

Images

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“Have you seen this village before?” Etienne asks. I tell him yes, we walked around it yesterday, but in the opposite direction. So this route is indeed new to me. “*Bon*,” he says, smiling. I am afraid he’ll revert to his native French, as he had the previous day. To my relief, he continues in English. “In this house my mother stayed as a girl, in the room behind that window with the green shutters, on the upper right.” A retired architecture professor, he describes physical locations with exactness. “I cannot remember why she was there. I forget so many things.” His fingers flutter away from his forehead.

We continue past the *mairie*, the town hall that anchors this tiny village of barely 100 souls. A few houses later, “This house my father bought. Then he sold it. I don’t know why.” He describes each structure that still reserves a spot in his memory, the words similar to those of yesterday: The now-vacant *chateau* on the hill, the public well with its red pump, the wash house where the village women knelt on stones to pound laundry in the trough of spring water that still flows through it. “They all came at the same time of day so they could...” He taps his forehead. “...gossip?” Yes, I tell him, forgiving him for the stereotype. We laugh. “Are you staying with us?” Yes, I say, not bothering to mention I’ve already been there three days. “*Bon*.”

A woman approaches us, smiling, from a nearby house. “*Bonjour*, Etienne.” They chat for a few minutes. He introduces me, but I founder with my unpracticed French, and they mercifully don’t include me in their conversation.

Continuing our walk, we come around a corner and he lurches to a stop, gazing at the cumulus clouds that billow above the hills. He scans them as if they were fine buildings. “Look!

It's almost like they waited for us to put on this performance. The form, the symmetry!" His voice is full of feeling. He frames the view with his hands. I wonder if he'll take out his watercolors when we return to the house, as he often does, to capture the scene. His paintings are as beautiful as ever, although he now covers less of the paper with paint, leaving hillsides, trees, and fences floating off into white. His wife, Sarah, asks if the paintings are finished and he says yes. She tries to convince him they could use more paint, but he insists they're completed. I wonder if the spaces represent the parts of his memory that are slowly drifting away.

Later, as the shadows stretch across the surrounding fields, we gather around a small table in the garden for aperitifs, our daily *kir*, a mixture of white wine and *crème de cassis*, a blackcurrant liqueur that is a specialty of this Burgundian region. Etienne explains that this is "the golden hour," when the sun is low in the sky and casts a warm yellow glow, a time valued by French painters. He talks animatedly about the quality of the light, and how it distinguishes the work of French painters. We discuss Monet and Degas and he is relaxed and happy. For a moment, I feel I'm speaking to the Etienne I know thirty years ago, the spirited, argumentative professor and artist.

As the sun sets and Sarah and I continue the conversation, Etienne becomes quiet. He starts to examine an ant moving along the arm of his chair, then a lizard scampering across the stone wall next to us. He gets up and goes to look down the street. Sarah asks him where he is going. "I am looking for the rest of our guests." She explains that it's only the three of us, and that no one else is coming. He's not sure she is right, and walks indoors to look around, just to make sure. She lets him go—it will give him something to do.

After dinner, another of Sarah's fabulous four-course meals, Etienne pores over photo albums of their thirty years together, the pictures mounted on sketchbook pages and carefully

annotated with names, locations, and dates. I ask him questions about the pictures. Sarah reminds him of who the people are, then leaves us at the table to go work in the kitchen. She sees that she will have about a half hour's free time before he tires of the albums and needs something else to do. He cannot read or watch movies because he cannot follow the story lines. He paints outdoors if the weather is good, and goes for short walks by himself around the village, where the townspeople keep an eye on him. They know that he belongs to the village, having spent childhood summers at this limestone house with his family, the house where his grandfather, the village blacksmith, pounded iron in the small forge that still stands at the back of the house.

Nowadays the house walls are lined with art and antiques. Some are paintings of his family, commissioned by artists his parents, active in the Paris art world, once knew. A sculpted white marble head of the 10-year-old Etienne stands on a stout bureau in a hallway, illuminated by the orange light of a stained glass lampshade. He still recalls having to sit for uncomfortable hours as the sculptor worked, knowing that if he behaved, he would be awarded a cookie at the end of each session. His father had commissioned the sculpture, and there was no refusing to participate. Etienne remembers his father as a vicious, autocratic man who openly had mistresses.

The next day, we walk around the village again. I ask him what it was like there during World War II. He tells me that instead of summering in the village, his parents sent him to live with relatives in a smaller city, in case of attacks on Paris. He was six years old when the German occupation began in 1940, and no town escaped it. In this rural village, soldiers came through, knocking on doors, demanding food. I muse that people must have readily given food when the soldiers asked. "*Mais non!*" he said as he turned to me, horror in his eyes. "If they had done that, they would have been collaborators!" In a town that size, everyone knew who the

collaborators were, and their betrayal would have doomed them to ostracism thereafter.

“Neighbors reported neighbors, and families turned on their brothers. No one wanted to give in to them, but some felt they had no choice. Even our own police who were supposed to protect us....” His eyes filled with tears, the pain of war and the shame of the occupation still real to him. He turns away. I have no words to comfort him as we continue walking.

By the time we reach the house, his memory of our war talk has faded, and he decides to busy himself with putting up the inside shutters that block the view of their living room from passing cars. His wife says that it is too early, but he still wants to. “What else am I going to do? You don’t let me do anything anymore.” She doesn’t tell him that it’s because he forgets how to do them and she has to show him each time. Because he forgets how frail he is and tries to carry heavy objects up or down stairs, risking a fall, and he has already broken a hip. Acting as his full-time caregiver has started to strain her usual patience and resilience. We decide he will show me his paintings instead.

Later that night, after Etienne has gone to sleep, Sarah and I talk over a whiskey, one of few opportunities for her to relax. We catch up on friends and family members, and eventually the conversation turns to her current situation. Finding respite care is a challenge in rural France, and although friends and neighbors offer to help, she hasn’t been able to line up any regular time off. She tells me of a trip she has planned for early autumn, when her niece, a violin student at the Paris Conservatory, will come to stay with him. “But for the future...well...” Her voice drifts off and we sip our drinks, listening to the silence of the house.

In the morning, I gather my belongings and begin packing. Etienne asks me where I’m going. Home, I say. “Will you come back?” Yes, I tell him, absolutely, and we smile. “*Bon.*” But it saddens me to think that when I do return, I will see an even more faded version of my friend.