

# Where I Am Now

ROBERT DAY

## *We Are a Country of Stories*

The sheep have been through the hay meadows in recent weeks. Dominique and his herders drive them in a round robin route of about twenty kilometers, staying two or three days in each meadow. My guess is there are three hundred, including goats. They were below me for two days, the ewes giving birth so that the lambs are growing the flock as it moves. Now they are west of me, past the village of St. Phillipe; I see them on my way to the Monday market in Castillon.

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I live in a small stone house perched high in a vineyard. From my bedroom window at a distance I see the castle of Montaigne. It is more than sufficiently large for royalty.

Close by and out the same window is the wreck of Château Montagne lived in by a *très difficile* countess who had her fingers broken (one at a time, according to the story going up and down the *côte*) last year by robbers until she produced the keys to her safe. Montaigne would not have believed it had he seen it himself.

We are a country of stories. And skeptics.

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I type in the mornings unless it is a market day, when I do my shopping. Food is dear, but wine is inexpensive—at least for the *vin en vrac* I buy from Monsieur R., stopping by his *chai* to fill my four-liter, straw-covered bottle and gossip in my weak French.

Afternoons I cut logs, clear brush, and help with the sheep at a small farm down the road. In exchange, I am offered meals and wood for my stove. I walk to work, as it is only five kilometers. I move my feet to move my words.

I may become a father: the farm had six of its sheep killed by a mad dog. One of the ewes had just given birth, and we saved the lamb (now named Molly). Because I carried her into the house and laid her by the fire bright, she thinks I am her mother and follows me everywhere, bleating, bleating for her bottle. I don't have a place for her, but I might rig one. We'll see.

The hunters are busy these days, shooting from early in the morning until sunset: pheasants, palombes (a dove-like bird that migrates through on its way to Africa), wild pigs, and small deer with a high-pitched bark. I see these men by the sides of the small roads that wind through the hills, sometimes with dogs. The other day one of them blew a brass horn as I passed. I do not know if he was calling something, or calling to other hunters that something (*pas moi!* I had hoped) was heading their way.

The cheese rinds, egg shells, wilted lettuce, apple and pear cores, bits of old *pâté* (among other odds and ends)

that I have been trying to compost in the woods between my house and Château Montagne seem instead to be feeding Boris—my *nom de cochon* for a wild boar with an indiscriminate palate. Not that I have seen Boris, only that there are never any leavings from what I put out. Called to the hunter's horn or routed by their dogs, he would be good game—and no doubt a hearty ragout. Now that I have named him, I hope not. And he might be Borita.

A few days ago, a hunter brought a hind-quarter of deer to the family that has Molly. The *femme de la ferme* used her butcher knife to carve the evening meal—and then some. Two sheep dogs shared the bones. I was invited to stay. My host opened bottles from his best years.

"There was a saying on the Kansas frontier," I said by way of a toast, "that the men were so hungry when they came in from the roundups, that the women fed the dogs first." Having once worked on a small ranch in Kansas, I am known by the French as "Cueboy," and in that guise I am expected to offer *bon mots* from the American West. We raise our glasses.

A great storm of wind and rain has come and gone, and now it is clear—although I have learned by the French radio (I do not have television—or the Internet) that it will get *très froid*. So be it: I have wood, wool sweaters, and maybe Molly to keep me warm.

In the meantime, off to lunch today at the home of a painter friend where we will be joined by the widow of another painter friend. The afternoon will be a buzz of Bernard and Johns and Cassett; as I know something about art, the talk among us will be a pleasure for me to recall—not unlike laying down bottles of good wine for a future of meals with friends. The most fruitful and natural play of the mind is conversation. I'll hold forth and dispute, but only for my own pleasure. *Tant pis* about death and all that.

*I Have Not*

Madame F., an eighty-year-old American ex-pat from California who lives beyond a line of poplars down the hill from me, fell leaving my house after dinner the other night and hurt herself badly: a nasty twisting of bones and cartilage in her left foot and lower leg. I got help from neighbors, and we took her to the hospital in Libourne. The French medical system is excellent; true, it is in a high fever of fiscal misery these days, but I sense the French think it is better to be in debt to themselves for their own care than to China for television sets, or to the Middle East for oil and war. After a few days Madame was taken (not sent) home in a hospital van where medical attention continues: visits by a nurse a few times a week, and a doctor less often, but routinely—or as needed. Of course, there are her friends. Me among them.

In the mornings I start her wood stove, a long arrangement of cook ovens, griddle plates, burner tops and water reservoirs, that not only heats her old mill of a house but cooks the meals she makes for all of us who have been her guests. Evenings I walk her dog, Ginger, a tall Rhodesian Ridgeback who sits part way into the large fireplace in the evenings because, out of her country, she is cold.

My neighbor and I talk books: Russian stories we read together in the early fall, and now de Maupassant: “Boule de Suif” that made him famous; “The Story of a Farm Girl” and “Madame Tellier’s Establishment.” (We have agreed not to reread “The Necklace” . . . in protest . . . but of what we are not sure).

In-between the Russians and the French, we confess our literary prejudices and affections: How much better Carlyle is as a writer on the French Revolution (even if wrong) than Dickens. The splendor of Chekhov. The recent death of Alain Robbe-Grillet and the novels of Duras (and while we are there, the wine by the same name). How neither of us

have read Radiguet. All this and whatever comes from our mutual reading of the *Guardian* or *The New York Review of Books* (she subscribes to both), and *The New Yorker* (my subscription)—along with other literary journals and belles lettres magazines we share with one another, and with others in our circle. Old and gray and lovely by the fire, my friend.

The other evening she asked if I had met the *jeune fille* American who this past summer moved into a farmhouse at L'Etang on the Montaigne estate; she is a painter. *Très belle*. I have not. Madame confesses that she has asked her to do the Monday morning market shopping. I am thanked for bringing in wood from the sheds below the house and building and stoking the fire, for walking Ginger—but the market needs a woman's touch. And no doubt better French, not confusing *rougette* (a small reddish lettuce) with *rouget* (a large reddish fish). Then there was the matter of *aiguilles*, which I understood to be sewing needles but were, in the market *patois*, *aiguillettes*, thin strips of meat; sewing needles cannot, as it turns out, be sautéed with garlic in olive oil. Nor can lettuce be poached with lemon and *herbes de Provence*.

Perhaps, Madame suggests, the three of us can read Radiguet (in French) and talk about it over dinner one night. In French.

### *I Am to Be a Godfather*

It has been decided I am to be a godfather to Molly with visiting rights. It seems best she stay with the flock as she has made friends with the other young lambs—three sets of twins among them—and that is fine by her and by me. In the evenings, I prepare her bottle, and when she hears me come out of the house into which I first carried her, she bounds up the rows of vines to bleat me a greeting. I know it is not love; but the bottle I carry, that is love. French folk

and flocks are not confused—or conflicted—about such matters. We understand I will not take her home but might, if the weather turns foul, carry her to the fireplace where we first were father and daughter.

Tomorrow to the Saturday-morning market in Ste Foy for myself, and to get a wedge of old Brebis (I can't make a mistake about that) for my broken-footed friend. Cold tonight, but good wood in my stove. *Sans* Molly, extra blankets. Maybe a nip of Armagnac. Maybe more than a nip.

### *Some Wines are at Home in a Pichet*

My house sits at the *carrefour* of four wine districts. West is St. Emilion, one of the great wine regions of France. I have a few celebrated bottles that my friends gossip I am saving for my *lit de mort*. The younger French—mainly from the cities—think it is better to drink the good wines now: My prized St. Emilions included. I'll split the difference one winter night over a good cut of veal. And Saint Agru. Or maybe a meal with Madame when she is well enough to return to my table. That's it. The future is a promise you keep to yourself.

Across the Dordogne River (about ten kilometers south) is *Entre Deux Mers*—a light, white wine that I am told does not travel but is splendid here in summer. Or with *truite de mer* anytime. Crisp. Dry.

To the north a kilometer or two is Côte de Franc. I can see the vines from my second floor windows. It is good wine and a good value. There is something tough and lean about it. In winter, it gets better if you open it and put the bottle by the wood stove thirty minutes before dinner. I drink half a bottle one night, then the other half the following night. Sometimes I fail at this arrangement.

The vines that surround my house are Côte de Castillon. It is those vines that produce Chateau Perreau Bel-Air, a

wine I save for the few visitors from America I have these days. By looking out the French doors in my dining room *cum* office, they can see what they are drinking. Our toast is to tip our glasses to the grapes.

East five kilometers is Bergerac, a sturdy, dependable red wine. Monsieur R. resents the upscale vintners who are making Bergerac, a Bordeaux-styled wine, so that it might be exported.

"Some wines are at home in a *pichet*," he says. "That way, 'if it gets broken at the table, desire shall not fail.' Confucius."

Monsieur is a *chai* of aphorisms. Roughly the age of Madame F., they are *chers amis*. He, too, is helping with her these days.

I don't catch Monsieur's meaning, but he seems pleased with himself for his saying, which he repeats, while he fills my jug. The wine—a *mélange* from his scattered small vineyards of various appellations—is strictly illegal, and that pleases him as well. One of his vineyards is not far from where the "*American Nouvelle*"—as Monsieur calls her—lives. Between Madame F. and Monsieur R. her full name will become Mademoiselle *Nouvelle American*.

"*Très nouvelle*," says Monsieur. " 'A young *tête sur les jeunes* shoulders,' to quote Catullus."

From time to time I have seen Mademoiselle *American* driving the roads in a *très ancien* blue Dyna truck with potted flowers painted—by her?—on the doors. She zips by with such speed and apparent determination to get where she is going that I cannot get a good look at her. I doubt she sees me at all. Because I drive a maroon Deux Chevaux made by the same company and of about the same vintage, I thought one day to flash my lights as we passed: one *voiturette* to another. I got a quick flash in return. Next time I'll honk.

I say to Monsieur that all I remember from Catullus is, "what a woman says, you can write on the wind, write on the rushing waves."

"Ah oui," says Monsieur, "but wind and waves are lovely, and it is better to have a *faux récit* than *rien*. Far better, as Cicero says. And a man has well lived his life if he drinks the last bottle from his cellar on his last day," he continues as he corks my jug. Walking me to my *Deux Chevaux* he quotes Shakespeare that a young man should be whipped who plays at being a connoisseur of wine and sauces.

"It was Montaigne who said that about young men and wine," Madame told me when we were talking of Duras and Radiguet, "not Shakespeare. He gets many things wrong, and I think it is on purpose. Either that, or he is finally addled."

I ask her about the "broken pitcher at the table," and she believes it might be the Old Testament but is badly quoted and has nothing to do with wine. She'll look one day. I decide not to mention Cicero.

### *Many Shades of Gray*

Gray is the color of the Dordogne sky this time of year. Many shades of gray. Sometimes with streaks of red or pink as the sun tries to burn its way through. The other day nothing got through because of a deep fog that came in the night. When I walked down to start Madame's fire the spider webs from summer were wisps of tendrils, white with the frozen frost. As I passed, they moved as if shivering. There was both the shade as well as the substance of things.

The grapevines and the wires on which they are strung were a dark brown, speckled with the white of the frozen fog. The grass in the pasture and the few large, round hay bales left from the fall mowing looked a pale yellow covered by a thin white shawl. Ten meters from my friend's house, I could only make out its shape: no doors, no windows. It will be the same for my house when I walk up the hill: only wizened webs in the icy air, and lines of brown vines making a perspective into the mist.

"Do you get fogs in Kansas?" Madame asks me as I load her stove.

I tell her not many, at least in the west where I lived. She is also curious about horizons. She understands that in Kansas you can see the edge of the earth in every direction. I tell her this is true.

"In California," she says, "you could see the edge of the earth in the sea. Here it is as if we do not have a horizon. At least I never think of it with the all trees and the hills."

She seems to study something in her mind, and I wonder if it is a recovered vision of the sea, or that she is imagining the vast sweep of High Plains pastures with its circle of horizons that is, for a moment, my own recovered vision.

When the fog cleared (two-days worth) it was such a lifting of gray that I saw the landscape as if for the first time: there were other, albeit muted, colors: dark evergreens among the brown and gray trees; trunks of the oaks and chestnuts with pale green-gray molds and lichens up and down their barks; in the winter's pale light, moss is everywhere on the rocks and trees—not only on the north side as it is in Kansas. With evening the tree trunks and the tree limbs grow a Manet black before all else.

Large dark-green balls with dots of white (like Christmas decorations) appear in the trees after the leaves have fallen: mistletoe. It is not prized by the French, but is by the English who live in the area. High in the tall trees, it is difficult to get. When I was a college student I saw similar balls of mistletoe, also out of reach high in the trees. I made Christmas money one year by shooting into them with a twenty-two rifle so that they splintered and I could collect the stems and berries when they fell. It is not a trick I am going to teach the French hunters.

I had a friend in those days who made wreaths of the mistletoe by adding greens and holly berries that she gathered from the woods. We sold the wreaths to the professors's wives and spent the money on books not

required for our classes. And for a case of wine we shared, my first and hers, as well: Château Lafleur. I still have a bottle, empty to be sure. And a small volume of Montaigne, still full.

### *Charlie Brown's Snoopy Fighting the Red Baron*

I am a father again: Noel, a ram this time, lost his mother a few days after she gave birth. Sometimes the ewes in this country die mysteriously, perhaps of a calcium deficiency, and we think that is what happened. Noel, like Molly, is now bottle fed three times a day. Two orphans together, we wonder if they will become friends as they run to the farmhouse side by side to get their meals. Molly seems to bleat more; Noel is the serious one. As a parent, I should not have favorites. Molly is my favorite.

Cold and damp in recent days. Cold is cold. Damp is damp. In the Dordogne, they add up to more than Cold and Damp. Because the bottom half of my house is built into a hillside it does not get warm in winter. My wood stove is in the fireplace upstairs, as is (thankfully) the bathtub. Only the kitchen and the dining room are downstairs. It is where I type: in my red stocking hat and white scarf—a vision of Charlie Brown's Snoopy Fighting the Red Baron, should a blue *voiturette* stop by now that we have flashed one another.

I might go to Paris for a few days to see friends. Paris is what makes me an American writer, and I need to visit it now and then to make sure it is still there. And I am still there as well.

## *I Am a Man of a Certain Age*

Madame asks what I *will* be writing. She is discrete enough not to ask what I am writing. Verb tenses matter in matters of literary decorum.

For lunch we are having *soupe eternelle*. At the Monday market I had bought a sturdy, wood-fired dark bread. If kept in a box in a cold room, it will last the week. In addition to the bread and soup there is the *vieux brebis* from Ste Foy and a pichet of *vin rouge* from Monsieur R. Ginger is part way in the fireplace. Anna, Madame's cat, is curled on a wicker chair. I am at the stove.

"You don't need to say about your writing," she says. "If you are *superstitieux*."

My friend is trying to improve my French, and she does this not only by using words I do not know, but cognates as well. In this way she is an excellent teacher; there are days when I walk home with a new word in my head, repeating it as I go, until I get back to my *Mansion's French/English Dictionary* from my student days.

*Pinceau, pinceau, pinceau*, I said to the vines the other day after Madame and I had had a long talk about Piero Della Francesca: *Pinceau, pinceau*, up the hill I talked and walked and talked until, settled by my wood stove, I found on page 471 it had been a "paint brush" that the *vignobles* had heard on my way past them—and that a phrase I had misplaced along the way was waiting on the same page: *coup de pinceau*, the stroke of the paint brush. Piero Della Francesca, we had observed the hour before, has lovely ones.

I tell Madame I am not *superstitieux*, and that in answer to her question, one day I am going to write a story—maybe a long story a la de Maupassant—that is *méditatif*. A *récit méditatif*.

"Will it have dialogue?" she asks.

Not much, I say. It will be composed like a Montaigne essay, but it will be fiction. I will use his aphorisms, but not put them in italics. There would be no plot.

*"Pas d'intrigue!* Madame says in mock alarm. "Will anyone in America read such a story? *Pas du tout!*" She smiles as I bring the soup to the table and pour the wine. I decide not to tell her I am indeed *superstitieux*—but not about what she has asked, or how she has asked. I touch wood as I put down the soup.

*"Soupe éternelle, c'est moi,"* says Madame. *"Et toi."* It is her traditional toast over her traditional soup. We tip our glasses toward one another. She seems amused that I could write a story bereft of readers. Delicious pleasures when enjoyed by themselves don't need the world's touch.

"The soup," she says as we start our meal, "has a *supplémentaire* by Mademoiselle American. She was here yesterday."

It is a rich soup: beans and rice, mixed with bits of both rabbit and chicken. It is pleasing enough, Madame and I think, to warrant a second glass of wine. And more bread to mop the plates clean.

"You should put French words into your *récit méditatif*," Madame says. "Add a phrase or two: *et peu à peu*, and you will get the language. And in this way your book will make you."

I walk off lunch on my way to Molly's, sensing snow in the air. When I get there, I rack the stove wood cut from the previous day, then cut long logs and stack them like tepee poles around straight trees. That done, Molly and Noel are to be fed (they remind me in not so subtle ways) before all is dusk, then dark.

I am invited to stay for dinner, but decline. I have a dish of my own making at home: a casserole of potatoes, carrots, onions, and *saucisse de canard* into which I stir (a secret) my unique Moutarde Douce sauce. There is also

a glass of *eau de vie de prune* I have promised myself for some reason I will fabricate along the way: Better a *faux raison* than none.

As I walk along the scent of snow that was in the air earlier becomes snow itself. I am to stop at Madame's to stoke her stove for the night. Getting there I see the blue Dyna in her driveway, and I see Mademoiselle walking toward the house: tall, a holly berry scarf around her neck. Black peacoat, its collar turned up. Jeans. Long legs. Yellow stocking cap. As she goes in the door, the light from inside shines on her face. She is young. Half my years. I am a man of a certain age.

A puff of smoke comes from Madame's chimney, and I know all inside is well and warm. Before I head up the hill home, I study in the dim light the potted flowers painted on the side of Mademoiselle's truck: a mixture of geraniums, deep purple petunias, bright-eyed pansies, and a tiny orange flower I do not know. Cold as it is, there is a sturdy glow to them. "Audacious," I think, both the flowers to be out in the winter night, and to paint them on the side of the old truck. Audacious: I'll look it up.

### *Monsieur R.*

Monsieur R. is French but lived a number of years in California where he worked in the movie business and so speaks excellent English. However, we have agreed to speak French in order that mine might improve.

But Monsieur's French occasionally slips into a stream of French and English, unbroken, as if he is speaking an integrated language, a *patois* that is richer and more fluent than mere *Franglais*. He seems not to notice this. Madame tells me he speaks that way to her as well, and the times he has joined us for a meal, I observe this is true.

Monsieur is also given to asserting the truth of matters that are not, strictly speaking, true. The other day as he was drawing my four liters of his *vin rouge* plus another five liters for Madame, he announced (apropos of nothing I could fathom) that "Jesus said *casseroles* should *pas* call kettles *noirs*." And later, in the same conversation, he quoted Montaigne that a man needs six hours sleep, a woman seven, while a fool takes eight.

"You should hear what he does in the name of Cervantes and Brillat Saverin," Madame says when I stop by with her wine. "'A meal that does not end with cheese is like a pretty woman with a mustache.' It is not a mustache but with one eye, and it was not Sancho who said it, but Brillat Saverin who wrote it. Oh well," she says with a laugh. "And the way he quotes you!"

Me? I ask.

"Yes," she says. "And me as well. We are all persona in his *oeuvre*."

Me? I ask again.

"*Ah oui!*" she says. "You have *une histoire à la Monsieur*. Complete with intrigue and dialogue. And aphorisms. The other day he had you saying there is no *Royal road to learning*, which I think comes from Dickens or Trollope."

I said I remembered saying no such thing, but that I was pleased to be credited.

"He quotes me as saying 'far-fetched and dear bought is not good for women,' which comes from where I don't know, but not from me," says Madame. "And he quoted Mademoiselle *American* saying *art is long but life is short*, which she might have said because it is an old saying; at least I have heard it before. Still it is not what someone young would say. And, I don't think they have even met. But soon she, too, will have an *histoire*. No doubt entangled with yours. He is trying to decide if he will have you returning to what he calls black-and-white Kansas when spring comes, or if you are staying here in technicolor France. It is some

reference from his movie days. You are in more than a *récit méditatif*, I assure you."

I am at Madame's sink bottling her wine when I notice something new over the fireplace: her portrait. Acrylic, I think. A pale gold background that sets off her white hair and against which her face is luminous. Her head is tilted right to left against the traditional line. Her eyes are rendered large and dark brown, but not enough to be piercing. The painting is beautifully composed and rich with under-painting. Madame is lovely in it, although likeness was probably not the object of the artist.

"I have no wrinkles," Madame says, when she finds me looking at it. "She put Botox on her palette. Her *coups de pinceau* are *unique*—'Seul en son genre.' The same as in the potted flowers on the side of her truck. I like especially the orange Million Bells because they are from pots of mine. Have you seen the flowers on her truck?"

I say I have: *Intrépide*.

"Ah oui," says Madame and smiles at my new word.

### *Vin Included*

If I go to Paris it will be from the train station in Castillon, the small market town where on Mondays I buy my fish and *fromage* and, from the tall Madagascar woman, the wood-fired bread that lasts a week.

After shopping I take a *grande crème* at the Commerce Cafe with friends, also there for the Monday market. We gossip—mostly in English to accommodate my poor French—about the usual: weather, grapes, the price of gas, and the good lunches to be had next door at the Hôtel des Voyageurs, the home of Yu-Yu, a small parrot that does not like anybody very much and me, it seems, in particular: always squawking with grating intensity when I come in.

"Before Yu-Yu there was Mal-Mal," says Monsieur. "He had excellent French profanity. Some very good words."

The Hôtel des Voyageurs is a Ticket Restaurant. In Castillon there are no Michelin stars, no Rotand Walking Men stickers. A Ticket sign on the door means it is for those who work in town and do not want to go home for lunch. In that case, their employer has made an arrangement for a meal: If you come back over and over again—a kind of *habitué*—I think you earn a discount on a future meal, or maybe the meal itself. I am not all that sure how it works. I should ask. Now that I think of it, I have seen such restaurants in Paris. At the Hôtel des Voyageurs you can get a three-course meal for eight euros. *Vin* included.

The restaurant has two rooms, divided by the kitchen in which there is a fireplace, used as a grill. The old vine stumps (*pieds de vignes*) that are pulled each winter from the vineyard below my house (and others all along the *côte*) are bundled and sold for fire wood. There are mathematical odds à la Diderot that the *côte de porc* I ate for lunch at the Hôtel des Voyageurs the other day had been cooked over the *pieds* that made the wine that was included in the meal.

As for the room behind the kitchen: I am not allowed. Once when I looked, it was packed with men eating *ensemble* at a long broad wooden table. They were pouring the dregs of their wine into the dregs of their soup and drinking it out of the bowls; crusts of bread were scattered about, the men's spoons and forks making a *porte couteau* of them. From the front room we heard the swarthy laughter of these men. I am not sure women are allowed. I am pretty sure they are not.

I have decided: In a few days I will ride my two-horse, maroon Deux Chevaux to the train station in Castillon, park it, and go to Paris.

### *What Rat?*

"Does she ask you to pee in her compost?" says Monsieur. We have arrived by chance at the same time to do chores for Madame and are walking her lane toward the house. Before I can answer Monsieur says: "Every cock will crow upon his own dunghill."

For a moment in my mind's eye I see him taking a pee on Madame's compost while crowing away. The vision passes and I say, no, she has not made such a request, although she has asked me to continue her compost while she is unable—a small square plot fenced-off against Boris, should he get tired of my fare.

"Nor me," says Monsieur. "But Burton in his *Melancholy* writes that peeing into the compost makes it richer."

He is a tall man with large hands and long arms. He is older than I am, but the bounce in his stride is younger than mine. There is a movie-actor visage about him; something beyond handsome or distinguished. No doubt he has broken many hearts.

"And what shall we do with the rat?" he asks. We are at the door, and, without knocking, Monsieur walks in—not waiting for an answer from me, which would have been: *quel rat?*

Monsieur has come this day to make croutons out of the bits of Madame's bread left over from last week, including the forked ends of the *baguettes serpentines* she has me buy. He takes great care in making his croutons, using sea salt, good garlic and Spanish olive oil he gets from a friend near Seville who, Madame confides, may or may not be a woman. *Un peu d'intrigue.*

"And we do not know for sure he is married as he claims to be," Madame has said. "I have never seen a wife. First, she was in California; then she is in Greece with her dying mother; recently she has come and gone from London. She is in Paris. She is in Belgrade. She is with a friend in

Addis Ababa. I think Monsieur R. only says he is married so he won't be pressed to marry. This has been going on for years—even before he returned from California. I would not marry him if he asked, so he has nothing to fear from me. And Countess P. will not have him in her house, so he need not worry about her."

It is Countess P., who lives in Montagne with—or without—broken fingers. I have never seen her, although it is said she drives out now and again. But back to the day Monsieur is not, after all, crowing on top of her compost, and is—or is not—married.

I had wondered why there always seemed to be a large bowl of croutons on the kitchen counter. And when I thought of it, I should have wondered about other dishes that seemed to appear: Who had made the *Potage Crécy* or the *Saucisson* with Horseradish sauce? Or the *Potage Bonne Femme* (which became the base of my own *soupe éternelle*, now in weak competition with the Mademoiselle American's version). And who was leaving lovely apple tarts with thin, delicate crusts?

"What is to be done with the rat?" says Monsieur from the counter where he is mixing the stale bread chunks in the iron skillet with its hot Spanish olive oil, garlic, sea salt and a concoction of spices.

"I think it best to take him to the Dordogne," says Madame. "Is he caught?" They are talking about a Ragundin rat for whom Madame had set a trap by her pond before she fell.

"He is not," says Monsieur. "But when he is, let me drown him in the trap. I take him to the Dordogne and he returns and you catch him again; then, I take him to the Dordogne and he comes back. Voltaire writes that 'man is born free but that everywhere he is like a rat in a trap.'"

"You have it wrong," says Madame from her wheel chair. "It is 'that everywhere he is in chains: *dans les fers*.' And it was Rousseau, not Voltaire."

"I take it," says Monsieur (and here he uses Madame's pet name at which she blushes so that he smiles with the youth that is in his walk), "you would rather not have us say: 'How now! A Rat? Dead for farthing.' And yes, he is caught."

"It's Shakespeare," she says, "and I doubt it's a farthing. But I thought you said the rat has not been caught."

"What difference does verb tense make?" says Monsieur. "'Will be caught,' 'has been caught,' 'is caught,' 'shall be caught.' Since the war and Camus, we are all '*aujourd'hui c'est moi qui suis mort.*' *Et le rat, also!*"

No," says Madame (and here she uses a pet name for M. R. at which he smiles toward me), "I do not want him dead. To the Dordogne. Swim, swim, vile rat, swim. And you don't know for sure the same rat returns."

"I'll paint him," Monsieur retorts. "Polka dots of orange water-resistant paint from a spray can I have in my truck. If Monsieur Ragundin comes back we will know. Then, Madame," and here turns off his frying pan and scatters his croutons on a paper towel, "will you let me drown him? He would make excellent fertilizer for your tomato plants. I will cut him into pieces and put one piece per plant: a hindquarter here, the *tête* there, the butt end here. The innards there. A big Ragundin will be food for half a dozen plants, and with ten tomatoes a plant that would be sixty tomatoes with ease that would grow round and red with vigor."

"The tomatoes will smell like rat."

"No more than your onions smell like pee."

"A dead rat stinks more than a live man's pee," she says.

"That's Ovid. Ovid says that."

"He did not," she says. "I said that."

"Well, then," Monsieur says, bringing his croutons to the table so we can taste test them, "let us talk about Countess P's. tongue."

"What about her tongue?" says Madame.

“How the tip of it was cut off to get the keys to her safe and now she talks gibberish.”

### *I Never Fail to Touch It*

From the Castillon *gare* the local train goes first to Libourne—a large wine center of a city—where I catch the TGV to Paris. Three and a half hours later I am at Gare Montparnasse. I stay at a small hotel not that far from where Gertrude Stein had her salon.

I have friends in Paris, among them Jane and her husband, Jean Louis, who join me for lunch at Balzar near the Sorbonne. Years ago we saw Barbara Streisand and her husband, James Brolin, eating at a table against the wall. Jane noticed the husband who, I was told, is a “hunk” (no French translation possible, unless Mr. Brolin is a hunk of cheese: In that case he is a *gros morceau*, which he is probably not).

After lunch I walked past the nearby bronze statue of Montaigne, his legs crossed with his right shoe sticking out tempting the students to touch it for good luck. Over the years it has lost its patina and is now a very shiny shoe indeed. I never fail to touch it.

I am also friends with a short-story writer of *New Yorker* fame, Madame G. We met years ago at Reclaimer, the restaurant where she had fed one of her characters. I ordered the meal of her story. Madame G. smiled.

These days I have been walking through cemeteries. I made my way to Père Lachaise and, for a populist friend in Kansas, stood against the wall where the members of the Paris Commune were shot. Nearby, I put my hand on the stone of Oscar Wilde because we share a birthday and because I like the remark attributed to him as he lay dying in a Paris hotel: Either the wallpaper goes or I do.

Other days I walk as I always do: in no particular direction except along the *rues* I have walked before.

The bloom of novelty has given way to the autumn of the familiar. I like to see where I have been, and where I have lived: Place Dauphine, rue Xavier Prévis (where I once rented an apartment above a couscous restaurant, but not so far above that Boris-sized cockroaches were put off by the climb). I use the Pont des Arts whenever I cross the Seine.

One sunny summer day a few years ago I came upon two students—a young man and a young woman—standing by the railing of the bridge in rain coats; a third student (I supposed they were all students; they had that look about them of going for pleasure to get their profit) collected money in a hat—all the while checking for the police. When the hat was full (I put in a euro not knowing to what I was contributing) the young man and woman began laughing, then stripped off their raincoats and, to a “standing” ovation, dove naked into the Seine. Their business associate ran down along the quais with the rain coats and the money as they swam ashore. No gendarmes out of Truffaut arrived, whistles blowing.

Before my train departed for the return trip to Libourne, I spent a hour walking through cimetière Montparnasse. Just inside the gate are Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir; some way in, and with the help of a small map you get at the entrance, I found Man Ray. I have always admired his photograph of Gertrude and Alice with the paintings as a backdrop. I found the stone of Samuel Beckett and sat there for a moment, waiting.

After three days—and a meal at Closerie des Lilas as guest of prosperous friends—I returned. It was Sunday and the oyster market was open in Castillon; I bought a dozen number two Arcachons. In my refrigerator was a split of Gremillet: cold and crisp. I steamed the oysters in *vin blanc* and water until they opened. Some cheese and red wine and bread in front of my wood stove, and then, as Pepys says: So to bed.

The next afternoon when I go to the farm, I learn that Molly does not exactly remember me (how quickly they forget), but Noel does. And there is Sylvester. Sylvester? Yes. He was born (perhaps while I was waiting on Samuel Beckett) and his mother will have nothing to do with him: So now there are three. Bleats all around. And well, yes, Molly does remember me. Or something about me.

"Hello," says a tall young woman as I return to the kitchen carrying three empty milk bottles.

### *My Cork Basket is Half Empty*

I am more than halfway through winter. I know because the basket where I keep old corks is much depleted. There are many clocks that mark the seasons in the Dordogne. These days you can see the vineyard owners planting new vines. The shooting from hunters has stopped. Primrose is blooming. Paperwhites are for sale in the markets. The daffodils that were planted up against the stone walls of the old houses and barns where the ground is warmer are coming up. V's of cranes are heading north. The wild plum trees between me and Montagne are starting into bloom. And my cork basket is half empty.

I use the corks to start my wood stove. When I open a new bottle I try not to pierce the cork so that I can turn it around for the wine I bottle from my jug. There is a curious pleasure in pulling a cork from a fine St. Emilion (only a few of these) from an *appellation de R*, illegal, and bare of label. Twice pierced, the corks can no longer be used for bottling but have other jobs; "double tasking," I have learned it is now called in America. "Triple tasking," now that I think of it. And *tant pis* for the prohibition against new wine in old bottles.

I save the spring-through-fall corks for winter fires. They are splendid starters (candle stubs are good as well) if you stuff a few in crumpled newspaper: I use the *International*

*Herald Tribune* or, if I am feeling pretentiously French, *Le Monde*. Once the corks catch, they burn with great brilliance and flame. And kindle the wood into warmth.

### *The French Make Terrible Fences*

The farmer with Molly, Noel, and Sylvester has asked me to cut fence posts out of his woods. He, too, knows that spring is coming and his demand for firewood is not as great, but he will need fence posts for a new corral I am to build around the sheep shed.

The French make terrible fences. Not even the most hard-scrabble Kansas ranch has such awful fences as most of the farms in France have. Both the posts (twisted and tilted) and the fence itself (drooping wires) are badly done. The gates are a wobbly wreck. They don't know how to make a brace post, or set a dead man. They don't see the need to make the gate posts bigger than fence posts.

If there are not more pressing chores, I will show the owner how to build a proper fence. But it won't be easy. There are no fence stretchers to be bought or borrowed; the French fence wire is thin and of poor quality. They use bent nails for staples. But we'll see. In the meantime I am cutting the posts, plus extra wood for the fireplace should spring be false. For sure, I am going to build a sturdy and straight-lined corral, stout enough to hold a High Plains Gomer bull.

Yesterday from the woods where I was working, I watched Mademoiselle drive up to the farmhouse and go in. She was wearing a bulky white sweater and the same stocking cap and maroon scarf as when I first saw her.

I turned off the chain saw and thought to join her now that we have met, if briefly ("I'm sorry, I must be going," she had said. "An errand to run for Madame." And out the door she went).

I am not shy. I talk a good game. But something—not being covered with wood chips nor that I no doubt reeked of work—stopped me.

### No Dénouement

“And will there be a gun over the fireplace to go off before the end?”

Madame is again curious about what I will be writing. I tell her there will be fireplaces, large enough for cold dogs to sit by on winter days, but no guns over them.

We have been reading Chekhov: Yalta is warmer than the Dordogne this time of year. The pleasure in reading Chekhov is in rereading him. There is no story we plan to boycott. Monsieur wants us to read *King Lear*, but Madame has resisted.

“He thinks the play is funny,” she said. “However, what he quotes from it is accurate—at least by my memory. The other day he was here saying that ‘age is unnecessary,’ and sure enough, after he left, I found it. I suppose that is amusing in a way, but I am not in a good enough mood to be amused by *King Lear*.”

It occurs to me that Monsieur R. has never asked what I do or why I am living here. When first we met, he seemed to assume I had been in my small house on the hill for as long as he had been in his assortment of stone barns and buildings and *chais*. Or as long as Madame in her converted mill. And further, it was as if we had all been in California together, whenever that was. Not that I know that Monsieur and Madame knew one another in California, but there was that remark she made about Monsieur’s *faux femme* in California. I am shy to ask.

It is also true that Madame has never asked what brought me here, or why I have stayed. Or why I am alone. She may be shy to ask. I think this is true.

“Will there be a curtain that bangs?” asks Madame.

I say there will not be a curtain. A scrim only. Through which the *intrépide* reader can see.

“But *dénouement*? There must be a *dénouement*.”

We are waiting for Monsieur to join us for dinner, and—perhaps—Mademoiselle, although that invitation by Madame has not been unconditionally accepted, something about getting to Bordeaux and back in search of art supplies. In the meantime, I sense that Madame is now beginning to worry about what I will be writing—unlike when my scheme had first amused her.

From the stove where I am fixing the meal, I say to Madame that since there will be no raveling, there will be no unraveling. *Pas de dénouement*. However, “age will be necessary.” She cannot help herself now and smiles. We hear someone has arrived.

“And some things will be left not said, or explained,” she says as Ginger goes to the door to see who has come.

*Ah oui*, I say.

### *Francis Bacon*

Monsieur has asked if I am married. I tell him I am not.

He has finished filling my jug and Madame’s as well. Outside it is raining: drip, drip, drip, as Dickens would write to earn his penny a word. It has been too warm in recent days to start the wood stoves for the few evenings that it is damp and cold. I do, however, keep Madame’s fireplace going. It cheers her, I think, to sit by it with Anna in her lap and Ginger toasting herself first on one side then the other.

“All was not merry as a marriage bell?” Monsieur says, his voice half a question. I am trying to guess if it is one of his quotations. But before I can ask, he says: “Madame used to be married and now she is not: ‘Hush, hark, a deep sound strikes like a rising knell.’” He is quiet for a moment. “Byron,” he says.

"And you?" I find myself having the nerve to ask. "Are you married?"

"There is a story I am," he says. He smiles the way he did when he used Madame's pet name. Then putting his arm around the side of the vat out of which he has just drawn the wine he says: "Which wife is this? The one I adored first and so took a second, or the other the other way around?"

"Oscar Wilde," I say.

Monsieur looks at me for a moment as if to drop a mask. Then he says:

"When I was a boy, I worked in the Montaigne vineyards. One day the owner gave me a book of quotations in English that a guest had given him. He knew I wanted to learn the language. Before that, I had no English. Each night when I came home, I would study the book. I set myself a goal to learn three quotations a day and say them out loud as I was working in the vineyards. It was only later that I would get the meanings. After I understood what I was saying, I would only learn the quotations I liked. Nobody knew what I was saying, so I was talking to myself, and after awhile I would have one of me say a quotation to the other of me, and the second me would answer in a quotation. For two years I did this."

I realize Monsieur has answered a question I did not ask, and not answered the one I did. I am charmed by this evasion, if that is what it is—and it is probably not.

From a bin behind the vat he fetches a bottle, checks its cork and its punt, which I can see is deep. It has no label.

"Here," he says. "There is a story in this wine. It is yours for the drinking and telling."

I thank him. Looking at the bottle, I say that we are of an age when old wood is best to burn, old authors best to read, and old wine best to drink.

"I don't know it," he says. "But now I do. I assign it to Bacon."

*Today I Told a White Lie That Helped*

Madame is getting restless. Over the years she has been the epitome of independence, and it vexes her not to be so now. The doctor says she will be walking on her own in a few weeks (it has been two months since she fell), but she doesn't quite believe it. Monsieur tells her Virgil says we do the most damage to ourselves by impatience.

"It comes from Montaigne," she says to me. "I don't think he ever gets any of them right, and I wonder if once upon a time he knew better and just set about to test and tease me, but by now he has forgotten that was his purpose, and has it in his head as fact that it was Virgil. And that you said 'Never trust the writer; trust the tale.'"

I smile and she knows I said no such thing.

"He is Google itself," she says.

I ask how she knows about Google—as I don't know much about it, only that it exists. She says the same, then adds:

"I understand you can find what you want to know in an instant, and that seems to me a bad way to go about the life of the mind, as if knowing something in an instant will lead to knowledge, much less to wisdom. Where is the pleasure of serendipity? And of friends who read as we do. I don't drink instant coffee. I don't make instant tea. Or minute rice. I make *soupe eternelle*. There is more than a difference."

She seems gloomy at the thought of Google. I have been teasing her about one thing or another in the past few days to bring her cheer, but that is wearing thin. She knows her flowers are starting up and the garden needs tending. We all help as we can, but not much will lift her spirits until she can get around pretty much by herself.

Today I tell a white lie that helped. I say the fishmonger at the Monday market had asked after her; she likes the

fishmonger, a broad faced, large shouldered man who juggles lemons at his stand in between customers. In fact it had been the flat-nosed egg woman (whom she doesn't like). Anyway, what's a fib good for, if not to bring on a smile. At the ranch where I worked in Kansas, they were called "right lies," some mishearing passed down through the generations.

"Tell the fishmonger," says Madame, "that I will return when I can walk on my own through the market, and that we shall have champagne and snails for lunch at the Hôtel des Voyageurs to celebrate. He will be charmed to know we can turn boudin and *vin de table* into escargot and champagne.

"As will Monsieur R." I say.

"It is where I got the menu," she says. "Only he claims such a menu is there, and after we have not had it, we will have had it. I know this to be true in advance of it being so." Now, I am the one who smiles.

Someone is at Madame's door.

### *A Recovered Vision in Place of a Dénouement*

If I stay in this country, will I stir fiction into fact? Have others say for me what I cannot say so well for myself? Will *soupe éternelle* be the life of my mind, and intrigue find me—but not in an instant? Will I learn my *histoire*? And will it have neither raveling nor unraveling? Will I be as *intrépide* as flowers on the side of an old truck? Will blood sausage and table wine become snails and champagne one Monday in a Ticket restaurant with a parrot that does not like me?

Or is the story for the telling in Monsieur's wine bottle that I return to a recovered vision of black-and-white Kansas where moss is only on the north side of the trees and rocks. Where we build fences with good wire, and stout corrals

with strong gates. Where we feed the dogs first, and know why we set dead men.

Looking at the great sweep of pastures and horizons that stretch to the edge of the earth in all directions, do I believe it myself?

Someone is at my door.