Jet Lag

Marseilles to Ajaccio to Calvi

The Port of Marseilles! Putaine de merde! Everybody along the quay looks like a pirate or a prisoner! Ruffians and lowlifes! Con artists and cheapskates! Five o’clock shadows at eleven in the morning! Beer fifteen minutes after that! And that’s just the babies, crying out for unfiltered cigarettes from their carriages.

But it is I who must look demented to the other passengers aboard the Danielle Casanova, our ferry that sails out from Marseilles to the island of Corsica. I can do my best at trying not to look like a tourist. I can hide (or, more likely in my case, forget) the maps, I can wear the local sports team colors, I can eat the entrails of animals (my people—and by my people, I mean English speakers—call such stuff “offal,” and aurally, that’s an apt word, while “sweetmeats,” no, is not) with a good helping of wine. But my outsider nature reveals
itself at inopportune moments: learning to unclasp the latch on the
Metro at my train stop, for instance, that first struggle, throwing too
much strength and attention into the mechanics of what is, for a
local, habitual gesture. I reveal my foreignness the way a person who
doesn’t have a baby holds a baby and proves childlessness, or who
never smokes does so pretending he’s always smoked, while every-
body can plainly see that he’s never smoked—even nonsmokers.

Here, on deck, I lean far over the prow and try to get a whiff of
the maquis. Instead, I get a noseful of exhaust and grease. A young
French couple, perhaps honeymooners, eye me and step away: I am,
even among tourists, an outsider. And the bumper sticker starts to
haunt me again like a snatch of annoying tune that you can’t get out
of your head: Travelers Destroy What They Seek. Travel-
ers are bad guys, of sorts—if not villains, at least antagonists, not in-
vested in this community, not fully aware of the laws and ways of the
locals, not doing, despite the good advice of it, what the Romans do.

Back in Marseilles, I had sat for a long time in Terminal 2, wonder-
ing whether I’d had the wrong time printed on my ticket. The wait-
ing room had an exoticism, even in its drab municipal colors (aqua
and dirty green), as if the terminal had slept in its clothes, hadn’t had
time to shave. In a corner an equally rumpled man lounged in a
little booth with a sign: Ecrivain Public Service Gratuit. A person to write official letters for you, free of charge if you were
illiterate or perhaps didn’t speak the language. On the scuffed walls,
I read warnings to travelers headed for Algeria; there’s some nasty
flu afoot. And under glass, a wanted poster for a Corsican terrorist,
armed and dangerous. I decided from the photo that this guy really
did sleep in his clothes.

I felt like I’d slept in my clothes, too, and always do until the first
cup of coffee, which seemed far away. But the lackadaisy of the
terminal alarmed me, and alarm can do the work of good coffee. The big board, with its embarkation points and times spelled out with roll-dexes of metal letters and numbers that tickered into place periodically, sounding like pigeons spooked into flight from a city roof, told me our stopping place was Bastia, on the northern cap of Corsica. But my friend Petra, already on the island, was meeting me in Ajaccio, on the west coast. And where were the damn ticket agents?

Another ferry boat, the Napoleon Bonaparte, landed and disgorged hundreds of Corsican visitors to the mainland. The Bonaparte was big. It dispelled my notions about ferries being nothing more than glorified rafts or upgraded tugboats just sufficient enough to cross a wide river. The people disembarking had had a boat for sleeping. There were lots of families, children, the infirm. I knew my boat, the Casanova, had, at best, “comfort seats,” so I’d be getting more of a working class—and yes, smoky—crowd. But what people I saw waiting with me (not many) were Northern African types in hiqabs, hijabs, and kaftans. The public writer would have made a killing for all his work if his service weren’t gratuit.

After another hour of nervous pacing, I captured the pity of a girl in the information booth out on the street who saw me wander by once too often, and asked in a French even I could understand: “Where are you going now?” I was in the wrong terminal, it seemed. She did everything but take me by the hand when she walked me to the proper one, and in my defense, it was also called “Terminal 2.” “Attention shoppers. If anybody is missing a little boy named Brian, please meet him in the other Terminal 2.” But nobody was missing a little boy named Brian. Had my boat been on time, I would have missed it.

But it was fashionably late, and I was grateful. It must be remembered, it seems, that however villainous we travelers are, we are of the bigger-than-life sort, the snake, The Dissembler, and we have shed our home like a skin. In the book of Job, God asks Satan, “Where
have you been?” He shrugs the answer off: “Traveling about in the world.” Seeing the sights. Still capable of malice and sidewinding in unexpected directions, he is also a bit vulnerable, pokeable; when the weather gets cold, his heartbeat nearly stops.

I waved goodbye to Info Girl; all the heroes of my life remain strangers. This crowd, in The Other Terminal 2, was much more like me: a bit more tonsorial attention and One-Hour Martinizing, engaged in the reading of newspapers and mass market paperbacks, nobody seemed to be shipping massive carts full of cheap goods. For a single euro, I finally got my coffee, strong and sold with an adorable little disposable filter. MTV pabulum’d through a half-dozen video monitors, and the dirty green paint was replaced by two zippy aqua stripes that raced each other around the white walls.

I sized up my fellow travelers the way they sized up me. There seem to be two kinds of travelers in general: the jobless twenty-year-olds ready to rough it with little cash and just a handful of belongings, and the fifty-year-old couple, their nest emptied, who’d earned some time, who’d have nothing to do with travel but luxury (no surprises, thank you). Both parties looked upon me with suspicion. My gay friends back home, who sometimes have enough money and time, even though they’re not yet fifty, are also fairly horrified by my preferred manner of travel. My next door neighbor in Chicago, Jim, retired and content working and worrying his lawn and garden, turned to me after hearing my hiking plans and asked, “What are you, sixteen?”

I am a stranger to this place, and by this place, I mean everywhere. I let the landlord show my apartment to a guy debating whether to take the identical one below me; when the potential tenant saw the piles of books and shelves full of more texts, he said, as if he’d found the Unabomber among us, “This is an awful lot of books.” My desires are inscrutable to most people, slick and effete and diabolical (Claus Von Bulow: “You tortured your own
wife?” Menendez brothers: “You killed your own parents?” Bouldrey: “What are you, sixteen?”). And when I get to the place where the walking across Corsica begins, I will be a stranger again. I’ve brought with me the strangest ideas: I want ice in my Coke at the café, have no pressing need for fresh bread, and I eat spinach in a salad uncooked.

It was more than two hours later that we heard a reassuringly smooth voice, fluent in at least five languages, announce that our boat was ready for boarding.

The couple in the fore of the Danielle Casanova back away from me, and I look up at what I’ve been sniffing at: two of the ten smokestacks belch thick black smoke into the blue Marseillaise sky. It looks like squid ink bleeding into Mediterranean water, almost fake, a stage show for our benefit, so we can make believe this is the industrial age and the primary transport mode. The Tricolor is wrapped so many times around the flagpole it may as well be the Swiss banner, for all we know. Or the Corsican bandera. The Dramamine I took was also inutile: we’re too big to bob.

The Mediterranean—what is that color? It’s wine-dark, Homer was right, but what kind of wine is that? I’m not afraid of swimming or sailing in the Mediterranean, and I ought to be. It’s a shipwreck-ridden sea, and two days from now, Petra and I will jump headlong into it, and I will bark my shin something fierce against a rock when a big wave batters me, and I’ll scrape most of the skin off the bottom of one foot, and a finger as well. I spend so much time worried about various imagined accidents that might nix a long hike (getting mugged in the park after dark, the floor-polishing Zamboni at the Gare Ste. Charles, a missed stair in the cathedral, a big rusty sign blowing down on me, rejected credit cards, thugs) that the obvious danger, at hand, is never heeded. It’s not scree but sea that will make
me limp through my first day along our trail. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

I chose to take a boat to Corsica, rather than fly into the island, for several reasons, all of which didn’t really work out. For example, it was supposed to have been more convenient for Petra, arriving on her own speed from Vienna, where she lives. She had planned to fly into Ajaccio, but then found a cheaper ticket into that northern town of Bastia (in which case, the Original Terminal 2 would have worked out just fine). Also, I am not fond of jet travel, or rather, not fond of all its components: the anxious and generic fermata of airports, the cramped, too-social seating of the plane, and jet lag, which is the closest thing regular folks have, I’m betting, to the feeling of drug addiction, as the body is pulled farther and farther away from its normal rhythms and told that this new, unnatural set is correct, when it is not. Freud said that if a person can work, love, and sleep, then he is healthy. Freud never experienced jet lag.

And, as usual, jet lag didn’t come over me until the second night, when my guard was down. I always make arrangements on the first day for being tired, for forcing myself to stay up as late as possible. That’s why I spent two days in Marseilles, to sample bouillabaisse and sleep, and not sleep, in a genuine habitation built by Corbusier (something like living in a shoebox with a veranda), working out the jet lag–drug addict withdrawal. By the evening of the second day, I felt normally tired, and I went to sleep.

And awakened, bolt upright, at 2 a.m. Ravenously hungry.

The journey back to sleep, indeed, is one akin to the journey of the recovering addict, except there is something natural to fight as well. The addict must know things are wrong. It seems wrong, for example, to be fighting this alert state. In me, it creates a strange corporeal hallucination: I see things behind my eyelids, and the misfiring hormonal secretions generate all manner of pink elephants. And the struggle back to sleep is comical and impossible. In my
Corbusier habitation, I could hear the cheap clock I bought in the Marseilles bazaar ticking like a bomb; a single Renault roared past like a Mack truck.

And I had deep thoughts in the dead of night, alone in that remote hotel room. Could the early explorers divine the change in time with sextant, astrolabe, or telescope, I wonder? It didn’t matter, I supposed; all that slow going made it easy to adjust to the earth’s time differences. When did it start to matter? What came first: alarm clocks or stress? When did we first start to trick nature, both mother and human? Was it my imagination, or did the minute hand on my cheap, noisy clock move backwards?

And somehow, I survived jet lag’s second night, that horrid witch’s Sabbath. The second morning after the second night, the jet lag manifested itself in a memento mori of creaky shoulder bones, bunched muscles, and raw eyes. And the desire for a six-course dinner for breakfast. Was this the glamour of shuttle diplomacy, as Henry Kissinger made it his way? I’d heard of one solution for jet lag called the “Pentagon Diet,” an unholy regimen of meats and hard alcohol and starches and coffee. Separately, each of these food groups is a favorite of mine, but (and despite my love for stews), in the case of curing jet lag, this seemed a bad mix, the stuff you might dig out of a fairgrounds dumpster after the carnival had shut down.

Before the continental adjustment, emotional states become arbitrary, or freestanding, uprooted, unearned, without their attendant narrative arc. I can look up at the in-flight movie at a random moment and burst into tears while hardly knowing the context of what is usually a dreadful second-rate film.

Being on a boat hasn’t really solved jet lag’s uprooting. Three hours into the six-hour ride to Corsica, I come out on deck after sobbing through a French-dubbed edition of a Harry Potter movie (though
the French even managed to muddle the context that I can usually divine when I don’t rent headphones on a plane and further confused me, I cried anyway), trying to catch that first whiff of the maquis. The smokestacks that were earlier squirting night into the day now seem only able to eke out weak black, the annoying stuff that gets into the blue of a watercolors set. With this much blue above and below, the smokestack black could never hope to besmirch it. No sign of land yet, but is that a floral scent? No, no; it’s an old woman standing upwind, her old woman perfume. My collar points whip little hickey marks into my neck, and handsome Corsican soldier boys loiter about.

No first scent of the maquis, and no solution to the problem of compartmentalized travel, really. Jet lag is just one symptom of the way I feel snapped off, without a proper beginning or end—not just in body and mind but in the rise and ebb of emotions and memory. Perhaps what’s happening during this thing called, too generally, “jet lag,” is the ability to travel so quickly from one place to a hugely different other place, and the mind’s desire to be with the body, which it simply cannot. It is the mind stretching, or shrinking, or maybe searching, or all three, to pick up what got left behind. For the entire six-hour ride, I never surrender my wish to sniff up some maquis but only huff the smell of food from vents along the side of the boat.

And then: approach. I look up at the horizon and realize that what I thought were clouds were actually Corsican mountains, rows of spines, like those on a horny-backed toad. In this same way, I decide that I don’t quite know, finally, what it is I’ve been sniffing for.

As we sail closer to the old port town of Ajaccio, the sky over it grows dark. The boat is two hours behind schedule, and we won’t land until half past nine in the night. Along the shore, the regularly spaced streetlamps look like tiki party lanterns swinging on a string; they twinkle from heat and atmosphere. Ajaccio is having a party!
On a Monday night! Of course it is—this is a resort island and a landing spot for tourists.

There are several towns along the coast of Corsica that are resorts, with their perfect sand and delicious Mediterranean waves. But resorts have a rather cruel feel to me, the pretty lady who likes to have you at her party—although if you didn’t show up she knows the party will be just as successful.

On any island whose sand is worth its salt, the town with the beaches will be the least typical of the place’s real self. Beach towns are for discotheques and suntan lotion, and are interchangeable that way. Even so, there are ways in which economic opportunity brings a bit of the genuine down to the waterfront. I have learned on islands like Italian Ponza or Spanish Mallorca that frumpy housekeeping peasant women will come into town to mix incongruously with the chic and fabulous in order to lure adventurous sorts without hotel reservations from the ferry to the little rooms they let in their home.

Sometimes these rooms can be a bargain, if you aren’t the sort that wigs out by living with a family, usually extended, and all its clutter of inherited and repaired furniture and one or two Down’s-syndrome child-adults that must be cared for until death. This is often the way of backpacking in my style, and I’ve gotten good at knowing what to look for in quality, when it comes to these lady hawkers down on the beach. For example: check the ankles. If their ankles have red splotches all over them, that would probably be bedbug bites. Decidedly, two-star accommodations.

But the closer we get to Ajaccio, the more it seems silent, even abandoned. No men in sunglasses with trophy wives on their arms, no ice-cream seller or boat renters or ladies in housecoats, with or without bedbug-bit ankles. A bell rings out the hour. No maquis here, just the smell of town: motor oil, garbage, bait bilge from the fishermen, fried food. I walk down the gangplank far ahead of the
others, because I travel light and fast with just a backpack. Everybody else aboard is encumbered with blocky luggage and blockhead children. For thirty seconds, I have Ajaccio all to myself.

And there is Petra, and she is a party. We have known each other for nearly ten years now, met on the pilgrim’s way to Santiago de Compostela, another long walk, when she was still married to a civil engineer named Matthias and lived as a cloistered housewife in the suburbs of Munich. Matthias fooled around with an Ethiopian Jehovah’s Witness, or no, not fooled around, for the only thing the Ethiop did, being strictly religious, was trade love letters to Matthias, and so he got nothing, in the end, from either woman.

Petra has bloomed since their divorce, become something of a high-powered executive for Siemens, taken up with a handsome young Austrian med student, and moved to Vienna. We get together at least once a year, here or there, and do a bit of walking together. She and I have an idiosyncratic and, we think, civilized way of doing this: hard work with a backpack all day, a shower and a glass of wine in the evening and, preferably, a modest hotel room at a modest price. We aren’t unwilling to rough it, but if one doesn’t have to, why should one? Petra carries in her backpack dresses, a bikini, lipstick. I have nothing but respect for her.

“Bienvenue!” she says and kisses me the way foreigners do. Her French is impeccable, another reason never to let her leave my sight on La Corse. Oh, Petra, I love your hair that way; are you getting younger instead of older as the years go by? “Sorry I’m late,” I say, instead, as if I were the one holding up the boat.

We have a long drive ahead of us, from Ajaccio to Calvi. She whisks me off into the interior of the island in a rented red Clio. Now is the time I wish I had taken the Dramamine, careening up narrow, winding mountain roads. If my mind had caught up with my body on the trundling ferry ride, it is left behind again, perhaps
tucked into a seat pocket on the boat, along with what turns out to be one of my guidebooks.

It feels late, because I have only been on Corsica in the dark. But it’s only a little past ten. We stop in some village (I don’t know its name; I am only along for the ride) and find a restaurant with several candlelit tables outside, with a magnificent view of my first forest fire. I am excited by this, having heard so much about fires in the maquis.

“It’s like living in a Mérimée story,” I tell Petra.

But she is unimpressed by the distant flames, or takes them in along with the constellations of the night sky. She has been here for a couple of days, so she is over the fire thing. “I got in trouble in Vienna last week,” she tells me over a little wine, to change the subject. “I went with some colleagues from the office to a champagne bar and then we went to a disco club and they asked me to dance on the bar, so I did,” she explains.

“Well, if they asked you,” I say, “then you shouldn’t get into trouble.”

“But I didn’t want to get down!” says Petra. “The professional go-go girl started tap-tap-tapping on my ankle and I had to lean down to hear her and she said to me, ‘You have to get down so I can do my job!’”

I’ve visited Petra in Vienna, that Byzantine city made of, apparently, rolled fondant. Its bricks seem made of leftover pieces of wedding cake people forgot to take out of the freezer on the first anniversary, or because the marriage failed. The streets seemed filled with Miss Havishams. “You got in trouble because you live in a city of sixty-year-olds,” I console Petra. I look around our restaurant, nearly abandoned except for one of those extended families, retarded men-children included, grazing at a table at the other end of the patio. They may just be the owners, actually. I am nothing but an expansive, overmoneyed American tonight. “Dinner is on me,” I tell her.
Petra tells me, as we receive our menus, of the German tradition of the Damenkarte, the menu given to a young lady when she is being taken out by a man. A Damenkarte is the same menu, only the prices aren’t listed. She says she is disappointed not to receive such a menu at our table. “You always know that chicken will be cheap,” I tell her.

She looks at me in disbelief. “You think I will order the chicken?”

Here, we order pastas and a fish smeared with oursin, which is delicious in a secret sauce sort of way, and only later do I find out that oursin is sea urchin paste. And while we wait, we sip more wine and look above us at the unobstructed stars, and I don’t recognize any of the familiar summer constellations. Are they arranged differently on this side of the world? I used to know them all so well, but living in the city, with all the light pollution, they’ve not been so vital to me, until I come out deep into the dark. This is the month of a year in which Mars will swing closer to Earth than it has at any other time in some absurd period, like sixty thousand years or something.

“Cavemen saw it happen,” I tell Petra.

But she’s not much more impressed with this than she was with the forest fire. “Cavemen didn’t know what Mars was,” she says, but I’m not so sure of that.

“Cavemen didn’t have it so bad,” I say, because for the next two weeks, we are going to be living, to a certain extent, like cavemen. Cavemen didn’t have to deal with freakin’ jet lag.

Our waiter brings yet two glasses more of the wine we’ve been sipping, a strong rough red from the Sartene, a region in the south of the island. I say we are sipping, but that is a lie. We quaff. Petra takes a gulp and plunks it down on the table with satisfaction. “Cavemen never knew how good this tastes.” The wine kicks in. My mind catches up with my body, and jet lag is no longer a problem.
I awaken the next morning in the modest hotel (no family squabbles, no retarded man-child, no bedbugs; just a noisy pool cleaner out the window) Petra has arranged for us. The pool seems redundant, for just beyond it spectacular surf crashes at the citadel walls of Calvi. Calvi is a grand fortress of a town. Its stone walls are a pigskin color (and by pigskin I mean football), and along the quay where the boats are moored you can get a view of everything that makes Corsica specific. Granite mountains practically rising straight from the Mediterranean.

The shape of Corsica is something like a fisted hand holding up its index finger. Not a “We’re Number One!” ballpark novelty foam hand sort of raised finger, but more of a “How many times have I got to tell you kids that this island is free and independent?” raised finger, a scolding finger. There has always been among incendiary nationalist types, whether they are ETA or Catalan or the local Front Corse Nationaliste Liberation, a rather schoolmarmish, corrective feel to the desire for statehood.

Of all the places I will visit on Corsica, Calvi, on the northwest corner of the island and a handful of kilometers from the start of our hike on the GR20, seems to maintain its Corsicanitude and avoid being a generic beach resort, and in its own right, also seems less of a scold. Guidebooks disagree with me, but Calvi feels more like a port town than Ajaccio, more like those naughty places like Marseilles or Odessa or New Orleans or Shanghai or San Francisco, full of leniencies and exceptions, where the rules get bent a lot because the borders are so porous.

Calvi, too, is our own point of launch, even though we’re going inland rather than out to sea, and it’s the town of our last hoorah before facing the rough road ahead. While studying our maps one last time and wearing our street shoes and dress shirts, we wallow in overpriced imported newspapers (the French journals are consumed with the loss of Charles Bronson, that greatest of American actors—“Adieu,
l’ami!”), filling out postcards showing all the places we visited, looking just a little better than they actually did, slurping espressos, and (not in our street shoes) taking a dip into the sea.

Yes, perhaps I should be more frightened of the Mediterranean, because it does not bode well that our first-aid kit is broken open even before we start walking. It is now that I scrape myself on the coral reefs while swimming. I owe it to my mistaken belief that the Mediterranean is tame, or tamed, delineated, unwild, cultivated like an acre of land, all done so by stories as well as history. Swimming in it does not inspire fear, but carelessness, and that’s why I bleed. It’s also the warmth of the water, I think, along with its pleasant painterly color, not snot-green nor scrotum-tightening, so that its dangers reside in its comforts. For this and many other reasons, I’ve come to understand that that which is slightly uncomfortable is safer. My skin, after I get out, is powdered with salt, almost dry, almost wet, as if I were lubricated with graphite. Oh wait: that’s blood. The anti-biotic cream I smear across myself has nothing over the cauterizing salt of the sea, though it burns a little; the cause and cure are one and the same.

The pain comes later. That night, after I repack my backpack and bury these street clothes at the very bottom, I dream I am floating, being pulled out by waves, looking up at the fortress town of Calvi and the mountains behind it; I lower my ears in the water and hear the click-clicking of mussels.

**Calenzana to Carrozzu**

We sit trapped, after only six kilometers of hiking from Calenzana, at the top of a hill in the forest of Bonifatu. We have been stopped abruptly by a very serious park ranger because of (surprise!) a massive fire in the maquis. Petra and I hope to wait around by the ranger station in order to start later, but in the meantime, we take a day
hike with just a day pack and find some strange rocks that look as if they’ve been worn away by ocean waves pounding. They belong on the beach, but here they are inland; only wind and rain could have done this work. Evidence of all kinds of violence—geological, meteorological, conflagratory, political, alcoholic, bilious—meet us at every turn on Corsica, and all of it is just barely softened by a thin layer of moss and lichen.

I have time while we cool our heels (mine still sea-scratched from our reckless swim, the real consequences of which I am just noting today) in a parkside restaurant, eating an excellent omelette forestière (mushrooms and ham) and a tomato salad. For dessert, the local specialty, chestnut cake immersed in warm chocolate sauce.

Chestnuts have gone the way of the Corsican vendetta: south. They were once vital to the local economy, but already, we have encountered several trees that were clearly well tended and now seem, troublingly, ignored. I say “troublingly” not because trees seemed sickly but because of their overly robust state. It chills me the way it might chill a traveler finding a field of tomatoes rotting on the vine or overripe apples breaking the branches in an unharvested orchard. I imagine that the entire population of the towns nearby were wiped out by plague or mass suicide.

Everything on Corsica used to be made out of sweet chestnuts, and there are hoary old trees everywhere we go on the island. They were planted five hundred years ago by the ruling Genoans to mill flour from the nuts, but as we would discover in our explorations over the next month, the trees were dying of their own fecundity, or falling apart, or rotting away, still fattening feral pigs yet forlorn and abandoned, as so many islands sometimes seem.

Perhaps the fires that hold us up are a kind of mercy killing. Just days before, I’d been dazzled by the fires in the mountains, spectacular as holiday fireworks. Now it occurs to me that half the Corsican men are employed as pompiers, fitted into dashing deep blue fireman
uniforms, trucking across vast stretches to douse the maquis, the pine forests, the scrub alders. Even the cows, it would seem, spontaneously combust.

And apparently, there’s a scam going on. “Les faux eleveurs,” they call them, “the false stockbreeders,” the cattle shepherds who have been known to burn the woods and maquis to create grassland for the cows so they don’t have to spend the allotment of money given to them, for cattle feed, by the European Union. The government and the EU discovered skullduggery and put an end to the allotments, and the number of fires dropped dramatically. In a country with high unemployment, however, fires create overtime pay for a lot of handsome pompiers, so nobody seems to mind, much, the flammable, inflammatory nature of inland Corsica. Except for Petra and me, who sit and wait for our journey to begin, truly.

The omelette is nice, though.

We are just about to give up and pitch our tent outside the little café for the night, when the ranger suddenly, almost capriciously, tells us we are out of danger and can go into the trail again. And before we know it, we are climbing straight into the stratosphere toward the refuge Carrozzi. “I think he was testing us,” Petra says. She has, usually correctly, distrusted men on our journeys together.

In a rather cliché turn, the moment we pass beyond civilization’s grease (both motor and cooking), the way, which might be a meadow anyplace else, offers up my first bona fide experience with that elusive thing: the Maquis. I take out my notebook and start to write, but I’m quickly frustrated—it’s as inscrutable as civilization’s grease.

“What were you expecting,” Petra asks, conciliatory, sincere, “a bouquet of wildflowers?”

When I lean down to pick a little, I’m pricked a little. I’m disappointed a little, too, for I’ve felt these pricks before, without paying a thousand-buck plane ticket for them. In my midwestern backyard are all sorts of berry brambles and wild rose thorns and leaflets
three, though I’d rather not let them be. I hate to steal a Corsican’s thunder, but where I’m from, baby’s first words are often, “vicious seed dispersal systems.” Okay, yes, the maquis smells nice when the sun beats down on it and draws out its perfumes, but when the sun is beating down on it, it is beating down on me, and I, backpack’d, sweat, and smell, and smell more strongly than the maquis, and I can’t smell the maquis, and then when I grow tired, there’s no place to sit but on this, the devil’s broadloom, the maquis.

I tell Petra something like this, only with less punctuation. She says she broke up with her husband for similar reasons.

We trudge on, and I find another excuse to moan.

“What thing is it now?” Petra asks. I can tell when she is more exasperated than usual when she speaks to me in an English with the bones of German construction still in it.

“We’ve been walking all day, and I can still see Calvi like it’s just down the hill.”

“It is just down the hill,” says Petra, who is never afraid to tell a true thing at the wrong time. This is why she gets on so well in France.

Along the way, signs nailed to the trees ask us whether we’ve seen a lost British boy. It’s here, while attempting my first climb over rocks rather than an actual dirt trail, that I try to distract us by joking about the British boy. If we come across a discarded map littering the piste, I point to it stentoriously and look at Petra with overweening significance: “Little dead British boy’s map.”

“Little dead British boy’s cigarette butt.”

“Little dead British boy’s rain poncho.”

“Little dead British boy’s upcoming accordion festival poster.”

“Shut up, stupid American guy.”

I do, because I have to concentrate. It’s here, while attempting my first climb over rocks rather than an actual dirt trail, that I realize this is a different sort of walking altogether. Let us call it a more difficult
sort of walking. As we trudge into the Refuge Carrozzu I notice, once I’ve stopped bending over with my hands on my knees catching my breath in the thinning air, that the Basque flag oddly flies over the sour gardien’s hut; this gardien always gets the worst of the traffic on the GR20 because so many people start their journey in the north and are terribly unprepared for it (not me! No, no, not me), and they arrive on his doorstep, more damaged goods. I see him glower over the bleeding feet of a Danish girl as he tapes them up, and this is probably the wrong moment to ask him whether he is Basque, but I do.

Rather than tell me that he is, which he is, he asks in French, “Are you an American?”

Perhaps it is the thin air that makes me a little dizzy. Perhaps the gardien and I are both trying to launch a Platonic dialogue, and both of us want to be Plato. But when an air of expectation descends over the four of us (even the bloody damaged Danish girl waits), I say, “No,” giving Petra a glance: back me up here, girlfriend: “I’m Canadian.” The cock crows for the first time.

Whether he believes me or not, there are more wounded lying in the streets of Atlanta, so we purchase from him a small camping site in the overcrowded grounds around his hut. Another thing different from other sorts of walks is that there is a very finite number of places where hikers are allowed to stop for the night. One cannot go pitching a tent all willy-nilly when there are problems with forest fires, food and water supply limitations, and flash thunderstorms that come up over a mountain in a moment.

“Canadian,” Petra snickers, as we unroll the too-clean tent (clean tents are not cool among seasoned trekkers).

“Shut up, stupid German girl,” I hiss.

“I am not German,” Petra says, standing up, and suddenly we are striking a deal: “I am Austrian.”

I am more than happy to shake on it. “Shut up, stupid Austrian girl.”
It’s not so awful to be in the camp city, at least not today. We dine and sleep with glorious views of the mountain, and three wiry French boys next door, their noses, feet, and hands bigger than the rest of their bodies, like puppies. Aching a bit, but grateful to be allowed to pass through the forest fire, I am also grateful that Petra brought instant soup.

As the light wanes and I prove useless in the task of flirting the French boys into lending us one of their slick aluminum collapsible pots, I try to provide the entertainment by placing the flashlight under my face in order to create a spooky grimace and tell Petra a story about Bigfoot, a folk legend of my (Canadian) people.

“You do not have to use the light to make your face scary,” she tells me. “You do not even have to tell me a story about Bigfoot to make your face scary.” She goes to talk with the French pups—and they like her. I rub my hands together in gratitude: hot soup tonight! I’m hungry: pimping, as a folk saying of my people goes, ain’t easy.

I mused, as I walked this first day, that I was made for walking. I’m a pack mule, and I tell Petra that I plan to start a travel magazine called Stubborn Pack Mule Monthly and show all these extreme sports guys what for.

“Will you tell them how to pack the special cooking utensils?”

“Clearly, we didn’t need them,” I say, and move my hands over the cute French guys’ aluminum pot Petra has charmed them out of, full of our soup—or rather, the soup Petra carried.

The funny thing is, I’ve done so much of the extreme trails by blundering onto them. The Via della Bochette, for instance, in the Italian Dolomites, “The Way of the Ladders,” to translate, or, to add a note of prosaic accuracy, “The Way of the Rusty Ladders Precariously Nailed into Sheer Cliff Walls Half a Century Ago and in Great Need of Repair.” After sauntering onto this walk several years back with only a day pack and some sandals, I found an article in Men’s Journal about the locus of my alpine madness, which requires hikers be outfitted in crampons and ropes.
I say, any trail that requires crampons and ropes is a trail not worth doing. My overcautious guidebook says I ought to have a compass here in Corsica, but it also says I should carry a snorkel and mask. I know what I am doing. And thank you, Petra; yes, I will have a bowl of our soup.

Carrozzu to Ascu Stegnu

The false start is spoiling the narrative of our journey. If there is an abrupt sense here of lurching into a journey without a good deep breath or a gradual sense of gaining momentum, if there is no grand climactic sense of the start of the walk proper, it is because, well, none of these things are possible, thanks to the “hurry up and wait” setback of the fires. The truth is, any walk seems without overture or announcement. One does not so much cry “all aboard!” over a bullhorn as slink away, slip away, escape. Which is another reason why I like to walk. It doesn’t seem as if anything monumental is taking place.

And yet, here I am panting again, leaning against a big piece of granite at the edge of a precipice, looking at another hour’s walk to a chalet hotel below. It has been a day of sheer ups and downs. We are exhausted. Even an hour’s walk seems overwhelming at the moment. In the ever-present present tense of walking, time ironically collapses into nothing, so that the hiking we will do tomorrow (and the day after that, and so forth) all piles on top of itself, so that it seems we must make two weeks’ worth of exertion all at once, and the thought of that makes me panic for a moment. I am used to making fifteen- to seventeen-mile walks in an average day of backpacking, but here on Corsica I discover another way in which the GR20 is new business. We will call it a long stretch if we manage to make seven miles between stations. The effort is put into ascent and descent, switchbacks and zigzags, and the trail never, ever, rides ramrod straight but molds itself to unyielding granite.
The next day we’ll be assaying the dreaded Cirque de la Solitude, but this day seems harder, perhaps because we didn’t psychologically prepare for it and I didn’t have the finest night’s sleep in my little, yet incredible, tent. I don’t have a soft mat to separate me from the granite ground. I scoff at the need for such a thing, the way I scoff at the snorkel, at the compass.

The walk this day, again, has been spectacular, first crossing the Sentier de Spasimata over a swinging suspension footbridge connecting a precarious chasm’s lips. In the early part of summer hikers swing over a raging river torrent, but now, it’s just something deep and dry to fall into. A young French-Basque couple who live near the Pyrenees hike alongside us with a black Labrador; he carries his own things in a little doggy saddlepack. He is all energy and curiosity, and trots far ahead and comes back to master and mistress, so that in all, by my reckoning, he is walking the GR20 twice. On the suspension bridge, however, he is a terrified pup, so frightened we have to pitch in to help him. By taking off my own pack and going out to lend a hand, I am able to discover his name, which is Lula; by “his,” I mean “hers.”

The French kids are nice, although the French guy kid is looking me up and down. Yikes, he’s clocked the Yankee. Is it in the shape of my head, or my haircut? Can they tell from my brand of socks or nibbled fingernails? But his eyes lock on my feet, and I realize he’s looking at my shoes, and he’s not the first to do so on this trip. “Pas de probleme?” he asks.

“No problem at all,” I respond. I don’t usually wear big clunky hiking boots, although I have a pair. I prefer a tough pair of walking shoes, instead, which means my ankles are weaker but my ability to maneuver my feet is expanded. Besides, when I wear my hiking boots, I often suffer blisters. I never do with walking shoes. With all this upping and downing, however, I am starting to wonder whether things might be different this time.
Lula recovers, but I quail on the steep stuff that leads into a spectacular batch of mountains, including the highest one on the island, Monte Cinto. Monte Cinto: symbol of Corsican spiritual autonomy. One always requires a big heap of stone to reinforce nationalism: Gibraltar, Canigau, Mount Rushmore. Monte Cinto is a spectacular lumpy mass that reveals itself just as you breach a pass along the way to the next stop along the trail, Ascu Stegnu. It’s the reward you get for the day’s labor, made of a strange orange-red stone that contrasts with the other granite, mostly gray, all of it covered from foot to pinnacle in lichen, so that in the morning it looks flocked, like a Christmas tree sprayed down with fake snow tinted crème-de-menthe green, and at sunset, it blazes bright, unmasked, as if we have only just arrived on a completely different island, or gotten it all wrong.

Then we descend. Descending is not my favorite thing to do, especially with extreme sports guys overtaking me at every step, appraising my nationality and my shoes as they pass. More of a torture for Petra are the uphills. Jack Spratt could eat no fat, and his wife could eat no lean. But we know this about each other, and we take our weaknesses in stride and cheer each other to the completion of our individual onerous tasks.

We are cheered, also, by the local cheese when lunchtime rolls around. Along the trail, an enterprising shepherd has converted his mountainside hut into a little shop, The Rennet Barn. We sample the Corsican brocciu and the smelly aged version of it (there’s a big joke in one of the Asterix and Obelisk comic books about this cheese, used as a powerful destructive weapon against enemies). These cheeses are made from ewes, ewes specifically. It seems important when the shepherd who sold it to us told it to us. It seems important in my guidebook, as well: ewes, only ewes. Thank heavens none of the local giraffes were involved.

I stand up, ready to deal with the last leg of our day’s walk. I notice that “Francesi Fora!” is sprayed on the rock I’ve been resting on,
“French Get Out!” I am not sure why, but my growing understanding of the Corsican disgust for the French relieves some of the pressure on me, American me. This is the eve of George Bush’s invasion of Iraq, and despite the world’s resistance to the United States’ plan to “rid the world of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction,” we all know war is inevitable. Here on Corsica, I am ashamed, I am resistant, I am Canadian—I am everything but able to carry on a conversation about my leader’s catastrophic intent.

“Francesi Fora!” “French Get Out!” —Corsica is a possession or, to use the American euphemism when speaking of Guam or Puerto Rico, a protectorate of France, and not all the Corsicans want to be protected. France doesn’t seem to see the problem here; they rain millions of tourist euros annually on the island, so what’s the big deal? I wonder whether the French, like most Americans, even know what “Francesi Fora!” means. Is the demand lost on those for whom it is written? In Calvi, I saw a broadcast of the ubiquitous CNN in which a nice lady from California criticized the French resistance to the American invasion of Iraq: “I can’t believe how unpatriotic the French are!” In my country, many patriots are boycotting French wine and french fries. “Francesi Fora!”

It may be here, on this afternoon, that the maquis loses the last of its romance for me; now that I have seen that it’s packaged for tourists in plastic bags in Calvi (a city that, until late afternoon on this third day of walking, I could still see, and about which I say so to Petra every few hundred meters, until she tells me to “Shut up, stupid American guy,” which is a veiled threat to “out” me, Not Very Canadian Me. I heed the threat.), and having fallen in its briars and prickers a couple of times. Now I prefer the saxifrage, gentle and luscious, appearing in pink and white. Also, ginebra, and some version of it in red. Liquor bushes!

Ascending once again, we find ourselves in that exhausted state on the granite precipice, and, though I can no longer see Calvi, I
can see the ski lodge in the valley below us, the one where we will spend the night, and it is not close. Another hour, by the guidebook’s reckoning.

Petra comforts me by initiating a conversation about sex. It works. We walk another half-kilometer straight downward, and I have to grab trees, occasionally, to slow my momentum. At some point, we hear some Bavarian hikers yodeling. No joke. It is a lovely moment, and that’s what gets me the rest of the way into the valley. Little things like these, the delights, are what often revitalize me. “Regardez!” yells a French hiker above us, seeing the valley from our little precipice, and the word seems more appropriate for a fine view than, “Lookie!”

Still, “The French don’t understand a decent shower apparatus, nor, apparently, can they make a ski village look nice,” I tell Petra once we check into our simple hotel room and I step out of the bathroom clean, and wrecked.

“This is no longer a ski village,” Petra laments, because the German guidebooks always tell you just a little bit more. It seems that global warming, or at least European warming, has made the once flourishing ski villages in these mountains useless—and the rusty machinery in its wake, its own junkyard, with pulleys, flywheels, wires, and gears, all rusted out. Once again, I get the sense that I am wandering in an abandoned carnival, as if vacation leisure were an artifact. “I can still see Calvi,” I say from our little balcony. Petra is as exhausted as I am, but she makes a point of getting off the bed, stepping up beside me on the balcony, and kicking me in the shin. We ought to be in love.

After a handful of regrouping tasks (washing clothes, shaving, getting a pot of tea) I call my friend Doug back home. He is watering my plants and gathering the mail. He is in the middle of a house call for work, and he’d be surprised to know that, although the Dow Jones Industrial Average is plummeting (making my dollars powerless
against the invigorated euro) and the president is one step closer to getting his way with a war in Iraq, the most surprising thing Doug tells me is that today is Thursday. What a strange idea. The specificity of time, of days, seems lifted away. Cavemen felt like this, I’m sure.

I regroup, too, by studying the guidebook before the day’s trip. For a change. I tend to like guidebooks for walkers because they are usually more frank and less likely to embellish. In *Trekking in Corsica*, of the present location in Ascu Stegnu, the author writes this about the unfinished refuge: “many [campsites] have been spoiled by people shitting in the building beside them. Turds also litter the unfinished rooms on the ground floor.” Less earthy yet equally deflating is the review of our dinner soon to be available at the lodge this evening: “This will allow you to order their steak-frites, which”—he can’t help but throw a wet blanket on the steak party—“(somewhat undeservingly it has to be said) enjoy near legendary status on the GR20.” I do not order the steak-frites, but a pork chop, chestnut-fed.

On the other hand, the guides seem to cater to those extreme sports dudes who are always mocking my walking shoes, for the appellation “difficult” for the walk today seems a bit overblown. “Difficult” in extreme-sports-guidebookese really means, “You have to go slow.” Trekkers hate to go slow. It’s a dreadful task, full of awful things like grand vistas and common courtesy and conversation. Those boys breeze by so much: I read, on the balcony, of tomorrow’s pass through the Cirque de la Solitude, which should slow them down a bit, too. The guidebooks promise a lot of scree and scrambles. I’d rub my hands together with relish—the same relish-rubbing I used to compliment Petra’s dance of the seven veils when she extracted the cooking pot from the French boys—but I wonder how well I’ll be able to handle that granite pass myself. It is dawning on me this evening: this is harder than I ever thought it would be.

And the next morning, when checking out of the ski lodge, a terrible accident happens: the young French couple who own Lula the
Lab are standing just behind me while the concierge hands back my passport, kept to assure payment, I wager. I hand over a handful of euro notes, and she plops the telling blue-and-gold booklet down on her desk. I can hardly expect anybody to mistake the big truculent eagle, clutching the slings and arrows of a forthcoming outrageous war, for a candy-apple-red maple leaf. French guy is no longer studying my shoes, but my non-Canadian passport. I wish he would look at my shoes.

Ascu Stegnu to Bergerie de Vallone

Sunburned and still sea-scratched all the way down one leg, maquismauled on the other: somebody has run me across the zester side of a kitchen grater. A perfect day for walking. Or running, if you are like any red-blooded American who has been caught lying about his nationality and is seeking the proper, moral thing to do.

While it took days to shake the view of Calvi, it is only fifteen minutes after I’ve been exposed as *un-Americain* to the Pyrenean couple before we lose sight of the old ski lodge—and the Pyrenean couple. It might have taken twenty minutes if I had not begged Petra to run for her/my life. We are surrounded by strawberry trees and a droopy kind of holly hanging in the live oaks. A filter of steely smoke clouds blue the sky. Pine needles fall from the tall pines down onto smaller trees, their upside-down V-bifurcated needles, like wispy clothespins, catch on the branches, and I am reminded of the cuckoo planting its eggs within another bird’s nest: the trees are in disguise.

And such mountains. The only thing that can get me to stand up straight anymore, besides the challenging burden of a backpack, is the good example of a tall mountain. I think my body instinctively tries to peer over them. The peaks soar, and so does my heart, a combination of breathlessness, spent energy, and eyefuls of vista. Rhythm and song rise up once I’m in full flight.
Walking has a prosody: when I walk downhill, the legs do dactyls (for the unschooled: one long stride, two doorstop jambs, a stressed syllable and two unstressed: “dithering,” “wearying”—“Corsica”). The ancient poets considered dactyls a stately rhythm. When walking down steep slopes, I notice how my feet are slowing the body against gravity, the gravity that needs to be slowed, and so the body generates a controlled energy, even a worrisome caution (“This is the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and the hemlocks”), an intrepid, stuck-up discipline that’s not nearly as fun and freewheeling as the wild galloping afforded during uphill anapests (the dactyl’s three-beated opposite: two quick steps for a running leap: “on the loose,” “unabridged,” “to the moon!”) that make you feel unleashed (“The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold”). But like the barreling burst of the anapest, charging uphill can be difficult to sustain. Just ask Petra.

Metered poetry and songs get caught in the brain when I’m walking, and that can be a gift or a torture. Today I am blessed with endless rounds of the old Blake hymn “Jerusalem,” the one asking whether Jesus didn’t go wandering around Great Britain: “And did those feet in ancient times / Walk upon England’s mountains green?” Yesterday I wasn’t so lucky: “I know an old woman who swallowed a fly” wouldn’t stop coming out of my mouth, and the day before, I suffered, awfully, Elton John’s “Island Girl.” I never can leave well enough alone, and spend many kilometers analyzing the song I’m singing: that grandma could eat flies, spiders, birds, goats—but a horse would be considered beyond the pale: “She died, of course.” Well, no kidding.

Here is where I differ, again, with most hikers, who will tell you that they do their best thinking while on the trail. Rousseau made an entire book about what he thought about while on his walks, and
kept a walk/thought journal the way people keep dream journals nowadays, and he even called them “Reveries.” Rimbaud seems to think walking saved his sick artistic soul. “I have walked myself into my best thoughts,” said Søren Kierkegaard, “and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it.”

But in solitude, while walking, the same dunderheaded thought seems shackled to my ankle, and I rattle it, over and over: “Where is a water source? / God, am I thirsty. / Where is a water source? / That guy has one of those high-tech canteens. / Did I mention I was thirsty?” or, “Why does that Belgian need two walking sticks and why is he making all that clicking noise with them? / Why that annoying clicking? / The clicking! / That damnable clicking! Now I must kill somebody!” or, “I never should have dated him. / He told me he wasn’t a good boyfriend. / Oh, the existential nausea! Death and anxiety! / It’s all his fault.” I do my best thinking in crowds, oddly enough, at the symphony or during a play. Dull plays are best for thinking. My playbill is always coated with notes scrawled in the dark concert hall or theater, sad inscrutable scribble, and useless once the lights come up. When walking, the only thing that can save me from my own shallow thoughts is civilized conversation with a fellow walker.

“Shut up, stupid German girl.”

“Shut up, stupid American boy.”

Two freakin’ philosophers, warding off the fear and trembling and sickness unto death. Petra and I climb above the tree-line to discover that the stone of the mountain seems green, though red by nature, because they’re wet enough to sustain huge amounts of moss. Later, I’ll find old sheep bones that, where not polished white, are flocked with more moss.

Flocked, too, the skies seem, with smoke from fires all about us. It is as if we have been wearing sunglasses all day, and certain cones and rods have been burned out. I’m concerned for all the neglected
trees, chestnut and otherwise. (I am not concerned for the maquis at all any more, since I am nearly an open sore from its nagging, scratching persistence, despite all fires, natural and un-. Please, I’m beggin yeh, I’m runnin’ around yeh dogwise—please don’t throw me in that briar patch!) The trees thin out rather quickly as we climb, until the pines give way to birch, aspen, maybe even peach, the kind of trees that have bark arranged horizontally rather than vertically, wrapping themselves for colder air the way mother wraps a scarf around and around your naked neck in winter. The aspen has weensy little pine cones that flake away to nothing between your fingers, like tobacco come loose from an untamped cigarette.

Against a vivid blue sky at the pass, above the smoke, even, the peaks, craggy, look cut with an X-acto knife. Thanks to Petra’s supplies (dried noodles in packets) and the borrowed cooking pot from the three handsome French boys (not yet returned; we keep thinking we’ll see them in the refuge each night, but they were in no hurry, judging from the amount of wine they drank in Carrozzu, and the way they were still sleeping when we cleared out late the next morning), I’ve been rescued from starving to death; and when we near the valley Spasimata, I run out of steam.

Petra sits down next to me and begins to pull things out of her backpack I have never seen before: a five-day-old German newspaper purchased in Calvi, a tube of expensive lipstick, two walking sticks of the high-tech sort, expandable (I am forgiving the Belgians already), and traubenzucker, tablets made from powdered grape juice, which tastes like and has the texture of Pez, and is, as Petra tells me, “given to children before they take a test.” I love Petra, full of specifics. And traubenzucker. She gives me three. I am ready for my Spasimata test.

I had hoped for a source of water somewhere along the way, having scarfed more charcuterie and cheese at lunch. I may as well have sucked on tablets of traubensell—salt. Petra’s usually dependable
guidebook promises a natural spring in five hundred meters, but it is early autumn, and that’s why the English word for spring is “spring.” At the place where we are supposed to refill our canteens, she spots a crevice in a rock where the moss is a little thicker. I hold my water bottle in proof and appeal, so Petra can see the droplets of condensation remaining inside.

“Je suis désolée,” Petra says, using French rather than one of our languages because there is something a little disingenuous in the way the French say, in a singsong taunt, “I am sorry! No water.”

I can’t blame Petra or her lying guidebook. I’ve eaten all that briny food myself. I have done this once before, just before attending the four-plus-hour “Die Walküre” at the opera, sucking down the aperitif olives and nuts and cheeses, then settling into cramped hot theater seats while my tongue and feet swelled up inside my mouth and shoes. “Sometimes,” I tell Petra, putting the canteen in its special sleeve and scratching my sea-scraped leg, “I think I want this sort of thing to happen to me.”

Petra hands me one of her two spiffy walking sticks. “Oh, the stones and the sea want only to get you.” She takes the bandanna from her neck to wipe the glow away. She’s a solid woman, but with delicate features, lovely blonde locks, and a cold-cream-white skin that does not make SPF 30 sunblock seem a necrophiliac’s freak show. Whenever I want to send Petra a gift for her birthday or the holidays, I fight the urge to send face powder, lipsticks with names like “gypsy” and “cabaret” and “harlot,” and silver combs. She adds now, “No matter how much you think you have conquered a foreign place, it is always savage and intends to collect your head for her belt, like Kali.” I am always wondering, when she rattles out these sorts of odd-duck particularities, whether they might be clichés in her native German.

It is here I must say, before Petra begins to sound like too much of a cliché herself, that so much of her Damenkarte capriciousness is
an act. We have known each other for years, and I have seen her overcome every manner of hardship, from a dangerous mountain pass to a painful divorce. She is hard-working, courteous, charming, and funny. She is the first to stop and look at a beautiful vista and the last to give up when the situation seems impossible. I ask her, here, why she likes this business of walking, why she always consents to join my nutty schemes. “But this walking,” she says, “it is traveling in the right speed for the soul and your thoughts. You can let your thoughts come, and get the spirit of the nature, your eyes and nose are feded. Feded?”


“It is the best way to travel. When we are walking up the mountains, on the way up I have all those bad thoughts like, I have to tell so and so this! Or I will tell them all! But on the top of the mountain, the thoughts are not that deep anymore, and even when I return home, I have to laugh and think, ‘who cares.’”

She philosophizes while leaning against the long trunk of a tree, blasted hollow by frequent furious lightning storms. Storms fly down among the many canyons without warning, and beleaguer hikers like us. The pine’s insides have been burned hollow, and people passing through the GR20 have slowly filled up the hollow with granite scree. Perhaps we are stalling here, and the filled-up tree trunk is proof that others have dawdled at this point, too, to avoid the big plunge into the overanticipated Cirque de la Solitude.

Scree—loose stone and sand—slides under my foot and makes me fall again and again. I’m trying to be careful, in case I might hit a walker just below. Singsong cries of “Oop-la!” from silly underprepared French women just above me barely preface a shower of scree on my head as we descend, parched, into the Cirque. Oop-la is what the French Academie admitted into their language to represent “oops.” Oop-la. There is something disingenuous about nearly everything said in French.
When Petra and I finally come to the lip of the canyon we are about to climb into, the first thing we notice is the heavy chains secured deep in the rock, with which we must go rappelling. Somehow, some officious person who helps maintain the GR20 has lowered himself down the cliff walls and painted very sarcastic trail markings—the universal red-and-white double-stripe of the grande randonnée, as if it were a walk in the park, as if it were walkable, as if anybody would get lost falling straight down into a chasm.

I look at Petra. Petra looks at me. Already, behind us, people are starting to bunch up. Only one person can descend this rock face at a time, and we are going to cause a traffic jam if we hesitate any longer. The irony (situational irony, not dramatic) of all of the wild GR20 is that the people who walk on it are herded into narrow passages most of the time, and forced to sleep in a handful of regulated camps; I’ve never seen the outdoors look so crowded as I do on this thin gray trail of the Cirque de la Solitude. And over there in the distance, where the trail leads up out of the amphitheater-shaped basin: all those hikers who have been walking their way across Corsica from the opposite direction. I look at Petra again: you go first.

And this is what she does: she reaches over her shoulder into a little pocket on her backpack, next to where she keeps her maps and guide and traubenzucker, and pulls out that lipstick. Then she opens it, lets its crimson nubbin carousel up and out. And then—listen up, all of you extreme sports dudes and Men’s Journal and Stubborn Pack Mule Monthly readers, for this is important—she applies the lipstick.

She puts on two or three layers, in fact, because this is the outdoors, and it is windy and she might have to bite it off her own lips in concentration for the next few hours. But she takes the time to blot a little with a Kleenex, and then she smiles, and she begins her descent into the chasm.

And that is why I go, too.
Yesterday, clouds chugged by in rows like boxcars. They’ve thinned out here, just south of the Ascu Stegnu. The mackerel sky hangs like a painting overhead, curdled, tired, maybe exhausted by throwing all this weather at us. This is how we enter the toughest leg of the walk, at least as it is reported by most guidebooks (save mine, this).

I behold the ironic outcome of earth’s mighty restlessness, which seems a thing of stillness and permanence. Yes, yes, the ferocious beauty of towering granite pillars, the phantasmagoric deep stony abyss (“Little dead British boy’s lipstick,” I say between gasps, but Petra can’t hear me), and, okay, yeah, the lunar loneliness of treeless valleys. But this is not walking. This is spelunking, this is rappelling, this is not even a walk when it is a walk—it is what they call in the business a “scramble,” which is a word that sounds like what it is.

The Cirque de la Solitude is also perhaps the most famous passage of the journey, yet our own experience with it seems more like Cirque du Soleil, with clowns and monkeys along with the acrobats and trapeze artists. Day-trippers and lightweight thrill-seekers come into the GR20 from a service road only to walk this one part, making it crowded and noisy with the yammer of “Oop-la!” and scree, scree, always with the scree. Which is also a word that sounds like what it is.

Physically, the Cirque is a steep concave valley, navigated by sheer walls like that of an amphitheater (think of the gallery balcony high up in a large opera house). I suppose if you are an experienced mountain climber, you have no need for the lengths of chain and metal ladders hammered into the clifflike rock faces, but I am grateful for this help, especially since the stone is covered with slippery moist lichen. Solitude is a physical misnomer here, as it’s the most popular section of the GR20, and we are surrounded by dozens of walkers of varying abilities. The thrashing of heavy chain against granite undoes any lingering notion that we are the sole proprietors of this bit of trail. But one thing is true: a walker is utterly alone with the ability to execute this bit of troublesome terrain.
It is during this lowering down the sheer rock faces that I learn how to do what most mountain climbers are taught to do in safe laboratories lined with big prefab fiberglass rock faces: how to be a mountain climber. By watching others, the ones who know what they are doing, I see the wisdom of going down a rock face backwards. Hiking backwards tends to limit the ability to enjoy beautiful views, but when holding onto a little bit of stone and lodging your foot in the crevasse between two other bits of stone in order to avoid having your own weight as well as the weight of your backpack pull you off a cliff, I give up a little sightseeing.

The Cirque may be the most difficult stretch of traveling I ever do, I thought, even in the middle of doing it. Do people in the middle of historical battles every have such thoughts? I am climbing over sheer rock faces with ladders and chains and a backpack swinging around, pulling down behind me, and the only way I think I can get by is by imagining somebody telling the story of my doing it, and hoping I don’t look bad when the story is being told. Not the best motivation for physical or moral certitude, but today, it will have to do.

I like my guidebook writers the way I like women: sassy, contrary, and sometimes dead wrong (but willing to take that chance). However, the author of *Trekking in Corsica*, David Abram, tried to downplay this circuit, and it didn’t help matters. Rappelling down chains with a thirty-five-pound backpack pulling you back into an abyss, a monkey on your back! As I let go of a length of rusty wire and drop onto a section of the trail that is relatively flat, I put my hands on my hips like somebody who knows what he’s doing. After all, what a sense of accomplishment I feel, only halfway through the circuit of solitude.

I see Petra, who has climbed up on a big smooth rock and is taking pictures of mountain goats on a ledge below us. I smell bad. I know this because Lula the goofy black Lab is avoiding me, and unless she also mistrusts Americans, I’d guess it is the adrenaline, which
I rarely have to secrete. Yes, yes, the couple from the Pyrenees have shown up (or caught up) again, like a bad centime—we all do on this trail, disappearing for hours or even days, but turning up at the end of a day or along a ledge just when you or they want to pass. And how did Lula get down here without opposable thumbs? She is wagging her tail and barking at the goats below and kites above, as if nothing ever happened. Petra’s lipstick looks fresh. She says, “I can still see Calvi.” In my moment of weakness, I have let her steal one of my jokes. I vow never to let this happen again.

I want to collapse, but I can see Lula’s owners approach from two or three precipices above us. We must flee, for I am pursued by the Furies. It is difficult to “flee”—a word that has built into it speed and sleek aerodynamic design—with a huge pack weighing you down. I do what I can.

And I am rescued from an even less surefooted ascent that day when I get lodged halfway up a crevice by a boy from Berlin (Petra says she can recognize the accent) whose ears are also sunburned purple. He is one of those who has been taking the road from the south, starting at our ending place in Conça, so, though he is just beginning the circuit of solitude, he is just a few days from the end. I realize that I envy him.

Petra snickers. Then, “Stupid German boy,” she mutters.

“Why is he stupid?”

“Because he thinks he is such a man for walking all this way, but he never takes care of his skin and his ears will fall off and he will die of the cancer before he even finishes the walking.”

I see her point. Day by day, we compromise on certain standards, let ourselves go little by little, and together, so that only an outsider can see the truth, the madness: the boy looks like a homeless drug addict.

“Why didn’t we start in the south and go north?” I ask Petra, once we are completely out of the Cirque and walking side by side.
side on a switchback trail. “Then we would not have had to worry about forest fires near Calenzana.” I speak in this stilted way to avoid the confusion English’s contractions generate. It usually takes weeks before I revert to idiomatic slangy American English when I return from these long junkets to Europe, and the reversion is facilitated only by the kidding of my friends.

“Nobody does such a thing,” Petra says dismissively, despite the hobo Berlin lifesaver. For her, it isn’t really a business to wonder about. I quickly agree. It seems right, in our Northern-Hemisphere’d brains, that one would head south always, as if by doing so one were going downhill, which might make it feel easier. Treebeard of the Ents makes just such an observation in Tolkien’s books. The fact is, the vast majority of hikers on the GR20 and nearly every other major walkway in the world (with the possible exception of the Appalachian Trail) go from north to south: it’s the way. I feel, for a moment, like a lemming.

I look back and watch that boy from Berlin move up through the Cirque against the flow of traffic, battling like a salmon upstream. That doesn’t seem like much fun.

But I am grateful for his existence, not just for dislodging me from my granite wedgie, but because he is one of those walkers who help spread news up and down trails. We can hear from hikers who have forged ahead, or if we have fallen behind; messages can be conveyed. We pass on rumors of good meals and dangerous passages, friendly shepherds and communist monks. Except that he didn’t and we didn’t. We should have asked him to tell the handsome French boys we still have their cooking pot; he didn’t tell us anything about how his ears turned purple, for he was just annoyed that his way was blocked.

Only a half a kilometer past the Cirque is the official GR refuge. It is huge. It might as well be a strip mall. It has been built to accommodate all the day-trippers, and as we round the bend, a group of
French husbands are waiting to applaud their French wives (“Oop-la!”) who took a little longer executing the circuit. We unbuckle our backpacks next to the well, and I slake the thirst that has haunted me since lunchtime, and with the plop of my pack, the “Bravo!”s rise up for the ladies.

Petra looks at me and shakes her head: we are not staying at this zoo. My legs are trembling, they are so tired, but before I can even organize a protest, I see Lula and her people mope up behind the French wives, and my backpack is back on; there is another place to stay just another kilometer down the trail, if I can summon the energy.

I grouch through the entire length of the thousand meters to punish Petra, my willful, lipstick-loving dominatrix. I want to sit. I’m tired. I have to go to the bathroom. How many more meters?

By the time the sun sets, we set up our tent outside the Bergerie de Vallone, bergerie being the Frenchified word for a shepherd’s hut, and a shepherd and his son make us Corsican soup and nothing much more complicated than a spaghetti ragout, but it does have wild boar in it, and it is delicious, with that strong rough red wine and the sheep’s cheese called brebis. It, too, is homemade.

The father runs the joint, and he’s as friendly as a way-out-West madam. He wears the blue coveralls emblematic of the paysano, the peasant worker. I like to walk through a small European town and chance upon a row of blue shirts and coveralls on a front yard wash line hanging to dry; they change, in the sun, from a dark to light blue, the way paint does when it has dried. His son runs the bar, flirts, wears camouflage pants with a reinforced crotch and a T-shirt with the many unbordered nations of the world represented by their flags: Basque, Quebecois, Catalan, Puerto Rican, Corsican, Tibetan.

The room of the bergerie is warmer than any we’ve come across before, and by warmer, I mean friendlier; the people who walk this extra few kilometers beyond the main gîte d’étape seem more of the independent sort, and there’s irony there, too; independent sorts are
much more likely to gather and gab in the evening, after the tents are pitched. There are only ten tents here, if that. I thank Petra for forbidding us to stay at the strip-mall gîte.

It is always the case, always a lesson I have to relearn: if I push myself just a little bit farther, walk for one half hour longer, there is a reward far more valuable than the actual effort.

As others finish their meals and head outside to their tents, I peek into the back room of the bergerie and spy a small kitchen. The mother is cooking her ass off. “Where are you from?” asks the boy with the nationalist T-shirt. I look straight into the flag of Puerto Rico, think of the training bases on the island of Vieques, where I love to take my sorry Yankee tourist carcass for snorkeling. Petra looks at me: she’s waiting to see what I say this time.

“Les Etats-Unis,” I say, because there are only six or seven people left in the bergerie, and maybe only a third of them speak French, and by saying the United States in another language, it doesn’t sound as bad; it seems less crass for me to say “merde” than “shit.” Two or three heads do bob up from tables close by, but then they return to the game of cards or leftover boar.

And if the paysano boy’s annoyed, he hides it well. He tells me that not many walkers come from the States. Lots of English, but few Americans (stop saying that word, I want to tell him, can’t you see I’m trying to run away from home?). He pulls from a shelf behind him a big bottle and four small glasses, for himself, his father, Petra, and me.

I look out the window at the mountain peaks in the fading light. The stone here, the granite, is a shocking red, as if animals have been killing little rodents and eating them as their blood spilled over the rocks. After several drinks and a long talk it will take days and many aspirin to recollect, the shepherd lets me take yesterday’s newspaper back to our campsite. I drift off, deciphering the news from Corsican, an Italian-Tuscan dialect. The front page of
the Corsican newspaper is full of forest fires and nationalist urgencies, and at the bottom, “below the fold,” a quarter-page advertisement for hunting gear. Nothing about Iraq, nothing about weapons of mass destruction.