Honorable Bandit

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I write in my journal—and it seems important to repeat in print: “I saw a cloud in the shape of a perfect brassiere today.” I think I mean that the shape is perfect, perfect for its being in the shape of a brassiere, but the meaning is there.

Many walkers, or so it says in my guidebook, tend to skip the Bavella stop on the GR20 in order to push on and finish the long trek. As I remarked after executing the Cirque de la Solitude, if there has been any regret I have ever had in the walking business, it is that I didn’t ramble a bit more, take a side road that pushed on an extra kilometer, or showed me a sight or extra view. Detours are always less peopled, too, and I feel privileged, private.

What we see, then, when we get to the refuge at Bavella, initially troubles us: an excellent view of a large lot full of parked cars steered
by day-trippers looking for the beach. Watching cars career up a switchback road in two minutes, one that takes us two hours, dampens the spirit. But what we soon realize is that the tourist types have some kind of respect, or maybe fear, of the extreme trekker types we seem to be part of. They don’t come here.

It’s at the penultimate stop on many of these long journeys where you also see a curious psychological problem manifest itself: an unwillingness to finish. So many pilgrims to Santiago hold up well, carry their burdens over hundreds of miles, only to suffer a major blister meltdown a scant twenty miles from the cathedral. It’s not always purposeful damage, either—old sores will suddenly go septic after healing steadily over earlier walks. Shoe leather will mysteriously fly apart (I’m not kidding: this happened to me) when you only need it for one more day.

And other discouraging things happen: friendships of the road suddenly fly apart faster than shoes in a trumped-up bar fight or accusations of theft. And here’s an odd one: an Italian woman who walked alone to Santiago was surprised by her husband at the next to last refugio on the road to the shrine. He had come to her as a treat: “I’ve come to walk the last part with you,” he said, with sincere generosity. She burst into tears: everything she had worked for, she told me later, seemed to have been rendered pointless. And so near your destination, the road becomes glutted and cluttered with opportunists, quacks, and sideshow acts.

At Bavella, a man unpacks his backpack and shows he only carries a rain poncho, a bottle of wine, a boom box, and a set of marionettes. He has hiked only two hours from the ass-end of the GR20, in Conça, and he probably won’t be walking much farther so well outfitted. Nevertheless, we enjoy a long puppet show with classical music, selections from major French operas: the yodeling alpinist falls in love with the Italian girl dressed all in black. The oaken Cossacks and maple Dervishes do their dances without tangling their
strings among them. “He doesn’t have any pig marionettes,” Petra laments.

There are several new people at the Bavella gîte, those walkers who perversely elect to walk the trail from south to north. These people are having their first hard day’s walk, as they are unseasoned—discovering that their boots don’t fit well, packs are overpacked, and perhaps it was a good idea, after all, to carry a set of cookware. Their ears are not yet burned purple, not like the ears of serious hikers, such as ourselves. In all, Bavella looks more like a hospital than a recreational facility. The gardien merrily applies moleskin bandages and Bactine. I play Florence Nightingale, because I know how to deal with these things, practicing medicine without a license. I thread a cleaned-up needle and lance a blister, and explain how it is best to leave the thread in while sleeping, so that the fluid has a way to drain out, following the thread out.

You can spot the new ones, if not by their moans of pain, then by their zealously friendly glad-handing. “Bon jour, I am Amadeo, and I am from jolly Gascony,” one might as well be saying, buying me a beer without asking me if I want one (I sure do). At seven euros a muled-in beer, I know that by the time he reaches Vizzavona, he’ll be as stingy with his beer money as, well, I am. Petra and I discuss an Italian who wore white shorts and a white T-shirt, so that he looked as if he were crossing Corsica in his underwear. A Flemish Jesuit priest, taking a break from his work in prisons. And my favorites: two helpless girls from Sydney, Australia, one plugged into some techno music on her Discman, the other flipping madly through the Lonely Planet Guide to Corsica and saying things like, “What? No Internet access in the gîtes?”

All the lost are found when you hold up a day, as well. The Belgian walkers whose clicking high-tech walking sticks drove me mad for days, until we were motivated to outrun them, have caught up again. So many people along the way, but defined as if they were all
part of a two-dimensional tapestry or cartoon with just a few strokes to make them flat, destined never to change but always be: the Italian who chain-smoked himself across Corsica, gathering his energy from nicotine and weighing down his pack with cartons of unfiltered black tobacco Ducadoes (I could smell him approaching for miles on certain days, and wondered whether I might find my own private patch of the maquis up in flames). The burr-headed Portuguese boy and his girlfriend, who once pitched their tent so close to ours that we could hear him grind his teeth through the night until the girlfriend hissed desperately, “Paulo!”

Arriving early in Bavella (it took us only four hours to get here, so we are washed and established by noon) also affords Petra and me a chance to look around. While we feel protective of our mountain hideaway, we feel too that we have full rights to the sights in town, so we walk down into it.

In the church we wander into just off the road from Bavella, there is a nautical theme. Actually, this is one of the few stretches of the GR20 in which we cannot see water at all (except rivers, delicious rivers), so perhaps this is a yearning, a leaning. There are hooks on the pews shaped like anchors, and statues of boats cruising below Christ in Majesty. A buoy buoys up the Blessed Virgin Mary, and even she attempts to capture that inscrutable color of the Mediterranean water, Star of the Sea, in the tint of her robes. The rooms are bright white.

Petra and I are not speaking as much near the end of the trail, either, which is odd, because we will spend another week after the GR20 together exploring Corsica as tourists, from a more luxurious base of operations. Now, we let each other out of our sights along the way, for hours at a time.

I sing more loudly in English. I sing more loudly because it won’t matter soon that other hikers might think me crazy, because I have
given up on the idea that I am going to scare some spectacular wild animal I have not yet seen (two scissor-tailed kites swoop very close by just to prove me wrong), and because I am determined not to hide my Yankee stripes.

I seem to have broken free of “Island Girl” and other pop hits; I rummage around in my memory’s jukebox and come up with an arsenal of folk songs. There are old folk songs that find themselves changed when crossing the wide divide of ocean or mountain or time. In Ireland, a girl sings, “He ne’er will come back til he’s rich and can marry me.” And we know this will never be. The girl knows it too; it’s her life’s sorrow. On the other side, the man has been forbidden to marry the girl, and so he is heading west, and won’t return until he is the King of California. Or he’ll just sing her song, “He ne’er will come back,” as if he’s talking about somebody else, getting some distance on the pain, and the pain he’s causing. Everybody is traveling, everybody is on the move, I think, as I sing.

We are near the end of the high mountain part of our journey, but there is still the spectacle of height and mountain vertigo. The fierce wind off the Mediterranean, the one from the northeast called Tramontana (there are the cold dusty Mistrals from the north, the foggy easterly Levanter, the hot Arab wind Sirocco, the Bentus de Soli from the east that stops at the shore, and the summery, zephyrous Maestros from the west) pulls clouds over the mountains just as I decide to wash my socks. So much depends on dry socks, and thus my knowledge of the winds. I’ve become nautical myself, at least for as long as I need dry socks.

I am even, here near the end, stunned to have a meal with one of the Rooster men, one of the originals, as they, too, have decided to dawdle somewhere along the trail. I realize, however, that his companion is no longer with him. They’ve broken up, a macho divorce. He seems vulnerable to me, alone, thrown from the henhouse,
perhaps, no longer strutting. Spotting him here, my heart nevertheless sinks—and he sees me sitting at a picnic table outside the little restaurant and clasps my hand as if we are old friends.

I am dismayed to have to know his name: Michel. Despite my self-reproachful lessons I had taught myself in Corte, I couldn’t help but think my terrible, terrible nationalist thoughts. Thoughts like: the men in France are not my type, skinny—emaciated, even—no power in their hands, all in their mouthy mouths, with so many puis-sant frontal labials to pronounce. And their names! Yves! Jean! Michel! What kind of name is “Marie” for a man?

Michel, who is, agreed, not emaciated, sits on a stump as if on a throne, paring his nails with a Laguiole knife. He is nearly sixty, his hands, like his lips, disproportionately massive and once roughed up like quarried marble; now even that quality has been smoothed from the wearing down of age. The nails he cut at seem made of goat horn, like the clasp of his knife. Often, when he talks, bits of spittle form in the corners of his mouth, and he has to wipe them.

He is not emaciated but built like a king, or a butane tank. His head is fleshy but small, and yet his knuckles are as knobby as the knees of a newborn colt. He makes me examine my own hands there under the picnic table, hands that always fascinate people because they are smooth, the palms of a blueblood, or a lazy-ass. Here in Corsica, with my walking stick, I have managed to build up the first calluses I’d had in years, and even a small, curious, painless blister at the tip of my index finger.

Michel has already given up trying to talk to me. What few words I can say in French make no sense to Michel, and because I make no sense to him, Michel apparently decides that he himself makes no sense to me, either. “Un Americain,” he says to Petra, and blows out his horsey lips. No, I can’t understand that at all.

In truth, mostly I don’t understand. Sitting night after night with other guests in these gîtes is like getting clues to a mystery. I listen
along, fill in unrecognizable words with a sound (Petra has told me that the sound of English is the sound of a cat chewing gum: Meow, meow meow. In retaliation, I tell her that the sound of French is the sound of a cow lowing), hoping to piece together the meaning later. One person will say, “Moo moo moo cheese moo moo at the market moo moo moo moo strong moo moo bad (evil?) moo down there.” And another will respond, “Moo moo Roquefort moo cloud.” Now, entering the dining room, I hear Michel say to Petra, “Moo moo Americain Teep,” as he tosses back a whole glass of something gold in his own private unmarked bottle. When he lifts his hand, I notice that half of the man’s pinky is missing.

Petra, enviously multilingual, says, “Moo moo moo moo?” (Note that the third moo I take to be the word morpion, which translates as “crab louse,” but I’m going to hope that I get this wrong and leave it untranslated.)

Michel answers, “Moo! Americain Teep! My country, my family, my religion. Is it true for this Americain moo, too?”

Petra turns to me. “Is it true?”

“Bon, Brian.” Michel must have realized that he had only been talking to a pretty girl who may or may not be part of a couple, and now makes an effort to engage me. I wish he had not. The only thing worse than not being talked to is being talked to. “Moo moo where in the United States do you live and moo?”

“Chicago,” I say. I am using my tight professional smile, and that makes me mad, because I am on vacation, after all.

“Ah,” says Michel expansively, and then, as Petra seems to be looking for an escape from the conversation, he says, “Moo, Chicago, Illinois.” I nod. “But you know,” Michel leans closer, “we call it here in France, Illy-NWAH, moo.”

Before I can unscramble this crazy comment, Petra is sitting down next to Michel—she actually likes this guy!

“Petra, tell your new friend that Illy-NWAH is actually the bad
pronunciation of the name the Native Americans of my region called the land. It would be like me calling his country Franchise.”

Petra is silent for a moment, examines the simple prix-fixe menu next to the door of the little restaurant, then says, “Comment? I mean—what?”

This is the other problem with the language gap; I have only baby talk to convey complex ideas. If they are mooing, I am goosing.

“Excuse-ay mwah,” I hit upon it—“But I must wash my hands because the pigs licked them.” Both Michel and Petra look at me doubtfully. Still, I flee.

The bathroom is in an unlikely place, built right next to our table. We will hear many flushings as this endless dinner commences. I close the door to the bathroom. It has been all girlieed up by a girly hand tired of living in the mountains, with certain odd concessions to tough-minded Corsica. A tiny cigar box made of Lalique glass and framed pictures of hunters matted with exposed cardboard corrugation. And potpourri, even if it is woodsy potpourri. The bathroom is old and damp and windowless.

I look at my face in the mirror, burned purple, then held my hands up to it, as if I can’t see properly unless mediated by reflection. I’d read in some men’s health magazine that one should sing “Happy Birthday” to oneself two complete times while washing one’s hands. I turn off the water reluctantly after the third refrain and dry my hands.

I step back into the dining room. Petra hardly acknowledges my return, for she is back in deep, serious conversation with Her New Boyfriend about—me? She is saying, “Moo moo depart from him/it moo moo moo early in the morning moo moo when we are not seeing each other.” What? What? Have I heard correctly? Was she plotting secretly to ditch me along the trail soon? And is this how I am to find out? She says it right in front of my face?

“Ah, quelle déception!” Michel laughs ruefully.
“Deception?” I blurt.

“Brian!” Petra looks caught, surprised I’ve slipped back to the table without her noticing. “Is it your birthday? Have we missed the celebration of your birthday?”

“No, why?”

“We can hear you singing ‘Happy Birthday’ to yourself in the bathroom!” Petra repeats this to Michel in French, and they laugh together. But I wonder, if they have heard me sing “Happy Birthday,” have they already plotted Petra’s ditching me in the middle of Corsica, disenFrenchized?

As if seeing the suspicion in my face, Michel shakes my hand and pulls me into the restaurant. “Moo, moo, moo, and come dine with me!” he invites, slapping the two empty spaces at his table, and we must never offend with a rejection.

He, too, must wash up, and while he does, I ask Petra if she thinks this guy is actually interesting. “J’adore,” she says (and I think she is gushing a bit too much—adore!) and suggests he is a tender flower, and we should not do anything to hurt him. But from the looks of Michel, he’s done enough to get hurt all on his own, enjoyed too many falls off of mountains, bad skin-care products, forbidden Armagnac, and unlicensed tobacco. Petra says, “His stomach is very tender, and he may only drink soup and eat bread. So we must not make any miam-miam sounds when we enjoy the dessert my new aunt has made us.” Miam-miam? Ah—the French word for yum-yum.

This, I can do. I think Petra might forbid me the wine, which I need more and more at these social pit stops, where Petra spends the night jabbering away with the locals while I sit trying to figure out how to eat tiny birds and gussied-up omelets without utensils—or worse, finish my food long before anybody else has (for lack of anything to offer to the conversation—and by “lack of” I mean “inability”) and stare at my empty plate while the rest eat like human beings.
When he comes out of the bathroom, he is shirtless again, of course, though he has decided it is suitable, in the establishment, to wear his stained leather vest, since we are having a nice dinner, you know, in a real restaurant and all. The restaurant is the only option for those not cooking noodles over an open fire, so it is packed, and we have to eat “family style,” whole tables of total strangers, grouped together, strangers who have no other choice but to dine and talk together.

I hate “family style.” If they were to truly eat in the style of my family, Rooster Man would be eating in Michigan while I ate in Chicago. Instead, Michel, Petra, and I are placed together at the same table, as are the two birds from Sydney. It is Monsieur Rooster who begins to quiz everybody at the table; apparently he is from Marseilles, although he claims to have family from Catalunya. When I ask him something in Catalan, it’s apparent I know more of that language than he does, and we all slip back into French, which Petra knows well and I know badly and the Australian girls know not at all.

I keep thinking of Petra giving me the slip. She has the good guidebook! And the maps of Corsica from Michelin! And they are all in French: the direction tout droit means “all to the right,” and I would turn right at every intersection. But tout droit really means “go straight.” Lost, I think. I’m lost. Little dead British boy’s dead American boy.

Michel, that Marseilles Rooster, explains how we should finish the last day, knowing that we have been walking the same road he has walked for the past ten days, beside the fact that he has never walked the last segment of the piste himself, but wanting to make sure that Petra and I do not get lost. The girls listen politely, and one complains about her omelette.

“Is that all this place serves?” she says. They will never make it, I start to think. But then, I wouldn’t wager on that judgment. The ones who turn out to be strong always surprise me, the way it always
surprised me when I went to Boy Scout camp and I saw the bullies from school flee first in homesickness. I have even surprised myself by making it this close to the end. When you are walking alone, regrets and regretful memories and misgivings (for a week, I really thought I would not make it) open up inside you like sudden holes in the trail. You stumble on and in them, you have to lock your legs in order not to fall into such a flaw in the ground; the mind does something similar to ward off complete collapse under the weight of the backpack of memory, which grows heavier every day, every week, every year.

The Rooster asks—or more specifically, brays like a farm animal, lows the question—do they know French? I translate and they shake their heads.

“But, moo, they are in big trouble!” says Monsieur Poulet, which does not keep him from leaning back in our booth and putting one arm around each of the girls in a proprietary gesture. I am up for protecting only myself, however, for his armpits are two dark bushy chapters from a horror novel. “How can they walk and moo in this country when they do not understand French?”

“I speak Italian,” says the taller of the two girls, the one not plugged into a Discman.

As if to illustrate, or perhaps as a punishment by our efficient waiter, we are quizzed and informed about the menu in Corsican Italian. The Rooster is silent for half the meal, while the four of us speak in boisterous, obstreperous, villainous English. Only Petra has the heart to drag him back into the conversation, taking pity on his weak brothy excuse for a soup, perhaps.

It’s almost a competition, the three English speakers versus the two French speakers, and our conversation crosses over each other like badly planned telephone wirings in a gentrifying neighborhood. “Would you like ice cream,” Petra asks as I smile across to her, and I fool around with my coffee, putting sugar and cream into it. I like my coffee black.
“No,” I say, and think I’ll try a little French. When we’ve called the socialist realist hotel, they lied, saying they were full, by telling us that they were *complet*. I am full, too. I say, “Jeh swee complet.”

Petra begins to giggle, then Michel looks down into his coffee and sputters into it. Michel does not laugh but makes a face at the Americain Teep that spoke volumes: What An Idiot.

“What’s so funny?” I appeal not to Petra but the Australians, under my breath, as if this were not a dinner for four but one for twenty, and only those closest might hear me ask.

Petra answers, “You just said that you were pregnant.”

I stand and go into the bathroom again. One of the Australian girls begins laughing like some cruel girl in an opera, given an entire laughing song to show off her coloratura. She only laughs once I am in the bathroom, however, as if being polite.

I sit on the toilet, not taking down my pants. I feel breathless and dogged. In a basket at my side is a booklet of crossword puzzles, most half-done and abandoned. My mother has such a basket in her bathroom. A familiar sight made strange—the worst thing that could happen. France would be easier for me if there were no same-nesses, no cognates in the language, no comparable table manners, as far and few as the Jumblies, their heads green, their feet blue, setting sail daily in a sieve. But no: *crossword puzzles*. And if the answers are any indication, idiotically easy ones, with words like *noir*, *fidelite*, and *aussi*.

Oh, the French, I think; but what bothers me most is that if I were French, I would be the most insufferable Frenchman of them all. I would have ruined myself on pleasure long before Michel ruined himself.

After I wash my face in the old sink where the hot water boils out of one spigot and the cold comes out of the other, I find the dinner abruptly over; Petra has already retreated to our tent. There’ll be walking to do tomorrow, as usual.
In the tent, I step over her body, curled like a question mark in her sleeping bag. To look through the sheer doorway, I straddle her and cross my arms, hoping to get a rise out of her. If I look menacing there, to her, then so what. Outside, I can see, in the perpetual gloaming that seems to be the lux aeterna of Corsica, Michel shooing two other new hikers, two purple shadows. I say, “It’s as if he has to know everything or he’ll die.”

Petra is quiet for a moment, and I think she has fallen asleep already. Then she says, “He knows.” It is funny, how I cannot see Petra in the dark of the tent, but I can see Michel just fine, though he is grainy like a black and white photo made from blowing up a negative too much. He taps his shoe bottoms with a stick.

I asked Petra, “Tonight, at dinner, you were talking about something with Michel. What was it?” Perhaps she would admit it. Perhaps I could get her to bring her disenchantment into the open, for once, and I can thwart her plans to bolt.

“About something?”

“About something that was quelle déception.”

Petra laughs with her mouth shut. “Oh yes. Last winter, when there seemed no hope that you and I might ever get together, I cheered myself by going to Sri Lanka. On the first day there, somebody stole my camera. Quelle déception!”

I watch Michel plod back toward the gîte. I know Michel cannot see me, not in the dark, but I lie down behind Petra anyway. I took a pleasure in feeling the little calluses at the bases of each finger from the walking stick, from wringing out my own clothes when washing them.

**Bavella to Paliri**

We just don’t want the walking to end, so close we are, and so easy, finally, has the trail become. Either the trail has flattened out, or we
have become stronger. One does get stronger with each day, but one never knows it distinctly—it just happens that in the beginning, after only six or seven miles, the body feels like it has been beaten with baseball bats and the feet placed under meat tenderizer mallets. Then, a week or so later, I can stride through fifteen miles and stop only because the place to sleep is the last convenient gîte.

In the Col de Bavella, between Asinau and Paliri, on fairly easy winding wide road, Petra and I are afforded sweet long conversation while we walk, and enjoy endless shifting views of the peaks of the Bavella, towering mountains that look like gherkin pickles, or, as they reveal themselves, no longer Oz’s Emerald City but the spiny back of Godzilla, or a nifty device I saw in a shop that grates the skin of a garlic clove right off. Clouds fly over us in sped-up time. We expect rain, then see the sky cloudless, and all things nebulous in between. “The future is cloudy,” says the Magic 8-Ball, “Ask again later.” Up into the mighty pines we saunter, the view always getting a little better, the road turning into a trail but cushioned with pine needles and the sweet gurgle of brooks, everywhere we go, all heading into the watershed made from the valley that becomes more and more apparent below us. Holm oak, lavender that smells oddly of lamb meat, wild lemon thyme. We name the serrated peaks along the Bavella ridge: “Misplaced Boxcar,” “Locomotive,” “The Mitten.”

And it’s always near the end, as the tasks of walking fall away and what is left is the ripe fruit of the task, that we begin to recall home and its routines. The habits of living day to day dull the senses—the ritual of getting up each morning, brushing your teeth, commuting to work, desk tasks, coming home, preparing for another day and heading to bed—so that I often cannot see the small wonders of the everyday world (grass growing, a cloud fleeting by in the shape of a bra, the child across the street learning to ride her bike; all ordinary miracles). It is only when I am removed from habit that I can see a
work of art that reveals a new mind’s vision, or when I am traveling in a foreign place, or when I fall in love. And this seems a definition of love: the removal of habit, the ordinary world made foreign and wonderfully strange, life as a great visionary work of art.

At a certain point, Petra finds a paradise of clean water and sunning stones with a private ridge, and we rest there. I walk ahead, and as soon as I am out of sight from Petra, such a good luck charm, the trail becomes difficult in that annoying way it seems the GR20 must be at every step: loose scree, wayward winds, wild pigs freaking me out, cows blocking the path, me climbing with my hands again (the word is “scramble,” Brian; use the proper trekker word), lots of spiny maquis to fall into and hide the trail.

My quick step startles many pigs, who in turn startle me. They even squeal in French, I swear: “Allors!” “Non, non, Nanette!”

The way becomes ominous. I pass a couple of lightning-blasted dead pines and more serrated mountain tops, deep into a green and yellow valley, and through brookside alder. And then I spy a shepherd and his hut, perched on the hillside. It looks lonesome, almost unattended. The keeper is sitting alone outside, I hardly notice him until I’m right on top of him, and he wants to know if I’ve seen any pigs. I laugh. I think these shepherds don’t give a damn most of the year, but as the chestnuts ripen around this time in September, the beasts need to be fattened for the bloody November slaughter.

I have written elsewhere about meeting Petra on another long walking trip, seven years before our trip to Corsica, on the way to St. James, in Spain. But what had deeply impressed me, being a boy and therefore being competitive, is that Petra had made the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela twice, two years in a row. It was her second time down the road when I was making my first journey. The first day I encountered her, we both, separately, chose to part from our companions to walk alone on a detour that added two miles to the day’s walking, with only a Knights Templar church as a reward. We
walked alone, together. We had the trail to ourselves, and we got to be fast friends, fast.

“Is it easier to walk this way a second time?” I asked her then, thinking I already knew the answer—knowing where you’re going, after all, you know what stones will trip you, what house will throw boiling water on the hobos.

“No, it is much more difficult!” she said. “In your mind, you know what the next town looks like, and in your imagination, you are already there.” I imagined her imagination, the map of the world collapsing, time taken out of the equation, destination the only goal for each day. Think of the way you’re a character in a play scripted to be slapped, and you telegraph a wince before the actual slapping.

I wonder about myself sometimes: must everything in my life be so flinty, so difficult? I am the one who reads the guidebooks only after I have made the journey, to discover that the sarcophagus I stood before was a great queen, or the ground I walked on was bloodied by Roland and his men. Only after. I read the guidebooks for nostalgia but find instead that I have missed a thing I should have seen.

What is nostalgia but this picking through the ruins of living—not living, but remembering living? Walking among the renegades in France was the adventure, and after entering comfortable, stomped-over Spain, it was as if I had entered the gift shop and never left it for a month, selecting souvenirs, when I had plenty of that back home.

I want to go back. I always want to go back, but I did go back once, and it wasn’t a smart idea. I returned to the pilgrim’s route to Santiago a second time in order to walk a new stretch of it, and because I wanted to meet new walkers on that way. “Segundos partes nunca fueron buenas,” Spaniards told me all the way to the end: “Second times never go well.” And that’s the truth. If there’s something to walking off from the prison, of escape, of every theory I’ve ever imposed on myself, I should have seen that the Spanish dicho
warned me from the first. Think of Orpheus going after Eurydice, or Lot’s wife’s botched rescue from Sodom and Gomorrah, or Stoker’s Dracula climbing out of the coffin in order to find his love again—second times never go well, Count. Nostalgia scares me, for it seems to turn gladness into ghosts, and grief into grievance.

What does it mean to say “betray one’s feelings”? It seems to have too many, and conflicting, meanings. If you betray a feeling, for instance, by showing it, especially when it is threatened unless hidden, then the feeling is destroyed by its revelation. But if you betray your feelings by not being true to the feeling, by abandoning it, by not being constant to it, then the not showing of an emotion destroys it. Staying true to a feeling can be either noble or destructive. These opposites, like building a sand castle on the beach that will be both a conquering and ordering impression on the chaotic surf, is an effort made knowing full well that the chaos will reclaim it.

**Paliri to Conça**

For all of my experience in walking, I think there is part of me that expects foreign travel to be much more foreign. When I am far from home, I’m surprised to find that clouds don’t form differently, that trees don’t have stranger leaf formations, that people haven’t invented languages constructed of something different than subjects and verbs. That there isn’t a new color, one not found in that crayon box.

More pines like beach umbrellas, more humorless trekkers on that race, always it is a race. “Then you can relax.” I think of American Pete for the first time in a couple of days. He probably sprinted over this ground hours ago. I, personally, love to go a-wandering along the mountain track. And as I go, I love to sing, and please God make it not be “I know an old woman who swallowed a fly.”

There are long strings of Lavicia pines but standing lone instead of bunched into forests, so that for the first time, I notice how they
are like big Seussian umbrellas of trees, which Edward Lear, Seuss’s patron saint, loved to draw when visiting Corsica. Also, the strawberry trees are full of their eponymous fruit (the botanical name for strawberry trees is *Arbutus unedo*, which means “eat one,” even though the berries taste awful, for nature is red in tooth, claw, and irony). Easy walking, too, a meandering flat trail. I pass hikers heading in, just a few, because they are mostly well on their way by now, those who start from Conça, and I’m a little worried about these stragglers. Apparently, I am not a welcome sight to them, either, a finisher, an all-but-done, carrying swaths of myrtle, the dove that nobody on Noah’s Ark wanted to see. La! Shall I wear black to make it easier?

And then we step through a V in a wall of orange-red rock, the Bocca di Uscida, a little pass that seems like one of those portals in a science fiction film. On the other side, there is nothing of the great granite panorama, everything is brought down several sizes in scope.

And we realize: that’s it. Okay, okay, the guidebooks tipped us off, but still, there’s a definite sense. We have officially completed the GR20, although there’s still another forty-five minutes of walking down into the village below. And after that clear ending, we endure the sputtering, half-hearted way the trail trails off (and a rather unsightly garbage dump picked at by life both wild and tame), and it is something of a fizzle. Now it’s over. No, now. No, uh, now. Wait. The last double-bar of red and white stripes is painted on a telephone pole. Petra takes my photo next to it, a telephone pole for a trophy. There is no other walker passing near us to take a photo with the two of us together. We are quiet for a little while and in fact do not even discuss the decision to walk to the first bar we find.

We drink beers in that bar at the end of the village of Conça. No welcoming party, just amber Pietra and a rack of postcards with sayings on them like, “GR20: Salut Les Forçats!” Civilization intrudes as well—Conça is spitting distance from all sorts of touristic haunts,
and two ill-behaved Corsican boys are fighting over a video gambling game at the corner of the bar, which I don’t think they’re old enough to play. The worse of the two boys, the smaller one, whips the older brother with a jeweled rosary he has, or the remains of one. When the bartendress admonishes him, the boy whips her, too. “The rosary belonged to his poor grandmother,” Petra says, not cracking a smile, “and he has broken it.” We move out to the veranda with our beers. A rosary hurts. The Marquis de Sade is smiling in heaven, satisfied.

On the veranda is the startling silence we wanted all along. A zephyr off the nearby sea lets us smell everything that grows here. Figs, prickly pear cactus, myrtle, locust—flowering locust?—rosemary. A scolding bird hidden away with a tone of hollow wood sounds like the feckless bartender inside, as the boys continue to squabble. Congratulations, you have just walked the entire Grand Rondonnée Number 20. Salut les Forcats.

When we have finished our beers, we have no interest in walking. Petra wants to hitchhike, a common pastime in Europe. I think again of the signs surrounding my hometown, of the prisoners who debone their wives, and then walk off. At first I try to sound as if I am, actually, still interested in walking. I give Petra this weird, obviously insincere lecture about walking. “This is another significant difference in travel by foot as opposed to other forms of transport—places that would otherwise seem dull or even ugly are lovely and strange and even an indulgence for a walker,” I tell her.

Petra says the German word for bullshit, I think. “No, really!” I tell her, and put my pack on as if I’m ready for another five kilometers. “You get to see it all when walking: the graffiti on walls, for instance.” I tell her that in the Spanish city of Leon, I came across some graffiti that was meant to bait skinheads: Yo Soy Un Yanki Rojo Maricon Judeo Negro. “I am an American Communist Gay Jewish Negro,” with all the glib nasty words used, as if I were a
better translator, I would offer: “I am a Yankee Commie Faggot Jew Nigger.” In Europe a “Yankee” is as marginal as a faggot or a com-mie. Graffiti is a part of the whole exhaustion of cities you witness when walking all the way—the exhaustions of cities at their out-skirts, the sputtering, the self-unraveling, the petering out. There are death rattles: a half-finished factory, a promissory pile of cinderblocks, then freeway or dirt road, then trail again. “We are here on the outskirts of Conça, and it would be a shame to miss out on this anthropological wonder,” I say. Even I’m not believing myself now. Still, I don’t want to be deboned.

We walk for a kilometer, and Petra is using the Killing Silence again. A shiny Renault zips past us on a stretch of asphalt we have to pass over. It slows, then stops. I have a moment’s panic: we’re going to get deboned anyway. I can’t really run quickly if this is foul play, not with a backpack pulling down on me. But as with any suspected instrument of foul play, it turns out to be beneficence: a priest in a white cassock, a Père de Blancs, as Petra explains to me as he approaches us, his hazards flashing, his car door agog. He speaks to Petra as if he knew I can’t speak a word of his French. “I see you are finishing the GR20,” he says.

We nod—you caught us.

“Have you had the communion yet today?”

Hell, we hadn’t had communion in years! So we say no. And right there along the side of the road, with cars other Renaults and Clios whizzing by and people staring at us, on our knees, backpacks still over our shoulders, this priest gives a mini-mass and offers us communion.

Thus fortified, I feel bold. “Let’s hitchhike!” I tell Petra.

“Yes, before somebody else tries to feed us communion,” Petra says, and sticks out her thumb.

We have walked enough. Now is the time to relax and sleep on feathers instead of stone, put down the pack and pick up the flagon,
and cook with the maquis rather than walk in it. I stick out my thumb, too.

It doesn't take long; there are no prisoners walking off here. An aged couple see us, recognize us well for what we are, and have probably done this dozens of time. We climb into their car, and the seats and floor are full of big white vats of—honey! They are taking their honey to town to be bottled and sold to tourists. I have to put my feet up on one to fit in, but I'm grateful for the ride. Honey leaks out of all of them, and my backpack, my shoes, my hair, are slathered in honey. Take that, Seneca!

Although the villages are pretty, we zip through them at comparatively astonishing velocity, and I fall asleep, in honey, for who knows how long, and I have to be shaken awake when we arrive in downtown Porto Vecchio: we're renting a car. Petra is in charge, and I am the sleepy boy too tired to be of any use to her.

Bonifacio, Figari, and Porto Vecchio

Here is the afterlife: the natural tall tale of walking forward sputters, reduces travel to vignettes, tableaux vivants. Bonifacio had been our original after-trek destination, the too-famous town perched on cliffs over the southern tip of the island. It's very spectacular to see it rise out of the chalky stone and shape itself, almost before your very eyes, into tall towers in which people live. Some say that this is the home of the Lystraegonians, the cannibals who chased Ulysses off in the Odyssey.

Today, they still seem to be eating tourists for lunch, because for Petra and me, Bonifacio is a shipwreck. We rent a car without a problem in Porto Vecchio (though the man at Europcar growled “this is a serious business!” as we leave, because we are amused at the unserious way he runs things. He made us follow a treasure hunt of telephone numbers to get through to him, and while we waited for
him to show up at his shop we watched how he made two boys miss their train waiting to return their car. Quite serious. And did he mean, Mafia on my mind, legitimate business?).

Aficionados of Corsica, including its natives, would be stunned at how little time we spend in Bonifacio. Its touristic quay below is a good place to get groceries and ship off postcards, but other than that, there is nothing local about the place, even this close to the off-season. In the souvenir shops they make available license plates for children’s bicycles and mugs personalized with names that will do me no good: Celine, Chantal, Chretienne, Clemence, Colette, Coralie. To an American, it seemed that the entire French-speaking land were populated only by little old ladies.

Petra and I spend a few hours poking around the maze of streets, full of tortuous curves down which cars and people careen, and find only more gift shops, more tourists, nothing genuine or local but the buildings—all, again, abandoned, a ghost town, only with people in it, people who don’t belong here, like me. Travelers destroy what they seek. I would welcome a cannibalistic Lystraegonian.

Petra leads us into the bureau of tourism to try and get us a place to stay in or near town, and the bureau workers are as unhelpful and unseeing as a lightning-rod Laricio pine. With all the mooing and lack of negotiations, I leave Petra to it, and I sit on a bench out on the street, one relatively less busy with tourists, and a long ostentatious sedan drives up, barely able to negotiate the narrow chalky streets, and it is blaring techno disco. A freakish sexed-up Corsican chick sashays toward the car with two fat Spanish men in tow, both very drunk. One of them wants to talk to me, but I am terribly embarrassed for him. “Que tal?” he says, perhaps mistaking me for a Spaniard, but yo soy un yanqui maricon. I can’t help thinking: earlier today I was hiking along the last bit of the GR20 near Conça and took in the Peak of the Damned Soul, a small mountain shaped like a witch’s hat, and stepped through the Bocca d’Usciolu, and
I am still wearing the same clothes I did it in. Can’t this man smell it? Can’t he smell the outdoors?

But he is too ecstatic and wants to share the feeling. The girl had probably fed him Ecstasy. “Que tal?” he presses me, and I tried to escape intercourse with “No hablo,” but he discovered my accident and shouted out to me in English, “Corsica is different.” He gushes, “You can feel the sensation.”

They drive off just before Petra storms out of the tourist office, so that the men and their moll seem an apparition. “Come on,” she says. “We’re leaving this stupid town.” Petra loves the word “stupid.” It’s one of those words that sounds good to the Germans. I personally like the German word Schwarzebadehosen, “black bathing suit.”

Down the road from Bonifacio, however, I would be spending many a day bathing in the shadow, sun, and sea of the “Lion of Roccapina,” a great natural stone formation that looks like said cat, couchant. I am more impressed by another rock that looks like an elephant. There is said to be a pirate treasure buried somewhere in the vicinity of the lion, and I suppose any traveler who knows this fact spends a few minutes poking around. Maybe I’ll be the lucky one to recover the lost doubloons. But as we drive over the unleveled roads down to the sea one afternoon, driving as if we were in an off-road vehicle rather than the mild-mannered Clio clone, we are able to watch some hunters create something of a noose around an unknown quarry in a brambly, maquisy (but not quite) area, perhaps looking for wild boar or what have you. It strikes me that if there were treasure here, it has been found.

Also, how is it that the beach for pleasure is also a city for the dead? We see more Roman-style mausoleums right up to the brink of the sea, “Right on prime real estate,” I can’t help saying, in my most American voice, to Petra.

Petra can’t be bothered: the tanning opportunities are just as good in the Ash Grove as they are seaside.
And in any case, you can’t put a tombstone directly in the Mediterranean, and that’s where I often find myself snorkeling on the days after our march across the island. Nothing as spectacular as I’ve seen swimming among the live coral on Eleuthera, one of the outer islands of the Bahamas I once frequented, but plenty of schools of pretty fish and little loners, the occasional trio of three different kinds of fish, some kind of children’s story going on right there in the shoals.

Swimming again in the sea, the sand is softer here than it had been on the northern, Calvi side of the island. Nothing to scrape the skin off me. It’s a soft lapping, healing our feet and shoulders after the walking. I go soft, once again, in the course of an hour.

Instead of staying in Bonifacio, Petra’s strength and fortitude leads us to inquire at a bar with flocked wallpaper in Figari. Figari doesn’t seem promising to me, at least in my mind. It’s the airport town, though the airport is over a great hill and in a valley out of sight. I will see that place only on the last day, flying out, and it has that sort of abandoned feel that so many island places have.

In the bar, the bartender, after Petra inquires, says no, there’s no such stuff, no house to rent for a week in a residence. But wait, he pauses, when Petra does not move. Let me ask Monsieur Simoni.

All of this, I watch helplessly. Monsieur Simoni, I figure, is the guy sitting outside the bar sunning himself like a lizard. “Monsieur Simoni,” says the bartender, a great hairy beast of a guy.

Monsieur Simoni waves his hand without looking in, to indicate that he can’t be bothered, and the waved hand makes the big gray ash on the tip of his cigar, which matches the color of the hair on the little poodle dog he molests in his lap, fall away into his empty beer glass.


This gets Monsieur Simoni’s attention. He motions us with the cigar to come sit down with him. He wants to speak to me, of
course, because I am the man, but Petra’s French is impeccable, or good enough for Figari. There are negotiations, explanations. I order a Pietra. I look across the street from our table to the grocery store. It is called “Super Simoni.” In the days to come, I will find there are at least six or seven other Super Simoni’s in the Extrem Sud region of Corsica.

Suddenly Super Simoni Himself is on his cell phone, calling his wife. She must have been two doors down, because she shows up, with a small child in her car, and he, without disturbing his own pet, shouts out some directions for her. She motions to us: get in your car and follow me.

So that we won’t get lost or mix her up with any other car, though there are no turnoffs or many other cars on the road and she, for a change, is not driving a Clio, she turns her windshield wipers on to make herself conspicuous. “Figari,” Petra muses as we drive behind our hostess-to-be. I tell her it is reminiscent of Figaro, as in the marriage of, and also Figo, figs, which are tasty, and also the source of “the fig,” one of a dozen obscene gestures for Italians. “Fichten,” said Petra, German for “to fuck.” So, overall, we are predisposed to liking Figari.

We follow Madame Simoni up two more back roads and find ourselves at a lovely little villa set off the road by a tall stone fence and a grove of well-harvested cork trees. She leads us up the steps and has in her hand a plastic Super Simoni grocery bag full of a hundred keys, all on various souvenir key rings, this one for World Cup football, that for the Super Simoni, another with a crucifix. My heart sinks as I look over the pristine stone villa and think: she will have a key for every house in the Extrem Sud but the one for this door. She grabs up a keychain with a tiny flashlight attached, and tries it, with a “non.” A little rubber baby: “non.” And over and over. Exasperated, she dumps on the patio table a big bag of keys. They scattered all over like toy parts to something sure to be a cool grand
model. “La?” she grabbed at one with a different football insignia of the Marseille team, but no, not there, not la. “La!” again, to a decapitated Moor on a chain. But nope, la, nope. I get nervous—the whole sequence of negotiations makes me grit my teeth the way a good work of art makes me bare my molars in response. Then Petra whispers, “Madame,” and points to the entry. The key is already in the door.

And then: “La!,” the door falls open, and inside: la, a perfect paradise. Two big bedrooms, a fully equipped kitchen, a patio, a dining room, more room and privacy than we had ever dreamed of. My heart sinks again: how much could such a place cost?

“Ask her,” I press Petra.

“Five hundred euros for nine days,” Petra responds: it has already been mentioned and I was not listening. This will cost me about forty dollars a day. I try to maintain what might be called a poker face, though I think of those mirthless guards at Windsor Castle baited with jokes. Petra and I converse in serious, low English. We cannot look too excited about the thing. It is a better deal than we would ever have anticipated. But Petra gives me The Sign: she pulls lipstick out, applies it, blots, and turns to Madame Simoni, ready to descend into a new chasm of solitude. “I will need it for a tenth day because my flight leaves a little later.”

Madame Simoni nods. It’s a deal.

She gushes about the location a bit more, promises to return with a few cleaning supplies in the morning, tells us that the family bar serves a nice meal if we are too late to shop at the Super Simoni grocery store, and if there is anything, anything the Madame can do for us, or Monsieur, for that matter, please let them know.

I think that if I ask Monsieur Simoni to rub somebody out for me (and I do have a specific target or two), he might be able to help me. “D’Affaires!” We see him a few days later outside the Super Simoni and Bar U Puncinu shaking hands with the Moroccan boys we’d
observed buzzing by on scooters, otherwise notable only for being overly sartorially and tonsorially achieved, and I’ve decided that they do his dirty work, although I can’t fathom what that would be.

But for now Petra and I wait until Madame Simoni’s car has pulled out of the compound, windshield wipers still brushing away the Corsican sunshine, before grasping each other at the shoulders and jumping up and down with joy. When we embrace, lipstick smears against my hiking T-shirt, and it is the only stain I am never quite able to wash out from our travels.

**Zonza, Uspidale, Quenza, and the Mare e Mare Sud**

And as if we have done it all our lives, we find ourselves in a daily pattern, sitting each morning on the terrace with bowls of milky coffee (“un nuage,” you ask the French to get them giggling, for the British always ask for just “a cloud” in their tea or coffee and the French like a one-to-one proportion). It is a change from the Corsican tradition of opening an uncooked egg and beating it into hot coffee to make “brodetta,” a little broth—not as awful as you’d think—another pattern I’ve established.

Petra slumbers late up in her room while Grisette the cat hunts in a garden of pines and cacti and dozens of cork trees stripped to the tits to stop up bottles of the D.O.C. Figari wine—the rough stuff (and by the rough stuff, I mean the wine) I’d enjoyed in Corte and Calvi. We haven’t actually seen vineyards in the Figari neighborhood, but there are all sorts of fishy things about Figari, and since I do nothing but benefit by them, I won’t make trouble.

Basically, it would seem our hosts own the whole town, from bar to villa, every church and restaurant and, if there is one, vineyard in between. Monsieur Simoni is the name, and when we ask why this dreamlike villa we’ve procured wasn’t listed in any guide, he explains to me (though only Petra understood), “We don’t like to advertise.”
It went something like this: after we had had our celebratory beers in the anticlimactic bar of Conça, we got ourselves our own Clio, and headed farther south. In the mountains we floated among the villages, more suspended off cliffs than built on any sure piles. The radio kept getting and losing the signal, so that the readout would sometimes tell us we have Radio DeeJay (88.9 FM) or Radio KissKiss (97.9), Tam Tam (93.9), and our favorite, Radio Nostalgi Corse, featuring those nostalgic Corsican oldies, Michael Jackson, Ray Charles, and Petula Clark singing “Downtown.” There is nothing in the world like slaloming through the mountains of Corsica listening to Petula declare, “The lights! Are much! Bright-er there! Youcanforgetallyourtroubles! Forgetallyourcares and Go! . . . DOWN-TOWN!”

As we got closer to the southern tip of the island, we saw more glammed-out Italian and French traffic with the “Corsica Ferries” sticker, and the locals got more and more hostile with every kilometer. We stopped at a wine shop (where are the vineyards?) and they wouldn’t let us sample (another front? But later, a year later, I will discover that there was, in this area, a great wine scandal involving the use of all sorts of fortifications in the wine, both distasteful and, well, distasteful). The office of tourism was downright vicious, and we left Bonifaccio in a huff. I was despondent, but Petra had strength and fortitude and, possibly, Mafia connections. We were just half a dozen miles up the road from the shore and found ourselves in Figari, the garden paradise.

Now, here at the villa, I can relax and regard the new geology, which is whiter, made of soft sandstone out of which people have carved troglodyte garages and shops. At the south slope of Corsica, at the beach, I note how stretches of mountain seemed to be crawling out of the Tuscan Sea, as if it were Sardegna trying to escape itself, a little sun-bleached for its swim, dressed in tufa.
That I could see Sardegna out there, just ten miles off, made me Radio Nostalgic, having been there just nine months before with my friends Adela and Stephanie. Adela had spent a couple of months as a “woofer” with a macrovegan agritourismo couple who shared their lovely farm in the off-season December month. Stephanie, a food writer, was on a dining spree, and I was happy to indulge her in the meat-eating portion of the journey, since her own partner was a vegetarian and the northern Italians love to make short culinary work of their baby animals—and horses.

While wandering through the ruins of yet another ancient Etruscan town gone belly-up, we sat on a broken pillar and watched a fisherman in waders wading out to some traps. We tried to guess what he filled his bucket with—mussels or langusta or eels. We saw him again up at the souvenir stand flirting with two Sardinian girls, bored in the off-season of their job, selling neither tickets nor postcards. He had the girls take a look into his bucket, and we could crane our necks to see, too, the black-green spiny sea urchins. One of the girls looked at him with joy as he murmured something Italian and under his breath, and she repeated it, in order to confirm for herself and so that we knew what had happened: “Tutti per noi!” All for us! Sea urchin sushi, a favored midmorning snack.

Sardegna, no matter how far we traveled inland that holiday week, seemed always close to the water and to the delectables extracted from it. Corsica, with even more coast and beaches, was more concerned with meat—incredible lonzu, that soft, cured loin made from the free-wheeling pigs. The luxurious night before this luxurious morning, I had lamb chops bathed in a honey and fig confiture with herbs from the maquis. Perhaps I was drunk. Perhaps I am predisposed to pleasure, having fallen into the congenial syndicate hands of the Family Simoni. Perhaps I felt triumphant for snagging a box of coffee filters just as the Super Simoni grocery was closing. “What
number?” they ask hurriedly in French (and, moo-free, I understand!), meaning, the size of the filter. “Je ne c’est quoi,” I say, a phrase that, like a broken clock, is appropriate perhaps twice a day, “Quatre?” And it worked! We now have forty coffee filters for eight days in Figari. Anyway, whatever the reason, the lamb was heavenly, and the chestnut fiadone (something like flan) served with myrtle liqueur made it all that much more pleasant.

Only the southernmost edge of Corsica feels nautical to me; the setup of the villages changes the farther south you go. As I mentioned before, families establish their cemetery sepulchers willy-nilly, as if all the ground of the island were consecrated; then, you come across an entire town of tombstones, settlements full of a population more dead than alive.

When Petra gets up, we take a swim in the shoals of the Extreme Sud, and in the late afternoon I slow-cook a chicken in the same confiture of honey and figs from the maquis. We walk into the maquis a little and find a twelfth-century chapel dedicated to—who?—St. Quilicus, and discover, too, some stately yet secret graves, and a stone basin, the memorial to a few bandits d’honneur.

Drugged on a single Dramamine pill, I am useless to Petra’s driving and navigation except to see and smile. We stop at some roadside restaurant called Passeport for a lunch, and everything we ask for on an already skimpy and gummy menu is not available, until we settle for two plates of cut-up tomatoes with chopped onion over all of it and a coffee. Behind me, the ubiquitous Nestlé Glace hamper, where all the frozen novelty confections slumber. The pictures of the ice creams on the sign, like those idealized views on postcards, always look so fresh and celebratory: cones with swirls and colorful jimmies, day-glo orange pushups, a leering spumoni clown face. But the Real McCoy has been packed into a paper wrapper, then packed
again into a cardboard box, and then again into this cart in a mountain town in Corsica. It’s all there, the swirls and leers and jimmies, when you peel back the paper, but they’re all tamped down, stuffed, smooshed. Your clothes can be clean and still look bad if they’ve been packed for a long time in a suitcase, and this ice cream is like that: decidedly not festive. And so I say: no sir to your Nestlé Glace confections.

At the Bar Simoni in Figari, the bartender who had introduced us to Monsieur Simoni looks like Magilla Gorilla, but his ferocity breaks down the minute he asks you what you want. “Nous sommes a bar,” is the phrase I learn today. Okay, then: progress has been made with my knowledge of French. This, and what Madame Simoni has said about the southernmost beaches: “un plage au sable fine, fine, fine.”

In a bar called La Refuge, outside of l’Hospidale, or, as it was corrected on the street sign, Uspidale, another handsome bartender identifies one of my maquis weeds as “l’herbe du Barbaron.” We go next door and buy some supplies for a short day hike along the Sea-to-Sea-South.

After easy rambles with light daypacks, we stop in the woods to pique-nique on more lonzu, bread, cheese, a ripe perfect peach, and a long cucumber. The French are everywhere that somebody will speak French with them. Here, in our perfect lunch spot along a sparkling clean river, there are boulders that look as if they rolled off a mountain, evidence of their angle of repose, except there is no mountain around for the boulders to roll off of, or repose. Glaciers? Giants? Chariots of the Gods?

With a beer and some nuts, Petra unlooses her lips again, always telling me the secrets of girls, local and the world over, heretofore well guarded. “When we jump off high places into the water,” she
says, for example, “we find our bikinis terribly rearranged in the violence of the plunge, and must put it back to rights before anybody notices and takes advantage.”

Driving back from Uspidale, we marvel at the way we can see (and so much of) Sardegna. Dramatically close in clear air. People get out of their car at a belvedere turnout just to look at it, as if a whale has swum into the Mediterranean, or some other rare sea monster. I can see the white stone again, and I wonder at the way two places can be so close to each other, and maintain wild differences.

After a hassled trip to the Hyper U, we see the couple from the Pyrenees with Lula, the black Lab, all trudging up the side of the busy highway. We stop and give them a lift to their campsite. They had stopped for a longer time than we did at the halfway point, hoping that the crowds would thin out as the month went on. They report that the GR20 is still very crowded since we left it. A rueful satisfaction, to hear this. But it is nice to see them, as if running into neighbors at the Dairy Queen—we are at home on Corsica. We know some people there. And that’s something of the truth: Corsica is a small town, in all.

We unwind that evening over another Cap Corse, the local blood-red aperitif made only on this island. What is Cap Corse? Bitters, I suppose, that set our mouths ready for heavier drinking. It is Sunday, and on the previous Wednesday Petra had bought the German newspaper, Die Welt, so we could find out what was going on in the world while we were socked into the mountains. Now, since she drove into the village to get our bread and more coffee, I think she’s maybe bought a new Die Welt and has the latest news—but that can’t be. “Is that new?” I ask her.

“Oh no, it’s the same one from Wednesday,” she says, smiling. “I like that the news never changes when I am on vacation.” And she goes back to study a piece on Gunther, the man who runs the Deutsch version of Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?
I drag my teabag idly through a boulle and realize that only the boulle facilitates this long dragging, like a child pulling a pull-toy; it seems a goof that most of the delights of travel are flimsy and based on all the triangulations of juxtaposed culture, the frictions and clownish contrasts. Hee hee, I’m dragging a teabag through a French coffee boulle. Hee hee, they’re playing Da-doo-ron-ron on Radio Nostalgi Corse as we drive by another lone crypt. Hee hee, eets a wild peeg in the bivouac, Chroist.

As the days go by, without a segment of GR20 to traverse, I fall into ridiculous activities, like washing the tent stakes in the sink and arranging bouquets of maquis for gifts back home. A mighty wind blows—is it a Mistral or a Sirocco?—blowing Petra and me, and a line of olive trees flanked by our stone fence, looking like spooks trying to scare us. I fill up a bucket or two of water and throw it over our rented Clio—it has been so easy to pick it out in the Hyper U parking lot among the hundreds of other Clios (the official rental car of Corsica is a Christmas-red Clio)—because there are muddy snout marks on the passenger side from a time when we were surrounded on the road by wild pigs demanding a handout.

Petra comes out to watch me and holds the Simoni family dog lest he drink from my bucket. “Your ride is your pride,” I explain to her. She likes things clean, too. She’s German, but she tells all the people in the world that she is from Austria.

Petra is no less frivolous with her newfound leisure. She busies herself with the remains of my “Poulet Figari,” the baked chicken I dressed with maquis herbs and fig confiture, our feast for the previous evening, by making a favored dish of her own homeland:

**Knödel. A la Maquis.**

**Ingredients**
Old bread from the bergerie, cubed
The ground-down stuff from my poulet Figari

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Chopped pieces of lonzu and sausiccon (you can use ham)
Chopped shallot
Chopped myrtle (replaces the more traditional parsley and nutmeg)
Milk (hot, because the steam will rise up through the bread)
Pepper and salt (lots, because, says Petra, “the bread is nothing”)

Let the bread absorb the milk for a while; overnight is best. Then add one egg; taste to see if it’s necessary to add pepper. Form into small balls with wet fingers. Petra likes them small, though she says, “Some mothers will make them like the size of the heads of babies. Not me.” Then boil the knödel balls in water just under boiling temperature until they rise to the surface.

I love that Petra has made knödel in Corsica. She tells me it could be better with schweinbraten or a salad, but we eat it with more myrtle and maquis seasoning. It is a delicacy, especially with Figari (vineyards? Figari?) wine and olives. But when I take the last uneaten bits of the chicken carcass and other garbage out to the road, I find four pizza boxes from the Family Simoni filling up our bin. Everybody wants something just a little bit more exotic.

Cultural differences rubbing up against each other are indeed the pleasure of travel, but they can also make me feel ill at ease. Freud spoke of the uncanny—that it is not the strangeness in strange things that seem upsetting to us but the familiar aspects of the strange thing. When I was a child, I nightmared for months over the whale Monstro, not because of his ferocious devouring of Pinocchio but because of his eye, a normal eye, with pupil, cornea, lids, whites—nearly human, seeing things just as well as a human could see things. I once watched Popeye on a television in a bar in central Spain. Popeye still sounded like Popeye even in Castilian, but Olive Oyl wasn’t Aceite de Oliva, but Olivia. I had to leave the bar. I can feel a wave of nausea, even as an adult, when I see off-brand candy in a store, or knock-off versions of major motion pictures. When bread gets wet
at the bottom of the sink, and I have to touch it, I get this same nausea. Or when somebody gives me an anonymous dirty joke typed on a piece of paper and then made into a copy of a copy of a copy, that also horrifies, perhaps when it ought to entertain. If I buy a jacket or a shirt in Europe, I am surprised to find the buttons or zippers switched to the opposite side than I am used, the “girl” side. The French write “miam-miam” when they want to approximate “yum-yum” on the kiddy menu. This sickens me.

I was also sickened at the beach north of Porto Vecchio by the granny-aged woman reclining on her towel, topless and knitting a sweater.

What happens is this: If you are not walking, or otherwise making yourself vulnerable to being designated as smelling bad—as long-distance walkers do—or American, or stupid, you can almost forget that you are not at home. That morning, after the sun came and warmed the yard of our villa and the Madame, from her own house, waved a distant good morning with the reptilian-green garden hose on her roses, I went in and pulled a Popsicle from the freezer (the box saying “Popsicles” because apparently that is a word recognizable throughout the world and even the French Academy has allowed it into France), and I unwrapped it and found it was one of those twin-pops, and I rested it against the counter to break it along its length to give half to Petra, for I had hollered out to the veranda in English, “Do you wanna Popsicle?” and Petra hollered back, “Yes,” and when it broke it made that same squeaky Styrofoam peanut sound they made in my hometown, in my childhood. I looked over at the English guidebook while Radio Nostalgi Corse played “What’s New Pussycat?” and when I sucked on my half of the Popsicle it lost its color, became snowcapped, or boring, or wan, or whatever you want to call it when it’s just ice, just as it has happened always, ever, anywhere, and suddenly I lifted my coffee boulle and saw the word in the bottom of my saucer: “Choky.” This is a European
brand of coffee. But the word is uncanny, not a word I want to see when I am feeling so deeply at home. The world shifts, I stumble mentally, the way you stumble when you think there’s a last step on the stairway and there isn’t one, or vice versa.

But the nausea passes, for it’s a crisp vivid morning, with postcard-blue skies. The harvested cork trees look as if they’re wearing halter tops, old grannies trying to look young.

I asked Petra if she ever felt this discomfort of the travel uncanny. She was quiet for a moment. “Do you remember when I came to visit you in San Francisco?” Petra came to see me after walking along the North Coast Trail on Vancouver Island. I introduced her to spicy food in run-down Cambodian pho shops and burritos as big as, well, Petra’s mother’s knödel. “You also showed me how the grocery stores were open twenty-four hours a day,” she reminded me. I recalled her being dismayed by this, and I thought of how she lived a while in Munich, where, in Bavarian old-school style, the shops all closed at four in the afternoon, and I realized that if I were a single man living in Munich, I would no doubt die, being at work all day and having no help getting a few staples to live on in the evening.

But Petra said, “I thought, you Americans have no morals, always with the store open like that. You shoot each other with guns and run into the forest to hide from the guns but there is no place to hide because you have chopped down all the trees.” I laugh, but she is serious; there is, for her, something terribly wrong with a twenty-four-hour Safeway, as wrong as gun violence and clear-cutting.

I travel because Petra is right, and I wonder whether there is a better way to do things. Nevertheless, I like the convenience of twenty-four-hour stores.

I nurse another Myrtle Liquor hangover (will I ever learn?). Because we drove an hour and a half to Madame Simoni’s native town of
Zonza, where we ate well at the Restaurant Le Terrace, and, because Petra was doing all the driving (I cannot, or rather will not, drive with a stick shift; it is a deal I have made with my addiction to self-destruction: it is as far as I will go), I graciously agreed to drink the lion’s share of the bottle of red from the Sartene region, Domaine Fumicicoli (a rouge that makes the inside of the mouth itch as if it were mosquito-bitten, but fruity, too), and bookended it with beers, liqueurs, and grappa.

I dined on more of the local meat, a veal chop, and a terrine full of a soufflé with spinach—preternaturally hot, that ramekin was, even after half an hour. For dessert, an aged brocciu that also made the mouth itch and burn as fiercely as the work of the wine, and then the sweet smooth crème caramel. Oh, and then the liquor de myrtle and its devious cousin, the eau de vie de myrte.

Meanwhile, Petra chose the other menu because Madame Simoni had specifically suggested the trout. The waiter kept saying something about how “There was no trout, désolée, but there is trout, if you like.” We are still not sure what it was all about, but I’m guessing it wasn’t a local trout. Petra said it was fresh.

Petra is such a fine counterpart, maybe too sensible when I am too impulsive. When I found that the village of Levie had a small museum that contained the bones of a nine-thousand-year-old woman and an extinct rat-rabbit—well, who wouldn’t want to see the skeleton of an extinct rat-rabbit? Petra, that’s who.

And why am I so impulsive? I think that I want to live with the same impressionistic surprising pleasures that memory gives off in blasts, unplanned and pungent. Travel is like that, like the way memory will exhale and puff something strong in your face. Or rather, that is how my memory works. Petra is even methodical in her remembering. My mind is a wonderland of rabbit holes, and so is my reality, I’m afraid. How often I get lost. We laughed at my guidebook, suggesting we bring a compass, but we don’t laugh anymore.
With all the zigzags and cols and bocca, when walking in the mountains (and here may be a key reason I love to do all this walking in the wonderland) I get turned around every twenty feet, and the wind changes when bouncing off every mountain wall. It’s as if I were a child playing at a piñata, swinging wildly at space, disoriented. If you’re lucky, candy will rain down upon you. If not, not.

On the ride home from Zonza, zipping fearlessly around more disorienting curves (and in the night!), we saw more of those corrected signs, changed so much they look absurd: “Sortie de Camions” (Exit for Truckers) has been changed to “Ortie de Mamions” “Please hold hand pail.” “El rey es subnormal, y todo del mundo lo saben.” Such urgencies to let the whole world know.

But of the hangover: in Simoniville, we give up at the post office and go across to Bar U Puncinu, hosted at all hours by Magilla Gorilla. Two Oranginas, I say.

Madame Simoni drops by and has an Orangina with us, between errands of mercy. Her first name is Angel, and she lives to fill her titular destiny. Her accommodations, suggestions for restaurants, quiet places on the beach—they are all fine, fine, fine. But then Angel flits off; she can never stay long in one place, ever, apparently. Up and down, up and down, like Puck in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Petra and I slump back in our chairs and enjoy the view: of the street. A flock of tiny but multitudinous gray-blue Corsican nuthatches circle around four or five houses like a little rain-cloud on a mission. This is how Petra and I are feeling, plopped between wheeling birds and sprightly angels. There is this terrible problem after a journey of learning to sit still again. We spend the week pacing, dithering, investigating, picking up and putting down, looking behind us, looking.

We have parked our Clio badly, and when the gas truck comes to fill up the Super Gas Simoni, we have created a full-on traffic jam. Sitting in front under a parasol’d table, we watch as cars slow to a crawl, then a succession of caravans/RVs heading into the mountain,
then, to our great pleasure, a parade of handsome firemen heading down to the coast, all in a red red row, as if this were May Day and we live in Russia in 1972. “Oh look, something else is coming!” I tell Petra when one of those rigs that carry new cars came trundling through with a brand new load of red red Clios. “What else would you like us to stop?” Petra asks. My hangover is suddenly gone.