Honorable Bandit
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The father shepherd, Paulo, has risen and taken his two pack mules into town for supplies and returned again before we have taken down our tent and showered. It is a gorgeous morning to enjoy, with plenty of coffee for which I am perfectly happy to pay a premium, and Petra takes her time packing. Whatever headstart we had on all the strip-mall types at the gîte a kilometer behind us is gone now. I recognize some of the French husbands and wives as they walk right through the camping area. Lula now recognizes me, though I swear I never gave her a handout, and if I had forgotten about the consequences of being a known American (I keep thinking of these words, “known,” “admitted,” words usually proceeded by “homosexual” or “communist,” and how “American” fits just as well, here), I’m reminded when I see the young couple, fresh as morning dew, stepping
like gazelles down the GR20. Is that how my eye sockets got to be feeling this way? From all these walkers stepping on them? No, no; it was that stuff shepherd-boy served us the night before in that unmarked bottle.

We had ended up tying one on, and because Corsicans believe in the hair of the dog as well as several other superstitions, all described over our drunken conversation after dinner, Paulo wakes us up with a complimentary shot of this homemade liquor he makes from myrtle, something I would get much more of as we go deeper into the country, and something I will take home with me to remind me of the things Corsica offers that no other place can.

To arms, to arms! Petra finishes her own preparations. With this little bit of liquor in us, our conversation as we break down the tent turns to all things deluxe. We are in need of a good restaurant. I describe the American tradition of “dine and dash” (slipping out of a restaurant without paying the bill), which renders worthless the German tradition of the Damenkarte. Petra never shows any sort of outrage about bad American behavior, although she is appalled about mass shootings at high schools and the concept of twenty-four-hour grocery stores. “You Americans have no morals,” she says, to this second thing. “What shall I do with the herring?”

For a moment, I’m afraid that I did something rash while in my cups the night before, and bought fish from a shepherd. But she is holding up the tent stakes and I’m sober enough now to figure out that “herring” is the German word for them. Like a fish.

“Because they are shiny and quick that way, if they are any good at all,” says Petra.

But starting off the day’s hike with alcohol doesn’t suit our types, Northern European types. We like to feel good and then drift off to sleep, or pass out, another kind of feeling good. We like our sensual pleasures one at a time. As the myrtle liquor wears off, we slip into lousy moods. A buckle on my backpack, not even an important one,
has broken off, and I fret about fixing it. Petra complains about the immediate uphill tilt of the trail. I try to use the same sort of encouragement she uses on me during the downhill assaults by misquoting my guidebook: “Only half a kilometer to go!” I say, even though there are, in reality, more than two, almost three kilometers of this. She isn’t a stupid German girl. She isn’t even a stupid Austrian girl. She studies the guidebooks much more closely than I do.

Heather, and hellebore, and the malodorous—at what is that?—it’s alder! How is it that I have to go to a remote island to discover that alder is stinky? Cool streams trickle down. More scrambles, the sour of Petra’s bad mood (and by Petra’s bad mood, I mean my bad mood, or hers dovetailing to mine as we finally get to the downhill segment). I come upon another plant that smells like sterile gauze.

It strikes me that the histories always talk about bandits, good and bad, “giving themselves up” after a long run and hide. A bandit can’t go too far on Corsica without seeing the sea, or Calvi; it must make a fugitive feel circumscribed, and I suppose they’d despair after a while, “give up” rather than give the self up. I walk far ahead of Petra for a while to minimize our disuse to each other. I am a little sorry about doing so when I come to a cliff that looks down into Lac de Capitello, one of several glacial fjords that is beautiful to peer down into and so clean and clear that even from this great height above I can see deep into its depths, and know that its depths are astonishing.

I keep waiting for Petra to join me in admiring the view. A good view is like a funny movie or an elaborate meal, not nearly as pleasant when experienced alone, unless you are some poser existentialist, and poseurs are no fun to be around anyway, anytime. And the longer I sit, the more I wish anybody would join me in admiring the view. After the previous day’s traffic jam in the ironically named Solitude Circuit, today, I have not seen another walker in hours. I panic for a moment, thinking that perhaps I’ve taken a wrong turn, but it
only takes a moment to let my eyes dart about before I spot that double stripe of red and white paint to prove that I am on the trail. Does nobody else wish to linger over this view of the fjord?

I decide to myself that when Petra catches up, I will stay near her and keep my black mood on a leash. This is one of the things I pull apart in my mind as I plod along alone, and just as my guidebook tells me I am nearing the end of the day’s wandering, Petra and I find ourselves reunited in a long, lovely valley along the Golo River.

“There you are, stupid American boy.”

“I missed you, stupid German girl.”

Her index finger shoots to her lips to hush me. “Stupid Austrian girl.”

We are so happy to see each other and near the end of our day’s walking, so we lollygag, stop for a skinny-dip, and enjoy the vistas. Shamelessly naked, we cavort and wave at several hikers who are finally catching up with us. We recognize many of them from previous étapes. There’s an aging, overly fit couple from Quebec who, on the first night in Carrozzu, were annoyed by the French party boys; he was going to shout at them, but when his wife saw that we had their cooking pot, she figured we must have been friends, and I remember her putting one of those tanned hands of hers over his equally tanned paw, and I saw she had a gold wedding band worn so thin it seemed as if it might snap in two at any moment. The three Australians, two women and one man, who have been arguing since they hit the GR20. The pipe-smoking ex-military man from Scotland (maybe), and his two energetic sons. Those two older French macho guys who can’t seem to keep their shirts on and who pace in front of the gîte each night as if they were roosters guarding a henhouse. The chain-smoking Italian, liable to ignite the maquis with his butts at any moment. That annoying Belgian couple with their clicky clicky sticks, and matching outfits, and ridiculous splatter-art spandex leggings. The strapping German boy and his new girlfriend.
(I want to be friends with them, but Petra wants to keep a distance from them the way I want to avoid the English speakers. And besides, the girlfriend has announced her sense of being underwhelmed by this trek in many languages, including my own, so that the boyfriend, after trying every form of placation, from scorn to unctuous conciliation to a sloppy liplock, all with the same ratcheted-up result, now makes of his face the blank emotionless beam of some giant plush beast on a children’s television show, with eyes all pupil and made of felt and a mouth that’s a sewn cloth strip devoid of expression, for any emotional manifestation tends to set her off. I start to call them Herr and Frau Dancing Bear.) And finally, there comes, last up the road, the dumpy guy from France who seems to be walking alone, which sometimes concerns me because, judging from the way I see him put on his hiking socks each morning, so that the reinforced diamond that belongs at the heel rides the top of his foot, he is even more out of his depth than I am. They are all on parade, and they are all looking at our naked bods.

But almost none of them wave back, although they frown at our fun. Nobody looks interested in joining us. And the water is fine!

After letting the sun dry us on smoothed granite, we put on our packs and head toward the promise of a shabby but large hotel (my guidebook gripes but reports that they sell postcards, so it must have some other modern amenities, too). We dare each other to jog to the hotel, probably just over that hill.

No, that hill.

And just across that meadow and over that scramble of boulders. Yonder.

We have been lulled into a false sense of ease, it seems, because both the English and German guidebooks have lied to each of us at the same time. Okay, they didn’t lie to us, but they made it mighty easy for us to misread them. “That’s not the waterfall they were referring to,” we realize, the one we skinny-dipped in, but this one,
here, the one we find two hours later. We are two hours behind our minds’ notion of when this day’s walk would end. This sort of notion is the sort that generates terrible feelings.

By the time we reach a rundown goat-shepherd’s hut (scree can be used to hold down roofing tile, too, apparently), the Bergerie Radule, we are as unmanned as the hut. No friendly Paulo or his easy-on-the-eye son serving wee and unwee drams. Just dozens and dozens of charming but trail-blocking goats (my God, I gasp in discovery, chèvre cheese smells like goats! Goats, they smell like goats!). Petra would like to drop despondently onto a rock to pout, but you have to look before you sit, because there are goat doodies everywhere, which makes spontaneous gestures of frustration look just as theatrical and artificial as they are. But I am right with you, girl.

After I give both of us time to have inner tantrums, I say, “that hotel might be busy because it’s Saturday, and the French sure do love ‘le weekend.’” I am suggesting that she take up her trusty cell phone, the one that gets reception anywhere, even at the bottom of a remote mountain pass on a remote island in the remote Mediterranean, thanks to her employment at Siemens. Petra gives (and gets) good phone. It gives me a false sense of comfort at all times; I remember the stories of guys stuck in a blizzard on Everest, calling their wives to say goodbye. It’s nice that modern technology has made it possible to say goodbye from your terrible accident. That’s what I call progress. Cavemen never got to call home after getting gored by a mammoth.

Petra, as sapped of energy as I am (I swear she was the one who dared us to jog to the hotel), pulls her phone out. Yup. The reception is so good, even I can hear the singsong voice of the patroness taunt, “Je suis désolée,” not sorry at all, really, “Complet!” Filled up. No room at the inn.

I fly into a tailspin of anger, doodies be damned, and stomp through the goats and into the woods, blinded by that lethal
combination of fatigue and rage (it's a kind of enchantment; I think
it's what witches visit upon their princess victims in the fairy tales).
Petra cannot, or does not follow; her pack is off her shoulders, and
by now, she knows when to stand back. I'd do the same for her.

I take a very wrong turn, and then another, and another, and the
red-and-white stripes demarking the GR20 turn into the yellow
markings of a local wayside trail, and they turn into an occasional
pile of rocks, until I am following what is probably a goat path, and
now is maybe a goat path if I am lucky, and now I am lost.

I try to backtrack, and hunt for the right trail, but there are so
many forks and tridents and intersections made by goats who don't
seem to give a damn where they are going, and after an hour, the sun
is starting to set and I am starting to panic. My acerbic guidebook
warns that every year, walkers on the GR20 have to be helicoptered
out because they get lost, and here I am, done with the compass,
done with the charts, and not in the port, no, not even remotely.

By now, it may come as no surprise that while walking, I've got-
ten myself lost on several occasions. I scoff at the number of times
we've seen the red-and-white stripes of the GR20 (it ought to be a
nationalist flag itself, since it often appears every five feet or so), but
if they didn't paint them so close together, I am the one likely to
wander off on some side trail and starve to death half a kilometer
from a restaurant. I have little sense of direction, especially when
among mountains that block the sun's actual location.

I have friends who have impeccable directional sense, something
I envy as much as I envy the phrase “divides his time between” in a
biographical note, or sensitive nipples, or a full head of hair. “It's like
I have this map of where I am, in the bigger sense, below me, and it
shifts around as I shift,” says my friend Pete. I imagine his brain
swimming and swiveling about inside his skull like one of those
liquid-filled compasses that you install on your car's dashboard.
Birds are said to have tiny magnets in their heads to help them know
south. Cats and dogs, too. The lower orders. I sit on a rock from which I wish I had to brush goat doodies, but even they are not stupid enough to get this far back in the woods. I console myself by thinking that my profound lack of directional sense is evidence of a *more evolved being*, and that I should not feel ashamed, but here in the wilderness, it is always the fifth great day of God, the day animals were created, and, even in that biblical scheme of things, men are not coming until *tomorrow*.

If there’s no sun by which to orient myself and the trail throws in a couple of curves (for example, on a trail that hugs a series of forested mountains—for example, the GR20), I am as confused as a blindfolded little girl at a birthday party, given a whirl and sent to whack at the overhead piñata.

Getting lost on an island is a little less dire than getting lost, say, in Antarctica, because eventually, if you keep walking, you’ll come across some sort of human habitation (God, I wish I could still see Calvi). One would think then that walking in the less wild portions of the world would be easier, but it’s in the civilized places where I get lost the most, where people are apt to move nature around, alter the course of a road, or block it with something new. All it takes is for some enterprising farmer to decide to plant corn where he had always maintained a service road to his old château, and a walker like me is, as they say, screwed.

While hiking in southwest France with Jean-Philippe, a Swiss friend of both Petra and mine, we came into the vineyards in the Bourdeaux, where is made the “Entre deux mers,” the St. Emilion, the Bergerac and Château Margaux; I had bucolic fantasies when entering the Gironne because we were walking among the wine grapes, miles and miles of perfect rows—how lovely, how picturesque! And how could a person get lost in such order, such ancient, stately order?
First of all, there is no shade in vineyards, or if the grape vines are high enough to create shade, then they are like those human mazes, and nobody wants to walk in a human maze with a backpack. Second, the grapes draw all sorts of bugs: wasps and flies and such and such. Two vineyard rows is the perfect width for building a spider web big enough to snare cows (the earthy Jean-Philippe was more philosophical about webs than I: “I would not like to bicycle in France,” he said, when I complained about my aching feet one evening, “because then I would not be able to feel the spiders.”) And further, the farmer will move his vines, or grow new grapes in new rows, and you will lose the path, or it will not be on a perfect north-south perpendicular to the sun, so that you slowly walk away from your goal until you have accumulated kilometers of overshot or mis-shot distance.

Fellow walkers once convinced me to take a “night étape,” a step of the journey in the dark. We stopped at dawn, after an evening of stumbling over the tiniest rocks and sapping our flashlight batteries, in a village seven kilometers to the south of where we wanted to be.

I made plans, some years back, for a walk in Spain’s Picos de Europa, where they make the cheese called Cabrales from the milk of goats and sheep and cows blended all together and then aged, wrapped in grape leaves, buried deep in the warm steamy caress of decaying manure so that it is such a stinky blue cheese that it is purple. My partner and I needed maps, and on the way to the walking, we purchased some in a shop in the town of Oviedo. They were not so much maps as charts that were drawn up by Franco’s military in 1954. Not so much charts as wish lists for Santa Claus. The charts were very picturesque; we liked them as potential souvenirs, and we had no guide for the Picos. Even the shopkeeper warned us that they were out of date; yet we were swept up, I think, in the romance of using old maps, of making do.
What we found, far too late and deep in the mountains, was that the maps depicted villages that no longer existed (think: Guernica), and also villages that the regime dreamed would one day exist in its new world order; roads, too, and vice versa. The problem was that there was, in one particular portion of our hiking trail, a network of paths that the grazing ingredients of Cabrales had worn into hillside, so that it was easy to believe we were not lost but that these old charts were perhaps a little off without modern GPS surveying. And we continued to follow trails that didn’t exist and made ourselves believe that two or three stones, more or less arranged in a triangle, were another hiker’s sign for us to go this way or that, when in fact they were just two or three stones sitting around, more or less arranged in a triangle.

Waist-deep in brambles and realizing that even sheep had not come over this path in a few months, a very large creature, which, for now, I will accept may have been a spider and not an animal with bright yellow fur (but I want this argument to remain open for future discussion), crawled up my pants leg and into my pocket. I screamed something like we are going back we are going back, and I was already going back, no open arguments there, and that is, I believe, the only reason we did not disappear forever into the wilds of the Picos de Europa. Today, the old Franco charts are locked in a box with some snow globes and collector spoons and other useless souvenirs.

And there’s more than just my bad sense of direction to reckon with. Between my guide to the GR20 and Petra’s German guide, there are thousands of discrepancies of distance and direction. It reminds me of how guides to the Camino de Santiago in French, Spanish, German, Dutch, and English never agreed on the number of kilometers to the next place. Each day, we multinational pilgrims would pool all the numbers together and average them out. All
charts for ocean travel come with an advisory emblazoned in the corner: “Note: the prudent mariner will not rely on a single source of information while navigating.”

And sometimes, misinformation and misapprehension are handmaidens to success. My friend Marta told me a wonderful story about how, in Nepal during World War II, there was a soldier from Ghurka who escaped from a Burmese prison camp. He stumbled out of the greenery into the British headquarters at the front one day, covered with running sores, filthy, weak with hunger and dysentery, but miraculously alive and, as Marta put it, “there.” He saluted his commander with a feeble arm.

You can just see the commander straighten to attention for the survivor, after bending fruitlessly over his charts. “How could you possibly escape the Burmese?” he asked the Ghurka. The soldier didn’t speak English, but little by little, through an interpreter, he explained that back in the prison camp, a dying English infantryman had given him a map.

Now you can just see the commanders eyes narrow with disbelief and hope. A map of the jungle? See the officers look at one another. As far as they knew, there were no maps of the impenetrable Burmese jungle, just as there are no real maps of the maquis. This had become quite a problem for the Allies as they tried to plan their maneuvers. They grew excited; a map was just what they needed to turn the tides in a campaign that wasn’t going well.

The commander asked the soldier to show them the map. The Ghurka pulled it from the inside of what was left of his shirt and unwrapped the dirty cloth that protected it. He squatted down and began to unfold the stained, fragile paper on the ground. One quarter had come loose along the folds and had to be placed like a puzzle piece where it fit. One corner was missing entirely. The officers looked with anticipation over the shoulders of the small Nepali man.
They squinted at the blurred tangle of routes and rivers. And suddenly: Piccadilly, someone made out, Buckingham Palace, Hampstead Heath, Wimbledon. They were looking at a map of central London.

Now where was I before that long digression? Oh yes: lost!

And so I flounder about in the weakening Corsican light, getting farther and farther away from where I want to be. I continue to take trails that are obviously not the right ones, because I am devoted, even to my mistakes. My big Michelin maps of Corsica are folded incorrectly, and I'll continue to fold them incorrectly in the same exact incorrect way until squares will come loose, like the squares of the Ghurka soldier’s London map. Getting lost is like using the wrong theorem in a geometry proof but proceeding anyway.

I know I shouldn’t panic. I’m not really lost in the way one might get lost in the tundra, but it’s an annoying kind of lost, a walking through spider webs lost, a did-they-say-there-are-poisonous-snakes? lost.

And then I hear cars. Oh, the sweet sweet spiritual “ommmm” of auto wheels on pavement. I follow their sound, and tumble out onto an incongruous highway, and I am sweaty, bug-bitten, those spider webs in my hair; I smell of goat, and a shot of adrenalin mixes in with the rage and fatigue for a heady soup of emotion, yet I’m following a road clearly marked to our next stop: Castel de Verghio.

But another big thing about being lost is that one loses confidence entirely, and every bit of proof of not being lost is disbelieved. Even a highway sign will not convince this lost wanderer that he’s been found; I am sure that the signs are directing auto travelers to a different Castel de Verghio than I am going to. A hiker seeks the mountain called Castel de Verghio, while a motorist is looking for the restaurant called Castel de Verghio. Instead, I find the hotel we had called back at the dilapidated bergerie. And I still feel nervous. In fact, it matches the description in my guidebook, yet another
defunct ski resort that looks like it had been run by a Soviet bloc country, and when I can’t find Petra, I decide to ask for a room.

This does not help belay my mistrust in being found either—because they give me a room.

I worry, even as I shower, drink a beer, finish the leftover brebis we bought from Paulo. Perhaps this is not the same place Petra called on her cell phone. I am still lost! As the sun sets and the dinner hour approaches, I don’t quite know what to do; I figured Petra would be here, and she is not. Is she so angry with me that she walked farther on? Where would her energy come from? I worry, then drink another beer on the veranda, hoping to see her pass along the road; she’d have to pass along in front of the hotel. There is a tent village behind the hotel, but I carry our tent in my pack. I poke around back there anyway, say a sheepish hello to the Pyrenees couple and Lula the Lab, see only one of the two mustachio’d shirtless macho Rooster men (if they annoy me, they must make each other miserable and avoid each other as much as they can while still being considered “together,” guarding one another’s safety), spot the Scottish military man smoking a pipe on a rock, and voilà!, not Petra, but the three missing French boys who were last seen in Carrozzu. Forever turtle-eyed with hangover and taking forever getting across Corsica.

“Allo!” they say, almost in harmony, like stooges. They are happy to see me, and I know why: I am the companion of Petra, who is something to look at on the road besides rocks and trees. But they are as indirect as American boys: “Do you have our cooking pot?” Oh, the French. Always thinking of girls with their stomachs.

“Petra is carrying it,” I tell them. They moo and chide, for how could I have left their cooking pot and its attendant unattended?

I worry, but drink another beer and wash some socks. And then, under the buzzing sulfur lights of the rusty ski lift, I see her, trudging up the trail, me fresh and scrubbed, she covered in red dust and so pissed off, I swear I can see steam shooting out of her ears. I run in
and practice in the mirror, trying out my “upset” face, the one I truly had while lost deep in the woods on a goat path. I hope this face will eclipse or nullify her anger. I run out and meet her in front of the hotel.

“There you are stupid German girl I got so lost it was horrible but I got us a hotel room and it’s my treat want a beer?”

She is silent for a couple of minutes, sticks out one hiking boot for me. She allows me to unlace it for her, and my quick fingers turn red with the dust. To show me she is going to forgive me, she says, “The Damenkarte hotel room?”

Sure, you betcha.

I lead her into the Hotel Castel de Verghio and insist on carrying her backpack up the stairs. For a place that is the source of great luxury and relief, the hotel is hideous, and critiquing it is my odd way of cajoling Petra out of her righteous anger. There is a Corsican man at the front desk with a face that looks as if it has been folded like cardboard, creased, and unfolded again in several odd places, and this is his hotel, his kingdom. He had, it seems, rerouted the GR20 so that walkers have to come to him. He has painted over the signs in the woods (and this is why I got lost, I think) and makes his rundown ski lodge an all-stops. Downstairs, on the veranda, four guys—perhaps from Flanders?—speak a wacked language just ever-so-barely Romance in root, and it makes this place feel even more strange.

But the mountains are always nice to look out upon, even if our balcony is ugly, and if I position my chair at a certain angle, I can’t see the beat-up rusty ski lift or the water-damaged industrial carpeting that curls at the corners of our room and shows the dry-rot floors beneath. A shower nozzle, even a European shower nozzle, and a fridge-cooled beer is luxury enough. Another reason why I walk: lowering the standards of what is considered luxurious.

I buy two more beers and bring them up to Petra. More placating
salve. She steps out of the bathroom scrubbed clean of the red dust and accepts the cold one. “We have to be nicer to each other,” she sighs, and drinks.

I think of the crafty hospitalero of this hotel, trapping walkers in his socialist-realist shack, and I think of our rather unsociable fellow walkers frowning as we skinny-dipped in the Golo, and then I nod to Petra. She is right: I must be nicer. She is not the enemy. The enemy is—what? Who gets me lost? Who makes me eat salty cheese when there is no water to wash it down? Who makes me sing “I know an old woman who swallowed a fly” over and over and over?

I look from the pretty mountains down to my feet, and to the ugly balcony. “I was very lost and very frightened,” I explain to Petra one more time, “but you are right. I shouldn’t have stormed off at the goat hut.” The Corsican beer is good. It’s called Pietra. It’s an amber, and both Petra and I prefer red wine, but sometimes you need cold beer. Petra teaches me a great onomatopoetic German word for the effect cold beer has on a furious, bilious mind, minds like ours at this moment. “It is the word that sounds like you are throwing cold water on a smoldering fire,” she says, “zischen.”

On our Soviet balcony, I would not doubt that everybody in the building could hear the zischen.

**Castel de Verghio to Manganu**

Although I spent nearly as much money on beer the evening before as I did on our room, we decide, in a stridently moral huffiness only a good night’s sleep can foster, not to give that awful hotel any more of our money. So we are up early and out on the trail before most of the others. It’s not until we have walked for more than an hour that I remember the French boys, looking for their aluminum pot. But the pot is light and Petra is glad to keep it, in case we have to cook for ourselves again.
With our stolen pot, we pride ourselves in being two bandits, as the first hour is a walk through the Forest of Aïtone, famous for harboring refugees.

“What other crime did you commit?” Petra wants to know.

“I killed a pig at the ski resort,” I tell her, then add, “and stole a wallet from the Comte du Castel Verghio,” when she is not satisfied with my misdeeds. She waits still: Petra loves a wild fantasy. “And I didn’t pay my cell phone bill.” This, finally, seems to satisfy her, the Siemens employee.

“What did you do?” I ask.

“I blew up a building with a bomb,” she says, as a matter of fact. Such a violent woman.

From the woods we can still see that ski resort, the broken-down ski lift looking like the Mad Mouse coaster ride at the traveling carnival of my childhood, the one that always broke down at least once, throwing some child into the sky or cultivating a crop of neck braces for the whiplash it engendered. This machinery here at Castel Verghio looks like it has been half-dismantled after such a terrible accident. The wild pigs sniffing around it do not add much glamour.

Before the sun is too hot, we are able to scale to the admittedly lovely but treacherous Ciottulu a I Mori, the “Hole of the Moors,” whose name refers to a crazy pierced stone at the top of one of the peaks. There is a refuge, and many of the walkers have not yet packed up yet. I recognize the bickering Australians, and the French guy who doesn’t know how to wear his socks. And mein Herr und Frau Dancing Bear. The only friendly person is the gardien, who slaves away in his shack making omelets for the macho French Roosters who have taken their shirts off again when really, really, they shouldn’t.

Petra and I are starving from our pre-dawn sanctimony, but the gardien is the only French speaker I have ever met who says “Je suis désolé” without some aspect of verbal irony affecting his tone, “no more omelets.”
We look over at the two shirtless men, and it seems to me that they are eating a dozen eggs themselves. “The rooster is tired,” the gardien tells us, and for a moment, I confuse his egg source with the shirtless men, and then I see he is making a joke. Petra tells him that roosters do not lay eggs, and perhaps this is the problem. Then we pool our money and buy two Mars bars and two Coca-Colas and we pay ten euros—more than ten American dollars—for them, and we do not complain. We move on, and I smile, knowing that at least the big omelets will slow down the extreme sports guys.

By noon we take our ease along the pozzines of Lac Ninu, which runs a little dry, like the promissory illusory springs that gambol through Petra’s guidebook. It’s late in the year. Pozzines are lush, green, grass fields, the grass so short it looks mown or manicured, kept irrigated by small streams threading just below in winding narrow trenches all around us. We have to watch our step, but it’s such a pleasure to walk here, and remarkably striking in contrast to the severe and bizarre gray and orange towers we walked through to get to Lac Ninu.

The walking has been mostly gentle today, but even so, the étape seems a song sung in a minor key, to be sung in a gingerly tone since even walking on soft pine needles and these pozzines, stuff that looks like the greens on golf courses (I sit eating bread and cheese and olives with Petra on the fourth hole and wonder whether there are any gators to exercise my heretofore useless zigzag strategy), reminds me that I am suffering blisters. That it is September, too, cannot be denied: fewer walkers, an angle of light, that drying, dying lake.

Wild horses appear on the shore! And day hikers, a woman with a tiny pack and her beast of burden, a great St. Bernard of a husband trudging up behind her. These feel like air let into a stuffy room—the woman’s tiny backpack is a subtle sign that escape is always possible, a left turn can lead us into rooms run on electricity and good
wine and coffee. That's all I really need: a subtle sign that coffee exists, not necessarily the coffee itself. The woman and her St. Bernard can leave us alone now. I said, you can go away now. Thanks! See ya! They spread their blanket just far enough away that they do not have to smell the two of us.

And as we clear up our lunch and approach the lake, there is an odd optical illusion: the lake seems to miniaturize the closer we get to it. This is the odd effect of the craggy dramatic ups and downs of the mountain peaks at the center of Corsica, which we are approaching. The mountains are not so high themselves, but they look alpine and impenetrable. The lake keeps shrinking . . . and oddly, so do the wild horses.

The horses, as I walk up to one, grazing and ignoring me, are tiny, and I have to bend over to put my hand on its neck. Lilliputian tiny. I've seen Shetlands, and these are smaller than Shetlands. Adorable and weird! Once again, I tell Petra that Corsica was once Pleasure Island, a carnival shut down, and these circus ponies, used by midget clowns for some surely hilarious skit, have been let loose back into the wild. They nearly rescue the mood of this landscape for me, which ought to be soft, the meadow on an English estate designed by Capability Brown. But I feel lonesome, and that's no slight against dear Petra. It just may be that “desolate” is easier for me to bear.

The circus animals try to rescue me from the lonesomeness by summoning their pals, a batch of unchaperoned piglets, which appear out of nowhere, not even a ridiculous clown car. It's as if we have come upon some Neverland, with the munchkin ponies and cholo piglets and husbands transformed into St. Bernards and manicured golf-course greens with nobody needed to mow them. And when lunch is finished and we pick up our packs to move on, we turn a corner and find a grove of ancient olive trees, so wizened that their very trunk cores have rotted out, so that they seem, on two long legs, to be striding along with us.
I never quite shake the melancholy all day, my brain turning even the lingering calliope music a shade darker. Perhaps it is because there is a difference in landscape. We’d been in stony mountains for days, and that is a desolate landscape. Devil-presides-there landscapes. This interval of softness (the golf course pozzine, trickle of water, the grazing wild horses), this was a lonely landscape. The difference between one tree and no trees is germane. Imagine suffering in hell for eternity, as Ulysses did so unjustly, and coping, as one would have to, and suddenly a door opens and Dante, one of the living, drops by, a creature of hope and goodness. Desolation can be an easier thing to navigate than loneliness.

At the top of the rather freakish red rock ridge—the French word for these, often in a formation that looks like the head of an Indian or bunny rabbit or, what? a spooky goblin, is calanches—coming down to Lac Ninu, we rest for a minute at the Col de St. Pierre. An unpicturesque chapel to Saint Peter constructed of mortar and granite blocks, it is something to lean upon and get the view below on both sides, but there is a single tree, one of those pines buffeted all its life by a one-way Mistral wind, that has been deformed into a grasping, cowering scrubby thing. Yes, it has shade to offer, but to take advantage of that shade seems a crime—all of Ruskin’s warnings about the pathetic fallacy notwithstanding: this tree suffers.

But we don’t have calanches and scraggy trees for long. In the lusher woods into which we descend grow lamb’s ear and big white tree fungi. And hellebore, my nemesis! Every time I see hellebore, it seems, something bad happens. I’ll lose Petra around a corner, or I’ll twist my ankle, or I’ll find no natural spring where my guidebook promised a natural spring, or I’ll run into one of the two shirtless Rooster men who devour the GR20 in great gulps, exhausting themselves by quick-stepping up a mountainside and passing us by in a whoosh (then collapsing exhausted somewhere, adding an even more unphotogenic aspect to the chapel of Saint Peter, say, so that
we’ll overtake them and have to be passed again, over and over, all day, always with a sense with the overtaking of big red tail-feathers in our face. Their French is an inscrutable patois from somewhere, and I enjoy not understanding a word of it, although I’m sure they are saying things to me like, “Your pack is too heavy” or “Those are the wrong shoes” or “You’re breathing in the wrong way.”). Or perhaps I’ll begin to admit to myself that I have finally, after all these hikes I have taken, bitten off more than I can chew. But I’ve thought of this before; I didn’t need hellebore to give in to that weakness.

There is this lovely pink mountain flower, wild cyclamen.

Yes, a minor key. The song I keep singing all day is “Blue skies, shining on me. Nothing but blue skies.” Nothing. A C chord, just about the only thing. “Do I see.”

And when we arrive in Manganu and settle into our tent (relatively) clean, a little bit of that lonely minor key in the bridge of “Blue Skies” still lingers. The next day’s walk to Petra Piana will be difficult though pretty, but there’s no reward at the end of that étape, according to our guidebook, not the sort Petra and I prefer. It’s all hardtack and tea bags. Petra is losing steam, and if it rains, we will be kinda fucked. What revives us is another nudie dip in pools of fresh mountain water along a string of rocks. A little chilly but so delicious. You can pretend there’s no refugio around the corner full of macho shitheads (mostly, they’re French and Dutch macho shitheads) slapping each other on the back because—why?—they can still shovel meat down their throats?

I feel that if my identity as an American is revealed I’ll be descended upon. Time was, when I met Petra, I had a little social curiosity to me, and the jibes I’d get about my country and its activities in the world would be endurable. But that was Love During the Clinton Administration, and this is a time to be so still, like a frog in a winter stream, that they can’t even detect your heartbeat. I beg Petra to continue identifying me as a Canadian. She agrees, as long as she can tell everybody that she is Austrian. Two amphibians.
I think I’m also more and more disturbed about Corsican autonomy, which goes beyond the violent and gets childish. The more I know, the more I have no right or power to say anything at all. But if the subject of nationalism is approached from a stance of weakness—saying I don’t feel part of the ruling party either, and then saying to myself, “Darling, you must force yourself” to feel part of it—may I be excused?

The night before, at the Soviet ski resort, three Corsican gentlemen watched Petra and me make a mockery of the crossword puzzle section of *Le Corse: Votre Hebdo* (Corsica: Your Weekly), and they used this to strike up some kind of conversation with us. “Where’s this guy from?” they asked Petra, when it was clear that she was in charge. It is my burden to explain, every time, that I am not much of a friend of George Bush. What is the best way to diffuse this issue? It makes me sleepy. But we chatted at length with one of the old local guys, and Petra heard that there are millions of Corsicans living in other parts of the world. “In exile,” it would seem. Would they ever come home if Corsica were made an independent nation? Petra asked what some of the typical names were out there. He said Santoni, Rossi, and the like. In the villages, they call after each other with an “O” at the beginning of their names—“O’Doni!” “O’Ma!” (Marie, a common name in this Catholic country, as is “O’Jo-Bate!,” short for Jean Baptiste). Rossi, Santoni—these are names, I notice later when flipping through my guidebook, of very active, if dead now, patriots of autonomy.

If I were to stand up for what my own country has been up to in order to protect itself, this would seem more inexcusable than waving the Corsican flag with its blindfolded and perhaps decapitated Moor waving in the air. Patriotism. I have an odd rule about naming towns: if they’re big, like London or Rome or Paris, then I call them the name my own language gives them, and let the others do the same: Londres is fine, Roma will understand when I call it Rome, the people there in Paris will recognize themselves when I do not say
Pahr-ees. But the French call Ascu Stegnu “Haute Asco,” and in my journals and photobook I am careful to use the Corsican spelling. Those names need more protection, lest travelers destroy what they seek. I like to see the Basque and Corsican and Catalan flags fly: Go team! But the poet Browning said it best for me: “Patriotism is the easiest virtue for a man to acquire.”

Tonight, in Manganu, in a tent, there are no lights to read by, no bar to have a nightcap and chat with the locals. We go to bed early. It’s a place in the crevice in the rocks. We see a cow, alone, high above us while swimming in the pool, and worry, but he isn’t worried. Nor is the black Lab, missed last night, but camping next door, on the other side of the aspen. In front of them, the Dancing Bears. Seven French ladies with little silver packets of freeze-dried dinner have hit upon the brilliant idea (and by brilliant, I mean pretty brilliant, since we have no unstolen utensils ourselves) of pouring boiling water directly into the packets. Last I saw, they were sitting at a picnic table, packets all in a row, waiting expectantly. The Dutch guy has generously offered to wear his shirt in the kitchen. Two Dutch guys who may be gay (Petra saw matching rings) play a complicated role-playing card game. The lone French guy who always passes us and we pass him back is wringing out his socks. The three Australians (or are they Kiwis?) still bicker. A breeze blows through and puts out the feverish little sunburn fire in my face. From somewhere on the other side, a gleeeful chorus of “Happy Birthday”—“Bon Ann-i-vers-aire!”—by French girls who aren’t tired at all by the long walks. Pipe smoke, just a little, from one of the old (definitely, them) Brits. That, and a green lawn smell, and that cow groaning up in the mountainside: maybe he is in trouble!

On my tent, hooded like and called a Cobra, hangs a zappy “sale” tag that proves we paid the six euros for the site and use of the showers and kitchen. My clothes dry on alder. Ancient alder and beech trees full of burls and fright-wig branches rustle.
Somebody is laughing at all their own jokes, a zipper on a tent goes—up; somebody is up. Clouds pass over, threaten rain, then change their minds. There is a slight French guy with legs like logs and a voice that could be mistaken for thunder.

The Dancing Bears are making amorous cootchie-cootchie noises in their tent, but what do they think will happen? What kind of energy do they have? And what will they do when I take a whiz just to the right of their tent? My tent flaps are full of clever toggles; the space age has been applied only to airplanes and super-lightweight tents that break down to the size of a playing card. Everything, including you, must be clever when camping: the order in which you hang your clothes on a single peg in the shared shower stall; the way you arrange the rocks outside so water, if it rains, flows around your tent and down the hill; the timing of the Sleepinol so that it hits your blood and takes you away at the end of a page in your journal, the end of natural light.

Manganu to Petra Piana

This is the chapter in which more wild pigs start to show up. Or, as the Australian guy in the tent behind the scrub alder says when the stray dog begins chasing the two pigs through the tenting section, biting them in the ass and making the squeal of, well, a pig: “Chroist! Eets a peeg een the bivouac!” And the gardien comes tumbling after. Petra says that Frau Dancing Bear in a tent down the way is complaining in German to her boyfriend, “But you assured me there would be no more wild pigs!”

But I am getting ahead of myself.

Earlier, after nightfall in Manganu, we have been given up to one of the famous flash thunder-and-lightning storms of these mountains. The farther we go down the GR20, the more we hear about and see ruined things, both man- and nature-made, zapped by
Thor’s hammer. With so much damage done selectively by the trained finger of forked lightning, it is possible on Corsica that damage, too, be both nature- and man-made, and it wouldn’t take much college training, I think, to become a rather effective arsonist, given the natural way the lightning can single out an item in the landscape.

Who could prove, after all, that it was a human, not nature, who incinerated that private refuge built to compete with your monopoly on the trekking business? There is a lot of this burning business running around Corsica. Later on the trail, we will find one such site of the remains of an unlucky private enterprise, a hut built to shelter us walkers and a complete suck on the local bergerie’s business, sadly bumped off by a sharp fork of lightning, or perhaps a contract fulfilled by Penelope “Pyro” Perkins. But again, I am getting ahead of myself.

Our guidebooks carry specific extensive instructions on what to do if caught in a sudden lightning storm, which include jettisoning anything metal and avoiding close contact with fellow hikers. Petra’s book also includes a sketch of a hiker assuming the flash-lightning safety position, which looks very duck-and-cover, and about as bootless.

Besides the lightning, there is also, of course, rain. It’s fun to hear the merry rhythm of raindrops on a tent roof when you’re snug in bed; but eventually you have to go out, and on this morning before the pig incident, we take the tent down even though it is still wet and the grooves in the stakes are caked with mud, and we plod into our day’s hike crabby, unfresh, and even exhausted. Lucky for us the rain never returns, and we are able to enjoy the spectacular views promised to us in the guidebook. In fact, the overcast drab enhances some of the landmarks, clouding out the pesky nuisance and distraction of other lovely landmarks drawing our eyes into the distant background.

One set of toothy mountains, stately and severely imperious as
mitered bishops or organ pipes or Klansmen, create a protected surround, much like the place where Brünnhilde sleeps, waiting for Siegfried’s wake-up smooch. When I get pictures developed and show them to friends back home, one will remark, “This looks like the place where you made an appointment to see the Devil.” But I am getting way ahead of myself.

“If we climb above the clouds,” I tell Petra, “they can’t rain on us.” I am speaking of the clouds, not the Klansmen. Mostly, we climb into the clouds, and clouds are cold, clammy and cold.

This also makes it possible, by some twist of nature, for me to be able to smell myself, smell any body odor when I sweat and exert. It’s an odd thing, disconcerting, like hearing your own voice on a tape recorder. I think of this to tell Petra: “Cavemen never heard their own voices on a tape recorder.”

Petra is still grouchy, thinking about the wet tent. “You don’t know that for sure,” she tries. I try to josh her into a better mood by telling her that our next stop for the night is named after her, and her amazing abilities on the keyboard. My jokes are lost in translation and cloud cover.

When we arrive at Petra Piana, we, Petra and I, are tired and dirty living among the pigs. I blow some euros on a big hunk of gâteau de fruits, a cake with dried fruit in it, a fruitcake, if you will, and a bottle of overpriced, burroed-in wine, and I’m counting on the first item to lift us up and the second to knock us out this night. The French influence on wilderness manifests itself in the officious transfer of planck (quotidian) wine, imported via liter-sized Fanta bottles or perhaps boxes, into genuine wine bottles stoppered with a wad of paper. The poor, trusty tent is a thing of clay and wattles made, after all this dust and rain. Would it were as sturdy as a cabin at Innisfree, but the weight of our human hornet’s nest threatens to bring it down with its own lopsided weight. Mud slowly dries, cracks, and flakes into puzzle pieces that I pull off one by one.
I have layered on the Bullfrog chapstick, and it does little to stop the drying-out process. It’s dry here, Arizona dry, let’s-make-raisins-dry—my nose bleeds, my lips chap.

“They could find us sitting in this tent looking at this map, totally mummified, ten thousand years from now,” I tell Petra, after we study the long, long trail blazed for us for the morrow. Without even a smile, Petra leaves the tent. My jokes are the conversational equivalent of “I know an old woman who swallowed a fly.” And I am not even able to cheer myself up with lame jokes. The jokes are not even lame: they are unjokes.

And then it is Petra who lifts my spirits immeasurably by coming to the tent with a modest proposal: tomorrow, instead of going on to ugly, inescapable Onda, we stop three hours from Petra Piana at a famous shepherd’s bergerie where they’ll serve us a fantastic lunch.

“And then,” Petra hesitates, because she thinks I am a purist. But hasn’t she known me for years? Doesn’t she know that I am anything but a purist, or perfectionist? Or lack any kind of discipline at all? And I make a face reminding her of this, and she, emboldened by all she reads there, speaks with confidence and speed, “And then we will take the cute little narrow-gauge train to Vizzavona, where we can sleep in a hotel with curtains and rugs and little chocolates and maybe something salty.”

I wish I had thought of it first. This, this gives me hope and joy—the possibility of the three tenets of the Creed of the Knights of Sleepy Justice: Flee! Regroup! Rest! Laugh and run away to the pampering we have earned, earned with day jobs, dammit, and live to charge ahead another day to the second half of our journey, much more to our style of walking.

Perhaps this seems like cheating to purists. I am not a purist, and I haven’t any purist friends. Or if they are friends, they are sent to Coventry soon after the stench of continence is sniffed from their big baby diapers.
I must say that, this far down the trail, I am feeling overwhelmed. Each day has been so challenging I can barely manage thinking about going on for another week. These frightening climbs up mountain peaks, lifting myself up thousands of feet over boulders and then slogging down through loose scree and whatever else is on the trail—how long can this go on?

This is such a different kind of walking than I’d done on the Chemin/Camino and all the other roads. This is rough stuff. I come down into each refuge with arms as tired as my feet. My feet aren’t flattened by long étapes, but various joints—ankles, knees, like that—are being asked to be agile, I am asked for an agility of the head and body. I am getting better at it, but a rest—

“A rest!” I exclaim to Petra.

—and that is when the wild pig runs through the slapdash tent town, perhaps to italicize the very rightness, the sanity, of our decision. Now, by “wild pig,” I don’t mean wild pig, not the boar they make into delicacies of every salty and stewy sort. Not wild pig, but a pig run wild. The Corsicans tend to let their various livestock run free all summer, hoping that laziness and gravity will keep them from scaling the mountains we seem hell-bent on scaling. This kind of passive farming cuts down on feed and upkeep. *Faux eleveurs,* indeed. The beasts are rounded up later in November for slaughter, fattened off the fat of the land. As a foe of all purists, I am not judging here. I’m just saying.

So these wild pigs, as with the ponies at Lac de Nino or the stray cow at Manganu, they are fairly accustomed to the presence of backpackers and stay out of our way—or plop themselves in the middle of the trail and have to be stepped over. They still startle me with size, and when encumbered with a backpack, the idea of being charged by a feral pig comes as a vivid negative fantasy, a fantasy I rerun in my mind like a little film loop, as incessantly as “I know an old woman who swallowed a fly.” They only seem to run away, or run around when chased by a gardien’s dog.
I am not disheartened by the possibility of the peeg een the bivouac knocking down my tent, and in anticipation for a trip into town, I clip my toenails while watching the peeg scramble down the shantytown lanes we’ve made with guylines and tent stakes. The screams of startled humans is so close to the squeals of near-feral pigs that I can hardly tell the difference. And that poor, poor German Dancing Bear couple—they have to learn how to secure their tent properly when there are wild animals around. And my toenails have been cutting holes into my hiking socks! It is amazing how just a little personal grooming can go a long way in lifting one’s spirits, even if it’s done on a mossy rock over dried ferns. I look past the mossy rock to our paper-stoppered *vin rouge*. If that pig so much as makes the wine ripple in the bottle, I am going to open up a can of imported Canadian whoop-ass on him. Her. American. Whatever.

“Would you like to borrow my toenail clippers when I’m finished?” I ask Petra, who is also growing bored with the trotting trotters.

She gives me a look as if I were the peeg een the bivouac: how dare I suggest that we share the same grooming implements. Or perhaps she is holding out for a pedicure in Vizzavona. She applies lipstick, her trademark gesture of desperate dignity in high places.

The pig keeps running around, but soon everybody ignores it (Mankind gets used to everything, damn Him!), and as my mother taught me long ago, it does, as does anything ignored (bullies, lovers, teeth), eventually go away.

**Petra Piana to Onda**

The French Rooster men see everything as a problem along the GR20. If I could speak to them in French (and I can’t, not with that accent, and not with mine), and if I could speak to them only as if I had problems to solve, we would get along just fine. I try to be
friendly for half an hour by keeping up with them as they stride, this morning, from Petra Piana. I tell myself that, as long as they keep their shirts on, I’ll stick to a short career as an ambassador, and since it is cold and we walk in rain ponchos, not only do they wear their shirts but also grandiose, tailor-made rain ponchos that make them look like matching ghosts floating down the switchbacks. They point up at the scramble we are about to surmount and say it is just like the Cirque de la Solitude: “Moo, moo, moo, même problème,” same problem. And so they open their guidebooks that I can see are so particular that every footstep seems to be recorded there, and their maps, amazingly, are marked down to the house and shepherd’s hut. What are those little dots on their maps? Are those . . . are those . . . are those sheep? I am reminded of the cheat sheets published for major video games, which, a friend points out, are called “walk-throughs.” I can’t wait for them to study the sheep dots and translate their “Moo moo moo inutile,” and so I seek out the poncho ghost that is Petra in the long line of trekkers and resume not being friends with the Roosters.

We have all awakened in the same rain cloud, and for better and worse, Petra and I were able to bring our tent down in a break between showers. As we stagger down the next passage of scree, the rain comes again. No lightning, but a frigid, you-left-the-freezer-door-open-and-now-it-is-defrosting-down-your-back rain. “An elephant is pissing,” says Petra.

“Elephant piss would at least be warm,” I counter. I’ve had no coffee: this is the first of my litany of comically hellish details (my epitaph, I would like to declare now, if it isn’t “Tends to Ramble” or “Good on the Uphills” or “A Whole New Kind of Losing” should be, I think, “He’d Have Found Something Else to Complain About”). The downhills, it has been established, are not my strong suit, and when the French Roosters, problem solved, begin to tramp down upon us on the narrow switchbacks, and rain starts to come down in
sheets, cold, cold forty-degree rain, rain that makes the rocks like ice cubes and the switchbacks an ever-culminating river, I pull my poncho down around my naked knees.

And having a rain poncho that is not tailored to my body and backpack and is far too big for the both of us, and what with me tripping over it when I don’t gather it up like an embarrassed scornful lady gathering in her skirts, and while zigzagging ever downward for an hour, two hours, so that the zigzag course is a river near what you think is the bottom but is not anywhere near the bottom: that, also, is also not the end of the trials.

For what we think is the valley bottom is just a plateau with a little shepherd’s bergerie and some flatness but, surprise!—the meadow is now a soupy lake of sheep shit! Marvelous! My feet are soaking wet, the Roosters have abandoned us, without a solution to whatever the problem is, Petra is struggling half a kilometer back, my backpack is about five pounds heavier from the water held by our tent and my undried clothes, and—what do you think I am thinking?

I am thinking that we are better off, ha ha, than those poor schmucks up top who didn’t take their tent down before the rain came again. But it is I who am an example of surpassing denial to think such stuff, because I always need this feeling of superiority to get on. Is this all part of what the Hindus call samsara?

It is two hours of this slog of displeasure later, and everything is getting more wet and more ugly and more slippery, until we come to the Bergerie de u Tolla, run by a jolly old shepherd who it turns out can’t do math but does all the important things quite well (and by the important things I mean that he cures meat and ages cheese), and his wife, who speaks perfectly good English and does fine omelets, math, and coffee in the hut alongside their home and bergerie. These two are so famous and beloved on the GR20 that they show up in all the guidebooks, English, Swiss, German, French, Belgian, Spanish. They are Jean and Michele Castagnoli, and coming to their
home seems another kind of enchantment, for the moment we open
their gate, a cat chases two roosters out like the nuisances they are
(allegory?), and the sun comes out, and we are handed two big bowls
of coffee without even asking for them.

Petra and I and half a dozen other wet pilgrims spread our wet
things along the barbed wire fence to dry. I see a fire salamander,
then two more, said to be rare, with their slick, black, cute, moist
bodies splotched with yellow spots, as if they have rested under a
ladder while somebody painted a fire hydrant. They are my good
luck sign, strength against the serrated hellebore leaves.

A small batch of older Swiss people, probably around my par-
ents’ age, settle in. The berger sells us his good homemade brocciu
from his cool little hut cave, and a lonzu, too, the delicious soft-
cured smoked filet of pork, and it will make for deluxe picnics for
the next week. But he can’t do the addition. It’s okay: he’s gotten on
so well in his life without math or English. Perhaps I could, too.
Mrs. Castagnoli tallies up, and we come to an agreement.

We dawdle for more than an hour. The sun dries things out
so quickly the storm seems a misreading of the guidebooks. The feel-
ing comes back into my fingertips. I frank the whole episode with
too many photos, including one of Jean and Michele, and it’s only
weeks later, after I get the film developed, that I realize that in every
shot, Jean has covered his face, superstitious, no doubt, about having
his image taken away from him. But I am, again, getting ahead of
myself.

Even my guidebooks speak of taking superstition seriously here
on Corsica. It seems to infect a person, me with my fear of hellebore
and growing obsession with the fire salamander. The father and son
shepherds at Bergeries de Vallone have given me a whole amusing list
of cultural facts, and by facts I mean superstitions. There are very
strict rules about the evil eye, for example, about seeing a weasel and
planning on rain, while snow is brought on by the braying of an ox.
The father could tell the future in a goat’s shoulder blades. “Corsicans
do not tell stories on Mondays,” I divined through slow translation at one point but never was sure what he meant by that—didn’t lie on Mondays? Didn’t talk on Mondays? If this had been a Monday, might he not have told me all this? “The priest always gives the pigs blessings before they are rounded up and taken to the market after a divine procession in town.” “And when a child is born”—I remember that he pointed to his son—“the husband is the one who takes to his bed for a rest of a few days.” I thought of his wife chopping and boiling and cooking in the back kitchen. That son of his, easy with the myrtle liquor and forgiving of the Yankee, all of eighteen years, smiled.

I sat with the Castagnoli coffee reminiscing about the other shepherds, how, outside, through murky windows, a lovely sun set over the fortune-telling goats, Nehi-orange and wild-rose pink. And in those windows, Ziplock storage bags filled with water and hung by a string, in the belief that the flies would see themselves magnified, like big bully flies, and be frightened off.

“More coffee?” Petra interprets the third query from Mrs. Castagnoli. But I was getting behind myself, having nostalgia for two days ago.

“Non,” I decide, and strap on my dryer, lighter pack and say goodbye to our saviors and continue to recall that other shepherd hut, what I thought I couldn’t, after so much of the myrtle liquor. I recalled how the son was eager to explain away his blondish hair and blue eyes. Being from Porto Vecchio, he had told me, where such blonde stuff is common, “I come from Vikings.” I was fascinated, too, by the way, on islands, every town is a port town, if it is not a resort.

Why is it that I find myself most satisfied, in all my travels, with these tours of islands? The concentrations of wild superstitions? I have set foot on Madeira, most of the Azores, Eleuthera, Sardegna, Mallorca, Menorca. England, for that matter. For one thing, they seem finite, they give rise to the belief that I can make a visit and
see something like all of it, get a sense of the whole thing. There is a coziness to islands, and they put me in a snug frame of mind. And then come the resorts.

The ones who stay on the islands after the resorts move in, they have an edge of island fever, exhibited in the mad way they drive cars down narrow blind alleys. But there’s an enviable purity among islands, as if a culture might be preserved without national borders, without an official autonomy, where McDonald’s won’t find it economically feasible to set up shop and American moviemakers won’t film or exhibit. That purity shows itself in language and superstitions and even the way all the dogs seem related—because they are!

Some islands don’t seem like islands, while some mainland places seem islandlike. Vancouver seems ensorcelled by water, while Vancouver Island felt to me a continent. San Francisco is insular as a peninsula and touts all the exoticism islands often have. I have made my walks along the lip of a volcano that had erupted inside a volcano in the Azores, and lowered a prepped and stuffed whole chicken into a boiling hot hole in that brewing island heat. I’ve walked along the elaborate man-made levadas of Madeira, hundreds of miles of small canals built to catch rainwater off the mountain-tops to send down to the vineyards. I saw fish swim their way up to the tops of those mountains through the stony troughs. I watched seals surround my rowboat near Norton Island in northern Maine, and a moose swim, ridiculously buoyant.

But all through these islands, I have felt the same ghostly sense, that the whole place might be relatively abandoned compared to previous times. They have more buildings than they need, and all the population seems heading away from home. On Corsica, this is reinforced by a couple of things, starting with the general exodus of its population (260,000 Corsicans dwell on Corsica, but there are over 800,000 living on the European continent, mostly in Marseille, Nice, and Paris), as we had learned at the Soviet ski resort from
the cantankerous gentlemen who insisted on buying us drinks. Also, there is a tricky business in the Corsican family law called *l’Indivision*, in which, in order to protect the family holdings, it is forbidden to sell off any land or house or holdings to people outside the blood relations. That’s a little bit of the vendetta coming back to bite itself in the ass: because so many family members leave for the mainland, there are, in any given village, dozens and dozens of substantial houses closed up and empty, nearly ghost towns given up for an archaic law.

And there’s this other thing that seems to have everything to do with the tradition of vendetta: Corsicans bury their kin “Roman Style,” and by Roman Style, they mean pretty much anywhere they want. We walk along the GR20, and every once in a while, we come across an old elaborate mausoleum. Old, but well tended, with fresh paint and tended hedges, and sometimes even fresh flowers, or at least planted flowers. I marvel at it; who is making the effort to tend them? I lift my nose in the air to sniff for a town. It sounds corny, but when you have been out in the wilderness for a bit of time, you actually can smell the smoke, perfume, garbage, and b.o. of civilization. Even without being in a cloud.

On islands, however, I can’t. Perhaps the sea air blows it off, like smog. And still we see more graves. They can be found along the sides of freeways, at the edges of towns, in a garden, or by a shepherd’s hut. They are lonesome things. Has Corsica, I wonder as I walk by a mausoleum now, half a kilometer past the Onda refuge, become a necropolis?

But then, what intrigues me is the push and tug of this feeling of bereft abandonment and lush possibility. There is the maquis that grows back faster than it can be burned. And walking among crazy riots of wildflowers, many indigenous to just this place, you tend to gasp: anything could grow here, everything fruits.
It is not the first time that we walk precariously along the lip of a canyon on a not-up-to-code trail skirting a cliff. If this part of the GR20 we are walking were in the United States, it would not be in the United States. Park rangers would install a chain-link fence or reroute the piste. But this is Europe, where they weed out the recklessly foolish and ungainly by letting them dance with death, thus. And by the recklessly foolish and ungainly, guess who I mean.

Really, I’ve had no trouble with these little patches of trail, here or anywhere else I have walked. My guidebook has warned me repeatedly that people with a fear of high places should not consider walking the GR20, because mostly, that’s what this is. I have a much stronger dread of walking along freeways, where the recklessly foolish and ungainly are whizzing by in metal torpedoes just half a foot away from me, and watching the way people drive on Corsica, I’ll choose Dead Man’s Crevass any day.

Nevertheless, what comes over me at a certain point of this segment is what can only be called “a cumulative case of the willies,” a lifetime’s vertigo all stored up in a lymph node and then set loose by the simple trip over a bit of loose gravel. I look down, I look at the way ahead of me where south-to-north walkers are coming toward us single file and must be reckoned with, and then behind me, where north-to-south walkers press me forward with an urgent need to avoid bottlenecks. There is no way but down, I think, and I imagine myself squeezed over the lip, bone-crusher-bird food. Because vertigo is not so much a fear of height but the mind’s feeble imagination conjuring the drop, the doing of the deed.

Sometimes my mind shuffles up to the precipice of any number of bad memories, perhaps in order to get my own attention when I’m feeling overconfident, too much in command. I remember that
in the movie version of *The Lion in Winter*, Hepburn’s Eleanor of Aquitaine finally gets her son Richard the Lionhearted to admit he is her own flesh by taking a nail and running it hard down her own arm and drawing blood. I do the same to myself with bad memories, or with my bad memory. All the places I’ve nearly had terrible accidents, all the chem lab spills and near-accidents with cars, they all come to me there on the ridge an hour out of Onda.

I also think of feeble rescues, of falling off this ridge and grabbing hold of, say, a dozen Mylar birthday balloons or, more realistically (more realistically!), those strange hawklike birds that circle above us along the trail, to buoy myself up and finding my solution woefully inadequate to the need, just adding to the vertigo. I’ve heard about what happens in falling dreams—you catch yourself by waking up, and the superstition is that if you don’t catch yourself this way, you die in your sleep. To do this in waking life, to fully imagine the fall from a Corsican cliff (and also the clever subsequent rescue) would be a real success of the imagination. So vertigo, its definition, may be, in the end, a horrifying revelation of the inadequacy of my own imagination to save me. If I could only imagine myself saved from this imagined fall off this cliff, I think as I let a south-north hiker pass me on the inside of the cliff trail, if my imagination were good enough, I could live. And that’s the opinion I carry of myself as I get past this little bit of the day’s road again, alive.

I can just barely make out, in the distance, two hikers traveling south to north, clambering over a ridge. As if in a Beckett fiction, I turn back to Petra, trudging behind me. “Look, we’re not alone!”

“We’re never alone,” Petra mock-mopes. I don’t know whether she’s complaining about the Rooster men or me. I don’t ask.

“Yes, but these are new hikers! Soon we’ll meet them and we will say hello and we will hear about all the news in Vizzavona and perhaps they’ll have a little chocolate for you or a little coffee for me,
and we can discuss literature and art and maybe one of them will be attractive and will want to date us!"

“You will be lucky if they are not banditos of Aïtone—they will probably push us down in the maquis and take our backpacks.”

“They can have mine,” I volunteer.

By the time I have finished my long ratcheted-up fantasy, the two hikers, silent, with hardly enough energy to nod hello, pass us (or we pass them) and with algebraic swiftness, are just as far behind us as they were ahead of us. “That didn’t take very long,” I say.

“They heard you talking too much and now they are running away, stupid American boy,” Petra says, but she smiles and proceeds to talk to me for a while; she must know I’m tired of my own head’s nonsense.

People say that people who walk a lot are not walking but running away by walking, but you’re not running away from anything by walking. You think a lot. You think too much. It’s just you, and your thoughts, and if it’s not your thoughts, it’s “I know an old lady who swallowed a fly.” If it’s not too strenuous a type of walk, you tend to think. About failures back home, shortcomings, unfinished business. People prefer not to think. They prefer the strenuous walk. Those who show the weakness of thinking are humiliated, or humiliable, because thoughts are a threat. The solution is meditation, ritual, walking as prayer, which is what it settles into after a while.

Besides, walking puts you in the way of people (often, more in the way than you’d like when walking single file along the lip of a canyon) and therefore puts you in the way of distractions, of story. I was making an excursion with my friend Robert, who taught at New Mexico State University, and he wanted to show me Ciudad Juarez, the great crazy border town, another kind of port city, however land-locked they may be. He parked the car at the frontier and we walked across, so that we would not be subject to deep cleansing levels of
official inspection conducted upon cars entering and exiting. On the bridge over an arroyo, we were descended upon by an American guy of the unshaven sort. If he had been on the GR20 I would have considered him an accomplished trekker; in the city of Juarez, I considered him probably homeless: same difference. He began to offer an extravagant story as we walked, his explanations matching the dactyls and anapests of our walk, and it was amusing to us for the uninventable detail: his son had gotten into a bar fight and he the father did not have money to bail him out. Could we make a contribution so that the two of them could go home?

This is a standard story, with variations, I hear from homeless people in the city: they are down on their luck, and what they need is a bus ticket home, and they are sixty-five cents short of that ticket, could I help out? The next day, there he is again, still sixty-five cents short—always, like Dante’s idea of Ulysses (or Tennyson’s), always heading home but never getting there.

When Robert gave him a dollar and I gave him a dollar too—we were so amused we felt that we had just paid for a performance—he thanked us by staying with us on the walk for a while, regaling us with a certain kind of joke that only men can tell, half-corn, half-naughty (“Did you hear that Suzuki, Kawasaki, and Yamaha are all teaming up to build a super-motorcycle? They’re calling it the Sukamakaki!”) We fed him dollar bills like a jukebox or a stripper until we had crossed fully into Juarez, and that was the most adventure we had there, except for the part where I decided to get a cheap haircut from a Mexican barbershop.

I take this literary detour into Juarez because this is another thing I love about walking. People, fellow walkers, reduced to the roles of minor characters. Other than Petra, I never see anybody long enough to know much more about them than a few salient character details. Walking is a back-to-nature business, but it also conjures a moving city full of secondary Dickensian grotesques, or the long
scrollwork line of figures decorating an Egyptian wall, or a Greek vase, coming to me single file, every one of them with a posture or antic or good joke to tell. They seem immortal that way, those still unravish’d brides of quietness, always on the trail: Lula the dog, the retired British general, the chain-smoking Italian, the man rustling up bail for his bar-belligerent son, the Roosters. They don’t change, they are always out there, there on the trail, unravish’d and immortal. More immortal, in fact, than I.

Vizzavona is considered the exact midway point of the GR20. It is the site of a weensy health spa and a big Swiss-style chalet of a hotel. It all seems dwarfed, however, by Monte d’Oro, the big slab of the biggest mountain on Corsica. Because it has a spa, it seems as if a bit of the resort beach has been dragged inland, and it’s as big a switch in geographical terrain as the forest is to the mountains are to the pozzines, all those flashy expensive cars in the parking lot and overdressed helmet-haired European ladies with trashy expensive purses mingling with a few hikers. You can’t see Calvi from Vizzavona.

So we do not stay at the chalet, and it is there in Vizzavona that the little narrow-gauge train, called by Corsicans “U Trinighellu,” crosses our path, not for the first time, but certainly for the first convenient time. Petra and I had planned to book a room in one of the other hotels here, but they are all overpriced, and when we see the schedule and price on the trains, it seems a simple thing to jump aboard and ride away from the GR20 for a few days to do all that regrouping and pedicuring, the washing of our clothes, the drying of our tent, the eating well and viewing the Citadel of Corte, considered the national heart of Corsica. So when U Trinighellu draws up, a miniature locomotive pulling miniature cars on miniature tracks, it feels like we are getting a ride on Santa’s train to the North Pole, and we only wish that some avuncular conductor would take our picture on Santa’s knee right there at the platform.
Instead, it seems to barely slow down—as if we are running onto the car like hobos or that guy on the border at Juarez (which we probably smell like) and stowing away. It then picks up an unwarranted speed, as all public transportation on islands, especially those with winding, narrow roads and tracks, seems to do, and we speed through dozens of tunnels in the mountains. One feels a little abashed when backtracking on a road of iron in a matter of minutes what one has covered on foot over the course of days. The way we are going? We are going backward, and second times never go well. Unless, of course, you are going someplace new.

The train is crowded. I’d read in my guidebook that there was talk of closing the system down a couple of decades before, due to lack of use, but I couldn’t imagine that now; it isn’t just tourism filling up the seats, for there are plenty of locals who have seen the spectacular scenery out the windows for far too long to be impressed any more, and have their noses buried in *La Corse: Votre Hebdo*.

Velocity upon velocity: by seven in the evening, we are billeted at the Hotel Sampiero, modestly priced and with reservations for a fine meal up at the top of the citadel stairs.