him nude, why not do it in your room instead of going outside where people come strolling by and see him?"

"Once again, it's not a painting of Jean-Yves. It's a landscape with Jean-Yves in it, like the watercolor with him fishing in the background."

"But this time he's naked."

"Yes, naked. What of it?"

"I've been telling you for the past fifteen minutes what of it! Well, as long as you don't make a big thing of his—"

"I don't make a big thing of it. *You're* making a big thing of it. But if you mean will it be visible, yes, it will. It already is."

"I'm not going to argue with you anymore. What's done is done. You'll finish your stupid painting and you'll go away and leave me to live with the scandal."

"Is that's what's bothering you? The scandal? What about Jean-Yves?"

"Jean-Yves brought it on himself. Good night."

"One more thing."

"Yes?"

"The next time you're curious about my work, ask."

"I won't be. I know everything I need to."

* * * *

Before getting into position the next morning, Jean-Yves asked, "Did you sleep with any of those women in the sketches you showed me?"

"Your sister had a talk with you, didn't she?"

"You bet she did, and I wouldn't call it a talk! Well, did you?"

"Artists don't do that. It isn't professional."

"That's not what I hear. Back in the Renaissance, the Impressionists, Picasso..."

"That was then, and what they say is exaggerated. You're the only model I've gone to bed with. You want to call it off?"

"Definitely not!"

"Then take off your things and I'll get the you-know-what out of the way today. If word gets around,

anyone who comes to gawk will see me painting you in your underwear."

The hikers' interruption had made us forget the crayfish. They evidently liked the jars we'd set out for them because by the time we remembered them they were quite full. Jean-Yves used them in a sauce that night with fresh pasta. Neither the crayfish nor his handmade noodles mollified Marceline. She continued to give me a wide berth.

From then on Jean-Yves brought a bathing suit to pose in, taking it off only once so I could modify a few details. To spite his sister, I wanted to make it as unmistakable and accurate a representation of him as possible, so I worked slowly. The length of time it took to finish would give her something else to fume about. Jean-Yves didn't care anymore, neither about his sister's anger nor the realism I lavished on his naked form. As far as he was concerned, the damage was done.

Two days later the painting was virtually done. "We'll come back tomorrow so I can look at it with a fresh eye and maybe put on a couple of finishing touches."

"And what will we do the rest of the day?"

"I don't know. Swim?"

"So you'll bring your bathing suit?"

"Yes, but I may not wear it. If nobody's come to spy on us yet, nobody will."

Finishing the painting took no time at all. A few dabs of color here and there, and we were free to do as we pleased till late afternoon. We behaved like a couple of kids. We skinny-dipped and wrestled in the water. The river under the bridge was deep enough for diving, and we had a contest to see who could look the silliest jumping off it. We waded over a mile upstream and clung to the rocks in the rapids to feel the current rushing past our naked bodies. We found some soft grass and lay naked on our backs in the sun.

"If anyone's out hiking today, there's no way we can get back to the bridge in time to cover up," he said.

"Is what we're doing against the law?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then let them."

"It wouldn't embarrass you? It would me." He thought for a moment and added, "But you didn't want my sister to see you."

"Not because I was embarrassed. Because she wanted to look."

"But you looked at me."

"As an artist — and you looked at me as a friend. And we were both comfortable with that, weren't we?"

"Very comfortable. It made me feel closer to you."
And he took my hand and squeezed it.

We lay side by side, holding hands, saying nothing.
Then he said, "I suppose you'll be leaving now that the painting's done."

"Yes, very soon."

"And the cliff series?"

"Junk. Not worth finishing."

"You'll come back?"

"What for? There's nothing left I want to paint. If I came, it would be to see you, but I'd need some sort of excuse. Your sister isn't about to have me over as a weekend guest. Why don't you come visit me instead?"

"Marceline wouldn't allow it."

"Jean-Yves, you're twenty-two years old. You can do what you want and go where you want. You have the money for a train ticket. If you don't, I'll send you some."

"No. I don't want that kind of present from you."

"What kind of present would you like?"

"Something you won't give me."

"Name it."

He hesitated, took a deep breath, and said, "I love the painting. Because it's beautiful and because it's something we have in common..." I could hear the effort he made to keep from stammering. He took another deep

breath: "But I suppose you're going to keep it."

"Unless I sell it."

He sat up, alarmed and hurt. "You wouldn't do that, would you?"

"Not for a million dollars. Well, for a million dollars I probably would, but no one's going to offer me that."

Reassured, he asked, "Have you ever painted yourself nude? A self-portrait?"

"No, why? Would you like that as a present?"

He blushed, and his stammer got the better of him. "No, that's not what I meant. I was just asking. I mean, we saw in the museum, lots of artists do self-portraits, and—"

"Relax. I was only teasing."

He lay back down, but didn't take my hand. "I wish I had a photo of you, though."

"Naked?"

He laughed. "Naked or dressed. It doesn't matter so long as it's a nice one." He turned his head toward me and went on in a near whisper: "Don't take this wrong, but the only kind of naked photo I'd want to have of you is the two of us together."

"I don't take it wrong."

"Most people would."

"I know, but I understand the kind of memento it

would be. I'd like to have one too. Why don't I bring my camera tomorrow? We'll set the timer and take one. Several, in case it doesn't come out. I'll take a picture of the painting and send that to you too, as large a print as possible."

"Send them *poste restante* in case my sister opens my mail."

"Would she do that?"

"She looked in your sketchbook, didn't she?"

"You're right. This won't be the kind of photo you show around. I know what my friends would think if they saw it, even if I made up a story to explain it."

"What kind of story?"

"That you're the son of some friends I met at a nude beach. Something like that. Americans think that France is full of nude beaches. The thing is, you look half my age. That's below the legal age in the States. People don't believe in innocence anymore."

"Don't your friends know you?"

Do they ever! I thought, though in a sense they didn't. Just being naked with him satisfied my desire. He had a crush on me. Anyone could see that. I had a crush on him, too, and our two crushes were equally innocent, although I wouldn't have minded them becoming less innocent if he were willing. I admit I thought about it, but I

didn't ask.

When we climbed out of the gorge he said, "Is there any chance you'll come back for the autumn colors?"

"Maybe. And I was sincere when I invited you to visit me."

* * * *

Marceline was up early enough the next morning to catch us on our way out. "I've been meaning to ask you," she began.

"Yes?"

"Just how big is that painting? It's taking you forever."

"Actually, I finished it yesterday. We're just waiting for it to dry."

"Then you won't be needing my brother if all you're going to do is sit there."

"No, not until it's time to carry it back up."

"Then it's about time he started making himself useful again." It had taken nearly two weeks without him to get her to grudgingly admit he was useful.

I spent the next two days alone at the bridge, looking at what I then thought was the best piece I'd done yet. I changed my mind about that after I got back to the

States and had a chance to look at some of my earlier work, but I still think it's very good. I knew I'd have no trouble selling it, but I didn't want to. I meant to keep it for myself.

It was certain I would miss him. It was equally certain that my feelings for him led to a dead end, and we would both be hurt. Would he love me any less if he knew I was gay? I doubted it, but it might make him wary of me. Or he might let me seduce him, which would be worse. Not that he would hate me for it or hate himself for submitting, but it would perpetuate the same destructive selflessness that characterized his relationship with Marceline. I would have the painting, and I'd let him choose one of the sketches I did of him in the streets of Montpellier, and we would both have a photo of us naked together, and one chapter of our lives would be closed.

When I got back on the second evening I said, "I'm taking Jean-Yves with me tomorrow. The painting will be dry by noon."

"Put it up in the garden so we can all have a look at it," Gilles said. "I've been dying to see this masterpiece of yours."

I looked inquiringly at Jean-Yves. I'd promised not to show the nude of him to anyone in the village. His sister had seen the sketches in spite of my precautions, but I had a

feeling he wouldn't want Gilles to see, though she'd probably told him what kind of painting it was. If not her, then the hikers had.

He shrugged and said, "What the hell? It's all in the family."

"You're bringing your camera with you," Marceline observed. "What for?"

"To take pictures of all of us before I go, as a souvenir. I'll send you all copies."

I took a picture of Gilles and Marceline, Marceline and her brother, and Jean-Yves alone. Then Jean-Yves took a picture of me.

"Now I'd like one of me with Jean-Yves."

"I'm no good at taking pictures," said Marceline.

Gilles took it for us.

When we set out for the bridge Marceline asked why we were taking the camera.

"To have a picture of the scene I painted."

"With my brother in it, no doubt."

"No, just the scene. For Jean-Yves I have the painting."

"I hope you didn't use up all the film," Jean-Yves whispered as we walked up the hill. "We will be able to take some pictures of us together naked, won't we?"

"Don't worry. There's plenty of film."

"We won't be going back there ever, will we?"

"No, and we can't stay long. A couple of pictures, then we pack up and tote it all back."

We stretched the canvas on the frame and set it on a chair in the garden. I chose some of the better watercolors—the shower Poseidon, the rose garden, Jean-Yves fishing—and the less good picture of *Au Petit Cadeau*, my present for Marceline, to put on the table to make it a miniature art show.

Gilles was in a jovial mood; Marceline was not. "There are three paintings of Jean-Yves here," he joked.

"Three?"

He pointed to the watercolor of the shop. "That's him too, isn't it? *Le p'tit cadeau*? And it looks like his *p'tit cadeau* has grown a bit since I saw him last," he added with a nod at "Boy Wading". "Not so little any more."

Marceline was offended. "Do you have to be so vulgar?" Her exasperation with her fiancé must have put me back in her good graces temporarily, because she said, "That's a very nice painting of our store."

"It's for you, a goodbye gift."

"But you haven't framed it!"

"People choose their own frames. It shouldn't be expensive. This is a standard size." I didn't mention the cost of having it matted.

She examined the oil again. "You said I'd understand why he had to be nude when I saw the painting," she said. "Well, I don't."

"I do," Gilles cut in.

"I don't want to hear *your* explanation. What are you going to do now that you've finished your painting?" she asked me.

"Go back to Provence. I've done everything I want to here."

"When do you plan on leaving?"

"The day after tomorrow. Tomorrow I want to rest up and get my things together. I've already called and reserved a rental car in Millau."

"You've paid through Saturday."

"I know, but there's no reason for me to hang around here."

"I don't give refunds."

"I didn't ask for one."

Gilles offered to drive me to Millau to pick up the car. Jean-Yves wanted to come too.

"What for?" Marceline snapped at him.

"To say goodbye."

"You can say goodbye here."

I reassured him. "I'll be bringing the car here to load it up. Just don't go wandering off."

"Gilles has suddenly become very friendly," I remarked to Jean-Yves while we ate our last dinner alone in my room, "taking our photo, offering to drive me to Millau. What gives?"

"Who knows? Maybe he wants to get at Marceline. She's pissed she didn't get to sleep with you, and he wants to rub it in."

"You really think that's why?"

"What else could it be?"

"I'll never understand the French."

"That's not French. That's Gilles."

"I promised you a sketch. Which do you want?"

"Me and Poseidon. Can I have my goodbye hug tonight? We won't be able to tomorrow in front of them. We'll shake hands, and it will seem so fake."

We hugged each other tight and held on for a long time. I thought he was going to cry.

PART III. MARCELINE'S WEDDING

CHAPTER FIVE

I'd been away from Provence less than a month. Thanks to the time I'd spent with Jean-Yves, my French had improved as though I'd been living in the country for over a year.

I missed him terribly. Despite the clear air and bright colors, I felt antsy and not in the mood to paint. I had just done what I considered my finest canvas and felt painted out. Nothing I did pleased me. I ripped up numerous watercolors and an acrylic too.

My chaste hunger for Jean-Yves became an overwhelming craving for sex now that we were apart. By the evening of the third day I found myself prowling the gay bars, hornier than the night before I left and sufficiently in control of the language to get what I wanted. I could chat up the regulars and go home with someone respectable.

Sitting at the bar, my knee pressed against the leg of the slightly older man I was cruising (I'd chosen him because he looked clean and cultivated and had no wedding ring — a married man wouldn't have a place unless he were in town on business), I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was the

hustler.

"That was a dirty trick you played me, but I forgive you. I wouldn't mind going off with you again."

"Don't expect me to pay you," I answered.

"Not even for the room?"

I turned away, and he went to try his luck with some other sucker.

"Who was that?" my companion asked.

"A mistake I made when I was new here."

We left together, and I spent the night with him. The sex was tame, and it left me hornier than when I'd picked him up. The next night I was back in the bar, an hour later in bed with another stranger, and by lunchtime the next day, as if obsessed, I could think of nothing but having sex again.

After another night of the same scenario I almost regretted not having come on to Jean-Yves. I'd stopped painting and focused all my attention on the demands of my dick. I needed to get away, to escape to some smaller place with no gay scene. I phoned a hotel in Roussillon, the ochre village, packed up all my belongings, and took the train to Avignon, where I left the canvases I'd done and most of what I owned in storage. With the bare minimum of supplies and no more clothes than I'd need if I did laundry every four or five days, I took the bus to Apt and from there

another to my destination.

In Roussillon I regained my equilibrium. The itch to do oil paintings didn't return, and the bright colors called for a sharper medium than pastel, so I worked in acrylics, mostly on cardboard. I put Jean-Yves out of my mind and avoided company, going out every day to paint in the village or by the old ochre mines or hiking in the Luberon to paint the sunflowers and the fields of lavender. I regretted having come too late for the bright red poppies.

One of the local boys, about fifteen years old, used to come watch me paint on the days I stayed in town. He had the same build as Jean-Yves and the same shy way about him and was much better looking. He never spoke, only watched. I asked him if he'd like me to paint him, in part to be friendly, and also because his features were so striking. He nodded. I sent him to get a chair from the café across the street, had him sit, and dashed off a small acrylic in my sketchpad.

I always see more when I start painting. This boy was more than handsome, much more; he was beautiful: full lips with flashing white teeth; large, soulful eyes with long dark lashes; a perfectly oval face and dark brown curls. I didn't feel the slightest sexual twinge. If Jean-Yves attracted me so strongly, it was because of his personality. I was no pederast. My desire for him had probably been an

illusion, I thought, and wouldn't resurface to trouble me if we met again.

The boy liked his picture and asked if he could have it. I gave it to him but warned that I didn't want people to think I'd paint them for free. He gave me five francs and said, "Now I can say I paid for it. I won't tell how much."

I'd put off having the photos developed because my feelings for Jean-Yves disturbed me deeply. I was usually attracted to men no more than ten years older or younger than myself. True, he was twenty-two and I was thirty-four, not all that much of a difference, but he looked so young and his manner was so childlike. The idea of having sex with him at once excited me and made me feel uncomfortable. It would be better not to see him again. But it would be heartless to break off with him without a word. I had to send those photos.

I set "Boy Wading" on a chair and finished off the roll of film taking photos of it and one or two of my better Roussillon acrylics. It took a couple of days to have them developed. I ordered duplicates of two pictures of me with Jean-Yves, the one Gilles had taken and one of the naked shots, then went back to the hotel and wrote him a letter telling him I'd gone to Roussillon and had been painting non-stop. To prove it, I included two photos of things I'd done there along with the family photos, the picture of me,

and us naked together by the bridge. I asked the hotel clerk for an envelope and went to drop it off at the post office. I purposely had not given him my address in the letter, but on the way back I realized the name of the hotel was on the envelope.

When I returned from painting two days later, the man at the desk said, "You had a phone call. *Un monsieur*. He said he'd call back tonight."

It could only have been Jean-Yves. Suddenly I wanted very much to speak to him, to hear his voice. "Did he leave a number?"

"Non, monsieur."

I could have looked it up, but I was afraid I'd get Marceline. Not only did I not want to speak to her, but she might not have known Jean-Yves had tried to get in touch with me.

By eight o'clock he still hadn't called. I had to eat dinner; I'd only had a sandwich and piece of fruit all day.

"If he calls back, say I've gone for dinner and to leave a number or call after nine-thirty," I told the receptionist.

I wolfed down my food and hurried back to the hotel. "Are there any messages?" I asked.

"From the same gentleman. He said he'd try back at

eleven but not to disturb you if you'd gone to bed."

"I'll wait up," I said.

* * * *

"Ben?"

"Jean-Yves. It's good to hear your voice."

"I got your letter. It was full of mistakes. The pictures are wonderful. Why did you take so long to send them? Why didn't you stay in touch? I thought you'd forgotten me. I had no way of knowing where you were."

"I explained in the letter. First I didn't know where I'd be, then I got wrapped up in my painting."

"No. You forgot me. It's been over a month. I was miserable." It was not a reproach. He was expressing his sorrow; undisguised, as was typical of him.

"I'm sorry. It was wrong of me, I know. I neglected you, but I didn't forget you. I tried, but I couldn't."

"Why?"

"Because I like you too much and we'll probably never see each other again."

"But you promised to come back for the fall colors."

"I didn't, and even if I had, how could I? I'm the last person your sister wants to see. We won't see each other unless you put your foot down and come visit me."

"In Roussillon?"

"Wherever I am when you're free to come. You can't have time to leave now with your sister getting married soon."

"No, you'll come here. I'll arrange it."

"You're too much of an optimist."

I'd written about being too busy painting not just as an excuse, but to hint that we'd moved on, that we both had another life — a letter full of what I was doing now, that hardly mentioned my time in Sainte-Ripouze and left out Montpellier altogether. Either he hadn't picked up on that or he chose to ignore it. Of course we'd see each other again. He'd invited me, and I'd invited him. But going back to stay at Marceline's was out of the question. What could he have been thinking?

And what could I have been thinking? I couldn't work with him around, just leave him with nothing to do in an unfamiliar place and go off all day. I hadn't planned to invite him, yet I was dying to see him from the moment I heard his voice. No, I'd wanted to see him all along and hadn't let myself admit it. How anxious I'd been to speak to him once I'd heard he'd called!

Jean-Yves phoned back early the next morning.

"Marceline's inviting you to her wedding."

"You're kidding! How did you wangle that?"

"By pointing out that she'd be leaving for her honeymoon the same day and wouldn't be back for two weeks. I'd be all alone, and you wanted a base for painting the autumn colors in the Cévennes."

"I don't. I just want to see you."

"But you'll paint too, won't you? I'll have to spend my days at the store anyway, so you can take the *mobylette*. They're only half an hour away, the Cévennes and the autumn foliage, so you see I wasn't lying. We'll be together every morning and all evening and on the days the shop is closed, twice a week and Sunday morning. The season's over; hardly anybody comes to Sainte-Ripouze. I close early too, and you'll come back from painting early because it gets dark. They'll be gone for two weeks. We'll have lots of time together. We can work on your French."

He was speaking quickly, not giving me time to answer him, desperate to convince me and afraid I'd find arguments against it. He sounded nervous, and traces of his stammer had returned. "You'll be my guest," he continued. "Marceline doesn't expect rent. I insisted on that."

"You're learning to stand up to her."

"It's not that hard when she has a thousand other things to think about getting ready for the wedding. She made just one stipulation — no oils, so you can leave as soon as she comes back. She says the one of me by the

bridge took too long to dry."

"I told you she doesn't want me around. Wouldn't she prefer I came after the wedding?"

"She said the night before. Everything will be in place then. She's of two minds, really. She doesn't want to see you; she wants *you* to see *her*, to show you what you missed out on. Gilles wants you there too, for the same reason. I only convinced her because he seconded me."

"They're some pair, aren't they?"

"You're telling me! And Marceline has another reason, one Gilles doesn't like at all. She doesn't want him to sleep with her the night before the wedding. She thinks it's improper."

"I can see her saying that. I suppose she'll be wearing white?"

"Yes, and a church wedding too. Will you come?"

"Okay, you've talked me into it. Now I'll have to think of a present. When is this wedding?"

"The first Sunday in October. You'll be in time to catch the fall colors."

"I told you already I don't give a damn about the colors. I'm coming to be with you."

* * * *

The official invitation arrived shortly afterwards, addressed to "M. Ben Broucks":

*Monsieur Philippe Cadot et Madame veuve Clémence
Debioux
ont le plaisir de vous faire part du mariage de leurs
enfants,
Marceline-Arlette-Ursule et Gilles Rémy,
le dimanche 4 octobre 1998 à 11 heures à l'Eglise
paroissiale de Sainte-Ripouze.
Réception à 13 heures au Café de la Place.
R.S.V.P.*

As a gift I thought Marceline would appreciate getting the oil portrait she'd asked me for at the beginning of my stay, and that I'd frame it for her too. I would copy the photo I'd taken of her and Gilles the day before I left. Portraits painted from photos are seldom any good, and when they're of two people they're worse. This would be no exception, but she wasn't looking for great art any more than she'd recognize great art when she looked at it.

I had to work quickly to have time to let the canvas dry and order a suitable inexpensive frame. I learned that there are no inexpensive frames in France.

I gave more thought to what I should get for Jean-

Yves; his sister was unimportant. I would have liked to buy him a piece of jewelry, but that seemed too much like courtship. At the very least he would interpret it as encouragement to deepen our friendship, and I was determined not to prolong our (for me) frustratingly chaste and futureless liaison beyond my stay in France. I settled for ordering an enlargement of the photo of "Boy Wading", fifty by thirty centimeters. He'd like that more.

As the time for my visit approached, the more eager I was to see him and the greater my trepidation. Two weeks alone in the house with Jean-Yves! We'd each have our own room, but he might want to sleep in the big bed with me. Could I refuse him? Would I be able to control myself? Exquisite agony! I promised myself I would behave. It was not his boyishness that attracted me. He had a good figure and a pleasant face, no more than that. It was his happiness that made him beautiful. I cared for him too much. It was wrong to get involved. To have a brief affair with him would be cruel. Falling in love with him would be a dead end. Nothing would happen. I wouldn't let it. Every day I turned the same thoughts over and over in my head, and I could think of nothing else on the long train ride to Millau.

Gilles picked me up at the station. He saw the bag with the gift-wrapped picture.

"You're giving us a painting. What is it?"

"You'll see tomorrow, but this is for Jean-Yves." I pulled the enlargement out of the bag.

"He'll love it, but we'd better keep this in the family. It wouldn't do to let anyone else see it. He's sure to put it up in his room, so no one will."

We stopped at the café to drop off my wedding gift with the others that had arrived in the mail. They were holding the reception there.

When we came in sight of the house, I saw Jean-Yves in front of it, waiting nervously. He recognized the car, stood up and waved, but his greeting was a reserved handshake. Gilles, who was watching, seemed to expect more.

"I'm so glad you could come. Marceline is pleased too. Let me help you up to your room with your things."

"Where's Marceline?"

"In Millau, doing some last minute shopping."

I turned to Gilles. "I have to go back and pick her up," he said. "I left her there when I went to get you."

"I could've waited. You didn't have to make two trips."

"With all she's buying there wouldn't have been room in the car."

Jean-Yves had already brought my things into the

house and was waiting for me in the room. He threw his arms around me as soon as I got there.

"Whoa! This is quite a welcome you're giving me."

"I've missed you."

"I can see that. I've missed you too."

"The wedding will be a chore, but after that we'll have a wonderful time."

"Why a chore?"

"My father will be there. The nursing home is sending him in a car."

"Will I get to meet him?"

"Only if he recognizes me."

"Is he that far gone?"

"Only if he *wants* to recognize me. Come with me. I have something to show you."

He led me to his room. I hadn't seen it before. It was small and furnished for a Spartan—a narrow bed, a wooden chair, a lamp, an armoire, no curtains on the window, not even an area rug, and bare walls except for what he wanted to show me—the sketch of him imitating the Poseidon, and the photo Gilles had taken of us taped to the armoire. "And there's this too," he said, pulling off the photo. He'd taped the one I'd taken of us naked by the river to the back of it. "A neat hiding place, huh?"

"You wouldn't have to keep it hidden if you had

your own place. I have mine on the table in my hotel room. The maid can think what she likes." That wasn't true. I'd left it in the envelope with the other photos.

His smile broadened and his eyes sparkled. "You really keep it out where you can see it? I'm glad. I'll have one soon — I mean, a place of my own. I'm getting a job."

"When? Doing what?"

"I don't know yet. Marceline asked me to wait until she returns from her honeymoon, but she's all in favor of it. Gilles says there's an opening in the place he works, but I refused."

"You were right; that wouldn't be independence. What exactly does he do?"

"Upholstery, at a furniture store in Millau. What do you think of my room? Not much to it, is there?"

"It's like a monk's cell. No wonder you can't wait to leave it in the morning. I'll do an acrylic for you while I'm here so at least there'll be some color. Till then this will have to do."

I went upstairs and took the enlargement out of its bag. He was thrilled.

* * * *

I didn't see Marceline until after breakfast. She was

running around the house in her white gown, stopping every two minutes to check it, and looking as frenzied as if she'd been chased into the street by an earthquake, too busy even to say hello. The civil service was set for ten. Surviving her anxiety till then was more than I could cope with.

Jean-Yves had not yet emerged from his room. I went to fetch him and found him in a light gray rental suit, engaged in a last unsuccessful attempt to knot his tie. I did it for him. Standing close to him, face to face, my moving fingers brushing his chest beneath his over-starched shirt, his warm breath caressing my hands, it was all I could do not to kiss him. I looked up at him, and he smiled innocently back at me, apparently unaware of what was racing through my mind.

We went outside to sit on the wall across from the house until it was time to leave. To get out of her way, we told Marceline, but we really wanted her out of ours.

Lucien, one of Gilles' brothers, came with his car to drive us to the *mairie*, where Gilles was waiting, though Marceline had cursed him all the way to the village because she knew he'd be late.

"You look lovely," he told her. "Where's your bouquet?"

She had forgotten to have us stop at the florist's to

pick it up and sent Jean-Yves running to get it.

The mob in the room made it look not much bigger than Jean-Yves'; there was no lack of witnesses, though only two were needed. Marceline had asked them all so she'd have a proper entourage when she walked to the church for the religious ceremony. Everyone was talking at once. It made my head spin.

Gilles feigned composure, but his on-going flow of disconnected, trivial remarks gave him away. He introduced me to his mother, then to his older brother André, who'd come down from Paris. Both his brothers had wasted no time moving away from Sainte-Ripouze as soon as they'd finished school. Then he introduced his boss to his mother, who knew each other already. Marceline, on the other hand, had suddenly calmed down when her brother placed the bouquet in her hands. She stood by the window looking bored, an impression she reinforced by asking what time it was whenever the noise in the room died down.

The fourth time she asked—it may only have been the third—Gilles turned to me looking harassed and asked, "Are American brides this distraught on their wedding day?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm not married."

"Looks like you're next, P'tit Cadeau," he said, changing the subject entirely.

"Next in the village to be married? What makes you think that?" Jean-Yves stammered.

"Agnès Coutel's getting married next month. Aren't you, dear?" his mother said, turning to an overweight girl, one of three bridesmaids.

"The week after *Toussaint*," replied Agnès.

"No, *maman*, the next in the family," Gilles explained.

"Of course he's next," snapped his mother, "unless he's still a bachelor when it comes the turn of your unborn children! There *is* no one else in the family."

"Ben won't let that happen, will you, Ben?" he asked, using my given name for the first time. "*Maman*, have you met Jean-Yves' friend Monsieur Brooks, the famous artist?" And he introduced us a second time.

The mayor, who had agreed to officiate himself, finally arrived. "Is everything prepared? Where are the witnesses? Stand here. Stand there." Before I knew what had happened, they were man and wife. I could tell because they kissed.

Monsieur le maire asked Gilles' permission to make a little speech, then went ahead and made one. *Quis tacet, consentit*. It was mercifully short and had nothing to do with the couple beyond pointing out that it had been twenty years since two people from the village last married each

other.

"Now can we go to the church?" asked Marceline.

Gilles lagged behind to whisper to the mayor,
"She's hoping her father will give her away, but if he's in no condition to, will you do the honors?"

"Why not ask Jean-Yves? An unmarried woman is under the authority of her closest male relative." With the millennium less than fifteen months away, he had yet to enter the twentieth century!

"My sister doesn't know that," Jean-Yves explained.

We had to run to catch up with Marceline and her bridesmaids, who hadn't bothered to wait and didn't realize they'd gone on without us. Cadot *père* hadn't yet arrived. Jean-Yves phoned the nursing home, and they said he was on his way.

"I'll give him ten minutes," Marceline said.

She asked twice for the time. Jean-Yves made it five, then ten minutes earlier than it was.

The old man showed up half an hour later, bewildered and complaining about having to wear a tie. When he saw Marceline in her wedding gown he asked, "Why aren't you at the store? Did you leave Jean-Yves in charge?" though his son was right next to her.

"Monsieur Cadot isn't having a good day," the attendant whispered.

We'd figured that out for ourselves. The mayor gave the bride away.

I took a seat at the back of the church, wishing I could sit by Jean-Yves. I couldn't follow the ceremony and thought it unnecessarily long, considering that they were married already. I wondered if they threw rice at French weddings and how I should phrase my compliments.

The mass suddenly stopped and everyone began talking loudly. Marceline was livid.

"What's happening?" I asked the person sitting in front of me.

"The attendant let old Cadot take communion by himself and he hasn't returned to his seat. She's gone to look for him."

Jean-Yves hurried up the aisle and grabbed my arm. "Come help me find my father."

He stopped outside the church door.

"Where do we look first?" I asked.

"We don't. He couldn't have left the church. I just wanted to get out of there."

* * * *

The wedding luncheon was to start at one o'clock, and I hear it went on till after ten and the last guest had

gone home. Jean-Yves and I left long before that. I asked him when we'd made our escape from the church if we should go on ahead and wait for the others at the café.

"I can't. I have to stand in line and receive your congratulations and everyone else's."

"What am I supposed to say?"

"It doesn't matter. Say something in English. No one listens to these things except Gilles' mother. She won't listen, but you'd better say something in French anyway."

"Say what?"

"*Vous devez être très fière, Madame.* Be sure to get the *Madame* right. It's not important if you screw up the rest."

"I'm dreading this luncheon. I don't know anyone here."

"That's all taken care of. You'll be sitting at the head table with me. They didn't know where else to put you."

Jean-Yves lined up beside his sister outside the church. "Why didn't you take communion?" she hissed at him.

"I haven't taken communion since *maman's* funeral. You haven't either. Besides, it's not allowed. I haven't been to confession."

"Confession!" she snorted. "What do you have to confess? Do you think I went?"

"Then you shouldn't have taken communion."

"I had to. I was getting married."

"I wasn't."

"You should have taken communion anyway."

Everybody noticed."

That was the last thing she said to him until she returned from her honeymoon.

The photographer took so long taking pictures of the wedding party that half the guests went on to the café and skipped going through the line to congratulate them. Jean-Yves got shunted here and there, everyone yelling at him to stand somewhere else, and I cannot imagine that any of the photos of him came out very good, though I'm sure those of his father turned out worse. He'd been found sitting in another row on the other side of the aisle next to some people who didn't realize he was the fellow everyone was looking for. People treated him with fake solicitousness and more like a child than they did Jean-Yves, which he was. I understood why his son didn't hold a grudge against the old man for having beaten him as a child and for pretending not to know him now. I was certain he was pretending.

The wedding party, fifteen in all, sat at a long table with little plates of *amuse-gueule* on a raised platform along one wall of the café. The seating arrangements

provided an object lesson on how French etiquette makes the best of an awkward situation. Marceline sat on Gilles' right, her father and the attendant from the nursing home next to her, Mme Debioux next to her son, then Jean-Yves and myself, and to my left Tatie H  l  ne and Tatie Mathilde, Jean-Yves' widowed or perhaps unmarried aunts from Dijon, his mother's sisters, and next to them, at the end of the table, the priest who officiated at the wedding. The rest of Gilles' immediate family, Andr   and his wife, then Lucien, were seated next to old Cadot's attendant, and after them the mayor and Gilles' employer. Jean-Yves pointed out Andr  's two children and their *au pair* at a corner table close to the door.

"Lucien isn't married?"

"Divorced. Twice."

"Why aren't Marceline and Gilles seated in the center? And don't the mayor and Gilles' boss feel slighted that they've been placed so far to the side?"

"Just wait. You'll see."

The luncheon began with several rounds of champagne toasts. Everyone at the head table made one, and a speech to go with it, except myself, the old man and his attendant, the priest, and the two aunts. The newlyweds exchanged a kiss after every toast. Cadot *p  re* protested loudly at being allowed only one glass of champagne. The

mayor spoke at least three times longer than at the *mairie*, and Lucien's was very bawdy, judging by how the female guests reacted, except Tatie Mathilde, who was very deaf and applauded enthusiastically. Jean-Yves, no less self-conscious after three glasses of champagne, stammered and made a fool of himself. I felt sorry for him. The toasts ended with the married couple toasting each other.

The waiters started bringing in our hors-d'œuvre immediately after, except for old Cadot and his attendant, who were served dessert. She took him back to the nursing home as soon as he finished it, their plates were cleared away and replaced by new settings, and the mayor and Gilles' boss moved to the places they had vacated.

Jean-Yves was very attentive to Tatie Hélène, whom he hadn't seen since his mother's funeral. She'd recently taken up painting as a hobby, and was delighted to learn I was an artist and had done an oil painting of her nephew, which she was most anxious to see. Jean-Yves answered her evasively. Totally oblivious of the *double sens*, she went on and on about how well he'd turned out, how much she regretted she wouldn't get to see more of him, and how big he'd grown. "There's no reason to blush," she said. "You really have turned out *très bien*. *N'est-ce pas*, Monsieur Brooks?"

"Yes, very much so."

Tatie Hélène's interest in art gave us something to talk about and kept the conversation going for the remainder of the meal. The three of us formed a group *à part*. The other members of the wedding party, from Gilles' mother to his brother Lucien and everyone in between, carried on one multiple incoherent conversation, sometimes yelling down the table to make themselves heard. It fell to the priest to entertain Tatïe Mathilde.

We downed copious amounts of food: after the hors-d'œuvre a consommé, followed by a fish course, then a sorbet, the *pièce de résistance* of wild game, a vegetable dish, a salad, cheese, and the *gâteau de mariage*. But the preparation was on the whole mediocre. Jean-Yves would have done a better job.

* * * *

Marceline had said one word to me all day: *merci*, when I offered my congratulations. Now, after dessert, she stood up and walked over to where Jean-Yves and I were sitting. "My brother's drunk," she whispered loudly in my ear. "You're supposed to be keeping an eye on him."

"I'll get him a coffee and take him outside for some fresh air."

"Good idea."

I hauled him over to the counter and ordered a double espresso. He knocked it back in one gulp.

"Bitter! And hot!"

I took him by the arm and led him firmly out into the street.

"Where're we going?"

"For a walk. You need to sober up."

He took a few steps, staggered, and stopped. "I need to..."

"Throw up?"

"No. Sit down."

"First we walk. We'll go to the public garden. You can sit down there."

Halfway up the block he stopped again. "I need to piss," he said, and opened his fly and urinated in the middle of the road.

"Couldn't you wait till we reached the urinal?"

"No, my bladder's very full. Don't worry, nobody's watching. The whole village is at the party."

He was right about his bladder; it took forever to empty. He fumbled around trying to tuck himself back into his pants and close his fly, but he was too drunk to do even that much. I slipped it back in for him and zipped him up.

"*Merci. T'es un pote.*"

"You're not making this easy for me."

"Sorry. I tried to do it myself, really I did."

"Forget it. That's not what I meant. I just want to get you sober."

It was precisely what I meant. Here I was exerting every ounce of willpower to keep my hands off him, and his alcohol-induced lack of coordination obliges me to grab his cock! "I was hoping we'd spend a nice evening together," I said.

"I'm sorry. We still can. You'll see. You can do another oil, *Garçon qui pisse dans la rue*. How do you say that in English?"

"Boy pissing in the street."

"There isn't a special word for it depending on where you piss, like there is for depending on where you walk?"

"Next time why don't you wet your pants?"

"I would've, but they're rented."

"I can see we're going to have a lovely time. Do you think you can make it up the hill?"

"If you hold on to me."

"It's you who need something to hold on to."

We reached the pissotière next to the war memorial.

"Now it's my turn," I told him. "Wait here."

"I have to too," he said, following me in.

"Again?"

"Must be all that champagne."

"Or the *île flottante*."

He found that very funny and couldn't stop giggling. "Now I can't," he said, standing beside me in the pissotière with his dick hanging out.

"Don't ask me to put you together this time, because I won't."

"I'll do it. Just wait for my head to clear."

"This is no place to get a breath of fresh air; it stinks. I'm leaving."

He followed me out without having tucked himself back in.

"Get that thing back in your goddamn pants!"

"Must I?"

"Yes."

"Watch how I do it."

"No."

I turned and walked on without him. I was no longer resisting temptation; my grown-up self had kicked in. Had he been my lover or just a buddy, I'd have found it hilarious, but I didn't know what our relationship was, or could be, or what I wanted it to become.

"Wait up! I'm fixed," he called out, and zigzagged up the hill to join me.

We walked the rest of the way to the terrace with

him hanging on my arm. He'd quieted down. I was mollified.

"Are you angry with me?"

"Not any more."

"I'll be good now, I promise."

We sat side by side on a bench and watched the sky turn pink. He curled up against my arm, his head on my shoulder, and he closed his eyes. He looked so peaceful I felt like kissing him, the way you kiss a baby. Instead I stroked his hair. He smiled.

This is ridiculous, I thought. What's keeping me from having sex with him? He'd go to bed with me at the drop of a hat. In fact, I'm sure he will be in bed with me. He wouldn't resist even if he were sober, and I've never wanted a man this much in my life. (That wasn't exactly true. My desire for a man —any man— was overwhelming when the urge hit me, but never before had I desired one man in particular.) Would it be so wrong? He's not a child; he's twenty-two years old, and he's not naïve, just inexperienced. If he gives an impression of childishness, that's all it is — an impression. It comes from his openness, his authenticity, his delight in the things that please him, his wariness of being hurt. And I wouldn't hurt him, not physically; I'd give him more pleasure than he's ever known. And if he feels ashamed in the morning, I'll shrug it

off and say we were both drunk—he'll accept that— and we'll go back to being the way we were. And if he's happy about it...

I made up my mind: we would have sex. I watched him, his eyes closed, his head resting gently on my shoulder. I imagined how he'd taste, how his body would feel when I pressed it with my hands, his arousal, his pleasure, my caresses returned. I felt at ease now, neither torn by uncertainty nor in the throes of an irresistible desire to throw myself on him. In a couple of hours we'd be making love, tenderly, passionately. I could wait.

The sun had gone down, darkness was falling.
"Asleep?" I asked.

"Not yet. Almost."

"Shouldn't we be getting back to the party?"

CHAPTER SIX

The square outside the café was a madhouse. The bride and groom were about to leave on their honeymoon, and most of the guests had followed them into the street to see them off. Marceline looked up and saw us. I mouthed, "He's almost sober". She didn't notice. She'd already turned her back to us to get into the car.

They drove off, and the others went back into the café.

"It's over," I said. "Let's walk home, unless you'd like another cup of coffee first."

Jean-Yves shook his head, and we set out.

The night was very dark. No moon, only stars. Jean-Yves wasn't very steady on his feet and kept bumping into me, giggling, and saying "Oops!"

"I'm sorry I didn't insist you have more coffee before we left."

He leaned back against the cliffs that lined the road across from the ravine, stretched out his arms and breathed deeply. "What a beautiful night!" he exclaimed. "How quiet it is, and how many stars! Hey! Let's go skinny-dipping by the old bridge. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"I can think of at least five reasons why not to, the best of which is that you'd break your neck trying to climb

down the ravine in your condition."

"I'm not as drunk as I'm pretending to be."

"You're drunk enough to pretend. Besides, it's too dark."

"The moon will be out soon."

"And too cold. You'll catch pneumonia."

"I have you here to nurse me."

"You don't have on the right shoes, and that's a rented suit. You'll get it filthy and probably rip it."

"This suit is another reason to go skinny-dipping. I hate wearing it."

"Then we'll go home and you can take it off. What'd you do with the tie, anyway?"

"Here... In my pocket." He took it out, crumpled into a ball and still knotted. "See?"

"I see that we have to get you to bed. You almost fell asleep on top of me on the terrace."

"That was the alcohol."

"So's your idea we go skinny-dipping. Now let's get back, okay? I'm bushed."

"I'm sleeping in your bed, right?"

"If that's what you want. We've slept together before."

We would not have sex that night. His silliness irritated me, he was too drunk. I was no longer in the mood,

and if I were, I would get no enjoyment out of it. I could imagine him falling asleep as soon as he hit the bed and snoring like a locomotive. It would be like making love to an inert, unresponsive, insentient lump of man-flesh. I'd have other opportunities. He adored me; he would melt at my touch and agree to anything.

The moon rose over the lip of the canyon as we approached the house. He fumbled with the key; I had to unlock the door for him. I turned on the light.

"Turn it off! It's too bright. It hurts my eyes."

"It's pitch black in here. You'll never make it up the stairs."

"I know my way around," he said, and flicked off the light switch.

He mounted the first flight easily and stopped in front of his room. I groped my way behind him. "I need my toothbrush," he said, and pushed open the door. I followed him in.

He'd left the shutters open. His window overlooked the garden, so only feeble moonlight entered the room. It was enough to see by after the darkness of the hall.

"I feel like kissing you," he said.

"Go for it. There's no stopping you in your condition."

"You'll think—"

"I'll think you're drunk. No, I know you're drunk."

I wasn't expecting much of a kiss, something weepy and slobbery, the unwelcome affection of a sentimental drunk. I was in for a surprise. He threw his arms around me and placed his lips on mine. I opened my mouth. He opened his, and I thrust my tongue in.

He clung to me desperately, pressed himself to me, our mouths locked together. I felt his erection rubbing my groin, against my own newly returned hardness. I pulled back from his kiss and cupped my lips on his neck below the chin, moving my tongue back and forth across his skin. He went limp in my arms.

I walked him backward to the bed, and he tumbled onto it with me on top of him. He slid his hands into my hair, twining it around his fingers. I continued kissing him as I unbuttoned his shirt, undid his belt, unzipped his trousers and pulled them down to his knees. Every newly exposed expanse of skin I kissed.

He lifted his hips and I slipped his briefs over his silken pubes, his swollen penis, his loose scrotum and the oval testicles hanging inside it. His erection was taut and rigid, his foreskin stretched back tight beneath the pink head I glimpsed for the first time, a liquid pearl at the tip. His nakedness glowed in the moonlight.

I bent my head toward the loveliness I had

uncovered.

"No," he said.

I sat up and quickly took my hands off him. "I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me."

"Not here," he went on. "In your bed. There's more room."

I looked at him questioningly. In none of my scenarios had he taken the initiative.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Don't you want this?"

"Suddenly you're not as drunk as you were."

"I wasn't. I told you I was pretending."

"Why?"

"For this. I wasn't sure, I didn't dare think you wanted me."

"You almost turned me off completely."

"I realized that. Twice. You do want me, don't you?"

"What does it look like?"

"How long have you wanted me?"

"Since Montpellier."

"I've wanted you from the moment I walked into your room and saw you sleeping naked."

"But you looked away."

"But I saw."

"Am I all that handsome?"

"No. You're handsome, but it was more than that. You were concerned for my feelings. I thought, 'Here's a man who'll be kind, who won't think only of himself when we... if we...'"

"Have you been trying to seduce me all along?"

"No, I've been trying to get you to seduce *me*."

"Do you know the agony of longing you've put me through?"

"It was no worse than mine."

I undressed him slowly, caressing him as I did. When the rest of his clothing lay on the floor, I lifted him and carried him upstairs in my arms.

I still didn't believe he was gay, only that he thought he was. He felt guilt and perhaps had been punished for innocent pleasures that meant nothing. The circumstances of his life and the prejudices against him had slowed his development, and part of him was still a boy. What he felt for me was a teenage crush, common enough, and he would grow out of it as most boys do. As he matured, he would become more self-assured, and once I was gone he would rediscover his attraction to women. I wouldn't stay in France forever. Until then, he was a consenting adult, and there was no harm in our finding enjoyment in each other. And the sex would be very, very good, a revelation for us

both. I could tell.

Nor did I believe for a second his romantic nonsense about love at first sight. I had seen his embarrassment when he brought my breakfast that morning and his lack of curiosity. He had fallen asleep easily lying naked alongside me in Montpellier. Clearly he was head over heels in love with me, sexually in love, by the time I left to return to Provence. That probably dated from the time we worked together on "Boy Wading". His sister's overreaction may have given him the idea or the rumors that must have been circulating.

He nestled into me as I carried him to my room, his head on my chest, his arms hugging me, his erection unsubsidized. I placed soft kisses in his hair and cooed in his ear: "Jean-Yves, my beauty... Finally. Are you as happy as I am?"

I lay him on the bed and went down on him. He shivered at the touch of my tongue on his glans.

"Aren't you going to undress too?"

I gradually and clumsily undid my clothing with my left hand while I caressed him, not at all clumsily, with my right, and ran my lips and tongue over the secret places on his body — his belly, the forking of his legs, his scrotum. He moaned and writhed, gently tracing the outlines of my face with one hand while he combed through my hair with

the other.

"You do this so well. I'm not nearly as good as you. I just go up and down on it."

I looked at him, astonished. "You've done this before?"

"This and more. More than I care to remember."

"Is that why your father beat you?"

"He found out about it."

"And then you stopped?"

"Eventually, when I went into the army. I haven't done it since."

He was as gay as I am.

"I had no idea. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No, I want to make love. I used to do it—I just told you I did—but I didn't like it, and I didn't like that I did it. I hated it."

"But you like what I'm doing."

"With you it's different. The others hurt me."

"Then why—"

"Not now. I don't want to think about it now. In the morning."

My clothes now lay in a pile on the floor. I got in bed beside him in sixty-nine position, and we pleasured each other. He hummed softly to himself as he explored me with his mouth. Nor did he just "go up and down". He

learned quickly.

I stretched my head forward and ran my tongue between his buttocks. "Oh, my God!" he gasped. "I've never done that, never felt that before."

"You like it?"

"It's wonderful!"

He lifted a thigh so I could reach deeper. I licked and kissed and sucked, and the tip of my tongue penetrated his tight opening. His head rolled onto the pillow and he lay in awe, squirming ever so slightly as I worked him.

"I want to feel you in me."

"Are there any condoms?"

"No."

"We shouldn't. It's risky."

"I'm safe. They tested me when I left the army, and I haven't done it since before I went in."

"And me? I've been tested too, but I've done it more recently. I've been sexually active longer than you have, too, and without much interruption."

"Maybe. I started before I was eight."

A shock ran through me and I sat bolt upright.

"Jean-Yves! What're you telling me? Do you mean—"

He placed a finger on my lips. "Not now. Tomorrow."

I did some quick calculations. "I've still been at it

longer than you, by about four years."

"I want you in me. I want to feel you ejaculate in me. Do it!"

He got on his hands and knees.

"Not like that."

"Should I stand up and brace myself on the table? It's the only other way I've done it."

"Jesus! What the hell did they do to you?"

"I don't want to talk about it now! I don't want to talk about it ever! But I'll tell you everything, I promise. Only not now, not tonight. Thinking about it would ruin everything."

"Okay. I promise I won't ask any more questions. Lie on your stomach on the bed."

"Like this?"

"Your legs don't have to be so wide apart. There's some kind of lube somewhere around the house, at least?"

"Lube?"

"Gel...oil...cream..."

"What for?"

"Oh baby, baby, don't worry about what's going to happen! I'll be so gentle with you; I'll go slowly. I want this to be the most marvelous night of your life."

"I know it'll be."

"You're very tight. It won't go in easily, but I'll be

careful not to hurt you."

"I trust you. They used to shove straight in —*baf!*— and it hurt terribly. Sometimes they spit on it first."

"I'll go downstairs and get some butter."

"I'm not afraid, not with you."

"You aren't, but your body is. It remembers — see how tense you are? Shhh... Try to relax. Wait for me."

* * * *

We awoke at the same time the next morning in a tangle of arms and legs, the stain on the sheets still wet where he'd come while I was inside him. He smiled at me —he beamed— and snuggled closer to me.

"How do you feel?"

"Very happy."

"I mean, physically."

He thought for a moment. "Not sore. Different, as if you were still in me, only I can feel it isn't there."

"I'm afraid I stretched you out a bit."

"A lot! But that's fine, I like being stretched out...by you. I want to do it again before breakfast."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"For you I am."

"We'll be doing a lot more of this in the next two

weeks, and I have other things to show you too."

He was getting mighty frisky, kissing me on the chest, working his way down my belly, then, millimeters away from my penis, moving up again to suck on a nipple or blow in my ear. His penis looked frisky too.

"Maybe there isn't that much left for me to show you."

"I never knew anything could feel that good; I had no idea. The pleasure was almost more intense than I could take. I thought I would scream."

"You did scream."

"I did? Yes, my throat does feel sore — but only my throat." He paused for a second, then went on excitedly: "I want to taste you there too, to feel you spurt in my throat. It'll soothe it. I know it will."

I couldn't hold him back. He went down on me. When he'd sucked for a few minutes he looked up and said, "When you sucked me last night... The second time, after we...after you..."

"That's okay. I know after what."

"...you swallowed it. I always spit it out; it made me nauseous. But you..."

"Them. You have to tell me about it, you know. It's something I should know."

"I will. I've been trying to avoid it, but—"

"Would you prefer we go somewhere together, outside, and we'll talk about it then?"

"No, here, like this, sitting in bed together, both of us naked, safe from everyone."

He told me his story. He spoke in a flat voice, expressionless, as if he were talking about someone else far away and long ago, but he kept his eyes on me. I could see his anxiety, the fear that I would disapprove and condemn him for what he'd done. At one point, a very painful part of his narration, I reached out to hold him.

"Don't touch me! Not now, not when I'm thinking about it. I don't want your touch mixed up with bad memories."

His Catholic school in Dijon was a boarding school. The boys slept in two dormitories, older and younger together, and as happens in such schools, the younger ones were taken advantage of. He was soon spotted as a natural victim, too timid to fight back.

"I didn't want to do those things."

"I know."

One of the nuns caught him and another boy at it one night and brought them to the priest headmaster, who spanked them on their bare bottoms with a ping pong paddle till their butts turned dark purple.

"Those were bruises," I interrupted.

A week later the priest called him back to the office, just him this time, gave him a lecture, and then started fondling him. The forced intimacies became more frequent and more daring, until the good father was cornholing him regularly.

"He was so big. Sometimes I bled."

"He was an adult. You were a child."

"Anyway, we got found out, there was a scandal, and my father moved us to Sainte-Ripouze. I thought things would get better."

But somehow or other he was spotted, and it started up all over again.

"Were you attracted to men when you were a kid? Did you find yourself thinking about their dicks, wondering what they looked like?"

"I had nightmares about them. No, I wasn't attracted to them. Men scared me."

He wasn't like me, then. I'd always been drawn to men, always trying to get a peek at them. He mightn't be gay after all, not naturally gay. Maybe his psyche needed to exorcise the horror by reliving it with someone he loved, who wouldn't hurt him, with whom he felt safe, so he could move on and be himself.

There was no dormitory in Sainte Ripouze, but one of the older boys would stop him in the hall and make him

go to the yard behind the outbuildings where he'd have to suck him off, or into the cellar, where they were less likely to be caught, and make him bend over. Or one would waylay him in the village, threaten him, and force him to go with him.

"I was *l'enculé*, their *p'tit cadeau*. That's when I got the name."

"And Gilles was in on this?"

"More than any of them. I said he was the ringleader, remember? He used to grab me and force me to go somewhere with him, then pull down my pants and shove it in me. All the time. He was rough with me, made me scream. He used to put his hand over my mouth. When I cried he'd say, 'If you want me to quit, tell your sister to start putting out for me.'"

"And now he's your brother-in-law. What an animal! I could kill him."

"He was a kid then. We all were. He left me alone when I got back from the army."

"I suppose by then Marceline was putting out for him."

"Maybe. There's more."

"Are you going to tell me about it?"

"I have to, don't I? Now that you know this much, you may as well know everything. And I think it's good for

me, not only so I won't have secrets from you, but to get it off my chest."

"It's an awful lot for one person to keep bottled up inside him."

He waited before continuing his story, mustering up the nerve to go on. I patted his knee reassuringly, but didn't keep my hand there. "The things you're telling me, nothing remotely like that ever happened to me, but I can relate," I said to encourage him, "not to the abuse itself, but to the fear."

"The fear was the worst of it, and the shame."

"I can relate to that too. When I was a kid, we had a house with a separate studio attached to it which we rented out to a divorced woman and her son. He was four years older than me. I must have been seven or eight. I was a little like you then, very shy, not many friends, a loner, a daydreamer. They weren't close to us, I didn't see him at all like a friend, just another kid who lived in the neighborhood, a big kid. To me he seemed grown up. I remember once hearing his mother yelling at him and him crying, and realized she was hitting him. I had no idea that a kid that old could still get hit by his parents."

"Yes?"

"His name was Ronny. You see, I can also relate to how hard it is for you to tell me what you have."

He nodded.

"One day he asked me to come with him, said he had something he wanted to show me. He took me to an empty lot near where we lived and unzipped his fly and took out his dick. It was hard. It couldn't have been that big—he was only twelve—but to me it looked enormous. I was fascinated; I couldn't take my eyes off it. At the same time I felt funny, vaguely worried. All I could think of was that he was going to ask me to show him mine, and I was embarrassed. Then he asked me, 'Do you want to suck it?'

"I didn't know people did things like that. To me your *zizi* was something dirty. I took a step backward and shook my head no, but I couldn't stop looking at it. I was very scared.

"He said, 'You don't do that?'

"I shook my head again. He stood up, put it back in his pants, and said, 'Don't tell anyone, or I'll beat you up.'

"I shook my head, and he walked away. I never told anyone about it. I haven't thought about it in years; in fact, I'd forgotten it ever happened until your story reminded me. But I remember it nagged at me for weeks. I wondered what had prompted him to do it. Now I think that the neighborhood kids must have been making up stories about me because I was different. Like people do about you."

"And that was it? You were lucky." And he went on

with his story.

After Gilles left school and started working —he failed the *bac* with too low a score to be allowed to retake it— Jean-Yves was in *quatrième*, and for the next two years until he took the *brevet* things got better. The boys didn't leave him alone, but there were fewer incidents and not all with Jean-Yves. They found another boy to bully and abuse and divided their sexual activities between the two. Twice he and the other boy gave each other blowjobs to see what it felt like, otherwise he was always in the passive role. Except for those two times I was the only one who'd ever gone down on him.

He used to pass Gilles in the village, and was frightened he'd have his way with him again. Gilles would smirk at him, but nothing happened.

A week before the *brevet*, a few boys in *troisième* convinced him to come to the beach late one night for a pre-exam party. They said there'd be alcohol and "stuff". Instead he saw some of the older boys from the higher classes who liked to abuse him, and Gilles. He realized what was up, but it was too late. They raped him repeatedly and left him lying there. He staggered home shortly before dawn.

Word of what had happened reached his father, who beat him mercilessly, leaving him with a bloody face and

two broken ribs. He took the exam two days later and failed it, and his father pulled him out of school.

"How'd he find out?"

"Does it matter?"

"Didn't he realize you couldn't stop it, that they overpowered you?"

"He wouldn't have cared."

"What happened after?"

"I kept to myself and pretty much stayed shut up in my room for months. Occasionally I had to go to Sainte-Ripouze on errands, but always during the day when people were around. I got stared at when they thought I wasn't looking, but the kids couldn't try anything with them there. Nothing happened. Then I started venturing out on my own, taking long walks and things. That's when I discovered my secret places."

We sat side by side on the bed for a while. Then he added, "There, that's the whole story. No more to tell." He attempted a feeble joke. "I should have told you all this the night before last. Then I could have taken communion to please Marceline."

"May I hold you now?"

He nodded. I took him in my arms. He sniffled a couple of times, then burst into sobs, and I held him my arms and rocked him till he calmed down.

"Do you think you can eat breakfast now?"

He nodded again, wiping the tears from his eyes.

"Your face is all puffy. Let me wash it for you.

Here, I'll get you a tissue. Oh shit! We forgot about the store."

"Nobody expects it to be open today."

"Then we'll take a walk somewhere. Alone."

We never spoke of it again. He didn't want my sympathy, didn't ask for reassurance. It was enough that I knew.

* * * *

Jean-Yves opened the store the next morning, and I went to paint in the Cévennes. I'd expected a more varied palette. The forest was mostly yellows, browns and greens with only a few small patches of bright orange. Beeches, oaks and chestnuts —hundreds of thousands of chestnuts— predominated.

I did a couple of acrylics and was back in Sainte-Ripouze by five. "It's lovely, isn't it?" Jean-Yves asked.

"It's nice, but you should see Vermont in the fall."

"I'd like to visit you in the States, but there's no way I'll ever have the money."

"I've been telling you to get a job."

"Will you go back there tomorrow?"

"No, it's too far, and it doesn't really inspire me."

"What will you do all day?"

"I don't know. Sleep? Neither of us got much sleep the last two nights."

"You can't do nothing for two weeks."

"Don't worry, I won't. I'll think of something to paint."

"Like what?"

"A nude of you. A real portrait this time. Will you sit for me?"

"On Thursday and Sunday afternoon when the store's closed."

"Tomorrow's Thursday."

"Tomorrow then."

It started raining that afternoon, and it was still raining when we woke up the next morning. We spent most of the day in bed under the covers. The house was cold and damp. The wind had picked up.

"I won't paint you today. The light's no good, and it's too cold for you to sit naked for hours on end. I'll do it Sunday."

The wind and rain went on all day and were still going strong the day after.

"I'll go down to the village with you," I told him,

"and paint it from the terrace of the café." They'd glassed it in for the winter. We can have lunch together there."

"We can't both sit on the *mobylette*."

"Then we'll take umbrellas and walk."

Jean-Yves stocked up on groceries that afternoon in case the rain didn't let up, so we had a lot to carry back to the house. "It can go on like this for a week," he said.

Saturday morning the weather hadn't changed. Jean-Yves was up before me. "I'll just run down to the store and put this up," he said. "I'll come right back."

"Put what up?"

He showed me a sign he'd made: *Fermé à cause de la pluie*.

"That's not much of a reason."

"It's good enough for me."

We spent the next four days in the house, mostly half-naked. On account of the chill we wore sweatshirts, socks and slippers, nothing else.

Jean-Yves said, "Nudism is fun. Maybe I'll take it up," he teased.

"I'm sure Marceline will love it, but won't you be too much of a temptation for Gilles?"

Don't think we spent all our time having sex. That we did at night, and sometimes in the morning too, or just in the morning. But we always cuddled and fondled each

other at night, even when we didn't have sex. For the most part we just talked and enjoyed the intimacy of being naked together.

I did do the nude portrait of him —in the kitchen with the oven on so he wouldn't freeze to death— a large acrylic, more than half life-size.

"What about the background?" he wanted to know.

"The kitchen won't do. I'll make something up and fill it in later. This is a portrait. I can forget about the background."

He objected when I put on my jeans to paint. I explained that I had to so as not to get paint on my *zizi*.

"I wouldn't mind. It would make it more interesting."

"I'd mind. Besides, you seem to find it interesting enough without the paint."

"I do."

I chose another classic pose — seated with one ankle resting on his knee while he bent over to cut his toenails, like the Greek statue of the boy removing a thorn from his foot, except he raised his head to smile at me and had his left foot on his knee instead of the right. Since Jean-Yves is left-handed, it was more natural for him to sit like that. His happy smile established an immediate rapport between him and whoever would look at the picture, and

his charcoal gray eyes were haunting.

He expressed a childish concern that not all of his penis would show. He wanted it to be what he called "a real nude".

"Don't worry. I won't leave anything out."

On Tuesday afternoon the rain stopped and the clouds started breaking up. Wednesday morning was bright and sunny.

"I don't feel like going to the store," he said. "It's stupid to open it for one day. We're closed tomorrow anyway."

"Marceline'll hear about it, and she'll have a fit. You've hardly opened up all week."

"I'll say I was sick."

"She'll blame me. I'm supposed to be taking care of you."

"You are taking care of me," he said with a mischievous smile, reaching for my cock.

I brushed his hand away. "You have to open the store."

"I want to be with you. We only have a couple more days."

"I'll go with you and paint the inside of the shop. But we'll have to put on clothes."

We could have forgotten about the clothes. Nobody stopped in all day. I liked how the painting turned out, the motley clutter of the items for sale, the name of the store in backwards letters painted on the window. Jean-Yves was only a figure behind the counter, his back turned toward me. I thought of doing a series of interiors of different kinds of stores when I got back to Provence.

Walking back he said, "The store'll be closed tomorrow. How about going back to the bridge and painting what it looks like now?"

"Can we chance it? Won't it be slippery after all that rain?"

"You're right. I'll have to think of something else. Will you go back to the Cévennes on Friday?"

"Maybe. I haven't decided."

* * * *

We were awakened in the middle of the night by a lot of banging around downstairs. Gilles and Marceline had returned early. "*C'est cuit*," Jean-Yves whispered. "We've been found out. *Nous sommes foutus*."

"You can sneak back to your room after they're in bed or early in the morning. They won't hear you."

"No, you'll see. She'll knock on my door to let me

know they're back."

"She might not."

We waited breathlessly. After about ten minutes she went up to his room and knocked.

"Hurry and put on all your clothes," I said. "You can tell them we were talking."

"With the lights out?"

He slipped into his briefs and went out on the landing. I put on my jeans and followed him. I couldn't let him face them alone.

It was no good making up stories; the nature of our relationship was obvious. Marceline stood at the foot of the stairs looking up at us, trembling with rage. Gilles came up behind her. "What'd I tell you?" he said. "Now do you believe me?"

I couldn't believe he'd dare say that when he'd probably fucked his wife no more often than he'd fucked her brother. I opened my mouth to say something, but Jean-Yves stopped me.

"Don't. It'll only make things worse. You don't have to live with them."

Marceline began to yell, saying terrible things, disgusting things. Jean-Yves didn't flinch. He stared back at her defiantly, waiting for her tirade to end. I didn't know what to do.

"And you," she said, turning to her husband, "if one word of this gets out I swear I'll strangle you."

"And let the whole village know my brother-in-law is a *sale pédé*? Are you kidding?"

Jean-Yves was putting a good face on it, but I could tell the strain was more than he could take. I put an arm around his shoulder.

"You!" Marceline seethed. "You get out of my house."

"It's my house too," Jean-Yves said.

"It's both our house, and nobody's going to be in it unless we both want him there."

"What about Gilles?"

"*Quel culot!*"

"*P'tit con!*" Gilles said.

"It's the middle of the night," I said. "Don't expect me to set off for Millau on foot carrying all my things, because I won't. You'll have to put up with me till morning."

"You're not staying here! I'll have you thrown out!"

"Go ahead and call the police," Jean-Yves said. "Let the world find out. I don't care."

That shut her up.

"I'll drive him to Millau in the morning," Gilles told her.

"I'm going too," Jean-Yves said firmly.

"With him? To Provence? What makes you think he wants you there? Do you think he's going to take care of you forever? Think again, you little fool."

I said nothing. She was right. Much as I loved him, I couldn't stay in France and I couldn't take him with me either.

"I'm going with him to the station. I want to say goodbye without you around to interfere."

"I'm not letting you."

Jean-Yves ignored her. He turned to me and said, "Let's go back to bed."

"Together? If you think for a second that I—"

"Let them," Gilles cut in. "What difference does it make? Your brother is what he is. Let him have his last fling. It's over anyway."

We went back into the room, took off what little we had on, and got into bed. Jean-Yves nestled up against me, his head in my armpit.

"I hate leaving you here with them."

"I'll work things out. She'll get over it. I want to make love again before you go."

"They'll hear us."

"Let them. Take me on my back. Pound me so hard the bed creaks. Hold me by the wrists so they'll hear my

moans. I want to rub it in; I want them both to know how much I enjoy it."

I kissed him. His lips parted to receive my tongue, and I rolled it around his, exploring the inside of his mouth. I placed my hand on his penis. "It's soft."

"Make it hard."

I slowly kissed my way down his body as I'd done so often in the past week and a half, the way I knew he liked. We'd come to know each other's bodies as we knew our own. I put my mouth around his flaccid member and ran my tongue under his foreskin, swirling it around his glans, and enjoyed the sensation of it swelling in my mouth. "I'm going to miss this," he said.

"Do you think I won't?"

I took him vigorously that night, and we made a lot of noise. *Eat your heart out, Gilles*, I thought. *He's mine now. You're stuck with his obnoxious sister.*

It was still dark out when we left for Millau. When we got to the station, a few minutes before the train, it was just starting to grow light. We stood together in the middle of the *gare*, embracing and holding on to our kisses as you see heterosexual couples doing all over France. The few people who'd come to catch the early morning train stared at us, pretending not to see. Gilles kept his distance, and

pretended he didn't know us.

"Let me know how you are," I whispered. "Write to me in Roussillon. I'll leave a forwarding address at the hotel."

The three familiar chimes rang out over the loudspeaker and they announced the arrival of my train. I punched my ticket in the machine and went to wait on the platform as it was pulling in. As I got on the train, I turned to look if he was still there. He stood in the doorway next to the "Passengers only" sign — *Accès aux quais interdit aux voyageurs non munis d'un billet*. His face was wet with tears. I waved to him, and he waved back. It was three months before we saw each other again.

PART IV. A DEPENDENT

CHAPTER SEVEN

My ticket was for Avignon, where I'd left my stuff in storage. I found a hotel and lay down in my room to think things through.

One thing seemed clear: the episode with Jean-Yves was over; it was doomed from the start. I wished it could have ended less traumatically. He'd have come for a visit; we might have taken a trip together. I meant to go back to Italy before I left Europe. Jean-Yves had never been out of France. Seeing another country would have done him a world of good.

We got on well together; I cared more for him than any man I'd ever known. He was bright, playful, and we had the same tastes; he was a talented and appreciative lover. I could easily fall in love, but I couldn't conceive of a permanent relationship with him. He was too much a child, too high maintenance. He asked for nothing and needed everything; he wasn't equipped to live independently. It would be like adopting a teenager. But I wouldn't simply abandon him. I had to keep tabs on him, make sure he was okay. We needed to find some way of communicating.

I'd had enough of the nomadic life, moving from

town to town, staying in hotels. I had ten months left before I went back to teaching. If I had my own apartment he'd be able to get in touch if he needed me.

I needed a break from painting too. Not give it up completely, just do less of it and spend more time in museums. I didn't want to deal with a severe winter as I did in the States. I'd go see how I liked Nice.

The year was growing old. Along the coast from Gibraltar to the Bosphorus, millions of migratory birds invaded the skies, a portent of change. Morning and evening, their nervous squawking deafened the trees where they perched, denser on the branches than early autumn fruit, until the instinct and the onset of winter would drive them across ocean and desert to a more welcoming climate.

I followed the footpath below the *corniche* east of the port, a popular summer stroll, to paint a dark and angry sea. The city sweeps it regularly, but the used condoms and wrappers they missed told me what went on there at night. Not for me, but there was no lack of bars.

I went to the Museum of Contemporary Art—a lot of interesting stuff, but not much of the kind of things I like—and the *Fondation Maegh* in Saint-Paul-de-Vence. Others, like the temporary exhibit at the *Beaux-Arts*, I put off for later. The Chagall Museum, his renowned *Message biblique*, took my breath away—Jacob wrestling with the

angel, the *Song of Solomon* paintings, all in warm, sensual reds. It made me feel I had no business painting, the canvases were so immense and imposing, the concept so original, the colors so vibrant, their presentation so perfect. The museum is small and the works are huge, so many private galleries display more pieces, but I spent hours there lost in admiration and returned to it twice before I left France.

I tried phoning Jean-Yves a few times. It was always Marceline who answered, and she hung up as soon as she heard my voice. I only wanted to let him know that I hadn't yet made up my mind where I'd go, probably somewhere on the *Côte d'Azur*.

It had become clear that an extended stay in Nice wouldn't do. The bustling city had its museums, the old city its charm, and it offered countless possibilities for gay contacts, but it was too big, too crowded, too frantic. I felt cramped there. The once charming coastal villages outside the city to the west were overbuilt, as polluted as Nice, and downright ugly; the resort towns between it and the Italian border too pricey; and I didn't want to move too far inland.

I went to see the Picasso Museum in Antibes. Here was a city I could live in. The newer town had all the disadvantages of the area around it, but it felt more open; you couldn't see it from the old town, and the prices were

lower. Passing by a real estate agency window, I saw an ad for something I could afford — two furnished rooms with kitchen and bath under four hundred fifty square meters, enough to sleep in and store my paintings, in a modern area between the marina and the station. "What do I have to lose?" I asked myself, and walked in.

It would be available in November, three days away. Could I see it? It looked cramped, but had a one-and-a-half size bed and a fair-sized closet to store my paintings and a bathtub large enough to soak in. I skipped the museum and we phoned the owner, who agreed to a ten-month lease. I grabbed it.

The day I moved in I called my hotel in Roussillon and left a forwarding address. It didn't take me long to set up house. The apartment looked no more cramped with all my belongings in it than it had when I rented it. I went out to celebrate with a nice dinner in the old city. The food was good and reasonably priced, the *prix fixe* menu varied, the service friendly — a good place to eat two or three times a week. I'm no cook, and the idea of becoming a regular made me feel like more of a local.

Once settled, I started my series of shop interiors. Most owners wouldn't agree to let me paint inside, but a couple did, among them the chef at my restaurant. He said I'd get in the way when it was crowded, but if I ate there on

a slow night he'd make room for me.

* * * *

I was becoming increasingly worried about Jean-Yves. The hotel had promised to forward my mail the day it arrived. It was almost a month now, and I still hadn't heard from him, but I kept calling, and eventually got through to Gilles, who didn't hang up on me.

"I want to talk to Jean-Yves."

"You can't. He doesn't live here anymore. He got a job and moved out. He doesn't have a phone where he lives either, and I wouldn't give you the number if he did. You can stop calling the store too. He never comes there. In fact, we hardly ever see him."

What he said made me think that Jean-Yves had stayed in Sainte-Ripouze, so I sat down and dashed off a short letter with my new address and sent it *poste restante*. He might receive it, and he might not. I'd done everything I could.

I saw a poster for a regatta in the *baie de Cannes* November the tenth, unusually late in the season for that kind of event. The sailboats would make a nice subject for an acrylic; they predicted moderate winds and choppy seas. So I took the train to Cannes. There was a good chance

they'd have to cancel because of the weather, but it was only ten minutes away.

I'd misread the poster. Eleven-ten is in October. I still made that error occasionally. I talked the bartender at a brasserie across from the station into letting me leave my gear behind the counter for the day, and went to look around the city.

The stiff wind and gloomy skies had all but emptied the streets, but I could imagine them mobbed with summer tourists. Not far from the old port at the end of a long row of identical restaurants, right before it became the main shopping street and continued on who knows how far, I passed *Le Zanzibar*. I could tell it was a gay establishment, though the door was closed and nothing on the front identified it as such. I thought of going back there in the evening to finish off a dull day in the company of other males like myself, but not too late since I'd left my things at the brasserie.

I ate dinner at a nearby restaurant and got to the bar shortly before eight. The place was dead, but from the moment I walked in I knew I'd soon be cruising again. There were a couple of gay bars in Antibes, too, and now I had a place. Everything pointed to Jean-Yves being out of my life forever, so I had nothing to feel guilty about, not a twinge.

I was feeling another kind of twinge inside me too. I'd always topped with Jean-Yves, and I regretted having let us fall into that pattern. My neglected prostate was claiming its due. Well, it would have to wait.

My eye was drawn to a man sitting in the corner, my hustler from last summer. He'd seen me come in and had been watching me, but wasn't about to chat me up. I'd given him the brush off three months earlier. I approached his table. "Small world."

"I come here sometimes. What are *you* doing in Cannes?"

"I'm in Antibes now. I got an apartment."

It sounded like it could be an invitation. He processed the information but apparently didn't think it worth commenting on.

"You've been there how long?"

"Since the first of November. It's not much. Two small rooms and a kitchen."

"Your own bathroom?"

"Of course. Would you like to see it?"

"You're asking if I want to go home with you."

"Yes."

"And do what?"

"What do you think? Fuck you again. You can fuck me too this time if you want."

"Can I stay the night? I don't live in Antibes."

"If you don't piss me off. But I won't pay you."

"What the hell? I won't make any money here tonight."

We left the bar and walked to the station. "You'll pay for my train ticket at least?" he said.

"I'm not taking you home as my escort. I'm putting you up for the night, and you'll get breakfast. That's enough."

"I don't know why I'm doing this."

"To fuck me. I fucked you twice, now you want to even the score. But you won't just fuck *me*. We take turns."

"You don't mince words, do you? Yes, I remember, and I remember liking it too — you did me good. I'd have come with you if you *hadn't* promised I could fuck you. Just don't go back on your word."

"Don't worry. Tonight I'm in the mood."

We stopped for condoms and lube at a sex shop two doors down from the brasserie where I'd left my things and took the train to Antibes.

He saw my paintings stacked up around the apartment. "I forgot you were an artist. Can I look?"

He flipped through the series of shop interiors I'd begun. "You should do a gay bar."

The nude of Jean-Yves caught his attention. I'd

filled in a grayish blue background with a table and vase of red poppies behind him. "Is that the dude standing in the stream? Where do you find such good-looking models?"

"He's my lover."

"Then what do you want me for?"

"He lives far away. It's been over a month."

"You like 'em young, huh?"

"He's twenty-two."

"There's no way that kid is twenty-two. You must've made him look younger. Would you paint me?"

"No. Just go to bed with you."

"Yeah, I guess it's time we got down to it."

I insisted on fucking him first, not too roughly so he'd go easy on me when it was my turn. He was a very good top. He made me come, which doesn't happen often. He held back his ejaculation, pumping with just the right amount of force to bring me over the edge and just enough discomfort to excite me. I wondered how I'd gone so long without it.

He withdrew and said, "It was good, wasn't it? You sure you won't even give me a *très p'tit cadeau*?"

"Use that word once more and I'll throw you out."

"Just joking. Don't go flying off the handle."

I'd done well to pick him up. We spent a sleepless night in sexual frolics and, much to my surprise, going

through my pictures of Jean-Yves. He couldn't believe we were lovers, so to prove it I brought out my sketchpad from Montpellier, the watercolors and photographs. The photo of us two naked together clinched it. He insisted on seeing them all. The detail of Jean-Yves' penis elicited this comment: "*Il a une belle bite, ton mec.*" I felt guilty putting Jean-Yves on display like that, but, after all, the hustler was not someone he knew. He recognized Jean-Yves from behind in the painting I'd done inside the store and noticed the backwards letters in the window. "Now there's a *petit cadeau* nobody would turn down!" he quipped. This time I let the comment pass.

I sent him packing in the pre-dawn darkness to catch the six-fifteen so I'd get some sleep. He didn't get his morning coffee, but he'd finished off most of my cognac. The wind had died down, and the sky was clear.

I slept till noon. It was one of those days that have become all too rare on the Riviera. The wind had swept away all the pollution and left the sky that incredible blue one imagines must have been invented by the artists who painted there. I'd missed the market and had no food on hand, so I decided to have lunch at my restaurant. I brought my acrylics in case business was slow that day, but the

place was so crowded I had to wait for a table.

From there I went to the Picasso Museum, which I'd skipped in order to go apartment hunting. As usual with Picasso, I liked his ink line drawings best, among them two full rooms of erotica, all heterosexual, Picasso being Picasso. I tried picturing what Jean-Yves and I might look like in a similar set of drawings. Of course we wouldn't be recognizable. Picassos never are.

When I got home it hit me that I hadn't checked my mailbox in three days. I'd received two letters from Jean-Yves, one written nearly a month ago (he'd inverted two numbers in the postal code), the other less than a week old.

The first said that he hoped to hear from me soon. Living at home had become unbearable. One of them must have snooped around his room, because they found the nude portrait hidden in his armoire, and Marceline had emptied her spleen and screamed filthy names at him. Now she refused to speak to him or acknowledge his presence, and half of Gilles' comments contained lewd plays on words which infuriated her, so husband and wife were at each other's throats. He'd become little more than a domestic servant who made their bed, did their laundry, the marketing, cooked for them, and cleaned up afterward. They'd taken over my room, and he suffered every night listening to them coupling in "our bed".

In the second he expressed his disappointment at not having heard from me. He went to check every day at *poste restante*. I must still be on the road or I'd have sent an address, but he'd overheard Gilles talking with his sister and got the impression I'd tried to call. He hoped that was so, but now he had no contact with them whatever. He'd taken everything he owned and moved into a room above the store. Went in and out by an outside staircase in back so he wouldn't have to walk through the shop. He'd have put a bolt on the connecting door between it and his part of the building if his sister didn't need to use the toilet. She'd opposed the idea at first, vehemently. Said they needed to rent the room as a source of income and she couldn't trust him not to bring men there "to indulge his vile tastes". (In that village? Who? In my opinion she just didn't want to do her own housework.) Gilles had supported the idea, though, arguing that they'd never been able to find a renter and neither of them wanted him around. Now Jean-Yves was looking for a job so he could eat. His money would run out soon.

A third letter came a couple of days later. He'd got my letter. He'd begun to think he'd never hear from me again. He was excited to learn I had my own apartment. A whole apartment or just a room? How did I like Antibes? Was I painting? He'd found a job as a dishwasher at the

café, exactly what I told him he should do all along. He'd started working, and felt a little better about life. His biggest problem was loneliness. He'd been living like a hermit. Worse — a leper, a pariah. He was dying to talk to me. I should call the store at night; Marceline wouldn't be there then. He didn't finish the dishes and mopping up till after eleven. How late did I stay up? He'd wait there for my call. He'd have called me, but I hadn't sent a phone number. Did I have a phone?

I didn't, and didn't want to go to café and call him from a public place where people would hear our conversation, or my half of it. I had a better idea. I went out the next morning and bought us each a mobile phone, and paid his six-month contract for three hundred minutes a month. I sent it to him with a copy of the contract and a brief note: "*Un petit cadeau d'avant-Noël. J'attends un peu que tu le reçoives avant d'appeler. Ben.*"

I sent it on a Thursday. A package might take longer than a letter; the post office was closed Sunday. He'd probably get it right before he had to go to work. I made up my mind to call late Monday night.

* * * *

He answered before the end of the first ring. He'd

probably taken it to bed with him.

"Ben?"

"To how many people have you given your number? Do you like my *petit cadeau*?"

"It's the best present anyone's ever given me, but Christmas isn't for another month."

"Celebrate early."

"Guess where I am now?"

"In bed."

"How could you tell?"

"By how quickly you picked up the phone."

"Guess what I'm wearing."

"I didn't call you to have phone sex. How are you?"

"Happy... now."

"How's the job going?"

"It's a job. The only thing I really hate about it is that it's in Sainte-Ripouze. I want to get out of here. But first I have to make some money. When will I see you again?"

"I don't know. I sure as hell won't go there, and I don't suppose you'll get a vacation till you've worked there for a year."

"Guess again. In another kind of business I might not, but I get five weeks —paid— during the *fermeture annuelle*. That's January fifteenth, in two months."

"Then I'll send another Christmas present, one for *étrennes*, the New Year. That's when the French traditionally exchange presents, isn't it?"

"It used to be. Long ago, not any more."

"I'll send one anyway, a train ticket so you can come visit me."

"For how long?"

"As long as you want. Stay a month if you like. It won't cost you anything."

"I don't want you supporting me."

"Not even for a month while you're on vacation? Why?"

"I don't know if I should tell you."

"You've told me worse, I'm sure."

"Things Marceline said, when I told her I was moving out and getting a job. She said I'd still be in the village, it wasn't far enough away, that I should do what I do best, make use of my experience and go to Paris and be a boy whore, or go live with you and be your mistress and let you take care of me for the rest of my life."

"Your sister is a bitch. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm crying, that's all. You've seen me cry before. I can't begin to tell you how horrible my life has been. I didn't put half of it in my letters. The way they look at me, the disgust. It's worse than when I was a kid, because

now it's something I chose to do, something that I am. But all I wanted..."

He was sobbing now.

"You felt just as guilty as a kid."

"But I wasn't."

"First of all, you aren't now. What did you do that was so terrible? Have I done anything you haven't? Am I a worthless piece of shit? Is that how you see me?"

"No."

"Did you get the impression that the couples we saw in Montpellier were ripped apart inside because they were vicious perverts who indulged in unnatural acts? Your sister is a bitch and Gilles is a hypocrite and anyone who thinks like them is an uptight, self-righteous asshole, and you're better than any of them and more of a man too. How's that for starters?"

"You said 'first of all' and now you say 'starters'. Is there anything else?"

"Only that I wasn't talking about what you did, but about how you felt. Does that make any sense?"

"I know exactly what you mean. All the things you said are things I know, things my brain knows, but it's not how I feel."

"Frankly the only reason I give a damn about what they say is that it hurts you. Will you come visit in

January?"

"Of course."

"And you won't worry about me paying for you?"

You can cook for me."

"I'll try not to. Worry, I mean."

"Good. Now let's talk about something else."

"Can we have phone sex?"

"I hope that was a joke. No. Try to hold off for two months. Then we'll have real sex. If you want, I'll draw dirty pictures."

"That's what Marceline says."

"Huh?"

"That you draw dirty pictures."

"She should see Picasso's. Now let's talk about something else."

"Like what?"

"How about I tell you about what I've been painting?"

He phoned again the following night.

"Jean-Yves. You called back already. Is anything wrong?"

"No, I just wanted to talk. Why? Are you busy?"

"What would I be busy with at this time of night?"

The second I said it I remembered that a week before I'd

been busy with my hustler. "I mean that if we talk like this every night we'll use up all our minutes."

"I didn't think of that."

"Did you read the contract? Did you see how much it costs if you go over?"

"No."

"Well, do." It was just as I thought. Living with him would be like adopting a son, a teenager.

"Are they that expensive?"

"More. Besides, I get up early. Remember? Natural light?"

"Sorry. I didn't think of that either. I'll let you go back to sleep."

"First let's decide when we should call. What are your days off?"

"The café's closed Wednesday and it opens late on Sunday. Otherwise I don't have any."

"What happened to the thirty-five hour workweek?"

"I get overtime. He knows I have no money."

"Are you working eighty hours a week, or what?"

"What else do I have to do?"

"Eat? Sleep? Do laundry? Live?"

"I do the first three."

"Very funny. Take another day off. Go to Millau. See a movie."

"If you say so."

"I say so. Don't kill yourself. Work fifty hours a week maximum. I want my Jean-Yves in shape when he comes to visit. Choose a day off—"

"I'm off tomorrow."

"Choose another day off and call me then. In the afternoon."

"What if you're not home?"

"It's a cell phone."

We spoke twice a week. I called him on Sunday morning, and he called Wednesday. He took Tuesday evenings off too, but I thought two days in a row would be overdoing it and he should save some minutes for emergencies. We didn't have much to talk about; washing dishes doesn't make for scintillating conversation. I could tell he was keeping back other things, and thought it was better he did. I'd work on his psyche and self-esteem later, in person.

Concern for him nagged at the back of my mind. How would we see each other after he'd used up his five weeks' vacation time? Did I really want to? I admitted I did, but wasn't he too attached to me already? Wouldn't it be better for us both to keep a little more distance between us? On the other hand, he was lost as long as he remained

in Sainte-Ripouze. How could I get him out of that nowhere place where he counted for nothing and set him up somewhere where I'd know he'd be safe after I left France? Should we try to find him work in Antibes? Would he earn enough to take over my apartment? Did he even have what it takes to live independently? Was it still possible for him to take the *brevet* after all these years and get that most basic of diplomas? Would he ever grow up—really grow up—or was there something in his nature that would keep him what his sister called a simpleton forever and ever?

I never failed to ask him about his work. Was he learning anything in the kitchen?

"That guy can't cook."

"I don't need you to tell me that. I've had lunch there a few times and remember the indifferent meal he whipped up for Marceline's wedding. Are you keeping your eyes open, seeing how one runs a business like that? Organization, finances, planning?"

"He doesn't show me anything."

"But you can observe, you can figure it out for yourself."

"There's nothing to observe. It's only a real restaurant in summer. The rest of the year the place is a café and somewhere you go to buy lottery tickets. The waiters don't even have to take orders. They see who comes

in and give them what they know they always ask for — a *pastis*, a beer, a coffee. What about your restaurant? Have you painted it yet?"

"Not yet. They're always too busy."

"Not like ours."

"Do you get out at least? Have you been to Millau?"

"Not yet. I'm too tired. I work a lot."

"What did you do all day yesterday — stay in your room? Don't you take walks anymore?"

"Too cold."

I said it sounded like a dreary, pointless life.

"It's the same life I always had, except for the few weeks you were here."

His despondency frightened me, but his dependence frightened me more. On top of that, I felt responsible for him. All his misery, everything he had to deal with was due to our having become lovers. And yet it was he who had seduced me!

* * * *

It at length dawned on me that people who worked in offices nearby had made my restaurant their regular lunchtime meeting place, different people on different days. I am not particularly observant for an artist. If I was to

paint there, I would have to do it on a weekday evening. I lucked out on my second try, a Tuesday evening. I thought how I would surprise Jean-Yves: "Guess what I did last night."

It had been a slow night, and my friend the chef had come out to watch me work. Actually, it was his wife, who worked the cash register, who dragged him out to have a look. We talked as I worked, and since Jean-Yves was on my mind I put out some feelers.

"I have a friend who does wonders in the kitchen. I keep telling him he should do it for a living."

"Bad idea. It's not an easy life."

"You seem to enjoy it."

"I enjoy my customers. I enjoy my vacations more. And I'm going to love retirement."

"How did you get into it?"

"The usual way. This place has been in the family for years. I'm the fourth generation. My kids knew better. Waiting tables and helping out in the kitchen —especially working in the kitchen— during summer vacation taught them all they wanted to know."

"But not all there was to know."

"Not by a long shot. What they mostly learned is that running a restaurant is a labor of love, which for them meant more labor than love."

"Are you sorry you won't be passing it on to your children?"

"I love my restaurant, but I love my children more."

"Have you ever thought of taking on an apprentice?"

"You mean your friend, the one you said is such a good cook? It isn't done. Teaching your kids, that's different. They've grown up with it. Some of the big name chefs take on apprentices. You know, those who've earned themselves three or four stars, but they get them from the cooking schools. Some very large restaurants train people, and hotel chains, too. They all get them from the cooking schools. Nobody would bother with someone with no background whether he has a talent for it or not. Everyone thinks he can cook. If he wants to be a chef, tell your friend to go to school for it."

"What do you need to get in?"

"Not much. A secondary education. You don't even have to pass the *bac* necessarily." He saw my face. "You mean he didn't finish school? Forget it. These places teach more than how to make an omelet. They teach you how to run a business — economics, math, advertising, consumer relations. There are private schools that just teach cooking, the kind rich people go to who want to take it up as a hobby. Not many go into the profession from there. And if

he went to one of them, the government wouldn't pay a centime for his education."

I couldn't bring myself to tell him Jean-Yves didn't even have his *brevet*.

* * * *

January came. I made the apartment ready to receive Jean-Yves. I bought a bottle of champagne and put it aside for his arrival. I shoved my toiletries to one side of the shelf above the bathroom sink. I rearranged my belongings to free two drawers and two shelves for him in the armoire, storing whatever I wouldn't need till summer in my suitcase on the top shelf of the *penderie*, moving the linens to the drawers there, and consolidating the rest. I bought some tableware to supplement what had come with the apartment. I just about turned the *penderie* into a warehouse for all but my most recent paintings and had to hide the vacuum under the bed and buy a coat rack for the entranceway, but I discovered there was room for two people in the living room after all.

I put up paintings (unframed) on the walls with Jean-Yves taking the place of honor, "Boy Wading" centered above the sofa and the nude at the head of the bed. I hung the *Petit Cadeau* interior too, which had a back view

of him, then took it down thinking he wouldn't want to be reminded of it. I gave the place a thorough cleaning and did my best to keep it that way. The morning of his arrival I put fresh linens on the bed, the champagne on ice, and bought a fancy cake at a *pâtisserie* the chef at my restaurant had recommended and flowers for the table. Then I walked to the station to wait for his train. I got there almost an hour early.

We greeted each other with a warm hug and a kiss. Not grinding our groins together and using our tongues to examine our tonsils, but a real kiss nonetheless, on the mouth. The other people in the station paid us no more attention than if we had shaken hands or one of us had been a woman. The Côte d'Azur is not *la France profonde*.

I would have described my apartment as basic; he was captivated with it. "I'd love to have a place like this!"

"You do, for a month. I suppose you'll want to go to bed right away."

"With you? I'm too tired." He'd gone to Millau the evening before and stayed up all night in a bar near the station to catch a six o'clock train. Otherwise he'd have had to take a coach to Béziers, wait two hours in Marseille, and would have got to Antibes at eleven at night.

"I meant for a nap."

"I'd rather have a shower."

"There is no shower, only a bath."

He looked disappointed, but when he saw the size of the tub he was thrilled. I pulled up a stool and sat next to him while he soaked. "Do you know what I'd like to do?" I asked.

"Paint me in the bathtub?"

"Eventually. There's plenty of time for that. I want to wash your hair for you."

It was a sensuous experience for us both. When he'd had his soak and felt clean and refreshed I asked if he wanted me to show him the city.

"Later, when we go out for dinner — or are we eating here?"

"We'll go out but come back for dessert. I bought a cake...and champagne."

"Then I'll rest a bit first."

He threw himself face down on the bed. The portrait hanging on the wall above his head gave me a view of both sides of him at once.

"Wake me up for dinner if I fall asleep," he said and was out like a light.

He only slept a couple of hours. In the meantime I opened his suitcase and put his things away. I gave no thought to making arrangements for his future. For the

moment I was just happy to have him there.

I took him to my restaurant, which met with his approval: "Honest home cooking, well prepared with quality ingredients."

We ate less than a third of the cake but polished off the bottle of champagne.

"You see?" he said. "It doesn't make me drunk, only a little buzzed. Just the right amount of buzz."

We left the glasses on the table and went to make love. We undressed each other slowly, touching, tasting, remembering.

"It's a small bed for a double," he said. "I like that. We'll have to sleep curled up together."

"Do you feel funny being right under your portrait?"

"Is it competition?"

"With warm human flesh? Not a chance."

It was a night of tender passion, though once I was inside him I took him vigorously, lying face down beneath me, my hands grasping his wrists and my mouth on his neck while he pushed up into me and rolled his hips and his legs flutter kicked in automatic reflex.

Then I asked if he wanted to mount me. The question surprised him.

"It doesn't seem right. You're the active partner, I'm the passive."

"That's nonsense. We're partners, period. This isn't like when you were in school. We're not getting off, we're making love."

"I can't picture you taking the woman's role."

"Try me. I want to feel you in me too."

"Won't you be submitting to me?"

"No, I'll be giving myself. Do you feel inferior because I fuck you?"

"In a way I do."

"You feel humiliated?"

"No, I feel safe, as if you covered me like a shield."

"And how does it feel?"

"Don't you know? It feels wonderful, exalting. It spreads through every inch of your body. The pleasure is so intense you think you're going to pass out any minute, but you don't, and it keeps getting more intense until you explode—I explode—and then you do. You fill me from my scalp to the tip of my toes, and my soul too, the way your... The way your dick fills me. Down there."

"You ought to write erotic novels. I do know. Don't you think I like to feel that too?"

"It still seems wrong."

"You'll change your mind."

Getting Jean-Yves to change his mind was not easy,

and I sometimes doubted I could do it in the short month left to us, though at other times I had absolute faith in my eventual (and timely) success. He went along with everything I proposed — everything but that. I had but to open my mouth and he acquiesced, so much so that on occasion I would suggest something I had no desire to do, thinking it would interest him, and we went and did it only to discover afterward that neither of us wanted to, but we always enjoyed ourselves because we did it together. It could be anything from bowling to visiting the hand-blown glass atelier at Biot to trying new and unusual positions in bed. I had more influence over him than was good for either of us.

Yet this one thing, having me bottom for him, he resisted, though from my point of view no unnatural act could be more natural. I have always taken the view of anal sex as dominance and submission to be a myth, a prejudice of our patriarchal society. Since in Jean-Yves' case it coincided with the stereotype of our division of labor —he did the marketing, cooked and tidied up, while I worked—and reinforced the exaggerated influence I had over him and had its roots in the molestation he had suffered as a child, I deemed it vital to disabuse him, so to speak. And above all I wanted it, wanted it desperately.

Curiously, our sexual relationship benefited from

my frustration. When I took him I would fantasize being in his place and make love to him with the passion with which I imagined him possessing me, driving us both to heights of ecstasy I had never before experienced. I loved him most when we were having sex, and our love grew stronger each time I entered him, each time we locked together joined at the loins, each time the orgasm washed over us. It taught me, who had coupled so many times and with so many different men, the awesome power sex has to strengthen the bond between two people.

As I said, I worked. I count the first three weeks of his visit among the most productive periods of my life. Mostly I painted and did charcoals of Jean-Yves, with no clothing on or very little, in only his briefs, for example, or just a tee-shirt. Jean-Yves in the bath, Jean-Yves half dressed in front of the full-length mirror, Jean-Yves' lower back, rump and long legs while the rest of him looked for something in the armoire, Jean-Yves standing naked in the kitchen holding a late night snack. I spent more time making pictures of him than I did fondling him, going down on him and fucking him put together. I was required to mount an exhibition of what I'd done on my sabbatical in the university gallery when I got back in fall. If I used only the best of them, I still could easily fill two rooms with nudes of Jean-Yves, but I wouldn't. I made no secret of my

sexual orientation, and my colleagues expected the male nudes to outnumber the female, but that they should all be of the same man would make it clear he was my lover, and it would give the impression I was putting him on display. Worse yet, he looked younger than any of my students.

Outside the apartment I worked exclusively in acrylics. I somehow wangled the *chef de gare's* permission to go onto the *quais* without a ticket and paint the platform at the train station with the pastel salmon walls of its main building and the footbridge crossing the tracks. I painted the port, the château, the beach in winter with a handful of people standing far apart from one another in coats and sweaters, the open market, the flower stalls, and I continued working on my shop interiors.

The first, *Au Petit Cadeau*, was by far the best of the lot, perhaps because it had Jean-Yves in it. I'd completed five others — the restaurant, an upscale boutique, an art gallery, a hardware store, a florist's. Jean-Yves said I should do a grocery or *pâtisserie*.

"I've been wanting to. No one will let me, because of the food. They say it would be unsanitary."

When I returned from painting the next afternoon he surprised me with the announcement that he'd convinced the owner of the grocery he frequented to let me paint the inside, but it would have to be late, after he closed up shop,

the shades pulled down so nobody would see. He would hang around as long as it took me to do it. I'd already asked the owner in question, and his refusal had been the most emphatic of all.

I just about gave up trying to find an angle that provided a halfway decent composition in so small and confined a space. Jean-Yves had accompanied me there; I had to send him home to make room for the easel. But it came out better than Marceline's souvenir shop. I talked the grocer into uncovering the fruits and vegetables so I wouldn't be painting only boxes and canned goods, and the single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling gave off an eerie light. Then, after I'd been painting about a quarter of an hour, the grocer decided he wanted to be part of it. I got him to pose on a step ladder as if he was taking inventory, and he didn't object to the uncomfortable pose, though he came close to losing his balance several times. He was disappointed that I refused to sell it to him, but agreed to pose for another some other night when I promised I'd give him the new one for a hundred francs.

Jean-Yves was ecstatic about it.

"Yes," I agreed, "it's a fine piece of work. I owe you for getting him to let me do it. I'll make you even more ecstatic tonight in bed."

I attended more to my own ecstasy than to his.

Crouched between his open legs, I licked and nibbled at him, pulling back whenever his organ started to pulsate, bending forward again to resume my ministrations when it subsided until he'd become engorged beyond endurance. Then I lowered myself onto him, slowly, cautiously, eyes bulging, breathing deeply, trembling from the stretch and the sensation of fullness. At its maximum state of arousal his endowment was massive. I rotated my hips and rocked gently back and forth. As if his body could read what I felt, when I'd adjusted to the pressure he began thrusting into me automatically. I raised myself higher and sank back heavily to meet his thrusts, and almost at once covered his chest with my ejaculation. My ring tightening around his shaft brought him to the point of no return. He reached out his arms toward me, and as I fell into his embrace I felt his seed pump into me.

"Did you like that? I know *I* did."

He nodded.

"It didn't feel wrong?"

He shook his head.

"You see? I told you."

"Only because you did it. If it'd been me, it wouldn't have seemed right."

For the time being it would have to do. I was unable to coax him into mounting me for as long as we stayed in

P'tit Cadeau

Anel Viz

Antibes.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I hadn't forgotten my idea of showing Jean-Yves Italy. I had spent a year there as an undergraduate and still had some rudimentary Italian. It would come back to me.

When I broached the subject he agreed enthusiastically, imagining a replay of our time in Montpellier — museums, painting, hotels, being together twenty-four/seven, and this time I'd show *him* the sights.

"I'll be staying there a few weeks," I explained. "I don't know the south and want to go all the way to Sicily, but we'll have time to do Florence together before you have to go back to your job."

"Will I like Florence?"

"You'd better."

He hadn't told Marceline about the visit. I kept urging him to call her; he kept resisting.

"Just because she's being a shit is no reason for you to act the same way. She'll have noticed you're gone, and she must be wondering what happened to you even if she won't let on. After all, she's still your sister."

"I can wait for her to make the first move."

"How? Does she know where you are? Did you tell her you have a cell phone?"

"She can guess where I am —with you— and I'm

glad she doesn't know where that is."

"Calling her won't give it away. It's a cell phone. She'll only know the number, not where you're calling from. What if she's trying to get in touch with you?"

"Why would she?"

"What if something's happened to your father? I've seen him; he could die any minute. You'd want to go to the funeral, wouldn't you?"

"Do you think she'd bother telling me?"

"She'd have to. You said yourself that you'll both inherit the house and store. If she wants to sell, she'll have to find you. At least let her know you're going to Italy."

He eventually gave in the day before we left, but would only call the store. "I'll talk to her, not to him."

She was as abusive as he thought she'd be, but she didn't hang up on him and wrote down his number. As I predicted, they'd noticed his absence and Gilles had come by to look for him. "In case you were sick," she said.

"You see? She does care."

"What makes you think *she* sent him?"

I sat next to him the whole time he spoke and witnessed his mounting anger. Every so often he'd cover the mouthpiece and whisper what she'd just said. My stomach knotted at the thought of what he must be suffering, but I was proud of his defiance. Could he have

sustained it without me there?

She was particularly foul-mouthed when it came to me. I was a child molester (of twenty-two year olds?) and had turned him into my concubine. He was debasing himself. (The French word she used was far stronger: *s'avilir*.) Gilles had told her about how he used to put out for everyone at school, but he was supposed to be a grown man now. And to do it willingly and to say he enjoyed it! She pressed him for details, and he hung up on her.

"She says she hopes we enjoy our honeymoon as much as we enjoyed hers."

"Don't worry. We will."

"I don't know how I can go back there."

"You have to; you have a job. It will pass. My family was none too happy when I came out to them, but they've adjusted. When you have to live with something, you learn to live with it."

"How old were you when you told them?"

"About your age, when I came back from Italy."

"So you spent a long time there?"

"A year, studying art history."

"You just told your parents? Mine knew already, and you see my father never accepted it."

"And two brothers, one older, one younger."

"Is either of them gay?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Why would they hide it from me when I'm out?"

"Did you ever fool around together when you were little?"

"Not that I remember. I shared a room with Georgie, my kid brother, until Greg went away to college."

"So you had your own room when you told him. Would he have been afraid you'd try something with him if you didn't?"

"Don't be idiotic; we'd slept in the same room for years. Besides, he told me he'd always suspected I was gay."

"And your other brother?"

"He said he knew all along."

"And they didn't care?"

"No."

"You were lucky."

* * * *

To me Italy meant Florence, the Uffizi and the Pitti, the frescoes in the churches, so that's where we went. We planned to stay a week, then Jean-Yves would return to his job and I'd head south. I wanted to see Sicily. He'd take the

key to the apartment to pick up his belongings, and he'd leave it with our friend the grocer.

But first we spent a day in Genoa. I wanted to paint the huge panorama of its modern port from Righi. The tourist office in the station booked us a hotel for one night. The owner, a surly man I took an immediate dislike to, warned us we'd be sharing a *letto matrimoniale* and offered to provide a bundling board. At first I didn't understand what he meant. He explained, and I brushed it aside, making a joke. "I trust my friend implicitly."

The man leered at us and said, "The question is whether he trusts you too much."

I didn't have to pretend to be offended. He ignored my reaction, gave us the key, and forgot about the barrier.

Jean-Yves rode the funicular with me to see the view then I sent him to explore the former *palazzi* of Genoa's ancient families. He'd seen me paint hundreds of times. I asked later what he thought of them, and he asked why they allowed the plaster to peel off the walls when they took such good care of the paintings and the furniture.

After over three weeks with a bathtub, he was happy we had a shower.

"Why's it next to the bed instead of in the corner? And why doesn't it face the center of the room?"

"Lord knows."

He got undressed and stepped into the stall. A minute or so later he opened the curtain and said, "It doesn't work."

He'd been using the wrong cord. "You've just pulled the emergency alarm," I told him.

"About ten times," he added.

The surly owner came bursting into the room to see what was wrong. Jean-Yves hurriedly drew the curtain in front of him. Luckily, I was fully dressed. "He thought that rope was the water," I said.

"I'll see for myself. I'm responsible for what happens in my hotel."

He flung the curtain aside to reveal a full frontal exposure of Jean-Yves, who turned beet red and quickly covered his privates with both hands. The owner began firing questions at him in rapid Italian, while he stared back at him, confused, intimidated and mortified.

"He doesn't understand a word you're saying," I explained.

That he'd made a mistake was perfectly obvious, but instead of leaving us alone, the man grabbed him by the arm, turned him 'round, and, ignoring or pretending to ignore my friend's cock, gave him a long lecture on how to use the shower, pointing to the signs next to the cords and reading them at the top of his lungs. Then he stormed out

and slammed the door behind him, leaving Jean-Yves in tears and me laughing uncontrollably.

"What's so funny?"

"I wish I'd painted that scene."

"I don't think I like Italians."

Our experience in Genoa had made me uncertain how the Italians would view two men sleeping together. The hotel in Florence gave us a twin room. When he saw the two beds, Jean-Yves was disappointed we wouldn't have a *letto matrimoniale*.

"I'm not asking for one," I told him. We can use one for making love and the other for sleeping. That way they'll both be unmade in the morning."

The maid must have thought one of us was a very restless sleeper.

Two days of trudging through the Uffizi Galleries, where the canvases cover the walls from floor to ceiling, one hanging on top of the other, reminded Jean-Yves of what he'd learned in the Musée Fabre: that he had little taste for Renaissance painting.

"Isn't there anything in this town I'd like?" he asked.

"What about the Medici tombs?"

"Too dark."

So I took him to the Accademia.

He'd seen plenty of Davids. Florence has more copies of that gay icon, most of them pocket size, than there are Eiffel Towers in Paris. They've also placed a couple of full-size copies in open spaces, which they try unsuccessfully to keep clean of bird droppings, and others nearly as large as the original in places like hotel lobbies, plus photographs in shop windows, in guidebooks and on postcards, every detail from every angle. None has as powerful an effect as Michelangelo's marble. It seems to breathe; the others are statues. In the natural light of the Accademia one sees an iridescent young man of gigantic stature, every part of him perfect, every muscle, every sinew, every curve a source of wonder. Another nude placed alongside it would beg for clothes. Jean-Yves was awestruck.

Another thing happened in Florence. I finally talked him into fucking me. He went about it very tentatively, so I got no physical pleasure from it, but it was a start, and mentally gratifying. I'd have enjoyed it more if he hadn't kept asking if he was hurting me.

"I'll let you know if it hurts. Just fuck me, will you?"

"It doesn't feel right."

"Trust me. It will when you get used to the idea."

* * * *

Our week in Florence was ending. Jean-Yves had looked troubled since we arrived, and his anxiety seemed to grow every day.

"We've had a wonderful time," I told him, "but you have a job to get back to."

"I want to see Rome," he said. "If I call my boss I bet he'll let me have another day or two. Then he won't have to pay me overtime for the extra hours."

"If he says okay I don't mind stopping two days in Rome on my way to Sicily. It will be easy enough to redo my tickets."

I listened to his half of the conversation as he spoke on his cell phone — his greeting, his hesitant question, his effusive thanks. "He's all right with it," he told me, as if I didn't know already.

On the way to Rome he sat huddled in the corner of the compartment, looking out the window, saying nothing, as if he were afraid of me.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Something's the matter. Out with it."

"No, honest."

He turned back to the window. He was stammering,

so I knew it wasn't true. He'd tell me when he was ready.

He kept it up for another hour.

"You know you'll tell me eventually."

He answered hoarsely, almost inaudibly. "I lied to you."

"About what?"

"I didn't call my boss. I was pretending to speak to him."

"Why? Well, there's no harm done. You can call from Rome. I'm sure you were right. He'll let you come back later."

"I quit."

"You what?"

"I quit my job. Long ago."

"Why? No, you don't have to tell me. So you could stay with me. Christ Almighty, Jean-Yves! You're impossible! You're worse than a child!"

"You're angry."

"You're damn right I'm angry! What made you do such a thing? No, don't tell me. I know exactly what you're up to, and I could strangle you for being so sneaky about it."

"I'm sorry."

"Some good it does me! Some good it does you, for God's sake!"

There were tears in his eyes. I was torn between my anger at him, my anger at myself, my exasperation over the whole situation, and feeling sorry for him.

"If you'd only told me when you got to Antibes we could have been looking for a job for you. I'd have let you stay with me. Now what the fuck are we going to do?"

I turned away from him and sulked. The people sharing our compartment had witnessed the whole scene and were embarrassed. Jean-Yves looked so upset and forlorn that one of them, a middle-aged woman, said something to comfort him.

"Comprends pas."

"Francese." That was all she got out of what he said.

Rome was the last stop. I had half a mind to leave him there and go straight on to Sicily.

"I don't have to come with you if you don't want me around," he said. "I have the money to get back. It's just that... Can I stay in your apartment while I figure out what to do? I have no place to go. I promise I'll be gone before—"

"Come with me and I'll buy you a ticket to Sicily. Just don't say anything to me, okay? I'm still furious, and I need to think this through."

Sitting side by side in a full compartment on the

train south, we were careful not to let our bodies touch. I'd never seen him look so miserable. To make it easier to ignore him, I tried speaking French with our fellow travelers, then English, and finally resorted to my broken Italian.

"Ben?"

"What is it?"

"I still had my job when I got to Antibes. I quit later. I waited a whole week to do it."

"Big difference that makes!"

"I didn't know how to tell you. I was afraid."

"Well, you've told me now. Putting it off didn't help, did it?"

"Not that I'd quit, *why* I'd quit."

"I know why you quit."

He started to cry. "Crying won't help either," I said sternly.

He got control of himself and, sniffing after every couple of words but doing his best to stay calm, he said, "Gilles came to my room. I asked him what was up. 'Marceline,' he said. She's pregnant and won't have sex with him any more."

"That's nonsense. She can have—"

"I know, but that's what he said. Maybe she doesn't think so, or maybe she was just mad at him for something."

How would I know? What matters is that he said he wasn't getting any, and since I'm—"

"That bastard!"

The other people in the compartment turned to look at us. Jean-Yves had been speaking in a whisper; I almost screamed what I'd said. They heard the fury in my voice, and must have thought I was yelling at him.

"Shouldn't we go out in the corridor?" I asked. "I don't think they understand what you're saying, but one of them might."

He shook his head and went on. "I said no. He came at me and we had a fight. He's stronger than I am. He pinned me face down on the floor with his knee digging into my back and twisted my arm behind me and pushed up on it. I thought he was going to break it. He said I'd better not move, that if I did I'd break it myself, and he took off my pants..."

"Oh, Jesus!" (This time under my breath.)

"He let go of my arm then. He began slapping my ass really hard. I had to bite my lip not to cry out. Then he said, 'Let's see how pink I made it,' and ripped my briefs in half."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing, but I knew he was telling the truth.

"Then he took hold of my balls and squeezed till I

thought I'd vomit."

"You don't have to tell me everything, Jean-Yves. Just what happened."

"He turned me over and lifted my legs and forced them apart. 'You like it now, faggot,' he said. 'Don't go pretending you don't.'"

"Jean-Yves..."

"No, don't touch me. Let me finish." The tears were running down his cheeks. "I didn't cry. I don't think I felt anything, except that I hated him. I knew what was going to happen to me; it didn't matter anymore. I lay there waiting for it to happen and stared back at him so he'd see how much I hated him... how much I hate him. And he spat in my face."

"And then he...?"

"No. He said he wouldn't do it that way because I'm his wife's brother. Now that I knew he could do it if he wanted to he'd come back some other time, and I sure as hell had better cooperate, because..." He broke down completely and wept his last sentences. "What should I do now, Ben? What am I going to do? I had to quit; I couldn't think what else to do. I can't go back there. God help me, what am I going to do?" He fell back against the seat and groaned.

"Oh my God, Jean-Yves. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't feel too good." And he dashed out of the compartment.

How had he managed to keep it from me, to be happy with me for a whole month as if it had never happened? He must have forced himself to forget, that is, to think he'd forgotten, to phone his boss and quit, then push it out of his mind, as a child does, pretending it will go away. A child? Many, many adults would do the same thing. I sat dumbfounded. I imagined myself killing Gilles. I pictured myself with my hands around his throat, bloodying his face, forcing a gun in his mouth and pulling the trigger.

One of the men in the compartment tapped me on the knee. "*Su' amico...*" How long had he been gone? I went to find him.

The toilet at the end of the car was locked. I knocked on the door.

"Jean-Yves?"

"I threw up."

"Let me help you."

"I made a foul mess. It reeks."

"All toilets in Italian trains reek. Open up."

He was white as a sheet. He'd splashed some water on his face, and his hair was sticking to his forehead. I'd had the foresight to bring our plastic water bottle in my coat pocket.

"Here, rinse your mouth out. Drink some too, just a couple of sips till we're sure your stomach's settled. Now how do you feel?"

"Very weak."

"Are you still nauseous?"

"I don't think so."

"Let's go back to the compartment."

Our traveling companions were very concerned about him. "*Sta meglio?*" one of them asked.

"*Si, un poco, grazie.*"

We continued to speak in whispers. "Are you still mad at me, Ben?"

"No, just disappointed you didn't tell me right away."

"I didn't want to upset you."

"You didn't want to face it yourself. You absolutely must stop keeping things from me."

"I'll try not to."

"You should have told Marceline too."

"She'd have taken his side."

"She would not. I like your sister less than you do, but I can't believe she'd have done that."

"He'd have said it was her fault for not letting him have sex with her. She might have let him fuck her again, or if she didn't want to she'd have given him her blessing to

go ahead and cornhole me to his heart's content."

"That's one scenario, but not the most likely one. If she did you could've reported the attack to the police. You could have anyway. Why didn't you?"

"The police don't intervene in what they consider family business."

"Yes they do."

"Not in small villages like Sainte-Ripouze."

For all I knew he was right about that. I let the matter drop.

He was shivering. I took off my coat and put it around his shoulders. "Lie down and put your head on my lap."

The middle-aged woman sitting across from us took a blanket out of her shopping bag and laid it over him. "*È malato.*"

"*Si.*"

"You should get off the train."

"*Si, lo so.*" I bent over him and said, "We're getting off in Naples."

"What for?"

"To take you to a doctor."

"No."

"Yes. From now on you do as I say. I'm responsible for you."

When we reached Naples he was sleeping peacefully. Sooner than wake him, I decided to stay on the train. Maybe he'd feel better when he woke up.

I sat looking out over the sea as it whizzed by. I was very frightened, and not only for his illness. I was frightened for his life in general. How vulnerable he was and how fragile!

The sun had become a bright orange ball sinking toward the horizon. Its reflection on the water, a wide band that came almost to the shore, was blinding.

"Ben?"

"Yes?"

"I feel terrible."

"Are you nauseous again?"

"Not nauseous, but my stomach hurts—it's very painful— and my head too, and I'm cold."

I felt his forehead. It was damp and burning with fever.

"We're getting off at the next decent sized town. You can't travel like this."

That was Paola. It looked quite large from the train, but it was mostly a resort, and more or less deserted.

Getting both him and our bags off the train was a

major challenge. "I'm ruining your trip," he said.

"Don't be an idiot. The trip doesn't matter; you do."

I hurried to the ticket counter and explained that my friend was sick and needed a doctor right away. The man in charge knew of a doctor not too far away, but it was late and he'd have to phone ahead.

"He says he can see you in twenty minutes. I'll write down the directions. You can leave your luggage in the office. I'll write you out a new ticket for Syracuse, one that'll be valid for a month. Just be sure to come back and get it and your bags before ten."

I couldn't thank him enough.

Jean-Yves felt dizzy now and could barely walk the two blocks to the doctor's office.

The doctor, a swarthy man of about my age and built like a professional wrestler, knew a little English, enough for us to communicate with my broken Italian. He was curt with us and made no attempt to hide his annoyance at being disturbed after hours, going so far as to inform us that we'd interrupted his dinner. He ushered us into a windowless room and said he'd be back as soon as he'd had his dessert and coffee. His bedside manner was appalling.

He took his time in getting back to us. He said nothing, just took Jean-Yves by the hand to be examined.

He resisted. He didn't want to go without me.

"What's wrong with your friend? Doesn't he believe I'm a doctor? All right then, you can come with us so he can see it's a medical office."

We followed him down a long, poorly lit corridor to the consulting room. There he handed Jean-Yves a hospital gown and had him go behind a screen to put it on, then he brusquely sent me to wait in an adjoining room. I hoped Jean-Yves had more faith in him than I did.

The doctor came to get me in less than five minutes. "Your friend won't cooperate. He wants you there with him."

"He's frightened because he doesn't know the language. He'll listen to me."

Jean-Yves sat on the examining table with a thermometer in his mouth, looking terrified. The doctor, already at the end of his patience, yanked the thermometer from his mouth, looked at it, and said, "He has a fever."

"Is it high?"

"Very high."

He felt around under his chin. "Glands a little swollen. Let's see what the matter is."

He pushed him back without warning and summarily lifted his legs onto the table so he lay stretched out full length. Then he untied the gown and threw the flaps

to either side, leaving him stark naked under the bright lights. That he'd given him a gown in the first place made no sense.

He began prodding around his abdomen, none too gently. "Tell him to let me know if it hurts."

I didn't have to. Jean-Yves screamed.

"Is it appendicitis?"

"Not if that's where it hurts. I'd say he has a bad case of food poisoning and the infection has found its way into his bloodstream. He should go to a hospital."

Jean-Yves caught the word *ospedale* and panicked. "No, no hospital! Don't let him take me there, Ben! I want to stay with you!"

"But he says—"

"No...please..." He started to cry.

"I thought you said he'd listen to you."

"He's sick, he doesn't understand what's going on, and he's terrified. Would it be okay if we got a hotel? If there's a crisis we can still get him to the hospital."

The doctor shrugged. "If that's what you want. I'll give him an injection for the infection and write him a prescription. The pharmacy across from the station is open all night."

He went to make out the prescription and get the injection ready. He returned with two enormous syringes.

Jean-Yves' eyes looked ready to pop out of his head.

"Roll over."

Jean-Yves didn't budge. The doctor flipped him onto his stomach and jabbed a syringe deep into one buttock. Jean-Yves yelped. The doctor pushed down on the plunger to inject the medicine into him faster than he should have. Then he repeated the process in his other buttock.

"I'm giving him three prescriptions. This is an antibiotic. One pill three times a day till they're used up. This is to settle his stomach. One right away, one tomorrow morning, then as needed. Don't let him eat or drink anything."

"Won't he get dehydrated?"

"You can give him a little broth tomorrow, not until then. After that tea, toast and more broth until he's better. Now this," he went on, "is for a suppository. Three days — when he gets up in the morning and before bed. Does he know how to insert one?"

I asked Jean-Yves. He shook his head.

"Am I going to have to do that too?"

He rolled him onto his side and gave me a small mirror. "Stand at his feet and hold this so he'll see what I do," he said as he pulled on a latex glove. "He'd better watch carefully, or you'll have to do it for him."

Jean-Yves was squeezing his cheeks together.

"Loosen up!" the doctor yelled at him, and slapped him on the bottom right where he'd given the injection. Jean-Yves gasped, and with no further ado the doctor shoved, literally shoved, the capsule into his rectum.

"Tell him to get dressed. You come and pay me."

* * * *

"I really, really hate Italians," Jean-Yves said when we were back in the street. He no longer felt dizzy, but was limping from the shots.

"The people in the train were very kind to us. The station master too. Come, we have to get a hotel. I saw one on our way to the doctor's, right on the beach a few hundred meters south of the station. I doubt we'll have trouble finding a room."

The prices listed at the entrance were astronomical. I sat Jean-Yves down in the lobby and explained our predicament to the receptionist. He was about as gracious as the doctor.

"We only take American Express."

"I have Visa and MasterCard."

"We only take American Express."

"Are there any other hotels nearby?"

"None that are open. Everything here closes in winter. They wouldn't accept your credit cards anyway. Only American Express."

I didn't have enough cash on me even for one night. Jean-Yves might have, but I wasn't about to use his money. The receptionist sent me to a bank with an ATM, but my cards didn't work in the machine.

I talked the hotel clerk into selling me a blanket and went over to Jean-Yves. He was asleep. I shook him and said, "We have to get out of here. We'll catch the next train through."

"How far?"

"Straight through to Syracuse. There's a room waiting for us there."

The next train to Messina was in forty minutes. I left Jean-Yves on a bench on the platform and went to fill the prescriptions. Then I took a short walk on the beach to clear my head.

The beach in Paola is an uninterrupted stretch of sand over thirty yards wide that probably extends for miles south of the city. I suppose that in summer it must be broken up by low fences marking off the property of individual hotels, but they had taken them down for the winter. The waves were lapping quietly on the shore. The ocean was dark, but the sand shone in the moonlight.

I'm really stuck with him now, I thought. Marceline was right; he's totally helpless. On the other hand, his helplessness was all the more reason why he couldn't go back to his sister's. I wondered if he had it in him to grow up and if I had it in me to help him do it. Well, the first step was for him to get better. Then we'd see. But however much I tried not to think about the day I'd have to leave him, I couldn't get it out of my mind. That it had to end was the only given in our relationship.

I saw that I had walked too far. I had to run back all the way to the station, and we came close to missing our train, a local. Although it was the middle of the night, it was mobbed, and we had to walk through several cars till we found a seat across from a sour-faced old man who'd taken it over for his suitcases.

"Perdona, è malato," I said, pointing to Jean-Yves. Anybody could see he was ill.

The old man pointed to the full rack over his head and didn't budge. The other passengers argued with him and got him to free a space for my friend. The man in the next seat got up and said to me, "You sit here. I'll find a place in another car."

"Grazie."

"È niente. Not all Italians are selfish animals."

For Jean-Yves' benefit I translated what the man

had said, and he smiled weakly at him and nodded. Then he looked at me forlornly and said, "My butt hurts, but I'm too weak to stand."

"I'll kiss it for you when we get to our hotel."

"Will it make it better?"

"Yes, but it will still hurt."

We pulled into Messina about an hour before dawn. Except for a few minutes in the hotel lobby at Paola, Jean-Yves hadn't slept all night, sitting on a cramped seat in a crowded train, with no room to stretch his legs and a twenty cc. lump of oil-based penicillin derivative in each buttock. He was reeling from fatigue.

"Do you want to stop here, or should we go on?"

"Let's get it over with."

The ferry left at eight. We boarded immediately to find places. The decks were cold and empty, the interior full of smoke, overheated and noisy. I found two deck chairs that would be out of the wind during the crossing and wrapped the blanket around him. He seemed so frail.

"Will you be too cold here?"

"The fresh air feels good."

I gave him an antibiotic and a sip of water to help swallow. "How's your stomach?"

"Very hungry."

"Not nauseous?"

"Just hungry."

"Then I'll hold off on what he gave us to settle it.

The suppository will have to wait too."

"Will you put it in for me?"

"Didn't you watch?"

"After that slap on the ass? I trust you more than I trust myself anyway. Do you love me, Ben?"

It would have been easy to say, "Of course I love you," but it wouldn't have fooled him. He needed more comfort than one can get from a lie.

"I care more for you than anyone in the world, but I have to be practical. That's how I am. We can't be together forever. I can't let myself fall in love with you."

"And I can't stop myself."

"I think I'd love you as much as you do me, if I dared, if I thought there was any hope of us having a future together."

"I know. It's enough."

"Get some sleep. Are you cold?"

"Only a little. The blanket helps."

A few people came to stand on deck as the day grew lighter. He slept fitfully in the morning sun. The crowd lining up as we made ready to dock woke him. He took up the conversation where we'd left off.

"If it was possible, what would you want most?"

"I'm not the kind of guy to wish for the impossible. What I do wish is for you to be set up somewhere safe and able to make it on your own when I go."

"I'll make your wish come true, I promise. And I'll let you go without making a scene. No more scenes from now on."

"Like the one at the doctor's."

"I behaved like a baby, didn't I? I'll grow up. Did you know today's my birthday? I'm twenty-three."

"We'll celebrate when you get better."

* * * *

I had expected to encounter another mob on the train to Syracuse, but it was relatively empty. We had seats facing each other, and no one came to sit next to us. Jean-Yves looked out the window, trying to interest himself in the passing scenery, but was too sick to enjoy it. I pointed out Mount Etna and the wisp of smoke rising from its summit. "Maybe we can climb it when you're feeling better," I said, and he answered with a sad smile.

From the station we took a cab to our hotel. They'd expected us first thing in the morning. It was after lunchtime, but they'd held our room. I explained to the

woman at the desk that my friend had fallen sick on the way down and I needed to get him to bed immediately

"Tell her we want a double bed," Jean-Yves said.

"You promised: no scenes."

"Just tell her. Why should you care what she thinks?

She won't throw us out."

I told her my friend was ill and needed my body heat when he had shivering fits.

"I can give you extra blankets. You'll be of no use to him if you catch it."

"It isn't contagious. The doctor said it was something he ate."

"Then by all means, sleep with your boyfriend."

I got him undressed and into bed.

"Now for that suppository. You'll watch and do the rest of them yourself, right?"

He nodded. "First you have to kiss where it hurts. You said you would."

As I leaned over to kiss his ass someone knocked on the door. He rolled onto his back and I pulled the covers up to his neck. "*Chi è?*"

It was a very clean-looking man of about fifty holding a black satchel.

"The *signora* says your friend is sick. I'm a doctor. My wife and I are staying at the hotel. May I come in?" He

had an American accent.

I just about dragged him into the room. "I'm so glad you're here," I said, and speaking a mile a minute I filled him in on everything that had happened.

"Let's have a look at him. Does he know English?"

"Only French."

"Then you'll translate for him."

"This man is a doctor," I told Jean-Yves. Before he could object I added, "An American doctor — the best in the world." That bit of nonsense was for Jean-Yves. I knew that Italy was full of excellent doctors, just maybe not in Paola.

Jean-Yves sat up and submitted to a thorough examination as a model patient — pulse, temperature, eyes, ears, throat, stethoscope. "He's very dehydrated," the doctor said.

"The doctor in Paola said we should give him nothing, not even water."

"I disagree," he answered tactfully. "We have to get a lot of liquids into him, but no more than half a cup at a time every ten minutes or so to begin with. Broth and apple juice for his electrolytes. Hot tea, bottled water."

"Food?"

"Toast, applesauce, a soft boiled egg. Yoghurt if he tolerates that. Tomorrow spaghetti. A simple tomato sauce.

Nothing spicy, nothing rich like *bolognese*. Have him lie down, and I'll feel his abdomen."

He palpated him gently, leaving the blanket across his lap. "There's nothing to worry about. He'll be good as new in two days. If it weren't for his weakness and the lack of sleep he'd feel fairly comfortable right now. Did the doctor prescribe anything?"

I handed him the prescription.

"Continue with the antibiotic. The antacid only if he feels nauseous, which I don't think he will. You can flush the suppositories down the toilet."

"He gave him a shot too."

"Any idea what it was?"

"He scribbled something illegible on the receipt."

He looked at it and whistled. "Comfortable except for the pain in his backside. He's been sitting all the time since he got it?"

"Pretty much."

"He should have walked around and done squats to get it circulating. He can try bringing his knees up to his chin while he's in bed, but it's probably too late. He'll be sore for a week."

Jean-Yves hadn't understood a word of my conversation with the doctor. "You see," I told him, "there's no reason to be afraid of doctors."

"I'm not afraid of doctors, only Italian doctors. This one I liked; he was nice. How long until I'm better?"

"You're already cured. You just need sleep and a light diet for the next day or two. No suppositories either. But your ass is going to hurt for a week."

"I really, really like Americans."

"I'm going out to pick up a few things for you to eat. I'll be right back."

"You haven't eaten either. Take your time; go to a restaurant. I can wait."

Before I could leave, the *signora* came up with a large jar of homemade *brodo*, tea bags, two mugs, a hotplate and a small pot.

"What did I tell you? Italians can be nice too."

I heated him some broth and set a mug next to the bed.

"I'll be fine now. Take your sketch book and go enjoy the city."

"I'm coming back to stay with you."

"No, I'm twenty-three now and I'm going to act it. You were going to Italy to paint, then I made you take me with you and you haven't done anything."

"I'll work in the room."

"How?"

"You'll see."

I'd done many good sketches of him, quite a few of them good enough to exhibit if I filled them in a bit to make them look more finished, more interesting. After lunch I picked up some sepias and red and white chalk for highlights and depth, then bought a few things for him to eat.

He was sleeping when I got back, lying on his back, covered with a light blanket pulled up to his shoulders. Draped loosely over him, it suggested the outlines of his body, even the small mound of his penis. He looked much, much better, but still very pale.

To try out my new materials, I drew him asleep as I had in Montpellier. I did a sketch of his head and shoulders in black ink using the chalk to bring across his pallor and also two full-length views, one from the side, the other standing over him, in pencil, chalk and a light pinkish sepia that approximated the color of the blanket. Then I tried touching up a couple of the dressed sketches from Montpellier and liked how they came out.

He slept for nearly three hours. I had moved on to one of the nudes when he awoke.

"Drawing me again? I'm not Italy, you know."

"I did a sketch or two, but I'm working now on altering some of my earlier drawings. Have a look."

I tossed him the other sketchpad. "This changes

them completely," he said. "Quite an improvement, though I liked them the way they were too. You must be doing one of the nudes now. You gave me our modesty pad."

"I'll show you when it's finished."

"You still owe me a kiss."

"Moon me and I'll give it to you."

"Two kisses — one for each shot."

"Two for each shot if you want."

He crawled out from under the blanket and got on his knees to receive my kisses, legs slightly apart, his head buried in the pillow.

"There. Does it feel better?"

"No, but it felt good."

"Are you going to stay like that? Aren't you cold?"

"It's about the most comfortable position for me to be in. My butt hurts when I lie on it."

"Then hold the pose. I'm going to draw you like that. We'll call it 'The Suppository'."

"Very funny."

That's how I came to make my first blatantly sexual drawings of Jean-Yves, sitting on the bed behind him — two of them, his testicles hanging low between his thighs, his ass deliciously rounded in blushing sepia, the cleft a single curve of black ink. When I finished the first I reached out and gently inserted a finger, then another, and

massaged his prostate while he wriggled in pleasure. This gave me the inspiration for the second, the same view with his anus dilated, a light sepia rose around a center of dark ink. I thought of the Picassos. I'd have to take him to see them when we got back to Antibes.

"Let's make love."

"No. Not till you're well again."

"Then let's cuddle."

I undressed. We got under the blanket, and he lay blissfully passive in my arms as I ran my hands caressingly over his body. "I'm happiest when you're touching me," he said.

The American doctor stopped in again the next evening. "I told you he'd be better in no time. Has he had a full meal yet?"

"We went to the *trattoria* across the street at noon. Pasta *bolognese* and a salad, but he only ate a little of it."

"Wine?"

"No."

"Good. Take him for a nice, long walk tomorrow if he can handle it. How's his rump?"

"Black and blue. Do you want to see?"

"That isn't necessary."

"I did a drawing of it. I've been experimenting with

charcoal and colored chalk."

"I'd like to see your work. I can skip seeing him in the flesh. That bad, huh? It'll probably be a short walk."

When he left Jean-Yves said, "I think I was more embarrassed by him looking at the picture than if I'd dropped my drawers."

I gave him a peck on the lips. "Get used to it. By now you're more or less a professional model."

"Could I earn a living at it?"

"I'm afraid not, but it would make a nice supplement to a real income."

He dragged his feet, and we walked very slowly. In spite of that we managed to cover pretty much all of the old city. His hips were stiff by the time we'd finished, but the exercise must have helped because the next morning the pain had subsided quite a bit. The bustle in the streets tired him, though. He enjoyed living in a big city when he was well, but he wasn't used to them since he'd lived most of his life in a small village.

"We'll go somewhere smaller and quieter for the rest of the trip," I told him, "but not so small that our sleeping together will freak them out. We can skip Palermo."

"Would we freak them out in Palermo?"

"No, it's the biggest city on the island, and from

what I hear, anything but quiet."

"You have some place in mind?"

"Yes, Agrigento."

* * * *

Our ten days in Agrigento were like another honeymoon. We stayed in a *pensione* near the top of the hill in the old city. The woman who ran it, Signora Nunciario, a widow with three sons, fifteen-year-old identical twins and a boy of eleven, wasn't too happy when we told her we wanted a *letto matrimoniale*, but it was off season and she needed the money.

"Personally I don't care what you do in private," she said coldly, "so long as my children don't know about it. The twins share a bed, so they won't think twice about two men sleeping together. Just don't be too affectionate in public."

"We'll be very discreet."

We were, but the twins, Sandro and Silvio, figured us out fairly quickly. How they looked at us gave it away. I got the impression that they did some experimenting with each other. They were the right age for it. Their mother didn't suspect a thing.

When she saw we weren't effeminate and had no

designs on her *bambini*, she took a liking to us, especially Jean-Yves, who'd developed an interest in Sicilian cuisine and helped her in the kitchen rolling out fresh pasta. She even said I could draw the boys after seeing the Montpellier sketches of Jean-Yves clothed. (I'd drawn him so often, I was afraid I'd tire of him as a subject. I never have, nor has he tired of posing for me.) The twins were thrilled with the idea until they saw how boring it is to sit for a portrait. I had more luck with them interacting with each other — wrestling on the floor in their jeans and undershirts, playing two-man soccer in gym shorts in front of their house. I also drew the old men who played *bocce* at the bottom of the hill for hours on end. I bought a set and asked them to give us a lesson, but the language barrier left us confused; for them the game was something that could only be explained in dialect. The rules differed slightly from the *pétanque* Jean-Yves was familiar with, and we earned the locals' disapproval by playing French style.

We took pains to keep our bedroom activities silent, communicating in whispers or hand signals, suppressing our vocalizations, making sure the bed didn't creak. In the room next to ours, the twins took fewer precautions. Their whispering and giggles were quite audible. There was nothing to identify them as sexual, but once Jean-Yves asked, "Do you think they're doing what we are?"

"Nothing this extreme, but something similar."

"I wish I'd had a twin brother."

"I'm glad you don't. Sex with two of you would overwhelm me."

No exaggeration. He was taking a more active role in bed and had fucked me two or three more times, confidently, almost with authority, though clearly as the submissive partner. "I only can do it because when I do I feel you *are* me," he said.

I understood what he meant. Sometimes in our couplings I was unable to distinguish my body from his. His smell, his taste, his touch, his warmth, his hardness were as mine. It took no effort to conjure up the sensation of the other's mouth on our skin or of his pleasure throbbing inside us.

That pleasure, my ejaculation pulsing in the center of his being, was what he most craved when we made love. He said that with my body covering his he felt protected — "like a shield," he'd once said— that I came at him not like an invader, but like a guardian to whom he'd entrusted a key ("as for a treasure," I thought), and that he could abandon himself freely and still feel whole. "No," he corrected himself, "more complete."

Every afternoon we went to the temples along the ridge overlooking the valley and stayed till sunset. I took

up watercolor again and painted him, ever my favorite subject, in that setting: crouched like a panther with charcoal eyes on an altar in the ruins, and another with the juice dripping over his chin as he bit into a new-plucked Barbary fig; two avatars of Dionysus. I had him hold a stick as if he were playing a flute — a Pan or an Apollo. He'd turned me into a figure painter. I wished I could paint him as a naked god among those well-touristed ruins and told him so.

"Paint me clothed here, then naked in the room in the same pose, and then combine the two in a third painting. Would that work?"

It was worth a try. We walked down to the Temple of Hera early in the morning. I leant him against a pillar and drew him from the right side, his left knee raised, his foot resting on the pedestal behind him. It made a lovely watercolor, and was an easy pose to replicate in our room, where I worked in chalks and charcoal.

"It's turning out beautiful," I told him. "If combining them doesn't work, I'll do this as a watercolor too."

"It's a comfortable pose, but I spent all morning in it too."

"Want to take a short break?"

He winked at me. "The god would love a quick

blowjob."

I knelt before him, placed his penis on my tongue, closed my mouth around it, felt it swell against my palate. He buried his fingers in my hair. "And after he comes, the god wants you to fuck him."

"On his back, his ankles locked around my waist, and our tongues pressed together to taste his saliva after his semen."

"And he won't have to bottle up his sighs. We're alone in the house."

There was a knock on the door.

"*Chi è?*"

"Sandro. May I come in?"

"No."

"Why?"

"We're busy. I'm drawing Jean-Yves."

"So what? Is he naked?"

"Yes, but don't tell your mother."

"I won't if you let me come in and watch."

I got up and turned the key in the lock. "*Maladrino!*
Va via!"

The spell was broken, the unfinished blowjob and promised fuck put off until night.

That was the only time I remember our figure drawing turning into sex play. On more than one occasion

it happened the other way around. That it happened at all shows how frisky Jean-Yves had become. He said he looked forward to getting back to the apartment where we didn't have to worry about being overheard and could let loose; he wanted me to ravish him. I didn't recognize it at the time as an unconscious attempt on his part to tie me to him, so I wouldn't leave him when my sabbatical ended.

I finished the studies for the oil, and we returned to the Temple of Hera to resume the pose. I left the space where he stood to be filled in with a reduced copy of the sketch I'd done in the room. It did not turn out well. I did a watercolor of him in the pose the next morning. It was better, but inferior to the chalk sketch and in no way a Greek god.

Sandro must have told his mother, because she apologized to us for his near intrusion. She saw no harm in an artist doing a nude, but her son's morbid curiosity infuriated her. He later told us that she slapped him.

I made one more attempt at painting him in the temple as a naked god, this time an acrylic done a little before sunset. He'd had it with raising his knee, so he leaned with both feet on the ground and I gave him a stick to hold to his mouth like a recorder. I had him dress all in black, and seen against the fiery sky one couldn't tell if this lone slim figure in profile was clothed or naked. It was

better than the other paintings, but no match for the chalk version.

That was the last piece I did in Agrigento; it was time we returned to France. Except for the slow leg across the middle of the island from Agrigento, which only had second class and didn't take reservations, I reserved seats and *couchettes* in first class for the long trip back. We needed the extra room for an oversized sketchpad I'd bought in Florence and the large acrylics, which I'd done on off-white cardboard, and our legs would need it too. Even so, twenty-eight hours in a train was more than I could face and I wanted at least one real meal a day —no train food, no picnics— so I booked an overnight train from Messina to Rome, where I allowed us a half-day stretch before going on to Milan via Bologna, where we'd pick up the night train across southern France via Genoa.

We were cramped and uncomfortable on the train out of Agrigento, and stayed on deck for the crossing to stretch our legs and breathe some fresh air. When we boarded the train to Rome Jean-Yves crawled into the *couchette* with me.

"This isn't done."

"Why not?"

"Because it just isn't."

"I'm doing it anyway. Our bags and the paintings

take up most of the other bunk. The other two passengers didn't leave us much space."

They gave us no disapproving looks, so they must have thought we'd done it for the space — we did have an awful lot of stuff. They did make him stop whispering, however. In the dark they couldn't see where he'd put his hands.

* * * *

He'd said he wanted to see Rome, but he might have just wanted to put off telling me he'd run away from Sainte-Ripouze. We had only a few hours. I squeezed our baggage into the two biggest coin lockers I could find and asked him where he wanted to go. "The Vatican?"

"Anywhere but."

"Michelangelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel? You loved his sculptures."

"Yes, let's see that."

"That's the Vatican."

We got there early enough to miss the long lines and the press of bodies inside. We spent over an hour looking at it and left with stiff necks.

"Now where? The Coliseum, the Forum?"

"More ruins? Are they as nice as those in

Agrigento?"

"Those were Greek. These are Roman."

He didn't seem convinced.

"There's no time for the Etruscan Museum. Another church?" He shook his head. "The Spanish Steps? Gardens? Fountains?"

"Fountains."

"The Trevi, then."

He held my arm as we walked from the metro. On the one hand, his unnecessary display made me uncomfortable; on the other, I was glad for his defiance after all the guilt and shame he used to feel, and gladder still knowing that a large part of his pride in being gay was pride in having me for a lover.

The generous outpouring of the Trevi jets brought to mind the little trickle from the spigot at the bottom of the hill in Agrigento and the aridity of central Sicily that I'd taken for granted during our stay, as well as Jean-Yves' extreme sensitivity to his surroundings. "Don't go jumping in," I joked. "You'll get pneumonia." We had our coats on.

"Is it allowed?"

"I doubt it." I saw no signs forbidding it, but remembered Mastroianni's expression when he watches Anita Eckberg walking in it, her dress trailing behind her, in *La Dolce Vita*.

"Look at all the coins people have thrown in. There must be a fortune in there."

"Think again. Those are *lire*."

"Are they making wishes? Are they supposed to come true?"

"Wishes are always supposed to come true. You're supposed to throw the coin over your shoulder."

"With my eyes closed?"

I shrugged. "If you wished I'll stay in France, it won't come true."

"I didn't."

I miscalculated and thought we had enough time to walk back from the Trevi, so we missed our train. I exchanged our ticket for *couchettes* on a night train to Paris via Genoa and Turin. To reach Antibes we would have to transfer in Genoa, where we'd arrive around four in the morning and have a two-hour wait for the morning milk run to Ventimiglia that stopped at over a dozen stations on the way. After Ventimiglia, we'd pick up an express. That was the easy part.

Our traveling companions, an older married couple, did not take our sharing a *couchette* in stride as they had in Messina. The woman, who'd overheard us speaking French and knew the language, said, "*Vous n'avez pas honte?*"

Her disapproval didn't faze Jean-Yves. "*De dormir, madame? Où voulez-vous qu'on mette tout ça?*"

"*À la consigne.*"

For a split second her answer made me think it was our having brought so much stuff into the compartment that she found so shameful, but as far as I knew, the train had no baggage car. Besides, the expression on her face and her tone of voice were unmistakable.

I lay on my side and made him turn his back to me to keep his hands out of mischief, and we did sleep, but the blunt irony of his rejoinder and his lack of embarrassment got me thinking how Jean-Yves defied stereotyping and how often I'd misjudged him.

I'd been convinced he was straight, and he had seduced me. Marceline had made him out to be the village idiot, and I'd taken him for God's innocent, inexperienced and trusting, an easy target for local practical jokers, whereas they'd brutally taken advantage of him for years. I knew now that he was very wary and very savvy, that I'd earned his trust in countless little ways I hadn't noticed. He was a survivor, and perhaps less fragile than he appeared, less fragile than he knew.

To make our connection we had to go from Brignole to the Stazione Principe. The waiting room was filthy, so we walked. The other was dirtier —full of trash,

and it stank— so we waited on the empty platform. I sat on a bench with his head in my lap, surrounded by bundled artwork, suitcases and shopping bags. I stroked his hair with my left hand. He brought my right hand to his lips and kissed it. "Good night," he said and, holding my hand to his chest, he napped until the train pulled into the station and woke him.

On the way to Ventimiglia he either held my hand or rested his in the crook of my elbow as the train made its slow way along the Ligurian coastline. People would get off every couple of stops and others took their place across from us. On the whole they ignored us, but some didn't hide that our closeness offended them. Jean-Yves stared them all down.

He did not hold my arm on our walk home from the station. We had too much to carry.

CHAPTER NINE

We arrived in Antibes dirty, exhausted and famished. We stopped to pick up eggs and bread on the way home but were too tired to eat when we got there. We dumped our stuff on the floor and soaked together in my oversized bathtub after washing each other lovingly, a pleasure we had missed in Italy, where none of our *pensiones* had a private bath except that unfortunate shower in Genoa. Due to our fatigue, soaping each other down only got us half aroused. I was dead to the world before my head touched the pillow.

I slept till nightfall. He had his head on my chest and one hand resting on my belly, his little finger in my pubic hair. I thought he was sleeping.

"Qu'est-ce qu'on fait maintenant?" he asked.

"Comment ça, on? Toi. You get a job."

"In Antibes?"

"If at all possible."

"Can I stay with you until I can afford a place of my own?"

"Stay as long as you want. Stay until I leave. Longer. My lease runs out at the end of August. It'll be paid for."

"I still have a lot of things in Sainte-Ripouze."

"A lot, a lot?"

"Enough. Clothes, your paintings, things I want to keep from when I was a kid."

"Will everything fit in here?"

"Easily."

"Even if my paintings keep piling up?" He nodded.

"Is any of it at Marceline's?"

"No, everything's in my room above the shop."

"I'll rent a car the day after tomorrow. We'll go in the middle of the night. Nobody'll see us. How long will it take?"

"Maybe half an hour to pack."

We bought a not too large suitcase—he said it was big enough—and set out after lunch. We drove through Nîmes and took a hotel in a largish village called Le Vigan, had a light supper and went to our room for a nap. We left at a quarter to eleven and made better time than we thought. About twenty kilometers from Sainte-Ripouze, we passed a bar that was still open and waited there till one in the morning. They were happy to see us leave.

There wasn't a light on in the whole village. We parked the car in the lot across from the café and walked the block or so to *Au Petit Cadeau*, turning down an alley next to the store to reach the outdoor flight of wooden stairs to his room. He checked that the shutters on the street side

were closed and flicked on the light.

"They've been here."

The place didn't look ransacked. "How can you tell? Is anything missing?"

"I don't think so." He pointed to a large gob of dried spittle on my nude portrait of him hanging on the wall.

"It'll wash off with a damp cloth. It won't hurt it. Let's hurry up and get out of here."

The full suitcase, two shopping bags of odds and ends, and a heavy folder containing my artwork stood lined up by the door. He pointed to a spot near the wall. "That's where he did it. Would have done it. I want you to take me there."

"Shouldn't we just go?"

"No. Fuck me, there on the floor, the way *he* wanted to."

"Stop playing games."

"Just do it!" He was giving me orders in a tone that expected me to obey.

"Without lube? I don't want to hurt you."

"I spit in his face; I can spit on your cock. Take off my pants." I started unbuttoning his shirt. "No, just the pants. And don't caress me, no kissing; just fuck me. Don't pull down my underpants. Rip them off. Now shove me to the floor."

"Jean-Yves, please..."

"Do it! Lift my legs way up and hold me by the ankles."

I couldn't enter him dry. I licked and tongued his hole. He squirmed with pleasure.

"That's wet enough. Shove your cock down my throat. All the way down. That'll make it slippery."

He gagged, and tears came to his eyes, but it came out slippery with mucus.

"Now shove it in me, hard, all at once, down to your balls."

"I can't hurt you. Don't make me."

"Shove it in! Now! *Aïe!*"

He caught his breath, then started panting to control the pain. His eyes had filled with tears. I made a move to pull out.

"Leave it there. Now fuck me hard, pound me! I'll fuck you when we get to the hotel, really fuck you. Now I want you to pound me!"

I thrust into at him with more of a frenzy than Gilles had probably ever done. Each time I hit bottom he caught his breath and bit his lip to stifle a cry. Then the pleasure kicked in, his gasps turned to moans, and he reached up and pulled me to him. I let go of his ankles and bent down and buried my tongue in his mouth. He wrapped his legs around

my flanks and his arms around my shoulders.

"Oh God, this feels so good! Keep at it, just as hard! Don't stop."

We were pressed together. I could feel his penis swelling against my belly. I sat back on my heels, wet it, and masturbated him furiously as my balls smacked against his backside. He shuddered, a cry strangled in his throat, and a spurt of jism landed on his face, then another string from his shoulder to near his nipple. I unclenched my fist and watched the last of his cum ooze from his twitching penis.

He would not let me withdraw, not till I came inside him. It took less than two minutes.

I licked the semen from his face, chest and belly. He pulled my mouth to his to share the taste. He wouldn't release me from the kiss until we'd run out of air.

"I knew I'd like it if you did it. Now I can leave Saint-Ripouze and never come back."

"Don't ever make me do that again. Not ever. Do you understand?"

We dressed quickly. He left his torn underpants on the floor — "Gilles will know what they mean." — and carried his things down the back stairs.

"Wait here a second while I go in the store. I'll leave the key on the counter." He came out carrying two

placemats. "You need these. I left twenty francs along with the key."

I said while we loaded the car, "That was quite the load you shot. Are you sure you'll be able to do me at the hotel?"

"Don't worry, I will."

We got there at five in the morning, and he did.

* * * *

We meant to sleep until check-out. His phone woke us up at eight-thirty. Marceline had found the key. I was too groggy to follow their conversation.

He didn't say much beyond the basic facts: that he'd quit his job, that he was moving in with me, that she had his number if she needed to tell him anything. She did most of the talking, and took her time saying it. He listened impassively, then he said, "It's over," and pressed the disconnect button. I couldn't tell if he was speaking to her or to me.

"She says you'll leave me and go back to America after you've trained me to be a whore."

"I wish you'd told her what Gilles did... tried to do."

"Why? So she'd have nothing? It's enough that it's

over between us. Gilles can rot in hell."

"She's half right, you know. I will leave you, but by then we'll have found you a real job. You'll never be a whore."

"Again."

"Don't say that. You never were. You were a victim. You're stronger than she thinks, and smarter. You know that, don't you?"

"I know that I love you and you won't let anything bad happen to me."

"When you put it that way it sounds as if I'm adopting a teenager."

"It does, doesn't it? But you aren't. I'm clingy, I know I am, but that's just because right now I see you as a haven. I can make it on my own. Do you believe that?"

"With all my heart."

So he moved into the apartment with me. I felt elated and at the same time trapped, trapped as much by my love for him as by his for me, but mostly by the responsibility I'd taken on. It would be so easy to let him stay a child. I had to make sure he had someone else to turn to in case it happened. Without telling him why, I pushed him to call his aunt in Dijon and let her know he'd moved to Antibes.

"Tatie Hélène? But I've only seen her once since I

was a kid."

"She seemed to like you a lot. She said you should keep in touch."

"She was just being polite."

"I don't think so."

"Where should I say I'm living?"

"With me till you find work. Why not? She liked me too."

"I don't know. What if Marceline...?"

"You know damn well Marceline won't call her and wouldn't tell her about us if she did. Something tells me she won't call Marceline either. If she needs someone, she'll call you."

"Why would she need someone?"

"That other aunt of yours, she didn't look too strong to me. She'll be alone in a year or two, maybe sooner."

"She has my cousin, Léon."

"Her son? I thought she never married."

"Widowed, very young, ages ago, before Léon was born. Tatie Mathilde's the old maid."

"Do you know your cousin? Why wasn't he at the wedding?"

"I don't know. I thought he'd be there. I barely remember him."

"He's still in Dijon?"

"I don't know where he lives."

Tatie Hélène was delighted to hear from him, and thrilled to learn he was in Antibes. She and Tatie Mathilde spent three weeks every June on holiday in Menton at a villa that belonged to some relative of her long-dead husband's whom she barely knew. We should reserve them a hotel in Antibes and they'd spend a day or two with us when they came.

"You have a relative who owns a villa in Menton?"

"It was news to me. They have the villa to themselves. She said he offered it to them when my uncle died, for Léon's sake. Léon doesn't come with them anymore, but they've kept up the tradition. We're invited to stay there, by the way. She hopes you'll paint."

* * * *

He did make an effort to grow up; he wanted to prove himself. Once again, I'd misjudged his dependence. He wasn't a child, and he needed me less than he or I believed. He started looking for work the day after he moved in, but finding a job wasn't easy because we agreed he should find something in Antibes. I knew—and distrusted—my motivation: to keep him with me.

My idea of making Jean-Yves a chef wouldn't go

away. When after a week he still hadn't found work I stopped by my restaurant and invited the owner and his wife to dinner for Monday, the day he closed. "You've made me so many good meals, I feel I should reciprocate. And I'm sure the last thing you want to do on your day off is cook."

"I don't; my wife does."

"Don't you think I deserve a day off?" she cut in.

"We accept. But let us bring the wine; we have a better cellar than you. Just tell us what you plan to serve."

That would be Jean-Yves' choice, but I thought it was safe to say, "Fish."

What I had up my sleeve I kept secret. They didn't know that a friend would do the cooking, and I didn't tell Jean-Yves whom I'd invited, only that they were friends I wanted to impress.

"From Antibes? Do I know them?"

"Vaguely."

"Do they know about us?"

"We won't tell them you live with me."

"It sounds fishy. I can tell you're up to something."

"What if I am?"

I loaded him with francs when he left for the market. He whistled. "So much? I suppose you want me to get a really expensive wine."

"No, my friends are bringing the wine."

"What kind?"

"I said we were having fish."

"It still depends on the sauce. I'll cross my fingers and hope they bring white."

They brought both, two bottles of each. We polished off both bottles of white, and broke into the red for the cheese course — Gorgonzola with thin slices of pear.

Jean-Yves did me proud. There was no mistaking his pasta was hand made (even the top Italian *traiteurs* in town rolled and cut their dough by machine), and he sauced it with tiny scallops in their own broth and a delicate sprinkling of fresh parsley, a recipe he'd picked up from Signora Nunciario. He followed it with four perfect gilt-head breams, unbelievably small and meltingly tender, poached, on a bed of baby lettuce and garnished with tiny stuffed summer squash, a French touch. I was afraid he'd overdone it when he brought out a nut torte for dessert, but it was amazingly light and rounded off the meal perfectly. My guests were impressed, and they cleaned their plates.

While Jean-Yves was assembling our dessert, the chef asked, "Let me guess... This is the friend you want to place as an apprentice somewhere. I'm afraid I have nothing to teach him."

"You could teach him how to run a restaurant."

"We don't cook the same. I make straightforward, traditional dishes; this is gourmet fare. And my kitchen is so small."

"Larger than mine, I'm sure."

"We could add a *prix fixe gastronomique*," his wife said. "It would catch on. We'd begin by just offering it in the evening, with no more than two or three choices, maybe just one. If he put it together in the afternoon there'd be room. The option of a more expensive menu could bring in a lot of money."

"It's a risk."

"There's a lot he could help with," she went on. "He could wait tables during the noon crush. He could take over for you one day a week once he was familiar with our menu. It's obvious you could trust him with the marketing."

I didn't need to argue his case. She had taken over.

"I'd have to pay him, real wages. He's not family, and he's no novice. Can we afford it?"

"He needs a job," I said. "He used to work as a dishwasher, and his money's just about run out. He'd appreciate anything, and he would be learning — how to manage the books, how to plan for large crowds, how to work on lots of different dishes at once."

"He belongs at the *Cordon Bleu*."

"I told you. He has no money, no education."

Working for you —working in any restaurant— would be a first step in getting him there."

"I'll sound him out, and then I'll think it over."

How Jean-Yves managed to contain his excitement when we broached the possibility of their taking him on, I don't know. With his wife and me looking on, the chef turned the conversation into a rigorous interview, asking personal questions that would never be allowed in the States. My friend, so shy, so reticent, so inexperienced, handled them with finesse. I'd underrated him.

"Where are you living? You'll eat at the restaurant, of course, but you still have rent, taxes, personal expenses. I can't pay you what you deserve."

"I'm staying with Ben until I can put some money aside."

"Stay with him as long as you can. If he's this anxious for you to learn the restaurant business he won't mind, will you, *monsieur*?"

"Jean-Yves is my best friend."

"But I won't have an employee of mine scrounging off you. He has to contribute his share." He turned back to Jean-Yves. "Do you have enough money for a uniform for when you wait tables — black slacks, white shirt? Spotless. Two, you'll need a fresh one every day, and a change of clothes for the kitchen, where stains don't matter."

Jean-Yves nodded.

"Stains don't matter; cleanliness does. That means you have to launder your cooking clothes every day, but that won't be an expense. We have a washing machine in a shed behind the restaurant. You do your own ironing."

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

"From now on, you address me as 'chef'."

"*Oui, chef.*"

"We'll start you with salads and sauces. *D'accord?*"

"They're what I like best."

"On a trial basis, mind you. We'll talk about salary some other time, not here. We're your guests. And thank you for that fabulous meal you made us."

It was agreed he'd start the following Tuesday for two weeks and they'd see how it worked out. By the end of the first week he'd made himself more than indispensable. They both adored him and looked on him as another son.

At first he worked Tuesday through Saturday, marketing, helping in the kitchen, waiting tables. Then they experimented with the wife's idea of a *menu gastronomique*, offering it on Friday and Saturday evening. It caught on, and they put it on the menu Sunday noon as well. They gave Jean-Yves Tuesday off, and put him in charge on Sunday, giving the chef and his wife two days

off. Since the restaurant closed after lunch on Sunday, we had a two-and-a-half day weekend together.

We needed it. He was gone from early morning till late at night the rest of the week, and came back dead on his feet. "Are you sure this is what you want to do?" I asked him. "I know I roped you into it. It was my idea, not yours."

"I like it. It exhausts me, but it's a wonderful feeling to be good at what you do. I feel useful. Like a man."

I became his masseur. He felt it was an imposition and refused to believe I honestly enjoyed it. First I'd have something to eat while he luxuriated in a hot bath. I'd gone back to sandwiches for lunch, but he'd bring back leftovers from the restaurant to heat up, so I always had a good, if late, supper. I looked forward to when he'd stretch out naked on the bed and I'd knead his sore muscles. It compensated for our truncated love life. We didn't have sex that much less often than before, but our sessions were more gentle, didn't last as long, and didn't always culminate in orgasm. Not during the week, that is.

I also took over the housework again. Neither of us knew what a person in his position usually earned, but he took home a lot more than he had as a dishwasher and insisted on paying half the rent. I lied about how much the apartment cost. I wanted him to have something put aside

for when I left and he'd need a place of his own. His income was adequate, but nowhere near mine.

Our relationship had been stood on its head. I stayed home and painted less. An outside observer would have taken him for the breadwinner. How he had to comport himself when he waited tables rubbed off on him, and he became more serious, less the *gamin*. We still acted as if I were the caretaker, but he didn't need taking care of, if he ever had. I could let myself love him. I would have, too, if I'd had faith in my courage to leave him when it came time to go back to the States.

I once asked if his employers knew we were lovers.

"I'd tell them if they asked, but they won't. They're not like that."

With him gone all day I was able to work on the painting he'd once asked me about, a nude self-portrait. I worked on it in secret, no more than an hour a day, so I'd have other things to show him when he got home. It would be a present for him, of course. What would I do with something like that?

No portrait before or since has given me so much trouble. The problem was my genitals. Uninhibited as I am about being naked in front of others, I found my own gaze embarrassing. I worried about the size of my penis, about making it too large, of all things. I was afraid I'd come off

as vain. I also worried about dripping paint on it and letting the cat out of the bag. I looked so uncomfortable that when I finished I had to put on clothes and touch up the face I'd painted.

We fell into a routine. Sunday afternoon was for outings, no painting allowed. Monday and Tuesday he stayed home and I went out. And all three days were for sex.

Early in spring I took him to the Picasso Museum. When he saw the erotic drawings a gleam formed in his eye and he became the playful Jean-Yves he'd been in Agrigento.

"You should do something like that of us."

I demurred.

"Come off it. You must have thought the same thing yourself."

I denied it, but half-heartedly, and when we got back to the apartment he insisted we both strip naked and made me take out my ink pens and what he called the naughty sketchpad.

The drawings were, to put it mildly, abysmal. I couldn't see myself from a decent angle, not even in the mirror, and finding a way to hold the pad was impossible. I got ink all over us. Still he wouldn't give up. I'd just have to draw him as a sexual soloist, he said, unless we could find

someone to pose with him.

"You can't be serious."

He didn't answer. I couldn't tell if he'd been joking or was ashamed he'd suggested it.

I filled a few pages with miniatures —grotesques I ought to call them— of him playing with himself and sticking fingers in various orifices, but there are only so many provocative positions a human being can contort into. I disappointed him by not getting hard.

The next morning, ready to try again, he dragged me, kicking and screaming (figuratively), to a sex shop to look for toys. He'd have spent a fortune on them if I hadn't bought them myself. When he realized I meant to pay for the lot of them, he put some back, and took as long deciding what to give up as he had choosing what to buy. He kept going to the counter to ask the owner's opinion until I whispered that he was pushing all the most expensive items. Then he asked me which looked the most artistic.

"Take what you think will be the most fun. It's your asshole."

The dildos, beads and other paraphernalia were good for one afternoon of giggles and, surprisingly, a batch of effectively lewd line drawings that would have tickled the artist in Picasso but probably not the man. Yes, I did get

hard, and yes, we did have sex play, but without the toys, which went into a drawer and stayed there until he took them out one evening and we fiddled with them for about an hour, feeling silly.

"Now what do we do with them?" I asked.

"Leave them with me when you go. I'll have to replace you with something."

"Why not someone?"

"Because a person you have to love. Toys are different."

I asked him seven years later if he'd ever used them. He swore he hadn't.

* * * *

Jean-Yves' transformation was not as swift as I've made it sound. That he seemed to have become more businesslike was principally a by-product of his job, which took up twice the time of the average Frenchman's workweek and left him too exhausted to show his enthusiasms and little time for melancholy, though I sometimes caught him looking wistfully at me and knew he was thinking of when I'd have to leave. He was childishly devoted to his chef and allowed himself to be taken advantage of, inviting it by his body language, giving in to

everything asked of him, one of the first weaknesses of his I'd noticed and one he repeated in his relationship with me. Though more of an equal partner in sex, he was always eager to submit. And on his days off he could be silly or childish in other ways.

We were sitting outside a café late one overcast Sunday evening, under the awning behind a heavy, clear sheet of plastic that kept out the chill and warmed by two space heaters placed along the wall. My hustler passed by on the sidewalk, hunched forward, the collar of his leather jacket turned up to protect his neck from the wind, not two yards from our table. I quickly looked away, but he had seen us. He stationed himself in a doorway across the street, lit a cigarette, and stood watching us intently. I ignored him.

After a while Jean-Yves said, "That man's staring at us."

"What man?"

"There, across the street, behind the blue Fiat. The tough-looking one."

I had to look at him, and as soon as I did he nodded to me.

"Do you know him?"

Why lie? If he came over, Jean-Yves would learn about our whole sordid relationship from him and that he'd

seen the naked sketches, so I said in as calm and disinterested a voice as possible, "Yeah. I slept with him."

"Often?"

"Twice."

"Before you met me?"

"Once before, once after." I hedged. "It was one of the times after I returned from Sainte-Ripouze. I don't remember if we'd had sex yet. I don't know what he's doing here. He's not from Antibes."

I was afraid he'd be hurt or jealous, but the news only intrigued him. "Is he any good?"

"It's his job."

Far from shocking him, the information sparked his interest. "Like what Marceline said you were training me to do! Does he earn a lot?"

"Not from me. The second time I didn't pay him a centime."

"How much would he charge to come home with us so you could do some gay Picassos?"

"You're not serious!"

"Why not? Would he hurt me?"

"No."

"Would you be jealous?"

"No."

"I bet he'd do it for free."

"I know he would."

"Then let's. You could do a ton of drawings of me being sexual with a man. We'd have a three-way too." He hung his head, looking embarrassed. "I'd like to see you fucking someone else. I've never watched people having sex before."

"Are you turning into a voyeur?"

"No, just curious. Please." He was sounding more excited. "You can give me orders and make me do filthy things. It'll be different."

"No."

"Not just for the Picassos. I want to because I love you. It turns me on to do anything you ask."

"I didn't ask. Do something else."

"It'll be fun."

"For him it will. I said no."

The hustler could see we were talking about him and had begun to cross the street. I gave him a warning look and shook my head firmly. He stopped halfway.

"He obeys you too," Jean-Yves said. He sounded proud, as if awed by my authority. "Why not go for it?"

"I told you the night we moved you out of Sainte-Ripouze. Never make me do that to you again."

He looked disappointed, but he accepted my answer. "Will you fuck me hard if we go home without

him?"

"Yes, but I won't rape you."

The hustler seemed to understand that we'd decided not to ask him to come home with us, cocked his head to the side with a "thanks anyway" kind of smile, and moved on.

* * * *

The real tourist season wouldn't start till June, but by May it was warm enough to go swimming. At least the air was; the water was another matter — for me, not for Jean-Yves, who'd grown up splashing around the little river that ran by Sainte-Ripouze.

The beach at Antibes was small, unattractive, and had no surf to speak of, so on his day off I took him to the public beach in Cannes, on the west side of the city, away from the ritzy hotels. He'd never swum in the ocean before, not even when he was in the army, and I wasn't sure he knew how to keep himself afloat in water over his head. I needn't have worried. He was naturally athletic, though none too good at sports. He didn't know any proper strokes, but he swam effectively and fearlessly. He spent hours body surfing. He figured out how to do it himself. Hardly anyone was in the water, and he had no models to imitate.

There were quite a few wind surfers out, though, and he made up his mind to learn how sometime in summer.

He also noticed that the men wore speedos. He didn't own a pair, so we had to shop for one. The boys in Sainte-Ripouze wore American-style trunks or, more often, a pair of shorts. I didn't own one either, but was quite happy wearing trunks if I had to wear anything.

"Are there any places where we can swim naked?" he asked.

I found out easily enough. There's a cove below the Pointe de l'Aiguille across the bay from Cannes frequented by naturists. Getting there without a car means taking the train to La Théoule, hiking up the hill that skirts the Estérel and then climbing back down to sea level by a path almost as treacherous as the one to the old bridge where I'd painted *Boy Wading*, but at least it's better marked.

We found that the cove itself was for the respectable naturists; the rocks that ran for half a kilometer or so at the bottom of the cliffs to the right was gay territory, and to judge by the condom wrappers along the path just inside the bushes, used for cruising. Along the water's edge, however, the men apparently behaved themselves.

I sat on a rock and sketched while Jean-Yves skinny dipped. I warned him to watch out for jellyfish. There were

a few boats anchored a short distance from the shore, much smaller than yachts, but very nice. He swam out to one of them for a closer look. The owner of the boat, a fat and very pink man as far as I could judge from my rock, invited him on board. I kept my eye on them for the ten minutes or so he stayed there.

When he swam back he told me that the man had wanted to have sex with him, would I believe?

"I don't have to believe; I could see that from here just by his body language. What are those black dots on your feet?"

He touched them and winced. He'd stepped on an urchin, something I'd forgotten to warn him about. I managed to get out some of the spines out by grasping them between my fingernails, but most of them stayed in. He had to climb the path and walk back to the train station putting his weight on the outside of his foot.

Back in Antibes I got out a few more with tweezers, but not all. He was a much more cooperative patient this time. It took two weeks for the rest to work their way out. For the first day or two there was a slight puffiness around the spines, but fortunately they didn't become infected. The experience did not put him off nude swimming off the Pointe de l'Aiguille, though he was careful where he put his feet. We continued to go there often, and he never got

around to learning how to wind surf.

The summer went by quickly. Tatïe Hélène had called early in June. Mathilde was ill; they had to cancel their trip. She was sorry she'd miss me. Could Jean-Yves come to Dijon for Christmas? His cousin Léon would be there.

"I don't see how I could. I work at a restaurant now. *Réveillon*, you know." The chef was determined to make it and Saint-Sylvestre gourmet affairs and couldn't do without him.

"Won't you be closed Christmas day and the day after? Could you talk him into giving an extra day or two off?"

"I'll ask."

"Léon doesn't live in Dijon?" I asked.

"No, it seems he lives in Geneva."

I encouraged him to go. "You ought to get to know your cousin. I have a feeling you'll turn out to be great friends."

"He's a lot older than you are. He could be my father."

I'd forgotten Jean-Yves was a child of his mother's middle age, and that her sister, though a year or so younger, had had her son when she was barely twenty.

"Do you remember him?"

"Barely. My father didn't like my mother's side of the family. You noticed he didn't come to the wedding. We hardly ever saw them, and Léon had grown up and moved out on his own by the time we left Dijon."

I had the feeling that Tatïe Hélène and León were people he could turn to after I left. That he did have family somewhere after all encouraged me.

* * * *

We had less than a month left. I wanted to find him a place he could afford after I'd gone. The apartment was paid through August, but by September he'd have to leave. He thought he could keep it, that it was within his budget, since I'd told him it cost less. "I want you to get some money put aside," I explained.

So we started looking and asked around. The chef offered him a room above the restaurant dirt cheap, something much like where he'd lived over *Au Petit Cadeau*, with a sink and bidet, only much smaller. He'd have access to the restaurant toilet, and there was a shower (cold) in a shed in the back court. I suspected he'd end up working harder and longer hours, but it was too good a deal to pass up and I felt better knowing they'd be there to keep

an eye on him.

Out of nowhere he announced he wanted us to get tattoos. "I am *not* going to decorate my body," I told him, "and that's final."

"Then I'll get one, just me. You'll choose the design and where to put it."

"You want me to brand you as mine."

He denied it, but I knew I was right. "No, because you're an artist. I want you to design it yourself. Something meaningful for us."

"No Picassos."

"Definitely not. Something only the two of us will understand."

He kept at it until I gave in. I sketched a lizard and told him to put it on the outside of his left forearm just above the wrist. He'd probably hoped I'd want it in a more intimate place.

"Why a lizard?" he asked.

"Because you reminded me of one the day you first took me to the old bridge, when I saw how effortlessly you scrambled down the cliffs."

He was happy with that. *Boy Wading* stood for the beginning of our intimacy. He didn't know that I meant to give it to him as a goodbye present, along with the watercolor I'd done inside *Au Petit Cadeau* and the nude

portrait of me he hadn't yet seen.

He insisted that I go with him when he had it done. "To make sure they do it right," he said, though what he really wanted was for me to see him endure pain for my sake. He overrode my objections and had them enlarge the sketch before they needled it onto his skin.

The chef, who'd guessed our relationship, excused him from work, with pay, the day of my departure and the day before. Jean-Yves cooked us a simple meal, which we ate by candlelight, naked, surrounded by my packed bags. I bought champagne. I gave him the three paintings as a present, in expensive frames. He admired the nude, but said I'd made my *zizi* too small.

"Because you weren't there when I painted it."

He didn't want to take *Boy Wading*. "That belongs to you. I want you to have it."

"I have over a hundred drawings of you. I'm keeping the one I did in the kitchen. We'll both have nudes of each other."

He had a *petit cadeau* for me too — a gold chain with a small lizard pendant.

I'd be traveling all the next day; we couldn't make love all night. For the first time our styles didn't mesh. I felt tender; he threw himself into it recklessly, desperate to be

possessed.

He took the shuttle to the Nice airport with me. We sat in the lounge together and held hands. I waited till the last minute before going through passport control.

There was so much to say. "We'll talk on the phone," he began.

"Too expensive. We'll write. This is my address at school."

"Why not your home?"

"I'm giving up my apartment. Now that my job's permanent I want to buy a house. Finding one won't be easy. I want a loft for painting, if possible with a northern exposure."

"We'll write every week."

"Much, much less often. We knew it had to end. You can't hang on to this."

"But you love me?"

"Yes, but we may never see each other again."

"You'll come back though?"

"Someday. I don't know when."

"France is a wonderful place to paint."

"And very expensive."

"When's your next sabbatical?"

"Seven years. Seven years is a long time."

"There's a bond between us."

"Bonds loosen. I have a life there, and you have one to carve out here. Life is more important than love."

"Love *is* my life. I didn't have one before I met you."

"Our love has prepared you to make a real life."

"Isn't love real?"

"Emotions are a different kind of reality. They make life fuller, they sustain us, but they can't keep us alive. You're young; you're just beginning to live. You'll see. Life can be wonderful, even without me."

"I'll be alone without you."

"You have your work, the chef and his wife, your aunts. You'll make friends. You'll miss me, but you'll fall into another life, better than what you had before we met. I'll miss you too. You've given me so much."

"You've given me everything."

"There's more to be had."

"You want to be optimistic, but everything you say is so sad. You sound more resigned than determined."

"I am resigned. You should resign yourself too."

"I have, for now. But it's not over; I won't let it be. Only you can do that."

"Me? I'll do nothing. What happens, happens. Life is good."

"Not for me it isn't. It never was."

"What about this last year? You'll fall in love again. There are other nice people on the planet."

"Our planet's too big. I wish it were smaller and that where you're going wasn't so far away."

We kissed, as on the platform in Millau, and I headed down the corridor toward emigration. Where the hall turned to the left I looked back and waved. He was smiling at me, holding back his tears. As soon as I was out of sight they would run down his cheeks as they had in Millau.

PART V. SEVEN YEARS

CHAPTER TEN

I wanted to make my sabbatical exhibition more than a display of unrelated paintings, rather something that would educate students in my craft. I had two spaces at my disposal, the long main gallery, one side all glass overlooking a French garden, a vast wall set back from it by two shallow partitions. The glass extended the length of the building. You walked down a corridor with the garden on your right past offices and studios to reach the gallery at the far end. A door in one corner of the gallery led to a smaller, four-walled room.

I arranged the larger space thematically, dividing the long wall into sections: flowers and fields, the ochre houses of Roussillon, shop interiors, etc. On the wall opposite the entrance, immediately visible from where the corridor opened into the gallery, I centered the oil painting of the beggar woman at Antigone, the highlight of the exhibit, between the three Poseidon fountains and three others from different cities. The third wall was an unrelated miscellany. I regretted having left *Boy Wading* with Jean-Yves. If I'd sent it to him after the exhibit, I could have replaced the hodge-podge with the Antigone grouping, and

surrounded Jean-Yves by the old bridge with the numerous sketches and studies I made preparing it, the perfect transition to the side room, devoted entirely to him.

Immediately to the right as you entered the room was the pencil sketch of Jean-Yves imitating the Poseidon fountain on the other side of the door. Watercolors, charcoals, sepias, pastels and one acrylic of Jean-Yves being Jean-Yves, clothed, grouped to alternate colors and monochromes, took up the rest of the wall. Between six watercolors, three from Montpellier, I hung the smaller, less detailed clothed pieces in batches of four to six, each grouping with its own title and mounted in various asymmetrical configurations between two heavy sheets of unframed plexiglas. The acrylic of Jean-Yves with a rustic flute in the Temple of Hera, the largest painting in the room, hung in the center between the Dionysian crouching panther and the Barbary fig watercolors from Agrigento.

Continuing around the walls, you came to a set of two dozen sketches of Jean-Yves from the chest up, mostly pencil drawings, sketches and charcoals. The central piece among them was an acrylic of him in my bathtub in Antibes, flanked by the two chalk-and-sepias I did when he lay sick in Syracuse. The full-length nudes occupied the third wall, the watercolor which I did in our room in preparation for the Temple of Hera directly across from its

companion piece. On the fourth I displayed the acrylic of him nude in his kitchen at Sainte-Ripouze surrounded by pencil sketches of details of his body from the neck down, including five of his buttocks (but not what we called his suppository pose) and two of his penis.

I included no "Picassos", but my chairman was leery of this section of the exhibition. For one, Jean-Yves looked so young. I assured him that he was over eighteen and a professional model (he may as well have been one) that I'd become fascinated with (as I had).

"Anyone would think he was your lover."

"Because I drew him with lust in my eyes?"

"No, love. Lust you could feel for any naked man."

"I resent the implication."

"That you're gay?"

"No, that I'm a voyeur and a stalker. It's no secret I'm gay."

"I'm sorry, all I meant was that there's no question of lust in these pieces. The subject exudes too much friendship and trust; it's clear he knew the artist well. You've caught that. It's what makes them so good. Aren't there any female nudes you can hang?"

"From this trip only copies I made in museums, and the earlier ones my students have seen."

"Well, I'm giving you the go-ahead, but the regents

won't be happy about it."

Once he'd let it through I admitted our relationship, in strictest confidence.

* * * *

The exhibit was popular with my students and most colleagues, a *succès de scandale* with a vocal minority of the faculty and visitors to the campus, and it embarrassed the administration. I sold a lot of pieces: the beggar woman, flowered landscapes, and half the Jean-Yves collection, including the Temple of Hera and the bathtub. (One woman ran off with his penis.) I could have sold most of it, but five I wouldn't part with: the nude in the kitchen, the Poseidon fountain, the Hera study, him lying sick under the blankets in Syracuse, and the panther.

I sent him the catalogue and flyer that named and numbered every piece in the show. He'd seen them all and could picture it exactly. "You're a star," I wrote. "Everyone here wants to see you in the flesh — as if they haven't already."

He wrote back, expressing his pleasure with what my chairman had said about trust and friendship, and included a notarized document attesting he was twenty-three years old and I'd paid him to pose for me. Since I'd

housed, fed, and taken him on vacations, this wasn't entirely a lie. "*Rémunéré* means you fucked his brains out," my chairman commented dryly, and passed it on to our Board of Regents, who for some reason anticipated a lawsuit.

Jean-Yves had already written me one letter before I sent the catalogue. He'd moved into the little room over the restaurant and was very lonely. He was thankful that his job ran him ragged and left him little time to brood about it. He'd been happier before, when he didn't know he could be happy. His second letter sounded less depressed. The chef's sons were coming for their mother's fiftieth birthday. They'd host a big celebration at the restaurant and had entrusted everything—the menu, running the kitchen, decorations—to him. They'd invited several chefs, from as far away as Monaco, Lyon and Geneva. He had a free hand and could spend whatever he needed, and they would pay him a thousand franc bonus too.

"He's becoming visible," I thought. "He doesn't know it yet, but he's going to make it big time."

I was right. As Jean-Yves described it, the birthday dinner made a bigger sensation than my exhibition. He made friends with the chef's sons, who took their father to task and convinced him to almost double his salary, add his name to the menu as *sous-chef*, and give him the whole top

floor of the building, which had been used for storage. He now had two rooms, his own bath, and a window on the street as well as on the tiny courtyard, not much bigger than an airshaft. More important, the chef from Geneva, Monsieur Grignon, taught at an *école hôtelière* associated with the Cordon Bleu and wanted him as a student. Jean-Yves shocked them all when he admitted he didn't have his *brevet*.

"Take the damn thing," Grignon told him. "Any idiot can pass. We can't let you in unless you've at least presented yourself for the *bac* and made a halfway decent showing. You don't need the actual diploma."

So now he was studying for the *brevet*, which he would take sitting in the middle of a batch of fifteen-year-olds. He knew he could breeze through the French and could brush up on history, which had been his best subject, on his own, but he needed to pay tutors for the maths, which was coming back to him, science, where he was hopeless, and English, which he'd all but forgotten. He wished we'd tried speaking it occasionally when we lived together.

I sent him a watercolor for Christmas and phoned him on his birthday, guessing that the chef would give him

the day off and we'd have time to talk. I'm afraid I woke him up. His schedule of work and study left him in a state of constant exhaustion. I was concerned for his health.

"Don't worry," he said. "I eat well."

"And sleep? And exercise?"

"No time for the first, no energy for the second."

Despite his excitement over his prospects, he didn't sound happy. He missed me too much. He wanted to know when I'd call again.

"For your next birthday. I can't go on letting you believe we're still a couple."

"A whole year?"

"Okay, when you get your *brevet*."

"I'm going to make that sooner than you think."

None of his tutors could believe he'd failed it. He sat for it in March—I'd been sure it would take him well over a year—and passed with flying colors, English his only mark under fifteen. Preparing the *bac* was harder. The government would have made an exception and let him enroll in a *lycée* as an adult because the first time he'd taken the *brevet* had been under trying circumstances (he didn't go into details with them) and his father hadn't allowed him a second shot at it, but since he held a more than full-time job he couldn't go to school, and would have to do it on his own. He thought he might do it in four years instead of the

usual five after the *brevet* if tuition at private schools were less expensive. Living in Geneva wouldn't be cheap, either, but he was saving up for it.

He spent three days after Christmas visiting his *taties* in Dijon, where he met his cousin Léon, whom he described as charming and full of life, "*tout comme toi*". (Charming I could accept—he was, after all, prejudiced—but I had never imagined myself to be "full of life".) Then his aunts came down for their June holiday in Menton, and he treated them to one of his *menus gastronomiques*. Hélène was enthusiastic about his studying cooking in Geneva and pointed out it would cost him less than he thought. "You can stay with Léon. He has an extra room."

She wanted to see some of my paintings. Sooner than ask her to walk up the two flights, he brought down the watercolor I'd sent and the interior of Marceline's shop. She liked them both but wished she could see something larger, an oil if he had one, so he went back and reluctantly got *Boy Wading*. To his consternation, the chef had arrived while he was upstairs, so he had to show it to all of them. Mathilde, his "*tatie dévote*", flushed crimson.

"Don't be such a prude," Tatie Hélène said. "This is a nude, it's a painting of a young man bathing in the river. It reminds me of Bazille." Then she whispered to him, "But if he's done a real nude, I'd love to see it."

"You'll have to go to America for that."

The chef wanted to hang it in the restaurant. Jean-Yves turned him down flat.

* * * *

Things were definitely looking up for Jean-Yves, but until he made it through those exams his situation would remain essentially the same. My news was more concrete. I bought a house, my first ever, in a nice section of town a few miles from the university.

I had plenty of paintings to fill the walls, but not nearly enough furniture to fill the rooms, and one of the bedrooms remained empty. I couldn't do much more than plan how I wanted eventually to set it up. Before I could buy furniture I had to buy appliances, and before I hung the pictures I had to put fresh paint on the walls. I hoped I could get it all done by spring so I'd have time to plant a garden. And I had ideas for building on to it in the years to come.

I made up a set of floor plans to send Jean-Yves and took a few snapshots to go with them. He wrote back that it was a lovely house and that he looked forward to living in it with me someday. Even with a future opening up in front of him, he couldn't picture life without me. That didn't

worry me. He'd give up on the idea in time, once he had that future in hand. From my point of view, we weren't lovers anymore, nor did I think our friendship would last forever.

It became a tradition for me to send him a painting on Christmas and phone on his birthday. He sent me presents too, a keepsake for my birthday and an expensive art book at Christmas. I assumed he intended the first book as a joke — erotic line drawings by Picasso with a long and racy essay by a famous critic. I complained he'd spent too much, but he ignored me, and the following year I received a lavish collection of Bazille reproductions. All the books he sent were expensive and exquisitely done.

His letters became less frequent —he'd taken on a lot, after all, and was constantly on the go— but he still wrote twice as often as I. He sent a couple of photos. He looked exactly the same. I sent him one too, pointing out my receding hairline and larger waist. He said I was imagining things.

Overly confident from having aced the *brevet*, he took a risk and sat for the *bac* in June 2002 — much too soon. He did not do well, and without the diploma he could not take classes at the IUT in Nice. On the other hand, his experience and recommendations from his employer and Monsieur Grignon would suffice to get him into the *école*

hôtelière in Geneva. At most they would require an interview, which I felt could only be to his advantage. There was an entrance exam, however, for which he would need some computer science and basic accounting. He could afford no more than one correspondence course on his salary since he would have to work part time. Tatïe H  l  ne would pay for the other, but he also wanted to study English "*pour ma client  le touristique*."

I offered to send money for English lessons. He refused. "Consider it four years' worth of birthday presents," I wrote back. "Phone calls don't count. Don't I owe you that?" He answered no, thanks to me he had everything he'd ever dreamed of and more. It took a lengthy and very expensive overseas phone call, but in the end he gave in. On top of that, we agreed he would write me in English, I would write to him in French, and we would correct each other's mistakes.

The first bit of computer science he mastered was how to use e-mail, which he wrote me on the restaurant computer. I received an e-mail from a ".fr" address that at first glance looked like a jumble of unfamiliar letters. I almost deleted it as spam until they sorted themselves out into j-y_cadot@. He'd written in English.

Hello Ben! I googled your school & found your e-mail. Soon I'll learn how to make my own website but I

have nothing to put there. Have you a website of your paintings? Is Boy Wading on it? Please send me the lien(?).

I did, of course, and complimented his English, giving him the word "link" and pointing out that "have you" was British.

Jean-Yves must have worn himself out studying, because in just one semester he passed the exam, and the following January he left for Geneva to study hotel management and *haute cuisine*.

His nearly complete transformation staggered me. It seemed incredible that his letters still dwelt on missing me and how he'd love me forever. In the next two and a half years he would change even more, almost beyond recognition.

* * * *

I phoned on his birthday, a month and a half after he started at the *école hôtelière*. I had had no news since Christmas. There was such a racket going on in the background I could hardly hear him.

"*Je m'éclipse un instant*," he yelled out to whoever was there. "*C'est important*."

Loud sounds of protest.

"*Des États-Unis*."

Some knowing noises, some shushing, then it quieted down and he moved into another room.

"What's going on there?" I asked.

"My birthday party."

"At Léon's?"

"At school. My classmates threw it for me. A surprise. You'll have to excuse me, I'm buzzed on champagne. I promise not to pull any stunts. You can't have forgotten Marceline's wedding."

"So you've made some friends?"

"Loads. At school and through Léon. We're at it all day at school, but I don't have to study much, or wouldn't if they didn't insist I improve my English. *All our examines are taking place in zee kitchen.* Did I get that right?"

I answered him in English. "Almost. And work on your accent. You're turning into a social butterfly, I gather."

"*C'est quoi, ça?*"

I had to get out my dictionary; it was no help.

"*Quelqu'un qui a beaucoup d'amis.*"

"*Populaire?*"

"*Plus que ça. Une personne qui sort toujours, qui aime faire la fête, qui fréquente le grand monde.*"

"*Bof! Faut pas exagérer.*"

"But you like living in Geneva."

"I adore it."

"How are you hitting it off with Léon?"

Our conversation was cut short. His friends came in to drag him away.

"I'll write soon," he said.

I got an e-mail from him two months later. That I heard very little from him during his year in Geneva took a load off my mind. I had not been faithful. In fact, I'd been involved on and off with another man for several months. We weren't all that compatible, and it only went on as long as it did because we lived in different cities. But there'd been others.

* * * *

Jean-Yves had gone to visit his aunts for Toussaint the fall before he went to Geneva. One evening they received a call from Marceline asking how she could contact her brother. Hélène passed him the phone.

Their father had died that summer. She'd have had him at the funeral, but he'd disappeared. Now she and Gilles wanted to sell the house and store and get out of Sainte-Ripouze, but he had joint ownership of the property. She'd give him half of whatever they got for it. They'd found a buyer already. When could he come down and sign?

I learned about it when Léon phoned me out of the blue to fill me in on the situation. His mother had called him, desperate with vexation. Jean-Yves refused to go. Worse yet, he wanted to write his sister and give up his claim on it.

"You're the only person with enough influence over him to make him change his mind."

"I know why he's doing this, but don't tell him I told you." And I filled him in on how Gilles had tried to rape him and some other things he'd gone through in Sainte-Ripouze.

Léon knew some of the story already —Jean-Yves had been open with him— but not the last incident. "He can't let that stand in his way," he said.

"I agree entirely."

"What does he have to worry about, after all? He needn't be alone with them. He can take a hotel in Millau and rent a car."

"Does he drive?"

"Oh."

Jean-Yves never found out his cousin had called me. He agreed to go when Léon said he'd go with him. He got his money, but not until Gilles had made some crack about Jean-Yves having found a niche with a much older man, and Léon had punched him in the mouth and broken

three teeth. Marceline said she wished he'd broken his jaw. Their marriage was on the rocks.

* * * *

Jean-Yves completed his studies in hotel management in record time. The program officially lasted two years, but they allowed him to skip a course or two because of his restaurant experience. It was a prestigious school and took pride in placing its graduates. Jean-Yves asked for something in Dijon. Tatïe Mathilde was declining rapidly, and he wanted to be close to Léon's mother, who had done so much for him and would soon be living alone. They found him a position as *sous-chef* in one of Dijon's luxury hotels.

He went to live with his *taties*, where he took over Léon's old room, and brought my paintings with him. That I found out from Tatïe Hélène, who wrote a long letter saying how much she admired my work and that Jean-Yves was very good to her and she enjoyed having him there. I heard from him less and less.

If I hadn't been gone for so long I might have suffered from his neglect, but I'd also been living my own life and he'd become like a distant memory, one of those people we stay in contact with although we no longer know

them well. I took a keen interest in his progress, but felt less in love with him than proud of his success. I began to think I might not take my next sabbatical in France, and I didn't think he'd mind.

Then, in just a few short months, his life changed entirely. Tatie Mathilde died that summer. Her will took everyone by surprise. She'd left everything she owned, a considerable fortune, to Jean-Yves on condition he continued to live with her sister and take care of her until she died.

This was unexpected. Jean-Yves hesitated to accept the inheritance.

"I don't know how to advise you," the lawyer said. "Consider this. Your aunt may live a long time yet. What if you wish to marry? Would you have to bring her to live with you? I do think you'd be allowed to put her in a nursing home if it became necessary, but you might have to pay for it."

"There's enough room where I live for a wife *and* children," Tatie Hélène snapped. "And I won't go to a nursing home whatever happens."

Jean-Yves explained that the conditions didn't bother him; he didn't feel comfortable having it all go to him. "She owned the apartment, too, didn't she, Tatie?"

"No, that I own; it was in my name too. But why

shouldn't you accept? What do I need money for? I'm an old woman. Think of everything you'll be able to do!"

It's a cliché to tell a friend who's suddenly come into unexpected wealth not to spend it all in one place, but Jean-Yves did just that. Using his half of the money from the sale of the house and shop and what Tatie Mathilde had left him, he took out a loan and purchased a fair-sized storefront in the oldest section of Dijon, which he turned into an upscale restaurant with himself as chef-owner. It cost him nearly every last centime of the windfall, but in a little more than five years he had moved from an uneducated, unemployed nobody bullied by his sister and mocked by the village he lived in to being a respected professional and his own employer. He'd have to work like a dog, but as I'd told him, there are two kinds of freedom.

He phoned to tell me the news as soon as the property was officially his then I heard nothing for over four months. I supposed he was busy converting the back room into a kitchen, buying supplies, decorating, hiring staff, and so forth. By then he had many friends in Dijon and had built himself a reputation as an up-and-coming *sous-chef*, so I didn't anticipate he'd have problems attracting customers. I expected any day to receive a newspaper clipping in the mail announcing that he'd opened.

Instead I received an e-mail:

Restaurant open & business is banging. Now I know why you need a computer to run a successful restaurant. Built my own website with Alain's help. Click on the link. — Jean-Yves

He'd made an impressive job of it: catchy graphics, an easy-to-use site menu, photos, reviews, sample menus, contact information, the works. His cry of triumph, however, was the name of his restaurant: *Le Grand Cadeau*. In one of the photos I could make out my interior painting of *Au Petit Cadeau* hanging on a wall. Eat your heart out, Marcelline.

I e-mailed him back immediately, in French.

Félicitations! Ravi de ton succès & j'adore le nom. Attends impatiemment y dîner un jour (bientôt?). Très joli site — aussi joli que le mien. C'est qui, Alain? On dit "business is booming", pas "banging". A+. Bisous, Ben.

Alain, it turned out, was a friend of Léon's.

We continued to e-mail each other, and as often happens with the advent of e-mail, our correspondence became more frequent and less informative, though I continued to phone him on his birthday and sent him a painting every Christmas, and he always hand-wrote a long

letter to thank me. I made his birthday call in the middle of the night so he'd receive it early morning, when I was sure to catch him alone. That evening he would be surrounded by friends at a noisy party, now always thrown at *Le Grand Cadeau* and hosted by his *équipe*. He was, I gathered, enormously popular.

As for our e-mails, they were inevitably upbeat, but also somewhat impersonal, like most electronic communication. I took it as a sign of the growing distance between us, which I'd predicted would come as we each built our own lives.

In one e-mail, however, he did write: "Your sabbatical is coming up soon. You'll take it in France, right?"

That was, in fact, my plan, but I could only afford half a year. I needed the time off, but our dean didn't give out full-year sabbaticals as readily. I opted for second semester, so I could spend the worst of the winter on the Côte d'Azur. No nomadic life for me this time; I'd chosen my base of operations in advance. I already knew where: Bandol, a town I'd driven through once, on the coast between Marseille and Toulon. The surrounding hills effectively protect it from the north winds, making it the warmest of France's Mediterranean port towns in winter, and I was enchanted by its pastel houses, its cleanliness, the

picturesque marina lined with carefully tended flower beds, three sand beaches, its population of well under ten thousand, the lighter traffic and the quiet (though it was popular with tourists), and above all the relatively low prices.

The tourist office put me in touch with a woman with the unlikely but intriguing name of Mme Esméralda Mérois, who regularly rented out a room in her house, *pension complète*, in a residential neighborhood with nearly empty streets, and a comfortable walk from the center of town. She considered herself lucky to have found a lodger for five months in the off-season, and agreed I could stay there at a reduced rate. When she learned I was an artist she told me she did crafts, and offered to let me use her attached garage as a studio. She didn't drive; she'd sold the car after her late husband passed away. She liked Americans; her daughter lived in the States. It sounded ideal.

So everything was settled months before my sabbatical began. I let Jean-Yves know my plans. He concurred that I'd found a bargain in Mme Mérois.

I booked a roundtrip flight to Marseille with a change of planes in Paris. We had no definite plans when we'd get together, probably sometime in February when the restaurant closed for three weeks and again at the beginning

of April, when he took another two weeks off. Wait and see.

PART VI. RETURN TO FRANCE

CHAPTER ELEVEN

More than Jean-Yves had changed since my last stay in France. The franc was out, the euro was in, prices had soared, and the dollar was spiraling downward. The World Trade Center was no more, we were at war in Iraq, our relations with France had reached a new low, and we'd lost credibility with almost every nation in the world. It took forever to get passports, and visas took even longer. The lines at the airports also seemed to take longer. I could bring my brushes, pens and pastels onto the plane, but not my tubes of oil paints or even a small bottle of ink. I wondered if this was a good time to go abroad. On the other hand, the government had begun to run roughshod over our civil liberties, manipulating us with the threat of terrorism, and staying in America was no picnic either.

I didn't sleep a wink on the overnight flight to Paris. Landing in France I felt no excitement, only boredom and annoyance. I dreaded the hassle of immigration and customs, but they waved me through without looking at my luggage. I checked it onto the Marseille flight and went to have breakfast. I had a two-hour layover.

Something was bothering me, something more than the atrocious state the world was in and the hassle of a transcontinental flight. It suddenly dawned on me: I wanted to see Jean-Yves. I'd show up at the restaurant and surprise him.

I told Air France to hold my bags at the Marseille airport and exchanged the last leg of my flight for a ticket to Dijon. They were booked solid. I'd have to wait until late afternoon. I phoned Madame Mérois to let her know my change of plans.

"That works out perfectly," she said. "You can't stay here now anyway, not at the moment. It's just temporary, you understand. There's been an *inondation*. One of the pipes in the bathroom broke..." She made one of those charmingly expressive French noises. "...just like that! I didn't know how to get in touch with you, so I made arrangements at a hotel. Now I'll call and cancel."

"When will it be fixed?"

"Not long. A day or two at most, the plumber says, but it'll be a full-time job."

"I'm sure my friend in Dijon will put me up for as long as it takes. I'll call and let you know when I'm coming."

I had half a day on my hands. I could have spent a couple of hours in Paris, but there wasn't really anything I

wanted to do there. I hung around the airport until my flight left.

In Dijon I took the shuttle to the train station and then walked to *Le Grand Cadeau*, a little under a kilometer if I hadn't lost my way twice. I got there shortly before eight.

On the shuttle and then walking to the restaurant I was struck by how big and full of people Dijon was. All French cities had grown since the mid-eighties, but I realized for the first time that Jean-Yves had spent his earliest years in a bustling metropolis, and that his father had moved the family far off into the country as a kind of penance. I grasped how hard it must have been on Marceline, just entering her teenage years, and how angry it must have made her. *Le Grand Cadeau* signified more than the sudden windfall and Jean-Yves' coming of age. It represented a step up, a new and larger enterprise than the modest souvenir shop.

It was not a large restaurant; it seated about sixty people, and the tables were almost all taken. The hostess, an attractive woman in her twenties, asked me if I'd reserved. "We're booked solid."

"Do you think you could find me a table somehow? There's only one of me, and I'm an old friend of the chef's."

Her face lit up. "*Mais, c'est Ben, vous!* I recognize

you from the photo. We had no idea you were coming. Of course you'll eat here. You must. Absolutely. I'll clear the small table near the kitchen where we keep the settings and stack them at the end of the bar."

"Don't tell Jean-Yves I'm here. I want to surprise him. I thought I'd ask to see the chef after the meal."

"Not a word, I promise; and I'll warn the staff."

He'd made a good job of it, an excellent job. The restaurant was well lit and the tables uncrowded, the walls decorated with original paintings, including a couple of the paintings I'd sent him every year for Christmas along with the acrylic I'd done inside Marceline's shop. I wondered if any of his customers recognized him in it from behind as the chef-owner. The hustler had, but of course Jean-Yves was older now, and he probably looked very different.

It was by no means a cheap place, but you got what the French call a good ratio *qualité-prix*. The varied menu emphasized Burgundian specialties and featured some tempting and unfamiliar dishes he'd learned in Geneva or invented himself. I ordered the *charcuterie* plate and the *lapin à la sauce moutarde*.

Unable to bear the suspense, I asked to pay my compliments to the chef before I ordered dessert.

If I hadn't known who he was and he hadn't done a double take and beamed with pleasure, I wouldn't have

recognized him as Jean-Yves, not immediately, under his chef's toque and white apron, his shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow. Broader in the shoulder, less narrow in the waist, his jaw squarer, and darker hair on his forearms growing over the lizard tattoo I'd forgotten he had, he looked, well, certainly older than twenty-two. No one would have spotted him as the figure in the *Petit Cadeau* painting unless he told them.

I stood up and we hugged. No kissing, not with all his customers watching, but he noticed the gold chain hanging behind my open collar, and pulled out the lizard pendant and held it up to his tattoo.

"Madame Mérois, where I'm staying in Bandol, she's had a break in the plumbing. A flood, she calls it. She asked me to come a day or two later."

"Stay for *la Saint-Sylvestre*. All my friends come here for the *réveillon*."

With so much to say to each other his pride in the restaurant came first. "What did you have for dinner?"

"Can you guess?"

"Give me a hint."

"The first thing you ever made me, before we even met."

He'd forgotten what it was, but was thrilled I remembered. "You shouldn't have been so sentimental. I

wish you'd ordered something more special, like the *magret aux mirabelles*."

"*Moutarde... Dijon...*"

"What did I give you for dessert? I hope it's not on the menu."

"Roquefort."

"Well that we do have, but let me surprise you. Are you at a hotel?"

"I just got in. I came straight here."

"Good. There's a bedroom upstairs where I get some sleep after the lunch crowd leaves before I have to start getting ready for dinner. You can sleep there tonight. There's a shower. I'll show you up after dessert and come join you when we close. I'll call Tatïe Hélène and tell her I'm staying overnight."

That said it all. We both took it for granted we'd have sex. It was all part of getting to know each other again.

The upstairs room was tiny, a short entranceway no wider than the door with the toilet and shower room on the right, the bedroom area a square space under ten by ten feet with a ceiling one and a half times as high. A double bed took up most of it. The only other furniture was a night table with a single drawer and one lamp, a miniature round metal table and matching stool in the corner. A warm

blanket lay folded on a shelf on the wall beside the bed, beneath it a rod with a few hangers and his change of clothes. Reflected in a large mirror over the head of the bed, the self-portrait I'd done for him provided an unabashed view of all of me... in stereo.

"This is absolutely miniscule. There's no place to unpack."

"Don't unpack. We won't be staying here. You'll stay at the apartment with me and Tatïe Hélène. She'll be thrilled; she knows all about us. I'll take you there in the morning. I'm sure you don't want to stay up till closing time after your long flight, and it would have been too complicated to explain how to get there. Anyway, you wouldn't have wanted to show up at her door without me there to introduce you."

"I've met her already. At Marceline's wedding."

"I'd forgotten. I also wanted to be alone with you the first night, just the two of us."

"You've hung the nude, I see."

"I couldn't exactly put it in Tatïe's living room, could I? She's seen it, though. I showed it to Tatïe Mathilde too."

"Now I'm glad you'll be there tomorrow to introduce me." I felt like teasing him. "How do you manage to fall asleep with it right in front of your eyes? Does it

intimidate the men you bring here?"

He winked. "I don't bring men here."

"Where's *Boy Wading*?"

"*That's* in her living room. It has another name now."

"*Garçon marchant dans l'eau*?"

"What else? Just about everyone I know has seen it. It's a work of art. More things about me have changed than my appearance."

Thinking of the painting reminded me that the first thing he'd cooked for me was fish, not rabbit. Rabbit was second, or maybe third. I didn't tell him.

"How long till you're finished downstairs?"

"Midnight, maybe a little before."

I put my clothes on the chair, showered and sat on the bed to wait for him, my towel tied around my waist. I tried to sketch him the way he looked now from memory, but he always came out as he'd been seven years ago.

He came back at eleven. "The crew will lock up for me," he explained.

He started unbuttoning his shirt. I hadn't been sure if he'd wait for me to undress him. I watched his every move as his new man's body gradually revealed itself. So many changes, all expected now that I'd seen him dressed. All but one: he was circumcised.

"When did you do it?"

He looked at me, not understanding, then down at himself and gave a little, half-embarrassed laugh. "That? Oh, about a year ago. I thought about having it done when you left —remember how I said I wanted to be like you?— but I knew you'd think it was childish. I thought of it again years later, and this time it seemed right. Not to be like you, but to mark myself for you. Like the lizard."

"I thought that was foolish too."

"Does it make a difference to you what my dick..."

"Looks like? No, it makes me feel uncomfortable that you did it for me."

"I did it for *me*."

"Did it hurt?"

"You'd have no way of knowing, would you? Yes, more than I thought it would. Not when they did it. For three or four days afterward, especially when I walked. Tatíe said I was nuts. I don't miss it, but who knows? — maybe I will. I haven't used it for sex yet. Get under the blanket and wait for me while I shower."

It was like making love with a different person, his body had changed so, yet how he reacted to my caresses and how he returned them was exactly the same. He took me first, not because he had anything to prove, but because our lovemaking moved naturally in that direction. He

neither asked nor gave any signal it was what he wanted.
We simply went with the flow.

He warned me to go easy on the way in. He hadn't bottomed in seven years, nearly twice as long as it had been the first time I took him.

"Anal sex isn't like riding a bicycle; a long time is a long time. I'll be gentle."

Afterward we lay in bed, curled up against each other as in the old days, not knowing if we were still lovers or if our lives had moved on.

"It was good," he said, "...as always." Then he added, "I didn't miss it, by the way. Did you?"

"It? Oh, that. I noticed the difference, but you're different in other ways too."

"Hairier?"

"That for one. A little. And your muscles — harder, toned. You've filled out. Very virile. It's amazing how exactly I remember how you were, as if I were looking at it now."

"You drew me thousands of times."

"Dozens, but I don't mean how you look. You feel different under my hands."

"And you touched me how many thousands of times?"

"Millions."

"You haven't changed at all."

"Except for my receding hairline, the love handles—"

He pinched the skin below my rib cage. "What love handles?"

"Give them a couple more years. I'm over forty." I was thinking how short our future together would be now — if we had any chance of one.

He didn't ask me if I loved him, as he did when he'd been so sick in Sicily, nor would I have known the answer. The Jean-Yves I'd been afraid to love was no more; he'd become the Jean-Yves I'd wanted him to be. It would take time to find out if I loved the new Jean-Yves as much.

* * * *

We slept late. Jean-Yves had only enough time to take me to his aunt's and hurry back to his restaurant.

"She knows I'm coming?"

"I told her when I called to say I wasn't coming home. She'd want to know why, wouldn't she?"

His answer only increased my discomfort.

She met us at the door. Jean-Yves gave her a peck on the cheek and left. She looked the same as I remembered her but was more voluble.

"Come put your things away," she said. "You two will stay in my room."

"I don't want to put you out."

"Of course you'll stay there. If you didn't you'd be in that little room at the restaurant and I wouldn't get to see either of you. Mine is the only double bed. I've moved a few of my clothes into Mathilde's room to give you some space. Jean-Yves said you only brought an overnight bag."

"Coming to Dijon was a spur of the moment decision. I was supposed to go straight to Bandol."

"I'm glad you didn't. It was a wonderful idea, and a wonderful surprise for Jean-Yves. I'm not going to ruin it by putting you in Mathilde's room. Even if you weren't a couple I wouldn't ask you to stay there. With all her religious bric-à-brac you'd feel you were in chapel."

"We may not be a couple. It's been seven years."

"All the more reason to take my bed. How else will you find out?"

Her matter-of-fact acceptance of our relationship astonished me. "It seems you know all about us. How long ago did he tell you?"

"The first Christmas, when he came to visit, but he didn't have to. It was clear enough when I heard he'd come to live with you in Antibes. You know, I'd already guessed when I saw you together in Sainte-Ripouze, at the

wedding."

"Was it that obvious?"

"You weren't; *he* was. Not that he was gay, you're never sure of that. You suspect, but you don't know. I meant I could see he loved you. That wouldn't *have* to mean he was gay. But I knew why my brother-in-law hustled them all out of Dijon. They didn't tell me; Mathilde did. She was thick with the priests even back then. Besides, my son's gay."

"Léon?"

"Yes, Léon. Didn't Jean-Yves tell you? No, he wouldn't unless you asked. He doesn't think things like that are important, and he's right. It's important to Léon, but Léon belongs to another generation. He lived through gay liberation and how things were before."

"Jean-Yves lived through worse."

"You don't have to tell me that. *You* were his liberation. I should have stepped in and offered to take him after that molestation business with Father Tidège. That father of his would have let me have him, too. It was the biggest mistake of my life, one I'll never forgive myself for, but I thought, 'Maybe he isn't gay. Maybe the best thing for him is to get away from where it all happened.' Then I saw him with you at Marceline's wedding, and I felt terrible. I hoped he wasn't gay, that he was just in love with you."

"But he is, isn't he?"

She brushed aside my question. "That's between you two. It's not my place to tell you what I think about Jean-Yves' sexuality. What does it matter whether or not he was gay? What he had to endure was as awful as what happens to the most unfortunate of them. I didn't find out till much later, and he doesn't know I know, so not a word. Alain told me."

"Alain?"

"Léon's partner."

I'd forgotten the name, and misinterpreted Jean-Yves' e-mail that identified him as "*l'ami de Léon*".

She went on. "That's why Léon refused to come to the wedding. They wouldn't let him bring Alain. Marceline wasn't openly rude when I asked about him, but her voice said it all. I couldn't believe she didn't know about Léon. Her father knew. That's why I never visited my sister. You only saw an old man at the wedding. You have no idea how horrible he used to be."

"Jean-Yves told me a few things."

"I imagine he did. You know, I wonder if he kept it a secret —Léon's being gay, I mean— so his son wouldn't know he had somewhere to run away to. He'd do that. Anyway, as I was saying, Marceline wouldn't let us bring Alain, and then there you were with Jean-Yves. 'What

hypocrites!" I thought. I'd have said something, I was so angry for Léon, but I thought, 'What if they *don't* know?' Bigots like them can be very dense."

"We weren't lovers then. That happened later."

"Oh, you were. *You* may not have known it yet, but you were."

"You're not far off. We'd become lovers by the time you went back to Dijon."

"It happened that night? I'm glad you told me. I was a little hurt when the two of you left without saying goodbye and then didn't come to see me off the next morning. Not that I'm one to hold a grudge. If that was the night you found out how you felt about each other, I forgive you. Finding each other was more important."

"I wish the woman I'm renting a room from in Bandol is as understanding as you are."

"Move out if she isn't. You haven't signed a lease, have you? Just be sure to tell her right away. Have you had breakfast? Just a bite. Jean-Yves expects you at the restaurant for lunch."

I got only one small scrap more of the family history after breakfast. She wanted to see my work.

"I have nothing to show you. Remember I just got here, and my luggage must be in Marseille by now."

"Not even a sketchpad?"

"I always have one, but this one has nothing decent in it yet."

"Well, you'll start filling it here, I'm sure."

"I'd enjoy doing your portrait. You deserve one after all you've done for Jean-Yves."

So instead of showing Tatïe Hélène my work, she showed me hers. She was, as she'd told us seven years earlier, no artist, and I knew that a woman that forthright would have no patience for empty compliments, but I was able to point out little touches I liked, and made some suggestions for coloring and composition, demonstrating what I meant on my sketchpad, which thrilled her more than praise.

"Don't forget to bring some larger pieces on your next visit," she told me. "I adore your work, especially the painting of Jean-Yves on my wall. Everyone I know is envious of it. Were you serious about doing my portrait?"

"Absolutely. Jean-Yves will be busy at the restaurant most of the time I'm here. We have to keep busy too."

"But your paints are in Marseille."

"I'll buy some more. I'd have to sooner or later anyway. I didn't bring enough for the whole time I'll be in France."

I didn't want her to change her routine for me, so

after breakfast I went to visit the Ducal Palace and the *Musée Magnin*. I reminded her I wouldn't be back for lunch.

"I eat supper early, at six o'clock," she said. "Later than that I get too tired to cook."

"I'm sure I'll be back by then."

We sat up for a while after supper and chatted some more in the living room until she went to bed. I was still up when Jean-Yves got back. It was after midnight.

"Aren't you in bed?"

"It just doesn't feel right taking over your aunt's bedroom."

"Don't let it bother you. Léon and Alain sleep there when they come to visit. They'll be here for New Year's, by the way, so we'll be moving back to the restaurant. You'll like both of them. They're wonderful people and can't wait to meet you."

"I suppose they've also seen that portrait of me. Do you show it to everyone?"

"Fair is fair — you put mine up in the university gallery. I was just teasing. But why should you mind if two gay men have seen it, one of them my cousin? Don't I have a right to show off? Now let's go to bed while we still have some energy. I'm taking tomorrow off, so we can... you

know, and I've arranged for someone to take over the dinner shift for the rest of the week so we'll have some time together for other things besides sex."

"I promised H  l  ne I'd do her portrait."

He gave me a kiss. "You're so good. Will you paint L  on and Alain too? I know they're hoping you'll agree to do a nude portrait of the two of them together. Nothing sexual, of course, and they'll pay you for it."

"I haven't done any male nudes since the last time I was in France."

"It's sweet of you to say so, but what does that matter? Don't tell me you've forgotten how! Come, let's make love. I ought to warn you, though — the bed creaks."

"I hope your *tatie* is a heavy sleeper."

"Don't count on it. She gets up several times during the night like most people her age, and her hearing's as sharp as Tat   Mathilde's was nonexistent."

"I think I'd prefer to stay at the restaurant."

"Let me tell you about H  l  ne. She's no voyeur, but she's enthusiastic about anything that has to do with man to man love. If she doesn't hear the bed when L  on and Alain are over, she asks them if there's something wrong between them. And she's a great fan of male nudes."

"I know. I saw her watercolor of Alain."

I'd guessed it was L  on, but she corrected me: "It

wouldn't be proper for my own son to pose naked for me."

"Artists have painted their wives often enough."

"And their daughters? Hardly ever. Besides, they were men."

"You sound very old fashioned."

"I am old fashioned," she said. "Can't one be both liberal and old fashioned? Anyway, that's Alain, over fifteen years ago."

"He looks like an adolescent."

"He was. Léon took him in after his parents threw him out."

"Here?"

"No, in Geneva."

The bed did creak, but not as loudly as I'd been led to expect. Jean-Yves was louder.

"I hope you're not doing this to make your *tatie* happy."

"This is no act, but it will make her happy."

He'd readjusted to penetration, and his pleasure was more intense than the night before. He ground his buttocks back into me and moaned non-stop. I found again my lover of seven years ago. I didn't know him yet, not personally, but every thrust I made overwhelmed me with passionate tenderness, and when I filled him with my seed I thought

my heart would burst.

I rolled off him and he rolled onto his back. He continued to twitch uncontrollably.

"It's like an electric charge inside me. It won't stop."

I took his member in my mouth and he exploded almost instantly. He cried out, "Oh God, it's so tender! It's unbearable! It feels so good!"

I said nothing until he relaxed. "I don't how I'll face your aunt in the morning. I hope she doesn't say anything."

"She won't, but just in case, I'll get up first and warn her not to."

* * * *

Jean-Yves had done well to see to it we'd have our afternoons together. We needed more than the sex. That aspect of our relationship was familiar ground; relating to each other as two equal partners was new. Just new, not hard to adjust to. It was an improvement over our old relationship, I felt comfortable with it, and we made the transition effortlessly. Still, we had to learn how to be together.

He stopped by the restaurant for half an hour every night to make sure things were running smoothly. "Buying *Le Grand Cadeau* was the best thing I ever did," he said.

"I'd hardly have had the time to see you at all if I weren't my own boss. Didn't you once tell me that work ties you down and gives you independence at the same time?"

"You weren't your own boss then."

"Lord no."

I loved Dijon. Jean-Yves took me all over, and his enthusiasm for the city was contagious. I'd have spent the whole semester there, both for Dijon itself and to be with him, but I'd have done nothing but portraits, since painting a city didn't interest me. I worked on Tatïe Hélène's portrait for an hour every morning. Posing any longer tired her out. I finished it the afternoon before Léon and Alain drove down from Geneva, and we left it on the easel to dry. She was very happy with it, and so was I.

I'd chosen to do a traditional portrait, reminiscent of both the Flemish school and the Italian baroque. She dressed in a satiny dark brown skirt and a simple, long-sleeved white blouse with a touch of lace at the cuffs, a patterned maroon scarf over shoulders attached by a cameo on her bosom, her hands folded neatly in her lap. We closed the curtains and placed a floor lamp with an old-fashioned shade to her right for light, which her pale face and hands reflected. Her face was turned toward me, her eyelids half closed, but you could see the eyes behind them were full of life. By her choice, she sat with *Boy Wading* in

the half-shadow behind her left shoulder. It was the first time I'd painted one of my own paintings.

The biggest change in Jean-Yves was that he had friends, tons of them, more than I had, and I met many of them. "I never realized how much I was missing," he said.

All his friends had heard about me and were extremely welcoming. If we'd arranged to meet them somewhere and Jean-Yves was late, as he often was since he left me to stop by the restaurant on the way, they recognized me immediately. From photos, he said, but I found myself wondering which of them had seen the portrait. His gay friends gave me particularly knowing glances, though according to him he never took men to the room above *Le Grand Cadeau*. I realized they were merely jealous. Of me. Jean-Yves was strikingly handsome, and thanks to my paintings they knew what he'd looked like with his clothes off seven years earlier. By the time I left Dijon I'd grown accustomed to the idea of having possibly been on display, and I thought no more about it. He must have felt the same. Everyone he knew had seen all of him from all angles.

It seemed as if everyone he knew had seen every piece of mine he owned, and though they were more into abstract art and graphics, they made an exception for my

work. One of his gay friends, Arnaud, owned a gallery and had displayed *Boy Wading* on more than one occasion, but not, he said, the nude me. So he, at least, had seen it.

"I thought you didn't bring men there," I told Jean-Yves.

"Not for sex. Of course I showed it to Arnaud. He's an art dealer."

Arnaud wanted to mount an exhibition of my work before I left. I promised to have a show ready for him by the end of June, so I could take it down after a month and have everything I needed for the sabbatical show at my university. He owned a small, storefront gallery I'd have no trouble filling in six months. Jean-Yves had taken me to see it on his day off, and I'd hated just about everything there, but since Arnaud was familiar with my work he'd expected I would, and he wasn't offended.

"Make sure you include a couple of nudes," he admonished, "or I'll put yours up."

"Watch out, or I'll do one of you."

"Is that a promise?" He turned to Jean-Yves. "May I hug him?"

Jean-Yves shrugged. "You hug everybody."

Except for some fellow chefs, mostly older men, and the people who worked for him, who were all younger, his friends were about his age, young married couples with

children, white collar professionals and people in the arts, especially theatre. Their children worshipped him. He had friends of all races, including a number of foreign nationals who lived in Dijon, and of every imaginable persuasion, except devoutly religious. He had some homosexual friends, both men and women, all of them out, but only a couple of them were in a steady relationship, and none particularly into the gay scene, unless there was an aspect of their lives we were unaware of. His social life could hardly have been typical of a man who worked such long hours.

"Are you ever alone?" I asked.

"I doubt it. I used to like being by myself, but now I think it was something I learned by necessity." He thought for a second. "I can get away when I want, though, and I guess I do pretty often, but never for long. There's the room over the restaurant, and I always sit up for an hour or so when I get back to the apartment after *tatie's* asleep."

"Do you like living with her?"

"I love *Tatie Hélène*, and I owe her. You know what good company she is too. My only regret about not having my own place is that I can't entertain there. One or two friends for a little while, yes, but company is too tiring for her, so I have to entertain at my restaurant. I wish I had somewhere less formal and where I didn't have to work all

the time. But she needs quiet, one-on-one conversation. And when anyone's there except me—even Léon— she has to jump up and down every two minutes playing the hostess. Doing her portrait has worked out beautifully. She has to sit still."

By the time I left Dijon we had realized that we were partners for life, however little we might get to see one another.

* * * *

Léon and Alain would arrive in the afternoon on New Year's Eve. I spent the morning finishing Tatïe Hélène's portrait, then moved my things to the restaurant to make room for them. I didn't stay long; I'd only have been underfoot. Jean-Yves had been there since the night before, getting ready for the *réveillon de la Saint-Sylvestre*. I hurried back to welcome them.

I found them admiring the newly finished portrait. "We're next," Léon said.

Predictably, his mother was enthusiastic. "A nude, please. I've been waiting to have a decent way of getting an indecent look at you."

"Honestly, *Maman!*"

"Mind you sit well for him. Not too stiff—" She

laughed. "Did I really say that? I meant, look natural."

"Most people would say it was against nature," I quipped.

She snorted. "It's no secret what I think about most people."

I was amazed how young Alain was, younger than myself, closer in age to Jean-Yves, in fact, although I would have known if I'd done the math when Tatïe Hélène showed me the watercolor. Léon looked about fifty.

I didn't stay long. I had to pick up my rented tuxedo and get ready for the *réveillon*. They'd meet there at nine.

I knew almost everyone at the party, and had to be introduced to a handful at most. Not that I needed introducing. They all knew I'd be there and recognized me.

Jean-Yves had seated me with Tatïe Hélène, her son and Alain. Arnaud sat there too. It might have been the artists' table or the gay table. Our host was in and out of the kitchen, being gracious and choreographing dinner in a whirlwind of activity. Whenever he sat down to eat he squeezed in at a different table. I noticed he went easy on the champagne this time. No one else did.

Hélène left at eleven, after the fish course. Jean-Yves brought her dessert, attractively wrapped, to take home with her, the only doggie bag I ever saw in France. We said goodbye there. The plumbing in Bandol was

working again; I'd be leaving the next day, directly from the restaurant. Léon escorted her home, then came back to join us. Our table was served the main course last so he could eat with us.

The party had become much louder. The formal seating disbanded after the cheese course, and people began circulating, having dessert at whatever table they happened to be sitting when it came, then moving again for coffee and cognac.

A stylish woman he'd introduced as Coralie came up to me toward the end of the party, when a few people had already begun to leave.

"I thought I'd be jealous of you," she said, "but I'm not. I can see how much he loves you."

I was flabbergasted, and it showed.

"He didn't tell you about me? He told me about you. You can see I don't mean all that much to him. I used to think I did."

"Do you still love him?"

"I got over it quickly. I'm a realist—a woman has to be to make it in the business world—and no one can stay mad at Jean-Yves. Did you honestly have no idea that a straight man was in love with you?"

"I thought he was straight when I met him. Then I wasn't sure."

"His aunt didn't tell you?"

"Hélène can be discretion itself when it's appropriate."

I stayed until all the guests had left and walked upstairs with Jean-Yves. We left the place a mess. The crew would come back the next afternoon to clean up. There was no question of our having sex that night — morning, I should say— but I wanted to ask about Coralie and if he was, in fact, straight. Not that it mattered; I just wanted to know.

"She was my *meuf* for about two years. Then I broke it off. That's when I had myself circumcised. So you see, it wasn't some youngster imitating his idol. It was a symbolic gesture, like a covenant."

I brushed aside his comparing me to the God of Abraham as unintentional and wrestled briefly with him calling Coralie his *meuf*. It was not a word he would have used seven years ago. Was he telling me that their relationship was purely sexual or that he had seen it as permanent, or to underscore the connection between us in this *tête-à-tête* conversation. Or he might have used the word quite naturally, because he was no longer a kid. "Why did you break up?" I asked. "How did she take it?"

"Badly at first. She didn't know about me and men."

"She had to know with that portrait of me on the wall."

"I didn't say she was surprised; I said she was upset. Anyway, I wasn't being fair to her. I was in love with you... I am in love with you." He waited a moment and added, "You saved me."

"But you're saved now. You don't owe me anything."

"It's not the only reason I love you."

"But it was good, you liked it, the sex with Coralie? You don't mind my asking, do you?"

"Ask me anything. Yes, we were good in bed together. I was more compatible with her than the others. Don't look so surprised; there weren't many."

A thought occurred to me. "You took them here to have sex?"

"I couldn't bring them to Tatie H  l  ne's before we were in a steady relationship."

"What did they think about your having a portrait of a nude man on your wall?"

"I suppose they must have wondered. They didn't say anything, except for Coralie, when we broke up. As you can imagine, she didn't have much flattering to say about us, but she admitted you have a beautiful body."

"I don't."

"To be honest, she asked if you were as handsome and well put together as you look in the painting. 'Better,' I told her. Why are you blushing?"

"Because she commented on it. She must have been making comparisons."

"That would be difficult. You don't look at all alike, with or without clothes."

"Cut it out. When you said you didn't bring men there, you realize it didn't occur to me you might have brought women."

"It still embarrasses you? You, an artist? You have to be used to it after a whole week in Dijon!" He was teasing. "I haven't had that many lady friends, three or four at most. You're the only man I've been with; that is, the only man I've been with because I wanted to. Some of my gay friends would love to have sex with me, but they know it's not in the cards. I haven't kept you a secret."

"You're not really gay then, not one hundred percent gay like me. I sometimes wondered if you were."

"I was sure I was, but I was wrong. In another sense I was right. I *am* gay. As long as I'm in love with you, I'm gay. One hundred percent, forever."

CHAPTER TWELVE

We'd stayed up all night. I slept all the next day and booked a *courette* on the overnight train to Marseille. (I was still tired.) From there I went to the airport to claim my luggage, then back to the *gare Saint-Charles*, where I hung around till mid morning when my train left for Bandol. While waiting, it occurred to me that I hadn't made love with Jean-Yves since 2005.

I'd phoned ahead. Madame Mérois was expecting me.

She lived farther from the shore than I'd been led to believe. I'd imagined a row of small houses in brightly painted concrete with tile roofs. Instead, the taxi drove along a winding road with no sidewalks between a wooded area and a ten-foot wall overhung with vegetation and stopped in front of an iron gate that might have been the entrance to a vast estate. Once inside, however, I saw that the property wasn't large at all, no more than three times the size of Marceline's, and the house itself, built in the middle of a grove of mimosa, was much smaller.

For an Esméralda, she didn't look much like a Gypsy: a tall, bony, long-limbed, flat-chested woman, tanned, but naturally light-complected with very pale gray eyes and a beaklike nose, her slate gray hair cut back to her

earlobes and lying close to her head. She did *dress* bohemian, a throwback to the sixties, in a wide-brimmed, floppy straw hat, a long-sleeved, waistless cotton housedress with a tiny pink, yellow and blue flower pattern that hung from her shoulders to mid-calf, leather sandals with only a braided strap around her big toe to keep them on her feet, and no makeup except her dark maroon toenails. She wore a fair amount of gold jewelry — large, heavy hoop bracelets on her left wrist and earrings to match, a chain necklace with a cluster of pendants symbolizing every religion under the sun, and a brooch, but only a wedding ring on her finger. She spoke to me in an odd-sounding English of British diphthongs and French consonants, and I answered her in my no less odd, American-accented French.

She showed me around the house, furnished in as many styles as there were religions on her necklace, but impeccably tidy. I didn't see the upper story, which was reserved for her. To my surprise, my room was quite spacious with an attached bathroom and French doors opening onto a terrace . The large double bed was buried under a jumble of throw pillows and she'd put plenty of hangers in the armoire, but there were no drawers in the dresser. I would have to keep my underwear folded on open shelves.

Her garden was definitely worth painting, a riot of color — wisteria, hydrangeas, sunflowers, marigolds, primroses, flowering herbs and palmetto. My garage studio, however, was a loss, lit by a single bulb. Though Madame Mérois couldn't remember a milder January, it didn't feel like April. When the weather turned warm enough to keep the door open it might get some sunlight, but the space was only suitable for stretching canvases and building frames, touching up things I'd painted elsewhere, and storing my finished work. In any case, half of it was taken up by her workshop. She made enameled jewelry, so she'd know where I could buy supplies.

She had strict house rules: rent paid on the first, quiet after ten at night, show up promptly for meals and let her know a day in advance if I'd be missing one, no snacking or painting in my room, make my bed every morning and clean my bathroom twice a week, no shoes indoors, no reading the newspaper before she'd seen it, and no Country Western music. Did I have any questions?

I asked about guests.

"You're free to use my living room, but I do live alone and I don't like having people I don't know in my house."

"I meant visitors."

"Overnight? No, I don't want you bringing strangers

here."

"Not strangers, one in particular. The friend I stayed with in Dijon."

"Then he... she? ...would come and stay for a while?"

"He, yes. Jean-Yves's very respectable, a chef in a well-known restaurant. It's in the Michelin Rouge." I hoped that like most French people she appreciated fine cuisine and that that would tempt her.

"He'd sleep in your room then? I don't have an extra bed to lend you."

"I... er..."

"Is he your lover?"

I nodded sheepishly while she went on with out stopping. "Then certainly you can have him here, as long and as often as you want, that goes without saying. Or any relative, for that matter. I only ask that if he stays more than three days —and he will, of course— you pay something to cover his *pension*. Do you have a PACS? How long have you been together?"

"Thank you, Madame. I met him when I was here in 1998, and we lived together for about seven months. I... We renewed the relationship in Dijon. We've sort of taken up where we left off. I'm sure you'll like him."

"I think it's splendid that your partner is French."

Remember: no noise after ten. Call me Esméralda."

It was too chilly to paint outside for long in January, and too dark in the garage, so I went to an art institute in Marseille three times a week to paint from live models. Seven years before my chairman had put his foot down and said that I couldn't include nudes in an exhibit again unless there were a few females among them. I couldn't imagine not having nudes. I'd already committed to doing one of Léon and Alain and another of Arnaud. These were commissions, and would remain in France, but I'd probably find a thing or two worth showing among the preparatory studies. And I was bound to do several of Jean-Yves.

The teacher at the institute took one look at my half-done canvas and said, "What are you doing here? You're obviously a professional."

I explained that I had nowhere to paint until the weather improved.

"Just don't use our equipment. Bring your own."

"I did, except the easel."

"You can use our easels... *and* our turpentine."

When the sun came out I did an acrylic of the garden. Esméralda came to watch me work.

"You should've waited for spring to paint my garden. It looks so drab now. I somehow thought you did

abstracts. My garage won't be of much use, will it? Do you do portraits too?"

I assured her I did, and she commissioned one of herself as a Christmas present for her daughter. "Could you bring it back with you and see she gets it?"

"May I exhibit it first? I have a showing scheduled for fall."

"I'd be flattered."

* * * *

Jean-Yves came for three weeks in the middle of February. We stayed in Bandol the whole time except for two day trips. We had foul, rainy weather, so while he was there I worked on Esméralda's portrait. She sat in my room with the French doors wide open, freezing in a light housedress while I worked bundled up on the terrace. I was afraid she'd catch bronchitis.

Jean-Yves thought of a way for me to paint in the garage. We rented a car for the day, and he posed as a mechanic working under the hood. He looked the part wearing my overalls, which were too large for him. We also picked up a *toque* and white apron to do a professional acrylic of him as a chef. Esméralda wouldn't let me paint in her kitchen, so I left the background to be filled at *Le*

Grand Cadeau during my next visit to Dijon.

I'd asked Esméralda if there were any towns close by I might want to paint.

"Why leave Bandol at all?" she asked. She was convinced her city was the most beautiful on the Côte d'Azur.

"For eight and a half months?"

"Why do they have to be close by?"

"I traveled enough the last time I was here. But I do want to paint the Corniche d'Or when the weather improves."

"You'll be going to visit your partner, though, won't you? You can paint Dijon."

"I didn't see anything there I want to paint. My large urban scenes never come out well."

"What about the roofs?" Many medieval houses in northern Burgundy have roofs with red, yellow and black tiles arranged in symmetrical patterns.

"Not my style. Maybe a cathedral."

She recommended I check out Cassis, the Île de Porquerolles, Hyères and La Ciotat. Jean-Yves and I took day trips to the first two.

We went to Porquerolles first. You get there by a ferry from Hyères, which I decided not to paint. I took my easel and acrylics, but didn't use them. It was too overcast;

I'd come back some other time. We hiked the western half of the island, which is wild, rugged and very green. It was also deserted. We made ourselves a nest in a stand of evergreen bushes overlooking the sea and made out for more than four hours. It was too cold to take off our clothes, but we did open our flies and take out what men have inside. That's what flies are for.

We went to Cassis next. Esméralda had given me a particularly glowing description, so we left early, hoping to do one, maybe two canvases. She'd also warned us that the train station was several kilometers inland from the village, so I rented a car in Bandol. We passed through La Ciotat on the way. Except for a fairly large and very uninteresting industrial section, it struck me as too much like Bandol to bother painting. I could easily have spent a month working on canvases of Cassis, though.

We took the boat tour of its famous *calanques*. The sea was so choppy that day that they almost canceled the tour, and not many people were with us. We both got pretty seasick, and Jean-Yves threw up, but I knew I'd return to do several paintings of the closer, more accessible *calanques*. We spent an hour in a café to calm our stomachs after the boat brought us back to port, and set out to hike to the third *calanque*, En-Vau, my easel strapped to my back. The inlet is very narrow and has the highest cliffs, so I thought we'd

be protected from the wind there and it would probably be warmer.

The first two, Port-Miou and Port-Pin, were very accessible, but quite a hike — the road to get to them is far from direct. Had we known, we'd have taken the car to Port-Miou. The hike to En-Vau was over three times as far as the walk to Port-Miou. We hadn't expected this. Its mouth was close to Port-Pin, but the two *calanques* ran a good distance inland at right angles to each other. By the route we took it was anything but accessible. Part of the way was almost as difficult as the climb down to the old bridge near Sainte-Ripouze and completely overgrown with brush and thorns.

We almost didn't make it that far. I was enchanted with the little yachts and sailboats lining the long, narrow inlet of Port-Pin, set well back from the ocean, the water absolutely calm. I was ready to stop there to paint them, but Jean-Yves reminded me that they predicted the sun would come out the next day. We'd told Esméralda we wouldn't be back for dinner. I called on my cell phone to say we'd be staying overnight and not to cook for us tomorrow either. She wasn't surprised.

"Aren't the *calanques* exquisite? I expect you'll go back there often."

I barely had time to paint the vertical white cliffs of

En-Vau before it started growing dark and we had to turn back. We struggled through the undergrowth up the steep hill and reached Port-Miou an hour and a half after sunset. Luckily, finding a hotel off-season in Cassis is easy. Ours had an excellent seafood restaurant on the ground floor facing the embarcadero.

I had a big bathtub in Bandol and we used to soak in it together, but we kept our lovemaking subdued so as not to disturb Esméralda. We could let loose in the nearly empty hotel, devouring one another greedily and rutting with abandon. We took each other doggie, deep and swift. In that position you feel your partner's prostate buzzing below your glans when he ejaculates, a curious sensation.

I go into these details because while we were soul mates, our mutual desire consumed us and we hungered for each other's body. We often discussed the sexual pleasure we had together.

"I'd rather feel you in me than be inside a woman," he said.

"Honestly?"

"Honestly. It passes through you in wave upon wave. There's no comparison."

"I'm getting used to you circumcised. My tongue has less to play with, but I think I prefer it."

"It does feel different. On the one hand the head is

less sensitive, on the other it's easy to delay my ejaculation. Either way I win."

Since I'd been unable to paint Jean-Yves nude at Esméralda's, I did an acrylic of him in our hotel room and we checked out as late as possible before returning to paint the boats in Port-Miou. The weather had cleared. We'd done well to wait.

I found it a challenge to paint him. My hand moved naturally along the lines his body had had seven years previously, and I had to scrutinize him and concentrate on what I was doing to get him to look as he did now. Despite that, I made one glaring error.

"You didn't look carefully enough," he said when I showed it to him.

Even after our conversation of the night before, I'd uncircumcised him, and had to do that essential part over. He snickered at my feeble excuse: "I told you it wasn't important."

When we got home Esméralda asked to see what I'd done.

"Only two paintings in two days? Nothing on your sketchpad? I expected more." The En-Vau was very small.

"I also did a portrait of Jean-Yves. A nude."

"May I see it?"

I looked to him for permission.

"Go ahead. Everyone in Dijon has seen your nudes of me; why shouldn't she? I'm as used to it as the most brazen porn star."

"You could be a porn star," she said, and turned to me. "He's a gorgeous man. You're very lucky."

Once upon a time his sister had predicted he'd follow a similar career.

As I'd predicted, Esméralda adored Jean-Yves; she was wild about him. She called him *mon grand* — "big guy". One morning two weeks after he arrived in Bandol she told me that we should spend the last week of his vacation together in Dijon so he could show me around Burgundy. She'd deduct a hundred and fifty euros for my *pension* from the rent. I estimated it would cover the rental car we'd need to drive around the countryside.

"She sounds anxious to get rid of us," I said.

"She told me what she's up to. She hopes that by showing you around Burgundy I can lure you up there for the summer. She thinks we belong together."

"The schemer! She's hoping to find a lodger who'll pay the full summer rate."

"She wants us to get a PACS."

"What kind of relationship is it when you see each

other once every seven years?"

"I could stay with you in America for five weeks every winter, and in summer you could come to France for three months."

"We'd be together just long enough for it to drive us crazy when we're apart. Are you still hoping for the impossible?" I was too, but wouldn't admit it.

"Those were daydreams. Now I'm trying to find a practical solution."

"Is there one?"

"There always is."

So the last week in February I found myself back in Dijon. Except for two mornings we spent keeping Tatïe Hélène company and the one afternoon I spent on Arnaud's portrait, we toured.

Our swing through Burgundy took us far afield. I painted two major gothic churches, the Auxerre cathedral and the *église de Brou*, but the highlight of that week was the two days we spent following the wine road.

We ought to have brought Tatïe Hélène along as designated driver. The more we drank the sillier we got, and by the end of the first day we were sloshed. In the last winery we stopped at, we appalled the other visitors by passing the wine we tasted from mouth to mouth, which we claimed permitted us to sample twice as many varietals.

The vintner was livid. Jean-Yves regained his favor by handing him his card and ordering three dozen cases of his pinot noir for *Le Grand Cadeau*. To appear on the wine list of what was quickly becoming one of the more popular restaurants in Dijon was a feather in his cap and good advertising. It was not a superlative wine, but it would do as the *cuvée de la maison* for the rest of the winter.

When we staggered up into the courtyard one of the people who'd toured the cellars with us offered to drive us to Saulieu, where we'd arranged for a hotel that night. I have no idea how he thought we'd make our way back to pick up the car. We were too drunk to think of it until the next morning.

Saulieu is one of the gastronomic capitals of France. Jean-Yves knew the chef at one of its fanciest restaurants—he was friends with chefs everywhere—and as a professional courtesy he treated us to one of the best dinners I've ever eaten.

Our binge had made us sentimental. We went to bed feeling very warm and tender. I was too buzzed to get it up and he too buzzed to keep it up, but we didn't care. We were mostly in the mood to cuddle and caress, and we kept falling asleep anyway. We woke late in the morning with massive hangovers. He claimed I'd kept him awake all night snoring like a locomotive. I told him he'd done the

same, and that was the truth.

We solved the car problem by having Jean-Yves phone the vintner and tell him that if he sent somebody to pick us up he could bring the wine back with him to Dijon in time to put it on the menu. The restaurant reopened in three days. I'd reserved a place on the train back to Bandol for the morning after the opening.

"I hope the wine isn't a total loss," he said. "I had no palate left when I said I'd buy it."

"Everyone with us at the tasting said it was wonderful."

"It's my restaurant. For that kind of decision I trust no one but myself."

We returned to Dijon with six bottles of a superb *aligoté* for Tatïe Hélène. She drank very little and only white wine. She'd given up red five years earlier. "This will last me the rest of my life," she said. She didn't even finish two bottles.

* * * *

I did very little work the first week after I got back from Dijon. That annoyed Esméralda. She had no patience for idleness.

"Stop moping!" she said. "He'll be here before you

know it. Are you like this all the time in America? Get out there and paint!"

"It's too chilly. I have a cold."

"It is not, and sunshine's the best thing for a cold. Go paint the marina. Paint the cafés before they fill up with tourists."

"They'd make a better painting full of people."

"Then go paint in the *jardin exotique*. It's never cold there."

"Never?"

"Certainly not now. It's the warmest spot around here. They have cacti."

I shrugged. It sounded like one of those local curiosities where the guide books send you, and I remembered Marceline's useless suggestions. Painting cacti would be like painting the cliffs that faced her house. On the other hand, however eclectic Esméralda's tastes, she wasn't Marceline. She wouldn't send me somewhere bland and uninteresting. She insisted, I went, and I painted — birds, not cacti (she hadn't mentioned that the *jardin* was also a zoo)— and my spirits rose.

It didn't take me long to realize that I'd find something worth painting in any place she said I should see. An example. She urged me to visit the medieval fortress of Le Castellet and the ancient hilltop village of La

Cadière-d'Azur. I thought the castle evocative, but its palette too limited for a painting, and the streets of La Cadière were too narrow to set up an easel and too empty on the day I was there to make an interesting composition. One would think it impossible to get lost in so tiny a village, but I did, and passed the same crisscrossing of alleyways several times before I made my way to its eastern end and looked out over a sweeping panorama of the vineyards that produce Bandol's wines and Le Castellet atop a steep hill surrounded by what from there looked like a small forest. I worked for two days to finish an oil painting of the scene, leaving the half-done canvas overnight with the proprietor of a nearby shop. I painted it as an unspoiled landscape by pretending the autoroute wasn't there and covering the racecar tracks and airfield on the horizon behind the castle with scrub and forest. The finished work recalled the French Romantic school. Esméralda liked it very much and, ever the ecologist, approved that I'd got rid of "*cette exécration piste de course*" and wished the government would follow my example.

"It won't. Formula One brings in too much money. What about the missing autoroute?"

"An artistic improvement, but the A8 has been a blessing. Before they built it every car going to Toulon had

to drive through Bandol. I do like that painting. You've given it a wild look, in spite of the vineyards. But the view from Notre-Dame du Beausset-Vieux is more impressive," she added.

The name was too long to remember; I had her write it down.

Overall it had been one of the mildest winters anyone could remember, and spring came early. By the beginning of April the prospect of a two-week reunion with Jean-Yves made my heart feel as radiant as the fruit trees that were flowering all over Provence. Most people, including Esméralda, attributed their early blossoming to global warming. She had a lot to say on the subject. It made her sick to think that her great-grandchildren would never see her beloved Bandol because by the time they were born it would lie fifty feet below the surface of the Mediterranean. In her more resigned moments she reflected that they probably wouldn't have seen it anyway, since her daughter had only brought her kids to visit once, and they didn't know a word of French.

I returned to the Luberon and spent a week painting the almonds and plums and cherries in blossom before hurrying back to Bandol to meet Jean-Yves. Esméralda knew the region well, and on her recommendation I visited

Barjols with its thirty fountains and the honey-producing town of Aups and painted the nearby Sillan waterfall and plane trees on the main square (which she hadn't mentioned) with their mottled bark that looks like a pointillist invention. She also sent me to the drowned village of the Lac Sainte-Croix. It had disappeared without a trace; I couldn't see it below the calm surface of the water. She'd known it before they dammed the Verdon River and had a livelier imagination.

I passed through Roussillon, where I stopped by my old hotel. The owner remembered me well and gave me a warm welcome. I looked for the boy I'd painted who reminded me of Jean-Yves, but couldn't find him. I doubt I'd have recognized him anymore. I described him, even sketched him from memory, but the drawing looked more like the Jean-Yves of Sainte-Ripouze, and no one knew who I meant.

Jean-Yves came down to spend two weeks with me on the fifteenth. We planned to take advantage of the early spring and spend his holiday traveling, my one long painting trip of this sabbatical. The dollar had continued to fall, so the cost of renting a car had become prohibitive. We'd take the train, visit picturesque towns, and only get a car for occasional day trips. We borrowed a tent and

sleeping bags from Esméralda. She and her husband had been avid hikers. The weather would be warm enough to camp, and that would save us money. When we couldn't, we'd stay in *gîtes* or hostels. Jean-Yves thought it a great adventure. He'd never been camping before, not even in the army.

I asked him where we should go first. To my utter astonishment, he said Millau. Esméralda understood immediately. The *viaduc* had opened the year before, and was considered one of the architectural marvels of France.

Our train would pass through Montpellier. I asked if he wanted to spend some time there for old times' sake.

"Later," he said, "on our way back. After the viaduct we should go as far south as we can, where it's warmer. We can stop at Montpellier on the way home if we feel like it."

It was still too cold in Millau for camping. We asked, and were told there was frost on the ground every morning. Jean-Yves knew of a comfortable *gîte* by the river on the outskirts of town, too far to walk, but we'd need a car get to the viaduct anyway, and we wanted to drive across it. The catch was they'd probably put us in a dormitory and we wouldn't be able to make love. We

thought we could hold out for a day or two.

The car rental wasn't far from the station. When we got off the train I asked, "Do you remember the last time we were here?"

He answered, "It was the saddest moment in my life."

"Were you thinking we might have a look at Sainte-Ripouze too?"

"I'm toying with the idea. Should we?"

"It would close a chapter, as the *gare* has."

"I don't know. I'll consider it."

The viaduct enthralled me as no work of engineering ever has. The roadway seems to float across the wide valley between two plateaus, one grassy, the other with steep, tree-covered slopes in place of the precipitous cliffs that tower over the stream that flows by Sainte-Ripouze until it empties into the Tarn a few miles southeast of Millau. Between the needle-like pillars from which the bridge hangs on web-like steel threads, the narrow strip of the Tarn winds lazily across the plain to the distant Garonne, resting after its rapid tumble through the gorges, the town spread out along its northern banks to the east.

I did five paintings of the viaduct, all watercolors. No other medium seemed to suit its ethereal lightness. Yet it is massive, two and a half kilometers of modern highway

supported by seven concrete pillars, the highest of them rising more than a thousand feet above the valley floor. The whole structure weighs over twenty-five thousand tons.

I painted it at night from the *gîte*, a faint line glowing in the distance high over the rooftops of Millau. I painted it looking down from the scenic overlook at the rest stop, its pillars rising up out of the morning fog. I painted it as I imagined it would look to a hang-glider hovering with it at eye level beside him, watching the shiny, toy-sized red, blue and black cars whizzing past behind the silken steel filaments. Of course there were no hang-gliders. There were no thermals to ride in so wide a valley opening into a plain.

We'd decided to make our next stop Collioure, a little fishing village on the Côte Vermeille near the Spanish border that had captivated Matisse, Braque and Picasso, and from there to work our way back up the coast to Bandol. Before we returned the car, though, we went to bid a final farewell to Sainte-Ripouze.

The village seemed emptier, quieter, sadder. Older, too, perhaps because it was the scene of an unhappy past so far removed from our present joy in one another. We passed a few people, and a couple of them eyed me curiously, as if trying to place me. None of them recognized Jean-Yves; they'd have said something if they

had. Marceline's store had become a *pâtisserie*. The new owners had saved a few centimes on redecorating by renaming it *Au Petit Gâteau*. We climbed the hill to the house where Jean-Yves and his sister used to live. It had a padlock on the front door and looked deserted and uncared for.

"Should we try to get inside and see the place we first made love?" I asked.

He nodded, but he looked apprehensive. He squeezed my hand. Since we'd arrived in Sainte-Ripouze he reminded me of the timid youngster of seven years before. He seemed smaller, skinnier, as if he'd shrunk. I held on to his hand and led him down the alley to the garden door. It was boarded up.

Standing in the alley, he turned to me and said, "I'm not frightened. It's just that the place is at once so full of memories and so alien. I'm glad you're here with me."

The night air was cold; he was shivering. I opened my coat and drew him to my chest, closing it around both of us. "Not all bad memories," I said.

He shook his head. "One beautiful memory, and he's here with me."

I kissed him on the lips, and my desire for him suddenly overpowered me. This was Jean-Yves as I'd first known him, and I realized how much I had loved him then

too, and how much I had held back. I had been as frightened of wanting too much what I couldn't have forever as I had been of his dependence.

I covered his face with kisses — his cheeks, his eyes, forehead, ears, neck. He fell back against the wall, and I slid to my knees, kissing his chest through the cloth. I unzipped his fly, took his limp penis in my mouth, and sucked it to hardness. Pressed to the wall, he ran his fingers through my hair and moaned his love for me till he filled my mouth with his seed.

I stood up and we kissed. There were tears on his cheeks.

"What's the matter?"

"*Rien*. I've said goodbye to a very sad place. That's all."

We walked silently back to the car, hand in hand.

Before returning to Millau we stopped for an *apéritif* at the café, where Jean-Yves was finally recognized by the owner. He inquired after Gilles and Marceline.

"I have no idea where they are."

"And yourself?"

"I run a restaurant in Dijon."

"Then we're colleagues!" he exclaimed.

Then it registered. For a month a little over seven years ago Jean-Yves had been his dishwasher.

* * * *

We stayed two days and two nights in Collioure. We pitched our tent on a lonely pebble beach a few miles' hike from the village, where it was forbidden to camp but unlikely anyone would stumble on us, on a sandy spot between two outcroppings of rock.

We walked back to the village to paint, and returned to our campsite after dinner. We lit no fire. We made love under the stars on an open sleeping bag in front of the tent, our first sex outdoors. We swam, too; the next morning, when the sun had risen high enough to warm the air. The sea was cold. We stayed in only a few minutes and emerged with shriveled penises and tight, wrinkled scrotums that held our testicles close to our bodies for warmth. He followed close behind me up the beach as we picked our way carefully over the pebbles toward the tent. Unsure where to place my foot, I stopped, and he licked me below the neck on the knob of my spine.

"You taste salty."

"Your tongue feels warm." I reached behind me, lifted his hand, and licked his forearm.

We lay sixty-nine on the sleeping bag and brought our frozen sex back to life, then screwed each other in turn

with the warm sun on our backs.

After Collioure we went to Montpellier. We took the train in the morning, made two stops along the way for some brief sightseeing in Perpignan and Narbonne, and got there at nightfall. I'd booked us a room in the same hotel where, seven years before, we'd lain chastely in the same bed, naked together for the first time. Like our visit to Sainte-Ripouze, having sex there would bring another chapter to completion.

Before we got there, another unexpected closure was granted us. In Perpignan, walking along the Basse on our way back to the station from the Palace of the Kings of Mallorca, we saw Marceline seated outside a café and next to her a little girl, some three or four years old.

"Should we say hello?" I asked.

"There's only one way to find out."

"Do you want to?"

"I want to meet her little girl."

We approached the table.

"Marceline."

"Jean-Yves." She turned to her daughter. "Adrienne, this is your uncle."

"Which uncle?"

"My brother. You're not going to say hello?" The

child looked at her lap and shook her head. "She's shy. Why don't you sit down? I won't be here long. We're waiting for someone, and then I have to leave."

Jean-Yves said nothing. We just sat. Marceline broke the silence.

"You're still together. I didn't think you would be."

"I live in the States; Jean-Yves lives here. I'm just on a visit."

"And you got together again."

"We weren't sure we would—at least I wasn't—but we did."

"Are you glad you did?"

"Yes, very."

"I hear he has a restaurant now. That's nice."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't know. I just heard. You still paint?"

"Of course, it's my living."

I felt funny, carrying on a conversation with Marceline while her brother sat near us, not seeming to pay attention. Marceline was polite, and appeared to speak naturally, without rancor, but I could sense her hostility, toward me and toward our relationship. Attitudes in France had changed since her father felt compelled to move his family from Dijon, and Perpignan is no isolated village. I had seen that people there were open about their sexuality,

so whether you approved or not you had to accept it. It was bad form to let your prejudices show here, but she still had them. How could she not, given her background?

Jean-Yves was not deceived by her manner. He, who as a child had instinctively rebelled against the hatred he sensed around him, had had to struggle for years to come to terms with himself and accept that there was no shame in being in love with the person he loved.

"You haven't asked about Gilles."

I waited for Jean-Yves to speak. After a long silence I said, "And we're not going to."

"I couldn't tell you anyway. I left him."

"Have you remarried?"

"I would've. We almost did when I sent Gilles packing, but we couldn't, so we split up."

"So you're alone?"

"No, I'm with someone else."

"You'll marry him?"

"What for? To wash his socks?"

"Will daddy be here soon?" Adrienne asked.

Jean-Yves stirred, the first indication I had that he'd been listening. "Gilles?"

Marceline turned to look at him, as if startled to hear his voice. She may have forgotten he was there. "No, Lucien. I told you we couldn't get married."

Jean-Yves didn't answer. "Did Gilles know?" I asked.

"He knew. He didn't care that I was sleeping with his brother, but I hate to think what he'd have done if we'd got married. And people would talk."

What others thought had always mattered to her. She was a strong-willed, but not a courageous woman.

"Does Lucien see him?" I asked.

"I imagine he does. I don't ask."

"And what about your other child?"

"What other child?"

"The one you had with Gilles."

"We never had a child. What makes you think that?"

"I heard you were pregnant."

"When? Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Gilles told Jean-Yves. Right before he left Sainte-Ripouze."

"Are you sure? No, why would you make that up? I wonder what made him say it."

Another painful silence. The news Marceline and I exchanged was all true, but what we didn't say made it all a lie. Jean-Yves' indifference was the more honest. I needed to hear one lie to make it bearable.

"What do you think of your brother? He's not a kid

anymore, is he?"

"How long were you in the States?"

"Seven years."

It wasn't hard to read her mind. She was thinking,
"Everyone has to grow up."

Jean-Yves stood up. "Do we have anything to say to each other?" he asked. It sounded cruel, but it may have been the kindest way to end the conversation.

* * * *

We meant to spend just one night in Montpellier, revisit some of the highlights of our first trip together, and leave. We hadn't decided on our next stopover.

We left our things at the hotel and returned to the outdoor restaurant on the Place Jean Jaurès for dinner. The waiter who'd been so attentive to Jean-Yves still worked there, looking older and dumpier. He didn't recognize us.

"He doesn't find me as attractive as last time."

"He must like them young. You don't look like an adolescent anymore."

We returned to the hotel early. We had some unfinished business there: to relive our first intimate moments followed by a replay of the most recent.

"As it was," I whispered to him. "Go take a shower

and come back into the room naked."

He disappeared into the bathroom and came out drying himself, as he had nearly eight years before. I kissed him gently on the shoulder at the base of his neck and said, "Now I'll take my shower. Wait for me."

I'd expected our poles to be hard with arousal, but we were just as we had been, aroused to our innermost core with no outward signs. I showered in lukewarm water to stay that way.

He lay on his back on the bed covered by the sheet, not exposed as I'd found him then. I slipped under and lay beside him, our two bodies not touching.

For minute or two we said nothing; then he spoke. "I remember when you got into bed with me that first night — how we lay naked next to each other, talking together as if it were nothing special, and all the time I wanted you to throw yourself on me and claim me as your own."

"All I wanted to do was touch you."

"Okay, touch me. Then fuck me unconscious. *Fais-moi tomber dans les pommes.*"

My hand brushed against his. He returned the pressure. I pressed harder against it, held it, turned my head toward him and licked his ear. I ran my other hand caressingly down his body till it came in contact with his sex. It was stiff as a flagpole. I moved the sheet to the side,

knelt between his legs, and pleased him with my mouth for nearly an hour.

He lay passive throughout, moaning and digging his fingers into the mattress. Only toward the end did he reach out and touch me. It was as if we were reenacting the night of his escape from Sainte-Ripouze, but then he'd been exorcising a demon. Now he was fulfilling a fantasy, and I readily played along with him.

Though his bottom was so wet with my saliva I could have entered him unlubed, I applied a dab before I thrust into him. That's when he grabbed me. I meant to penetrate slowly, but he put his hands on my buttocks and pulled me into him, then entwined his fingers in my hair and drew me down for a kiss.

I rode him till he came. I'd have licked the jism from his chest and cock, but he said, "Don't stop!", so I wiped it up with my hand and brought it to my mouth. Then I remembered our first time, turned him over, and pumped him till I climaxed, my body covering his like a shield.

I awoke as I did the morning after we'd first made love, in a tangle of arms and legs. I gently extracted myself from his sleeping hold, and as I had on the morning we'd first slept together, I sketched his naked, sleeping form. I

left the sketch on the pillow where he'd see it when he woke, and went downstairs to bring us up a breakfast tray.

We stayed in the room until almost checkout time, left our bags behind the desk, and, taking nothing but my largest sketchpad, my charcoals, and a few acrylics, we walked to Antigone. The day was hot and muggy. He took me by the hand and led me, both of us laughing like schoolboys, straight into the spray of Poseidon's fountain. The jets turned off for a moment as if vexed by our intrusion, then a single jet rose up two stories above the god and cascaded down on us. We kissed in plain sight of everyone and came out dripping wet.

"Enough of Montpellier," he said. "Let's spend the rest of the day at the beach."

Soaked to the skin, we took a bus to Maguelon, which we'd heard described as quiet and uncrowded. We walked a long distance along the beach. The further we went, the more nude sunbathers we passed, many of them gay. We shed our clothes and stretched them out on the sand to dry more quickly. I took the art supplies I'd brought and walked back alone to a more populated section of the naturist area that wasn't all men. I'd promised myself to include some female nudes in my sabbatical exhibit.

I laid the pad across my knees and began an acrylic. Jean-Yves had expressed some doubt that they'd let me

paint them. "We'll see," I answered. "I'm not going to paint anyone in particular, just groups of people bathing and sunning."

I was right. Most people ignored me, though a few seemed put out, and one woman approached me angrily, no doubt to lodge a protest, but when she saw that all the figures were anonymous she let me be.

I did only one recognizable portrait, a charcoal of a wrinkled, old woman, her skin loose on her bony limbs, her withered, hanging breasts flattened on her chest. Oblivious to the stares of those around her, she stood in the middle of the beach, hunched forward, knees slightly bent, shrieking and cackling like a fishwife into her cell phone at the unlucky object of her wrath (male, judging by her epithets). I thought I'd captured her perfectly and it would make a fine piece with sepia shading and white chalk highlights.

"*That* I would have liked to see!" Jean-Yves said of her. "Where do we go next?"

"Cap d'Agde. I want to do more nude beach scenes."

"Just don't wander off like that again. Men kept hitting on me."

We left my more unwieldy art supplies and the

canvases I'd completed —everything except our tent, sleeping bags, the clothes on our backs, and what I'd need to paint— at the luggage check at the station (the terrorist threat had made coin lockers obsolete, a thing of the past) and rented a campsite for three nights at the world's largest nudist colony. Holding hands and bare-assed, we explored the facilities. Hundreds of naked bodies of all ages milled about, not just on the beach, but on the streets, in the shops, snacking at cafés, playing tennis and miniature golf; we saw vacationers, lifeguards, waiters, salespeople, all wearing only flip-flops or maybe a hat. We stopped for an ice cream and had to struggle not to giggle when the buxom woman behind the counter asked, "*Deux boules, n'est-ce pas?*"

We saw no inappropriate behavior, no gawkers, until we hiked out into the dunes, where we saw a number of gay couples openly engaging in sex, and we gawked.

I had my sketchbook with me. Jean-Yves winked and said, "Picassos?"

I shook my head. "That would be going *too* far."

A couple sixty-nining a few yards away from us overheard me. One of them looked up and said, "*Ça dérange pas.*"

I shrugged —what the hell?— and sat down to sketch them going at it. After ten minutes or so the same

man asked if I'd finished. They wanted to fuck.

"Encore quelques minutes," I answered.

They were very obliging.

It must have occurred to us —I know it occurred to me— to have sex in the dunes where couples and cruisers who'd come to do the same could see us. Just a thought, not a temptation. We confined our intimacies to inside our tent at night.

The clothes went back on when the sun went down. Some thought a sweatshirt enough. The restaurants required above- *and* below-the-waist attire in the evening. The rest of the time "clothing optional" was the rule.

I finished quite a few large acrylics during our stay, beach scenes and street scenes thronged with naked people, male and female, the best of them a mixed group playing with an enormous beach ball. No one objected to my painting. A few even offered to pose for me. Had I set up an easel to sell caricatures I could have made a tidy sum. Except for one man doing handstands and cartwheels on the beach and the two exhibitionists, however, Jean-Yves was my only model. The line drawings of the couple I'd done in ink, the acrobat got the same treatment as the cellphone hag, and Jean-Yves was treated to full color.

I was beginning to think I'd have enough nudes to fill the large gallery, maybe both rooms, when I put up my

sabbatical exhibition. Wouldn't that stick a feather up the administration's ass? I had a chuckle over the idea of calling the exhibition "Exhibition".

When it was time to move on I asked, "Sightseeing or painting?" Cap d'Agde had been both.

He wanted to see Cassis in good weather. We had five days before he had to return to Dijon.

We first stopped at Esméralda's to drop off my accumulated paintings and pick up a change of clothes. "That's a lot of flesh," she said when she saw what I'd done and asked if I wasn't overspecializing. She adored the acrobat and cellphone hag, though, and asked me to sell her the latter. I wouldn't let her have it; it was a keeper.

We brought my easel, canvas and oils to Cassis, the only medium that could do justice to that intensely blue sea, white cliffs and dark evergreens. There was a cheap hostel with primitive facilities we could stay at somewhere on the trails behind the *calanques*. We planned to return to En-Vau, since the weather had cheated us when we were there in winter. We'd learned of another trail to get there, a few kilometers longer but without the climb.

We made it as far as Port-Pin, and discovered that the ledges on the west wall of the *calanque* were a favorite hangout of sun worshippers. "I'm skipping En-Vau," I said. "There's more than enough here to keep me occupied."

"Esméralda was right. Haven't you done enough *naturist* paintings?"

"A temporary preoccupation. I've gone through phases before."

I now faced the serious logistical problem of finding a place to set up my easel. I had to shell out more than I could afford for a small boat with some flat deck space. I had my doubts about doing good work on anything so unsteady, but the water in the *calanque* was absolutely still except when the sightseeing boats moved in and mine would rock drunkenly back and forth in their wake. When I heard their motors approaching I'd take whatever I was working on off the easel and lay it on the deck. Jean-Yves didn't stay with me on the boat. We claimed a spot for him on a ledge some four meters above sea level, and I anchored in front of it.

I completed one large canvas of sunbathers on the rocks and made good progress on four medium-size paintings of Jean-Yves that I'd be able to finish later: reading on the ledge, about to dive into the *calanque*, treading water beside the boat (it was so clear you could almost see to the bottom), and climbing up to his perch. I held my breath while I worked on the dive canvas. Arms pointing straight up, knees flexed, heels off the rock, toes hooked over the edge, it seemed he would lose his balance

at any moment and come crashing down into the water. Sometimes he'd break pose and lean back against the rocks. More often he sprang into the air and dove. Then I'd work on him smiling up at me from the water and seen from behind on his way up to the ledge.

Reception was poor in the narrow, sheltered inlet. When we went to the village for dinner the second evening, I found a message from Esméralda on my cell phone that Jean-Yves should call Léon. I had a premonition what it would be about: Tatie Hélène had died.

I called Air France immediately and got us two tickets on the first available flight out of Marseille. We forgot about dinner, made the long trek to the hostel to get our belongings, and took a bus to the station just in time to catch the last train to Bandol. Jean-Yves managed to remain outwardly calm, but was so visibly shaken that Esméralda immediately asked what was wrong. He couldn't sleep that night, and paced back and forth in our room till dawn.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Léon and Alain met us at the airport and drove us to the funeral home. On the way they told us what had happened. She'd passed away suddenly of a heart attack. Léon became worried when he couldn't get his mother on the phone for two days and hurried to Dijon where he found her sitting in the chair where I'd painted her. The coroner couldn't say exactly how long she'd been dead.

Decomposition had already set in, and a pane of glass covered her open casket. She was dressed in the same clothes she had worn for my portrait, and looked peaceful. Her features had not altered, nor had her body begun to swell with putrefaction, but when Jean-Yves asked to have the glass removed so he could touch her face, the undertaker categorically refused.

Jean-Yves took his aunt's death worse than her son did. He blamed himself for not having called her or sent a postcard while we were traveling, and felt terrible he hadn't got to say goodbye to her. That he wouldn't have said goodbye if he'd phoned her every day made no difference, nor did it that she hadn't expected to hear from him. We knew we'd be camping most of the time, and it had been arranged that her son would keep tabs on her.

Léon gave us his mother's bedroom so Jean-Yves

wouldn't be alone at night, and took his and Tatïe Mathilde's old rooms for himself and Alain. "Have you ever seen him this way before?" he asked me.

I said no, but I had — on the train to Sicily when I became so angry that he'd lied to me and he told me what Gilles had tried to do and how he'd fled Sainte-Ripouze. I worried that he might fall sick again.

We buried Tatïe H  l  ne on the twenty-ninth of April, next to Mathilde, as she'd requested. Her husband had died over half a century earlier, and she'd lived with her sister for most of those fifty years. They'd led a retiring life, hardly ever had company, and seldom went out, but dozens of people came to her funeral. Though they hadn't seen her often, all Jean-Yves' friends knew and loved her.

"How young they all look!" I whispered to Jean-Yves. "L  on and I must be the oldest ones here."

"It tells you something about her, doesn't it? At Tatïe Mathilde's funeral I saw nothing but priests and old women."

He delayed reopening the restaurant and mourned for two weeks. It was the first time he'd lost someone he truly loved. She was the only mother he'd had, and that only for a few short years. He was inconsolable. He would appear calm, quietly talking to the people around him, and suddenly fall into fits of weeping. "I didn't know it could

hurt so much," he said.

I thought surely he must have felt grief before, when his real mother died. A child longs to be close to his mother, even if she's shown him little affection and treated him coldly, and when she's gone he knows he'll never have the warmth and protection he's longed for. In some ways we suffer more when we lose a parent who's withheld love than someone who's been kind to us.

"I was numb in those days," he explained. "I don't think I had emotions then. I repressed everything I felt."

"That's not the Jean-Yves I knew in Sainte-Ripouze. You were so eager for my friendship, so ready to give of yourself."

"Things began to change when I went into the army. When you met me I was healing."

"Yet you had a breakdown after you got out."

"It's amazing the hold that village had on me. Going back was like closing the door on the future. I was terrified when we went to see it on our trip. If I hadn't met you and Gilles hadn't come after me I might never have been able to run away."

"Yes, we can find opportunities in the most devastating events."

"This death has devastated me. I can't see what good it has to offer."

"There *is* nothing good about your loss. But do you remember what the lawyer said when he read Mathilde's will?"

"That Tatïe H  l  ne had a long life ahead of her and I might want to get married? He didn't know I was gay."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant. I ignored it. I was free to get a place of my own as long as I stayed in Dijon. Why would I leave Dijon? The restaurant ties me down as much as she did. More. There are two kinds of freedom — remember?"

Alain returned to Geneva after the funeral. L  on stayed a few days longer. He'd had the shawl and brooch removed from the coffin and gave them to Jean-Yves as a keepsake. He could also remain in the apartment, which L  on had inherited, rent free and for as long as he wished. Jean-Yves wanted the portrait as well, and begged his cousin to give it to him, but I convinced him she'd have wanted her son to have it, and he agreed to give it up if he could keep it just a little longer. I'd be going to Geneva to do the nude L  on and Alain had commissioned and promised to bring it with me.

Under no circumstances would I leave Jean-Yves alone in that condition, and I realized in my heart of hearts that I didn't ever want to leave him. I phoned Esm  ralda

and gave two weeks' notice. I stayed with Jean-Yves two or three more days after Léon left until I felt sure he'd be all right on his own, then I flew to Marseille, packed my things, rented a car, and was back in Dijon the next morning. I'd painted nothing in Bandol except Esméralda, her garden, and the birds in the *jardin exotique*.

We converted his —that is, Léon's— old room into a makeshift studio. It had a high ceiling and two tall windows, and was well lit in the afternoon. I undertook no new pieces until I went to Geneva to work on Léon's commission. Instead, I finished those of Jean-Yves I'd begun in Port-Pin and helped Arnaud sort through what I'd done since my arrival in France to choose the pieces for the exhibit I'd promised him. He decided to make it exclusively of nudes, his included. "A few more females wouldn't hurt," he said, "just to round it out."

Jean-Yves was sure he could get Coralie to sit for me. I had my doubts, both about her agreeing to it and my wanting to do it in the first place. After all, she'd been one of his lovers. On the other hand, why not? She'd seen my nude self-portrait. She was probably looking right at it every time Jean-Yves screwed her.

After Jean-Yves had returned to work and was too

busy to mope, I spent a weekend in Geneva doing the portrait of Léon and Alain.

"Don't stay a day longer than you have to," he said. "Remember that I'll be without the two people I love most," meaning me and the painting of Tatïe Hélène.

Léon hung his mother's portrait in their living room across from an empty space on the wall he'd reserved for his and Alain's. "So she'll be able to look at it," he explained.

I took out my sketchpad and watched them undress. My art shows how much I like seeing naked men, and I especially enjoy seeing a gay couple naked. It helps me understand how they fit together. Removing their clothes brought out the twenty-odd years that separated them. The age difference was striking: Alain fit and toned, with a full head of dark hair and a close-cropped beard; Léon with a noticeable paunch and flabby thighs, the skin on his face puffy and pinkish. Representing them as the couple they were would raise suspicions, even look unhealthy.

"My mother was appalled at how young Alain was the first time I brought him home," Léon said. "For three years she wouldn't let us have the same bedroom when we came to visit. She made me sleep on the sofa."

Alain added, "She changed her mind when she realized our relationship was going to last. That I was older

now had nothing to do with it."

"But we want her to feel good about it, don't we? What if instead of a joint portrait, I paint you as two men in the baths at the gymnasium in ancient Athens?"

They were uncertain until I sketched in my idea. Léon would be seated on a bench with a sheet draped over his shoulders; Alain would be at his feet looking up at him, one leg crossed under him, the other dangling in the pool. The only question was where they could pose for it.

That's how I came to paint my first and only canvas in the sauna of a gay bathhouse. The conditions were far from ideal. Though the heater was turned off, the oils turned almost liquid, and the stench of turpentine in the small, enclosed space made it impossible to breathe. Léon almost passed out twice, though he downed liters of water, and we couldn't take a break because the manager allowed me a single afternoon to paint it in.

Le vieux sage et son disciple is one of my little-known masterpieces. I talked them into letting me bring it to Dijon for Arnaud's exhibit. They could come down the day it closed, see my work, sign the guestbook, and take it home with them.

After the heat and humidity in the bathhouse it took forever to dry. I expected Jean-Yves to whine about the delay, but he said, "Then I'll be able to see it right away."

That's good."

His acquiescence made me uneasy. "Don't you miss me?" I asked.

"Of course I miss you."

There was more to it than that. I was jealous. His last girlfriend, Coralie, had attended the funeral and shown herself extremely solicitous of his grief. She called to check up on him a few times and twice stopped by with a selection of Teuscher truffles, saying that chocolate increased the flow of endorphins and was good for fighting depression. She'd been at the apartment when I called to tell him my Greek gymnasium idea. And then there was his suggestion of my using her as a model. On top of that, we'd made love less frequently since Tatie Hélène's death, and I knew he was basically heterosexual and only involved in a gay relationship because of me. My fear that it wouldn't last was one of the reasons I resisted getting a PACS.

I couldn't have hidden my feelings very well, because Alain asked, "What's wrong? Has something happened to Jean-Yves?"

"Jean-Yves is fine."

"Something isn't right. I can tell."

"I'd rather not talk about it. I think he's losing interest in me."

Léon snorted loudly. "That'll be the day! You know

Jean-Yves better than we do, but he did live with us for a year, and on this subject we can be more objective. *Vous êtes scotchés, vous deux. Oui, grave.*"

Alain laughed. "He's trying to hide his age again. Don't ask me where he learns his *argot*. I don't know half the expressions he comes up with."

He spoke passable English, so I tried translating for him: "We're stuck to...or on...or with each other. Big time." It turned out he'd understood Léon perfectly. My slang would have gone straight over his head anyway.

When I brought the double portrait back to Dijon, Jean-Yves said it reminded him of us and called it one of the best things I'd ever done. He named it for me: *The Older Sage and His Adoring Pupil*. I thought it wiser to leave out the "adoring".

"Is that how you see me?" I asked. "As an old man?"

"Don't be ridiculous. What's got into you?" And he literally dragged me into the bedroom and we made love.

Lying in his arms in the sexual afterglow, my doubts about his sexuality no longer seemed important. I wanted something that would tie him to me. I said, "Jean-Yves, I want us to get a PACS."

"What about all your arguments against it?"

"Don't you want one?"

"For almost eight years."

"There was no such thing when we were living in Antibes."

"But everyone knew it was coming, and it came just a couple of months after you left."

"Your sister, too?"

"Marceline doesn't follow politics. But I want to know what made you change your mind. All your reasons not to are still valid, and we haven't thought of how to solve them."

"Let's go ahead and go through with it and see if they really cause problems. If they do and we feel the PACS is more important, we'll find a way to work through them."

"That's what I've been saying all along."

We kept it a secret until we'd fixed a date and the announcements were printed.

***Messieurs Benjamin Brooks et Jean-Yves Cadot
ont le bonheur de vous faire part de leur entrée
dans un pacte civile de solidarité
collation le vendredi 23 juin 2006 à 20 heures
au Grand Cadeau, rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Dijon***

I scribbled a note at the bottom of one

announcement: *petits cadeaux seulement, s.v.p.* "How does that look?"

"To a French person, very tacky."

"Well, we're half American. How about this?" I ripped up the card and wrote on another: *No gifts expected, or only très petits cadeaux.*

"If it's in your handwriting it'll pass, but work a 'please' into it somewhere."

We sent announcements to Marceline and Esméralda. Esméralda attended the reception. As we expected, his sister did not, but she sent a polite, if impersonal, note of congratulations and the smallest *petit cadeau* we received. Most of our friends blatantly ignored our injunction to hold back on lavish presents.

A sculptress friend of Jean-Yves' wanted to do a bronze casting of us, an all-male version of Rodin's *Kiss*. There was no way to refuse. With all the running around we had to do applying for the PACS, getting ready for the party, changing my visa status to permanent resident (though I'd only be in France in summer), not to mention painting the nude portraits of Arnaud and Coralie I'd committed to, we had little time left to sit for it, and the sculpture wasn't finished until a day or two before I went back to America. Instead she gave us the best of her preliminary sketches on the day of the reception.

Another friend, a photographer, insisted on making our "wedding" pictures his present, also impossible to refuse. In addition to taking photos at the reception, he had us come to his studio for a formal portrait. Once we were there, he coaxed us out of the rented tuxedos and spent three precious hours photographing us together in sensual poses. He arrived at the reception not just with spotlights and camera, but also an album of a dozen large, beautifully finished, black and white photographs of the two of us that bordered on the erotic. They made more of a hit than the dinner Jean-Yves had so carefully planned but hadn't actually prepared himself.

Arnaud gave us the best abstract in his permanent collection, one of the few I liked. Léon overrode our decision not to go on a honeymoon (we'd taken trips together twice in six months) and gave us a week's vacation for two at a luxury hotel in Bonifacio, breakfast, flight and rental car included. Without knowing it, he chose the perfect place. So much about Corsica reminded us of Sicily. And yes, I did paint there, but not a single nude. Suits were mandatory at the beach we liked best, Palombaggia. Besides, I'd grown tired of doing them for the time being. I drew pictures of peasants of indeterminate age, sun-burnt and wrinkled as prunes, and of stray dogs. I'd have drawn Jean-Yves too if he hadn't been afraid to pet

them.

Alain's gift was by far the most useful and the most appreciated. As a mid-level executive for Swissair, he promised us transatlantic flights at greatly reduced rates for as long as he kept his job.

My exhibit had opened two weeks before we became what I called "husband and husband", though officially a PACS is not a marriage. Arnaud was quite taken with my idea of calling an exhibition "Exhibition" (he called it "*très coquette*"), but it didn't exactly translate into French, so he dubbed it "*Exhibés*". I refused to let him sell anything in it except his own portrait, which I knew he wouldn't do. I needed them for my show at the university gallery. I sent a copy of the catalogue to my new department chair, a woman, as a warning of what to expect.

A startling number of our acquaintances had been to Cassis, Maguelon or Cap d'Agde, where they admitted to having bared it all. The four acrylics of Jean-Yves at Port-Pin, *Boy Wading* (brought out at Arnaud's insistence to show how I had developed as a painter and how my favorite subject had improved), *Le vieux sage et son disciple*, and Arnaud's portrait formed a single grouping, labeled "*le coin des amis*". He regretted having no nude of me to round out the collection. He forgot about the self-portrait in the room above the restaurant, and I didn't

remind him of it. Coralie mentioned it to him at the *vernissage*, when it was too late to make changes. "I'll get you for this," he said.

He had his chance after I left. Jean-Yves told me later that he turned our wedding sculpture and the photographs, enlarged to twice their album size, into Dijon's most successful exposition of the fall. It stayed up for an unprecedented three months, and people still flocked to see it — or us. Word got around; people who came to see it went to eat at the restaurant, people who'd eaten at *Le Grand Cadeau* went to the gallery. Both businesses flourished. Jean-Yves sent an envelope full of newspaper clippings from all over Burgundy, some with photographs. The sculptress and photographer profited too. She landed three important commissions and sold an earlier work to Autun's Musée Rolin; he took orders for prints. Our airbrushed bodies may grace the parlor walls of unknown private homes in France for many years to come.

The party kicked off with half a dozen champagne toasts, proposed in turn by Léon, Alain, the *sommelier* of *Le Grand Cadeau* in the name of the entire staff; then Jean-Yves, impromptu, gave a very moving speech and raised his glass to Tatie Hélène before we toasted each other. I remembered how embarrassed I'd felt for him at his sister's wedding.

We locked elbows, American style, and when our heads came together he whispered, "Don't worry, I never get drunk on Piper Heidsieck."

Worried about what? The twice as many glasses of cheap champagne he'd gulped down one afternoon seven and a half years earlier had not adversely affected his sexual performance, and they certainly hadn't inhibited him!

* * * *

The price list at the entrance to our hotel in Bonifacio caught my eye. Our honeymoon had cost Léon a fortune. "We can't accept this," I told Jean-Yves.

"It's a package, and we took the flight, so we have already."

"I still feel uncomfortable."

Our reception by the woman who checked us in determined me to stay there. She reacted in much the same way the man in Genoa had, but where he'd shown open hostility, she was merely flustered.

"We were expecting a couple," she said. "I'm afraid the room has only one double bed. We can give you another, but the view isn't as nice."

"We are couple," Jean-Yves told her. "We're

celebrating our PACS." In case she wasn't convinced, he put his hand to my chin, turned my head, and kissed me on the lips. The display raised a few eyebrows in the lobby. He defiantly placed a hand on my buttocks as we followed the porter to our room.

The resemblance to our Genoese experience stopped there. The bath was in a separate room and the staff irreproachably gracious.

I tipped the porter generously to atone for our little demonstration of gay pride. He left.

"*Frimeur!*" Jean-Yves said, meaning the tip.

"*Toi-même!*" I answered, and patted his ass.

The festivities at *Le Grand Cadeau* had gone on almost all night, and our flight to Ajaccio had left at some ungodly pre-dawn hour. We were alone in a room together for the first time as an officially recognized couple. Now we could make love.

We slowly unbuttoned each other starting at the shirt collar and kissed every inch of newly exposed skin, the underside of our wrists, too, when we unbuttoned our cuffs. As we peppered our lips with miniscule kisses I unzipped his fly, cupped my hand around his genitals, and with a gentle tug drew them out of his trousers. Then I wrapped both arms around him and left them to hang, half aroused, in the open air while my tongue explored his hard

palate and the inside of his molars.

"If I asked you to tuck me back in, would you do it?"

"Not a chance! If you're thinking of pretending you're drunk again, forget it! You're a big boy now."

"No bigger than I was then."

We tumbled onto the bed, finished undressing each other in a frenzy as unbridled as the first touches we exchanged had been coy and tender, and joined our bodies in an explosion of passion, kicking off our underwear and our honeymoon in a single burst of energy.

* * * *

I'd just made love to him. We lay bathed in sweat in each other's arms on crumpled sheets rank with semen and the musky odor of our bodies. Our pounding hearts and heavy breathing slowly subsided into peaceful normalcy.

For the last two months we'd been living in Dijon as a married couple. It was much the same as when we shared my apartment in Antibes, but now we were equals, two men, self-sufficient and with successful careers. "I leave in less than a week," I said. "We should talk."

"I thought we were going to wait and see how the cycle of long separations and extended visits affected us,

and then talk."

"There are other issues. Sexual issues."

"I know you're not the kind of man who can take long periods of abstinence. I've always known; it didn't keep me from wanting the PACS. It's enough that you're faithful when we're together. Just don't tell me about the others."

"There won't be any others. I mean to keep this commitment, and I don't think it will be hard. I meant your sexual issues."

"Me?"

"You're not a hundred percent gay; we both know that. You'll be suppressing a whole side of your sexuality."

"Coralie said the same thing, only more harshly. 'You enjoy fucking women but like to get fucked by men.' Of course she was angry when she said it."

"She was still right."

"Correction: I like getting fucked by you. You weren't the first man who fucked me; there were others, more than I can count, and I didn't like it."

"Can I fill your need for women?"

"What need? I only need you. Coralie didn't understand—not at first anyway—that I didn't need men, that I needed a certain man. She thought she could fill my need for men. She talked me into letting her do me with her

vibrator. I didn't like it; it hurt. Nowhere near as much as what happened to me as a kid; the pain was bearable. But I still didn't like it."

"And with me?"

"You never hurt me."

"I've seen you wince."

"*It* hurts a little sometimes, not often, but you never hurt me. And I always like it."

"But after me fucking you, you like fucking women best."

"Not so. I like making out with you and sucking you and having you suck me, and I like to fuck you too. Fucking women comes sixth on my list at the very earliest."

"Prove it."

We've made love so often it all blurs together in my mind. Some stand out as special, and most of those I've written about. This was one of them. If I blot out everything around me and focus on the sensations of my body and search out my prostate pressing forward against the base of my penis deep inside my pelvis, it grows warm and a sweetness spreads out from its center. Sitting or standing or lying on my side, I feel my body in another position, lying on my back, my knees beside my ears, every muscle gone limp, a soft whimpering in my throat, his belly weighing on my buttocks, his heat and hardness filling me,

his throbbing like a deep kiss. I've felt it many times, but when I feel it in my imagination we're always in our room in Dijon, in Tatie Hélène's double bed.

PART VII. ARRANGEMENTS

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Setting up my sabbatical show was a nightmare. After the *insouciance* of Jean-Yves and his friends in regard to depiction of the human body, I came close to chucking my job and going back to live in France as Jean-Yves' dependent.

Our new chairperson, Anita Hogarth, leafed through my portfolio and said, "Nudes, nudes, and more nudes. Don't you think it's about time you grew up?"

I might have answered, "All those perfect little circles in a row with the saw-teeth lines that make them look like Christmas tree decorations — is that what grown-ups paint?" but I could see I'd have a hard enough time without bringing up her trashy semi-abstract pop.

"I suppose we'll have to let you hang *some*, but no nudes in the front gallery and a variety of subjects in the back room."

She'd put some half-dozen pictures of Jean-Yves to one side. "Who is this guy?"

"My partner."

"An exhibitionist?"

That was going too far. "You can say what you like

about my art, but I'll thank you to keep your mouth shut about my partner."

"I'll allow only one nude of the same person, and no more than one picture of him—"

"Or her."

"...that is, if you *have* painted him with his clothes on."

"I see you're not looking at my work very closely." I took the portfolio and started pulling out less revealing pictures of him. "If I follow your rules it'll make for a pretty skimpy exhibit. People will think I frittered my sabbatical away."

"Not necessarily. You only took a semester."

I left the layout to her and concentrated on getting her to agree to my choice of what to hang. I got her to okay two Jean-Yves nudes, the dive and the climb back to the ledge, on the grounds they formed a set, and with the support of others in the department wore her down to let me put a beautiful portrait I'd done of him in Dijon in the main gallery. It was my favorite painting. His charcoal gray eyes at once illuminated and darkened the canvas. She interspersed the clothing-optional beaches with bathers in swimsuits, nixed the street scenes from Cap d'Agde as "flights of fancy, wishful thinking", said the cellphone hag was in poor taste (she was, but my drawing of her wasn't),

and hung every stray dog I'd painted in Corsica. I wanted to drag her, kicking and screaming, to Arnaud's latest.

"Anita isn't really a prude," my old chairman said.

"The administration's put the fear of God into her."

"Department chairs are supposed to support their faculty."

"Believe me, no way will any of us vote for her again."

Cold comfort. To give my students a better idea of what I'd accomplished, I removed everything on my office walls and put up some of the better pieces I'd brought back from France — the cellphone hag, for one. That earned me a stern letter from the academic dean, exhorting me to get them out of my office on the grounds they intimidated students. I wrote back that nobody had complained to me, but I'd consider his request if he could provide even one signed statement from a student. If he couldn't and persisted in insisting I take them down, I would file a formal grievance. That shut him up.

Whence this new-found assertiveness? It wasn't just exasperation; there was also the new Jean-Yves' assertiveness, as in the hotel lobby in Bonifacio.

The exhibit finally came down, and I shoved the whole frustrating experience to the back of my mind. As far as concerns my work, I forgot about everything but my

classes and fell back into the familiar routine.

I still wished I were back in Dijon. I missed Jean-Yves, I missed France, I missed having sex. Of the three, I missed Jean-Yves most. I didn't find myself lusting after other men — I missed having sex with him. Since he wasn't there, the only noticeable change having a PACS made in my life was the amount I spent on international calling cards. We'd have spoken every day if it weren't for the seven-hour time difference and his eight-to-midnight schedule.

There wasn't much I could tell him. He had more to say. I knew his friends; he'd never been to the States. He got his license and bought a car to drive out of the city and stock his restaurant directly from the farms. He converted the upstairs into a second dining room. He earned his first Michelin star.

The week before my sabbatical exhibition closed, someone left a note for me at the gallery: "I want very much to purchase one of your paintings, but I see it belongs to a private collection. Could you put me in touch with the owners so I can see if they'd be willing to sell? — Catherine Gorman."

Like all stories, mine is made up of coincidences.

This one will defy belief.

I couldn't imagine which painting was part of a private collection unless it was one I had just sold. I checked the brochure. There was only one — Esméralda's portrait. I couldn't possibly sell that one.

I skimmed the guestbook to see if a Catherine Gorman had signed it. She'd left a note above her name: "I saw a portrait of a woman who looks just like my mother. Then I saw the title was *Madame Mérois*, and when I turned around I saw that you've painted her garden too! This is incredible! I absolutely must have that painting!!! P.S. I love your nudes."

She wanted to buy a painting she already owned. I couldn't wait for Christmas to let her know.

She lived a few hundred miles away. I gave her time to get home before calling. As soon as she heard my name she said, "I know. Mother told me."

"Your Christmas surprise has been spoiled."

"This was a bigger surprise. If someone delivered a wrapped painting to my door, I'd have guessed. By the way, she says I don't have to wait till Christmas."

I didn't wait till Christmas either. I went to Dijon as soon as classes were over and brought Jean-Yves back with me for spring semester in the middle of January when *Le Grand Cadeau* had its six-week *fermeture annuelle*.

He was impressed with the size of my house, which when I bought it had been little more than an oversized bungalow. To the right of a small vestibule inside the front door, a long living room ran the length of the house with a large wall, a showplace for my paintings, facing a line of six small-paned windows. A door at the far end opened onto an enclosed added-on sun porch, half the width of the living room and sealed off for winter. To the left was a twelve-foot square dining room, and next to it the kitchen with a central butcher-block counter (another recent addition), dishwasher, walk-in pantry, and a breakfast nook in the corner. A door next to the left of the pantry led to the basement, which housed the washing machine, my workshop, and a lot of junk, and outside to a trellised, covered walkway between the house and the garage. Jean-Yves hated the electric range and pronounced my cookware totally inadequate. Now he knew what to get me for my birthday.

Straight ahead of the vestibule was a narrow hall and alongside it a staircase that made a ninety degree turn to the left at a landing three-quarters of the way up, with my favorite sketches in metal frames on the wall. A small guest bedroom at the end of the hall nestled between the sun porch and the pantry, and a narrow bathroom with a toilet, sink and shower stall was tucked under the stairs.

The upstairs, originally half the size of the ground floor because the roof sloped on four sides, was my pride and joy. To the left, on the front side of the house, was the large master bedroom with an attached bathroom, a dressing room, and two walk-in closets. To the right was my studio which I had designed and largely built myself. I'd had the roof torn out and raised and put in a skylight across the back of the house, which faced east, and made the outside wall below it all glass from floor to ceiling. Beyond the glass wall was a large balcony I'd built over the sun porch, pantry and breakfast nook. I'd reinforced the roof above the walkway and installed a kind of patio above the garage. Finally, between the inside wall of the studio and where the skylight began I'd built a loft for storing my finished paintings, accessible by a spiral staircase. I turned the space on one side of the door into a cozy conversation area, with a small sofa, two armchairs, a coffee table, and albums that contained photographs of virtually everything I'd painted since high school. On the other side was a closet with a sliding door with shelves for my paints and brushes and other such equipment, props to use in portraits, and floor space for my easel, rolled canvas, large pieces of cardboard, and so forth.

I was in class for most of the day. Left alone in the house, Jean-Yves kept himself amused leafing through the

albums of my past work. I took the bus to work so he'd have the car for grocery shopping. He marveled at the low prices, but found our supermarkets appalling: no true veal, little lamb, nobody had heard of *pintade*, a meager selection of not-always-fresh fish, a handful of imported cheeses at astronomical prices, the produce wrapped in cellophane and unsmellable. He said our bread tasted like cotton, and French wines were overpriced. We were both unfamiliar with the California varietals and hesitated to experiment. I did belong to a health food co-op that stocked some unusual items, and the fruits and vegetables were flavorful, though droopy-looking, but it was small and often closed.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, when I taught art history, he came to school with me and sat in on my lectures, and I took the opportunity to introduce him to a few colleagues. The rest of the time we lived quietly together and saw few people, except when I invited a small group of friends for dinner one night. It was the exact opposite of how he lived in Dijon. We'd made a one hundred eighty degree turn — *he* used to be the loner.

His visit went by all too quickly. I meant to wait till summer before returning to France, but we missed each other too much, and I spent a week there during spring break. As summer was drawing to an end we took a hard

look at our long-distance, commuter relationship. Over the past year we'd been together five months and one week. The separations were painful; eight transatlantic flights, even at reduced rates, added up quickly; one of us was always living out of a suitcase; no place felt truly like home; we never felt rested after a vacation. Running back and forth like that, I did less art and fell way behind in my classes. It was far from ideal, but it was the best we had.

"You were bored in the States," I told him. "You know you were."

"Maybe if my English were better and I could get around more."

"I'd rather be in Europe myself. We have our friends, we live more openly as a couple, this city is so much more vibrant... And then there's France. The trouble is, as an American I'd never get a permanent, decent-paying teaching position, I'd have no health coverage..."

"There are other things you don't want to give up, and America has other advantages."

"Like what?"

"Your house and studio for one. Where in France would you find a work space like that? And in America we could adopt a child. Our government hardly ever lets same-sex couples adopt."

"Still thinking about that little girl?"

"Or boy. It would be nice to be a father."

* * * *

This, I'm told, is how it happened.

Three students, two male, one female, had been awarded summer grants for projects in installation art and would be responsible for the first exhibit of the semester. The weekend before classes were due to start I "supervised" their setting up (*i.e.*, opened the gallery and locked the building when they left). They finished after midnight.

The woman, who lived out in the country and whose car was too small for her project, had come to campus with the two men in their SUV. I found them in the parking lot getting ready to change a flat tire and offered to drive them home. They could take care of the tire in the morning, when they'd be able to see.

My memory stops there. Evidently I went to drive the woman home first. On a back road a car came hurtling toward us out of the fog, spinning like a pinwheel, crashed into my front passenger door, and we careened across the road into the guardrail. The airbag saved my life. My left thigh was crushed, four ribs and a collar bone broken, I had a fractured skull and a ruptured spleen. The student sitting

beside me was killed; the men in back escaped with minor cuts and major bruises. I was five days in a coma, and conscious but unable to connect with what was going on around me for another three.

The world came back into focus. I lay in a hospital bed, my left leg in a cast suspended by wires from the ceiling, an IV drip in my right wrist, a tube sticking out of my stomach, another coming out of an artery in my groin, a very disagreeable catheter shoved up my dick, and a tangle of wires ran from a half-dozen electrodes taped to my chest and forehead to a monitor by the bed. I groaned loudly.

"*T'es vivant?*" said a voice sitting somewhere near my head.

"Jean-Yves! What're you doing here? What am *I* doing here, for that matter?"

"You've been in an accident."

"Tell me about it."

"How do you feel?"

"Awful. How'd you get here?"

One of my students had talked the department secretary into letting her into my office to look for an address book to notify my brother.

"I'm sure the hospital has taken care of that," she was told.

"They haven't. No one picks up the phone. I thought

maybe I could find a work number or something."

My brother and his family were on holiday in the Caribbean. They still didn't know I'd been hurt. She didn't know Jean-Yves' last name, and went through my address book page by page looking for his number. She found two, and rang up what turned out to be a restaurant. She didn't know he was a chef and thought she'd dialed a wrong number. She asked was there anyone there called Jean-Yves and could she speak to him. Since the hostess's English was limited to food, prices and reservation times, she had an awful time making herself understood, but the message got through.

"Are you going to tell me about it?" I repeated. "I meant it literally. I don't remember a thing."

I was asking a question halfway through his narration when a bossy-looking nurse opened the door. She ignored me and addressed Jean-Yves.

"He's talking. That's a good sign. Does he remember English?"

"Not a word," I answered.

"Are there any places on your body you can't feel?"

"Unfortunately, no."

Jean-Yves could see that I was out of danger and the blow to my head hadn't affected my intelligence. "Shall I get your paints?" he asked in French. "Your face is very

colorful."

The nurse turned on him. "Who're you? Who let you in?" Then, to me, "Is he a relative?"

"My partner."

"So he's not a relative. I'm sorry, you'll have to leave. Next of kin only."

"We have a PACS, the French equivalent of a civil union."

"You're not in France. I'll ask the doctor if he can be here when I see him. Until then — out he goes!"

"He's come here all the way from France. Are you going to ask him to sit in the corridor?"

"No, in the waiting room."

"You better sit with him and keep him company. If not, I'll have your ass!"

Jean-Yves cracked up, so she knew he understood what we were saying. "Out! Out!"

"Push the call button," I told him in English.

"That won't do any good," the nurse said. "They know at the desk I'm in here."

It's a good thing she didn't understand French, or she wouldn't have let him do what I said next. "Unplug the monitor."

In less than thirty seconds five people came running into my room. "Get that bitch out of here!" I yelled.

Another nurse said, "We can't have him carrying on like this. Get the doctor on call to order a sedative."

"Getting that bitch out of my room is all the sedative I need!"

I've never seen a doctor materialize so quickly. "What's going on here?" he asked.

"He's hysterical."

"I'm not hysterical; I'm pissed. They're not the same."

The doctor agreed with me. "Okay, what're you pissed about?"

"The man is my partner by civil union. He is fully authorized under French law to make all decisions for me in case I'm incapacitated. I say he stays here."

"And who says he can't?"

All eyes turned to Nurse Bossy.

"Let's reassign him another nurse. Now will someone please plug in the monitor?"

Jean-Yves, who was still holding the end of the wire, did as he asked.

The room emptied, and Jean-Yves took up his story where he'd left off. A younger, prettier and politer nurse came into the room.

"Would you like to step outside for a moment while I take care of him?"

"He stays here. I did the same for him in Italy when there was no legal bond between us."

"You're sure? I'm here to change your linen and clean you up."

"Good. Teach him how to do it."

"I'm also going to remove the catheter."

"Even better."

She checked my vitals and took care of some messy personal business. "Now get some sleep," she said.

"Doctor's orders."

"No. We have important things to discuss."

"What's the rush? I'll be here when you wake up."

I woke up with just the IV, half as many electrodes, and the cast.

"I've been thinking," Jean-Yves said, "and I've made up my mind. I'm moving to the States."

"You can't! What about everything you've worked for?"

"*You're* everything I've worked for."

"I won't let you do it."

"You're in no condition to stop me. If the PACS is going to mean anything at all we'll have to live together. I have to be there when you need me; you have to be there

when I need you."

"You *are* here."

"Thanks to one of your students. As far as I can tell, no one else cares."

"No, nobody gives a good god damn, and they won't give a good god damn if you're here either. You saw what it's like. Our PACS means nothing to them; there's no civil union in this state. All they care about is marriage."

"We can get married? There's no civil union, but we can marry? I'll never understand Americans."

"You're not alone there. Sometimes I don't. Yes, some churches will perform marriages for same-sex couples, but the government doesn't recognize it. It has no legal standing. Now if it's a man and a woman, then they are legally married. The church ceremony is enough."

"If we just have a church ceremony can we wear wedding rings?"

"Anybody can wear a wedding ring. That won't get you into my hospital room automatically."

"I could lie and tell them I was your legal husband."

"You couldn't be. Men can't marry here. Even if a priest or minister's signed off on it they won't stand up and take notice. A copy of the PACS with all those official-looking stamps and a call from the French Consulate might have some effect. I don't know."

"So we could get married in a church, then? That's at least something. But no Roman Catholic ceremony, no communion, no abracadabra."

"I'm not talking about us getting married. I'm explaining how things are. We *have* our PACS. The Catholic Church won't perform a gay marriage anyway. Now the Unitarians, the Anglicans..."

"And no tuxedos."

"You talk as if we *were* getting married."

"Aren't we?"

"You're nuts! *Complètement dingue*. What'll you do here? How will you find work?"

"I have more experience than some men who've been chefs their whole lives. I've run my own restaurant. My Michelin star ought to be worth *something*."

"Do you know how hard it is to find a job in this country? Do you know how hard it is for foreigners to get a work permit?"

"There's our PACS."

"I told you already, there's no civil union in this state. Anyway, that's the feds. They care even less."

"Listen. We've already established they won't let you teach in France. I was *sous-chef* at the Sofitel. They know what I made *Le Grand Cadeau* into, starting from nothing. They'll find me a position. It'll take one phone

call."

"Find you something how close? What makes you think they can find you something here?"

"If not right away then eventually. Once I have a job in the States I can transfer. You have a Hyatt here, a Marriott, a Hilton, a Radisson...you name it. The big international chains work together more than you think. They're always doing favors for each other. People hop from one to the other all the time."

"You seem to have everything figured out."

"I wasn't sleeping."

"I don't want you to give up everything for me."

"What am I supposed to do? Give *you* up for everything else? I wouldn't have any of it if it weren't for you."

"But your restaurant! How can you give that up?"

"How can I give *you* up? The restaurant I can sell; who on earth would buy you? You'll see, they'll snap it up. It has a good reputation, a first-rate staff and kitchen crew, it's fully equipped... I bet it's worth five times what it was when I bought it. With the dollar this low I might come here a millionaire."

"And the apartment?"

"That belongs to Léon."

"It's your *Grand Cadeau*," I pleaded.

"I'd rather be your *petit cadeau* than have a *grand* one."

"I never heard you call yourself that."

"No, but I've thought it ever since Gilles made his snide remarks. Look, I know what I want, I know how to get it, and I'm going to go for it. I'll do it too."

"You'll have to improve your English."

"Okay, not one more word of French till I take you home."

"J'sais pas. Faut y réfléchir."

"Not one more word of French."

"All right already! I'll think about it. Promise you'll think it over too."

"I already have."

"Think it over some more. Will you buzz for a nurse?"

"Buzz?"

"La sonnerie. What'd you think it meant?"

"La saouûler."

I thought he just had school English. Where had he picked up the slang? And what made him think he could use it as a verb?

A new nurse came into the room. "Do you need anything?" she asked Jean-Yves. "Is he awake?"

"Very. And he won't listen to me."

"I have listened to you, and it's tired me out."

"He can't accept changes."

"Like hell I can't!"

"Have you two finished arguing?" she harrumphed.

"If you have, can one of you tell me what I can do for you?"

"Where've they put my belongings?"

"Which belongings?"

"My keys, for one."

"In that drawer."

"Is it locked?"

"No."

"Take my keys," I told Jean-Yves. "You can't go on living in the hospital. And take my car registration too."

"What good will that do? The thing is totaled."

Less than ten years earlier I'd had to push Jean-Yves to find a job, negotiate for him, and set him up to land him a job in a kitchen, and it took me eight months. Five days after our conversation he strode into my hospital room grinning from ear to ear and announced, "It's all taken care of. I'm the new executive chef at the Radisson. I start in three months if we can get all the paper work done."

"So you're going back to France?"

"Is that all you have to say to me? I have to apply

for the visa, but the Radisson can push that through in a week. I'm staying here until you're out of the hospital and I've seen for myself that you can get around well enough to take care of yourself."

"I'll get an aide."

"Who? Nurse Bossy? No, I'm staying right here."

"And how will you sell the restaurant?"

"Léon's taking care of it. I've done my bit. It's your turn to get to work phoning churches."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah. What's this shit about only two weeks' paid vacation?"

* * * *

I couldn't believe how easy it was. It took longer than he said, but by his next birthday we'd been living together for two weeks, he was running the kitchen at the Radisson, *Le Grand Cadeau* had been sold, and he'd put I don't know how much money in a Swiss bank in both our names. (I do know how much, but I'm not telling. That's what Swiss bank accounts are for.)

"So, when are we getting married?" he asked.

"When I'm off these damn crutches."

"How about June twenty-third?"

"Why the twenty-third?"

"The same day as our PACS."

"Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"Definitely June twenty-third, so you'll only forget our anniversary once a year."

"We'll have a second honeymoon."

"At least. Montpellier was a honeymoon, Italy was a honeymoon..."

"Some honeymoon. You were sick as a dog."

"...even Sainte-Ripouze was a kind of honeymoon. I bet ours was better than Gilles and Marceline's. Where will we go this time?"

I thought a minute. "Vermont, the first state to recognize civil unions. We'll keep it short."

"I agree. Five honeymoons is overdoing it, and there'll be others."

"Others?"

"They'll legalize gay marriage here someday. A few States already have, right?"

"Ever the optimist, aren't you? Well, it could happen. We'll wait till autumn, when I have my long weekend. I promised you once that I'd show you *our* fall colors."

"Sounds like a plan. It means you'll paint. It wouldn't be a honeymoon if you didn't."

"And other things. I always paint."

"We always do the other thing too."

Jean-Yves always had the last word. I don't think I've won an argument with him since that first year in France.

We exchanged vows in the same style. We intended to write our own, of course; nearly everybody does now. Jean-Yves wanted none of that having and holding and obeying crap anyway, especially after I told him that holding meant "hanging on to" and didn't have anything to do with making out. As for "What God has joined together, let no man rend asunder" he said wryly, "They'll try anyway."

We spent an afternoon writing them, showed them to each other, and immediately fell to arguing about what we were promising each other, objecting to a phrase here, a word there. So we compromised and phrased our vows as a dialogue. I let Jean-Yves have the last word. The minister loved the idea.

– *You left your life behind you and came to be with me.*

– *You gave me that life. You taught me to hope.*

– *You taught me courage. You weren't afraid to love me.*

– *I didn't love myself. You taught me self-esteem.*

– You taught me responsibility to others. Before we met I cared only for myself and my art.

– I'd been imprisoned by bigotry. You showed me independence.

– You were your own man. You tied yourself to me.

– There are many kinds of freedom.

Our wedding dinner was a much smaller affair than the gala we had to celebrate our PACS. The Radisson wouldn't hear of their executive chef holding it anywhere else, but small towns in America being what they are, they didn't want us too visible. Two men toasting each other and kissing might offend their customers. They gave us a private room off the main dining area that would accommodate twenty people at most. We decided on fourteen so we'd have space to mill about and socialize. With ourselves, Léon, Alain, my brothers and sisters-in-law we could invite six more. Jean-Yves has no patience for American prudishness, and was put out.

"Did you want to invite hundreds? Small wedding, quiet honeymoon..."

"It's the principle. I don't like hiding it; I want everybody to know."

"They will. You'll be listed as my spouse in the next faculty phonebook. We don't have to scream it from the rooftops."

"Things are different in France."

"You're forgetting Sainte-Ripouze."

We honeymooned the second weekend in October. The autumn colors were at their peak. We drove, mostly. My left leg was still very weak; I couldn't walk far. The doctors said I might walk with a limp for the rest of my life. "I won't be able to keep up with my lizard," I said, kissing his tattoo. "I never could."

We pulled into a scenic overlook and sat on a low wall at the edge of the parking lot, the forest spread below us, an endless crazy quilt of crimson, orange, yellow, brown, dark and light green.

"I'll go to the car and get your paints," he said.

"No, I just want to sit here with you."

We stayed there a long time, silent, hand in hand, watching the play of sunshine on the trees. The clouds would roll past, the sun would break through, and one color, then another, would blaze up like a flame then subside into shadow. On the slopes, where they caught the light at an angle, the leaves glowed and became translucent.

"*Could* you paint this? Remember the cliffs across from where I lived, how they kept changing? Only this is beautiful."

The afternoon wore on. A breeze sprang up. It was

growing chilly.

"So, what's our next major step?" I asked. "Or do we just go back home, keep to ourselves, and lead a semi-closeted existence?...happily ever after."

"I'd like to adopt a child."

"I've gone that route already. I remember a frightened little boy who'd never known the security of a loving family."

"What happened to him?"

"I married him."

When we make love nowadays I bottom four times out of five. I'll feel his mouth racing over my sex, and a moment later I'm folded back over myself, his penis bucking inside me, and from pubic bone to coccyx I open like a chasm of quivering ecstasy to engulf him utterly.

Sometimes I feel insecure that he says he's chosen to be gay. Will there come a day when he'll want more than just me? I keep it to myself; he'd be hurt if I told him. Just see what he's given up for me: his *Grand Cadeau*, his friends, his country, his language, his sexual identity. He broke with Coralie before he even knew I'd come back. How could I doubt him?

I don't, of course. It's just that for the first time in my life I know what it means to need another person so desperately, and so I wonder: *Is it really possible to give up*

one's sexual identity?

That I could ask him, and I did once. He answered,
"My sexual identity is that I love you."

Funny, the tricks life plays on us. When I first knew
him, it terrified me to think that he'd make me his whole
life. Now he has become mine.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anel Viz, a native New Yorker transplanted with only mild success to the Midwest and who has spent much of life in French-speaking countries, returned to his childhood passion of writing fiction and poetry a few years ago. He looks forward to devoting himself to it full time after he retires from college teaching in a couple of years. He writes in a variety of genres and enjoys pushing the envelope, both in his literary experiments and his treatment of sex. His stories appear regularly in *Wilde Oats* online magazine.

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