

Part 3- Further Older Wiser

n-The train for Santiago de Compostella leaves in a few hours, so I write as the sun sets behind the squeal of wheels and rails.

Only two weeks ago Amsterdam gave way to a deluge. Now I find myself in the aridity of the Languedoc. Rome was a stranger in this land, then the Moors and then Charlemagne, eventually the Inquisitor himself. Different peoples mix it up until their neighbours give them a new name. Vast stretches of time and lots of houseguests. What do you get? A new country...a different myth...a new race...a crusade.

Innocent? They burned the library with the heretics.

The blood of endless battles lost oozes from the soil of Europe. I felt it between my toes as I wandered through Holland, Belgium and France. The lives of 'lesser men' spent by the pompous weak who find themselves in charge. Each and everyone a visionary...intoxicated most by their own reflection.

History...Whew! Heavy man.

Yes it is.

Did you see Spain? Yeah through the window of a train. No. No. NO. I have to walk...taste it, hear it, feel it, smell it.

So when I take a train, usually I get a night train. I sleep while I'm missing the country. A trick of the light. Speeds things up without that feeling of guilt.

A mother just walked by with her son... maybe five years old. Big clueless eyes, mouth hanging open...quite the little fighter.

She's a train. A train with a little traveller. Pulls him along while he blinks to an ever-changing horizon. While he smugly plans his destination, she knows better. Each piece of track, the train is forced to embrace...that is the covenant...yet still it fights the rail that decides its direction. Unappreciatively, the traveller tires of the shaking and jerking...and the train watches him get off...far shy of expectations.

I travel alone but strangers are my friends. One night its Dutch travellers, then German, then French. Tonight she is from Texas and she is sitting beside me as I write. I helped

her buy her ticket and now she won't leave my space.

Cities have their strong points. Diamonds, art and red lights for a few weeks... took a good taste. Do what you will in Amsterdam.

To the best of my recollection...

Arthur runs a bar just inside the district. It was clean but dark even during the day. Some tables sat by the stained glass windows. Others sat in the shadow. As the sun went down the atmosphere changed and I began to notice the artifacts on display around the pub...mainly instruments that were used to maim over the last few centuries. Especially noteworthy were the black axes that stood behind the large corner table. Dangerous hundreds of years later. The shadow they cast on the wall was ominous. Every second night Arthur gives demonstrations of one of these deadly tools in his collection. That's what brought me back over and over.

Arthur was covered in tattoos. Dragons with forked tongues, vipers with fangs, serpents, women and knives. To say he looked like a thug is fair but underneath was another kind of man. Not friendly really. Just "a certainty about the way things are" in his demeanor. But what a collection of tattoos.

Quite the group of regulars notable by the variety of leather outfits...both men and women. One regular came in each day at 6 p. m. and sat at the end of the bar. Only as I was leaving this fine city did I learn of their liason. She wore a loose undistinguished top, beige french pants, no make up. Her hair was black, pink, black, tied back, with a long pony tail. Eyes of Bali. No leather.

They didn't talk. When she came in he brought her a drink and she'd briefly look into his eyes and nod. It was pink and sparkling...innocent looking. He'd walk away polish some glasses, saying nothing.

It was my last visit to the bar before I would make my way south through Belgium. I asked him for directions to a nearby travel agency intending to pick up some mail but instead of giving me directions he said,

"Jah. You should visit Tress," pointing to the chair she had yet to occupy.

I took the opportunity. "Do you mind if I ask you about that tattoo on your left arm?" He looked at me stonefaced and waited without moving.

" You have none...jah?" he finally said in his deep baritone.

" No."

He held up his left arm. " Which one?"

" Well er uh...that one," I had the feeling he was ready to pounce so I executed my question more as a respectful observation. " She is one ugly siren." In fact it was a bizarre looking dragon with breasts.

He burst out in a belly laugh. It took him several minutes to recover and served, and yes, I counted, three other drafts before he came back to my spot at the bar. He looked me in the eyes, stonefaced. Then he burst again.

" So is it from the days of King Arthur...oriental, gnostic, what?" I asked.

That was it. I was his student for the rest of the evening. I watched him take beers to several tables, then he would return and launch into another story of another tattoo, lifting up his shirt to give me a clean view.

I thought I would forget his explanations, but the events that followed were memorable ones. The most curious of these varied mythical creatures was the one on his chest. It's mouth open, it arched upward with its lower lip to a chalice, its body coiled but ready to spring. There wasn't a hair on his chest but he confided that he shaved it everyday and wore the low muscle shirts because this particular serpent was the key to all the others.

Tress came in. Arthur introduced Tress to me in French and obviously mentioned my interest in seeing her shop. Then he disappeared over to the corner table of eight or so. College kids, boisterous, and generally irritating. While Arthur got their beers, I looked straight ahead and waited for her to say something.

She started it off with a mocking, " So stranger. Where are you going?"

" Asia."

" hmmm. The Silk route? Most go west...the promised land." Her accent was strong and breathy as

she rolled her eyes.

" Been there. I'm going east."

" ...to the land of promises broken."

" What do you mean?"

" You're going. You will see."

" You've been?"

No smile but the corners of her lips turned up. One of her eyes was dark brown and the other midnight blue. Her skin was perfect. She didn't answer. I got the impression there was nothing she didn't know.

We sat silent and looked straight ahead. Arthur came over said something in French to her again, but then was distracted by a call from the boisterous ones, who seemed determined not to be eclipsed by the axes in the darkness of the corner.

" Hey, you with the face..." called one.

I could see the blood working its way up his neck to his forehead. The vein on his temple swelled like the serpent on his chest and his eyes became thin and focused.

" What's your name?"

" My name is Aaahrht," he said with his guttural pronunciation. Who could understand that Dutch accent?

First this character laughed and then said, " You ain't from Boston." The mockery in his voice was enough but it was the silence of his friends at the table that I noticed.

Arthur did not answer. His friends tried to hush him up but this kid was muscular, and thought himself pretty. Probably a tight-end at some preppy school visiting on his parents dime for the summer holidays. I guess he thought he would try to push some buttons. Not wise.

Arthur went over to the table. Both Tress and I turned around to watch.

Whew man...hit me.

The table was silent but Preppy boy was very willing to stand his ground.

" So Art. What's with the tattoos?" he laughed. The table was motionless.

" I am a vuerk of aahhrrt," Arthur said deadly serious.

Preppy boy continued on. " Really? You're a work of art...what is Art?"

Arthur stood there silently.

" I mean, is Art vanity?" he looked around at his friends. No takers.

" I mean," he laughed again, " Is Art sex? Is Art inspiration?"

He lifted his hands palms up in mock seriousness. "Tell you what Art just get me another beer."

Arthur turned slowly and came back behind the bar, poured another beer, looked at Tress with a secret smile in his eyes, one eye brow lifted, and then slowly carried away the drink. Over he went.

It seems some of his buddies who were equally sized football types had discovered their courage and they ordered beers.

Arthur returned, poured the beers and took them to the boisterous ones.

" So Aaahhrrt... is Art desperation?" smirked preppy one.

" Or maybe Art is aggression?" added another tentatively.

" No. No. No. It's passive aggression," chimed in another. The girls just sat there quietly unimpressed with their male friends. They sensed danger.

" So Art? What is Art?" said the first preppy with his derisive smirk. You could tell he'd never taken a direct hit in his life. Too much padding.

" Aaahhrt is many things."

" C'mon. Enlighten us."

Arthur leaned forward and moved his massive left arm in front of preppy boy's face. The bar had gone completely silent.

" Zumtime Ahhrrt is fate, zumtime destiny." He said pointing at one serpent then an-

other.

Then slowly he moved his right arm in front of the preppy boys' face. "Zumtime Ah-hhrrtt is zaadness, zumtime Ahhhrt is vunny. Ligga lyyfva," showing him a woman and a knife.

" Well that's very interesting Art. Thank you for your lecture..." he looked around. The girls were silent. So were his teammates. He was on his own.

" Daz more."

" Really." Preppy boy was looking a little pale now, almost polite.

" Zumtime Ahhhrt is...mahaadness ...zee com-paash-an," The tattooed thug grabbed the axe from its perch and brought it's elongated cutting edge into clear view of his student.

Now there was a quiet gasp throughout the bar.

" ... Ahhhrt can be deathhha." Slowly he brought the axe around in front of this most attentive student who pushed his head to the back of the chair, the axe blade now at his neck. Preppy boy's eyes were huge.

Arthur's arm swelled as he held the heavy axe with one hand, his other hand behind his back. He continued.

" Zumtime Ahhhhrt brings you to you are knees." Preppy boy keeping his chin up slowly let his knees find the floor with the gentle but firm guidance of the blade. Then our thug pulled it away from the neck. Preppy boy closed his eyes.

" Or mahhbe she iss zee paaower of zug-gestion ..." he said playfully, "ozzer time she chops off our head."

sssshht! And crash.

Arthur brought the blade down onto the table and sank it deep into the wood planks. The whole bar let out a cry in perfect unison. Preppy boy shook for a second then actually blacked out still on his knees.

Then dead silence.

"Allo...Allo..." Arthur asked the sleeping wonder, then he turned to preppy boy's friends. "He zleeps... ligga zee in-noz-zent."

Arthur broke into a belly laugh, which further terrified these unfortunate ones. This in itself made him laugh harder. But quickly enough, he contained himself shaking his head, adjusting his shoulders and lifting his eyebrows in a nearly nervous tick...almost a look of self-disgust.

He slowly walked behind the bar with the axe in hand. All the patrons, mostly regulars stood up looking like they wanted to applaud, but somehow remained stupefied in silence...peering at the scene. Arthur took a slight bow when their eyes fell on him...and the preppies...just stared at their friend still on his knees, out cold.

One patron took the floor..."Now that is a piece of work," he said pointing to the sleeping antagonist. Nobody clapped. Just silence. Arthur managed another shrug and poured a draft...now stone faced and untouched.

The show was over. Preppy boy will always want to forget. I know I never will.

I followed Tress out much later. She said, "I'm around the corner."

Window shopping is the point here. Seems pretty bland when you get down to it.

"So Tress what do you do?"

"Arthur did not say?"

"Not exactly. I was asking for directions to a travel shop...to pick up some mail."

"Ah. Oui."

"He said I should speak to you."

"I take people places they have never been. Come."

We walked by some ladies that sat behind picture windows. Some were petite and appeared terribly bored. Others were huge and just a tad scary. Something for everyone, but pretty much a business thing. Not even a hundred yards and we were walking through a street level door to a staircase.

Up we climbed. It was a fine journey following her up the stairs. I went in expecting to

see posters of pyramids and turquoise beaches. Instead, it was a quiet room all done in deep red, velvet walls, leather sofa...etc. with the obligatory this and that. "This ain't no travel shop." I thought.

" I guess I should introduce myself. My name..."

" I don't want to know your name. What do you want to drink."

"Whatever you are having."

She was already pouring herself a whisky..."Glace?"

"hmm?"

"Do you want ice?"

" Please."

"This is good rye. From Canada. "

" Hmmm" I nodded.

" So I will take you on a tour of my shop. Here there are five rooms. One room for each of the senses and this first room...for the fools."

" So you're not selling..."

" I teach the Touch " she said, as though it was pure business.

" And there is a difference?"

" When you go east you pass many temples and such. On the way, you will see the Hindu gods of my homeland...look for the coiled serpent. For you that is a beginning."

" So there is something to this?"

"It is the finest and oldest of arts that I teach."

" ... since the beginning of man, I'm sure."

" Non." She wagged her index finger at me. "Most have no experience of Touch. You

speak of sex." Now she was a schoolteacher in tone.

" Oh."

" It is Touch...without touching, 'l'erotique'."

" So I am an Untouchable?" I laughed, nearly disappointed.

" In these rooms, that is good. This is why we journey east. To be untouchable here in this room opens the door to the next and so on."

She continued but now sympathetically, " That is why so few go beyond this room. They are fooled, distracted, and at the same time, how you say...deprived..." She gently put her hand on her breast, then her belly.

"Imagine a life spent where you touch no one. And no one ever touches you."

The French accent was killing me. So did the idea.

" I can't imagine." I said.

" This is to stay in this room forever. You have already left it behind. Non?"

" Yeah. But you're confusing me. You just said to be untouchable is good."

" Untouchable is l'erotique."

" Ah...but to touch no one and have no one touch you..."

" oui. Yes. To live untouched...this is deprivation. O.K. it is the same word, " she said somewhat agitated, "but it means two different things." She was getting cross.

" I'm trying to get there, Tress."

" O.K. This Untouchable, she...how do you say? She disquiets us most...Oui. She is mother, daughter and lover," she nodded as if to reassure herself then she broke a smile.

"And he? He is father, son, and sacrifice?" I joked derisively.

Ah! You know. You know," she laughed and shrugged. "But you do not know... Touch is to drink of the chalice. She is the ocean you must chart."

"And you know my course in life?"

"It is written all over you. A million tattoos."

"Then you know that I seek something real...I want the truth."

"To seek is not the same as to burn. What is more real, more true, than that which consumes you?"

"Maybe we talk about the same things..."

"Like what? Don't say it," she commanded with her hand stopping me.

"You teach Touch... some teach love," I said thinking of Katherine.

"Ah! Words. And more words," she said almost disgusted. "I am not talking of love. What is this love that everyone finds? They use it up and throw it away, non? They steal it and lie with it, then curse it, non? Tell me. Non?"

"It's not meant to be that way. Not all people are..."

"Ah you know you know. You want to believe in a different world. Bien. Have faith."

"Some have known the truth and love is always a part of it," I argued.

"What is this truth?" she laughed. "Some may know something, but if they truly know, they keep it to themselves. The rest of us are content to lie to ourselves. She alone will show you. The rest is of no concern."

"If they know, they teach it."

"If they know...then they are dangerous. They learn to disappear or they don't teach for long."

The certainty with which she said this stopped me.

"Well you can always have hope..." I said in mocking despair.

"Ah! Oui. The last daemon."

"Man...I can't get anywhere with you."

" Ah! But you touch me," she smiled. "Touch. It is l'erotique."

" I can't imagine a world or a life without love."

Now I was getting depressed.

" Fear has many faces. One of those faces can be what you call love."

" I wish you hadn't said that."

" Ah, you see. It hurts, non?"

" What else is there, Tress. What else is there?"

That passionate tone came back to her voice. She put her hand on her breast then moved it slowly to her belly, just as she had before.

"There is more, but that comes much later. Apres, apres," she concluded.

We sat for a few minutes and said nothing.

"Tress, I would like to do this. I mean, I have time but no money."

" Arthur is my patron. You are his guest this evening."

" So this is Arthur's work?"

" Oui. Yes."

"I thought there was something about..."

" It will not be all new for you. This I can see. It's just more. But leave your caution in this room. Be thirsty."

" Done." I said with a half smile.

" This room you see is obviously a room for gratification...immédiatement. Boys from college and the faster-better-stronger crowd...they like this room. All my rooms have a name. This one is Ouest."

" I am almost untouched," I smiled.

She laughed. " After this room our journey takes us to foreign lands. Most never go beyond this room. And few make it to the last...except Art of course."

" I see. "

"Now I take you to the land of kings and slaves, that is if you want to go?"

" Yes."

"From here on we journey east ... we are 'Further-older-wiser.'" She opened a door to a dark, narrow, but longer room. There was one black, high back chair in the center of this room. A deep bass rhythmic groove was playing. "Who is that guitarist?" I thought.

" Changez. Sit there." She walked around the chair and behind a translucent screen. I watched her change in the dim blue light of the mirrored wall that I faced... only ten feet in front of me.

"Do you like to look at yourself?"

" Seems I have no choice." I returned. I took a sip of the rye.

" This journey starts the same as all others. Look at yourself. Do you recognize him?" I looked carefully at the dark reflection in the mirror. Featureless, faceless ...maybe a man, or a promise yet to be broken.

" If I didn't know it was me, I wouldn't know it was me."

" True isn't it?" she said.

Then she appeared from behind the screen and turned the music up so that the chair vibrated on the deep notes. She walked by me as though I was no longer there. She was alone with the mirror and the Africa that shook me and swallowed me. If there is a king of rock n roll, he's no white man.

Time bends. Space curves.

The feigned caress of the illicit, the gum and the runny nose, the locked knees of non-compliance, the clothing off shoulder and in the way, and finally, disrobed and tentative, the arched submission...she was dangerous. This was art bringing cliché to its knees.

Still the seductress, she approached my chair. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, meditating on restraint. She circled behind the chair and tied on a blindfold. While everything went black I felt the pit of my stomach.

I felt her breath on my neck. Electric.

"I see you are not touched," she whispered.

"Not yet." I took another sip of rye.

"Good, then we go further."

Tress took my hand and led me across the room and up a couple of stairs. She opened another door and we walked through. The door closed behind me. It was quiet and very warm. I lay back, this time on cushions.

"This room you can smell things that are both exotique and exciting." I heard her walk a few steps and then return.

Aromas slowly wafted by my nose, one after the other. Some were recognizable, some were like fleeting memories. Some were her. Some made me feel funny and flashed purples and lightning blues in my private darkness.

"You are in the land of bondage. This is Egypt, thousands of years ago. Now you are a slave."

She walked away and returned. No touch, just a hint of pressure on my wrists.

"This fragrance suits you," she whispered.

"Touched?"

"No."

"Follow me." This time she helped me up. Maybe it was the rye, but my balance was off.

The next room was warmer. I stumbled. The whole floor was a mattress of sorts Quiet music.

Eastern.

"Lie down."

I lay down and she knelt beside me. The heat was terrific and made me sweat a river.

There I felt the quill, maybe leather, maybe a knife...

Time bends, space curves.

"Are you touched?"

My skin was purging itself, salty and wet. I remained silent.

"Then we go further," she whispered.

Next room. I am sitting lotus now and sense that she kneels in front of me.

...a very quiet plaintive cry from a bow and string took me down.

"What do you hear?"

"Nothing. Just that weeping."

"This is India. Here you hear only yourself. Does it sound true or is it a broken promise?"

"I hear nothing." I protested.

"Rest here. Listen." Just my heart, my breathing, her breathing. Sadness. More sadness. The string and the bow crying...

"Touched?"

"Yes." The fatigue had set in. I had succumbed.

"Good," she whispered gently. "Then we taste the last room."

She released the pressure on my wrists then left the room. I took off the blindfold and put on my clothes... This room was dimly lit. There was a pedestal in the center and on it was a book. Not a big book. A small one.

'Book of SHE' was the title. I picked it up and just then a pin light lit a space on the sofa in front of me. I sat down to read. "Hmmm. Just ten pages. How odd," I thought.

Immediately I was absorbed and barely noticed Tress return, now robed. She sat side-saddle next to me on the sofa, her wrist over my closest shoulder, her eyes on the book. When I completed it, I looked at her and she smiled.

" She is waiting..."

" ...on a promise." I added.

" Yes. Does it speak to you?"

" Who wrote this?"

" Justine."

" What man would she not destroy?"

" Who is to say?... she is dangereux...especially to the thirsty," she said coyly.

" And if his thirst cannot be quenched?"

" Bien. It is your voyage...be untouchable," she concluded for me.

Hours had passed...Roman time.

"Remember and practice," she said," It is dawn, I must rest."

I left in the early morning light.

I received only two letters...one from Penthy. He informed me that he had read my letters over the last year to our mutual friends and to family. What possessed him to do that?

" I thought that you would be glad that I shared your letters... few as they are. Everyone has been asking about you," he wrote.

Yeah...I'm sure. As though I confide in a friend to have it publicly announced. I am far away from them so it is pointless to be mad. In the future if I write, I'll be sure to water it down.

I came through Paris. Spent a week there. Walked a lot and saw a bit of everything. But I've never seen such a city. Slept in the subway with some other back packers and played for a little change.

The subway is just not the place to be at night even if you're not alone. But every place is packed here. It was just after dawn and I was beat from lack of sleep.

I sat alone at a sidewalk café and enjoyed an espresso, long and black. The streets were quiet and I had taken out my guitar just to play for myself quietly. I was absorbed in a thought... something waits for me ... Yin yang, a white temple...maybe a tranquil pool reflecting clouds...no telling how dark or deep...

She came out of the elegant hotel next door- such an unpretentious doorway for such an expensive bed- strikingly foreign, dressed in white...sleeveless but for an Indian silk scarf embroidered with gold and black patterns that she wore over her head, a mock veil that fell with her full straight hair to her waist...no jewelry except for a hammered gold arm band below her shoulder offsetting the tattoo...a sign or a word too small to read at that distance.

More than anything, I felt something from her.

She was pure slave, ancient and empowered. A lightened brown impression comfortable in any time or space.

She walked by me. I continued to look down at the strings and kept playing my poverty as something beautiful. She came around the railing that circled the tables and sat at the table directly behind me. There were no other patrons so this seemed odd.

Waiter came out. " Espresso s'il vous plait," she said smoothly. What a voice.

Moments later I heard the waiter return and caught a glimpse of the two of them in the reflection of the window over my left shoulder. There was some quiet talk as the waiter left her coffee and then he disappeared. I played on quietly.

He returned with my second espresso then quietly informed me that I was not allowed to play here or to collect money on their property. I was not welcome back.

I'm a stranger in a foreign land.

" I play for myself."

" Please monsieur."

I put my guitar in the case closed it with a bang and swallowed the rest of my espres-

so...sat for a minute or so but failed to collect myself. I stood up slowly and turned around focusing my eyes through the glass at the waiter who now stood inside with a smirk on his face. My jaw clenched...the pores over my entire body opened. Heat emanated from my ears.

This was to be purely pissed off.

Her reflection in the window questioned me. I saw her looking down trying to light her cigarette. "Innocent or conspirator?" I wondered.

I set off walking by her, but then heard her say with this strange accent,

" Be true or be cursed."

To say something...but the blood was pounding in my head. A good time to keep silent.

Such a cool, calming voice.

I took a few steps more then felt the spell. I felt like I was committing a crime, so I stopped. I was turning to stone. My tongue went to paste, my mouth went completely dry, as though from the harshest roach.

Stoned in peculiar fashion.

Yes it is.

To wait... to turn ...and then look back at her...to feel my head tilt to the side. At first I thought it was the magick. But no...this was different. Katherine had taught me...or warned me.

Strangely, I remembered that bizarre time under the moon, when we both lay in the mud together just before the night of the goat. "Voodoo," she had said. She looked deep in my eyes. " Voodoo lays her veil over Rome. Out of fear, they accept this charm- they call it Law. They write it in stone and they obey."

I remember how she cackled.

Then Kat had said, "But she...she knows only possession."

A split second had passed. I dismissed the thought and tried to focus on this woman be-

fore me. I felt it again and then saw it in her face.

Seconds turn to years. This slave girl was old and wise but still appeared young, and I watched her through a window in an isolated house. I watch patiently from my grave. Such a thought. Shake it off.

Her green eyes looked steadily into mine. She slowly exhaled a plume of smoke and waited.

Touched.

I stood there saying nothing, still clenching my teeth... soaking her up with my eyes.

An eternity passed.

"Be true or be cursed," she said as though I must know how to respond. She took a long drag, still watching and waiting, then exhaled looking away, depriving me of her fiery eyes.

Fatigue or anger. I'm not sure. Maybe some strange sadness. But I felt it from her.

Before she could look back, I walked. Left Paris the same day.

I should've said something. But then, I could not.

There are worse crimes, I suppose.

It has been months since I left England, yet my thoughts wander back to Katherine and her wild but kind nature. Whatever my path, somehow I know that what she gave me still grows inside.

I left her nothing. What could I give?

I should open that package sometime. But first, I should go further.

So now the screeching wheels have gotten to me. I unplug pen from page , and black from white...Back to the world of colour...until I care enough again to write.

Yes it is.