
RENÉ GALAND
FROM FAR, FROM NEAR

I. IN ANOTHER COUNTRY

Foreword
… but that was in another country

The epigraph is borrowed from T.S. Eliot’s poem, “Portrait of a Lady.” T.S. Eliot had himself borrowed it from Kit Marlowe’s drama, The Jew of Malta. The reader will easily understand why I chose it.

“Car JE est un autre”: Rimbaud’s famous statement has been subjected to numerous interpretations. In the context of his Lettres du Voyant, it suggests that the literary work is the creation of a collective unconscious, that it makes manifest the obsessions, the anxieties, the fears of an entire people at a specific moment of its history. It is in this light that such stories as The little man with the boater and “The flyswatter” may be considered.

Many of the stories in this collection might classified as “contes cruels”, if may make use of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam’s title. But isn’t cruelty an essential characteristic of the genre? One would think so if one thinks of Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Mérimée, Barbey d’Aurevilly, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, Henry James, Kipling, Hemingway, Faulkner, Lovecraft, Borges, Kafka, Julio Cortazar, Dino Buzzati, André Pieyre de Mandiargues, Noël Devaulx, Jakez Riou, Abeozen, and many more.

Finally, many writers make use of characters who are themselves writers, or who are deeply interested in literature and the arts. Proust thus gives his narrator his own views on Madame de Sévigné, Racine, Corneille, Saint-Simon, Chateaubriand, Nerval, Balzac, Sainte-Beuve, Baudelaire, the Goncourt Brothers, Saint-John Perse, and the “nouvel écrivain”, whom he does not name but who obviously is Giraudoux. One character, Bergotte, is a novelist and the author of an essay on Racine. Another character, Swann, is working on a study on Ver Meer. One may observe the same device in the novels of David Lodge and A.S. Byatt, and in Serge Doiubrovsky’s “auto-fictions”. Several of my own characters are students, teachers or writers to whom I have attributed the novels, poems and/or critical essays which I would have liked to write myself.

The Bermuda triangle

It was last October that Tony Jackson joined our team. He never had worked for an insurance company before, but his experience with cars will be greatly needed when Sam Callahan retires at the end of May. When one of our insured gets into an accident, it is Sam who inspects the damage car and checks the repair bill so that we are not overcharged. Tony is especially qualified for this kind of job, since he was head of the repair division in one of the most important dealerships in our area. In the coming months, Sam will show him the ropes: Tony is a bright fellow, it won’t take him long to master the paper work.
While waiting for Sam’s retirement, Tony takes mostly care of the files for which Lauren Farber was responsible. She has not been coming to the office for the past five weeks. She had to take a six month leave to take care of her mother. Mrs Farber has been divorced for years, she has no one except her daughter to take care of her, and her health is rather poor: first she had cancer surgery. This has been followed by X-ray treatment and chemotherapy. When that treatment is completed, she’ll have a hip replacement, followed by weeks of physical therapy. In former times, Lauren would not have been given such a long leave. She would have had to give up her job, and she would have been replaced. But new laws forces employers to give leaves of this kind when a close family member has a medical emergency.

Our business takes care of house and renters’ insurance as well as of automobile insurance. The two services are completely separated. They communicate only in the case of clients who insure both their house and their car or cars with us, and who thus qualify for a discount on their premiums. Lauren took care of the files I to M. For Tony, it is the most boring part of his job. And one must admit that it is quite a headache. Nothing more boring than to compute the premium for each customer, since every case is different. First the compulsory sections: bodily injury to others including dental and cosmetic surgery, loss of salary, etc., personal injury protection, bodily injury caused by an uninsured auto, and damage to someone else’s property. Then there are the optional insurance sections: optional injury to others, medical payments, collision, comprehensive (vandalism, fire, etc), substitute transportation, towing, labor costs, bodily injured caused by an underinsured auto.

For each section, the client may lower the premium cost by setting the maximum amount of reimbursement by the insurance company. He may also set a deductible. Other discounts are available (for clients who are 65 or older, for clients who drive less than 5000 miles or 10000 per year, for clients whose car is equipped with anti-theft, for clients who have been accident-free for a five-year period. On the other hand, if the client has had at-fault accidents or traffic violations, his premium may be increased accordingly. There is also an extra charge depending on where he leaves and where he parks his car: if he is lucky enough to live in a small village where there is no traffic to speak of, and if he parks his car in a locked garage, his premium will be lower than if he lives in a big city full of crazy drivers, car thieves and vandals. Tony may be a virtuoso on his pocket calculator, he can’t wait for Lauren’s return and the departure of Sam, which will allow him to spend a minimum amount of time on this type of chore.

Finally, the day comes when Lauren is back at her files. Now it is Tony who inspects the damaged cars and checks the repair bills. He gives his reports to Sam, who signs the authorization form and forwards the paper work to the cashier. Lauren is thirty-eight, although she looks younger. It has been years since she has celebrated her birthdays. She does everything to look less than her age, but the biological clock is ticking. She is clear-sighted enough not to have any illusion: if she does not find a husband soon, it will be too late for her to have a child. This gnawing thought gives something desperate to her attitude with men of her age who are still bachelors. We saw that in the way she behaved with Ricky Baxter, a former colleague whom she tried to catch. She was all the time after him, using every pretext to go to his office, bringing him some papers, asking him for some information, going to the water-cooler just at the moment when he happened to be there, sitting at his table in the diner where we usually have lunch. He got tired of her little games, and he changed jobs as soon as he had a chance, which really put her nose out of joint.
In the office, we wondered what would happen when Lauren would catch sight of Tony, a fellow her age, a bachelor, and rather handsome. He also has a good voice which allows him to cultivate his hobby, probably inherited from his Italian mother: il bel canto. When one hears him humming Là ci darem la mano…, Vieni fra queste braccia…, Tu chi a Dio spiegasti l’ali…, Donna non vidi mai…, Libiamon’l’iampi calici… or O Lola, ch’hai di latti la cammisa / Si bianca e russia comu la cirasa…, one knows right away which opera was broadcast on TV the evening before. Don Giovanni, La Gazza ladra, Lucia di Lammermoor, Manon Lescaut, La Traviata or Cavalleria rusticana.

Is Lauren going to play the same games as with Ricky? Apparently not. The fact that they failed seems to have taught her a lesson. Not that she has given up. She just changed her tactics. She begins by finding fault with Tony’s paperwork. Going over the files which she took care of while she was on leave, she has discovered that he did not give a client the discount he should have got because he insured not only his house, but also his wife’s expensive jewelry and furs, as well as all his electronic equipment. The client did not notice (somebody as wealthy does not care about a few dollars), but for Lauren, what luck. She shows his oversight to Tony, and says with the kindest voice: “Of course, all this was new to you, and you did not know our colleagues in real estate insurance. I always go to Ralph Redstone, he is so pleasant. His wife also is very nice. You should get to know them. I am having them for dinner Friday of next week. Why don’t you join us? If there is a problem with the date, we can change it. If you ever need him, you’ll find that Ralph can be most helpful.” Tony is trapped, but his guardian angel will save him.

On the following Monday, when he goes to Sam’s office to take the repair bills he has to check, some one is there: Sam introduces him. It’s Ralph Redstone. And Tony: “What a coincidence! Lauren Farber just talked about you. It’ll be a pleasure to see you and to meet your wife next Friday.” Ralph is all surprised: “Next Friday? Are you sure? Lauren did not tell us. Anyway, next Friday, we have tickets for the Boston Symphony.” Sam bursts out laughing: «Well, Tony, I believe Lauren has picked you for Ricky Boxter’s replacement.” And he explains the whole story to Ralph, who finds it quite funny: “Tony my boy, I am glad to have met you, and I wonder how you’ll handle the situation.” Tony also wonders. Going all by himself to the woman’s place on Friday evening is out of the question. He knows that Ralph Redstone has called her to explain that he and his wife have a previous engagement. No, he is not going to throw himself under the lioness’ claws. He has to find a way out, and for that he turns to his closest friends, the ones you call in a desperate situation, when you need help to get rid of the compromising corpse. This calls for Jimmy Reardon, who, as always in such cases, can be counted upon. On Tuesday morning, Tony shows up at Lauren’s office, looking sorry: “Bad news, I am afraid. I just saw Ralph in Sam’s office, and they can’t make it for Friday night, but if you don’t mind, let me invite you to have dinner at Henrietta’s Table. We could meet at seven thirty in the hall of the Charles Hotel, if that’s OK with you.” What can the woman say? Having dinner with Tony is better than being home alone on a Friday night. What she does not know is that in the hall of the Charles, she’ll find Tony with his friend Jimmy and with Stacy, Jimmy’s girl. After dinner, they finish the evening at the Regatta Bar, which, like the restaurant, is part of the hotel. For music, that week, there is a jazz quartet, a pretty good one. Of course, Tony has arranged things so that he won’t be alone with Lauren when he takes her home. Jimmy and Stacy live in the suburbs, they parked their car in the hotel garage: first they will take Lauren to her
apartment, which is near by, then they’ll drop off Tony, who lives in the Italian quarter, towards the east, before driving back home to Quincy, south of Boston.

In order to distance himself further from Lauren, in April, Tony takes the ten day vacation to which he is entitled for the previous six months. He has a good reason for doing so: Sam is scheduled to retire at the end of May, and it is not during the weeks, or even the months after his departure that the business could manage without his successor. Tony loves Bermuda, which he visited first when he was in college. At that time, it was the favorite vacation spot of students for the spring vacation. End of April is ideal for the weather. Tony always stays at Paget House, a residence located in a huge park with trees, bushes, greens and shady walks. Elbow Beach is only five minutes away, ideal for swimming, ideal also for the evening: there are dances in the big hotels, and lots of young people.

One pleasant thing about Bermuda is that there are no rental cars for tourists. If they want to drive around, they take taxis, or they rent small scooters which don’t crowd the roads. This what Tony does when he goes to visit the underground caves near Walsingham Bay. This is where he meets with Erin. At first, he sees only her back. Two tourists separate him from her in the line of visitors waiting to buy their tickets. She is tall and slender, and dressed like many other girls: a white T-shirt, with I LOVE NEW YORK stenciled in black on the back, blue jeans, white Reebok sneakers, and, on her head, the helmet which is compulsory for all riders on scooters. Tony did not notice her until she took off the helmet and her long blond hair fell down her back. When she turned around after purchasing her ticked, he could see how pretty she was, that her breasts, under the T-shirt, looked marvelous, and he swore to himself he would not miss this chance. The place is quite favorable for his plans: stalactites and stalagmites sparkle with all their crystals under the electric lights, hence the name of the place, Crystal Cave. Tony finds it easy, while visiting the cave, to get close to the girl and to start talking. Her name is Erin, and, as might have been expected, she is a New Yorker. They are neighbors, since she is staying at the Bayside Hotel, on Elbow Beach, a few minutes away from Paget House. Nothing more natural, after visiting Crystal Cave, than to go together to another nearby cave, Amber Cave, at Leamington, and to continue together their visit of St George Island, towards Fort St George and Fort St Catherine. Nothing more natural either than to have lunch together and to meet again later for swimming on Elbow Beach. Obviously, there is no boyfriend in Erin’s life at that moment, just as there is no girlfriend in Tony’s. They have nothing to do but lie on the beach, swim, and take the sun. But it soon gets too hot, and they seek refuge on the terrace of the Bayside Hotel, where they can lie on deckchairs under huge parasols, sipping pine-apple juice and chatting.

The landlady of Paget House is British, and she has kept the tradition of five o’clock tea for her clients. Tony has invited Erin to join him. He waits for her in the hall while she goes to change. At the Paget House, she is the one who waits for him while he dresses up for tea: it would be out of the question to show up in swimsuit and T-short. The residents are mostly British, somewhat elderly, and neither Tony nor Erin would like to shock these survivors of a species bound to disappear with the venerable Mrs Thatcher. Tea is served with the usual scones and cake. Erin kind of likes the somewhat superannuated ambiance of Paget House, but Tony does not really appreciates it: how can he invite Erin to come up to his room without being looked at somewhat askance by the respectable ladies, who would undoubtedly shake their head at today’s mores? No, he cannot expose Erin to their sternly disapproving looks. Erin is not dumb, she understands
Tony’s predicament, and she is the one who, after tea, invites him back to her hotel, where no one cares about what others are doing.

During the following days, Erin and Tony are always together. In the morning, sightseeing on their scooters, stopping at the lighthouses built high up on the cliffs and the forts which defended the western shores of Somereset Island. The capital, Hamilton, is less attractive, good only for shopping. Still, they find it pleasant to walk along the avenues lined with mansions dating back to the XVIIIth century. The afternoons are spent on the beaches scattered along the southern shore, especially Horseshoe Beach. When the sun gets too hot, they can find shelter below the high cliff. These days are like paradise, but they go by too fast. Erin works for a big investment company, she has to be back by Sunday, but neither she nor Tony want to separate so soon. Tony exchanges his return ticket to Boston for a ticket to New York, so that they can spend a few more days together. He is due at work on Thursday, but on Friday evening Erin will take the AACELA to Boston for the week-end, bypassing airport and police controls.

The flight between Bermuda and New York takes only one hour, but one has to be at the airport two hours in advance for police control. The anti-terrorist regulations take a long time to enforce, when passengers have to take off even their shoes. After the control, however, passengers can visit the shops where merchandise can be purchased tax-free. This is where they can buy the famous black rum of the islands, with the words BLACK SEAL printed in huge black letters, and a seal holding a barrel of rum balanced on the tip of its nose.

Erin lives in an apartment close to Washington Square. The office building where she works is also located downtown, near Wall Street, close enough to walk. While she is working, Tony put away the breakfast cup and silverware, makes the bed, and cleans the bathroom. He spends the day walking about, visiting museums, reading the New York Times and the latest issue of the New Yorker. At the end of the afternoon, he does some shopping for dinner: he likes to cook, and he is rather proud of his talent as chef. Erin is back by six, and they have the entire evening and the night all to themselves. Of course, it is unthinkable that, being in New York, Tony would not spend one evening at the Met, especially since they are giving Le nozze di Figaro. How could he resist the temptation of going to listen to Figaro singing about his suffering (Oh Susanna, Susanna, quanta pena mi costi / Con quegliocchi innocenti/ Chi creduto l’avria!...), or plotting his revenge (Se vuol ballare, Signor contino...)? His pleasure is doubled when he finds that Erin is also an opera buff: the ideal companion. These few days together have apparently given them an idyllic idea of what their life together could be, and Tony has even pronounced the fatal word: “engagement”, and Erin, upon hearing the word, grabbed him and hugged him so hard he could not breathe.

On Friday night, Tony picks up Erin at the station. She does not really know Boston, and Tony shows her the city. Some day, they will probably have to make a choice: live in Boston or in New York? Who will have to change jobs? Or could they manage like those young couples separated by their careers during the week and who are together only during the week-end and the holidays? But it is still early to think of these problems. They want to think only of their present happiness.

While Tony was away, Lauren has thought up another tactic. On Monday afternoon, she comes to his office: «It looks like your vacation agreed with you. You look tanned and so healthy... The weather must have been great. I wanted to let you know that the Boston Lyric is giving Così fan tutte this week-end. I was planning to go with my neighbor Jenna, but she is no longer free: her sister-in-law’s baby arrived three weeks..."
earlier than expected. So…” Tony has to think fast: how can he manage? So he starts talking to give himself time:” _Cosi fan tutte? _One of my favorites. It will surely be good. The _Boston Lyric_ always does things well, and they have the perfect singers for Dorabella, Fiordiligi and Ferrando, and for don Alfonso especially.” And Tony starts to hum, as if carried away by the music, _Vorrei dir, e cor non ho..._ and _Oh poverini, per femmina giocar cento zucchini_. And then, as if he resumed control over himself:”It is really very kind of you to offer me the ticket, but I must tell you I’ll be in New York next week-end, visiting my fiancée.” Lauren takes the hit without bending her knees. She exclaims: “I did not know you were engaged: may I be the first one to congratulate you?” And Tony, with the kind of silly expression suitable in such circumstances: “Yes, it is quite recent. We have not announced it yet.””

Tony has a kind heart. A few days later, Lauren receives an envelope without any sender’s name. Inside, there is only a sheet of paper with these five lines printed on it:

WWW.MATCH.COM
DIAL-A-MATE..........................800 592-2888
LUNCHDATES.............................617 327-5369
RIGHT ONE THE.....................617 824-3687
SUCCESSFUL SINGLES..............800 346-3153

Enough to give some comfort to a Cinderella who has not yet found her prince.

**The little man with the boater**

He had arrived during the night. Arrived? Fallen, one should say, for the two guards who had brought him had pushed him so hard that he had stumbled and fallen flat five yards away, and his boater had rolled another five yards farther. The guards were storm troopers from the National Party. Their uniform was too well known to be mistaken for anything else: black beret, black pants with the bottom slipped into black leather paratrooper boots, submachine gun hanging from their right shoulder. We were able to watch the entire scene, since we had been wakened up by the noise of the key turning in the heavy padlock, the rattle of the chain which held the tall gate shut, and the rattle of the hinges which had not been oiled for ages. Our sleep was light anyway, since we slept directly on the concrete floor of the covered portion of the schoolyard. We had been issued no blanket, not even a little straw to cover the concrete. The schoolyard was by floodlights, and behind two of the second floor windows of the school building overlooking the yard, machine guns were manned by storm troopers. Razor wire had been strung back and forth along the railings which enclosed the schoolyard, just in case any ill-advised prisoner should have attempted to escape.

The little man had been entitled to the usual beating: he had dried blood under his nose, black eyes and bruises, but it could not have been too bad, since he had been able to get up all by himself, to pick up his boater and to brush off the dirt from his clothes without showing excessive physical pain. He was short, rather skinny, and dressed up as for a garden party hosted by a duchess, navy blue blazer, grey flannel pants, black shoes, and on his head a boater not unlike the ones which were word at the beginning of the century (the XIXth century, it goes without saying). We knew nothing of what had transpired recently, since we all had been arrested two days earlier by the storm troopers, in our beds, before dawn. We had been allowed to put on some clothes, but not to take anything, money, watch, paper, pen, cell phone, nothing at all. We had been taken to the nearest schoolyard, and kept there since. We had nothing to wash up, no soap, no razor, no towels, nothing but water from a faucet at the end of the schoolyard.
There were about a hundred of us. We all had been, to some extent at least, active in a liberal party. Some of us had even held positions in the government formed by the Freedom Front, a coalition of Liberal parties. We were famished. On the day of our arrest, we had been given no food at all. We were lucky the water at the end of the schoolyard had not been cut off. On the second day, things were a little better. In the morning, four prisoners escorted by armed guards had been taken away. They returned carrying one, a big basket full of slices of bread, another a huge carton full of old cans, and the last two a wash basin filled with lukewarm water which the guards called “coffee”, maybe because one or two cups had been poured into the water. We were given each one slice of bread and one can of the so-called coffee. At noon, same thing, except that the lukewarm water was called “stew”, because of a few pieces of potato and salt pork swirling about in greasy water. For dinner, the lukewarm water which one prisoner poured into each old can with a rusty ladle had been baptized “soup”, probably on account of some pieces of turnip and carrots which had been thrown in. The little man with the boater had given us some news.

The government led by the Freedom Front had been about to sign the treaty which would have placed the country under the jurisdiction of the International High Court. This could not please the National Party, whose leaders had come to the conclusion that their only resort was to overthrow the elected government. They had been clever: the storm troopers had used vans similar to the ones which made deliveries all through the city every morning at dawn. They had thus been able to seize control of the ministries, the presidential palace, the homes of the Liberal representatives, the police stations, the TV stations, and the newspaper printing presses. All the jails had been quickly filled up, and other prisoners had been sent to other places: schools, sport stadiums, movie theaters, etc…, until the labor camps needed for the enemies of the nation had been built.

The Leader of the National Party had immediately spoken on all TV stations and published a communiqué in the newspaper, explaining that his Party had been forced to act in order to stop the traitors who were going to subject the Nation to foreign powers. The Chiefs of Staff, as was the duty of all true patriots, had sided with him. Every good citizen would approve the necessary measures which had to be taken immediately: arrest the enemies of the Nation, and prevent these from doing further harm by sending them all to labor camps. Considering their numbers, one might have thought that the country was populated by enemies of the people, since for each good citizen there were dozens of bad ones who had to be imprisoned. The little man with the boater had heard the communicated of the new chief of state. He worked for National Security, where he took care of files. His office was not located in the building the Ministry of the Interior, and had not therefore been immediately seized by the storm troopers. Our little man had thus been able to shred thousands of documents and to delete practically of the information stored in computers about Liberal activists and other opponents of the National Party. The storm troopers did not discover what he had done, but he was among the suspects, and he had been arrested.

The sun had risen while he explained to us what had happened, and we were much too shaken to go back to sleep. We remained seated, our backs against the wall, waiting for the meager breakfast. Around eight, the guards called up the prisoners assigned to this task, and we lined up near the railings. We looked like bums next to the little man with the boater, with our unkempt hair, our unshaved faces and our rumpled and dirty clothes. Obviously, the guards could not help being irritated by such a an elegant gentleman. The first prisoner in line was waiting, his can in his hand. A guard signaled to him, he came
closer, extended his can, a ladle full of brownish liquid was poured into it, he picked up a slice of bread in the basket, a single one, and he went back to the rear of the schoolyard. If ever a prisoner had dared pick up two slices, a guard would have taken away the break, slapped the can out of his hand and hit him across the face with the metal butt of their submachine gun. When it was the little man’s turn, the guards were ready for him: one of them pushed the can into which the brownish liquid had just been poured, and the neatly creased grey flannel pants were all spattered with big brownish stains. One of the guards laughed out loud: “Look at the dummy who can’t even unzip his pants before taking a pee!” And the other guard echoed his laughter at the funny joke.

At noon, the guards resumed their little game. They pushed the little man towards the railings and into the razor wire. The sharp steel barbs penetrated the wool of the blazer, and the poor guy could not manage to get away. The two guards came to his help, each grabbing an arm and shaking him back and forth. They did not let him go until the back of the blazer was all torn up. Only the boater was left. The guards were not quite satisfied yet. At the last feast of the day, they finished their game. The little man had his can of soup in one hand, his slice of bread in the other, and he already had his back turned to the guards. One of them stepped behind him, with the tip of his gun he pushed up the boater which fell to the ground. Then the guards began to play soccer. One kicked the boater towards his friend, and when the little man tried to pick it up, another kick would send the boater flying. After a while, the guards got tired of the game, and they let the little man get close to the hat. But as he was just going to pick it up, a heavy boot crushed it. Nevermore would the little man wear his crown of straw. This was too much: the little man stood up; he threw the content of his can into the face of the guard, and then stepped back, stunned and scared stiff by what he had just done. The guard could not believe what had happened: did that really throw his soup at him? And yet, he had to believe the evidence: the greasy water was trickling down his nose, his cheeks and his chin. Raising the barrel of his submachine gun, he emptied the entire magazine into the little man’s belly.

The weather was wonderful. Through the entire summer, not a single drop of water fell on the ground, and the huge dark stain left by the little man’s blood remained on the schoolyard ground since none of us would ever step on it. It was still there two months later, when we were moved all to the barracks of the labor camp which our new masters had had especially built for scum like us.

**The flyswatters**


For a resort, this remote corner of the coast located at the end of the world might seem rather bizarre. What does one find in this desolate landscape? Rocks covered with lichen pierce a thin cover of soil In the moors, now and then, amidst the heather and the dwarf gorse, one sees only a few black sheep nibbling at meager tufts of grass, watched by a dog and a barefoot boy covered with rags. The shore line, as far as one can see, is only cliffs and rocks beaten by huge waves. In a rare few spots, however, the lower shore has made it possible for men to find some shelter. This is where one can find a few fishing villages. The men who have been bold enough to settle there had to build small low granite cottages strong enough to hold out against the most violent storms. But these villages have lost most of their population: it has been nearly three quarters of a century
since sardines and mackerels have abandoned these waters: they never returned. Learned men have given all sorts of explanations: new freckles have appeared on the face of the sun, currents coming from the North and the South poles have changed direction, and what not. The fishermen have their own explanation: someone had cast an evil spell on the fish. Finally, their boats have carried away women and children towards better fishing grounds. The only ones who remained were old men, widows, and a few men too weak or too timorous to venture on the high seas. To survive, they have only a few sheep and what they can grow on some fields hardly larger than their miserable cottages. Between the low stone walls which they built to protect them for the stormy winds, they have brought whatever extra soil they could scrape here and there in the moors. They fertilize these tiny with the dried sea-wrack they gather below the cliffs, after the high tides. From these tiny patches they get meager crops of potatoes, barley and oats, insufficient, most of the time to tide them over until the next year crops. All they have to cover the gap is what they can get from the sea: shrimps, crabs, an occasional lobster found in a water hole, and every kind of shellfish, scallops, winkles, clams, mussels, but that kind of food does not fill you up, it is good only to stave off your hunger. For fuel, they have only dried up gorse and peat. The only cash they ever get comes only once a year, after the sheep have been shorn.

In this desert, there is one oasis: the high cliffs of two narrow promontories shelter a small cove and the white crescent of a beach lined with multi-colored tents, deckchairs, and bathers taking the sun. Way back from the beach stands a large Renaissance castle surrounded by green lawns, gravel walks, tall shady trees, and tennis courts. The Renaissance castle is actually a hotel which was built during la belle époque, when rich vacationers began to think that sea water and sea breezes were actually good for one’s health. Seated at tables on the hotel terrace, other guests protected from the sun by huge parasols sip at cold drinks. Water-skis, and especially the motor-boats which pull them are prohibited from this bay where guests want peace and quiet. Only sail-boards are tolerated. On the north side of the northern promontory there is a larger bay where water-skiers can freely practice their sport: there is no beach, just a wide estuary. Judging from its width, one might believe that it is the mouth of a huge river. Actually, just a few miles from the estuary, the river is much narrower. The estuary is lined with granite quays. This small town was once a major fishing port: nowadays, all the motor-boats and sail-boats anchored in the harbor belong to wealthy yachtsmen. When the fish disappeared, the town would have been deserted had it not been for the mayor who persuaded the town council that it could be turned in a major sea-resort.

The bay was already a favorite port of call for yachtsmen, since it is well protected from the high winds. The mayor contacted yachting clubs, quite a few of which took the town for their port of registry when the town council promised to build all the necessary facilities and to charge minimal fees for their use. He also promised that the picturesque character of this old fishing port would be preserved, but that it would also be transformed into a pleasant place of residence for all future summer guests. Many houses had been abandoned by the fishermen in search of better fishing grounds, or by the men and women left without jobs when the canning factories had to close. The mayor, with the help of the the councilmen and the leading businessmen of the town, created the Western Society for Urban Renewal, and gathered the necessary capital to purchase the abandoned houses (for next to nothing, since most of had become the property of the town for non-payment of taxes), and to rehab them. The exterior appearance did not change: whitewashed walls, doors and windows surrounded with grey granite stones, blue slate roofs, but the inside was completely redone: flagstone or parquet floors, bathrooms and
kitchen equipped with the latest appliances, etc... If a house was too small, it was combined with the house next door to give the new owners all the space they wished.

Only the quays, the square in front of the church and the square in front of the town hall had been paved: this, of course, was where the old mansions, and the best shops, restaurants and hotels were located. The other streets were not, and there were no sidewalks: as soon as it rained, they turned to mud. The mayor was able to get government subsidies for paving all the other streets and sidewalks. The new residents would be able to walk outdoors without ruining their shoes. Other projects were financed in equal parts by government subsidies and by a no interest loan to be reimbursed by an increase in the property tax. Up to then, the only sources of fresh water were cisterns which collected the rainwater, or a spring located a short distance from the town. All day long housewife sent back and forth carrying pitchers and buckets. The new residents could not be subjected to such chores. Pipes were installed to bring water to each house from a nearby lake and from upriver. Power lines brought electric service to the town, and lighting to the streets.

There was especially the delicate problem of privies. Indoors, beside each bed, there was a nightstand containing a chamber-pot. Outside, in each back yard, there was an outhouse, usually just a wooden shack covered by corrugated iron. Inside the shack, nailed to the right wall, a wire hook held squares cut from newspaper sheets. Against the back wall stood a commode with a double cover. The top one was attached by hinges to the lower cover. When it was lifted, one saw a round hole in the middle of the lower cover. Below the commode, a capacious concrete cesspool was buried underground. This is where the night-soil was deposited. Women, usually, lifted only the first cover. Men had to lift both (unless they had to do more than pee: if not, the lower cover would have been all wet). In fact, for just a pee, they often found a wall or a large tree which allowed them to unbutton their fly discretely without shocking a passer-by. The latter, if any, politely respected the local customs and went by, pretending not to see anything unless he knew the fellow well. Then he would come up with such witty a remark as:"Hey, Luke. I see you are busy felling a wall." And Luke would come up with an equally witty answer:"Don’t worry, the mortar will hold." If men had used the shed for everything, the cesspool would have been filled up in no time at all, and the cesspool emptier would have had to come twice a month to pump it out. As it was, he had to come often enough, and whenever he did, what a stink! Bad enough to repel a an old skunk, But now, with sewer lines to carry away all the waste to the new treatment plant, the town council could pass an ordinance ordering each household to install indoor plumbing connected to the sewer system. If any owner refused to conform, his house would be declared unfit for human occupancy and condemned. Tax credits and deductions were given to the owners to make them swallow the bitter pill. Some of the older residents grumbled, but the mayor let them know that the renovations projected would require a large labor force, which would put an end to the local unemployment. Later, there would be new jobs created by the stores, the restaurants, the hotels, the garages and so on which would be required. Not all the grumblers were convinced: they were made to understand that if they were not satisfied, they could always leave. The Western Society for Urban Renewal was willing to give them a good price for their house. The most stubborn ones left: good riddance!

As soon as the renovation work started, the Society launched big publicity campaign. The purpose was to attract not only summer tourists interested in sailing and nautical sports, but also year round residents. The folders emphasized the charm of this seaside town which had been able to retain its traditional character, the mild climate, the
picturesque landscape with its beaches, cliffs, rocks, moors where flocks of sheep grazed, wooded mountains, torrents and waterfalls. They showed floor plans of houses, underlined the low cost of living, etc. The operation was a success. Even before the first housing project had been completed, most of the new residences had been sold. A prosperous future was assured for the old seaport.

Mr Dorndir was pleased: no better resort for the family summer vacation could be found than this isolated corner of the Atlantic coast (1). This castle-like hostelry was quite impressive. Everything had been arranged for the comfort of the guests, and the chef, as soon as he has he was better known, would certainly earn the four, or even the five stars which he deserved. Mr Dorndir likes to get his money’s worth: is this a mark of his profession? He holds a high position in the Bank of the West: as vice-president in charge of mortgages, he sees to it that the bank gets its monthly payments on time, and if by any chance a payment is overdue (which happens rarely, given his reputation), the delinquent customer has to suffer some unpleasant penalties for his delay. There is no shortage of amusement: the beach, where, after a swim, you can take the sun. Not for long, though: if you don’t want a sunburn, better open the parasol above your deck-chair. With his sunglasses on, Mr Dorndir allows his eyes to wander over young girls whose graceful shapes are hardly covered by their bikinis, comparing them with some regret to Mrs Dorndir, whose plump body could never fit into their three nylon triangles. This is why she wears a most decent swimsuit adorned with a kind of miniskirt which covers the top of her thighs but does completely hides her cellulitis. They have a ten year old girl: in spite of her protests, they still call her by her baby name, Bee. She insists that at her age, she should be called Beatrice, but the fact is, she does not have anything to hide yet. She spends her time playing volley-ball or tennis with friends her age. As to Mrs Dorndir, she has made friends with the wife of a judge at the Chamber of Commerce.

There are many excursions available. Since Mrs Dorndir is prone to seasickness, they chose a day when the sea was as flat as a mirror to go the islands which have been made into a refuge for wild life. On the way, they saw dolphins and porpoises, and, when approaching the islands, seals lying on flat rocks. The marshes, sand dunes and cliffs provide an ideal habitat for birds. The islands are famous for the number of species which live there, and their guide has given them all the names he could remember: seagulls, gannets, shearwaters, boobies, skimmers, kitiwakes, skuas, terns, albatrosses, puffins, petrels, loons, scoters, grebes, cormorants, pelicans, curlews, egrets, herons, frigate birds, fulmars. The sightseers returned to their hotels, so exhausted that they did not take their customary evening walk after dinner.

This walk has come to be a kind of ritual: each evening, in the company of the judge, his spouse and their children, Mr and Mrs Dacier go to the nearby town, but to reach it they take the path used by the customs officers. It is a narrow path between heather and gorse bushes. It follows the sea along the cliffs to the tip of the narrow promontory which separates the cove of the hotel from the bay with its estuary, and then returns to the town harbor. On the embankment, they stop at the terrace of the Grand Café to have a drink, a liqueur for the grown ups, lemonade or soft drinks for the children, before walking back to their hotel along the road across the base of the promontory. If it takes them three quarters of an hour to go around the promontory, returning to their hotel from the Café takes less than ten minutes.

Another excursion took them inland, to the marshes. A flat boat took their to the heart of these perpetually flooded lands. The guide showed them not only the birds, geese, ducks, mallards, grebes, herons, etc but also otters. There are even the beavers recently
imported from America who prosper in their new surroundings. Afterwards, their tour bus
took the sightseers to the mountains with their torrents, their waterfalls, and their forests
where, in the clearings, stags, roes and deer graze without fear: They are not afraid of
people, since hunting has been prohibited in these forests for more than half a century.
There are also wild boars, but these beasts did not show themselves.

The most spectacular excursion, they say, takes them to the Geysers. These are not
real geysers, there are no volcanoes in these parts, but in some places the sea had dug
tunnels and grottoes into the rocky coast, and some of these tunnels and grottoes
communicate with the surface through narrow chimneys. When strong winds blow from
the ocean, they push the waves into the tunnel with such force that the seawater and the
foam splash way up in the air out of these chimneys. In order to see the geysers at their
best, one has to choose a day when the winds are especially strong and the time when the
tide is high. Unfortunately, these conditions have not yet occurred by the date when the
Dorndirs’ new friends have to return home. The Dorndirs have more luck. A guide is not
needed for this excursion. They take their car. The tide will reach its high point at eleven,
but they are there one hour earlier to enjoy the fantastic view of foamy jets spurting out of
the surface of the cliffs as from the blowholes of gigantic whales.

In the guide book, Mr Dacier has noticed there is a famous inn nearby. It has a
French name: l'Auberge des Geysers, the Geysers’ Inn. Driving a little further along the
shore, they go by the ruins of a deserted village and reach the beach where the inn is
located. It is not noon yet, and they are the only customers so far. A waiter asks them
whether they would prefer to be seated indoors or at the terrace overlooking the sea. The
waiter has a strong French accent. The weather is fairly warm, and the winds from the sea
have died down after high tide, so Mr Dacier chooses the terrace. As they are led to their
table, Mr Dacier notices with curiosity a kind of horsewhip hanging from the back of each
chair. But first things first: Mr Dacier makes his selection from the menu, which, as it
happens is written in French: he orders the langouste à la mayonnaise maison [lobster
with home-made mayonnaise] with a Mosel wine, carrés d'agneau [lamb chops], with a
Châteauneuf-du-Pape, a salade maison (it is a mix of lettuce, radish and tomato],
plateau de fromage [a tray of cheese], tarts Bourbon, café et liqueurs. The come the
usual formalities: the sommelier brings the first wine, uncorks it, serves a little in a glass,
Mr Dacier tastes it, gives his approval, and, after the sommelier has poured, the bottle is
put away in the ice bucket. The waiter brings the lobster and turns to go, but Mr Dacier
keeps him: he wants to know about the leather switch at the back of his chair
--Ah! Monsieur means the flyswatter
-- The flyswatter ?
-- Yes, Monsieur, this is what we call it.,
-- But why? It does not look at all like a flyswatter.
-- That is quite true, Monsieur, but they are not used for real flies. What we call “the
flies” around here are the women who come to pester the customers. They are all dressed
in black. Monsieur may have noticed the ruined village up the coast? A few families have
remained there, lazybones and drunks who did not have the courage to go and look for
work elsewhere and who send their old mothers, their wives or their daughters to beg for
some coins. Unfortunately, the law does not allow the restaurant to bar access to the
beach: all the area covered by the sea is considered as part of the public domain. Of
course, the restaurant could hire somebody to keep he flies away, but we found out that
many guests enjoyed doing the job themselves. This why the restaurant has put these
flyswatters at their disposal.
-- But in spite of that, the “flies” keep on coming.
-- Ah! Monsieur, what can you do? Some of our guests are too kind-hearted and slip them a few coins. And then, there are others who get so excited that they feel it is worth some bronze, silver, or even gold. It is true that the “fly” was still young and fairly pretty.
In the meantime, other guests have arrived, families who have been looking at the geysers, and occupy other tables, Mrs Dacier, sharply to the waiter:
-- Spare us your comments and watch your language, there are children here.
-- A thousand pardons, Madame. You must see how things stand. One gets carried away with anger when one sees people like that exploiting their betters. See! There is one coming to your table. I trust Monsieur will receive her as she deserves, and that Madame and the young demoiselle will lend him a hand. But should Monsieur be reluctant to use the flyswatter, I am sure another guest will be pleased to take over.
Mr Dacier, justly piqued by these doubts about his manly courage and his moral energy, answers briskly:
-- No, no! We’ll do it ourselves, won’t we, dear and Bee? Won’t you show what you can do?
The only thing that is black on the “fly” are the rags she wears: her face is pale and thin, her hair grey, and her bare feet covered with sand:
-- A small coin, Sir, please, just a small coin! The little ones are hungry!
And the waiter, ironically:
-- Yes, I’ll bet, it is her drunkard of a husband who is thirsty!
-- No, Sir! No! It’s for the children. Please, have mercy, Sir! Just a coin!
But the blows are already raining on the “fly” extended hands. Mrs Dacier also has grabbed her flyswatter, but her blows are quite lady-like and barely touch the victim’s hip. Bee, on the other hand, puts all her energy into her task, and her whip leaves red marks across the “fly”s bare legs. The newly arrived guests look admiringly at Mr Dacier and his family. The “fly” has sunk to the ground. The waiter signals to a colleague. Each grabs a shoulder of the “fly”. They drag her down the terrace stairs, along the alley to the beach, and then as far as the edge of the property, where they drop her behind bushes where she will no longer spoil the view. The “fly”s heels have left two parallel lines in the gravel of the alley and in the sand of the beach. One of the waiters gets a rake and soon no trace is left of the lines in the gravel and the sand. The Dacier’s waiter return to their table, full of compliments.
-- Well done, Monsieur! After this warm reception, I am sure the “flies” won’t bother you any more! The Mosel wine is cool: will Monsieur allow me to refill the glasses?

August draws to a close, the evenings are getting cool, and the Daciers return to the city, quite pleased with their holiday.

(1) Dorndir : Steelhand

A poet’s calling

Tim Hollis is fairly contented. He even has everything he needs to be happy. At least, this is what he believes. After all, did he not accomplish everything he had dreamed of achieving when he was young? Is he not one of the most respected poets of his generation? Does he not enjoy the esteem of his peers? Isn’t that worth all the money in the world? And anyway, it is not as though he was penniless. He is not so badly paid for his work in the archives of the university library. His apartment is small, but quite comfortable. The New England city where he lives has all the resources one could wish for: theaters, a symphony hall, good restaurants, etc…. He can afford to travel, all the
more since many of these travels are free because he is often invited to give readings or to
give talks at meetings, either in the States or abroad, with a generous *honorarium* and all
his expenses paid. Most of the time, all he has to do is to read and talk about his own
work, or, occasionally, to lecture about the American poets with whom he feels he has
most affinities, Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, Robert Frost and Robert Lowell, mostly. But
the arrival of this letter has brought trouble to this quiet life. This letter has caused him to
look back at his past, at the choices which determined his fate.

Timmy is still quite young, less than three, and his sister Maggie is barely five.
Their parents both work. His father is an accountant. With his wife’s help (she is also an
accountant), and with a secretary, he does the monthly accounts of several clients, the
kind one finds in any town or city. They are mostly small business people, shopkeepers,
but also plumbers, electricians, hairdressers, retired people, there are even doctors and
dentists. The work may vary, but the accounting remains about the same: salary sheets,
taxes to be paid to the federal government, to the state, to the city or town, Social Security
deductions, medical insurance, rental payments, supplies, equipment, heating, lighting,
telecommunications, cleaning, trash collection, etc…

While the parents work, Timmy goes to a daycare center while his sister is in
kindergarten. Daycare and kindergarten close in mid-afternoon, but the parents work until
six. In the interval, a young woman from the neighborhood pick them up and babysit until
the parents are home. In order to keep them occupied, she sings for them, nursery rhymes,
for instance. And one day, one of them produces an extraordinary effect on Timmy:
"*London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down, / London Bridge is falling down, my fair lady.*" It is not the first time he has heard it, but that day he sees, flashing
before his eyes, a high bridge crumbling down into a wide river under the eyes of a pretty
lady. He thus has his first revelation of the magical power of words. Cindy’s voice causes
other equally fascinating images to appear: Jack and Jill rolling down hill, little Jack Horner in his corner, Sally Walker in her saucer, Humpty Dumpty sitting on a wall, Mary
followed by her lamb, little Miss Muffet scared by a spider, old King Cole all happy with
his pipe, his bowl and his fiddlers, Peter and his pumpkin, Polly and her kettle, Marjorie
Day sleeping on the straw.

Later, in school and in college, Tim finds out that the magicians of words have a
name: they are called “poets”, and the secret of their power is “l’alchimie du verbe” (at
least, that what a French poet called it). They carry him away to huge caves in which the
treasures of Kubla Khan are piled up, to deserted beaches where he observes the spasms
of lightning, hears an angel cry in his ear, or sleeps a heavy drunken sleep, to a tavern
where he drinks, late at night, in the company of a pretty young whore, to Apollinaire’s
grave where he shares a joint with two young American poets, to Chili, where he receives
the prophetic visit of a lunar moth (1). Never would he presume to get a place within their
ranks. What will he do? When one is not especially strong in math and science, there is
no point in trying to be an engineer, when one is not attracted to business and has no
calling for medicine, what can one do? The choices are limited. Finally, Tim makes a
decision: at the end of October, he takes the LSAT: his results are quite good, he will
certainly get into a good law school. But before he sends any application, Tabitha, the
black slave who was hanged at Salem for witchcraft, appears to him in a dream. She tells
him her story and the story of her seven young companions. The version found in official
documents bears little resemblance with her tale. But who is the Black Man by whom,
according to the judges, the young Salem girls were possessed, if not the demonic double
of these very same judges, this monstrous double produced by a culture which turns
desire into a satanic impulsion? And what can they know, these judges, of the poetic power of hysteria, the only way, for these girls to express through physical symptoms all that is forbidden by a society which prevents them not only from saying, but also to feel, this society which makes of desire the very essence of evil? Their only way to prove their innocence is to make others responsible for their behavior: Tabitha, and all those who caused them to experience feelings considered to be evil by their social group, desire or jealousy. And Tim, under Tabitha’s dictation, feverishly writes The Book of Tabitha, his first poetry collection. Henceforward, his only ambition is to write, and this is incompatible with a lawyer’s career.

Poetry, Tim knows it, is not a job. In order to make a living while writing, he will need an occupation which will not absorb all his concentration, which will allow him to earn enough money to live on while leaving him enough energy for his future poems. Most aspiring poets go into teaching, but this profession is too risky and too demanding. Under the most favorable conditions, it takes at least six years to complete the course work and the doctoral dissertation required, and six more years for the research and the publications needed to get tenure. Twelve years wasted, enough to cause any source of inspiration to dry up forever. For an aspiring poet, journalism and advertising are just as bad. After thinking things over, Tim concludes that working in the university archives might well be the best answer to his problem: two years of study will procure him the required diploma, and the time and effort required are not anywhere near what would be needed for a Ph.D. The job does not consume all of a man’s energy. After a few months of training, it gets to be a routine.

Tim’s sister is five years older and at least fifty years wiser (so she believes). She is twenty six, she has an MBA from a prestigious business school, she already has the title of vice-president in one of the most important banks in the country, and she has no sympathy for her brother’s silly decision. Tim’s parents are not happier about their son’s career choice. They have financed his four years of college, and they are willing to give him an interest free loan for his three years of law school, since even a beginning lawyer already makes a very good living. But he’d better not count on any help from them to become a bookworm. Ginny, Tim’s girl-friend, is not happy either. They have been together for nearly two years. She is a Western girl, born and bred in Minneapolis, but she thought a few years in an Eastern college would be more sophisticated. Tim and Ginny are not officially engaged yet, but it is understood that they will get married next June. Then Ginny will work as a paralegal and they will live on her salary until he gets his JD. Then she will herself go to law school, and she will also be able to have the kind of career that the young women of her generation want and deserve. Baking cookies and keeping house may have been good enough for their grandmothers, and perhaps even for their mothers, certainly not for them. But if Tim want to bury himself in archives in order to do in scribbling,, it won’t be with his meager salary, hardly of fourth or a fifth of what a business lawyer’s earnings, that he will be able to finance his wife’s tuition. Why should she sacrifice her own wishes, which, everybody agree, are most reasonable, for his ambitions which, everybody also agree, are totally crazy? Ginny won’t change her mind, and she will make good her threat: if he does change his mind, she will break up with him. Unfortunately for her, the manuscript of The Book of Tabitha which Tim submitted to Norton has been accepted, and it will come out next fall. This certainly won’t make him see reason, all the more since he has begun work on another collection of poems, Voices from Wounded Knee. The Civil War, which lasted five years, from 1861 to 1866, had stopped the colonization of the great plains between the Mississippi and the Rocky
Mountains. These huge prairies were the domain of nomadic Indian tribes who were dependent, for a large part of their subsistence, on the buffaloes which they hunted. As soon as the war ended, the march of the white settlers towards the west resumed. The buffaloes were well on their way to extinction, killed for their fur or for their meat which was needed to feed the thousands of workers who were building the railroads towards the Pacific. The Indian tribes, deprived of their lands by treaties forced upon them manu militari, were relocated on reservations whose soil was usually too poor for cultivation and depended for survival on the meager food rations which they received from the government.

In 1875, the American army was pacifying the Dakotas and Montano. On June 25 and 26, a detachment from the 7th Cavalry, six hundred men under the command of Colonel Custer, attacks a Sioux camp near Little Big Horn River. But this time, Custer encounters a foe able to resist: there was in this camp a contingent of nine hundred Sioux and Cheyennes warriors commanded by two of their best leaders, Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. The American force is annihilated, Custer himself is killed. This victory is of no help to the Indian people. A treaty imposed by the American government takes most of their territory from the Sioux. Their land is given to white farmers. In the eyes of most American, the small portion which is left to the Sioux is still too generous a gift. In February 1890, the federal government breaks its treaty in order to give half of the land which had been left to the Sioux to new farmers. Nor will the Sioux receive any food from the administration. They'll have to manage with what they grow on their remaining land. Their children will be placed in schools where they will not be allowed to speak their native language or to keep their traditional culture. There are even rumors that the Sioux nation will be transported to a reservation in Oklahoma where living conditions are the worst that could be imagined.

On December 29, a detachment of five hundred men from the 7th Cavalry (Custer’s old regiment) armed with a battery of four Hotchkiss guns is sent to the Sioux camp of Wounded Knee to disarm the natives and to take them to the train which would transport them to exile. Most Indians had already handed over their weapons when a shot was heard. Who pulled the trigger? No one will ever know, but this single shot caused a general fusillade. The Indians looked for shelter, but gun shells fell among them. When the shooting died down, 25 soldiers and 300 Sioux had been killed. Among the latter were women and children. Among the soldiers, most of the victims had been killed by their own comrades. It has been reported that during the shooting, soldiers shouted: ":"Remember Little Big Horn" et "Remember Custer." Voices from Wounded Knee: those voices are the voices of the Indians who were massacred on this site, men, women and children. Another voice comes from elsewhere: the voice of Custer, who, in a section of the poem, pleads for mercy from the victims of the massacre for which his name was a justification.

Ginny is stubborn, but Tim’s stubbornness is equal to hers. Neither will yield, and the day after graduation she goes back home without saying goodbye. Tim, on his part, does not even try to contact her. They’ll never meet again. Tim does as he planned. After getting his diploma of librarian-archivist, he has the good fortune of getting a job in the university from which he got his BA. He is well aware that one the reasons why he was hired was the fact that his first poetry collection, The Book of Tabitha, received an award given to young poets, and that the second one, Voices from Wounded Knee, received excellent reviews. All universities are interested in anything that increases their prestige.
The years go by. Tim gets used to a job which, has he hoped, does not make excessive demands on his time and his energy, and allows him to work for his own purposes. Like Peter Ibbetson, he lives in wait for the voices which come to him during the night. Like one of his favorite poets, he keeps, next his bed, paper and pencil to write down the messages he receives (2). And if by chance a lady friend who happens to spend the night is awakened by the light and the rustling of the paper, she wonders at seeing him writing down feverishly under the dictation of a voice which she can’t hear. And his poems continue to come out, at irregular intervals, according to the whims of his nocturnal visitors. Tim’s parents, impressed at long last by what they read or hear about their son’s writings (he has even been seen on PBS), have reconciled with him. Even his sister has come to recognize that, after, perhaps this is the best he could do.

And one day, a letter arrives. He rereads it: “Pardon me if I take the liberty of writing. You don’t know me, but you knew my mother, Ginny Lawton. She died recently of cancer of the liver. She had divorced a few after her marriage, and she had taken back her maiden name. I was only five years old at the time. My father (but I believe he was only the man whose name I bear, Jack Moreland, since he never make any effort to see me, and my mother never talked about him) had gone to live in California where he had been transferred by the company he worked for. My mother was then a partner in her Minneapolis law firm, and she refused to go with him. I don’t think she had ever loved him. If I write to you, it is because of something which happened after her death. I was moving her belongings from her apartment. On her bookshelves, in addition to law books and to works of classic writers from the Elizabethans to the generation of Scott Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Dos Passos and Hemingway, there were only some bestsellers (a few only: she got rid of most of these type of books as soon as she had read them). This is why I was quite surprised when I discovered, hidden behind a row of law books, a few volumes of poems: your works. I got curious, and I looked at them more closely. In one of them, Alabaster City, on the back cover, there was a picture of the author, yours, with these words written below in my mother’s hand: “The only man I ever loved.” It was easy to get your address, since you are listed in Who’s Who in America and in the International Authors’ and Writers’ Who is Who. Would you be willing to see me? I am scheduled to go to New York on business in a few days (I work for GlobalCom), and it would be very easy for me to get to Boston, should you agree to see me. Sincerely, Tabby Moreland

P.S. Tabby i short for Tabitha: I now understand why my mother shoes to give me such an unusual name.

Tim is dumbfounded. So Ginny really loved him? And if he himself, along the years, has never had more than brief relationships, not even a true love affair, was it because he never found anyone who could replace the girl he allowed to go away without even raising a finger to stop her, from sheer stubbornness and pride? Should he not have tried to contact her two months, six months, or even a year after she left? Couldn’t a compromise be found? And who is Tabby? Could she be his daughter? Finally, he sends her a letter that does not say much, but which leaves everything open: “Dear Tabby, allow me to give you this name since it is the one you use. I was deeply touched by what you tell me about the words written by your mother on the back cover of The Book of Tabitha. Your mother and I, when we knew each other, were probably too young to understand our true feelings, and everything that was at stake in the way we behaved at the time. I believe that she realized it long before I did. It goes without saying that I will be most happy to see you. Call me as soon as you know when you can come to Cambridge (my phone
number is: 617-491-4891; my address: 472 Massachusetts Ave., Apt 8F, Cambridge, MA 02139. I hope we can have dinner together. Fondly, Tim Hollis.”

The phone call arrives four days later. Tim is not at home, but his answering machine records the message. “I will be in Cambridge next Wednesday. I should arrive at your place by 6 p.m., it that is OK with you. I don’t have to get back to the airport until 11 p.m. Just in case, here is my cell phone number: 763-964-7937. Till soon.” Tim texts a message to confirm. Wednesday: Tim feels it would be ridiculous to dress up. He keeps his usual clothes: tweed jacket, grey flannel pants, light blue shirt and burgundy tie. At a quarter of six, the bell rings. Tim presses the intercom button. A voice: “This is Tabby. I may be a little early. The plane was on time, the car I had rented was ready for me, and I was lucky enough to find a parking space nearby.” Tim answers: “This is great. Push the door as soon as you hear the buzz.” For the apartment, it is on the eighth floor. Turn left as you come out of the lift. It is the first door on the left.” Tim waits by his open door. The lift stops. There she is.

She looks a lot like her mother, a bit taller maybe, and dressed not like a student, but like today’s businesswomen, black skirt and jacket, ivory shirt, no jewelry, a black leather bag large enough to hold a laptop and some manila folders. Unlike Ginny, who allowed her long blond hair to spread over her shoulders, Tabby wears hers combed back into a bun at the back of her neck. She extends her hand:

-- I am so happy to see you.
-- And I to see you. Do come in.

And Tim leads her to an armchair, next to the fireplace. A silence: what can be said? Both know very well what they want to ask, but Tabby cannot ask Tim: “When did you last have sex with my mother?”, nor can Tim ask her: “When exactly were you born?” So she stands up and walks to the large window overlooking Cambridge, the Charles River, Boston, and the bay:

-- You are fortunate to have such a wonderful view. From my apartment, one sees only the building across the street.

She accepts the glass of amontillado which Tim hands to her. To avoid the silence, he asks her about her job: does she have to travel a lot? This is exactly why she likes it, she answers. Not a month goes by without one or two trips. She flies fairly regularly to Mexico, to British Columbia, to New York, to Europe, to Singapore, to Taiwan, wherever GlobalCom has a branch. After the amontillado, it is time to go to the restaurant where Tim has made a reservation. For her first visit to Boston, he suggests local specialties, clam-chowder, blue-fish broiled dry, roasted potatoes, and a salad, with the house chardonnay. While waiting, Tim asks about her trips:

-- With all this traveling, you must have some interesting experiences?
-- Funny things certainly do happen. The first time I went to Taiwan, for instant, the vice-president of the local branch who was responsible for our welcome (there were three of us from our central office) had sent a car to pick us up at the hotel where we were staying. Apparently, he was in charge of our dinner and our entertainment. Imagine our surprise when we found out that the car had taken us to meet him at a high class bordello, and his surprise when he saw me.. He certainly did not expect a woman to be there. For him, this was not funny. Chinese culture, as you know, is one of these cultures which anthropologists call “cultures of shame”. Our host would certainly have lost face if he had not saved by the owner of the place, a most aristocratic lady, quite distinguished and tactful, who invited me to have dinner with her in her private apartments. She counted
extremely important people among her friends, ambassadors, CEO’s, bankers, politicians, etc.

While waiting for the clam chowder, the waitress brings a basket of rolls, small squares of butter, and glasses of chilled water. The sommelier comes with the white wine. It is now Tabby’s turn to ask questions:

-- I only read your first two books. If it is no trouble, could you talk be about the later ones?

-- Would it really interest you? You must know that writers, even if they don’t admit it, like nothing as much as talking about their writings. Even those who write primarily for themselves, and this is the case for many, think of those who will read them, and especially of those who will understand them. The waitress takes away the empty clam chowder cups. Tim continues:

-- Anyway, what I write is not especially difficult to understand. I place myself in the tradition of American poets who combine a somewhat ample epic vision with a passionate attention to the concrete, to what Rimbaud called “la réalité rugueuse”, poets like Whitman, Hart Crane, Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg. Speaking of Rimbaud, you may know his often quoted declaration: “JE est un Autre.” It is at the basis of everything I write. It is true for The Book of Tabitha and for Voices from Wounded Knee. It is equally true for my next collection, Alabaster City. The title is borrowed from the poem by Katherine Lee Bates which is heard everywhere, America the beautiful. The stanza from which it is taken serves as epigraph for my volume:; “O beautiful for patriot dream / That sees beyond the years / Thine alabaster cities gleam / Undimmed by human tears.” But the vision hoped for by the good lady has little to do with reality. The tears have continued to flow, and if they have not tarnished the white surface of the skyscrapers, one cannot say the same for the polluting agents which mix their acid with the rains. The beautiful alabaster walls are now all pock-marked and tarnished.

The waitress brings fish, potatoes, and salad, and refills the glasses. And Tim:

-- If you don’t mind, I’ll stop a while to do honor to the menu. Which they both do.

-- To return to Rimbaud, in this collection, the voice of the Other is the voice of all those who build this city, the first colonists who came on the Mayflower, the Huguenots chased from France after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the Irish fleeing from the famine, the Blacks imported by slave traders, and all those whom poverty, persecution and wars forced to seek refuge her, Jews, Italians, Porto-Ricans, Mexicans, Haitians, Vietnamese and other recent immigrants. Of course, for the voice of the Other to be heard, the I must yield to him. This is the hardest part. The best method, like for learning a foreign language, is immersion. And I have spent months immersing myself in the life of different ethnic communities. But if the I must yield to the Other, I must not totally disappear. This is what Rimbaud means when he compares the birth of the poem to that of a symphony or of an “opéra fabuleux”. The symphony presupposes the presence of a conductor, and the opera that of a director. In a polyphonic poem, this is the function of the I. And that is not easy. This is why, after Alabaster City, I wrote Gradiva. There is only one voice, that of a woman, as in my first collection.

Tim stops to sip his wine. And Tabby:

-- Of course, with a single voice, it has to be less complicated.

-- It still remains fairly difficult. The same voice may whisper, shout, howl, screech, cajole, wheedle, insult… Of woman, Rimbaud (one must always return to him) says that she “will find the unknown”, “things that are strange, unfathomable, repulsive,
delicious.” These are the things which I have tried to hear from the voice of Gradiva. You recognize the name: she is the heroine of the novella by Wilhem spea commented by Freud (3). But my Gradiva is rather the incarnation of the principle defined by Goethe in the final lines of his Faust: “Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan”. She is the symbol of the force which pushes us upwards, towards the heights of the Absolute, as is expressed by her name: Gradiva, she who ascends. This is why I am tempted to characterize this work as a kind of anabasis. My Gradiva takes her place in a lineage in which Woman appears as the figure who holds the key to the fascinating realms located beyond Death, I am thinking of the Surrealists. My most recent work is Family Scenes. The title has nothing to do with Freud’s famous Urszene. Each text is spoken by the different members of a single family, children, adults, boys, girls, men, women etc. I said they have nothing to do with Freud, but this is not quite true, since there often is something fantasmatic in the incidents, real or dreamed, related by these voices. But I see your glass is empty: some more chardonnay?

-- Better not. I’ll have to drive back to the airport.

-- Of course, you are right. To finish with my writings, I am presently working on a collection titled Beyond madness. The title comes from Rimbaud (always him). For Rimbaud, the poet, in order to reach the Unknown, must make a monster of his soul, transgress every limit. In order to become the “suprême Savant”, he must experience of the forms of love, of suffering, of madness. One is rather surprised to find this link between poetry and madness in Yeats, who assumes the personality of an old mad woman in the poems he attributes to Crazy Jane. On the other end, this is to be expected among the Surrealists, who have extolled the poetic force of writings, drawings or paintings created by mad people. The Surrealists have tried to capture this force. In poetry, the best known examples probably are Les Champs magnétiques, by André Breton and Philippe Soupault, and L’Immaculée Conception, by André Breton also, but his collaborator for this work was Paul Éluard. To create these texts, they identified with people suffering from different forms of madness. I am certainly not the only one who has used madness as a source of poetry. A fairly recent example is a poem by Frank Bidart, in which the speaker is a madman, a sadistic killer (5). I have not gone quite that far, but I have tried to have the reader enter the characters’ delirium. Some are not really mad. They are survivors who have been victims of a traumatic experience which has left them physically and/or mentally diminished, accident, illness, death of someone they loved, divorce, etc.

To end the meal without departing from the local cuisine, they would have to order Boston cream pie or Indian pudding, but Tabby is no longer hungry. She only wants an espresso: it is OK since she won’t be able to sleep in the plane anyway. As to Tim, no dessert rich in calories or cholesterol suits his diet. He’ll manage with a cup of decaf coffee. The meal is at an end, and the real question has to be asked. Tim does not wish to be too direct about it, and so he says:

-- How long have you been working for GlobalCom?

Tabby understands where he wishes to go, and she answers:

-- Two years. Since I got my MBA at Northwestern.

-- You must have been one of their youngest graduates.

-- Actually, a good many of my classmates were my age. I had my twenty-fourth birthday just after I got my degree.
A quick computation: twenty-four two years ago, in 2005, just after graduation, which takes place end of May / beginning of June, she was born in May / June 1981. Ginny broke up with Tim end of May 1980: Tabby cannot be his daughter. Unexpectedly, the realization gives him a shock. Tabby notices it:

-- You are pale. Are you feeling all right?

-- Yes, I am all right. I guess I should explain. There is no reason why you should not know. It was the sudden realization that if you were born in May or June 1981, you could not be my daughter, and when I got your letter, the idea that I could have a daughter, that I was going to meet her, this was something I had never expected. I don’t know whether you can understand, but it gave me hope. Hope of what? I don’t know, but of something which would give me happiness. So, when I realized this was not the case….

She also looks disappointed: how will she ever know what man her mother had slept before she married Jack Moreland. Will there be anyone, among her mother’s classmates in law school, who will be able or willing to give her the information? The waitress brings the bill, and Tim hands her his credit card. She returns with his card and two receipts. Tim adds the tip, signs one of the receipts for the waitress, and puts away the other receipt and his card. The time has come for Tabby to drive back to the airport. Tim walks her to her car. They are standing on the sidewalk. He says:

-- You know, I would have been very happy and proud to have you for my daughter.

Tabby looks at him with a sad smile. Suddenly she stands up on the tip of her toes, kisses him on the cheek, says “Thank you!”, goes around the car, opens the door, get in, puts her briefcase on the seat, starts the engine, waves at Tim, drives off, and Tim finds himself alone on the sidewalk.

(1) Allusions to poems by Coleridge, Saint-John Perse, Rilke, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, Ginsberg, Breton
(2) Peter Ibbetson: novel by George du Maurier. (18902); like one of his favorite poets: Saint-John Perse
(3) Der Wahn und die Träume in W. Jensens ’Gradiva’ (1907)