

Very Decent of You

If you drive east on D117 you come up on a twisty road out of the scenic gorge where the town of Quillan is spread, and cross part of the Plateau du Sault to get to the little French town of Puivert. As you dip down the road to drive in, you notice a recreational lake, which was at one time a much larger body of water. If you come in from the west on the D road, you go through the market towns of Lavalenet and Foix before you arrive.

You turn into the village and notice the aged stone row houses leaning over the narrow streets. An old church near the *mairie* just off the town square seems to be crumbling, some of its windows cracking as it falls back to an earlier time. There is a severe, cold-looking war memorial near a bricked-up fountain, and a small café just up the hill beside an open atrium.

You turn on to a road that swings toward the lake and drive through clusters of newer dwellings on the outskirts of town before you turn right into another row of stone houses at least several centuries old. These are in various states of order and disorder—but something catches your eye as you make a turn and drive down the narrow pavement.

Propped against the bright blue door of one of the houses as you pass is a pair of binoculars leaning on the baseboard against the painted steel trim. If you know anything about optics, you quickly see that these are very good binoculars—Bushnell, made for the National Audubon Society, 8 x 42WA, a focus that brings distant objects up in marvelous clarity, 430 feet at 1100 yards with adjustable lenses in both eye pieces as well as the main focus wheel.

There it is—this very good instrument without a case, just propped up on the base against the blue door. Perhaps fifty yards further down the pavement, past three or four more houses, the landscape opens to pastures and a stunning view of the Pyrenees foothills. You would like to reverse the car and go back to borrow those binoculars to take a look at this view, but you drive on a bit puzzled.

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He was a crisp, alert Englishman, living in a place between where he did not quite fit—and yet where he belonged—working as a manuscript editor for a large Midwestern American university press. At the time I was in mid-career, working as director of a smaller scholarly press. The Englishman had always been friendly to me when we saw each other at book conventions, and I enjoyed chatting with him. It may be that he wanted to be a writer, and was attracted to me because he knew I'd managed to have some of my work published, but mostly we shared our mutual interest in bird watching, and about this he was far more knowledgeable and enthusiastic than I.

Once I was invited by the English department of the university where he worked to give a poetry reading, which he enthusiastically attended, obviously very pleased that a fellow scholarly publisher was being feted for his own writing. I recall faintly that he brought his wife to the event and proudly introduced her to me. I heard from him occasionally after this—usually excited notes about bird sightings and flight patterns, to which I responded with hastily scribbled postcards.

A few years later, I was again invited to his campus to serve on the teaching staff for a writers' conference. Shortly before the event, I received a phone call from him. I must admit, at first I had trouble placing him, but his British accent soon brought him to mind. He asked if we might get together while I was at the conference. He had been retired early with a disability from his job at the press because he was having serious vision problems. Then, he said, he had recently lost his wife to cancer.

He seemed submerged in grief, but was trying to find some peace, trying to go somewhere or relocate himself. He promised not to dwell on his troubles if we got together. We could talk about literature or birds, he said. He realized that I would be busy, but he hoped I might possibly find some time to just talk.

I was busy—and I was not looking forward to milling around at the conference—but I needed the money. Rather than agree to meet for a meal with him, I suggested that he come to one of the conference sessions; perhaps we would be able to talk afterward. I could hear his disappointment on the phone. "I'm sorry to occupy you in this way," he said. "I guess I'm a bit lost, and it affects my judgment."

Ashamed of myself, I faltered, spoke sympathetically, and finally suggested that we breakfast together one morning during the conference.

"I would enjoy that very much," he said. "Very decent of you. Recently I heard a Bullock's Oriole that I'd like to tell you about."

Still, I could not bring up the image of his face in my mind. I had much to do—insurmountable piles of work in my office, I had the conference to prepare for, I had my children to be a father for, my wife to be a husband to, my aging parents to worry about. I had my poems, which I desperately sought time for. I was in the prime of life, and rotting with self-importance.

The Englishman appeared after one of the conference panels and put out his hand for a shake. One of the lenses of his glasses was dark and the other heavily tinted. He was holding a white cane. The panel had been overlong and insipid, and I was irritable and weary. He said his name to me, smiled and waited.

"Oh yes," I said. Slowly it was coming to me—I was to do something. He was squinting at me through his tinted lens with admiration and pleasant, British expectation. I was to do something, yes, to say something, to open some small gate, a simple cordial thing. But students were also crowding around me. They wanted me to *do* something, too, to say something, to praise their work, to spur their careers. They had hopes and expectations, and so did this man standing in front of me, smiling with admiration.

"The conference is interesting, isn't it?" I said at last. "This is a beautiful campus."

"I wonder," he said. "Could we breakfast together one morning while you're here?"

Why did I say what I said next? What I said next was irretrievable—like an icy balloon coming out of a cartoon villain's lips, a cruel, masked scoundrel with a twisted face. As soon as the words came out I wanted to stuff the cold balloon back into my mouth. To my own very small credit at least, I winced as I said it.

But I *said* it: "You know, I'm so busy. Please forgive me. I just don't see how I can find the time."

I will not forget the look on his face. Occasionally, on my best and worst days, the memory of it comes in and shames me. His look was not disgust or surprise or disappointment. It was something less

than these, something helpless, abandoned, and lost. One eye dark, the other shaded. A face fallen into itself.

I wonder now, in my shame when I sometimes recall this and other such moments, whether I have ever been decent? Yes, I have. Surely I have, and not infrequently, but it is the lapses that are hard to think about. I try to console myself by thinking now: If I could breakfast with this man tomorrow, listen to his eager, intelligent talk of books and birds, I would do so in an instant. I would welcome it. But he is gone. I have tried and cannot trace him down. I hope he has forgotten this moment. I have not.

A week after the conference a neatly wrapped package arrived in my office. In it was a pair of excellent, lovingly-used Bushnell binoculars and a note: "I had meant to give these to you at the conference. I am moving, and these are of no use to me anymore, but I know you will enjoy them. Please watch for the two of us now—and write well." There was no return address and the postage mark was smeared.

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It seemed an especially good thing to do this year, to travel to our small house in Puivert, in the Languedoc of southeastern France, to a place tucked into a valley in the foothills of the Pyrenees, far away from anything modern and "significant." A place to walk and talk and look—to be quiet, to eat French food and drink French wine. The Languedoc is an ancient land, a beautiful place forgotten, or not quite yet "discovered" or rediscovered—with a strange history, a curious language of its own, part French and part a residue of some other language mostly faded now.

We wanted to escape from the desperate, downhill world for a while, to come to a small place, to a narrow lane running through a row of 18th century houses, where there aren't many people or cars, only a few natives who have not moved away, and a sprinkling of weekenders and part-timers from Toulouse or Marseille, a few transplanted Brits coming for the air, the light, the quiet Pyrenean foothills, the fields and scenic Cathar castles of the area, perched precariously on the highest peaks.

When I am in the Languedoc, it is my curious pleasure to understand almost nothing that is said to me. It is beyond my hearing

aids, beyond my age to learn another language, to understand these words. I am happily, selfishly in a world beyond communication, which is where I often want to be at this point in my life—to smile, to nod, to shuffle along and say nothing nor comprehend much that is said to me—to observe human beings, their habits and activities, without the expectation of spoken words.

Carlos and his Japanese wife are still in the neighborhood—a very odd, sad situation. Carlos tries to converse with me, but our talk is halting and difficult, almost impossible. His head is large, his features southern European; his brown, French/Spanish eyes are out of kilter, seeming to focus at different times, and always a bit out of sync, never quite together. He and his wife are like lost children in this out-of-the-way place.

Carlos knows perhaps as much English as I know French, which makes our conversations like ditch-digging, one painful shovelful at a time. I use my pocket French dictionary like a pick to loosen the packed dirt.

Usually Carlos approaches me from some oblique direction, pretending to be surprised when he sees me. He would like to talk, I know, and I feel impolite because I have little patience with our drudging progress. He is a lonely young man. It disappoints him that we are not able to communicate.

Carlos must be at least forty years younger than I, and he does not comprehend my deafness. His thinking is circuitous. One year when we came to Puivert, for some reason he made a concerted effort to sell his house to us. We did not understand his motive, and were not in the least interested. We already had a house, and I was a bit piqued to be regarded as an affluent American with enough money to buy anything. But he had worked hard to prepare the place for our inspection. It was clean and neat, but strangely appointed. I remember a curious glass bricked window in the back of the house, where there should have been a picture window open to the lovely foothills.

Then someone told us that Carlos does not actually own the house. Apparently his parents own it—but they have never really given it to him. They allow him to use it, and he pays no rent because both he and his wife are unemployable. He was trying to sell us a house he didn't own.

One year when we arrived, Carlos and his wife were taking care of a baby that had been born to them. Carlos showed it to me. It was beautiful, and he was very proud. But now the baby is gone, apparently taken away from them. Now the Japanese woman has only Carlos, her off-center French/Spanish husband in the sticks of rural France. They eat only organic food, drink no wine, not even taking pleasure from the splendid food of France. They have a car, an aged Peugeot which breaks down frequently. The wife seems to go to a doctor often.

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It is magnificent autumn in the Languedoc. This morning and last evening in this remote valley the sky is completely filled with migrating crag martins—so many swarming high and low, I wonder that there is room in the sky for other birds. I try to focus on them with my binoculars, but their constant movement makes this difficult. They have all-white breasts against dark underwings, and their heads and bills are black and stubby. They swirl in masses, apparently feeding on an abundant hatch of insects over the fields; they fly high up against the sky, then dip down close to our balcony windows. Many hundreds, probably thousands—it is a wonder that they never collide.

Obviously they are migrating, perhaps on their way from England to Africa, but for now they are swarming over our valley, restocking their small bodies, turning sudden swirls together like the wave of a giant hand. I wonder if there are leaders amongst them—boss martins—or whether it is a common urge that spurs them to move in veering, coordinated currents together.

Carlos is in the street the next morning when I go out to take my garbage to the *poubelle*. I know that he has heard me coming down my stairs, but he pretends to be surprised when he sees me. He does not look up at the astonishing ebb and flow of birds overhead. Even when I call his attention to them he does not look up. He looks at me, focusing one eye, then the other, his mouth set straight. I have never seen Carlos laugh; but his smile is handsome, even though rare and fixed.

The martins are driving their waves and turning over our heads. A heavy mist comes down over the mountains and slides along the slopes out over the valley to create a darkening ceiling. The birds crowd and swoop beneath it as it lowers. Hard weather comes up quickly in the Pyrenees. Suddenly it begins to pour rain and the birds are pushed down by the heavy drops, eventually retreating into the woods beyond the sloping meadows, to rest and wait out the downpour.

I head for my door as well, not wishing to hammer out a conversation with Carlos in this rain. But he stays in the street, his hair growing heavy and his eyelids dripping, his shoulders beginning to darken. He still has not looked at the crag martins. Does he know it is raining? He looks disappointed as I hurry to my house. "Au revoir, Carlos," I call out as I shut the door, but he does not answer.

Today when I step out for a walk Carlos is working at his doorway, kneeling with some tools and a miter box, pretending to do repairs on the baseboard under his bright blue door.

"Hello, Carlos," I say in English.

He looks up, affecting surprise. "*Bonjour*," he says. "Where are you going?"

I respond with my miserable French, "*Pour mon promenade*." Carlos would like for me to ask him what he is doing, to come over and see his work, but I proceed down the road.

"Where did you go yesterday?" he calls out in English, trying to hold me. He had seen us drive off in our car.

"Mirepoix," I respond. "*Le marché*."

"Ah," he says. "Did you buy some peanuts?"

"No," I say. "*Vin, fromage*, and some *pommes*."

"The wine will make you vomir." Carlos and his wife are teetotalers.

"I will not drink too much," I say, and continue walking, widening the distance between us. He looks down at his job; he looks up again and—even from this distance—I know I am failing him again. He hammers at his doorway, making noise. I sometimes wonder if he tries to make me feel guilty. I suspect this could be true.

But why am I guilty? Because I am an old, deaf man? Because I have come to a foreign land without knowing the language? Because I wish to be quiet and alone?

I walk on under the swirling crowds of martins, look back over my shoulder and Carlos is growing smaller. A few steps further, around a dipping bend in the road, and he has disappeared. Now there are only the martins, the wooded foothills of the Pyrenees, and the faint tap-tap of Carlos's hammer. He is working. Then even this noise is gone, absorbed in the fuzz and faint sirens in my ears.

I become impatient the few times I try to have a conversation with Carlos. He perceives my indifference. He always reads me carefully.

"How are you?" I dutifully say one day when I see him.

"What?" he says.

"Como tally voo?" I try to say, showing an edge to my voice.

He hears my edge. "Not good," he says.

"I'm sorry. What is the matter?"

He looks at me to see if I really care. "I am not good," he repeats, and walks away.

This morning as I come out for my walk, Carlos is looking authoritatively at his doorway again, as if he *really* means to fix it this morning.

"*Bonjour*, Carlos," I say to him.

"*Bonjour*," he says. "*C'est belle journée.*"

"*Oui, oui*," I say, and keep walking. I cannot think of anything more I can say to Carlos, or anything I might give. He is on his own—and so am I. I have my little notebook to scribble in, my binoculars, my paté and cheese and wine and baguette in a small sack for my lunch. I have come to France to be selfish, to write words, not to say them.

When we leave here, Carlos and his wife will remain, eating their organic carrots and drinking bottled water as they gaze at the slithering glow of their television and the odd gray-yellow light that comes through the glass brick window in the back of their house.

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The last morning—the day of our departure for the U.S.—the sky is clear. I finish loading our baggage into the rental car, and take my binoculars outside. The crag martins have migrated on. Magpies, wagtails, and sparrows have come back out of hiding in the woods

to their daily routines. The foothills are in silhouette, but as the sun advances, the distant trees and stones become illuminated. It is hard to leave. It is so buoyantly lovely in France this day—the dahlias must be blooming in Paris in the gardens of the Tuileries, the animals of Lascaux must be romping in their caves, women are untying their bikini tops along the Mediterranean shore, the stones of Carnac are marching on the Brittany shore in the sun.

Tap-tap-tap goes Carlos with his little masonry hammer. The dog who seems permanently staked near the house behind ours is barking, barking. A rooster is crowing somewhere in the valley. A bull is giving strict instructions to some cows.

I scan the sky with the Bushnells for any holdovers from the hordes of martins and find a small group sitting on a wire between two poles. I wonder, have these laggards decided not to make the difficult journey? I focus carefully. I go to where Carlos is leaning in his doorway, motion to him, lead him down the street, and put the binoculars in his hand.

“Carlos, take a look,” I say. “Some of the crag martins have stayed.”

He puts the binoculars to his brown eyes—but he squints one eye, then the other as he looks. I show him the ridged fingertip adjuster between the lenses and he tries again. He is still closing one eye, then the other. But then I demonstrate how each of the small optics focuses separately. He turns these lenses one at a time, and suddenly sees the martins so clearly, so perfectly, he almost falls over backward. He is smiling his handsome smile. He is stretching out an arm to see if he can touch the birds.