

Shadows

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At 3:00 in the afternoon, I was drinking my morning coffee in a *place* in Bonnieux that opened to a north facing valley. No sun reached our table on that October day. Nevertheless, the pleasure was tangible. The French have surely devised a better word for “pleasure,” the effortless ease and contentment you experience when you sit outside in autumn in a small town in Provence and overlook the amber tinted olive fields, listen to isolated footsteps tapping on stone, and smell lavender hovering around your skin like sun – when you absorb how the French have composed their earth.

Late to rise, therefore late to markets, ruins, and food on this, my first trip to Europe in years and my partner Bernie’s first since he was a teenager. For a time, I visited Europe every year or two. Then my sister got sick and I spent the next several years taking care of her and after she died, I spent years thinking about her dying. The summer before our trip, Bernie’s mother had died and in a gesture of sympathy, Bernie’s

friend Melissa and her husband had offered us their home in Le Paradou, a village near Arles.

Like all residents in Le Paradou, the owners had painted the shutters a calm, depthless sky blue, a proclamation of hope against the worn-away stone walls. The house was a *mas*, a Provençal farm house, built in the mid 1700s, which had been the home and workshop of the village *charron*, repairer of wagons and carriages. Set on one side of a stone wall on a road lined with plane trees, it was a ghost house.

Not only the ghost of the original *charron* but mementoes of the former owner, violinist and conductor A., were scattered around as though, in a few minutes, he would set up his music stand under the fig tree and play Bach's violin concerto. On a table, his guest book lay open with thank you notes from friends he had entertained more than ten years before. His shoes lay beside the door.

A. had been a member of a world-renowned string quartet and had converted the enormous room in which the *charron* had worked into a music hall where Casals and Stern had played. Every day for an hour right after he rose, A. had played Bach on his violin in the music room. When the owners were here, they played Bach recordings every morning in his honor. A. was dead and buried in a cemetery on top of Les Baux, an old fortress, but, beyond a doubt, his spirit preferred this *mas*.

Bowls of dried lavender, so old that time had sucked out any drop of purple, sat in each room, their overly sweet scent suffusing our clothes, the sofas, the kitchen towels. For Bernie it triggered a memory of visiting his dying grandfather's house, when the windows had been closed for weeks and the air was stale with the odor of lavender

toiletries. Now, in this lavender-saturated air, Bernie sensed an older presence inhabiting the *mas*.

The twelve pages of instructions from the owners about the *mas* included data on each tile, set of curtains, and piece of furniture added since A.'s death. The house was a memorial, a letter from the owners to A.: "Dear A., we haven't changed a thing unless we absolutely had to and we always buy locally."

We also contended with the ghosts of the owners, Melissa and her husband. I felt envy of their good fortune in having this house, coupled with disapproval (a close relative of envy, augmented by pride) that they hadn't decorated better. Cooking omelets in their pans in a traditional kitchen, three times as big as the living room, we moved cautiously, feeling like shadows. Or maybe it was because we didn't remove the front shutters and let in the light, which would have required lifting off the shutters, then rehang them at night. They were heavy, it was true, but, in ways we didn't understand, letting the light in would have been psychologically difficult. Maybe it was the ghost of Bernie's long ago love affair with Melissa. In fact, she wasn't a friend at all but an old lover offering him the gift of the house after his mother's death. Perhaps we didn't have to rehang the shutters at night, but we weren't sure, we felt tentative about everything. In front of the fireplace, the ghosts all seemed to gather comfortably – the *charron*, A., Bernie's mother, my sister, and the old relationship with Melissa. Faced with such a crowd, we were incapable of doing anything as substantial as opening shutters and letting in some light.

Though the temperature was unseasonably warm, the swimming pool had been cleaned and drained. Six brown leaves lay on the bottom. The empty pool signaled

autumn, firmly, indisputably. Neither the cypresses lining the property and waving in the wind, the 26 degrees centigrade temperature, nor the blue sky could mount a rebuttal to that nearly immaculate, abandoned hole.

Despite an apricot orchard, green shrubs, and a scrupulously clean lawn large enough for *pétanque*, the grounds felt bereft, as though someone had clipped the cypresses, swept under the fig tree and disappeared. Maybe it was the dearth of fallen leaves on the lawn or the lack of wind inside the stone walls. Whether arranging fresh fruit, a shop window or backyard, the French possess a gift for elegant presentation and that elegance can suggest a frozen perfection, a sort of absence.

When we finally awoke each morning, we squirmed into our clothes quickly, but never quickly enough. In the bedroom, a white comforter and white sheets lay quietly in front of white walls, white chairs, and lamps shaded with crumpled white cloth. But not a newly hatched white – a white burdened by years of being white and therefore comfortable, easy with itself and short on energy. The room dropped stillness and generated a neutral milieu in which we could lie around passively, or should we wish to face the world, resurrect ourselves and traipse downstairs.

Bernie cried one morning, thinking about his five foot tall, ninety-two year old mother and how angry she'd been about dying. Not wanting anyone to remind her she had no choice, his mother had raged at him for trying to ease her death and help her on her way. With her signature gestures, grand, half serious, half theatrical, she waved her arms, making a show of dismissing the situation and Bernie, whose presence in her apartment showed she really was dying. But her gestures had been feeble, barely a ghost of her previous self.

We drove to a different market each day, following the towns on the owners' list: Monday: Fontvieille, Stes. Maries-de-la-Mer; Tuesday: le Paradou, Tarascon; Wednesday, St Rémy de Provence. We were always late.

In Apt, there were piles of cotton cloth, napkins and scarves, dyed shutter blue, sunflower, brick red, and nasturtium, that wrinkled with each hand that lifted them. As I stared at one, then the next, my eyes lost focus and I imagined the floral and paisley patterns of Indian fabric, which the French had imported in the 1790s. When the Indian material became too costly, Napoleon ordered the French to copy the designs. In time, the patterns enlarged, hues burst from the cloth, and French fabric became more vibrant than their shadowy prototype. I wanted their sun and warmth and color for bedspreads, curtains, and tablecloths, but I couldn't choose. I didn't want just one, I wanted the ten best so that when I came home from work, they would make me happy. Could any fabric bring that about? Well, maybe Provençal fabric could, but which one? "Tomorrow," I said. "I will go to Beaucaire tomorrow and choose." But I never did.

More often than not, because the markets closed at Noon and we arrived at 12:01, what we stumbled on were stall owners packing up. We drifted around anyway, listening to the going-home clanging, tables collapsing, boxes landing with a thud in truck beds, a pile of cloth thumping softly on another pile, olives sliding into jars, jars clattering against each other, banter about the day. Always someone hadn't quite finished or wasn't in a hurry to get home and, in Tarascon, we found him – maybe his in-laws were visiting, maybe he didn't like his wife, maybe his wife had died. Testing his olives, pointing to our tongues for salty, puckering lips for sour, we became a tiny part of market life even if we had arrived only in time to sense its absence.

We hadn't planned on this – we had planned on rising at nine a.m., visiting the amphitheater in Nîmes between ten and noon, lunching at the three-star restaurant only one block from the Le Paradou *mas*, then seeing the Roman ruins at Glanum. Instead we meandered towards Bonnieux, turned off to Gordes, decided on Rousillon, ended up in St. Rémy.

Everywhere whiffs of slightly dusty lavender, dried and fresh, with their reminder of an older generation's scent, permeated our skin, nostrils, hair and eyes. In St. Paul de Mausole, from the window of Van Gogh's hospital room – purple lavender fields. In Gordes, from the mountain peak to the valley – lavender.

In Bonnieux, a few hours from dusk, the mistral blew us up the steep steps inside the town wall, round and round to a medieval chapel at the pinnacle where we stared across the valley at the Marquis De Sade's chateau in Lacoste. *Le plaisir de souffrir*. Did the Marquis choose the pleasantness of Provence as a counterpoint to the pain he enjoyed? By the time we escaped the obstinate wind in Bonnieux, we understood why the mistral drives people crazy. Maybe the mistral caused the Marquis to go crazy too.

At the 800 foot high fortress of Les Baux, I understood Rapunzel's story. What made Les Baux seem massive was that it sprang straight off the valley floor, so high a wall that an attacking army wouldn't have seen that a mesa halfway up supported a village. So high I thought about how long it would take, if you were a princess, to descend from the fortress tower to the top of the mesa on which it sat, much less walk all the way down to the plain, a kilometer below, probably planted even then with orderly rows of lavender and grapes. The steps were narrow, difficult for one person, even a person as thin as a princess who didn't get food regularly because she lived so far above

the fields. There had been no water in the fortress and no fountain in the town, so villagers had trudged down to the plain for water. I understood the isolation a princess in a medieval fortress would feel. You would not leave the castle lightly. The Provençal poet, Mistral, called Les Baux “*un lieu où souffle la désespérance.*” A place where despair is in the air.

But what mesmerized Bernie were the fortress buildings, which had been both constructed and carved. The medieval builders had piled and shaped stones together but had also carved from the cliff on top of the promontory in the same style as the stones had been shaped. For example, an arch started as part of the rock, then became stone blocks, then returned into the rock. The medieval contractors had crafted a seamless arch so that no one could tell where the cliff ended and stone construction began.

Before my sister developed a brain tumor, lived for three and a half years and then died, I had walked around Les Baux’s fortress and village. That time was far away, a “before” time. After her diagnosis, my sister had pulled from the closet a dress she had not worn for a year. In the pocket, she found a note. “I wrote that before I knew I was going to die,” she told me. Provence was that for me, before and after time.

In the Les Baux cemetery on the mesa, the graves of substance resembled small houses surrounded by three-foot high iron gates. Outside the fence, real geraniums thrived in planters; inside the gates, fake yellow roses and orange snapdragons. On the stone marker of “Jeanne née Deremble et François,” two purple stone buoys hung. In this graveyard of broken stone and tilted markers, the living chose buoys and fake flowers to help the dead journey to the underworld. If Bernie and I had wanted a place where the membrane between life and death was porous, Provence was it. We forgot to look for A.

Then a sunset blistered the Les Baux sky. Layered with pink, persimmon, bronze, and the yellow green of a bottle in your parents' medicine cabinet, the sunset expanded time, metamorphosing like a slow-growing inferno, inflaming, softening, reemerging to colonize the horizon all the way to the Camargue and the Mediterranean. Spasms of orange, pomegranate and burgundy knitted with umber, copper, apricot and grape. A slash of blood red lipstick, then saffron and raisin bled into each other. Gold spun, coral convulsed, ochre kindled. Black spirals spewed into streaks of purple orange coral gold like charred wood. I swear it lasted two hours.

The Camargue in southern France flows directly into the Mediterranean. It's a marshy delta of salt beds and pools called *étangs*, populated with cowboys, white, stocky, heavy-headed Camargue horses, black-hooded white magpies with blue wings, and thousands of pink flamingoes. We walked paths zigzagged with skinny creeks where stagnant, faded algae dotted the nearly invisible blue water as densely as dots in a pointillist painting. No one else appeared, only a small black crustacean at the edge of the road. It was late in the day for bird watching. When we stopped in the raised platform blinds to watch flamingoes, we discovered that not only were we late but we had forgotten binoculars and mosquito repellent. For the mosquitoes, I wrapped my head and face in a scarf. For binoculars, we used the video camera to watch fifty or so wading birds, more coral than pink, raising one leg, then the other, in a nonstop skate, both awkward and graceful, as though the four feet tall birds were practicing the precise

moves in slow motion before letting go and doing a full glide across water. They walked together in one direction, then in unison abruptly turned back. I say abruptly because the change had no preamble but, abrupt as it was, the movement was slow and languid – they were indifferent to all but the food they dredged. Sometimes a neck as long as a leg dropped down to nip a crab and then the bird seemed to skate on three legs.

Beads of green algae on blue water, voracious flamingoes, no cars, wild white horses so close you could hear the swish of their tails as they trotted in the spongy ground. A realization that the land and water of the swamp were scarcely separate, conjuring up the possibility that everything that kept you alive might be as illusory and transitory as the constantly draining land of the Camargue. Your body could bubble up and gurgle and all the water under the surface erupt through your skin – you too would then be swamp. The hazy sun descended over water that reflected white clouds and blue sky. Waves skimmed the reedy copper-tinged islands. The tangerine sun turned the birds to balls of orange and pink cotton candy.

At dusk, we headed to the salt basin and Salin des Giraud, a town worn down by salt gnawing at houses, billboards and cars. Across the shallow *étangs*, thirty-foot-high salt piles lined up like grey pyramids marching towards the Mediterranean and Egypt. Camargue *fleur de sel* is now sold in gourmet groceries, packages hand-raked and individually signed by the harvesting Salt Raker, but it didn't look like gourmet salt. It looked drab and dirty, as though it came from a remote world of constant thirst and salt grating at your skin.

Marc et Mireille, Poisson – a hand-painted sign for freshly caught fish. Before the trip, I had read about two restaurants in Beauduc so we turned off the paved road and

bounced and bumped and jolted toward Africa. After half an hour, a second sign, *Chez Juju*. The name made me laugh but the sky was darkening. Deciphering the few signs that appeared was increasingly difficult. There were no lights, transformers, or electricity poles, no stores or houses, nothing but valves and sluices and allegedly two of the best fish restaurants in Southern France. Every ten minutes, we considered turning back. Five times we pulled over at a turnout to allow a car from the opposite direction to pass. “Customers returning from dinner,” I said, cheering up. “Look at those lights – we’re getting there.”

But the lights receded, then arose farther away. On the edge of the pitifully narrow, mountainously potholed, one lane spit of a road with no shoulders, no more than six inches above the Mediterranean on either side, in the pitch dark, we heard rather than saw the waves splashing level with our tires.

After two hours, we arrived in what I had thought would be the village of Beauduc. In the dark, all we could see were abandoned unlit trailers and a ghostly white horse, wandering around with neither tether nor purpose, on land not much higher than the road on which we had driven in. Except for hoof steps, total silence. As our eyes adjusted we saw a few shacks and on top of one, “*Chez Juju*.” I worried that someone might think we were trespassing. But who?

I later learned Beauduc wasn’t a village – it was *La Plage de Beauduc* – a beach. Maybe there was a beach on the other side of the trailers but it didn’t look like we had pulled up at the back of a resort town but instead at a pumping station devoid of any humanity with a sign saying *Chez Juju* that might as well have said, “Welcome to Nowhere.” The restaurant looked like a shack because it was – to create the restaurant,

the owner had simply constructed a cabin around the 1913 Marne taxi-bus in which he'd been living. I realized the cars had not been customers returning from dinner but waiters going home after work, getting out before the tides came in.

If we weren't going to drive into the sea, there was nowhere to go. Hungry, with hours left to drive back, like the flamingoes we slowly reversed direction and drove along the bumpy, potholed, water-filled road to the *Mas du Vieux Charron*, where hours later we opened the refrigerator to the stink of an amazingly runny goat cheese. We had wrapped it in three layers of paper and one of plastic and still the smell attacked. But what flavor! It melted in your mouth, bitter, sweet, rich, peppery. We grabbed a few eggs and some olive oil and made an omelet.

Later, we found out that *Chez Juju* was only open for lunch, a fact the magazine article hadn't mentioned, and that you didn't drive to *Chez Juju* or the *plage*. You took a ferry –thirty minutes total – but to us, the surreal landscape fresh in our minds, it might as well have been a ferry across the River Styx.

We had been told we could get the world's best (and most expensive) olive oil at *Cooperative Oleicole*, "just north of Maussane les Alpilles." Bernie loves olive oil – he sometimes slurps a few tablespoons just to savor the flavor. Each day when we made our unsuccessful market runs, we carefully examined the signs, especially around Les Baux because the full name was *Cooperative Oleicole de La Vallée des Baux*. Even so, we missed it. The day before we left Provence, we drove north from Mausanne and scanned

even more closely for the *Cooperative*. Signs for *oleicole* this and *oleicole* that lined the road, for lavender and wine, for everything except what we wanted.

We went home, reread the instructions. “North of Mausanne.” Had Melissa accidentally typed “north” when she meant “south”? A few incorrect letters and spell-check? – it could happen. We went south and pulled in at lavender markets. We gobbled *daube* in wine and frisée with perfect olive oil, probably from the nowhere-to-be-found *Cooperative*. The frisée was so flooded with flavor that organic California produce paled in comparison. We drank red Côtes du Rhône and licked *sorbet au pamplemousse*. We did all this but we did not find the *Cooperative Oleicole*.

Was there a shortage of olive oil in which case it wouldn’t be available until December? But then we would have seen “*Rupture de Stock*” signs. On our final day we asked again. A man pointed north, *just* north, throwing his arm toward downtown Mausanne. We gave up and parked. We would not taste the world’s best olive oil. So be it. Then, as we walked around for the last time, we saw a large two story building surrounded by cypress and fig trees on a street, not “just north of Mausanne,” but just north of Mausanne’s main street. The oil was as good as its advertising claims:

“ . . . with its mature fruits aromas, its slight artichoke perfume and its subtle dry fruits and almonds tastes, this olive oil tickles the pallet sending shivers of pleasure down the spine.”

It tickled our palates, shivered our spines, and, most important to Bernie – had no peppery aftertaste. It took us two hours to decide how much to buy. It wasn’t cheap and getting it home would be hard. Who would pay \$100 to ship a bottle of olive oil? Unthinkable! We would carry it. Finally, knowing we should buy at least five but worried

about bottles clinking against each other in our backpacks for four more weeks of travel, we settled on a single one liter bottle.

By the time we arrived that autumn, Southern France had emptied. The towns weren't exactly depopulated but felt ready for more people than were walking around – we never waited even a minute for a table. Except in Rousillon where the tourists were French, the tourists had disappeared and so had the people who lived there but didn't remain through winter. In front of a desolate restaurant in Bonnieux, we saw a wood plaque advertising air conditioning and views. The mistral walloped the sign until it spun like a top.

Because of the sharp contrasts created by the autumn sun low in the sky, the few people we saw on streets emerged out of intense darkness. Like a Caravaggio painting, the extremes of light and shadow added drama to every encounter. Our mindset, the half-empty villages, the stark contrasts between background and foreground light, the lack of demarcation between water and land in the Camargue – all this made us feel as though we were drifting in a shadowy underworld without a guide.

Because we ourselves were *rupture de stock*, we missed the markets and we missed the three star restaurant around the corner from our *mas*. In the Camargue we missed *Chez Juju* by eight hours. In Bonnieux, people fled indoors while we struggled with the mistral. The Celts and Romans were gone, the Lords of Baux and the troubadours of courtly love, also A., my sister and Bernie's mother.

But, leaving the *Cooperative Oleicole*, we barreled across the lawn like kids out of school, warm in our own sun and blessed with great olive oil. We lugged that heavy, cumbersome, one liter, green bottle around Europe for four more weeks. Every day, as

we opened our carrying bag, we worried the oil had oozed on our raincoats and sweaters. But it hadn't because we were careful – we double and triple-bagged it, carried it upright, hugged it to our chests in trains and planes and busses, and, finally, set it down, intact, on our kitchen counter, where, despite rationing, we polished it off in a month.

Two years before my sister's death, she stood on the stairway in her house and discoursed on why "*Minuit, Chrétiens*," the French carol, was overwhelmingly superior to "O Holy Night," the English version. This was what my sister did, *prononcer*, hold forth and serve up *un véritable discours*. "How fertile the words are in French," she said, "Listen! 'It's midnight, Christians!' The ecstasy of *delivrance* with its extra half-syllable at the end, the expressive strength of *Rédempteur*."

She was right. "Pleasure" is better, and more plentiful, in French. *Plaisir*, a smooth elongated whispering sound. *Joie*, not as hard as the English, suggesting expansive lightness. There is also *réjouir les sens*, rejoice in your eyes and ears and the sensation of skin under a warm sun. There is *masochisme* or *le plaisir de souffrir*, what the marquis sought. There was ours, *le plaisir des papillons noirs*, the autumnal pleasure of living close to the dying and seeing black butterflies rise in the light. And there was *le plaisir de rester en vie*, the taste of perfect olive oil.