

Chateau de Veilleuse

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Three people gradually uncover the gruesome history of a French castle.



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Cold gray-green waves sprinted towards the windy French shoreline. At twenty meters out the frigid surf curled a foamy white and dissolved calmly into the peachy sand when it reached. By September the beaches resume lonely. Ruined sandcastles rested far from the reach of the tide. Summer was gone and temperatures had cooled. Fierce gusts seemed to tug the tremendous forces ashore, one after another, as a weathered sailor would yank a line, as a boy or girl would pull the string of a kite so it may mingle with air, seek a wind with stamina, and eternally fly.

Not a boat had dared to cast off that day. Rough seas had been predicted throughout the channel. Hence, feeling caged, local Fishermen flooded the pubs. Yellow raincoats clogged taverns like an artery as we passed through rounds of fishing villages on the way to the beach. Bellies of ale would go home empty-handed that night. Masts of the ships packed closely together in the bays engaged in swordfights, rocking to and fro along the uneven docks. After a gray, rainless hour, Gerard had steered the car down a small road that accessed the beach. He put the top down to experience the sea, as we drove along the sand.

Jagged black cliffs extended into the ferocious sea afar, materializing a rather craggy overlook that allowed the woods farther out along the cliffs, wrapping around a picturesque castle-like structure. Multiple towers, in varying heights, poked at the overcast sky--a few towering into the low-hanging clouds. Judging by the architecture, eighteenth century at least, I presumed the castle had been abandoned shortly after construction. I watched in awe as the razor-sharp rocks sliced the sea's chopiness below it. Rows after row of coiling waves rammed thunderously against those black rocks that stood as resistant and permanent as gravestones.

Skeletons of boats lay about the tide pools and cavernous coves by the violent bluff: rowboats, ferries, schooners, sailboats, Gerard mumbled after taking the keys out of the ignition. He had mentioned the overlook by accident when he referred to the beaches. Local villagers are much more frank, he had said. They refer to it as the shipwreck graveyard.

That's a shame. It belongs on a postcard. Yet, I'm surprised it does not have a lighthouse those bluffs are a deathtrap. Why is that? Do you know? I inquired.

Hmm well, I believe there once was a lighthouse, but, as you can see, there certainly is not one anymore. Plenty of stories surround the place almost as densely as the woods do.

Gerard glanced at the cliffs as the subject was on his mind, and said, Lost a second cousin to them seven years ago you're right, to ensure safety, they really need to put a lighthouse up there for the sake of local fishermen. Can't say for sure, but I'll bet that overlook would be a terrible place for construction ... it's a miracle some idiot was able to put a such a grandiose castle there to begin with. Imagine if you step out the wrong door up there black-razor suicide awaits you those rocks are, I'm confident, would surely break your fall in half, that is.

Gerard and I walked against the wind. Both of us were deeply in thought. Jelena must have concluded we are twins. I mulled what he said as we strolled along the beach, scrambling for higher ground here and there as white surf crawled up the shore, washing away our footprints. Somehow, in his clever mind, Gerard knew I was in awe. I stared mournfully at the cliffs and listened, itching for more info, more of the story, hoping he would elucidate about his cousin. *God rest his soul, of course.*

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Acquaintances, likely members of my family, Iâd bet, would say Iâm weird for adoring such dreadful stories, for desiring to listen to them, but the undesirable truth is that I enjoy a story, whether fiction or truth, happy or depressing; a profound story leaves an untiring imprint that indulges the lack of adventure in my daily life. Since returning to France, from Polynesia, I had craved a sense of adventure.

Jelena, Gerardâs wife, rose excitedly in the car.

â Gerard! Dear!â a feminine voice cried. We stopped and turned like a pair of synchronized walkers; or, as Gerard commonly alluded toâ a pair of trained baboons.

â Yes my darling?â Gerard called.

â Tell him the whole story. Donât be vague about it.â

â Whatâs the story behind that place,â I interjected, pointing at the castle.

Gerard paused and exchanged serious looks with Jelena, like he knew the history but was hesitant to explain. I walked forward a bit, zooming in on the castle that clung to the rocks, my feet sinking deeper into the sand with each step. With each step, though, I felt I was pressed by another question.

â It has a beautiful name Reynard. Really, it does: *Chateau de Veilleuse*,â Jelena blurted suavely, yet sensually. By the way she pronounced it I suspected she had had an intimate affair with the name.

â Castle of Nightlight,â Gerard declared in French, translating Jelenaâs unusual accent. She was born in a farming hamlet in the countryside. Sometimes her words, in that village accent, albeit French, sound slurred to me. Nevertheless, I fear it rude to tell her so. Gerard knew of this, for even he had difficulty discerning her words at times. Nonetheless, Jelenaâs singing voice is pleasant, and coupled with the piano, just short of divine.

â Would you like to hear the stories?â Jelena eagerly pressed, facing me, yelling over the howl of the seaside wind. Tall brown grasses waved on a dune beyond her petite body. She must have realized I couldnât hear her very well, because she exited the car. Gerard met her halfway between me and the car. She had carried her dress all the way out. He picked her up and she screamed at first.

â Iâm going to drop you in sea,â he joked.

â Oh my, dear. How thoughtful of you â! Well, I hope itâs a wine-red sea then, dear.â Blue peeked in the gray sky but the sun, like a medallion lost in the sea, was nowhere to be seen.

Clouds floated around in the blue sky in familiar shapes as if they were Greek statues drifting aimlessly in a cerulean pond, tossed in there by a frustrated artist working out of an old boat house. Sunny breaks in the clouds grew golden and dimmed periodically. For the most part it was an overcast day. I wore a sweater after seeing a layer of frost in Gerardâs pumpkin garden that morning. The wind certainly didnât help the chill. Other places in Europe had snowfall already.

â Is there a way to get up there?â I asked, cupping my hands to blow warm air on them. I was in the mood for adventure. Gerard had invited me for the weekend and I planned to do as much sightseeing as possible.

â There is a road up from the beach. Not sure if I want to tempt it, though. Besides, I just had the car cleaned yesterday.â

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“ I can sense your abundant adventure, dear,” Jelena teased as Gerard smiled. “ Let’s take a ride up there. It will be fun.”

“ I don’t mean to be a bother, Gerard,” I added.

Her arms around his neck, Jelena pulled him close. “ Unless you’re afraid that is.”

“ Alright you two, I get the hints. Look, it’s just that I have a special bottle of wine, fine and aged, waiting at home, but if you both want to drive up there, then I’m outnumbered. We’ll go,” Gerard decided. Upon his return to France, Gerard inherited his Father’s Estate, including the Winery. While off in Polynesia with the service, Gerard’s father had suddenly died. It was devastating news for us. Due to our ongoing projects at the time, Gerard was prohibited from attending the funeral. I don’t think that Gerard ever let go of that anger. Knowing him, his frustration with government lingers like a daytime headache.

I’d served with Gerard in the Foreign Service. We were stationed together for four years in the Pacific before he’d met Jelena. Memories swirled around in the car as we drove up the beach. From far away the waves crashed so soundlessly. We drove in the woods for a while, passing two rusted jalopies along the way.

“ Drove that model back in the day, huh, Reynard?” Gerard nodded to me.

“ Eyes don’t belong in the backseat, dear!” Jelena scolded. Gerard ignored her.

“ Yeah I did, and mother hated the noise in the morning. She cursed that bloody thing.”

“ Is that all she hated, now? Heart-attack on wheels it is.”

Jelena’s face looked as if a bug had splattered before her on the windshield—utterly shocked yet confused.

“ You mean to say it didn’t operate up to par?” She asked.

“ No my dear,” Gerard laughed. He looked back at me with a grin, Jelena looked at me, too, like she could pry open the meaning from me.

“ Well, let’s just say the car never brought a shortage of ladies. Always were riders,” I said.

Jelena smacked Gerard on the head with her white gloves. “ Ugh, figures you two would be sporting ladies around—how many?” Gerard ignored the question as if it were rhetorical and drove in silence.

Out of nowhere a bridge appeared. It was made of stone and arched over a creek. The woods crowded around the creek and grew densely thereafter; everything was especially dark in the trees.

“ How tranquil darling, it is dream-like out here, don’t you agree?” Jelena asked, rosy cheeks caught in a smile.

“ Tis, I guess. Seclusion is a downright blessing for some. Actually, it reminds me of the label on a fine wine. And, speaking of wine, I hope you both understand we could be sipping on some aged-merlot right now,” Gerard emphatically said. “ I’m delaying my second love for your boscaje-delving cause, this fabled jaunt you know.”

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Columns of trees slowly molded into the delicate shapes of a grey stone village of cobblestones streets. Stone town-homes crowded the narrow lane, naked clothes lines stretched across. Stairways, covered in dead leaves, led away from the street to unseen places. Windows were gray and curtain-less. Moss and vines coated the sides of roofs and over balconies; when humans depart, nature rushes in, or, back, rather.

Broken flower pots lay by the street, with soil and dead flowers filling in the uneven holes in the cobblestone. A sudden break in the village buildings revealed a dark grove beyond. White crosses were hammered into the ground, uncomfortably visible from the road, appearing as if they had been constructed in a hurry, of broken fence posts. At least fifteen were arranged in the ground.

“What a drab place to live. I can’t fathom such eeriness!” Jelena complained.

“I don’t think anyone lives here, darling. Not even a ghost would haunt this place,” Gerard adamantly declared.

“Ah, there it is,” Jelena sang. She stood up in the backseat.

“Sit down while the car’s moving, darling. Wouldn’t want you falling out now?” But the sight was overwhelming.

Dark towers appeared above the connected townhouses, overlooking the village from the bluff, partially eclipsed by the village rooftops insomuch that the towers seemed to be black chimneys at first glance.

“Yes, but look dear! Stop for a minute!” Jelena demanded. Gerard unenthusiastically obliged, and put the car in park and we stepped out amidst the village structures; blank windows, empty balconies, dead flowers.

An old bakery window along the street must have seemed inviting to Jelena, who moseyed over and peered inside at the empty shelves. She cupped her hands around her eyes and looked silently inside; whereas Gerard and I spoke of something in the newspaper.

“What was that dear?” she asked.

I noticed Jelena’s remark and Gerard stopped talking to me to answer her.

“I didn’t say anything darling,” Gerard assured.

“Oh, that’s odd ! I just heard somebody whispering ! Wait, are you two playing tricks on me?” She grinned, turning around.

Gerard looked at me with an unimpressed face, meaning he believed Jelena was hallucinating.

“Honestly, I heard voices whispering.” Jelena’s face wore a serious veil. “Chilly whispers echoed in my ear,” she scoured the lane with a confused expression.

Returning to the car, we drove onward. Jelena was pensively quiet in the backseat. On the far side of the village were three two-story, stone cottages with a courtyard separating them. The courtyard was overgrown by a dense layer of shrubs and bushes, rendering the illusion that they grew from chest-deep of undergrowth which it seemed children had tunneled through to get from place to place.

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“ We have gorgeous groves of towering oaks such as this back home. Oh the nostalgia!” Jelena reminisced, suddenly spry, admiring the gigantic oak trees lining the road. Farther up the road, modest ditches replaced the trees, nudging the woods back from the road. With the sky more exposed, it was brighter, and we were treated to majestic views of the castle.

Gerard frantically shifted gears as we muscled uphill while the last structures of the village folded into the woods. The cobblestone road, bumpy and narrow, was replaced by a sparsely traveled dirt road, a thin strip of grass grew between the dirt furrows— only the second lively color we’d encountered.

Dark woods surrounding the dirt road broke on the right after half a kilometer. On the left, the woods spiraled up the knoll where the castle ruins rested on. Shrubs and weeds enfiladed the right side, shallow enough to view the sea crashing into the cliff thirty meters or so below. Gerard parked the car and I found some rocks to put behind the wheels so it wouldn’t roll. A bruised sky loomed on the horizon.

“ No doubt the place was well-fortified. There are the turrets, high walls. Rows of archers could post there, firing on the unfortunate enemies attacking from lower ground.” I had read numerous historical accounts of sieges, wars, etc. In order to balance my science classes at the university, I found military history relieving, and a surefire way to rewind from precise topics.

“ This is one remote place, huh Reynard?” he joked sarcastically. “ Of course, as you alluded to, assaults must have succumbed to the idealness of the defenses. Yet, does that look burned to you,” Gerard pointed.

I focused on the patina of the stone. Naturally, it wasn’t black. A pile of extra stones, likely from the initial construction, had been piled aside. They were dark gray.

“ Remote,” the mention of it reentered my thoughts. I let out a laugh. Gerard chipped in a smile.

When we were stationed in the Pacific there were days when we walked roads, if you could even consider them of that quality, from outpost to outpost and saw no human beings. Instead we encountered empty villages; villages which had dissolved due to disease and natural disasters. During rainy seasons we passed through abandoned trading posts on long expeditions. If anybody knew isolation, we certainly did. Our history with the islands, the Polynesians, was undermined by the grim tasks we performed— searching for suitable plots of land for nuclear tests.

“ Not quite as lonely as Polynesia is it? I can’t say I miss the place at all. Though we learned so much about the world, though we gained in our pursuit of knowledge, it was a place and time I’d prefer to erase from my history.”

“ Well, for me, not all of it. I miss the turquoise lagoons surrounded by rugged mountains that greeted sheets of fog, and the many docks that boldly waded out, the coves so shallow that launching boats had shadows on the sandy surface, and the mist waiting in the palm groves each morning by our hut, and the humor of the natives. But I, like you, detested the time we spent at *Fangataufa*. Mentioning the name makes me nervous. It’s difficult to speak so openly about it now for you also, isn’t it?” Gerard asked.

“ I have never been able to conceive something of equal magnitude.” A gaping hole in the sea exposing deep blue depths where they detonated the bombs— what were we thinking?” I said, sighing as I reminisced.

A narrow path wound up the knoll to the castle ruins. An old, contorted gate rusted in brush to the side of the path.

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“Let’s go up there!” “Come on!” Jelena said zealously. She was already halfway up, prancing along the path, twirling her parasol. Gerard smiled at her excitement and happiness.

“Darling, there’s nothing up there. We should go—it’s about to storm,” Gerard pleaded as he noticed the swollen purple-blue clouds, the wind picking up.

“Damn it, we are going to be caught in the rain!” “Can you help me get the cover up?”

“Yes, of course. At least it’s all downhill from here, we should be fine on our way back into town,” I said.

A strong gust blew Jelena’s parasol over the cliff. Thunder grumbled in the distance. A storm was coming ashore. Gerard and I finished putting the cover up. Fascinated by the electric sky, Jelena crept to the brink of the cliffs and peered at thunderstorm.

“Darling, come on, let’s get out of here before the storm hits!”

“Coming!” she shouted, bountifully skipping over.

A wall of heavy rain rendered the distance a fuzzy loudness. I removed the rocks and jumped in the car.

“I think we made it just in time,” Gerard said to me. Swollen and purple, a bolt of lightning cracked over the shoulder of the dark castle as Gerard pressed on the accelerator.

The serene green hallway was terrorized and gray as the storm caught up with us. Strong gusts stretched the trees to and fro like the waves. Hoards of leaves slapped on the windshield. Twigs and branches tumbled onto the road. Gerard swerved just in time to avoid a large branch. Seeing it, I held on tight, expecting more close calls. The rear window was a dark blur. It was unnaturally dark for that time of day and to make matters worse, rain pattered so hard I could barely hear the engine.

“The heavens opened on us!” “damn it,” Gerard swore. The wipers cleared the windshield as fast as they could. For a moment we lost sight of the headlights.

“This is so unusual for September,” I said.

“Not as unusual as you would think, Reynard,” Jelena said, leaning forward to my ear. Gerard’s arms were locked, and his eyes didn’t veer from the road.

“By the sea, it would shock you how fast the weather can change.”

“Hold on!” Gerard yelled. His arms jerked to the right. The car narrowly missed a fallen tree trunk and slid into a ditch by the woods.

“Is everyone okay?” Gerard asked, after the car came to a stop.

“I’m fine.”

“Yes dear,” Jelena added. Gerard scanned us both as if he didn’t trust our responses. Rain, with the weight of nails, relentlessly pattered the top while nobody spoke.

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“That was close,” Gerard admitted. He was out of breath, probably because he had held it through the intensity.

“Are you okay dear?” Jelena pried shyly.

“I will be. Give me a moment. We will be really lucky if we can get out of here cleanly.”

I closed my eyes for a second. Opening them again introduced me to a darker, vague world. Sprurts of heavy showers sailed over the car.

“Gerard, I’ll get out and push.”

“Let me see how much damage has been done, first,” he said. I handed him my coat to shield himself.

“Be careful dear!” Jelena whined from the back seat.

The door opened, misty rain entered the car sideways. Gerard stepped out and wandered carefully to the front. I unlatched the hood from inside the car. After a minute, he slammed it down. Then, he disappeared underneath the car, probably to check the axle. Thunder struck overhead, spooking Jelena and I.

Gerard moved back toward the door, lips already gabbing as if ready to report the damage assessment, when a bolt of thunder struck again.

Off guard, he took a weak step and lost his footing on the wet grass. I gasped in horror as Gerard, off balance, fell head first into the window. The impact left a spider web crack in the glass.

“Gerard!” Jelena shrieked, crawling over the front seat.

“Stay in the car!” I yelled.

I clambered out my side and around the car. Blood gushed from his forehead and he wasn’t moving when I got to him. I peeked at Jelena through the smeared blood on the spider web. Raindrops streamed down my cheeks and plummeted from the tip of my chin on Gerard’s body.

My heart pounded intensely as I struggled to place him in the backseat. Water kept getting in my eyes. Jelena panicked inside. I had to wait a moment in the rain before confronting her.

A bloody gash appeared near his hair line. Jelena examined it in her arms.

“He’s been knocked out, Jelena. Now, listen, I need to find us a place to go where we can get him out of the rain and treat his wound, okay?”

She nodded. Her face was pale and sick and bloody fingertips stained her white gloves.

I grabbed my coat and disembarked. It was cold and windy. Everything in the distance was vague and unreal as if the world had shrunk. Thankfully the road was downhill, so it was easy to remember the way to the village.

A million things needed to be answered, and a million pieces of water vied for my attention, my discomfort. *Even if I reached town, would I find anybody?* Suddenly I felt guilty for lying to Jelena. At least she wasn’t distrustful enough towards me to know any better. Honestly, I was unsure what state Gerard was in.

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In the sheets of rain, each step brought me closer to something I could not see before. Depressingly, all I saw were trees. I contemplated returning to the car. Maybe I could get it out of the ditch and weâd be on our way. Thunder and lightning flashed behind me and I instinctively ducked.

Suddenly, the village was there, mostly obscured by the rain, but I could faintly hear the old gutters rupturing from the excess rainwater and pancaking onto the cobblestone street.

A man with a cane hobbled towards me in the curtains of blurry rain. From far away I had written him off as a tree or log because his movement was so slow and without substance. Oddly, however, by the way the man hobbled, so oblivious to the rain, it was as if the droplets didnât affect him a bit; it was as if he wasnât worried about catching a cold, about slipping, and the piercing chill couldnât cool his flesh.

I ran through deep puddles to get to him. Time embedded itself in everything. Gerardâs condition was grave, every second I wasted walking was another second he couldnât be treated.

âAre you the driver of that white automobile?â the old man shouted over the rain when I was twenty meters from him.

âYes!â I shouted back, slowing. âMy friend is injured; do you have a doctor in town?â

âNo, Iâm afraid we donât.â

âHow about a phone? A car?â

âUnfortunately we donât sir.â I looked over my shoulder and mumbled curse words.

âI have a cart we can haul him back to town with. Come, I will show you.â

Hobbling with haste, the old man led me to a barn in the forest behind the village. Thick-trees acted like umbrellas, finally relieving me of the cold dampness for a brief while. Hurrying around, I harnessed a pair of night black horses, took seat beside the old man, and he cracked the whip furiously. Chills ran down my spine as I observed how strong he was, which, was contrary to how I envisioned him after seeing that he used a cane. The horses charged through the forest and into the irritating angle of the rain.

âYou couldnât get the car started?â the old man pried.

âWe had to swerve to evade a tree. Itâs in a ditch now.â

âWhich side, right or left?â

âRight,â I said.

Lightning struck and illuminated the distance. An electric mauve mist glowed over treetops as the cart rattled, scaring the horses into a fit. But the old man pulled the reins tightly and they resumed the rapid pace.

Jelena was peering out the foggy windows like a sentry when we found the car. She beamed with relief upon seeing us. I rushed over, she rolled the window down.

âThis man has offered to take us back to the village,â I told her.

âReynard, he is awake, but confused and in immense pain.â I glanced at Gerard. The blood had dried.

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“Alright, let’s try and carry him to the cart.” Jelena held the door open. Not wanting to risk slipping while carrying him, I laid Gerard flat and dragged him up and out of the ditch. Somehow I managed to lift him in the cart. Jelena covered him with coats old. Again, illustrating his strength, the man cracked the whip and we were off.

The temperature had plummeted due to rain and wind. I lent Jelena my coat and rubbed my hands together for warmth.

“So, what happened to him?” the driver asked. I supposed it had been on his mind.

“He slipped and hit his head.”

“If I may ask, why did you three come here today?” I found it a rather intrusive question.

“The castle seemed interesting from the beach, but we got caught in the storm.”

“Oh! I see. Bad luck that is.”

The village appeared as unexpectedly as the sun on an overcast day. Clearing his throat in order to compete with the rain, the old man spoke.

“I suggest we go to the Inn. We have beds there.” Gazing upwards, his gray hair, then his whole body appeared to blend with the sky. “I doubt this storm will let up. It would be best if you spent the night here.”

“Sir, thank you so much. God bless you,” Jelena said sweetly.

Candles flickered around the tavern as I carried Gerard inside. I sat him upright in a chair. Jelena caressed his cold hands while I scavenged for a rag and water.

“It’s in the room back there,” the old man said, realizing what I was searching for. “I must return the cart. I shouldn’t be long. Please, make yourselves at home,” he added.

“Thank you so much sir” for everything,” Jelena said.

I cleaned Gerard’s wound carefully. He was conscious, but extremely disoriented. His eyes randomly opened and he spoke a sentence in gibberish. By his symptoms, perchance he had a concussion or worse, amnesia.

The tavern was dim and musty. Tables and chairs filled the room, and a long bar occupied the far wall. Two windows, like an enormous pair of glasses, provided a view of the street.

“Reynard!” Jelena grabbed my chest, kneeling. “Tell me the truth, Reynard. Is he going to be okay?”

Stunned, I stood and pulled her up to face me, and said, “Gerard is a strong man, as you well know, Jelena. Right now, the best thing we can do him is monitor his symptoms, make sure he is comfortable, and pray.”

She bowed her head. I took it as a sign that she wasn’t convinced.

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“If it’s any consolation, I have witnessed men on the threshold of death overcome illness and injury. Letting yourself worry will not be conducive to Gerard’s recovery.”

Jelena wiped her eyes with a handkerchief and gravitated back to Gerard’s side. The old man hobbled through the door just as I sat down.

“Would either of you care for a drink?” he said.

“I prefer beer if you have it.”

“Sure do.” His eyes moved to Jelena.

“A cup of water please. Oh, and thank you.”

The old man joined us upon delivering the drinks.

I gulped half the stale beer at once. Jelena sipped in a very ladylike manner. The old man poured himself a shot of scotch, using a candle he’d brought with him to see.

In the candlelight I noticed a painting of the seaside castle hung on the wall behind the old man. Only, in the painting, all of the architecture was intact and the exterior was more of a gray.

“It must have been a fantastic sight in its day. Say, what happened to it?” I asked, nudging my mug at the painting.

The old man instantly knew what I was talking about. Turning to me, eyebrows sinking into his eyes, he downed a shot that must have had the potency of water, because he neither flinched nor expressed any change upon his face.

“A fire,” he said. I was astounded how he was able to get a word out. Surely the scotch had burnt his throat.

“A fire ravaged the castle long ago.”

“A fire? Oh Lord, how tragic. When was this?” Jelena asked.

“Not just a fire. It was night when this village, a guiltless place of harmony and community, was desecrated for an act it took no part in.”

Thunder growled so loudly it could have been in the attic. Purple light flashed behind the man and revealed the forest out the back window, darkening his façade for a brief second. His face lit dimly again with a stern look still gloomily upon it. The old man took a deep breath as if he hadn’t finished the story, with emotion coating his cold, watery eyes.

“Listen you,” he spoke to us all. “What happened that night, in the fiery raid, is no fairy tale, but a glimpse at an unjustified tragedy.”

Jelena and I stared uncomfortably into his maddening eyes; he looked beyond us, at the dark hallway that led away.

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â On a September day nearly three-hundred years ago, a low fog covered the ground as the summer day folded into an aubergine twilight.

Apart of the autumn majesty, purple scarlet waves crashed ashore as the sun melted deeper into the space of night. From the village, a stunning picture arranged of the dark woods grabbing at the pink moon, sinking in a strange purple glow, which hid between the castle towers and the lighthouse. Stars, our godly sentinels, twinkled early that night. Maroon and gold leaves rustled in the streets. Bluish smoke lingered on the rooftops; the town baker was making treats for the following morning. Wind blew in from the south that night, carrying anything worthy of sea, anything that floated, up the coast with little resistance.

The lighthouse that once marked the cliffs was lit to allow local ships to find shore. However, it was not local ships that were sailing through the hovering fog that particular night. Spaniards, wretched dark-haired, tan skin barbarians, had scoured the French Coast for a village to ransack. An entire fleet of ships converged on the beaches over there. Days before, the French Navy had sunk a military fleet off the Coast of Spain. The Spaniards wanted revenge. Somewhere along the coast, navigating in the fog, were the French Navy. An attack was imminent and they had been sent by the King to defend the coast.â

Thunder rumbled over the tavern, purple illuminated the windows, and yet, the man passionately continued.

â Late that night, a high tide carried the Spanish fleet to our beaches. Four-hundred Spaniards landed ashore with the help of the lighthouse. Bearing torches, swords, anger, the columns of armed soldiers plodded up the beach, through our dark woods, with the intent of pillaging any villages between â †

Mademoiselle Cordeaux, a sweetheart of this village, had played her viola at the edge of the beach that very night, unable to sleep since her lover was out at sea. She saw the fiery columns marching quietly bright toward this village. She ran back to the village, screaming like a siren. All the townspeople awoke and gathered in the lane. She informed them of the encroaching force. After quickly convening, residents decided to retreat to the tower to burn the lighthouse and hopefully signal the French Navy. A messenger was sent afoot to the nearest village, a hefty ten kilometers away. Every other villager fled to the castle,â he sighed with contempt.

â Mademoiselle Cordeaux, a lover of music, stayed behind in the village. She enclosed herself in a balcony with her viola and played sorrowful tunes as the Spaniards crossed the creek and entered the village.â

I didnâ t think Jelena was listening until she asked, â What happened to Mademoiselle Cordeaux?â She kept her eyes on Gerardâ s bandaged head, stroking locks of his hair rather carefully.

The old man scratched his ear and gestured a painful face at me, retracting it just as Jelena placed her eyes on him, waiting for an answer.

â It was Mademoiselle Cordeauxâ s wish to distract the soldiers long enough for the French Navy to arrive. She was brutally raped by the soldiers, Iâ m afraid. From what I hear, pertaining to the stories, her painful screams reverberated all the way to the castle.â His teeth were clenched and his lip curled upon finishing.

â God Rest her soul,â he murmured as he clutched the cross around his neck. â To Mademoiselle Cordeaux,â he toasted, lifting his cup before downing it in one unbelievable gulp. I drank some from my mug.

I felt a shadow hover me as I set the mug back down on the table, a horribly dark feeling emanating from the windowâ as if the light in the tavern had subsequently changed. I reluctantly glanced over to it. On the

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glass, head-high, was a foggy spot. I locked my eyes on the spot, watching it vanish and reappear in slow, rhythmic fashion. The rhythmic fashion reminded me of the breathing. It was as if someone were standing with their face pressed to the glass on the other side, breathing, staring inside.

Was my mind playing tricks on me?

I tiredly blinked. Another sip of beer spiraled into my chest. I returned to the man's story, listening to the words that climbed through his rotting, crooked teeth. He periodically closed his eyes as he spoke, perhaps to re-envision the story, or to concentrate, I wasn't sure. A dark feeling disrupted my concentration again. It took a second to realize where the constricted light had emanated from. Having felt it a second time, I was confident it was deliberate. Then, a color enticed my eye. Red, the most recognizable, the most alluring color of all, attracted my exhausted eye as a shiny red apple would. All of a sudden the rain pattered harder, and the old man's story grew quieter in my ear, as if diluted, almost unnoticeable.

The tavern windows blurred. A shadow invaded my space, drawing me to the window. There was a lady at the window, out in the rain. I turned my head in shock when I saw her image—that of a young woman. She had greenish-blonde hair in a French bun, pale white skin, gloomy rings around her eyes, and blood red lips as if she'd kissed a hemorrhaging wound. Altogether, a jealous expression shrouded her ghastly face. Her breathing fogged up the glass as she stared inside—directly at me. In a slow motion, she brought her hands up and pressed them flatly against the glass. Apparently, it was not jealously.

Rainwater streaked down the window pane where she stood, rhythmically blurring her physique. It looked like the lady was crying by the way the streaky drops plunged around her face. The blood red substance on her lips mixed with the streaks and smeared. No thought crossed my mind. I was just entranced; nature wouldn't permit me to avoid the gruesome portrait. Fear reached my capacity, causing my eyes to water. I broke away and wondered why nobody else saw her, or if they did, why they didn't react. I wiped away a few tears with my sleeve and coughed to hide what I was doing. The old man was still talking.

I returned to the window, but the lady was gone and the foggy spot was clear.

“Why didn't the people flee the village?” Jelena asked.

“They would've been slaughtered, miss. Killing was a blessing, though—they would have raped all the women, likely enslaved the children.” Jelena sighed upon learning of the consequences, her face hopeless and grim.

“The lighthouse, a signal, was their only chance.”

“Only chance—they what do you mean?” I inquired. The old man jerked his head to me.

“We, as in the French Navy that is, had tailed the Spanish Fleet out at sea but lost them in the fog. They scoured the French Coast, desperately trying to pinpoint where the Spaniards had landed,” the old man explained in a depressed tone, clearly upset by it.

“Where was the lighthouse at on the bluffs?” Jelena randomly asked.

“Originally, the lighthouse was atop the tallest tower, a long climb for a guardian each evening I should add, so, when lit, the enormous flame could be descried for many kilometers out at sea—they! And local sailors, admirals, even foreign traders who sailed into port nearby, always referred to it as the Chateau de Veilleuse.”

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â Nightlight Castle,â I whispered aloud. He nodded in agreement.

â A gorgeous, gorgeous, dreamy, name,â Jelena sort of sang, twirling Gerardâ s dark hair in her fingers, slightly smiling.

â Trust me friends, it once saved countless lives, thousands of boats.â

â Have you seen it lately? Pieces of ships are scattered all around it.â

The old man sighed and took a drink. â I dare not venture to the cliffs and see the destruction this cursed place has caused â | No, I came inland once and never returned to the sea, for it was not kind to me.â

Paranoid and sensing the room was gloomier, I checked the window. Eerily mystical with raindrops and darkness, glancing over at the windows became a twitch. A window: a transparent separation, there is always another side to something. Nothing was there, thankfully, but I shivered as I turned to face the old man, who, staring emotionlessly at me, or through me, seemed confused yet intrigued. When Jelena broke the silence I was practically startled by her voice, like I expected it to be the apparition I had seen.

â Jacque, I need to get him to bed. He needs rest â | Please help me.â Jelenaâ s eyes were windows of tears, just like the tavern windows. She was on the verge of a breakdown. Although I wasnâ t married I was the only boy of four sisters. Strangely, I recognized the overwhelmed expression of a strong person realizing their weakness. Gerardâ s condition was obviously affecting her.

Closer than brothers, I refrained from ever disclosing my true feelings about Jelena to Gerard. Compared to him, Jelena was naïve and carefree, or so I believed. Yet, when Gerard and I had biked inland for several days underneath wavy soft purple and sun-gold skies cut by sweeping panoramaâ s of rolling hills, stretches of chartreuse pastures with quaint cottages, through obscure farming villages, over creeks, beside vineyards, across flowery meadows of the French countryside one day, Gerard revealed his feelings for Jelena to me.

Out of breath, cycling uphill, Gerard confessed he was in love with Jelena. Being his friend, I remained silent and swallowed my doubts. Iâ m glad I had. At the time I was confident that he was mistaken, seeking just an empty beautyâ a childish lady. Jelena was not spoiled, however. In fact, she was raised in one of those obscure farm villages that sprinkle the French Countryside. Her family was poor but she was sent to a girlâ s school in Paris, where she bumped into a handsome fellow by the name of Gerard as she threw birdseed for the pigeons by some extravagant fountains one afternoon.

The old man intervened and offered to help carry Gerard upstairs, but I told him to go ahead and unlock the door. He nodded and disappeared into the dark. Purple flashed in the windows as lightning illuminated the lane, but I didnâ t see his body down the hall. While I plotted how I would haul Gerard upstairs, I secretly listened for footsteps. As old as the tavern was, I expected the ceiling to at least creak under the old manâ s weight. Surprisingly, it didnâ t make a sound.

Did he go upstairs?

I didnâ t have time to explore the hallway. Gerard would be too heavy. Jelena intimately rubbed his hand to keep it warm. His motionless body gave no response, no acknowledgment. She sobbed quietly, wiping away what she could. Her hands closed on her face like curtains, shielding her tears from being seen. I picked up Gerard and placed him over my shoulder. I let out a grunt. Gerard was a track star in high jumping in his province. I was the distance runner.

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I proceeded upstairs, Jelena followed closely. Friendly gravity burdened me. The old man was nowhere to be seen. Angry, I yelled at Jelena to go and find him. Then, I turned into a shadowy corridor. At the end, on the right, a doorway of light slanted into the hall, showing a window was in the room by the squiggly lines of streaking rain moving across the floor. Gerard's weight was beginning to burden me so I hurried into the room and laid him on the bed face-up. Jelena leaned in the doorway, hands over her eyes. A candle, weakly lighting the room, flickered with our entrances. The wax was twisted and dusty, the type they used hundreds of years ago.

“I don't know what to do, Jacque.” Her voice was muffled, mouth crooked, as she tried to cry and talk at the same time. I regretted yelling at her, but I, too, was exhausted and worried.

Jelena's posture and sobbing warped me to the day of their wedding, which had been heavenly. I witnessed them both happy, outpouring with joy. I was the best man. Now, Gerard was unresponsive and Jelena was utterly despaired. The world was flipped.

“Excuse me miss,” an unseen voice warned.

Jelena screamed, dropped her white handkerchief, and jumped into the old man. She naturally jumped back into the hall, but changed direction and lunged forward immediately and turned to look back at him as she acted as if she would wrap her arms around me.

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” she giggled nervously. Her sense of humor was still present despite the overarching melancholy. Laughter is deeply entwined in her personality.

“I am terribly sorry Miss. I didn't mean to frighten you,” the old man genuinely apologized. An awkward pause overcame the three of us until the caretaker spoke again. He looked at her like he was in love, as if he were innocently ogling to cherish the moment. “I've seen many women over the years, and, let me tell you in a purely observant manner, you are truly beautiful.” Should anyone say otherwise, send them to me. The old man raised his cane in the air and shook it, slyly grinning at the same time. In his other hand were a stack of blankets and two pillows.

I saw a smile round about Jelena's face. Who knew the old man had a sense of humor? I smiled, too. It was the last thing I could imagine the serious old man say. Our solemn salutation had melted a little bit more to reveal his heart, for he was tender underneath his aged fortress.

Blushing, flattered, Jelena glanced up at him. “Thank you, that was sweet of you,” she said bashfully.

“Is there anything I can get before we sleep?” he asked.

“Pardon me sir; perchance is there another room where I can stay the night?”

“Of course, right this way,” the caretaker extended his arm to left like a waiter.

Recalling the previous time I tried to accompany him, I followed him closely to ensure he wouldn't vanish on my watch. He stopped and picked up a candle, struck a match and lit it. We moved onward at a slow pace, revealing silky cobwebs sprawled near the ceiling, one after another. A ring of keys was pulled from his trousers once we halted beside a door. A couple of wrong keys later and the door swung inward in a long screech.

I walked in the room as he held the door. A window was in the rear. Lighting blazed outside as I wandered over to it. Rain instantly flickered in a light purple hue that stretched across the forest, exposing the guise of

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the woods in a mauve daylight.

“Will this do?” The old man ambled to the window. The room overlooked the woods behind the village. I stared outside, fascinated by the colors, the rain, the violent violet of a storm. I heard him approach, and he must have been close to me, yet, his existence seemed so contrived. The air was cold, and with him being there, surely I should have felt his warm breathe on my neck. Even when he spoke, I didn’t. Perhaps he’d grown impatient of my pensiveness.

“Yes, this quite fine. Thank you,” I finally said.

“You’re a quiet one aren’t you?”

“Pardon me?” I said.

“Oh, and a writer, too, I bet?” He stared at me using the reflection of the dark window. His reflection rendered his face and hair more gray and sickly, and his body, shriveled.

How did he know that? Yet, many people are writers—it’s not uncommon.

“I am indeed. Good guess.” Pleased, he bowed his head at the woods as if he wanted to acknowledge something down on the ground, in front of me. I was curious what was there, but before I could check it out, the old man spoke.

“Another drink before you shove off?” he asked.

“Yeah, I could down one more.”

Again I followed him closely as he hobbled downstairs. Hallways in the tavern were filled with cold drafts. My hands shook in the air. My heart trembled. Red goosebumps appeared beneath my transparent skin. Rain still hadn’t let up. I sat down at a table and rubbed my hands together and blew hot air at them.

“What a day huh?” I said, initiating conversation. It was strange because I was sure I had seen the man out of the corner of my eye when he actually had gone somewhere behind the bar.

Thinking back on the window, the grotesque image I had been haunted by earlier, I shivered and tucked my hand in my sleeves. It was quiet and dark around me. The old man had gone into a backroom and must not have heard me, *or what if he was playing tricks on me?*

Drops of water trickled from the ceiling, moistened my shoulder, and sent deep chills throughout my body. Skies cracked overhead as if they were embedded in the ceiling, a gray-mauve night sky abruptly glowed in the lane out the windows, darkening once again to a long hiss. Rain relentlessly pummeled the cobblestone, striking so stiffly that it bounced upward before draining downhill. I remembered where I was right then.

Prior to that moment I had been lost in the abnormality of our fortune. Rainfall brought a cold front; the tavern room ensued cold enough to host my warm, ghostly breath in the somberness.

“You want beer, right?” the old man asked, appearing in the dimness.

“Yes,” I stuttered. For a hobbling old man, he could wane like the moon, and reappear like lightning.

The beer was utterly stale but I drank out of anguish rather than thirst.

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The old man poured himself more shots. Needless to say, the more he drank, the more I was ashamed that an old man could outdrink me.

“Do you wish to know how the story ends?”

I froze and peered at him. “Is there more to it?”

“Indeed there is,” he assured. I hunched forward and listened.

“After Madomiselle Cordeaux was killed, the Spaniards plundered the village and marched through the forest, torches in hand, the nightlight guiding them as they thirsted for more retribution. From the castle, the villagers scrambled around as the sea of flames slice through the darkness, preparing to defend the nightlight.

They had no chance, though. When the Spaniards arrived at the castle, they threw torches on the knoll, and set the castle walls afire.” He stood and headed to refill his cups.”

“My god!” I uttered.

“Another?” he grumbled inquisitively as he moved his way behind the bar, touching every table with his hairy knuckles along the way for support.

“A”

“A”

“Yes,” he confirmed after a moment. “And when they watched,” he grumbled, downing another shot. “The Spaniards apathetically watched as the fire engulfed the whole castle, as flames jumped out the windows. Everything was burned. The villagers, refusing to leave, were burned alive—all of them—women and children included. In the morning, the ruins still smoldered when the French Navy landed, drawn to the overlook by a black smoke seeping into the sky.”

Thunderstorms continued outside, routinely brightening the landscape as I tried to process the gruesome story.

“Nowadays, when it storms, the ruins of the castle are a series of waterfalls. Stairwells and crumbled floors are natural waterfalls for the rainwater funneling down the medieval spiraling staircases like some deep subterranean cavern from the tallest tower.” “If you go there my friend, prepare yourself in advance, for the warbling on the scorched steps, of the tainted water rushing over the black wooden beam evoking a horrible charcoal memory, will terrorize your conscience.

The old man uplifted from his seat with the help of his cane, waddling to the window.

“Come here,” he demanded. I warily joined him before the window. A river of rainwater raced over the cobblestone street.

“You see that?” he pointed. “That is the rainwater from the castle!” he declared as he stepped through the window and into the current. “In your life you will have the chance to rescue somebody. You will have the chance to save someone from darkness. You be a nightlight.”

Thunder erupted somewhere. The street briefly lit. When it darkened again, the river was no longer clear. It had turned red—as red as a pool of blood in a dark alley.

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My skin tightened. Coldness stole the little warmth I held onto. His body was washed away. I stared at the street. My body tingled and wouldn't budge like it had fallen asleep.

Only one question lingered amongst the raindrops on the window of my eyes. *If everyone in the village perished, how was the story spread?*

I must have went to bed at some point, but my actions after that point in time seemed so insignificant that I can't account for them.

Morning awoke me early. I checked on Jelena and Gerard. They were cuddled together under the blankets, with Gerard snoring. The old man was nowhere to be seen.

I was able to get the car started after changing one of the tires. When Jelena and Gerard awoke, I offered to drive them to the nearest town so we could get coffee, and Gerard could be examined by a doctor. Thankfully, he would recover with nothing more than a scar.

We ate lunch at a pub.

“Did you visit the beach,” the bartender had asked.

Yes, and we ventured up to the Chateau de Veilleuse also. Had some car trouble, and ended up finding a caretaker who let us stay the night.”

Silence replied. I looked at the bartender after not receiving a response. He stared at me as if I were a ghost ordering a drink.

“A caretaker?” he said in disbelief.

“Yes, the old man who oversees the tavern.”

“Sir, I believe you are mistaken. That village has been abandoned for hundreds of years. Nobody lives there anymore.”

“

“

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