



**Jean-Jacques Greif
Hitchhiking**

1960

Cassis

Gretry knows Marseille like the back of his hand.

“This is the Saint-Charles train station. At the bottom of this staircase, there’s a bus that goes to the Cassis road.”

Half an hour later, at the end of the bus line.

“Where is it, your Cassis road?”

“Wait, I’ll check the map. Here.”

“That boulevard?”

“Yessir. According to the map, we’re already in the countryside.”

“Is this a recent map?”

“Hmm, 1947... It looks like they built a whole suburb since then. We just have to walk, we’ll get out of Marseille eventually.”

“You’re supposed to know the city by heart. You haven’t been here since 1947?”

“It’s my first time... But I studied the map!”

“There are houses for miles. If I had known, I wouldn’t have packed so much stuff in my backpack.”

“Hey, who’s carrying the tent and the stove?”

“I have the frying pan, the pot and the plates... Look, it already feels a bit like the countryside here.”

“There are still cars turning left and right. Let’s at least go to the crossroads.”

After the crossroads, the houses become scarce. A bare, dried-out scrubland appears. The boulevard loses its sidewalk. We put down our bags and raise our thumbs. No car stops. An hour later, Gretry is getting restless.

“The bend over there would be better.”

“I don’t see why.”

“Cars accelerate after the crossroads, so they don’t want to stop, while in the bend they slow down anyway. I’m saying that, but what do I know? I just studied the map of Marseille. You’re the king of hitchhiking.”

“I hitchhiked in England, it was different.”

“You stood on the other side of the road?”

“Yup. Plus, we were only two.”

“Well, we’re two, if I count correctly.”

“I say four. Each bag takes up as much space as a person in the car.”

Hitchhiking

“Let’s split. I go to the bend, you stay here.”

“In that case, where do we meet?”

“In Cassis, they have a town hall. On the town hall square.”

“The first one to arrive waits for the other.”

“Okay. See you later.”

It seems he is right, with his story of the bend. A Dauphine¹ slows down when it sees me, then stops where he is and takes him away. I stay stuck at my crossroads. The sun and temperature rise. I should have brought a large handkerchief. I would make knots at its four corners to turn it into a hat, like Captain Haddock in *The Crab with the Golden Claws*². How many kilometers between Marseille and Cassis? Twenty? Twenty-five? If the Dauphine was going to Cassis, he is already there. I will at least walk to the bend... This backpack weighs a ton.

In the troupe, we got no wooden legs.

We got fools, but they blend in.

The best way to walk

Is still ours:

Put one foot in front of the other

*And start over.*³

I am a Roman legionary. I already have the bag. Missing the armor, the shield and the sword. Going on foot to Rome. No car, all of a sudden. Back to the Roman era through a space-time rift. Get in the shade. Walk to the small grove of trees over there...

An engine noise. I turn around, I raise my thumb without thinking. It’s a farmer, sitting on his tractor, pulling a sort of flatbed trailer.

“Get on behind, my boy!”

“Thank you sir.”

By Golly! Thousands of cars overtake us. The drivers smile and wave as they pass by. If I had stayed on the side of the road, one of them would have stopped and I would be speeding to Cassis. Instead, I advance at three miles per hour, roasting like a chicken.

“There, I turn to go to the field. Good luck!”

Traveled one mile, lost half an hour. No more shrub that would give me some shade. *Cornegidouille!*⁴

Striving this desolate scrubland and pink stone hills, almost invisible paths lead to secret olive groves and hidden vineyards. Helpful winemakers and olive growers take

¹ A small Renault car.

² A Tintin adventure.

³ A summer camp marching song.

⁴ This literary swearword is taken from *Ubu roi*, a play by Alfred Jarry (1873-1907). *Corne* = horn. *Gidouille* is the enormous belly of king Ubu.

Hitchhiking

me to the next path in their old truck. Can't complain: a kilometer by car doesn't wear out shoes as much as a kilometer on foot¹.

Grétry is waiting for me on a bench, reading his newspaper.

"It's me! You been here long?"

"A quarter of an hour. The first car dropped me off halfway, then I slowed down. I didn't want to humiliate you."

"Three p.m. Seven hours for twenty kilometers. The Roman legionaries went faster."

"There was one who walked so fast that he dropped his helmet."

"His helmet?"

"*Cassis*."

"Oh, very funny... Say, I could eat a bite."

"The shops are closed, it's nap time... The newsstand man told me about a camping ground on the cliff above the beach. We could set up there and then we'll buy something to eat."

We put up the tent, inflate the air mattresses. I hate inflating the mattress. If I were a trumpet player, I'd have to blow all day... By the way, why did we decide to visit the Riviera? Too hot. We should have chosen Sweden. Besides, Swedish women are not shy, or so I've heard.

"Hey, Gretry, we could go down to the beach. The water should be good at this time."

"We haven't finished setting up. Look, there's a trench around the other tents. It's probably against the rain."

"I camped with my father in Brittany when I was little. It rained all the time. We didn't dig ditches around the tent. Look at the sky: not a cloud in sight. You think it's going to rain?"

"Not in the next five minutes."

"We've worked hard, we deserve a little dip. We'll dig tomorrow."

The next day, the sky remains blue. We postpone the start of the work for twenty-four hours. In the middle of the second night:

"Greif, Greif, wake up!"

"What, where am I?"

"The flood! The tent is full of water. Don't you hear the storm?"

"Oh, rage, oh despair²... Let me sleep."

¹ Quoting a marching song: *Un kilomètre à pied, ça use, ça use, un kilomètre à pied, ça use les souliers. Deux kilomètres à pied, etc.* (One kilometer on foot wears out, wears out, one kilometer on foot wears out shoes, two kilometers on foot, etc.)

² *Ô rage, ô désespoir*, from Pierre Corneille's *Le cid*.

Hitchhiking

“We have to dig! Get up!”
 “I don’t have a shovel... Tomorrow morning...”
 “I started digging with one of the tin cups. Take the other and come help me! Our clothes are all wet.”
 “They’ll dry...”
 “Hurry up!”
 “Well, well, I’m coming... Hey, you’ve already dug a lot... You don’t need me.”
 “Shit, Greif.”
 “Uh, don’t get angry, I’ll dig!”
 Hey, I can sleep while digging... Zrabom! A monstrous thunderbolt. Never wake up a sleepwalker suddenly. Do they have storms in Sweden? If it’s to get wet, I might as well go back into the tent and lie down on my air mattress.
 “You can go back to bed. I borrowed a shovel from the neighbor, I’ll finish the trench. It’ll go fast now.”
 “No need for a tent... We’d live with Swedish women...”
 “What are you saying?”
 “Me? Nothing... I’m asleep.”

The sea, the vast sea¹.

On the harbor.
 “Look, Gretry, a Snipe!”
 “A what?”
 “The boat, there, with the guy in blue who folds the sails. *Bonjour, msieur*. ‘Tis great, the Snipe!”
 “You know the Snipe, boy?”
 “I just spent three weeks in Brittany at a water sports center. They had Snipes and Vauriens.”
 “Té², the Vaurien, it’s not a boat, it’s a toy. With the Snipe, you go out in any weather. You want to have a go?”
 “Ah yes, thank you...”
 “You come tomorrow morning after eleven o’clock. I’ll go out to sea very early, then I have to go to work in Marseille. I’ll leave the sails on. Will you be with your friend?”
 “Yes.”
 “There are two life jackets. Don’t forget to put them on!”
 The next day, we go down to the harbor with a picnic. Gretry is worried.

¹ *La mer, la vaste mer*, from a poem in Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal*.

² He speaks with a southern accent that I can’t render in English.

Hitchhiking

“I’ve never done it, me.”

“Hitchsailing?”

“Sailing.”

“In Brittany, it was already my second time. They gave me an assistant instructor certificate. I’m used to taking beginners out to sea. Boys or girls... There was a nurse in the sailing center. *What would you say to a little boat ride, Bernadette?* Guess what happened.”

“During a move, she stumbles and falls into your arms.”

“Exactly. Rather a wrong move, actually. The outcome is that we turned turtle.”

“Does that mean capsized?”

“The boat turned over and we fell into the water. It was a Vaurien. With a Snipe, there’s no danger.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Well, here we are. I’ll hold the rudder and the mainsail. You take care of the jib, it’s the small sail in front. You just have to pull or release this rope when I tell you. Except on a boat you’re not allowed to say *rope*. There are sheets, halyards, stays, but no rope. Instead of pulling and releasing, we say *sheet in* and *sheet out*. So I’ll tell you: *Sheet in the jib!* It’s simple.”

“Just tell me *pull the rope*, it will be more effective. I promise not to denounce you to the maritime police.”

We leave the harbor of Cassis. Curiouser and curiouser... Under a blue sky that promises calm waters, little waves jump in all directions. Mischievous wind gusts play hopscotch. The Snipe is not that stable. Take it easy... Don’t panic!

“Sheet out your jib a bit... I mean, let the rope go... We’re going to tack. Beware: the boom, that horizontal bar, will change sides. You have to keep an eye on it, otherwise it can knock you out. We’ll also change sides. Ready? Here we go... Now, sheet in your jib again. Hmm, it didn’t help much. We’ll repeat the maneuver... We’re not too far from the harbor, that’s something.”

“You look worried.”

“The wind keeps changing direction. In the Atlantic, you can count on it. You orient your sails once and for all and keep your course. Do you see the little ribbon on the stay? It indicates the wind direction. Or let’s say it should indicate it. Instead, it panics like a compass at the north pole.”

“That’s annoying?”

“If we needed to go somewhere, it would be. We can stay here quietly and eat our picnic.”

“We will have to return to the port someday.”

“When we have eaten, the wind will surely have calmed down.”

Hitchhiking

“I’m not so hungry, all of a sudden. We don’t risk drifting to Algeria, I hope.”

“Algeria is far away. Maybe until the island of Monte Cristo¹.”

“I don’t even remember where it is, that one. Near the Château d’If?”

“No, near Corsica, over there. Note that I don’t know if it really exists. Well, I’m tacking once more. Watch out for the boom... I’m going to try to return to the port.”

I tack and tack again. One time we get closer to the port, one time we move away from it. In the end, we manage to return, but don’t ask me how. We tie up the boat and go ashore, legs somewhat unsteady. An old sea dog is watching us.

“You’re barmy, you kids. Going out in a mistral² like this!

The tomato war

We want to try all the beaches on the Riviera. Next stop: La Ciotat. We split up like the other day. I get to the city hall in La Ciotat around two o’clock. Gretry has been waiting for me for about ten minutes. He looks happy.

“An hour earlier! We’re making progress.”

“It’s not as far. Maybe 15 kilometers. The real progress will be when we can go faster than on foot.”

We find a big campsite just behind the beach. We bought a child’s shovel to dig the trench. We should have also bought the bucket to make sand castles. The beach bores me. I just read and swim for an hour or two, then I look at the pretty girls walking by. They don’t look at me, so I get in a bad mood. Gretry suggests something for me to do.

“Why don’t you go shopping?”

“We did say: each in turn. Today, it’s you.”

He brings back pâté, salami, veal cutlets, breadcrumbs, mushrooms, macaroni. He lights the butane stove. Just one fire, it’s not enough. We have to cook the cutlets first and then the macaroni, or vice versa. At least it keeps us busy.

When it’s my turn, I buy country bread, tomatoes, goat cheese, and fruit. Gretry protests.

“You know I don’t like tomatoes.”

“But no. How could I know?”

“I tell you every other day.”

“Really? I don’t remember at all. Are you sure?”

“It’s selfish. I pay half, but you eat everything.”

¹ The island where Edmond Dantès, after escaping from the Château d’If prison, finds a fabulous treasure (in Alexandre Dumas’s *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*).

² A wild wind that blows often near Marseille.

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“Everybody likes tomatoes. It’s just delicious, especially when the weather is that hot. And me, I eat your menu without complaining. I don’t accuse you of being selfish when you choose things you like.”

“If I bought something you hate, you would complain.”

“Oh, I like everything!”

Our neighbor, a plump graying German, slowly gets off his big black motorcycle. He takes off his helmet, his black leather jacket, and his undershirt.

“Ach, zu heiß!”¹

His fat torso steams as much as a locomotive. He smiles when he sees Gretry preparing the cutlets. He thinks we eat all day.

“Ach, Franzosen! Immer am essen, immer am fressen!”²

Gretry and I have been studying German since eighth grade, so we can converse with our neighbor.

“Hey Gretry, you should ask him where he learned to know Frenchmen so well.”

“He may have come here about twenty years ago. Or he met French prisoners in Germany. He may have known your father!”

“In Auschwitz? It’s possible. I’ll describe my dad to him: a very thin man, with a shaved head, wearing a gray and white striped pajama...”

As we don’t want to embarrass him, we stick to talking about the present.

“Where do you go every day on your motorcycle?”

“Today, I saw the Lubéron mountain and the town of Manosque. *Sehr Schön!* Tomorrow I’m going to Avignon. That’s where the Palace of the Popes is, isn’t it? You have a beautiful country, gentlemen. A beautiful country...”

When Gretry goes shopping, he brings back books. He doesn’t buy them, he steals them.

“They’re going to nab you some day, and you’ll be in trouble.”

“Come on! You’re happy to read them on the beach. Besides, I don’t steal them, I borrow them. Today I returned Gide and Sartre.”

“You took them from Cassis, you’re returning them to La Ciotat. I don’t know what the Cassis bookseller would think.”

“Everybody does what I do. There’s probably a guy who took books from La Ciotat and returned them to Cassis. It balances out.”

¹ Too hot!

² Ah, Frenchmen! Always eating, always wolfing!

Hitchhiking

Ah ah ah, let's laugh three times.

Boldness, more boldness, always boldness, as Danton said¹: we decide to travel fifty kilometers all at once! We get up at dawn and hit the road at seven in the morning.

“Did you understand? When leaving Six-Fours, instead of going back up towards La Seyne-sur-Mer, you keep going to Saint-Mandrier-sur-Mer. There, you follow the coast to the *Pinède*² camping ground and you look for Maurice Garbarz.”

“Who's that again?”

“A friend of my father's. He was also in Auschwitz³. My father and he belonged to the same camping organization, *Les Amis de la Nature*. When I went camping with my father, he always had the tent next to us.”

“I'm not going to rush. I'd rather you arrive before me. That way, you can introduce me.”

“His wife's name is Renée and his son is Jean-Jacques.”

“He looks like you?”

“Not at all. He's only thirteen⁴. He has red hair and a glass eye.

“To find him in the camping ground, I ask all the kids: *Do you have a glass eye?*

Maybe he's spending an hour or two on the Bandol beach. Or maybe I'm luckier than him for once. Anyway, I arrive first, early in the afternoon.

“Bonjour Renée, bonjour Maurice, bonjour Jean-Jacques.”

“Hey, Jean-Jacques! You recognize him, Renée? It's Lonek's son!”

“I knew he was on the coast. Lonek told us you might come visit us.”

“We're at coffee. Renée, give a cup!”

“Here you are. You have sugar, there. You remember when we camped in Belle-Isle? That was in 1950, ten years ago. How old were you then?”

“Five years old, my brother Noël four. I remember it very well.”

“Lonek didn't give you much to eat then, so I fried a few more potatoes and told him: *Look, Lonek, I have too many potatoes. If you want some for your kids...*”

“Your father wasn't ashamed to camp back then. Now he's a real bourgeois. Since he lives on Boulevard Saint-Germain... I think he lets your mother decide.”

“What's for sure is she doesn't like camping. They're spending their vacation in Poland with Olivier. They have friends in Warsaw, they're going together to the Baltic Sea.”

“In Poland? That's really like Lonek. Me, give me millions, I don't go back to Poland. After how the Poles treated us! Mind you, he says that in his town the people

¹ During the French Revolution.

² Pine grove.

³ I told his story in *Le ring de la mort*, then translated it into English. It was published by Bloomsbury USA as *The Fighter* in 2006.

⁴ I am fifteen and Gretry is sixteen.

Hitchhiking

were not anti-Semitic. It was the Austrian part of Poland, they were more civilized than in the Russian part.”

“Wait, I think I see my friend. Hey, Gretry!”

“Renée, give a cup.”

The tents are pitched on a hill amidst the pines. It feels like Sweden! I would gladly stay in the shade, but Gretry and Jean-Jacques Garbarz want to go to the beach twice a day. As soon as I take the rocky path down to the sea, the sun gives me a left hook to knock out a bear. It’s impossible to counter, the opponent is too strong. Dirty brute! My fellow sufferers are in just as much pain as I am. I dread the moment when one of them will stop.

“I can’t take it anymore, you guys. Go on without me!”

“We’re almost there. Put in a little effort...”

“I can’t stand on my legs anymore. My strength is leaving me.”

“We’ll stay with you until the Fort Bravo patrol arrives.”

“You’re crazy! The Comanches will get here before the patrol. You’ll die for nothing... I forbid it. I’m your officer, you must obey me. Everyone has to die someday! Tell my mother I thought of her until the end.”

That reminds me that Jean-Jacques Garbarz lost his eye playing cowboys and Indians in the summer camp at Mimizan. A Comanche arrow! Talking of summer camp, a group of children is walking in front of us with a young instructor. These kids, the sun doesn’t bother them. They yell:

The Pope is dead. A new Pope is called to reign!

Spider? What a funny name for a Pope!

Why not dragonfly or butterfly?

Ha ha ha, let’s laugh three times.

You’ll make us die of laughter!

Since my story amuses you, I’ll go ahead and repeat it.

The Pope is dead. A new Pope is called to reign.

Spider? What a funny name for a Pope!

Why not dragonfly or butterfly?

Etc.

By the fifth time, Gretry gets angry.

“If they do it again, I’ll throw stones at them.”

Despite this threat, Jean-Jacques Garbarz, hypnotized, starts reciting along with the children.

¹ *Un nouveau pape est appelé à régner*, which sounds like *Un nouveau pape est appelé Araignée*, A new pope is called spider.

Hitchhiking

The Pope is dead. A new Pope is called to reign.

Spider? What a funny name for a Pope!

Me too, I like it.

“Have you noticed, it’s a song without music!”

“A song without music, I call it a poem.”

“But no. A poem, you can recite in different ways. While here, the tone is always exactly the same. When they say *Araignée*, they go up on *rai* and they come back down on *gnée*. It resembles what is called *sprechgesang* in modern music. I’ll have to talk to my brother about it.”

“Your brother who is in high school?”

“No, no, not Noël. The other brother, Olivier.”

“Ah yes, the musician.”

“He wants to become a composer.”

“He’s a little young, no?”

“He’s ten. He’s already composed several pieces for the piano.”

“So these nasty kids are making modern music without knowing it. Hey, where are they?”

Jean-Jacques Garbarz shows a small path on the right.

“They went that way. They may be going to the nudist beach.”

“Yesterday you told us that it is surrounded by steep rocks and that the nudists arrive by boat.”

“We can see them from above. They are tiny, of course.”

“Strange excursion goal for a summer camp: *Today we’re going to ogle the nudists. Don’t forget to bring your binoculars!*”

Maurice Garbarz reads *L’Humanité*¹. Gretry widens his eyes. It’s even better than a nudist.

“You are a communist?”

“You see.”

“You are a factory worker?”

“Communists aren’t all factory workers.”

“Are there communist bosses?”

“Me, I am both a worker and a boss. What do you say about that?”

“Worker and boss... Is that a riddle?”

“I am a leather goods craftsman, self-employed. I make wallets and bags. My wife works with me.

¹ The Communist daily newspaper.

Hitchhiking

“You own your own business. Under a communist regime, the state would confiscate it.”

“It would belong to everyone. Oil companies and banks would also belong to everyone, including me.”

“Do you think you would be rich? In America, there are rich and poor people. In communist countries, everyone is poor. Look in Russia!

“You can’t compare the Soviet Union to America. You have to compare to Russia before the revolution. Now, no one is starving there. They’re not poor. I know poor. When I was a child in Warsaw, I didn’t have shoes, not even to walk in the snow in winter.”

“There were very poor people, barefoot children, in France at the beginning of the century. Democracy allowed us to reach a much higher standard of living than in a communist country.”

“You’re studying, but I dropped out of school at twelve. I am ignorant, I speak French poorly¹, I can’t discuss with you. If my elder son was here, he would answer you. He studied, he went to Polytechnique...”

“Is he rich?”

“Oh, he earns well, can’t complain. He’s in insurance.”

“You see, you were very poor and your son is rich. Capitalism works!”

Green grapes

We take leave one morning. Eastward, full steam ahead! Bolder than Danton: seventy-five kilometers! I arrive in the late afternoon, more than an hour before Gretry.

“At first it was going well,” he says, “but then I waited at least three hours in a place called La Londe-les-Maures.”

“Ah yes, I passed by there. It’s strange, I never see you by the side of the road.”

“Me, I’ve never seen you either.”

In Le Lavandou, we find a beautiful spot under the pines, right behind the beach. It’s called the *Pinède* camping ground again. There’s room because the month is coming to an end. People who take their vacation from July 14th to August 15th have already left.

Neighbors with an old Simca offer to take us to Paris, or almost.

“We’re leaving tomorrow morning. We live in Brunoy. You’ll just have to share the fuel costs. Let’s say three thousand francs per person.”

“Thirty new francs?”

“You young people adopt these new francs right away. At our age, we will never get used to them.”

We examine this friendly proposal. Gretry decides to accept.

¹ He does indeed in the French version.

Hitchhiking

“I’m more than fed up with hitchhiking.”

“You have a bad memory of your forced stop in Lalonde-Ionla.”

“Three hours in the sun, thank you. They’ll drive all day tomorrow and all night. The day after tomorrow I’m in Paris.”

“Me, I think it’s too expensive. I’m going to try my luck with hitchhiking.”

I ask the neighbors if they can get me out of Le Lavandou and put me on the road.

“We can drop you off on *Nationale 7*¹. Then it’s straight to Paris.”

They reach *Nationale 7* a little before Aix-en-Provence, but in the end they drop me off in Avignon. It’s 11 a.m.; we have already covered more than two hundred kilometers. Better than nothing!

Me who complained about the scarcity of cars on the Cassis road... Herds of automobiles, vans, trucks run right by me with a smirk on their face. I get dizzy. They seem to be racing. Hey, ho, you don’t see me? If I walk to the bend, maybe... Cars full to the brim. Parents, children, dogs, cats, luggage, inflatable boats, provisions for the road. No room for me. By the way, in the vehicles that took me on the coast, the driver was always alone. I imagine a couple.

“Look, a hitchhiker... Stop! The poor guy may have been waiting for hours.”

“You’re crazy. What if he is a highwayman. He kills us, and what’s more he steals the car.”

“You suspect everyone. He seemed too young to be a bandit.”

“So what, you’ve never heard of juvenile delinquency?”

“If he wanted to murder us, he wouldn’t have a backpack.”

“Okay, okay, I stop.”

By the time they agree, they are already twenty kilometers away. Me, back to square one.

I try the bend, the top of a hill, a crossroads, the end of a village. I walk along a vineyard. Hours in the sun. Ravaged by thirst. I go down into the vineyard and rip off a bunch. Sour, but it still refreshes.

Ouch, ouch, *oh là là!* After a quarter of an hour, I puke my guts out. No car stops to rescue me. Call an ambulance! I am dying in complete indifference. The grapes are too green... or rather, covered in sulfate. Against myxomatosis. I mean, phylloxera. Don’t confuse grapes and rabbits. I should have washed them... Except if I had water to wash them, I could have drunk it to quench my thirst.

With all my looking for the right bend, hill and village, I’ve already traveled 15 kilometers. Ten more to Orange. It’s worth going there. The ideal hitchhiking spot awaits me at the exit of Orange, I feel it.

¹ The main road from Paris to the Riviera before there were freeways.

Hitchhiking

The sun pretends to be a pumpkin. Orange floods of light pour into Orange. A city called Blue? Purple? Ah, I know: Vert-de-Maisons! Blanc-Mesnil¹! Yeah, not the same as the color alone. I'd sure like to eat an orange or two. No risk of sulfate—I peel them. Well, that'll teach me: the grapes, if I'd removed their skin, I wouldn't have gotten sick... I buy two oranges in Orange, a half baguette, a small goat cheese. I settle at the exit of the city. Cars continue to flow in a bubbling stream. The drivers don't see the side of the road. Their gaze is fixed on the goal of their journey, over there in the north. They turn on their headlights. As if it was waiting for that signal, twilight gives way to darkness. My shadow lengthens and multiplies. I increasingly resemble a ghost or a vampire. No one will stop anymore.

I go back to Orange. I buy a train ticket. Family discount. No more expensive than the gas fee contribution for the Simca. An empty train enters the station. Since the signs hanging from the sides of the railcars say Paris, I get on board. Still someone in the locomotive, I hope. We stop at mysterious stations: Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne, Lorrez-le-Bocage-Préaux. Paris four in the morning. The subway doesn't run yet. Is this how you treat your customers? I demand an apology! Refund! Well, got to walk home. Three-quarters of an hour of walking: boulevard Saint-Germain from one end to the other. Fortunately, Gretry agreed to take the plates and pots to lighten my bag. I call him at the beginning of the afternoon. His mother answers. No, he hasn't come back.

He calls me two days later.

“I've just arrived... A nightmare. The Simca broke down in the middle of the first night. A mechanic claimed he had fixed it. One hundred kilometers later, same story... Half the mechanics on the Nationale 7 have worked on it. They will send scholarly articles to the faculty of mechanism. In Auxerre, we thought it was dead, but a heroic mechanic undertook a last-chance operation that lasted more than six hours. He barely saved it. It managed to drag itself to Brunoy, but I don't think it'll make it through the winter.”

¹ Vert = green, blanc = white. The two cities are suburbs of Paris.

1961

Mutiny on board

I passed the first part of my baccalauréat exam last year with a *mention très bien*¹. My mother wanted to rent a small plane and write *MON FILS MENTION TRÈS BIEN* in white clouds in the sky, but in the end she just called everyone and offered me an automatic watch. Now that I am taking the second part, my parents want to know what gift would make me happy.

“You can ask for anything,” she says.

“Within reason, of course,” my father adds.

“We’re not rich, but dad is starting to make some money with the appraisals for the German embassy.”

“The other doctors in the neighborhood know me now, and they send clients to me for neuropsychiatry.”

“What do your classmates receive when they pass their baccalauréat?”

“I don’t know. A phonograph, a moped...”

“A new bed?”

“Moped. A motorized bicycle.”

“You want that?”

“No no. What I would like, I think, is a trip to America.”

Nothing easier. I can stay with cousin Sylvie in New Hampshire, with cousin Max in Minneapolis. My mother also knows a lot of people in New York.

“Tounia’s sister. Her name is Bronka. She emigrated over there before the war. Willy’s sister. You met her: she came to Paris a few years ago. She has a daughter your age, by the way.”

Willy, a brave G.I., liberated France in 1944. He married Reine, a friend of my mother. They often come to play bridge with my parents. I don’t remember his sister, but if she has a daughter my age then yes.

My mother takes care of everything. I don’t want to interfere: it brings her so much joy. She writes to Bronka, to Willy’s sister Mrs. Colen, to Max and Sylvie.

She buys my boat tickets.

¹ The baccalauréat, which marked the end of high school, was divided in two parts, the first one at the end of 11th grade and the second at the end of 12th grade. If the average of your marks was above 16 out of 20, you got a *très bien* (very good) mention. Your mention was *bien* (good) between 14 and 16, *assez bien* (good enough) between 12 and 14, *passable* (passed) between 10 and 12. Under 10, you failed. A *mention très bien* was quite unusual.

Hitchhiking

“You’re leaving on June 29 on the *Liberté* and coming back on September 22 on the *Flandres*. Just in time for your birthday... It’s expensive, but you’ll be housed and fed over there. I’ll give you some pocket money.”

Considering all things, within reasonable limits. There’s even enough left to go to the train station by taxi. She buys a platform ticket to accompany me to the train.

“Above all, don’t forget to give their gifts to Mrs. Colen, Bronka, Max and Sylvie. Thank them for their hospitality. Tell Mrs. Colen that we’ll host her daughter if she comes to Paris.”

“Only if she’s pretty.”

The sea train stops at the ship’s pier. The *Liberté* ocean liner doesn’t look like the small ridiculous ferries that used to take me to England. It’s a three-stacked floating palace with sides perforated by hundreds of portholes. Are there any buildings in Paris as big as this iron monster? Perhaps the Louvre—but the Louvre doesn’t cross the ocean.

I climb the gangplank. A ship’s commissioner examines my ticket.

“Tourist class, cabin 221. You go to the right and go down two floors.”

Having left my luggage in the cabin, I explore the ship. A marbled salon, a gilded salon, a small chapel, a pool, a movie theater... A different film every day! Already tonight: *The apartment*, by Billy Wilder. I go out on the deck. I sit in a comfortable deck chair. Tintin, the little reporter, sets off to Congo.

A charming stewardess:

“Would you like to rent the deck chair, sir?”

“Rent? How much?”

“Only three thousand, I mean thirty francs, for the crossing.”

“OK.”

“What name is it under?”

“Greif... G, r, e, i, f.”

Just like in the Luxembourg Gardens. As soon as you sit on a chair, the little old lady arrives: “Ten francs!” I mean cents. Except she doesn’t ask for your name. The stone bench is free, but you freeze your ass.

The last visitors are leaving. The gangplanks are removed. Pulled by three surly towboats, the large ship moves away from the dock, slowly crosses the harbor, and finally sets off into the open sea as if it wanted to catch the setting sun. The loudspeakers announce the first dinner service.

Oh, you didn’t have to go to all this trouble... White tablecloth, porcelain plates, silver cutlery, crystal glasses. Just reading the menu already makes me drool: *Soup with tender vegetables from the Breton garden, fillets of sole in their mustard seed garland, wild boar steak on a bed of forest mushrooms, ballet of salads and pizzicato of nuts,*

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tour de France of cheeses, small chocolate cabin, rainbow of sorbets, fruit cornucopia. And this is Tourist class. It is impossible to imagine the menu for Cabin class and First class. If they printed this kind of menu for the canteen at lycée Louis-le-Grand... *Hunk of bread and its mustard tuft, pork fillet on its well-cooked noodle mattress, apple compote in its steel bowl.*

After dinner: cinema. The armchair is almost too soft. Need to digest the feast. Hard to keep my eyes open. Even half asleep, I can see that Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine are in love, but they don't realize it. Wake me up when they exchange their first kiss.

Hey, what? The projection interrupted. The lights come on, the loudspeakers mutter: "Back to Le Havre... Certain categories of staff... Regret... Our amiable passengers... Looking for replacement solutions..."

A mutiny! It's time to go up to the caravel's deck and harangue the crew. "Sailors! Fear not! The ocean does not end in a giant waterfall that falls into hell! The earth is round! Soon we will see the golden pagodas of Cipango!"

I didn't look closely when I was walking on the deck. No sails, but perhaps some kind of cranes that would make excellent gallows. Hang the main leaders, to subdue certain categories of staff.

Well, I'm not the captain. Besides, the projection has resumed. This time, they will kiss. No! New interruption... "We propose to our amiable passengers... The Sussex, Cunard Line, from Southampton, stop in Cherbourg tomorrow... Passengers who wish to, a special chartered Air France Boeing 707... Please indicate your choice to the head purser, *Mercure* lounge..."

They finally kiss, but I don't care. A PLANE! They are offering us a plane, which costs twice as much as the boat! And not just any plane: a Boeing 707, a new jet model! Ah, my brave little sailors, I don't blame you anymore... You have a thousand reasons to rebel. The *Compagnie Générale Transatlantique* exploits you shamefully. You toil like prisoners on this galley for a paltry salary. In the middle of the 20th century... Hold on!

New York tomorrow! Five more days in America! Yes, but if everyone chooses the plane? Not enough room in their chartered Boeing. Will they draw lots? Take a piece of paper from this hat... Or rather, first come, first served... Without waiting for the words *The end*, I rush into the *Mercure* lounge.

"Greif, G, r, e, i, f. Plane, plane!"

"Do you have a lot of luggage?"

"Uh, two suitcases."

"Big?"

"One big, one small."

Hitchhiking

“That’s good. For the plane, weight is limited. If you had a trunk, it would travel by boat.”

With all of this, almost midnight already. No one is talking about dancing. The orchestra may be part of certain categories of staff. Better go to bed quickly. Get up at five o’clock. Special train to Paris, special bus to Orly airport, special Boeing, Idlewild airport!... New York! The cabin looks like a train compartment. Four bunk beds stacked two by two. The other passengers already asleep. Tomorrow, later, today: the plane! Jet! Soon, rocket planes. By the way, Mrs. Colen? Let her know. Hoping she’s at home. She’s gone to Boston to see her sick old mother... Bronka, Tounia’s sister. In Brooklyn. A suburb. They have a métro like in Paris. *I want a carnet of tickets. Here’s my card of numerous family*². Yes, but Bronka doesn’t have a daughter. Willy’s niece. When he comes to play bridge, his American laugh echoes throughout the apartment. I don’t have an uncle. Even if the Germans hadn’t killed everyone, only two aunts. But my children will only have uncles. Uncle Noël, Uncle Olivier. Bring them gifts. A toy store on the top floor of a skyscraper. The jet elevator that goes up, up... It turns. Goes horizontal. Not normal. Pay the elevator operator. Where is my money? Lost my money! My suit doesn’t have pockets. Left for America with a suit without pockets. It’s not a suit, it’s a swimsuit...

Aah, the bunk bed! The cabin... No elevator. A nightmare. Slept long? What time is it? I can no longer hear the hum of the engines. Back at the dock. I’m going to miss my train! I should have brought my automatic watch. Sleeps at the bottom of a drawer. I can’t stand having something tight around my wrist. Having shined one year in the dark, its hands must have lost their luminosity, so they wouldn’t help much. Bomm, bomm! Someone wants to break down the door with a hammer! Just as I fell back asleep... My poor head swollen like a balloon. I open a swollen eye. A cabin boy in the cabin. Are you crazy or what? Waking people up in the middle of the night!

“Five o’clock, gentlemen. Breakfast has already been served. The first departures will take place at seven o’clock. Make sure you don’t forget any luggage on board!”

I gobble up grapefruit eggs, bacon croissants, orange juice tea. Head elsewhere. What are you saying? The speakers are constantly spitting out new instructions. “Mr. Griffe... Asked to present himself...” Who? Can you repeat! “Mr. Greffe...” Me! My God, what? No more room on the plane... My ticket doesn’t entitle me to a replacement transport. I’ll never see America! Where asked to present? “Mr. Groffe... The commissioner... Mercure...” A police commissioner? I haven’t hanged anyone. Not my fault... But no: the chief purser, in the Mercure lounge.

¹ The international airport was renamed Kennedy a few years later.

² As written in the original, based on French expressions: *un carnet de tickets, une carte de famille nombreuse* (30% off in trains, 50% off in the subway, for a family with three children).

Hitchhiking

“Mr. Greif? Thirty francs. We reimburse you for the rental of the lounge chair. Bon voyage!”

And here is the special train. A first-class carriage, another... There are only first-class carriages! A real fairy tale. Yesterday, coming from Paris, I bounced on the wooden seats of a third-class compartment. Today I flop, I flounder, I squirm on a soft bench. Yay!

Orly airport, 11 AM. Calling my mother from a public phone booth.

“Hello...”

“Hello? Who is this? Do you want an appointment with the doctor?”

“No, it’s me.”

“Who, me?”

“Don’t you recognize your own son?”

“Jean-Jacques? But where are you? Is there a phone on the boat?”

“In Orly.”

“What are you doing in Orly? Did you miss the departure?”

“The boat didn’t leave because of a strike. They’re offering us a plane. You need to let Mrs. Colen know.”

“Mrs. Colen? Let her know what?”

“That I’ll be arriving five days earlier. The plane takes off at one o’clock. Tell her it’s a special Air France flight. I’ll be at Idlewild airport at three o’clock.”

“It only takes two hours? That’s not possible.”

“Three o’clock in New York. Which means ten o’clock here.”

“Well, I’ll go send her a telegram right away.”

Boarding takes longer than expected. They’re weighing the bags and the passengers.

“These bags are too big, madam.”

“We were told two bags per person.”

“We’ll exceed the weight limit. The plane won’t be able to take off.”

The Air France agents are talking to those from the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique. Some of the luggage will be taken by train and boat. The passengers transfer toiletries and underwear from one bag to another, trying to joke.

“I wonder if that one will really make it to America.”

“Oh, it’ll make it across the Atlantic, darling, but we’ll be back in France by then!”

I pass the inspection easily. I’m only taking a suit and a pair of shoes in addition to what I’m wearing (plus some gifts). My two bags weigh less than either one of darling’s suitcases.

Fasten your seatbelts. One hour late at least. Now the plane is rolling and rolling... It wants to take off, but it’s too heavy. Hey, you can’t expect a plane to take off carrying the cargo of a transatlantic steamship. Ah, ah, phew! Me, Lemuel Gulliver, perched on

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the back of a goose, I'm contemplating the small houses of the land of Lilliput from the air...

The man sitting next to me introduces himself.

"Djo souis Bernie Feshbach. Djo souis Ameuricain."

"My name is Jean-Jacques Greif. I am French."

"Are you going to New York City?"

"Yes. I will stay with a friend of my mother. She lives on Riverside Drive."

"That's a good address. You'll probably have a nice view of the Hudson River."

The pilot introduces himself as well, through a voice that comes from the loudspeakers.

"This is Captain Delépine. This new Boeing 707 can fly from Paris to New York without stopping in less than nine hours. We are currently flying over Brittany. A lunch will be served in a few minutes."

The dishes have fancy names like on the boat, but they are not as good. Still better than the canteen.

The pilot changes his mind. Upon further reflection, the Boeing cannot fly to New York in one wing stroke.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking. We are encountering headwinds, which are all the more inconvenient as the plane is overloaded. We will make a technical stop in Gander."

Gander? Does it exist? Where is it? In Iceland? In Greenland? As if reading my mind, the pilot clarifies:

"On the island of Newfoundland."

Soon, we are flying over a torn green carpet that floats on the ocean. Is that where the pilot wants to land? He should have looked into it: there's no airport on that island! Unless... That tiny gray strip... You could land Blériot's plane there, maybe even Mermoz's¹, but a 100-meter-long jet, definitely not. He's crazy! He's descending... He's going to try... The Boeing lands abruptly. The pilot reverses the power. We are hurled forward, our belts sink into our ribs, yet we barely slow down. This is going to end badly. The plane cannot stop at the end of the runway. Its giant wings prevent it from braking²! Sinks into the forest, tears down trees, flips over, explodes... I chose the wrong means of transportation. Fatal error. While I could relax in a lounge chair on the deck of the Sussex, Cunard Line...

¹ Louis Blériot (1872-1936) was the first person to fly across the British Channel. Jean Mermoz (1901-1936) is famous in France for air mail flights between France and South America.

² Partly quoting a poem by Baudelaire, *L'albatros*.

Hitchhiking

Wait... Saved! The steel albatross succeeds in stopping. That was a close one. The passengers applaud. And what else? Are you going to offer him champagne? It's not the feat of the century. He just pressed the brake pedal.

We go out to stretch our legs. A log house stands at the edge of the runway. They put up a sign saying *Aérogare – Air Terminal*, lest we mistake it for a trapper's cabin. They also planted a pole with a Canadian flag, so that we know which country we are in. Inside, they sell trapper's hats, seal skin purses, little creatures carved from walrus teeth, Indian moccasins and all that. When jet planes have replaced propeller planes for good, no one will stop at Gander and the walruses will be able to keep their teeth.

The fly

Idlewild, 7pm. Four hours late. I can't wait to see New York... No. Patience. Line up to show our passports. Wait for our luggage. Convince the customs officers, who find our excess baggage suspiciously strange, that we are not smugglers. Around 8 o'clock, I finally leave the customs area. Hundreds of people rush at us. How shall I recognize Mrs. Colen? She recognizes me.

"Djinn-Djak! You haven't changed at all, you look just like your mother, how is she?"

"Good evening, ma'am. She's well. You saw her in Paris?"

"Three years ago and you too you know. You remember me?"

"Of course."

A polite lie. *White lie*, in English. We take a taxi.

"The trip was not too tiring?"

"A little. We are very late. I'm sorry."

"Oh it doesn't matter you know, I called the airport to find out the arrival time they told me the plane was delayed which was convenient for me you know, it was difficult for me to come earlier no one else could my husband has a lawyer's conference in Chicago my daughter rehearsing a play you know, always call the airport planes never on time you know, last winter we went to Florida they said the plane change the engine back in the airport lounge six hours you know..."

She dazes me. I say *Yes, oh yes, of course...* The taxi rushes into the night. Lights flash from all sides like tracer bullets. Headlights? Streetlights? Nine PM in New York, four AM in Paris. Woke up at five, so in one hour twenty-four hours awake. Slept so little on the boat. I lose control of the muscles that keep my eyes open. Talk to Mrs. Colen, otherwise I'll fall asleep. Just when we discover the illuminated silhouettes of the skyscrapers in Manhattan, that would be too silly.

"I often think about your brother."

"Willy?"

"Yes, I'm working on a desk that we bought from his store."

"Is it a good desk?"

Hitchhiking

“Willy told me it was the best. He showed it to me: *Here’s the bureau¹ fantastic!*”

Mrs. Colen lives in a huge brick building, on the twelfth floor and there are even more above. We cross an entrance hall decorated with a Cinemascope fresco. A boat—tall black smokestack, paddle wheels—descends the Mississippi river. Ladies in crinolines and black servants carrying their umbrellas walk along the shore. A black lift operator, it’s probably a coincidence, pilots our elevator.

“Hi, Mrs. Colen!” he says.

“This is Djinn-Djak, he’s going to live with us you know, he’s from Paris France”

“From France? No kidding!”

Mrs. Colen opens the door to her apartment. All the lights are on. Has her husband returned from Chicago? Her daughter from the theater? No, no one there. These Americans are really extravagant: they leave their homes without turning off the light!

Suddenly, Mrs. Colen screams.

“Djinn-Djak come quickly!”

She seems terror-stricken, as if she had just seen a rattlesnake. Possible, that, on the twelfth floor of a New York building? In America, anything is possible.

“Look there a fly oh please, Djinn-Djak...”

She hands me a dishtowel. The country of violence. Three hours since I arrived and I have to kill an innocent creature already. Hey, never done that, me. The flies that dance and buzz under the ceiling of my room in Paris are my pals. I have heard of spoiled children who have fun pulling their wings off, but that’s not my style. Here, got no choice. If I don’t come to poor Mrs. Colen’s rescue, she sends me away. I wander all night through the wild streets of Manhattan, infested with bloodthirsty gangsters. Who knows if I’ll see the light of day again? In short, it’s the fly or me! I grab the cloth firmly, I dive to the bottom of my soul in search of my ancestral hunter’s instinct and vlam!

Ha, are there any other suicidal flies in the area? You’ll see! I bet I can take down seven at once!

Mrs. Colen thinks that hunting opened my appetite.

“What would you like for dinner, Djinn-Djak?”

“Oh, I’m not hungry. I already ate twice on the plane. For me the time is around four AM.”

“Of course I’ll just go get something to drink.”

She brings two tall sweating glasses from the kitchen.

“What’s this?”

“Iced tea you know.”

They have funny ideas, these Americans. Tea is meant to be drunk hot. Anyway, keeps you from sleeping. If I take a sip of this devilish brew, I’m guaranteed a second night of insomnia. I’m going to die from exhaustion. Or even worse, I’ll have horrible dark circles under my eyes.

“Uh, thank you, I’m not thirsty either, I’m very tired, I’d like to go to bed right away, good night, see you tomorrow.”

¹ *Bureau* can mean an office or a desk in French.

Hitchhiking

Mrs. Colen and her cold glasses look silly. She finds my haste puzzling. Well, I'll be more affable after a good night's sleep. I go to my room. I manage to take off my clothes before I fall asleep, but barely.

I wake up in the middle of the night. Can't help it, because the Paris time you know. I review my program. The Metropolitan Museum, a full day. The Museum of Modern Art, same thing. Otherwise, two museums a day... Fifth Avenue, 42nd Street, Times Square. Broadway an old path traced by the Red Nose Indians who sold Manhattan to the Dutch. That's why this avenue is the only one that's not straight ... Saw all that in the movies. Yesterday, I mean the day before yesterday, *The Apartment*.

My eyelids become heavy again. When I re-wake up, it's daylight. Eight o'clock. I hear a faint conversation from the other side of the door. I get dressed, I leave my room. Yesterday, it was night. Now I see the river, ten times wider than our poor Seine. On the highway along its bank, millions of suburbanites race to reach the office on time. A gigantic metal bridge oversteps it, shrugging its shoulders: "For America, I am an ordinary bridge," it says.

By the way, this vague talk that blends in with the dull roar of the cars, where does it come from? There, on the ground... It shines, it speaks... A television set! And in front of the TV, can't believe my own eyes, a girl lying on her stomach and laughing!

"Good morning. Are you Kathy?"

"And you Djinn-Djak? Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, but I'm amazed."

"Oh yeah, why?"

"We have no television shows during the day. Only in the evening. And we don't watch them lying on the ground."

"Lying in your bed?"

"No, the TV is placed on a small table. Everyone sits on a chair. It's very solemn. One of us says: *Father, it's eight o'clock. Léon Zitronne will present the news. Can you turn on the TV?* He replies: *Only when you quiet down.*"

"You're joking."

"I'm exaggerating a bit, okay. Do you have several channels?"

"Of course: thirteen."

"We only have one."

"People must be bored in your country."

"They play bridge, like your uncle Willy and my parents. There are even some old people who still read books. Are you studying theater?"

"I study acting so I can play in movies. Everyone says I look like Elizabeth Taylor."

"Ah yes..."

Maybe true, but who needs a second Elizabeth Taylor?

Merry Noël

The streets of New York are noisier and dirtier than in the movies, the skyscrapers taller. The pedestrians are in a hurry. The words *promeneur*, *flâneur*, and *badaud* don't even exist in English. They give me furious looks when I stop to tilt my head upward. So what? Do you want me to walk with a tilted head, at the risk of falling on my nose?

Hitchhiking

Here, you can't walk and look at buildings at the same time, like in Paris. Lovers don't smooch on public benches¹ In New York, there are neither lovers nor public benches.

I visit museums from morning to night. I even find an Indian Museum where feathered wax warriors paddle in their canoes without moving while equally immobile squaws prepare pemmican for their papoose in front of the wigwam.

A silly thing is that I was unaware it would be hot. Haven't read the right books. If someone had told me: "It's like a steam bath," I would have understood, without having ever taken a steam bath. I wouldn't have brought my navy blue wool suit. I live a good kilometer from the subway. Ah, I can't take it anymore: on the way back from the museum, I take off my jacket and walk in the street in my shirtsleeves. Shocking, isn't it?

I put my jacket back in the building entrance. It's cold on the banks of the Mississippi river, with air conditioning. It doesn't weigh much. I feel my chest. *Oh my God!* My wallet has escaped from my inside pocket! My passport, my money... When I was holding the jacket on my arm. Two hundred dollars. My poor father. Earned by the sweat of his brow. What to do? The police? The consulate? What if they send me back to France? "Young man, if one doesn't know how to travel, one stays at home. Sixteen years old? Your parents are very careless..." I should have chosen the moped.

I return toward the subway. I go through the small garden that occupies the central median of Broadway. Earlier, I thought I was hot. Now I'm burning, I'm suffocating. Hey, how can you jump rope in this heat? My ears are buzzing, my heart is pounding. This kind of misadventure never happens to me. It's the change of time that disorients me. A brave New Yorker finds my wallet... Where to send it? In my passport, my Paris address. They must have a lost and found service. Inquire at the police station. A telegram to my mother: send + more = money².

There! In the middle of the path. Miracle on Broadway! I'll never take off my jacket again, even if I have to melt in the sun like a pat of butter. Well done, young man. Me Eagle Eye, big red-nose warrior! Well, the trail still hot, burning. By the way, I could have changed my identity. "Lost my passport, Saturnin Loiseau³." You have to come with someone who identifies you, otherwise it would be too easy.

I eat hamburger in town for lunch, I dine with Mrs. Colen. Kathy is absent almost every night because of her theater. Instead of buying fresh produce at the market, Americans get frozen food from their refrigerator. They don't drink wine at the table like the French, but milk.

"This is the first time I've had milk since my last baby bottle."

"This morning you ate cornflakes with milk!"

"Ah yes. The milk is absorbed by the cereal, so I don't feel like I'm drinking it. I can't stand drinking milk. In school, when I was little, there was wine on the table."

"Children drank wine?"

¹ Quoting a song by Georges Brassens: *Les amoureux qui se bécotent sur les bancs publics*.

² A classical math puzzle: you must replace the letters by digits so that the addition makes sense.

³ Yes, a *Tintin* character.

Hitchhiking

“Until 1954. The prime minister at the time, Pierre Mendès-France, had it replaced with milk.”

“I remember him. He was Jewish. Here, we couldn’t have a Jewish president.”

“With us, it was already the second one, after Léon Blum in 1936. He didn’t last long. When they fired him, instead of going back to wine, they put grape juice on the table, and later beer. Your American milk, it’s not real milk, otherwise I couldn’t drink it.”

Every morning, after saying hello to the George Washington bridge, I watch TV with Kathy. To make it even more enjoyable, we kiss during the commercial breaks. I’m not too unhappy. A future Elizabeth Taylor!

She doesn’t want to go to the museums with me.

“I already go with my school.”

“Yesterday, I visited the Museum of Modern Art. I saw *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* and *Guernica*¹. They have some beautiful paintings by Italian futurists. Several Boccionis, *Mama mia!* They also have a German expressionist that I like, Beckmann.”

She takes me to the top of the Empire State Building, to the Rockefeller Center, to Times Square. She shows me a futurist restaurant, The Automat, which Boccioni would have liked. The dishes are presented behind small windows that can be opened by inserting quarters.

She finds me ignorant. I may know Picasso and Beckmann, but I’ve never seen *Gone with the Wind*.

“Me, fourteen times already. If you want, we can go together.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll also ask my boyfriend. He’s only seen it twice. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Should I tell him that we kiss while watching TV?”

“No need. You see, you’ll be leaving, while he’s my *steady*.”

I look at her out of the corner of my eye during the movie. She’s too busy crying her eyes out to kiss her boyfriend, a colossus with a crew cut. She cries at least ten seconds before the sad parts. She knows the movie by heart, of course. The plump black slave looks like the woman who comes to clean every morning at Mrs. Colen’s.

Kathy invites her friends to come see her Frenchman. Can’t decide which one is the prettiest. If Americans have big teeth, it’s not the better to eat you up my child, it’s because they exercise them by chewing gum. I find Kathy and her friends nicer than French girls, except I don’t know many French girls. Do they laugh for no reason, like these Americans? Or maybe there’s a reason: they laugh to get my attention. It’s like a lottery. Ladies, who will win this exceptional prize, a *French boy* just arrived from Paris? They crowd around me, make eyes at me, barrage me with questions.

“Do you like New York?”

¹ Two Picasso masterpieces. Guernica is in Spain today.

Hitchhiking

“Yes, but I can’t help looking up to see how high the skyscrapers go. It gives me vertigo. All those vertical lines running away into the sky...”

“How come you speak English?”

“I learned by listening to your radio.”

“Is there American radio in France?”

“No, it’s a joke I read in *Mad Magazine*. What the Martians say in bad science fiction movies. Actually, I learned in school.”

“I’m studying Spanish, but I don’t speak Spanish like you do English.”

“I’ve been to England several times. It’s right next door.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Here or in France?”

“Here? Ha ha ha ha!”

I wait for them to stop laughing to answer.

“No, no girlfriend. In my high school, there are no girls. Even next year, when I go to a kind of college¹, there will still be no girls.”

“You may meet girls outside of school. Your sister’s friends.”

“I only have two brothers.”

“What are their names?”

“Noël and Olivier.”

“Noël? That’s the French word for Christmas, no?”

“Yes. Because he was born on Christmas Day.”

“But you’re Jewish.”

“So what?”

“Christmas is a Christian holiday. No Jew would be named Noël.”

“Really? I never thought of that. Besides, we celebrate Christmas, with a fir tree and gifts. Don’t you?”

“Of course not.”

“You don’t get any gifts?”

“We receive them on Hannukah.”

“Ranuca? Is that the same as Christmas?”

“You don’t know Hannukah? Are you sure you’re Jewish?”

Not very Jewish. Never gone to a synagogue. No Jewish friend. In high school, while others went to catechism, I stayed alone in the classroom. They wondered why. I hid the fact that I was Jewish: “My parents are communist, so they don’t believe in God.” Here, it’s different. Kathy Colen’s friends are all Jewish. They hang out with each other,

¹ *Maths Sup*, a *classe préparatoire* that “prepared” students for the tough admission competitions of *Grandes Écoles*. See the afterword of *No Accent* for an explanation of the French school system.

Hitchhiking

so they don't need to hide. In France, they think I'm some kind of heretic. Here, they criticize me for being a bad Jew. I just have to use the same excuse.

"In my family, we don't believe in God. Because my parents are communist."

They suddenly stop laughing. They pale. A worried look appears in their eyes. They step back. Hey, do I have the plague or something? Okay, I understand I made a terrible mistake. Americans think communists are demons from hell. I remember the Rosenbergs. My parents went to protest against their death sentence. It was pointless, they fried them both on the electric chair.

The pretty girls take me for a dangerous revolutionary, a vampire thirsting for capitalist blood. I hope Kathy will still kiss me in the morning.

She kisses me one last time to say goodbye: she's going to a *summer camp*. Mrs. Colen decides to take care of me.

"I noticed that you buy a lot of books."

"We can find books in English in Paris, but here they're cheaper."

"I'll take you to a friend who's a literary critic you know, I don't know anyone who owns as many books she gets them for free you understand."

This lady lives in Greenwich Village, which is a bit like the Latin Quarter of Manhattan. Shelves loaded with books cover the walls of her apartment. Literary critic... I'd like to choose that profession, to receive lots of books, except that Math Sup is not the best path to get there. I would have to go to hypokhâgne¹, like Gretry. Too late. My mother told me: "Go to Polytechnique first, then you can do whatever you want."

"Do you like New York?" the friend of Mrs. Colen asks me.

"Very much. I like Greenwich Village. I found a good bookstore on 8th street. I bought *Finnegan's Wake*, by Joyce."

"A difficult book."

"More difficult than *Ulysses*?"

"Much more. He invented words and puns from all the languages of Europe. No one has ever understood it except him. Have you read *Ulysses*?"

"Yes."

"If you had been here on June 16th, I would have invited you to celebrate Bloomsday."

"You celebrate Bloomsday?"

"There's a street party in front of an Irish pub near here, with hundreds of people."

America is cool after all. American women aren't all as silly as Kathy Colen's friends.

¹ A literary *classe préparatoire*. "Khâgne" is a 19th century student slang word implying that literary students had knock knees (*Genoux cagneux*).

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“Since you like Joyce, I’m giving you these two books that explain his work. Do you want a glass of iced tea?”

“Thanks for the books. Iced tea? Sure.”

Already fifteen days. The day after tomorrow, I’m leaving for Minneapolis with cousin Max. For my last day, I go to Brooklyn to meet Bronka Cohen, Tounia Kassar’s sister. A small Polish lady who looks like Tounia and my mother’s other friends. She rolls her r’s like Tounia, except she says good moRRning instead of bonjouRR.

“The woman I’m staying with is named Colen.”

“Cohen and Colen is same thing. They change the name when arrive in America, to appear less Jewish.”

“They should have gone all the way and become Smith or Jones.”

“Don’t have enough money to buy fake papers. Just they scratch a little the passport. My sister also changes her name during the war, when she is hiding.”

“My parents changed their first names, Lonek and Malvina, to Jacques and Jacqueline.”

“Yes, Tunia tells me their story. Your father goes to Auschwitz, like her husband. They are lucky they survive. Except for my sister in France, my sister in Israel, and me, from our family all dead. Every day I regret I not convince them follow my example and emigrate.”

Bronka has two sons, Ron and Murray, who look like American football players. Their room is full of football armor and helmets, baseball bats and gloves, ice hockey things I don’t even know what they’re called, tennis rackets, golf clubs. No need to talk to them about Joyce. They do own a great treasure: several hundred issues of *Mad Magazine*. They offer me a few of them. Thanks, you guys!

Mrs. Colen prepares a good dinner, with roast beef and corn on the cob, for my last evening with her. She’s very kind. When she puts a tender hand on my shoulder to offer me more milk, I wonder if she wouldn’t like to kiss me while watching TV. Fell in love when I saved her from the horrible fly. Gee, it’s not possible. If I kiss the daughter, I can’t kiss the mother. Anyway, she’s as old as my own mother, so no dice.

The suburb

I shall spend a month with cousin Max in Minneapolis, a month with cousin Sylvie in New Hampshire, and then a week in Brooklyn with Bronka Cohen before sailing back.

Max, his wife Gerda and their little Jimmy have come to New York for me. We visit a museum that I had missed, full of stuffed dinosaurs. Jimmy knows all the names of

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the dinosaurs, even though he's only four years old. Normal for a boy of that age. My brother Olivier was the same. Freud explained it in the analysis of Little Hans, actually.

I put my two suitcases in their car trunk. *Let's go!*

"We will visit Roosevelt's house and Niagara Falls," Max tells me. "For twelve years only I live in America. I don't know my country yet."

Roosevelt's house is too big. It looks like Scarlett's in *Gone with the Wind*. Jimmy is a distracted student. He didn't listen well.

"Whose house is this?"

"President Roosevelt's."

"The president isn't your Rootbeer, it's Candy..."

"Kennedy is the president today. Roosevelt was the president during the war. He's dead now."

"Well, his house is ugly."

The kid is right. He likes Niagara Falls better.

"It looks like an overflowing bathtub!"

We put on long yellow oilcloth coats to go by boat to the foot of the falls. We still get wet.

Say, we are in Ontario.

"This is the second time I step on Canadian soil."

"I thought this was your first time in America."

"Yes, but the plane made a stopover in Newfoundland!"

We drive northward to go around Lake Erie and Lake Michigan. Nobody asks me my opinion, but I would have preferred the south route, to see Chicago and its famous gangsters. What am I saying... There are no gangsters anymore, Tintin captured them all.

It's at Jimmy's request that we go northward.

"I want to go over Mackinac Bridge. Longest in the world! Is just four years old, like me."

"It's a baby bridge, then. Maybe it will grow even more..."

We drive over the bridge for hours. They call it Big Mac. Everything is bigger in America: buildings, waterfalls, cars, steaks, and especially people. I feel like I've shrunk by crossing the Atlantic.

We cover more than fifteen hundred miles in three and a half days. Since Americans can't be separated from their car, they sleep in places called *motels*, that is, *motor hotels*. At first, I thought the car would enter the room. Poor thing: while we choose between the thirteen TV channels, it mopes outside all alone.

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Me, I'm bored to death in the suburbs of Minneapolis after just fourteen minutes, despite the thirteen channels. If I wanted to spend my vacation in the suburbs, I could have taken the subway to Vert-de-Maisons. Too nice: Max, Gerda, Jimmy, the neighbors who have a daughter my age, the neat little houses sitting on their square of lawn, the ping-pong table, the thousand lakes of Minnesota. The nice neighbor my age kisses me without complaining, but... gasp... I can't believe my lips... her kisses have no taste! Who would have believed that such a thing was possible? Condemned to spend a month among the living dead. Quick, escape from this nightmare. I look at a map... How far is California?

Max tries to entertain me.

"Tomorrow I'll take you to see my friend Bob. He works at General Mills, they make biscuits. I think it will interest you."

Cousin Max is a "social worker." I've never heard of this job. Does it exist in France? "I help people," he says. His friend Bob takes care of a big, pimply, flashing machine called *computer*. He wears a thick sweater under his white coat because the machine needs a refrigerated room.

"Max told me you study mathematics."

"I'm only finishing my secondary studies."

"This computer can perform very complicated calculations. I'll show you. First you have to give it instructions. We use punched cards, one line per card. This machine here is for punching the cards. I type the first line on the punch keyboard... *Begin*... That's just to tell the computer it should start. So I've made one card. Then I ask it to prepare three one-dimensional spaces in its memory to put integers in... Another card... Put the number 2 in the first space... The number 2 in the second space... Add the content of the first space to the second and store the result in the third... We'd like to know what it found, so I ask it to print. You see, I type Print on this card. On the last card, I write End."

Bob inserts his deck of cards into the computer's belly. The machine chews, blinks, seems to hesitate... Suddenly, a device I hadn't noticed spits out a wide sheet of paper. Bob shows it to me proudly.

"Look: four!"

"Four what?"

"Four, that's the result of the operation. Two plus two equals four!"

Good joke. I can also find that out, and without making so much fuss. They don't know what to invent anymore.

"Bob studied at a very good university, with a scholarship," Max tells me in the car. "Maybe someday you'll take care of a machine like that too."

"Anything is possible."

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“Your mother writes you’re a very good student. I’m in same high school as your father in Poland. He’s a year older than me, so not same class. Everyone knows him, because he wins all the prizes. Plus, he’s learning the piano at conservatory. We think he becomes a great virtuoso, but he chooses medicine. Sylvie admires him so much, she studies medicine like him.”

“She’s also your cousin?”

“Yes. I grow up in Chernovitz, like her. I go to Poland after first World War. You know, I’m thinking something. You tell me you like to see California...”

“I may never come back to America. It would be a shame to leave without seeing everything. I want to take advantage of the opportunity.”

“Sylvie has a cousin, not her father’s side, like your father and me, but her mother’s side. She lives in San Francisco. Her name is Selma.”

We call Sylvie, who gives us Selma’s number. We call her. She has heard about my parents and would be delighted to see me. From Minneapolis, you can call to New Hampshire or California as easily as anything. You dial the number and voila! They are a century ahead of us.

I try to remember the long journey from New York to Minneapolis. Did we see hitchhikers on the side of the road? Ah, I remember where I saw them: in the movies. James Dean, perhaps. A farmer picks him up in his pickup truck and afterward, that’s where it gets interesting, a beautiful blonde in her convertible.

Max and Gerda say no to hitchhiking.

“It’s very dangerous.”

“Your parents sent you to us. For you we are responsible.”

“You are only sixteen years old.”

“We can trust Selma because she is Sylvie’s cousin, but we do not want between here and San Francisco lose track of you.”

“We put you on the bus and she welcomes you when you arrive there.”

“I understand...”

I am happy to go, but sorry to leave my friend Jimmy. I gave him two miniature Dinky Toys: a truck and a bus. The truck has the inscription: *Calberson. Déménagements*. He can’t read yet, but he already knows the alphabet.

“You see, you can tell it’s a French truck because of the accents on the e.”

“Are the buses like that in France?”

“Yes, they have an open platform at the back for smokers.”

He hesitates to put my gifts with his plastic dinosaurs. I invent a story.

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“People believe that dinosaurs disappeared in a great cataclysm millions of years ago. In fact, some of them survived on a continent that slipped underground at the time of the cataclysm. This lost world is under the Atlantic Ocean.”

“How they do to breathe?”

“Ah... The volcanoes of Iceland act as ventilation shafts. Okay, give me the dinosaurs... I hide them under the rug. Nobody suspects they exist. Suddenly, a big earthquake occurs and a kind of ramp forms between the underground world and France. The dinosaurs come back up. They are astonished to see houses and roads. They look for their kind. See who arrives on the road: vroom, vroom...”

“The truck!”

“The dinosaurs have never seen a beast like that. They wonder if it’s a friend or an enemy. They charge at it to intimidate it.

“The driver is scared.”

“Yes, he tries to drive away in reverse. Screech, screech... To go faster, he makes a U-turn and speeds away. The dinosaurs shout victory! At that moment, who is here?”

“The bus!”

“How did you guess? The dinosaurs charge as before. Only, the driver is so scared that he has a heart attack. He falls on his steering wheel, which triggers the horn. Tweeet, tweeet! This shrill scream scares the dinosaurs, and they go back underground.”

“Well, your story, the other day I saw the same one on TV.”

“Did it really happen? Amazing!”

“Course not: it was Godzilla!”

The man from Laramie

Instead of sitting in a convertible next to a beautiful blonde, I am sitting in a steel dinosaur next to a beautiful blonde.

“I am Miss Missouri 1960,” she tells me. “I was in Minneapolis for the Miss Middle-West competition. It was Miss Indiana who won.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. Where are you from?”

“I am French. I come from Paris.”

“How wonderful! Do you like America?”

“I love America! Everything is more beautiful than back home. Look at this Greyhound bus... In France, the seats do not recline in buses and there are no toilets. It’s as good as an airplane!”

We head south on the highway. The sun sets to my right. Its rays, awkward alchemists, transmute the ocean of golden wheat that surrounds us into a darker and

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darker copper lake. In Des Moines, Iowa, we cross the main cross-country road that connects Chicago to San Francisco. I change buses to go West. *Good Bye, Miss Missouri!*

As soon as I close my eyes, the bus stops to wake me up. A toll, a red light in a city, a bus station. It never drives more than three hours. The driver announces: “You have fifteen minutes.” The passengers drink coffee, buy a newspaper. Or: “We stop for breakfast. You have half an hour.” I eat sunny-side-up eggs with small sausages and bacon. We change drivers once every two stops. The new driver says: “*Howdie, Folks?*”

We pass through Omaha, Nebraska, around four in the morning. A private detective, wearing a raincoat and soft hat, walks through the sleeping streets looking for a femme fatale. The sun says Good Morning to us near North Platte. At lunchtime, I munch on a hamburger in the Cheyenne, Wyoming bus station. Soon after, we cross Laramie. Saw *The Man from Laramie* on Avenue des Gobelins with Noël, but don’t ask me what it’s about.

We have arrived in the West, but you can’t tell. The towns in Nebraska and Wyoming look like those in Michigan or Wisconsin. Low houses, Esso and Texaco gas stations, hamburger restaurants, two or three churches. We leave a town, drive on the highway, enter the same town again. Going in circles like the Dupont in the desert¹. The ghost bus, condemned to wander between Cheyenne and Laramie until a waitress falls in love with the driver.

I was hoping to witness some duels. If cowboys don’t challenge each other in the street, how do they know who is the fastest shooter west of the Pecos? Not even eager to look out the window anymore. I prefer to memorize the Mad magazines that Ron and Murray gave me. Maybe this famous *Far West* never existed. T’was the cinema invented it. The cowboys had enough to do keeping their cows. They didn’t have time to draw their six-shooters every five minutes. Same thing for the musketeers: they didn’t fight duels with the Cardinal’s guards every morning. Well, let me take a nap... One for all, all for one.

The road is so flat and straight, it seems like it will last forever. The passengers are getting frustrated.

“Will it go up, yes or no?”

“What is it waiting for?”

“We can already see the Rockies.”

It has to, eventually. It cuts through forests, crosses streams, finds passes between peaks. Unlike the sluggish buses we have in Europe, the Greyhound doesn’t slow down when it climbs a mountain.

¹ Policemen Dupont and Dupond in Tintin’s *Land of Black Gold*.

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Early in the evening, we arrive in Mormonland. Their temple, as big as eighteen times Notre Dame (at a guess), lords over Salt Lake City, the capital of Utah. Phileas Fogg passed through here when he went around the world in eighty days, except he was going in the opposite direction. Back then, the Mormons were still polygamous. According to Jules Verne, men married several women to do them a favor, since unmarried women don't go to heaven. God himself revealed it to the Mormon prophet.

I was wrong to say that all cities are alike. Reno, in Nevada, where we stop at the end of the night, is as different from Salt Lake City as vice is from virtue. Dozens of casinos crowd both sides of the main street, heavily made up with neon to attract night birds. Even the bus station is full of slot machines. The driver gives us a half-hour break, although it's still too early to have breakfast.

At dawn, we drive along a large black area that starts to turn dark blue and shiver. Lake Tahoe. *California, here I come!* You could think you were in the Alps, but the pines look American—as tall as skyscrapers. They drank too much milk when they were saplings. The road drops down to the plain in tight curves. Last stop: Sacramento, the capital of California. Around noon, the driver announces: "San Francisco, end of the line. *Bye Folks!*"

A big leg of lamb

I look at the forty-year-old women in the crowd. Which one is my cousin's cousin? A very thin man approaches me.

"Jean-Jacques? I'm John Wingerd, Selma's husband. She's at work, so she sent me in her place."

"What does she do?"

"She's an assistant to someone who studies wine. An oenologist."

"And what about you?"

"Student. I'm learning how to operate *computers*."

"I saw one in Minneapolis. It took him ten minutes to figure out that two plus two equals four."

"It's convenient for storing information and performing statistical calculations, though. I got a scholarship from the police to study, but I'm not forced to work for them afterward... Okay, where are we going for lunch?"

He takes me to a small restaurant near the bus station. My suitcases are a hassle. The streets go up and down like ski slopes. Don't mistake me for a sherpa. What I'd like is to finally be able to lie down.

The houses in San Francisco were built at the beginning of the century, after the great earthquake. Some have been renovated since then. Not the wooden home of the Wingerds. The superhuman efforts it makes to stay upright on its slope exhaust it.

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Cramps are looming. Horrible nightmares keep it from resting: the big bad wolf approaches, makes threats, begins to blow...

I understand why we had lunch at the restaurant: there's no kitchen or dining room in the house! A sink full of dirty dishes occupies a corner of the main room. A stove is hiding in another corner behind a tired armchair. The entrance hall contains a large blue refrigerator whose motor murmurs strange frozen words¹.

"Our children are staying with friends in Canada. You can settle in their room."

I find one of the two beds under the mountain of clothes and toys that cover it. I miss the movement of the bus, but I manage to sleep anyway.

When I wake up, Selma is there. All dishevelled. She must have lost her comb in the mess of her apartment. I've never seen a woman like her, or maybe the witches in picture books. It's time for dinner. Selma takes a big leg of lamb out of the refrigerator. Each of us cuts a few shavings, sandwiching them between two slices of bread, and voila.

"There are more exciting things to do in life than cooking and cleaning. Once a week is enough."

"You should tell that to my mother!"

If there are women in Paris who don't tidy up their apartment and have married forty-year-old students funded by the police, I don't know them. I feel like I'm meeting a character from a novel. I'm finally discovering something unexpected... They've put a Chinese town full of little slanted-eyed men in the middle of San Francisco! They commissioned a museum from an architect who had no ideas, so he copied the Palace of the Legion of Honor, which I can see by leaning out the window in Paris. They invented the tram-cable car to climb the steep streets.

I decide to go see the other curiosities of the city in a tourist bus. The driver takes us to a beach from where we can see rocky islets covered with seals. He asks each of the tourists where they come from. The others say *Louisville, Kentucky* or *Portland, Oregon*. Then it's my turn.

"Paris."

"Paris, Texas?"

"No. Paris, France."

"Really? *Wow!* You've come a long way. Ladies and gentlemen, this young man came all the way from Europe just to see San Francisco. You like it?"

"It's almost as beautiful as Paris."

I find it strange that someone could mistake me for a Texan. To begin with, Texans are at least two meters tall. And they speak very loudly, stretching out the words, as if to call their herd of cows. Me, I haven't yet transformed my Franco-British accent into

¹ *Des paroles gelées*, as in Rabelais's *Quart Livre*.

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an American accent. Sometimes, I can't make myself understood. I'm looking for the central post office to send a letter to my mother. I ask for directions from a beautiful San Franciscan.

"Excuse me, I am looking for the Central Post Office."

"Say that again."

"The Central Post Office."

"The center of what?"

I try to shift the stress, to open one o, then the other, then both. It's no use. I ask a policeman. He looks at me as if I was one of those Martians who learned English by listening to the radio. In the end, I give up on using words to express myself and show him the letter.

"Oh, you want the CPO! Next street on the right."

It's forbidden to use whole words when you can abbreviate them. *Time is money.*

What surprises me the most is that I'm wearing my wool jacket without sweating. In the evening, I regret not bringing a coat. Selma, who invites me to dinner at Jack London's favorite restaurant, smiles at me shivering.

"People who don't know San Francisco have no idea how cold it is. It's because of a current that comes from Alaska."

"I imagined California differently. Palm trees, orange trees."

"Like in the movies?"

"Yes, like in the movies. I was hoping to swim in the Pacific Ocean."

"The movies are in Los Angeles, Southern California. Wait... If you want to swim, I think I have an address in San Diego. It's even further south than Los Angeles. When do you have to go to Sylvie's?"

"Oh, I have time. Late August or early September."

"But you're going to stop over in Pittsburgh, right?"

"What would I do in Pittsburgh?"

"Well, see your cousins."

"I have cousins in Pittsburgh?"

"Of course. Your father's mother had two brothers. One was the father of Sylvie. The other emigrated to America before the First World War and had three children. They are your father's first cousins. Their name is Kostman, it's Sylvie's maiden name."

We call these new cousins. I talk to a woman.

"Who? Who are you?"

"The son of Lonek Greif, your cousin. I come from Paris, France."

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“Ah, hmm, yes! Lonek! Sylvie told us... She said he has three sons. Um, which one are you?”

“I am myself. The eldest.”

“Are you coming to America? You’ll have, hmm, to come see us in Pittsburgh.”

“I’m already in America. In San Francisco, with Selma Wingerd.”

“Oh really? Ah... But why didn’t you write? You can, hmm, come stay with me. My name is Cécile. My son left... He’s working in Washington, for the government. So I have space. You must be fifteen or sixteen years old...”

“Sixteen.”

“My brother Aaron has a daughter your age, Ruth. Oh, our little Ruthie is very funny. I think you’ll get along well with her. I’m going to call them... When can you come?”

“In a week. I’m going to spend a few days in San Diego first.”

Sharks

To save time (is money), I travel at night. Since I walked a lot to say goodbye to Chinatown and Fisherman’s Wharf, I fall asleep as soon as the bus starts moving. I wake up: we’re crossing a suburb. I doze off, I open my eyes: again a suburb. I dream vaguely, I look out the window: still suburbs, always suburbs. I understand eventually: all of this is Los Angeles.

Here I am on the sidewalks of San Diego, early in the morning, with my two suitcases. The heat and palm trees are here. Good! A city bus takes me to La Jolla, a town that extends north of San Diego. Two old ladies are talking next to me.

“I got fed up with the Episcopalians. They never clean the church. My hairdresser recommended the Methodists. Let me tell you, I found their pastor vulgar. Now I go to the Baptists.”

“With Father Campbell? He’s supposed to be a great preacher. I should try it. I attend this new Adventist church that opened near me.”

“That’s convenient.”

“Yes, but they tire me out by fussing over preparing for Jesus’ return. I was thinking of going back to the Lutherans...”

6464 La Jolla Boulevard. Harry Learman, that’s the name Selma gave me... Knock knock... Is anyone there?

My cousin Max entrusted me to Selma, who sent me to a stranger. He might have died six months ago. A settling of scores between gangsters. He was crossing the street, a stray bullet... Me too, stray. All alone at the end of the world.

“Are you looking for someone, young man?”

“Good morning, Madam. I’m here to see Harry Learman.”

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“For his research he’s gone out to sea. Day after tomorrow he comes back. I live next door, I’m his landlady. Did he tell you to come today?”

“Not exactly. It’s my cousin, in San Francisco, who gave me his address.”

“You come from San Francisco?”

“Right now, yes, otherwise I come from Paris, France.”

“You’re French? Me in Prague I was born. My name is Mrs. Ondricek.”

Another little lady with a heavy accent, like Bronka Cohen and Selma Wingerd. She’s glad to meet a traveler who comes from distant Europe. I must look honest, with my wool suit and my sixteen years. She opens Harry Learman’s apartment for me.

I put on my swimsuit, grab a towel and leap to the beach, on the other side of the boulevard. I finally swim in the Pacific Ocean! Then I lie down on the towel. Another night huddled up in the bus, need to stretch out.

I should go back. Put away my things, buy some food. The sun is warm, but not too much. Some people are doing an acrobatic sport—standing on a board in the waves. I’ll go back in five minutes. First, lie down on my stomach for a bit, more comfortable...

What’s up, Doc? I fell asleep. A sort of tingling on my calves... A thousand million thunderbolts! They’re as red as poppies. My whole back burns as if it had been rubbed with sandpaper. When I think I was so peaceful in San Francisco. At least I don’t need to go shopping, because Mrs. Ondricek invites me to lunch.

“I made Wiener schnitzels. Oh, I miss Europe. To Paris I went before the war, with my parents... America, ‘tis good for a year or two, but then... People so coarse they are. They ignore culture. All children, big children.”

“Harry Learman, where I’m staying, is a researcher?”

“He studies fish some kind.”

“Maybe he’s more cultured than the others. I found a lot of books at his place.”

“You’re right, some cultured, but so few...”

A little later, I understand why Mrs. Ondricek is unhappy: two of these coarse Americans live with her. Two giant blonde and golden girls. Her daughters. Instead of reading books, they balance on the waves from morning till night. They show me their boards.

“This is called a *surfboard*. It’s a sport that comes from Hawaii. Over there, they have waves that are twenty feet high.”

“Do you have nice waves in France?”

“Where I used to go to summer camp when I was little, there were very big waves. We couldn’t swim, it was too dangerous. Luckily, there’s a little river and some lakes.”

“That seems ideal for surfing. Do you have sharks there?”

“Sharks? I don’t think so.”

“Then it’s even better.”

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The next morning, Mrs. Ondricek sees that I'm not walking around in shorts like everyone else.

"To the beach you don't go?"

"I got sunburned. I'll wait until tomorrow, maybe."

"If you want, I can drive you. Disneyland, you want? It's not far. Or Mexico."

"Mexico? Really?"

"Not Mexico City, just Tijuana. Is border town. Less than half an hour from here.

"*Okay!*"

What I like is that Mrs. Ondricek has a big, ten-meter-long Ford. Noel and I, when we were little, we dreamed of driving an American car. We went to the auto show every year to see the latest models. The newest Chevrolets have wings like airplanes. I was very disappointed when Max and Gerda made me cross half of the United States in a vulgar Rambler, a car no bigger than my father's Citroën and devoid of any decorative bulge. In San Francisco, it was even worse. The Wingerds had a box on wheels in their garage called a Nash, which they hadn't driven for years. In Mrs. Ondricek's Ford, there's even air conditioning. You can catch a cold in the middle of summer, that's progress!

I don't know if all of Mexico is like Tijuana. In any case, Tijuana looks like the Mexico you see in movies. It's convenient for people in Hollywood. When they need to shoot a Mexican scene, they say, "Let's go to Tijuana."

Men, women, children, dogs, donkeys, and tourists are so numerous in the streets that we have to leave the car at the entrance to the city. Instead of bothering to rent shops, the merchants sell their goods outdoors. Tortillas! Tamales! Souvenirs! Aztec statues! Mexican hats!

A barber sitting under a tree hails me.

"Hey, gringo! Your hair is too long, come and let me cut it!"

"No, thanks..."

Harry Learman returns from his sea expedition. Just when I wake up.

"*Good morning*. Who are you?"

"I'm French. I'm a friend of Selma Wingerd."

"Who?"

"Selma Wingerd. From San Francisco."

"I don't know her."

"Well... She gave me your address."

"Did she say she knew me?"

"Now that I think about it, not really." She said, *I have an address in San Diego.*"

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“We’re not going to make a big deal out of it. Since you’re here, why don’t you stay.”

“Thank you!”

Something like this couldn’t happen in France. These big children are good children. Mrs. Ondricek invites us to dinner with her daughters. Harry Learman gives the latest news.

“A current has changed direction off the coast of Peru. Some small fish that were migrating north are now moving south. The tunas that ate them are now looking for food elsewhere. As a result, the fishermen are complaining.”

“The sharks are hungry too,” says Miss Ondricek #1. “One of them attacked Hank Towers last Tuesday near the pier.”

“He ate his leg,” adds Miss Ondricek #2.

“What was he doing near the pier?” Harry Learman asks.

“What do you think? Surfing.”

“It’s not a question of hunger. The shark mistook the surfboard for a rival.”

“He didn’t eat the surfboard, he ate the leg.”

“He doesn’t see further than the end of his nose, he relies more on his sense of smell. Hank Towers smelled like fresh flesh!”

In Paris, no one ever talks about hungry sharks. I’m glad I came!

Shark fins

The plane costs barely more than the bus. The stash of cash my mother gave me is almost intact. I’m not going to bring money back to Paris. I also need to take care of my mental health. Crossing the country in a bus seat again? I’d go crazy.

Noël and I don’t just go to the auto show, but also to the aviation show at Le Bourget. I jot down for him: *Eastern Pacific Company, San Diego to Los Angeles, Lockheed Electra*. We barely take off before descending. The sun looks like a big red ball floating on the Pacific Ocean. Each of the countless houses in Los Angeles projects a tentacular shadow, as if it wanted to absorb its neighbor.

After waiting two hours in the airport, I board a *Trans Continental Douglas DC6*. Seen from above, the big city has disappeared into the darkness, replaced by a strange light ballet. On one side, small fixed lights twinkle patiently. On the other, moving lights move in slow procession. They don’t advance at random; they know that a fixed light awaits them. No one gets lost, no one makes a mistake. All the moving lights will find an abode!

First time I spend the night in a plane. The seat is less comfortable than in the bus. The plane doesn’t stop every three hours to refuel or change pilots. Main difference: the bus’s baby sleeps like a dormouse, rocked by the motion, while the plane’s baby

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cries all night. What am I complaining about? My classmates spend their holidays with their grandparents in the countryside. After gathering hay, they play pétanque. Me, I'm flying over Texas. I went to Mexico. Caramba, I ate tortillas! The Aztecs eat watermelons¹. Hey, Gringo, your hair is too long. My cousin's cousin makes a living by drinking wine. My father's uncle had three children, whom my father never talked about. The children of my father's uncle's children are my second cousins. A girl my age. The stars look like the fixed lights of Los Angeles, except they don't wait for anyone. An old man kidnaps the baby and walks him to stop him from crying. "I'm used to it, I'm a grandfather," he says.

The day is breaking when we arrive in Chicago. The skyscrapers that crowd the edge of Lake Michigan hesitate to take a dive.

"I bet I can swim faster than you."

"That would be the day!"

"You're too chicken to try."

"You first!"

The *TWA Chicago-Pittsburgh* leaves in four hours. The ground hostesses can't do anything for me.

"The travel agent who sold you the ticket planned for a long layover, but he had no choice. If the Los Angeles flight was delayed, you'd miss your connection."

"There's no earlier flight to Pittsburgh?"

"Not with us. You just have that small suitcase, or also a checked bag?"

"I have another suitcase."

"If you want to see it again, you'd better not change airlines. Do you live in Los Angeles?"

"I'm French. I live in Paris."

"How nice!"

"You must be tired, after a night on the plane. You can rest in our office. We'll let you know when it's time to board."

On the other side of their counter, I discover placards hidden from the public: "*Smile! Smile! Smile!*" As soon as I reach the legal age, I will marry a smiling stewardess, or Miss Missouri. Our children will have big teeth and we will tell them, "Smile! Smile! Smile!" I lie down on a bench in the stewardesses' office and dream that Miss Mouse is smiling².

A Lockheed Super-Constellation. The king of propeller aircraft, recognizable by its triple tail. It acts high without realizing that it is already completely outdated. Pittsburgh in the late morning. More than twenty hours since I left Mrs. Ondricek's. I feel a little

¹ *Les Aztèques mangent des pastèques.*

² *Miss Souris sourit.*

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pang in my heart at the moment of landing. I hope the pilot knows what he's doing and that he'll be able to control his behemoth. Curiously, I feel the same pang while waiting for my suitcase. Yet, if it's lost, it's less annoying than if the plane crashes. Phew, there it is!

I don't see any cousin. The brown-haired girl? No, my cousin is probably the same age as my father. Fifty-six years old in ten days. Write *Happy Birthday* on a postcard... Why did I come to Pittsburgh? If I had stayed with Mrs. Ondricek, she would have ended up adopting me and I would have lived in that anteroom of paradise called California. Those cousins nobody ever heard of, it's suspicious. The loudspeaker would be easier to understand if he stopped chewing his gum. *Griff? Grief?* Someone is sad? Who? *Mr. Griff...* Hey, that's me! What do you want now? Already paid for the deckchair. They summon me to the TWA counter. A couple who are a hundred and twelve years old (altogether) is waiting for me.

"Djinn-Djak? Hmm, I'm your cousin Cécile."

"And I'm Harold Steinitz, her husband."

Cécile is shy and searches for her words even to say very simple things. The opposite of my father, who is nonetheless her first cousin. We head towards a giant parking lot. Harold shows me a car. *Holy Mackerel!* A brand new Cadillac, recognizable by its two shark fins.

"You admire my car? I need to have the best. I'm a banker. If I seem rich, people are less afraid to entrust me with their money."

Met all kinds of Americans in six weeks, but this is my first millionaire. I'm sitting in a Cadillac! I'm surely going to live in a dream house with a pool and tennis.

They leave the pool and tennis to the new rich. They rent a large apartment in a kind of hotel in the center of Pittsburgh. A maid comes every morning. When you're hungry, you ask the concierge to bring up a meal. Cécile doesn't need to tire herself. Her main occupation: finding ways not to die of boredom. She should get a small dog. Meanwhile, my arrival is timely. Instead of preparing for Polytechnique, I could earn a living as a companion to single ladies. An ad in the paper: "Learned and witty young Frenchman, speaking good English... Knowing how to kill flies and play bridge... For referrals, contact Mrss Colen, Ondricek, Steinitz."

"Hmm, I'm going to call my brother Aaron. You need to meet your cousin Ruthie."

"Selma told me you have another brother."

"Ah yes, hmm, Leo. He also has a daughter, Lilian. She's at *summer camp*, I think. Do you hear that infernal noise? They start with their jackhammers at eight in the morning."

"It's surprising that we can hear them so well. We are on the fourteenth floor and they are on the other side of the avenue."

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“There was already a skyscraper. Not so old... Maybe twenty years. Look, they are only at the foundations. It will take months. What will become of me?”

“I thought they built skyscrapers in three weeks in America. After all, time is money...”

Cécile was right: our little Ruthie is very amusing. She is full of energy, as if she had managed to conserve the capital that other people deplete around three or four years old. Moreover, she is tiny and laughs like a child. She lives in the suburbs of Minneapolis, I mean Pittsburgh, with her parents and little brother. Her older sister, Beth, is already married.

“Djinn-Djak, Djinn-Djak! You must come to the Country Club, oh you must.”

“What club?”

“It’s a place where everyone goes. I’ll introduce you to everyone. Oh yes! Let’s go tomorrow. No, this afternoon! My mom will drive us. *Mom! Mom!*”

Everyone around the pool at the Country Club is Jewish. In this country, people socialize by communities. No place for infidels like me. Ruth’s friends are as attractive as Kathy Colen’s. This time, I pay attention to what I say. My brother Noël? Oh, it’s a very common name in France. We have an actor named Noël Roquevert and even another named Noël Noël.

Already in New York, I was looked at as an exotic creature, so in Pittsburgh, imagine. Ruth is quite proud.

“This is my cousin Djinn-Djak. He is French. He’s from Paree!”

“Really, from Paree?”

“Do you speak English?”

“What do you think of America?”

“My boyfriend’s sister went to Paree last year.”

“Do you know Meeshell Dourann? He’s someone I met in Cleveland. He lives in Paree.”

“Michel Durand? Yes, I know him! A tall blond and very athletic.”

“Um, he was rather small and dark.”

“Then I don’t know him. I’m sorry.”

Ruth is more fun than Kathy Colen, but nobody is perfect: she refuses to kiss me.

“It’s disgusting! With all the germs in the mouth...”

“There are people who do it, though.”

“They have no hygiene. It’s very dangerous. I’m sure I’ll never do it.”

I meet my cousin Beth and her husband at a reception that Cécile throws for me. Beth is less shy than Ruth. She doesn’t mind kissing me. On the contrary. She drags me

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into a room... Hey, that's child abduction! I vaguely remember that one of the Ten Commandments says, *Thou shalt not kiss a married woman.*

"Are you sure? If your husband walks in here and sees us..."

"So what? I have the right to kiss my cousin!"

Cécile has invited the whole family. Her brother Leo remembers the good old days.

"I saw your dad in Poland. His name was Leon, like me, in memory of his maternal grandfather, Leon Kostman, who is my paternal grandfather. It was in 1925. I went there by boat with my father to attend your two aunts' wedding¹. It was the first time my father had returned to Poland since he emigrated. Your grandfather had a beautiful inn. He arranged a magnificent feast for the wedding. Did your dad tell you about that?"

"No. He doesn't talk about Poland. He considers himself one hundred percent French. I know nothing about my grandparents and aunts. I didn't even know I had cousins in Pittsburgh."

"Well, you tell him you saw cousin Leo. I'm sure he remembers me. He had a very pretty fiancée. I think they got married, and then they divorced. Your mother is his second wife, isn't she?"

"Yes. He met her during the war."

Leo speaks slowly, as if to give more weight to his words. It's because he's a lawyer. He is tall and massive. His hair is all white. His brother Aaron, Ruth's father, spends his life on the road in his big car selling steel beams. He too, tall and massive. Just by looking at him, you can tell his beams are very strong. If you build a bridge with his beams, it's not going to break at the first gust of wind.

The spider

One evening, while enjoying the cool air with Ruth and three of her friends on the veranda of her house, she lets out a terrifying scream. I jump in my chair.

"What's the matter?"

"Look, a spider!"

Oh yes: a curious little spider is climbing up the leg of her chair. I remember the similar scream that Mrs Colen let out when she saw a fly. These Americans suffer from a kind of collective disease. A phobia of dirt, small creatures, and germs—the worst of all being the bacillus of communism. They constantly wash themselves. They put bleach (or a liquid that looks like it) under their arms to suppress the smell of perspiration.

They're getting on my nerves you know. I grab the spider between my thumb and index finger, roll it into a small ball, and swallow it (without chewing).

"We eat those kinds of creatures in my country. Snails, frogs, and spiders."

¹ See *Lonek*.

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I wouldn't have believed it, but Ruth is capable of screaming even louder than the first time. This would be the moment to confess that my parents are communists, to see if she faints.

My mistake, maybe. I was still hoping to convince her to kiss me. Now it's going to be difficult.

The next day, at the Country Club, everyone:

"Is it true you eat spiders?"

Sylvie and Armand

I call cousin Sylvie in New Hampshire.

"Hello, Sylvie? It's Jean-Jacques. You know I'm in Pittsburgh?"

"Yes, Selma told me. You did well to stop there. Now you know the whole family."

"I have a very nice little cousin named Ruth."

"Leo's daughter?"

"No, Aaron's."

"Oh yes, he has two daughters..."

"I thought I could bring her with me to Manchester. If it's not too much trouble for you. You could meet your cousin."

"But yes, why not? I went to Pittsburgh only once, years ago. Yet they're my first cousins, like your father."

One more short night in a Greyhound bus—with a layover and a bus change in New York City. These Americans, with their big teeth and good health, can sleep anywhere. I can tell that Ruth is used to sleeping sitting up. Not at home, I guess... No, I know: at school!

When we step out of the bus in New York:

"Djinn-Djak?"

"Yes, my dear."

"Hey, you didn't kiss me while I was sleeping, did you?"

"But no, what an idea..."

"Are you sure? Swear it!"

"I swear and I spit... Uh, that's what we say in French."

I bet she had a dreadful nightmare. I was kissing her, but my mouth was full of spiders and toads...

Sylvie and Armand, her husband, pick us up in Boston. American luxury cars are a thing of the past: they drive a Peugeot 404. Manchester is located northwest of Boston, about an hour's drive away. Armand is a painter, sculptor, and graphic designer. I settle into his studio and draw skyscrapers with India ink. He creates catalogs and posters for

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the textile industries in the area. He shows me different reproduction processes: lithography, screen printing, offset.

He takes me to a modern synagogue.

“I was asked to design the interior. I chose a local beech for the paneling. I also made these sculptures. They represent old Jews I knew in Poland.”

“It’s the first time I enter a synagogue. I’ve visited many churches. My parents liked to choose a place to go to on Sundays. We would go visit the cathedrals of Chartres or Reims. I preferred going to the movies.”

Sylvie speaks French and English with an accent. She still feels a foreigner in her new country. It would be easier if she worked. In Paris, she was a dermatologist at Saint-Louis Hospital.

“Armand can draw anywhere, but me, for medicine, they asked I redo my degrees. If I wanted to, I had to learn English first. We arrived nine years ago, in 1952. I was already forty years old and felt too old.”

“I remember you treated my brother Noël. You removed a birthmark he had under his ear.”

“Did it not come back?”

“Let’s say it’s less visible now that he shaves”

“I like your parents. I’ve known your father since I was quite small. I have new friends here, but it’s not the same... On the other hand, Paris reminds me bad memories. Rose, my sister, died during the war.”

“She was deported?”

“She managed find some fruits, so she cooks them on a small stove in her hotel room to preserve them. She falls asleep. The jam overflows and puts out the fire. The gas asphyxiated her. I miss her a lot.”

I give her updates on her cousin Max and cousin Selma. I tell her about my vacation.

“The crew mutinied, so I came back to Paris in first class and took a jet... Since the suitcases were too heavy, it landed in Newfoundland... All the exits were closed, yet a fly managed to get into the apartment... A bridge called Big Mac... A leg of lamb for the whole week... Wait, I’ll show you my Mexican visa...”

Yes, ladies, when Djinn-Djak is around, boredom goes away! Sylvie even gets two entertainers for the price of one because Ruth is even more talkative than I am.

“You don’t go to the Country Club, Sylvie? In Pittsburgh, I go to the Country Club every day.”

“I don’t even know what Country Club is.”

“It’s a big park with a pool. You meet everyone. When it’s hot, like now, I love to swim in the pool.”

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“If you want, we can go to the sea on Sunday. I’ll ask Armand. You’ll swim in the ocean.”

“Oh yes, oh yes! You know what? I’ve never seen the ocean. It’ll be the first time!”

It’s very close. After driving for three-quarters of an hour, we arrive at the top of a hill and see a huge gray expanse. Ruth refuses to believe it.

“It’s not the sea, it’s a lake.”

“But yes, it’s the sea. It’s the Atlantic Ocean.”

“The sea is blue, I know that. And there are no waves.”

“It’s gray because the sky is gray. It reflects the sky. We are still too far away to see the waves.”

“It’s a lake!”

I don’t need to dip my big toe to guess that the water is freezing. Still have to swim, though. After swallowing that unfortunate spider, I have to defend my tough guy reputation.

We warm up by eating a soup called *Clam Chowder*, and then lobsters.

Shakespeare in the Park.

I don’t understand anything about the American school system. Ruth enters a class called Junior High. It’s between our eighth and third grade. She can’t solve first-degree equations, has never studied a foreign language, and is unaware that the world existed before the United States declared independence. If she falls asleep in class, what can you expect.

“I don’t like math, so I took English and theater instead.”

“You can choose the subjects you study?”

“Of course. Not you?”

“We have a choice for languages, and that’s it.”

“You know what? It’s too late this year, but next year I’ll take French. Maybe they’ll send me to study in Paris!”

In the meantime, she has to go back to Pittsburgh, and I have to go back to Brooklyn. We take the bus together to New York.

Ron and Murray, Bronka Cohen’s sons, sit in front of the television in the morning, like Kathy Colen, except they watch baseball instead of sappy soap operas. They want to explain the rules of the game to me.

“See, the bases are loaded, so the pitcher had better not miss his shot.

“Out! Out! He put some spin on it to trick the batter.”

Despite my good will, it’s really too difficult. You have to start from childhood, like piano.

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I visit the Brooklyn Museum, I go to Manhattan to buy a few more books in my favorite bookstores. I don't want to waste my days watching television and reading Mad Magazine. Hey, I haven't even seen the capital of the country!

Washington is five hours by bus from New York. Ron and Murray take me to see Shakespeare's *Richard II*, which is being performed outdoors in Central Park. I will take the bus at one in the morning to arrive in Washington at six.

We are standing a kilometer away from the stage. It's free, so people come three days in advance with their sleeping bags and sandwiches to take the seats. I vaguely see the actors. The distance blurs the sound. I don't understand anything. Neither do Ron and Murray.

"It's old English."

"I studied the text in class, but I didn't memorize it."

After spending hours standing in the park, I am happy to sit in a comfortable bus seat. I feel like I'm going to sleep well this time... Damned! We've barely left, and we're already stopping. Trenton? Another city full of skyscrapers I've never heard of... Then it's Philadelphia, Baltimore, and finally, Washington.

What can one do in Washington at six in the morning? I eat scrambled eggs with bacon, pancakes drizzled with maple syrup, and toast. Now that I've recharged my batteries, let's get moving! I start with the Mint building, for the simple reason that it can be visited as early as eight in the morning. The sight of printing presses and fresh greenbacks inspires American tourists.

"Can't you give me a little stack? It wouldn't make any difference!"

"Good place for a hold-up, that's for sure..."

"Doesn't look too complicated to make them. I'll try it at home!"

The guide is a good actor: he laughs as if hearing these jokes for the first time.

After this little appetizer, I move on to serious things: the Lincoln Memorial (which looks like the Madeleine church), the Jefferson Memorial, the Capitol, the Supreme Court, the National Museum, the Smithsonian Museum (where Lindbergh's plane, the *Spirit of St. Louis*, hangs from the ceiling like a chandelier), an oriental art museum...

Toward the end of the afternoon, I decide to head back to the bus station. The September sun caresses me with its last rays. I sit on a lawn from which I can see the whole city. The creamy monuments are showing off in the purple light of the sun, like actors who come to take a bow under the spotlights before retiring for the night.

A busy day. A nice conclusion to this vacation in America. Me too, I'm bowing out in the glorious light of the retiring sun. Speaking of retiring¹... This lawn is very comfortable... I'll lie down for a few minutes.

¹ In French, to say the Sun sets, we say *Le soleil se couche*, the Sun lies down (or goes to bed), so it incites me to do likewise.

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Hey, what's up? It's dark, all of a sudden. I was hoping to take the bus at seven to arrive at midnight, but it's already nine.

Baltimore, Philadelphia, Trenton...

Here I am on the New York subway at two in the morning. It doesn't close, but there are fewer trains than during the day. I have to change twice to go to the Cohens'. If I wait twenty minutes at the start and twenty minutes at each change, I lose an hour. I decide to take a line that goes directly to Brooklyn... It doesn't pass through my neighborhood, so I'll have to walk a bit.

Bad idea. I walk along deserted streets at three in the morning. I cross sinister areas. I pass by ruined buildings. I hope they're uninhabited. If I believed in ghosts, it would be even worse. I quicken my pace when I see ominous shadows. A young Frenchman disappears in Brooklyn! His desperate parents issue a plea: "Tell us if you've kidnapped him, we're willing to pay a ransom."

The detectives in charge of the investigation:

"You let him travel alone at sixteen?"

"He wanted to."

"Well, he was taking a walk at three in the morning in a very bad neighborhood."

"That's not at all like him. Such a serious boy..."

Say, I've arrived! Alive! Two nights without sleep, but I'll rest on the boat.

Seven at one blow

Bronka drives me to the port of New York. My heart leaps in my chest when I see the tall chimneys of the ships at the end of the street, between two skyscrapers. The giants of the sea are packed by the dozens near the docks, as if the mayor of New York had summoned them for a conference.

The *Flandres* liner reminds me of a certain "French" restaurant in Pittsburgh that my cousins love—wood paneling, plush carpets, bow-legged armchairs, crystal chandeliers. Somewhere below the waterline, at the end of a corridor, I find a cabin as cramped as the one on the *Liberté*. I share it with three Frenchmen who work in Standard Oil refineries. They remind me of the *Pieds Nickelés*¹. The one who looks like Ribouldingue is already planning an escape.

"Listen, buddies, I know a trick to get into first class: through the infirmary, top secret, can't say more. Instead of staying in this rat hole, I spend my days scarfing caviar by the pool with the toffs. I find meself a rich heiress who invites me to her cabin. You

¹ Nickel-plated feet. Three thieves in cheap comic books. They are often in a situation where they have to plan an escape.

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want to know the difference between a first-class cabin and a tourist-class cabin? It's the same as between a Cadillac and a *Deuche*¹."

"How come you ain't found a rich heiress in six weeks in New Jersey?" asks the one who looks like Filochard. "Tell you why: first you'd have to learn English."

"Maybe you've forgot that on the way here you didn't leave the cabin because you was so seasick," Croquignol chuckles. "You won't seduce your American beauty by puking over the railing... Actually, this cabin ain't so bad. It's like being in a submarine."

"You been on a submarine?"

"No, but I could have. My father wanted me to do my military service in the Navy. I preferred the Air Force. In the end, they exempted me 'cause I'm nearsighted. Well, guys, before I lose my appetite and turn green, I'd like to have a little bite to eat."

"They haven't announced the first service yet."

"By the time we make it up to the dining room's bar and have drink, they'll have announced it long ago."

I leave them at the bar and enter the dining room. The head waiter just happens to need a single passenger to complete a table of eight. The people already seated are Vassar College students who will spend a year in France. Seven American young ladies²... The polygamous Mormons were right. Go to heaven with seven *pretty girls*!

I wonder if the good milk and chewing gum are enough to explain their beautiful blonde health. It may be a matter of selection. The pioneers who landed in America died like flies. The Indians took care of those spared by hunger and malaria. Only the strongest survived.

Six gigantic blondes and one not-too-tall brunette, who speaks and laughs less loudly than the others. Her name is Polly Black. We become the best of friends.

My cabin companions don't understand.

"When the head waiter showed you the table, you should have refused."

"Alone facing seven chattering chicks. Tough luck, buddy."

"Not to mention that they speak English."

Hey, you Pieds Nickelés, just admit that you're jealous!

The girls are not as vigorous as one might think. Their number decreases day by day, like in an Agatha Christie novel. One survivor gives us the key to the mystery.

"They don't feel well. They find it too rocky. Did it move as much on the way over, Djinn-Djak?"

"On the way over, I took the plane. But I can tell you that it rocks less than the small ferries that cross the English Channel. Have you noticed the hooks on the floor? If there

¹ For *Deux-chevaux*, a small cheap Citroën.

² Vassar was a women-only college until 1969.

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was a storm, they would tie the table to the ground with a cable. I'm sure they would put suction cups under the glasses to prevent them from tipping over."

In any case, the rocking does not bother the dance enthusiasts who twirl every evening in the Grand Salon. Polly gives me lessons. She studies literature, dance, and piano. I have the impression that she belongs to the America that celebrates Bloomsday rather than the one that makes Barbie dolls in its insipid suburbs.

"Listen, this is a samba. Three months ago, I went on tour in South America with the Vassar dance troupe. We learned rumba, conga, cha-cha-cha, and samba. Look, what makes the samba is the syncopation..."

Polly shows me a game she learned on the boat that was going to Brazil. The narrow corridors leading to the cabins change level for mysterious reasons, so one constantly comes across small stairs of a dozen steps.

"You see, you lean on both bannisters and jump down. The winner is the one who takes the most steps in one go."

"Alright, I'll try. Five steps!"

"Admire the professional: nine!"

"If you lean forward, of course."

"I didn't forbid you to do the same."

"Okay... Ready... One, two, three... Ten steps!"

What's good about this game is that you get to kiss at the bottom of the stairs. Polly is not at all afraid of germs.

1962

Le Grand Voyage

Since my parents bought a television set (after having long feared this machine would brainwash the children), my mother has become a regular viewer. How else could she converse with her bridge friends?

“Did you watch the documentary last night, Marie-Cécile? That new capital they’re building in Brazil is extraordinary.”

“One has to go to these young countries to see big projects. Would you imagine such a thing here?”

“And the Commandant Cousteau’s show on sharks!”

“Listen, Marie-Odile, say what you will, those who film it are courageous.”

One evening, my mother calls me.

“Jean-Jacques, Jean-Jacques, they’re looking for people like you for a show.”

“To present the news instead of Léon Zitrone?”

“No, young people who like to travel. You have to write a letter explaining where you’d like to go.”

“Mum, you’re forgetting I’m in Maths Sup.”

“Oh, just a little letter, you only need two minutes. You take breaks from your studies now and then, it’ll be a distraction. The game is called *Le Grand Voyage*.”

I’ve seen a Japanese film whose title intrigued me: *Contes de la lune vague après la pluie*¹. Afterwards, I went to see a series of films by the same director, Mizoguchi, with my friend Polly. I dream of discovering Lake Biwa in the morning mist and hearing the monks sing mournful prayers in Zen temples.

It’s a banal idea. They’ll receive a million letters about Japan. I decide to talk about my day in Tijuana: “Hey, gringo, come get a haircut!” I explain that my visit to Mexico was too brief and that I’d like to go back.

The show’s producer, Jean Thévenot, calls me to tell me he’s chosen my letter.

“I really liked the story about the barber.”

All I gain in this matter is having to study Aztec gods in addition to linear algebra. I dive into an encyclopedia of mythologies. I borrow books by Jacques Soustelle² from

¹ Tales of the hazy moon after the rain. In America, the title was simply *Ugetsu*, meaning Rain-moon. In Japan: *Ugetsu monogatari*, Tale of the rain-moon, the title of the original 18th century novel by Akinari Ueda.

² Eminent specialist of pre-Columbian civilizations, as well as a minister in several government, friend then arch-enemy of Général de Gaulle.

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the library. I write notes on the history and geography of Mexico. By the moustache of General Alcazar, I'm ready!

The RTF¹ studios are located on rue Cognac-Jay, near the Eiffel Tower. I'm introduced to the two other candidates I'll be competing against: "Danièle, 20 years old, Lille" and "Mireille, 20 years old, Paris." I'm "Jean-Jacques, 17 years old, Paris." These are the labels in front of us.

Jean Thévenot asks us questions to test our culture as apprentice travelers. In what year did the campanile of St. Mark's Square in Venice collapse? What was the name of the colonel who discovered the first oil deposits in Texas? Etc.

Hey, it's a trap! Why should an apprentice traveler have to answer these questions? Danièle, 20 years old, answers two out of ten questions. Mireille, 20 years old, and I answer three out of ten.

"Fortunately, we have prepared questions to break the tie. Listen carefully: what fuel is put in the tanks of jet planes?"

"Kerosene!"

"Exactly! My dear Jean-Jacques, you win at the 11th hour."

Easy. I have books on planes, I draw planes, I even took a jet plane last summer. Mireille, 20 years old, is not happy.

"They prepared a boy's question to break the tie. It's not fair!"

Now I'm alone on the stage of candidates. Jean Thévenot questions me about Mexico. A jury of journalists, geographers and "personalities" judges my answers. Everything goes well until the moment when I have to talk about the religion of Mexicans.

"They are Catholics in their own way. The ancient gods survive, discreetly disguised as saints and demons. They no longer sacrifice babies to the god Tlaloc for rain, but they leave dolls in the chapel of Saint Ramon..."

A member of the jury, the cultural attaché of Mexico, turns as red as a chili pepper.

"What are you saying? We are good Catholics like you!"

That man has an Indian face. I'm sure he secretly adores Quetzalcoatl and Huitzilopochtli, so he wants to hide his game and confuse the issue. What does he think? That I invented my theory? I just repeated what I read in a book. He gives me a bad mark to punish me. I earn fewer "kilometers" than last week's candidate, a lover of Greece. Too bad, because the candidate who gets the best score of the year wins a trip around the world.

¹ *Radio Télévision Française*. Public radio and TV. There was still one TV channel only. A second channel was created in December, 1963— and the name of the administration then became ORTF, *Office de Radio Télévision Française*.

Hitchhiking

Cassis bis

The candidate who loves Greece will go on a trip around the world. I have to settle for a round-trip ticket to Lisbon. My brother Olivier represents me at the awards ceremony in early July. He is very happy to appear on television.

“Where is your brother?” Jean Thévenot asks him.

“Already left for vacation. He’s going to Italy, Greece, and Israel.”

“Well, we can say he is faithful to the spirit of the Grand Voyage. I give you his plane ticket, which is valid for one year. He’ll use it next summer!”

Where am I? In Cassis. Bernard Béraud, a friend of Gretry, was driving there. He was looking for someone to share the gas costs. I spend a few days with him in his parents’ vacation home.

“We were camping up there on the cliff. A big storm flooded our tent. Gretry was getting angry because I was buying tomatoes and he didn’t like them.”

I raise my thumb beyond the last house of Cassis early in the morning. Two years ago, it took me a day to crawl to La Ciotat. Now that I’m a seventeen-year-old seasoned traveler, I race along the French Riviera. The sun hasn’t even disappeared behind the horizon when I’m already crossing the city of Cannes—in a car whose driver seems to like my company.

“I’ll soon stop at a hotel I know in Juan-les-Pins. If you want, you can sleep in my room... We could sleep in the same bed...”

“No, thank you. I prefer to continue to Nice.”

Maybe cousin Max was right to advise me against hitchhiking across the United States. In the movies, it’s always a beautiful blonde who invites James Dean to get into her convertible, never a big guy wanting to spend the night with him.

Fifty kilometers before Nice, two beautiful blondes invite me to get into their convertible. I like that better! It’s a modest white Renault Floride, but my hair is fluttering in the evening breeze as if I were driving a Thunderbird.

The driver talks to me through the rearview mirror. Hey, watch the road!

“Are you comfortable back there?”

“Yes, thank you. If you see another hitchhiker, don’t stop. There’s no more room!”

“It’s a bit tight. Where are you going?”

“Rome.”

“We’re going to Nice. I’m sorry. Are you a student?”

“In preparatory class. I’m starting Maths Spé at lycée Louis-le-Grand high school.”

“Oh my! I’ve never understood anything about math.”

“I can give you lessons if you want. Do you study something?”

“Piano at the Conservatory.”

Hitchhiking

“Ah yes? My brother does too. In which class?”

“Pierre Sančan. And your brother?”

“Lucette Descaves.”

“What’s his name?”

“Olivier Greif.”

“No, it doesn’t ring a bell.”

“He’s younger than you, he’s only twelve.”

The passenger is a law student. She never understood math either.

I take a slow train that snails all night to cover the two hundred kilometers between Nice and Genoa. It’s not fast, but it still moves faster than a hotel room.

Italians don’t know about hitchhiking. I spend the morning at the exit of Genoa, unsuccessfully hailing down Fiats and Alfa Romeos. In France, even when people don’t stop, they slow down when they see me; they hesitate, they consider being more generous next time. Here, as soon as a driver starts, he swears never to slow down. It’s a matter of honor. In addition, his car is too small and his family too large. The cheeks of the bambini flatten against the rear windows. They look like slices of Prosciutto. The mamma, sitting in front, laments and waves her hands. “The price of Olive oil has gone up again. They say it’s because of the drought. The more they test their bombs, the more they mess up the climate. Scientists say nothing for fear of frightening people... This Khrushchev is capable of launching atomic bombs on the world... It’s never been so hot, no? Stop bothering your sister, Anselmo, if you don’t want to get one... Even the Pope is becoming communist... But look at that crazy man by the side of the road... What do you want? Can’t you see the car is full?”

Around noon, I say *basta*. Six hours waiting around... I go back to the station and get on the train to Rome.

The mosquito capital

A small tourist office in the Rome train station.

“*Scusi*. I’m a French student. I’m looking for a cheap place to stay. A kind of youth hostel.”

“We have accommodations for foreign students in the Olympic Village. It’s across the Tiber.”

A large dormitory. Travelers from all over the world come to visit Rome and meet the new Pope called Spider. My neighbor, a tall, very thin man, speaks to me in English.

“My name is Jeff Field. I live in Montreal.”

“People from Montreal don’t all speak French?”

Hitchhiking

“Everyone except me.”

We dine with a joyful group in an open-air restaurant. My neighbor is an Austrian student who looks like Marlene Dietrich.

“Ich bin französisch. Mein name ist Jean-Jacques.”

I must not tell her my last name, otherwise she would be surprised: “Oh, but that’s a German name!” I would have to lie: “Alsatian...” I haven’t often said the phrase “*Je suis juif*.” In America, sometimes: *I am Jewish*. In any case, I’ve never said: *Ich bin jüdisch*.

As soon as I lie down, I have to defend myself against a swarm of enraged mosquitoes. Wait a minute, you dirty bugs... I slap myself left and right. Usually, my succulent skin attracts all mosquitoes within a hundred meters, and the people around me are as safe as if they were sheltered under a mosquito net. This time, the little vampires are too numerous: while the most vigorous ones delight in my blood, the others go elsewhere. All night long, it’s a concert of slaps interspersed with curses in various languages and bursts of laughter. Jeff Field grumbles.

“I should have known, with the river. In Canada, we have lotions that repel them.”

“They exist in Europe too. We’re not savages! We can buy some tomorrow morning, I mean this morning. Don’t you find it strange that they built an Olympic city right next to the Tiber?”

“Why is it called *Olympic City* again?”

“The Rome Olympics, two years ago. They thought that if foreign athletes spent the night scratching themselves to blood, they would have trouble running and jumping. Meanwhile, the Italians slept like logs on the other side of the city.”

“Did they win more medals?”

“Their strategy failed because of Zatopek. His skin is so thick that mosquitoes broke their teeth on it, so he won all the medals, even though they dug ponds near here to breed mutant mosquitoes. We should catch a specimen and show it to an entomologist: *Ma, da vero, it’s a monster! Call the army... The future of the human species is at stake!*”

Jeff wants to see the monuments from the outside and film them with his movie camera.

“You’re not interested in the inside?”

“You are not allowed to film inside, and there isn’t enough light anyway.”

While I visit twelve museums and fifty churches, he goes by bus to Pisa, Florence, and Siena. Film reels accumulate in his suitcase. After two weeks, we take the train together to Naples. He wants to film the islands of Capri and Ischia.

“Don’t you want to come with me to Pompeii tomorrow?”

Hitchhiking

“It’s just ruins, no? I filmed ruins in Rome.”

“Yes, but the Forum and the Colosseum are all eaten away by the centuries, while in Pompeii they have brand new ruins. The city was covered in ash by an eruption of Vesuvius. They’re unearthing it.”

“Alright. Tomorrow Pompeii, the day after Capri and Ischia.”

“When you go to the islands, I’ll visit the museum.”

In Naples, they eat a kind of pepper and bacon tart called pizza. The crust is a bit hard, but it’s not bad.

Although Jeff has already filmed many ruins, I persuade him to come with me to Greece instead of going to Germany. The train takes us to Brindisi, on the Adriatic coast, where we part ways temporarily. Jeff found a cheaper boat ticket than the one my mother bought, and his boat goes to Athens while mine stops in Patras.

Ulysses and Agamemnon

The crossing lasts all night. The ship is a ferry full of cars and trucks. Passengers sleep on the deck. I doze on a bench that I share with two tall Americans, Ann and Debbie.

“French? How come you speak such good English?”

“I learned by listening to your radio.”

“You speak better than our radio!”

When day breaks, we see on our left¹ a rugged, wrinkled coastline exhausted from the centuries-old battle against the waves. It extends into a string of reefs that rise from the sea like so many fists.

Hearing us speak English, two gentlemen approach.

“I’m Buddy.”

“Tom.”

“Ann Miller.”

“Debbie.”

“Jean-Jacques. I’m French.”

“Oh, look to the right!” Ann cries out. “That island... Ithaca!”

No wonder she knows Ithaca: she studies Greek history at Princeton University. Tom and Buddy are less knowledgeable.

“Ithaca? Like the city in New York state?”

“They named the city after this island, not the other way around. Ithaca, come on!”

“Uh...”

“It’s just that... it’s our first time here.”

“Ulysses’s island! You’ve heard of Ulysses... Homer, The Odyssey!”

¹ Or rather, as Capitaine Haddock would say: *to port*.

Hitchhiking

“Oh yeah...”

“The Odyssey... Of course...”

I don't care if they're illiterate. These good boys have a car and agree to take me to Athens. I suggest a little detour.

“When we pass through Corinth, instead of crossing the canal and arriving immediately in Athens, we can go visit the Peloponnese.”

“The Pelo-what?”

“It will take a few hours, but you'll have memories for a lifetime. We'll see the great theater of Epidauros. And Mycenae, the city of King Agamemnon. You know, the one who led the Greeks to Troy. Homer, *The Iliad*...”

In the end, they are very happy.

“We don't have things like that in the United States.”

“Or maybe in Hollywood, but it's fake.”

Mr. Sound and Mrs. Light

I am meeting Jeff at the American Express office on Syntagma Square. It's like our Place de la Concorde with the king's palace in place of the obelisk. This *American Express* amazes me. They give Jeff mail that they've received for him. Then he shows a small plastic card and withdraws drachmas.

“Do they have offices in every country?”

“At least in the countries where I've been. It's convenient for mail.”

“Do they give you as much money as you want?”

“Maybe not a million dollars. It's mainly convenient for unexpected expenses. I used it to pay for my boat ticket in Rome and now I just bought a plane ticket from Athens to London. If you see a little American Express badge in a shop window, it means you can pay with the card.”

“Not a bad idea. I wonder if it exists in France.”

“They don't give it to just anyone. You have to earn a decent amount of money. My father has the real card. He got a second one for me.”

We find a small hotel near Omonia Square. Jeff is very happy to film the Parthenon.

“In Paris, you have a beautiful cathedral.”

“Notre-Dame. Did you film it?”

“If a piece of the cathedral falls, you repair it. So why don't they repair their Parthenon?”

“A piece did fall. A beautiful marble frieze. An Englishman, Lord Elgin, picked it up. Since you're going to London, you can see it at the British Museum.”

Hitchhiking

“If it’s in a museum, I won’t be able to film it. I’ve filmed everything I can in London on the way here. You know, I don’t need my camera anymore... If you want, I’ll give it to you.”

“You’re giving me your camera?”

“I’ll say it was stolen from me. The insurance will reimburse me and I’ll buy the new model. Look, it’s a Bell and Howell.”

“In this story, I’m the thief.”

“No one will know it’s you.”

“No, thanks. I stole a pen in class when I was nine. They caught me and I have a bad memory of it. Besides, I feel that people who have a camera or a movie camera look at things through the viewfinder and don’t really see them anymore.”

“Maybe I see them less than you, but I’ll see them again in Canada. Overall, I win!”

“Why don’t you forget it at the hotel. The maid will be happy.”

“What maid?”

“We saw her this morning in the hallway. A pretty redhead.”

“I have no memory of her. I’ve heard of that, though.”

“Heard of what?”

“That the French have an eye for pretty women.”

Before taking the London flight, he goes back to the American Express office. Another pretty redhead approaches him as he takes his mail.

“I know those stamps! You’re Canadian?”

“Yes. You too?”

“My name is Harriet. I live in Toronto.””

“I’m from Montreal. Jeff Field. Let me introduce you to my friend Jean-Jacques. He’s French.”

“From Quebec?”

“No, from France.”

“I met him in Rome.”

“I also went to Rome. Did you see Spain? I recommend the Alhambra, in Granada.”

As Greeks speak an incomprehensible language, tourists have to come here to chat a bit. There are as many people as in the New York subway at six in the evening. Hey, these two tall girls...

“Ann! Debbie!”

“Djinn-Djak! How have you been since Patras? What are you doing here?”

“I’m accompanying my friend Jeff. And you?”

“We came to buy boat tickets to go to Crete. I want to see the palace of King Minos in Knossos.”

“It is really the palace of King Minos?”

Hitchhiking

“Reconstructed by Evans. He painted the columns blue and red. It’s a bit kitsch, but beautiful enough.”

“You make me want to go.”

“Come with us. We leave tomorrow evening.”

“Okay. See you tomorrow!”

I buy my ticket. Jeff gets into a taxi to pick up his suitcase at the hotel and go to the airport. Hey, I’m all alone with Harriet!

“Are you staying in Athens for a long time?”

“I’m flying to Munich Saturday morning. I have to visit Germany, Denmark, Scotland and then I’m going back to Toronto. Tonight, I’m going to the Parthenon. There’s a Sound and Light show. It’s supposed to be very good.”

“Would you accept my company?”

“Why do you think I’m telling you? My mom recommended me not to venture out alone at night. I prefer a gentleman to escort me!”

Hundreds of tourists are sitting on the grass of a hill near the Parthenon. Powerful spotlights smear the unfortunate monument with all the colors of the rainbow while loudspeakers evoke the history of Athens by yelling from hill to hill. Mr. Sound and Mrs. Light wanted the best British classical voice, so they went and fetched an actor from the Royal Shakespeare Company: “Oh Glorious Leonidas! Oh Valiant Spartans! You have Sacrificed your Life to Stop the Persian Hordes in the Thermopylae Pass!” The sound is a little better than on a train platform, but American tourists are struggling to follow.

“What is he saying?”

“They fought with salamis.”

“Father Icles¹ fought the war with polo ponies.”

There are sessions in French, German, Spanish, Oxford English, but not in New York English.

The next day, I explore the Archaeological Museum with Harriet. Then, the Byzantine Art Museum. The Agora Museum. I’m starting to get tired of museums. Jeff’s influence, I guess. Harriet wants to see everything.

“You can come back to Greece whenever you want. I have to cross the ocean. It’s harder than jumping over a stream.”

“Aren’t you ever tired? Did you train before leaving? Do you think you’re the Marathon soldier?”

“I have a secret... Look, Jean-Jacques, the secret of little Harriet: I put on reasonable shoes. Not very elegant, but sturdy and comfortable. I toured Europe without getting blisters.”

¹ Père Iclès.

Hitchhiking

“And I have reasonable sandals. My toes can breathe the fresh air of Athens!”

“Are you taking the boat to Crete tonight?”

“I’m coming back to Athens Friday morning.”

“My last day.”

“I know. Let’s meet at eleven in the American Express office. Okay?”

The Bathroom of Minos

Here I am back on a boat deck with Ann and Debbie. All the benches are already occupied. Where will we sleep?

“Here would be good, no?”

“If the goat starts peeing, it will drip on us. I suggest we go to the other side.”

“With the sheep?”

We disembark mid-morning in Heraklion. Ann and Debbie are hungry. They rush into a restaurant on the port. They force me to taste stuffed vine leaves.

“There is nothing more Greek. You’ve never eaten this?”

“Just one, then... I’m not very hungry.”

The boat, um... Well, let’s forget about it. If Theseus had been seasick, how could he have faced the Minotaur?

We spend the afternoon in the palace of Knossos. Ann, who has been studying it for years, knows every nook and cranny. As night falls, we explore the countryside about a hundred meters from the palace. We find ruins half hidden in the tall grass.

“And this, what is it?” Debbie asks.

Ann scratches her head.

“Well, I don’t know... It looks like a spa. A bathroom, so to speak. There may have been a spring nearby. You know what I suggest? We could sleep here.”

“In the bathroom?”

“Since I met you, it will be the third night that I spend with you under the stars. You’ve kept the pioneer spirit. Like cowboys in westerns movies.”

“It’s not the same as on boats, Djinn-Djak. We will rest in the arms of our mother Gaia, our good old earth. On a grass pillow, as the Japanese say.”

“I suggest a fern pillow instead. Look, these dry ferns are easy to pull out. It will be more comfortable than sleeping on stones.”

On the boat deck, I counted sheep without being able to sleep. Then I wandered through the labyrinth of Knossos with an excited archaeologist. I’m so tired that I sleep as soundly as an American—despite the venomous snakes and scorpions crawling on the ground. The cold wakes me up a little before dawn.

“Bye bye, girls!”

“You should stay a little longer. We haven’t seen all of the palace.”

Hitchhiking

“I have to go back to Athens to catch another boat. It won’t wait for me.”

“Where are you going?”

“To Haifa, in Israel.”

Harriet has found a museum of musical instruments. If she stayed one more day, she would visit the toothbrush museum. In the evening, before we part, we kiss under the arcades of a deserted street. Suddenly, screams:

“Stop! Stop! Forbidden! Forbidden!”

“Not sex in street... Go your hotel!”

It would be funny if the shouters weren’t two furious police officers. The law is draconian: kissing in public, ten years in jail! I think of the two Dupondt dressed in Greek style in *The Ottokar Sceptre*.

“Stop, Tintin! Forbidden! No sex in the street!”

“I would even say: Stop, Tintin, forgotten! No sex in the text!”

This Tintin! Stronger at foiling cosmopolitan plots than finding a Tintine to kiss under the arcades.

“Your hotel is nearby, right?”

“It’s a boarding house for ladies. They wouldn’t let you in.”

“Mine, then?”

“Too far. I have to get up early to catch the plane. Come see me in Toronto...”

I have one day left before leaving for Israel. I decide to go to Delphi. Hitchhiking works like a charm. There are fewer cars than in France or in Italy, but trucks stop willingly.

I try to imagine the great temple of Apollo based on the remaining columns that have managed to survive the centuries. Mount Parnassus, on the other hand, hasn’t aged a bit: it overlooks the ruins, immense, dark, and frightening. I look up, hoping to catch a glimpse of a muse or two. Hey, some French people!

“Did you come from France as a group?”

“From Corfu.”

“From Club Med.”

“Day trip.”

“Should have stayed on the beach. Too hot here.”

“Over there you eat as much as you want, whereas on the bus, just sandwiches.”

“Jérôme, stop bothering your sister or you’ll get it...”

The young woman in red serving as their guide notices that I’ve sneaked into the group. It’s group-hitching! She shows me the stadium, the theater, the Temple of Athena. It’s here, perhaps, that the Pythia delivered her oracles, seated on her tripod...

In the henhouse

The boat is more like the ugly ferries that cross the English Channel than a beautiful transatlantic liner. Since I have to spend two nights onboard, my mother had the good idea of buying me a Cabin Class ticket.

Overcoming my disgust, I chat with the lice-infested people sleeping on the deck. Lying on the ground! Where people walk and spit, and I don't even want to think about those who get seasick. Almost all Jewish. Me too, but I'm not going to Israel to find my roots. I've read a book by Arthur Koestler that takes place in a kibbutz. The only place where the communist ideal was realized. Nothing to do with the fake Soviet communism that my parents like so much. In the kibbutz, property is truly abolished. I explain this to two American giants (without mentioning communism, of course).

"Toothbrushes are collective. You can't even own a man or a woman."

"What do you mean?"

"Free love! People consider sex to be a physiological phenomenon, like digestion. Are you hungry? Come to my place, and we'll feast!"

"Are you sure about that?"

"I read it in a novel. I'm going to check whether it's true."

The small white houses of Haifa look like spectators sitting on the bleachers of an amphitheater, watching the ballet of the waves and the winds. The two giants gave me the address of a reception office for foreign students.

"Hello."

"*Shalom!*"

"I'd like to work in a kibbutz."

"Lodging and food in exchange for six hours of work per day. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes."

"The kibbutz is called Yehiam¹. In Galilee. You take the bus to Netanya, then another bus..."

Neither free love nor public toothbrushes in Yiehiam. Of what Koestler describes, only communal meals in a big white dining hall remain. They believe that cooking alters the food, so they eat bread, fruits, and raw vegetables: carrots, cauliflower, red cabbage, peppers, tomatoes. Gretry wouldn't like it. I learn an essential phrase in Israel in summer: "*Maim karim, beva cacha.*" Fresh water, please!"

¹ The h sounds like the German *ch* in *Bach*.

Hitchhiking

Twenty young French people are already working in Yiehiam. They belong to a Jewish association.

“Do you know each other in Paris?”

“We meet two evenings a week.”

“We learn Hebrew.”

“We dance the hora¹.”

“What’s the name of your association?”

“Hashomer Hatzair.”

“It sounds like the name of a planet in a science fiction movie.”

“You have never heard of it? Are you Jewish?”

“Well, yes...”

I don’t hesitate for a second to answer yes. I’m not risking anything since everyone is Jewish in this country—except the Arabs, of course.

These certified Jews are giving me suspicious looks. It would be better if I had a hooked nose and was called Cohen or Levy. While I have always feared having to recite the Lord’s prayer and show a fake baptism certificate, I have to prove that I am Jewish. Like in New York. Never heard of Hanukkah. Not even circumcised.

On the one hand, they suspect that I am not Jewish. On the other hand, they are willing to consider as Jewish many people who were not really Jewish, and certainly less so than me.

“Hey, Sandrine, they say in this book that Proust was Jewish!”

“I knew it. And also Montaigne.”

“Simone Signoret is Jewish, her name is actually Simone Seligman.”

“Mozart was surely Jewish, because Mozart is Moses.”

I know Montaigne well. He’s a friend. If he were Jewish, he would say, “I am Jewish.” You’re going to dig up his corpse to convert him?

I live in a small house with a French student and the two American giants from the boat, who arrived shortly after me. We are woken up at three in the morning. We work from four to ten, before it gets too hot.

I pull weeds in a cotton field. Ouch, my back! Standing on a binding-thresher, blinded and suffocated by wheat dust, I throw bundles of straw into the trailer. They could have given me gloves: it’s as prickly as barbed wire. Jews have spent centuries with their noses buried in books. Suddenly, they become farmers. It’s a topsy-turvy world!

The people of Yiehiam dream of a swimming pool. We dig a hole with shovels and picks. We break monstrous rocks that have been sleeping underground since the time

¹ A Romanian folk dance.

Hitchhiking

of Abraham. A blow with a pickaxe shakes your bones from the occiput to the big toe. To everyone's surprise, the two giants, unable to endure this torture, take refuge in the infirmary.

The students from the Hatzair planet do not complain, as they prepare to emigrate to Israel to work the land. I have lost the desire (which did not torment me too much) to settle in a kibbutz to taste perfect communism. Letting the others go singing to the fields, I find myself a quiet little job in the chicken coop. I clean the incubators, I help the vet vaccinate the chickens. I grab them by the legs to get them out of the cage. He shows me what to do when a chicken is injured

“You hold its head under your sandal and pull its legs sharply to break its neck.”

“I thought we cut off their heads and then the body continues to run around like an idiot.”

“And the blood spurts up to the ceiling to dirty our beautiful chicken coop?”

I have to pick up and count the eggs. That's harder than calculus. I place them delicately in a cart. I count on my fingers: five, ten, fifteen, twenty... Free love. Do they need a rooster to lay eggs? I haven't even seen a boy and a girl holding hands in Yehiam. Haven't seen a rooster either. If I kissed Sandrine, the kibbutz police would arrive immediately: “Sex forbidden! Sex forbidden!” Two hundred forty-two... No, I'm mistaken: two hundred fifty-two... Or forty-two? Oh no! I can't start over again...

After a good nap, we spend the afternoon dancing the hora and learning songs.

Shibolet basade Korha baruakh

Meomes garinim kirav¹...

The leader of the student group wants us to sing in French for the inhabitants of the kibbutz. We learn *Si tous les gars du monde*² (If All the Guys in the World):

If all the guys in the world

Decided to be friends

And shared one morning

Their hopes and sorrows,

If all the guys in the world

Became good friends

And walked hand in hand,

Happiness would be there tomorrow.

The Salt Statue

Goodbye, chickens. After three weeks in Yehiam, I'm leaving to visit Israel. In this country, hitchhiking isn't an adventure—it's the normal way to travel. Clusters of

¹ Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep, and can't tell where to find them...

² A 1957 song by Marcel Achard and Georges Van Parys.

Hitchhiking

soldiers and civilians wait at the exits of cities. Already, in Russia, Jews were used to helping each other. Are you going to the market? Hop in my cart!

Workers take me in their van. Since I don't speak Hebrew, they try English.

"What country you?"

"France."

"France? De Gaulle!"

"Yes, De Gaulle."

"We Arabs. Israelis, but Arabs. In France, people equal?"

"In principle, yes."

"Here, Arabs not the same rights as Jews. Inferior citizens. Earn less money. They bosses, we workers."

To get another opinion, I question the driver of the next car, who is Jewish.

"They say you treat them as inferior citizens. They earn less money than you..."

"Let them go live in Egypt or Jordan. They'll earn even less money. They'll have to pay bribes to corrupt officials. If they dare to complain, they'll go to jail!"

It reminds me of what my mother used to say about the maid: "If she's not happy, let her go back to her farm in Normandy. She'll quickly regret the good life she has here!" I conclude that Arabs are indeed treated as inferior citizens. If all the guys in the world...

It only takes one day to travel through Israel from north to south, cross the Negev Desert, and arrive in Eilat. The Red Sea is blue, as I suspected. A sandy café stands alone at the entrance of the city, as if to defend it against the advancing desert. They've placed a plaque above the fireplace: "General Moshe Dayan passed through here when he went to defeat the Egyptians in 1956." Once, I slept in the same hotel as Napoleon (but not at the same time). There was a similar plaque above the fireplace. The Jews managed to hold out for twenty centuries without a military hero. As soon as they settle in their own country, they become as foolish as everyone else.

The Dead Sea is gray. The water looks like oil. It's as warm as bathtub water. I take a little dip out of curiosity, but it's not pleasant at all. There are fresh water showers every twenty meters on the beach at Sodom. God told Lot's wife: "Rinse thyself carefully when thou comest out of the Dead Sea!" Since she didn't follow his advice, she was turned into a salt statue.

I spend the night under the stars with a Jew from Brussels, Harry Bronitz, and a Jewess from San Francisco, Barbara Kaplus. We get up at three o'clock to climb Mount Masada. Barbara protests:

"It's pitch black. We're going to get lost and fall into a precipice."

Hitchhiking

“There are already thousands of people on the path. We just have to follow them. We’re not risking anything.”

“If we wait too long, Barbara, the sun will rise and it will be a furnace. I’m afraid we’ll melt like the tigers that circled around little Sambo.”

When we arrive at the fortress (or rather, what’s left of it), the horizon is beginning to turn pink.

“The people who lived here had a beautiful view.”

“The sea looks like a strawberry milkshake.”

“A what?”

“Don’t you have that in Belgium?”

Guides show tourists the traces of the camps the Romans had built around the fortress. The besieged Jews committed suicide—men, women, and children—rather than become slaves. I do not congratulate you. I have never liked collective suicides. Parents who suicide their children... They would be dead anyway by now, but still.

I go to Jerusalem with Barbara and Harry. We stay in a hostel at the University Campus. Israelis are warm, you can’t deny it. They dance in the streets on Saturday night. They start conversations easily. Among Jews, no need for formalities. Yes, but Harry says we have to be careful of a neighborhood called Mea Shearim, where very religious Jews live.

“If Barbara goes there in her short skirt, they will throw stones at her.”

We see these religious Jews in the street. They wear big hats and grow their beards down to their belts. They turn away, afraid that the sight of Barbara the temptress will lead them to sin. Their intolerance scares me. You’ll go to heaven and I’ll go to hell, so why do you want to lapidate me on top of it?

We follow the tourists who go to visit a three-thousand-year-old café where King David drank a milkshake after defeating the Philistines. As it is a sacred place of the Jewish religion, I have to rent a small black skullcap and fix it on the top of my head with a clip. Harry doesn’t understand what bothers me.

“You wear a kippa to go to the synagogue.”

“I don’t go to the synagogue.”

If I emigrated to Israel and wanted to get married, I would have to borrow a kippa and go before the rabbi. I prefer to go back to France and get married before the mayor.

I go back to the reception office in Haifa and ask for another kibbutz. They send me to Shaar Hamakim, near Nazareth. I pick green apples by climbing up a tall aluminum ladder. As this kibbutz is expanding, many recent immigrants have come to settle here. Mexican Jews say they were persecuted, insulted, and threatened in their country. Cuban Jews say that it was even worse there because anti-Semitism was rampant in

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secret. These hot-blooded Latin Americans are ready to tear each other apart to establish who has suffered the most. No, they reconcile. They agree that they have reached the Promised Land. They don't mind having to get married by the rabbi.

If Israel serves as a refuge for these poor people, fine. I hope I'll never need to take refuge there. Israelis founded this country because they wanted to become like everyone else. Well, they succeeded. In France, I know Jews who stand out from the ordinary, that's what I like. What does it mean to be Jewish? I vaguely hoped to find the answer to this question here. Not a chance! A fellow apple picker tells me his perplexity.

"I have great conversations with my grandmother's ashes, which the Germans scattered in the sky. She claims that little boys who move away from other Jews are immediately assimilated into the rest of the population. I tremble with fear, but not enough to lose my presence of mind. I reply: Yes, but grandma, little boys who boast of being Jews are persecuted to death."

"You have to find the right balance.

"Exactly. I'm standing on an aluminum ladder called *identity*, in the middle of a field called *conformism*. I'm pulled in two different directions by demons named *Assimilation* and *Persecution*.

He's English. He's studying philosophy at Cambridge.

I spend a few days at Niounia's, a childhood friend of my mother's. She lives at the top of the city of Haifa, on Mount Carmel.

"Your mother is an extraordinary woman," she says.

"Yes, of course."

I say yes out of politeness. This extraordinary woman spends her mornings cleaning the apartment and her afternoons playing bridge, except on days when she goes to the hairdresser. The exploits she accomplished during the war exhausted her. She needs to rest.

I ask Niounia if she knows Tabor Street.

"It's very close to here."

"I have a friend in Paris who told me her aunt lives in Haifa, on Tabor Street."

"What's the aunt's name?"

"Dora Emmer."

"I know her very well! I know her brother is a doctor in Paris."

"He's a friend of my father's. They met during their studies."

"Dora's niece spent her vacation here last year. What's her name again?"

"Katia Wittgenstein."

"Is she your fiancée?"

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“I’m only seventeen. I’m not getting married tomorrow. I know Katia a little. In fact, I saw her in June. We took the same math exam at the university. Then we went to a concert together.”

“Dora tells me she’s a very good student. But your mother says you’re a real champion. Always first!”

“I see that I’m famous as far as Haifa.”

There are fewer people in Israel than in Paris. They all know each other, or almost do. It’s also that Dora and Niounia come from the same region of Poland, Eastern Galicia¹. Jews are trying their best to reconstruct the communities that the Germans destroyed.

The secret laws of hitchhiking

On the boat from Haifa to Venice, I dance with Sharon, a Canadian from Toronto.

“It’s funny, I met a Canadian from Toronto in Athens.”

“There are two million people in Toronto.”

“Maybe, but she had the same shoes as you.”

“Ah... Wasn’t her name Harriet, by any chance?”

“The world is small.”

“I told her, to travel, you need sturdy shoes. It doesn’t matter if they’re not pretty.”

“You are not traveling together?”

“We were together in London and Paris. Then, I went to Israel because I’m Jewish. She went to Greece and Germany. Me, Germany, no way. We arranged to meet in London.”

Phew, that was close! I was about to dance a slow, sensual dance with Sharon and whisper sweet nothings to her. But since I kissed Harriet (at the risk of being thrown in jail), I can’t seduce her friend. It would be a kind of adultery. Well, not really, but there is a commandment that forbids it. The Lord can turn you into a pillar of salt for less than that.

The boat stops in Athens, then passes through the Corinth Canal. I crossed it by car with Tom and Buddy at the beginning of the summer. From above, seen from the bridge, it was dizzying. From below, it reminds me of Fifth Avenue. We glide between two vertical cliffs a hundred meters high. I gaze at the blue ribbon of sky.

“Look, Sharon... Do you see the stars?”

“I see two or three, yes.”

“It’s a phenomenon that physicists study. Someone at the bottom of a well can see stars in broad daylight.”

¹ Western Ukraine today. See maps in *Malvina*.

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“It’s not a well, it’s a canal. We see stars because night is falling. The people up there on the deck can see them too.”

“You’re not sensitive to the mystery of things.”

“There’s enough mystery as it is. I don’t need to invent more!”

The boat carries automobiles in its broad sides. I’m starting to understand the secret laws of hitchhiking. I’m not going to wait for hours on a road near Venice, watching Italian families packed into their Fiats whiz by. I force myself to chat with everyone I hear speaking French. You are taking the train? You are going back to France? You have a car?

A couple agrees to take me to Lyon. Since they’re in a hurry, we don’t have time to visit Venice. That’s just as well: no image will blur the one I’m engraving in my memory when the ship enters the city. The rising sun floods Venice with its russet light. It would like to warm the chilly old stones, wake up the dozing waters, dissipate the fog to better outline the contours of the palaces, but the city refuses to emerge from its torpor. “I only exist in your dreams,” it whispers.

I forgot to ask them if their car was in good condition. They bought the Simca from the people who drove Gretry from Lavandou to Brunoy. It coughs, it chokes, it squeals, it sighs. They stop every twenty minutes to let it rest.

“It broke down in Greece,” the husband tells me. “It was nothing, but they didn’t fix it very well. They said they had the parts, but I suspect they just patched it up their way.”

“What’s more, it cost us a fortune,” the wife adds.

We left Venice at seven in the morning. We cross Turin in the middle of the afternoon. Four hundred kilometers in nine hours. Not bad. Trying to lure a Fiat, it would have taken me a week. At the exit of Turin, the road climbs up the Mont-Cenis. The poor Simca struggles. It has a fever, chills, and vapors. It’s mountain sickness! “You’re too heavy,” it groans. “Get out and push!” It grumbles, it agonizes. It sees its whole life flash before its eyes—the noisy factory, the jovial dealer, its first owner who was so careful and the next one who was so clumsy...

It would be cruel to let it suffer any longer. It must be put out of its misery. Throw it into the abyss! In a last surge of pride, it reaches the pass as night falls. Yes, but now it has to go down. Its brakes scream with terror. Its vision blurs. Its tired old headlights illuminate either the cliff or the void. Where is the road?

“If you see a hotel,” suggest the woman.

“We’ll find one in Modane. Just ten more kilometers.”

As we pass by the Modane train station, I ask them to stop and I part ways with them. Around eleven o’clock at night, I jump onto an empty Milan-Paris train. Being careful, I brought my *card of numerous family!*

Hitchhiking

A Letter from Toronto

September 30, 1962

Dear Jean-Jacques—

Must I apologize for not writing sooner? When Sharon came to London, and spoke of you, I wanted so much to go and see you again before I crossed that dreadful ocean—but it was quite impossible, and so it seems that with the exception of words, we are left with only the memory of a few days together in Athens. I suppose you realize what happened there in Athens? When I first met you, I wasn't certain just how much I liked you, but when you left for the islands I was very lonely; so that by the time you came back—that last night—I knew that I did feel something, and when we had parted I was very certain about it. It's a very sad thing that we women cannot and do not make up our minds until it is too late. And so when I talked to Sharon about you, it was so odd—almost as if you were a ghost brought out of my memories.

[I skip two or three pages]

Are you back at school? How is Paris (that horrid city)? Do write me and tell me all about you, your life, Israel and all. Although letters are at best a poor substitute for direct contact, they will have to suffice for now. And who can say—perhaps we shall see each other again—I would like to abolish all oceans—Write soon.

Love,
Harriet.

I answer. We exchange letters. As I had the privilege of being accepted in the Maths Spé preparatory class of lycée Louis-le-Grand, which means I spend most of my time studying math and physics and can barely think of anything except math and physics, I find it very difficult to write more than a few lines to her. She senses that my heart isn't in it and ceases eventually to send letters over the dreadful ocean.

1963

Three thousand kilometers

I am ranked three hundred and fortieth in the Polytechnique competition. They take three hundred and twenty or three hundred and twenty-five students, depending on the number of candidates who resign to go to École Normale Supérieure. There's no doubt I have to come back from vacation on September 1st and present myself at the school. The Army is a very farsighted institution. It does not want to be caught off guard if an epidemic of cholera, drowning, or anti-militarism eliminates twice as many students as usual.

I go to the large Air France agency at the Invalides terminal.

"Look, miss, I have a round-trip ticket from Paris to Lisbon."

"Oh, Isabelle, look at this ticket... First time I've seen this. Do you know this code?"

"A gift from the General Management. Is your father a government minister?"

"I won it in a television game show, the Grand Voyage."

"Ah, I know that game. Congratulations! You want to go to Lisbon?"

"No, actually."

"Why not? It's a charming city"

"I would feel trapped in a dead end. I don't want to go to Spain because it's a dictatorship, and Portugal is too. Can I exchange my ticket?"

"Of course. A gift from the Management!"

"Where can I go if I turn my round trip into a one-way ticket?"

"Well, twice as far. Lisbon is a thousand five hundred kilometers away. You can go three thousand kilometers. To Moscow, for example."

"What I like is hitchhiking. In Russia, you can't."

"Tel Aviv?"

"I was there last year."

"Cairo? The Pyramids, the Valley of the Kings..."

"I'm afraid of having trouble because of my Israeli visa."

"Or Istanbul."

"Ah, I knew you'd find something. Istanbul... I see some of Turkey, then I come back through Greece and Italy. Let's go for Istanbul!"

"Hey, Olivier, can I borrow your bag?"

"Which one?"

"Your brown one. For my vacation."

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“Yes, but be careful. I really like it.”

“Come on! You never use it.”

“Of course I do: when I go to school.”

“You don’t go to school.”

“Hey, once a week.”

“It’s always canceled because of your conservatory. Anyway, you know I’m very careful.”

It’s a faux leather bag with a shoulder strap. I will keep it in the plane’s cabin. I also take a not-too-big suitcase. My mother has prepared a mountain of clothes.

“But Mom, I don’t need three pairs of pants. Two is enough: one on me, one as a spare. Everything has to fit in the suitcase. The jacket, I will never wear it. I’m going to warm countries.”

“You might be invited to a formal evening. If the Air France people introduce you to the ambassador.”

“I’ll borrow a jacket from the ambassador’s son.”

On July 10th at three in the afternoon, I board the Air France Caravelle. It’s the big novelty: a 100% French jet plane. When General de Gaulle goes to visit his friend Adenauer, he travels on a Caravelle. If he wants to see President Johnson, he must accept getting on a Boeing because a Caravelle cannot fly more than a thousand kilometers without a stopover. Unable to fly to Istanbul in one go, it has to stop in Milan and Athens to fill up on kerosene.

The flight attendants pamper me.

“They warned us: you are a VIP.”

“Am I entitled to a double serving of candies?”

“Triple serving, if you want... Once we reach our cruising altitude, I’ll take you to the cockpit.”

The problem is that the plane can’t seem to choose a cruising altitude. Here? No, it’s a bit high... What if I went down a hundred meters! Wheee! Ah, that’s fun. Thrilling, even... Let’s go back up and start again. Wheeeee!

The flight attendant hesitates.

“Er, do you want to come to the cockpit?”

“Maybe later. I think I’d better keep my seatbelt on.”

The captain thinks like me. “Please fasten your seatbelts,” he loudspeaks. “We are flying above the Alps. These small turbulences are caused by convection currents. It’s a normal phenomenon in summer.”

I stay firmly seated in my chair. I discovered a paper bag in the seatback in front of me. If I go to the cockpit... Do they have paper bags there? I think the flight attendant could sit next to me and hold my hand, since I’m a VIP. Instead, she takes care of a

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lady who feels sick. She opens a small hatch in the ceiling, pulls out an oxygen mask, and places it on the lady's face. The Alps look like pointy cakes covered in sugar, but I'm not hungry.

I sit in the cockpit between Milan and Athens. We fly over the Adriatic Sea. The captain points out a vague line on the left.

"That's Syldavia."

"And soon, we'll see Borduria."

"I see you know your classics.¹ Actually, it's the Dalmatian coast, that is to say Yugoslavia. Soon, we'll see Albania. If we could turn a bit and fly over the land, we'd get to Athens faster."

"You can't?"

"The Albanians forbid us their airspace. They think the whole world wants to spy on them. They're like the Bordurians."

"Tintin jumps from the plane without a parachute. He can't die, so he falls into a cart full of hay."

"I don't recommend trying that!"

Istanbul, ten o'clock at night. The flight attendants offer me a seat on their small bus."

"We can take you to town if you want. Where are you going?"

"I don't know."

"You can just take a room at the Janissaries Hotel, where we're staying. You'll see, it's very nice."

As we're close to midnight, I follow their advice. Terrible mistake! The bed is too big, the carpet too deep, the bathroom too flashy. By renting this VIP room, I cancel out all the benefits of my free ticket. Moreover, this hotel is located in the business district. To see Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque and all that, I'll have to cross the Golden Horn, the estuary that divides the city in two.

The harem and the treasure

As soon as the day breaks, I jump out of my three-place bed. The little Spirou² who carries my suitcase shows me a bus.

"It goes to Hagia Sophia."

"How do you say thank you in Turkish?"

"*Teşekkür ederim.*"

"Well, *teşekkür ederim!*"

¹ Syldavia and Borduria are imaginary Balkanic countries in *Tintin*.

² Another Belgian comic book character. While Tintin is a reporter, Spirou is a hotel groom in a red uniform.

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When the bus goes down towards the Golden Horn, we can see on the other bank the mosques with large domes of the ancient city. Their minarets look like well-sharpened pencils. If I were a calligrapher djinn¹, I would pull them out to draw arabesques in the sky.

Cars speed in all directions, which doesn't prevent thousands of pedestrians from running across the streets. I don't know if all Turks are nervous or just the inhabitants of Istanbul. They didn't even take the time to build a bridge over the Golden Horn. We cross the estuary on a shaky boat bridge. I find a YMCA near Topkapi Palace. I settle in a dormitory that reminds me of those in Mimizan. The night will cost me less than the tip I gave to little Spirou this morning. My neighbors are Swedish, Swiss, American. The Swede takes us to see a moldy Byzantine church.

"It's over a thousand years old. It's written in my guidebook."

"In Swedish, yeah. You can tell us whatever you want."

We spend a moment in the great mosque overlooking the Golden Horn. We take off our shoes, sit on the huge carpets covering the floor. The people who invented this system knew how to rest. That's what's missing in New York: some mosques. Even better than public benches.

The carpets have turned the head of our American. As we stroll through the dark alleys of the Grand Bazaar, he starts bargaining with a shopkeeper.

"Gosh! Much cheaper than in Buffalo. He's already lowered his price by fifty dollars."

"He can do better. I bet he doubled the price of his carpet just because you have blond hair."

"It's huge. How are you going to transport it?"

"I'll tie it to my suitcase with straps."

In the bazaar, you can change money without ceremony. You gain twenty percent compared to the official rate. At the Janissaries' hotel, they didn't even give me the official rate. I should have stolen their towels.

The next day, we visit two more mosques and then take a city bus to see a castle on the Bosphorus, about twenty kilometers from Istanbul. I hear French being spoken—students traveling in a group.

"They're better at mosques than castles."

"They should turn it into a hotel. From up there, there must be a beautiful view of the Bosphorus."

In France, I would never dare to approach a young girl I don't know. Here, the solidarity that brings compatriots together abroad changes the rules of the game, so that I start a conversation with a pretty blonde without hesitating for a second.

¹ Djak.

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- “Is that yours, the little sightseeing boat down there?”
- “It brought us here, but it’s not my personal property.”
- “I think I’ll go back with you to Istanbul. One more or less Frenchman, they won’t see the difference. What’s your name?”
- “Agathe.”
- “Amazing. I was just thinking that your eyes looked like agates.”
- “That’s a bit too easy.”
- “It’s your parents who gave in to the ease by giving you that name.”
- “They hadn’t seen my eyes yet, I think. Maybe they liked Agatha Christie.”
- “Or Baudelaire.
- Tell me, does thy heart sometimes fly away, Agathe,
Far from the black ocean of the vile city,
Towards another ocean where splendor shines,
Blue, clear, deep, like virginity?
Tell me, does thy heart sometimes fly away, Agathe?*
- “Yes, but look: here the city is white and the sea is black!”
- “Do you live in a vile city?”
- “In Paris.”
- “In which neighborhood?”
- “Rue de Varenne.”
- “I thought so. We’ve already seen each other on the street, for sure. I live on the corner of Boulevard Saint-Germain and Rue de Solférino. Are you a student?”
- “I’m entering *khâgne* at Lycée Fénelon.”
- “Oh yeah? I’m in *Maths Spé* at Louis-le-Grand. Do you know Armelle Le Goff?”
- “Vaguely. She is in another *khâgne*.”
- “Her brother was in class with me. He just got accepted into Polytechnique. I was rejected, so I’m going to repeat a year of *Maths Spé*.”
- “And you, do you know Jean-Claude Portal?”
- “Of course. He’s in my class.”
- “I know his grandfather.”
- “The senator?”
- “My father is also a senator. He’s the senator for French citizens abroad.”
- “Original profession. He must have some clients around here, I mean voters.”
- “Yes. He gave me some names, but I didn’t go see them. “
- I’m going back to Istanbul by boat with Agathe and the other French people.
- “What are you doing tonight?”
- “We’re going back to our hotel, then we’re having dinner in an open-air restaurant.”

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“That young man over there is your leader? I’ll ask him if I can have dinner with you, paying my share. Where is your hotel?”

“It’s the Birlık Hotel, next to the Blue Mosque.”

I accompany the group to the hotel. Wow: a room with two beds costs barely more than a night in the YMCA dormitory. All I have to do is share it with the Swede or someone else to save some money. I’ll move tomorrow morning since I’ve already paid for tonight.

No, it’s not because I want to sleep under the same roof as the beautiful Agathe. I have dinner at her table, we talk about the Latin Quarter, but the same invisible barrier separates me from her as from my classmates’ sisters. These distinguished young girls from the sixth and seventh arrondissements scare me. For one thing, I am Jewish. And then I grew up in a working-class neighborhood. I played hopscotch on the sidewalks of Boulevard Saint-Marcel with the pupils of the communal school¹. I find these girls too polite. Their vowels are longer than mine. They resemble (younger) Mesdames Mouton-Duvernet and de la Mésange, who play bridge with my mother. Besides, I won’t sleep under the same roof as her.”

“How long are you staying in Istanbul?”

“Tomorrow at two o’clock, we’re boarding a Russian boat for a tour of the Black Sea. We will stop in Bulgaria, Romania, Odessa, Yalta, Astrakhan.”

“And tomorrow morning?”

“We’re visiting the Topkapi Palace. Departure at eight o’clock, I think.”

I get up at dawn, I pack my suitcase, I’m ready at seven o’clock. Gee, I forgot to talk to the Swede...

“A very clean little hotel, next to the Blue Mosque. Not only is it better than here, but it’s cheaper.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow. For one night, it’s not worth it.”

“Here, there are only young Christian gentlemen. Over there, young ladies too.”

The American guy heard that.

“Ladies? Where?”

I leave with him.

“Not so easy to carry, your carpet.”

“In fact, it’s a magic carpet, but I don’t have my license.”

Quick, quick... I have a meeting at eight o’clock!

“Good morning, Agathe.”

“Oh, what a surprise... How are you? You’re all red.”

¹ The plain public primary school. Most of its pupils went to work at age twelve or fourteen. Although it was next door to our apartment on Boulevard Saint-Marcel (where I grew up until I was 14 and we moved to boulevard Saint-Germain), my brother Noël and I went to lycée Montaigne with the other bourgeois. See *No Accent*.

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“I ran with my suitcase. When I put it down in my room, I realized I had forgotten my sandals at the YMCA.”

“You can go get them later.”

“I don’t know. Maybe I wanted to lose them subconsciously. My mother bought them for me for this trip. They hurt me. I prefer my sneakers. I’m tired of my mother buying me stuff. When I was five years old, it was fine, but now I’m eighteen.”

“It’s the right age to cut the umbilical cord.”

I visit the Topkapi Palace with the French students. The harem disappoints them.

“It’s kind of empty.”

“They could charge a lot more for entry if they put in some odalisques.”

“Even wax women would do.”

They don’t appreciate the treasure either.

“The treasure in the movie *Treasure Island* is better than this.”

“And Ali Baba’s treasure. Open Sesame!”

“Rackham the Red’s treasure!¹”

“It’s because they put the stuff separately in display cases. They should pile everything in a big trunk until it overflows.”

“The diamonds and rubies don’t shine enough. They need better lighting.”

“It’s mostly the guard who’s pathetic. It seems like the treasure has no value. They should put at least three guards with machine guns!”

The Dutch Girls

Agathe’s departure saddens me. I fall in love too quickly. I’ve known her for less than twenty-four hours. I must learn to control my impulses... To console myself, I go visit Hagia Sophia with two Dutch girls who live at the Birlik Hotel. Their peasant solidity contrasts with Agathe’s grace. I’ve moved from Fragonard’s world to that of Brueghel the Elder.

“We crossed France to go to Spain, and then we followed the Mediterranean coast to here.”

“How do you travel?”

“Well, hitchhiking.”

“Hitchhiking from Holland by way of Spain, that’s quite a trip.”

“We’re going to Tehran, then we’re going back home.”

Ten minutes is enough for them to decide they don’t like Hagia Sophia.”

“It’s too big. You feel closer to God in a small country church².”

“Shall we go see the Blue Mosque? Are you coming with us?”

¹ *Tintin* again.

² Hagia Sophia was a church in the Byzantine era, a museum in 1963, and it is a mosque today.

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After ten minutes:

“It’s a mosque, so what.”

“It’s not that blue.”

“Someone told me about a large underground cistern...”

We go to visit the cistern, which dates back to Roman times. Hundreds of columns stand in the water like giant reeds.

On the way out:

“I’ve had enough of all these old things. Maybe they have an amusement park in this city, with roller coasters and rides.”

“Or a zoo.”

“Oh yes, a zoo would be nice.”

They ask two young Turks passing by, who are delighted with the opportunity.

“Zoo? Animals? Yes, but far. Take bus.”

“We’ll show you. I’m Mehmet.”

“I’m Ali. Which country you from?”

“Holland. Amsterdam.”

“And me, France.”

They are happy to practice their English. They need to learn this language because they are studying commerce. *Tiger. Monkey. Kangaroo. Say*, an animal I’ve never seen in a zoo...

“Look, in that enclosure, the sign: *canis domesticus vulgaris!*”

“What kind of animal is that? A jackal?”

“No, a dog.”

“This is dog.”

“A dog in a zoo? They’re crazy!”

“Why not? It’s an animal like any other.”

“In that case, they could also put people in there.”

“They would go to the prisons: If you want, instead of staying here, you could live behind bars in the open air. You would see people, it would be entertaining. On the sign, they would write: *homo sapiens sapiens not sapiens enough...*”

My American roommate and his carpet are going to Greece. If I go with them, I’ll visit Katia Wittgenstein. She’s spending her vacation on an island with a Greek classmate. Or I could go to Tehran with the Dutch girls. I’ll see more of the world. I can always go to Greece afterward.

I hope the Dutch girls will accept me... Oh yes. I even think my offer relieves them. Over there, it’s Asia. An unknown continent, unsafe areas. They hire me as a bodyguard!

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“When do we leave?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, we’re going to the beach with Mehmet and Ali. You can come with us.”

As I get up earlier than them, I go to the Iranian consulate to buy a visa. If we were in France, it would be closed since it’s July 14th.

Mehmet carries a large bag full of towels, Ali a basket containing a picnic. We take a *vapür*¹ to the Prince’s Islands, in the Sea of Marmara, half an hour from Istanbul.

“Beach on the other side of island.”

“No cars on island.”

“On the back of a donkey we go.”

This is the first time (and the last, I suppose) that I ride a donkey. My conclusion: long live the bike!

Last year, I dragged my suitcase around Italy, Greece, and Israel. It suddenly seems useless to me. I decide to leave it here and pick it up on my return. I stuff my toiletries, a spare shirt, and a nylon anorak into my school bag. My mother bought me several short-sleeved nylon shirts: “It’s easy to wash, it dries quickly, and you don’t need to iron them.” I leave my second pair of pants, my sweater for cool nights, my pajamas, socks, and underwear in the suitcase. I wear my swimsuit as underwear, so I won’t have to change when I want to swim in the Black Sea or a river. Instead of washing socks, I’ll wash my feet.

The Niankara Falls

We get up at six o’clock. I entrust my suitcase to the owner of the Birlik Hotel.

“I’ll be back in two weeks.”

We walk down to the Golden Horn. I feel light with my little school bag. These poor Dutch girls make me feel sorry for them, bending under their huge backpacks. I don’t understand why they didn’t follow my example. My mother taught me that a gentleman should carry ladies’ luggage, but if a hundred-kilo bag flattens me like a pancake, I’ll look silly. We take a ferry to cross the Bosphorus. This strait, which connects the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, separates Europe from Asia at the same time. My friends are feeling quite emotional.

“I’m setting foot in Asia!”

“Be careful! You put your left foot first...”

After crossing a small suburb, we arrive on the road to Ankara around eight o’clock. Cars are rare, but it doesn’t matter. When they see my two friends waving their arms

¹ From the French word *vapeur*, I guess. A steamship.

Hitchhiking

like windmills and striking marilyn-monroeish poses, all drivers stop. I understand how they managed to whiz across Europe painlessly.

They find it very amusing to cover a hundred meters with a Turkish man, fascinated by their blonde hair and loud laughter, but I don't laugh.

"Listen, we should refuse people who are staying in the neighborhood. While we drive to the next street, the car that just passed us might be going to Ankara. If we had stayed in place, it would have stopped like the others, and we would be in it."

"Oh yes... You're right. You French people are very logical."

"We'll do as you say. It's better if we arrive in Ankara before nightfall."

We are bounced around like beach balls in the back of a truck that takes us to the entrance of Izmit. I would love to walk through the city to stretch my legs, but the blonde windmills are already spinning their wings. You don't feel like stretching your legs when you're loaded like a donkey! Two policemen, finding our attitude suspicious, ask us what we're up to. The Dutch girls point eastward, open their blue eyes wide, mutter *Ankara*, and we end up crossing Izmit in a police car.

We get into a vehicle of uncertain make. A cross between an Opel and a Mercedes, which a disciple of Professor Frankenstein has made by assembling pieces torn from several corpses. "I'm going to Adapazari," the driver tells us. He should add: "If God is willing." With each bump, I fear that his Opcedes will decompose like in a Mack Sennett film.

We eat a *kebab*, a dish of lamb and rice, in Adapazari. We walk a bit to get out of the city.

"Look, girls, if you have a toothache, a dentist!"

"There were signs like that in Istanbul."

The sign, hanging on the facade of a house, shows a two-meter high molar, topped by Chinese characters.

"It seems that all dentists are Chinese."

"This Chinese dentists speaks Turkish? What do you think?"

"No need to talk. You show him the tooth that hurts, he pulls it out, and that's it."

In the early afternoon, we travel through a desolate moor on a straight road, about a hundred kilometers before Ankara. We are all three sitting on the passenger seat of a small truck. Suddenly, the road seems to stop at the foot of a gray cliff that goes up to the sky. Or rather, it's amazing, the road enters the cliff, and indeed we're speeding without slowing down. I don't see a tunnel nor a door... Ah, ah, silly me! It's just a storm, a downpour, a vertical river, the Niankara Falls. As soon as the liquid wall catches us, it's as dark outside and inside as in the middle of the night. Torrents of water hit our roof and windshield savagely. The wipers resist for a moment, then give up.

Hitchhiking

Lightning pierces the darkness, thunder imitates a rock avalanche, and the rain intensifies. The Dutch girls tremble like leaves. Me, I can't help but laugh.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I'm thinking about the makeshift car that took us to Adapazari. I wonder if it would withstand this kind of shower."

"You'd better wonder if the truck will hold up."

"It's still moving. Not very fast, but it does move forward. Look at the steering wheel: Ford. It's a strong beast."

Heaven doesn't have much to reproach us, I guess. Instead of pouring down on us for forty days, it turns off the tap after a quarter of an hour. The driver, who has made great efforts to stay in the middle of the road, seems relieved. He sends long litanies of curses, or perhaps thanks, to Heaven, or maybe to his faithful Ford.

We arrive in Ankara in the middle of the afternoon. Hey, a Hachette bookstore! I go in to consult a city guide.

"It says we can sleep cheaply on the University campus."

"Can you look up where the Iranian consulate is?"

"What do you want to do at the Iranian consulate?"

"Well, get a visa."

"You don't have an Iranian visa?"

"You have one?"

"Of course. I got it in Istanbul. When you told me you were going to Tehran, I thought you had done it too."

A bus takes us to the hill where the ministries and other official buildings are located. We rush to the Iranian consulate. A thousand thunderstorms!! The guard is closing the door. The Dutch girls try to beguile him.

"Five minutes! You can wait five minutes..."

"We just need a little visa."

"I let you in, and then what? Everyone already gone. No one to give visa!"

"It's this bloody storm that delayed us."

"Too bad. We'll come tomorrow morning at the first hour."

"Closed tomorrow."

"Closed? Tomorrow?"

"Shah's birthday."

They discuss animatedly in their rough language.

"We're going back to Istanbul."

"Back to Holland."

¹ *Mille tonnerres*. A Capitaine Haddock curse.

Hitchhiking

“Because of a 24-hour delay? We could find things to do tomorrow. They might have a zoo.”

“There aren’t enough cars on the roads. If we keep going like today, it’ll be too long.”

“Let him celebrate his birthday without us.”

“Well, now that I’ve come this far, I’ll continue.”

In Europe, administrations don’t close for just any reason. We can sense Oriental complications. Ah, we shouldn’t have started Asia on the wrong foot! What really upset them was the storm. In our civilized countries, nature isn’t as brutal. After such a storm, we can fear anything: earthquakes, tornadoes, tidal waves, locust rains. And also, the Chinese dentist... We’re arriving in areas where it’s better not to get sick.

“Are you leaving tomorrow morning?”

“You noticed, we passed the bus station. We’ll see if they don’t have a night bus.”

“A night bus? Good idea.”

I go with them. I have cut a small map of Turkey from a brochure I found on my bedside table at the Janissaries Hotel. For the price of the room, they could have given a more accurate map. Let’s see... I have to go through Erzurum to get to Iran. The direct route from Ankara to Erzurum, via Kayseri and Sivas, is represented by a line so thin that it even appears dotted in some places. I could reach the Black Sea at Samsun, follow the coast to Trabzon, take a swim. Trabzon is ancient Trébizonde. A city whose name exists in French surely deserves a look. I buy a ticket for Samsun. The other route intrigues me, with its dotted lines. I’ll check it out on the way back.

The two Dutch girls get on the Istanbul bus around six o’clock.

“Goodbye, girls. Have a good trip!”

“Same to you, Frenchman!”

An hour later, the Samsun bus leaves the station. The driver’s assistant walks down the central aisle with a bottle of cologne. Passengers reach out their hands and refresh their faces. An excellent custom, but I would prefer reclining seats and toilets like in a Greyhound bus.

Where is Mecca?

When I close my eyes, I see a jumble of images: roads stretching like marshmallow, landscapes passing by too quickly, pale houses, indistinct villages, and then the liquefied sky falling on our heads. Black rain crackles in my dreams. I emerge from sleep not quite knowing... Where? When? Autancar... Tankara... A vague scent of cologne. Already, dawn is whitening the windows. Monday? Tuesday? The rain has crossed the barrier that separates dreams from reality. It washes away the sleeping landscape. This isn’t a shower that sings or tells a story, but a deaf and blind rain, a rain

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that wants to know nothing. I catch sight of vague shapes that resemble warehouses and factories. I can make out cranes and masts in the distance. We enter Samsun.

The clock at the bus station says five in the morning. Should I stand by the side of the road in the rain? If I were driving a car, I would pity the poor wet hitchhiker, but I would hesitate to let him in. It's like putting a soaked towel on the seat. Warm steam will fill the cabin and fog up the windshield. The dripping creature from the Black Lagoon—I mean, the Black Sea. A bus leaves for Trabzon at six o'clock. Tempting. The ticket only costs a few francs. I have time to eat a pancake and sheep cheese while drinking heavily sweetened black tea. The Turks say *Chy*¹.

I thought I would be swimming in the Black Sea... The rain persists, stubborn, morose, insolent. What's stupid is that they forgot to asphalt the road. Trucks carve ruts that look like bathtubs full of muddy water. The bus skirts around them as best it can, tracing a winding path and moving in fits and starts. It doesn't go fast, but it occasionally catches up to a truck crawling like a slug. It can't overtake the truck. It accelerates, it pulls out, the engine moans... Watch out, a chasm, a quagmire! It gets stuck, returns to the right, catches its breath. Hundreds of meters below, waves foam with rage as they attack rocks that bravely resist, for they are as strong as Turks². The bus gets nervous, champs at the bit, and resumes the assault. The passengers hold their breath. Come on, brave bus, try again, yes, that's it!

Around noon, we arrive in Ordu. If I trust my map, we've covered a hundred and fifty kilometers in six hours. I buy some sort of meat sandwich. Ugh... Too greasy! Since I've been taught that one shouldn't throw away food, I force myself to swallow it down to the last crumb. If the bus continues to zigzag, accelerate, and brake suddenly, I'm going to feel very sick.

A young girl crosses the central aisle and sits down next to me. She speaks German.

"Are you German?" she asks.

"No, French."

"Ah, I don't know French."

"I speak a little German."

"I learned German in school. I want to study at a university in Germany. My uncle works in Düsseldorf, so I could live with him. Are you going to Trabzon?"

"I might spend the night there. Then, I'm going to Erzurum, and afterward Iran..."

Suddenly, the bus stops. A rut deeper than the others? A landslide? The driver turns to us and starts a vehement speech. I think he's describing the natural disaster that prevents us from continuing. He raises his arms, getting worked up. Is it that serious?

¹ It's the Chinese word that also begat tea, thé, tee and so on.

² Instead of saying *strong as an ox*, French people say *fort comme un Turc*, strong as a Turk.

Hitchhiking

The mountain must have fallen into the sea, I can't see any other explanation. I ask my neighbor.

"Is the road blocked?"

"No. He's angry because I'm talking to you. I must not. I'm sitting on the wrong side of the aisle. He won't start again until I go back to my seat. I'm sorry... Goodbye."

That's when I notice that men are sitting on one side and women on the other. In Istanbul, the sexes weren't separated on the bus. We're far from Istanbul... My Dutch friends wouldn't have liked this situation. They guessed what was waiting for them: harsh regions where free women risk a lot. They thought my protection wouldn't be enough.

We arrive in Trabzon towards the end of the afternoon. How did the word *Trébizonde* enter my memory? I must have read or heard it somewhere. Racine may have mentioned it in his play *Bajazet*, which takes place among the Turks.

*Ô puissant Bajazet, tu règues sur le monde
De Bagdad à Tunis, d'Alep à Trébizonde.¹*

In the Trébizonde of my imagination, wealthy merchants come to buy Chinese silks for the tsar of all Russias. Caravans wait at the gates of the city, white-sailed ships crowd the harbor. Melancholic princesses, locked in high towers, watch the sea while humming strange tunes. Reality disappoints me: Trabzon makes no effort to live up to its beautiful French name. It's a Turkish city like any other, dominated by the minarets of its mosques. I saw vague ramparts from the bus. Perhaps other traces of the ancient city remain. As soon as the rain stops, I'll go search for them.

In the meantime, I visit a very old monument: the Trabzon hotel. The owner, as placid as a china doll, smokes his hookah while watching the slow slide of drops on the window. Am I perhaps bothering you? He looks at me without any curiosity. Yet I don't resemble the Turkish traveling salesmen who frequent his establishment. For all he knows, I might have come from the moon. Nothing surprises him. He gets up unhurriedly. A room? Why not? Number four, on the second floor.

Traveling salesmen are not fussy. They make do with a sink and a cold water faucet. If they want a hot shower, they go to the public bath. They don't demand electricity. When the digestion of a greasy meat sandwich irritates their bowels, they go down to the courtyard toilets without protesting. They accept the little inconveniences of life. The sheets are dirty? They can't be washed because the rain would prevent them from drying. Bedbugs? No one has ever died from a bedbug bite. I say bedbugs, but I don't know the name of the nasty creatures feasting on my blood all night long. Fleas? Lice? Ticks? Not only do insects that love human flesh adore mine, but I am much more

¹ Oh mighty Bajazet, you rule the world / From Baghdad to Tunis, from Aleppo to Trébizonde.

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sensitive to their bites than other people: reddish patches appear all over my body, they itch, I scratch, they bleed, then scabs cling to my skin for months. So I wake up in a bad mood. From my window, I see that carts full of spongy vegetables, pulled by steaming horses, are invading the market square. Thus, the rain insists on pestering the world.

Discouraged, I give in to convenience and get on the Erzurum bus. I scold myself sharply: so what, is this a hitchhiking trip or a bus trip? If I had brought a small mirror, I would chastise my reflection:

“Say, Jean-Jacques, you are not scared, by any chance?”

Already, I crossed the United States by Greyhound because I was afraid of confronting the bandits of the Wild West. No braver than the Dutch girls.

The further we get from the coast, the poorer the villages. In the small town of Gümüşane, where the bus stops for about twenty minutes, I order a kind of pancake and a glass of tea in a café. Although Turkey has been using the Latin alphabet for forty years, the owner writes the bill in Arabic characters as in the time of the Ottoman Empire.

After Gümüşane, the road, or rather the trail, winds through wooded mountains. Between Samsun and Trabzon, the bus always found a village where it could stop at prayer time, allowing passengers to prostrate themselves on the carpet of a mosque. Lacking a village, the driver stops in the middle of a forest. The women and children stretch their legs. The gentlemen take out their portable prayer mats. They look puzzled, seeming to search for something. A patch of moss not too wet? No: Mecca.

Some turn to the right, others to the left. It is no longer raining, but the sky remains gray. The passengers begin to argue. The driver points in one direction and says (I understand Turkish as if it were French, all of a sudden):

“I stop in this clearing twice a week around noon. When there we see the sun, it shines above this mountain. So that’s the direction of the south and Mecca.

The passengers snicker.

“That way? That’s a good one!”

“If that’s the south, I’ll gladly eat my mustache!”

“Praise be to Allah, I have an infallible sense of direction. The south is there!”

“Say what you want, I’m praying.”

“I see that you belong to a new sect...”

“Excuse me?”

“That of the people who turn to the North Pole to pray, ha ha!”

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Factions form. Geographical and theological arguments fly in all directions. What would the great Sherlock Holmes say? You have to examine the fir trees: the green of their needles is lighter in the south than in the north.

Noticing that the matter interests me and assuming that I have studied Science with Einstein himself, they ask for my opinion. I indicate a direction at random. Result: one more faction.

We are not about to start again. I go up into the forest, where I hope to find cleaner toilets than those at the hotel. Please don't leave without me!

From above, the prayer mats look like playing cards scattered on the tabletop of a bridge table. When I come back, I hear a strange noise. It sounds like a lawnmower or maybe a washing machine at the spin cycle. Forgetting their quarrel, the passengers widen their eyes: a small red Fiat is coming from Trabzon, gamboling merrily, as if it were going to bring pancakes and fresh cream to its grandmother. There are four models of Fiat: small, very small, tiny, and dwarf. This one is a dwarf. It has Austrian license plates. It's not even called Fiat, but Puch, a brand that manufactures Fiat cars under license in Austria. One might be tempted to pronounce it *Puce*¹, but you have to say *Poor* while scraping the final consonant as if to spit it out. While I indulge in these technological and phonological considerations, the driver tries to extract himself from his car. The Turks wonder whether he will make it out.

"He's an adult. He shouldn't be driving a children's car."

"For children? You sure?"

"Europeans are very rich. They make automobiles for their children, believe me."

"Pedal cars. I've seen a picture in a newspaper."

"Your pedal car makes an engine noise."

"They make cars with engines for their children."

His contortions make me feel sorry for him. I would like to grab the red shell with a large snail clamp and remove the fellow with a giant fork. Well, he manages to do it on his own. He unfolds, stretches, and breathes. The passengers approach, eager to hear us speak our gibberish. Two foreigners in the same day!

Yesterday, I was speaking German with a young Turkish girl. Today, I am speaking English with a tall Austrian.

"The W on your plate, is that Vienna²?"

"Yes. And you? English?"

"No, French."

"I have to learn French to sing Faust. At the Conservatory I study singing..."

"From Vienna to Erzurum. These little gadgets are sturdier than one might think."

¹ Flea.

² Wien.

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“It’s better since the rain stopped. Car is not happy when has to cross a bathtub. Lucky I only have small breakdowns. I have tools and spare parts. You see, on back seat.”

“Say, you wouldn’t happen to have a compass in all that, by any chance?”

“Yes, wait... Here.”

Hey, the bus driver was right. I say nothing, otherwise they will start their prayer again.

We left at six in the morning, but at noon we are not even halfway there. It’s because the bus becomes as flabby as Turkish delight as soon as the road goes uphill. The little red toy raced ahead of us like a meteor.

Stopover in Askale for dinner. Night has long fallen when we finally reach Erzurum. Xenophile passengers ask me where I plan to sleep. They speak to me in Turkish, I answer in English. When you’ve spent sixteen hours together on an asthmatic bus, you understand each other very well.

“I don’t know. Is there a hotel in this town? Let me tell you what would be nice: if they installed streetlights to start with.”

“Come with us.”

I follow them in the dark. We enter a house. You should invent electricity, I assure you. You could hang a beautiful illuminated sign saying *Hoterü* or *Caravanserai*, it would light up the street as well as a streetlight.

The timid glow of an oil lamp allows me to guess that I will spend the night in a small dormitory with half a dozen Turks. It costs about one franc. Oh, how I miss my beautiful two-franc room at the Royal Palace in Trabzon! If I keep going at this rate, tomorrow night it will be free and then they will give me money.

I saw my roommates on the bus. I try to remember if they have the faces of murderers. They hide their true faces behind thick black mustaches. It is also said that Turks are fond of young boys. Am I still a young boy?

In the red flea

It’s not raining, yet I’m taking the bus again. It’s not cowardice, it’s realism. I can’t hitchhike if there’s no one on the road. People are too poor to own cars. Yesterday, the bus overtook a single truck. I saw two cars: the singer’s and an English-registered Vauxhall that passed us without stopping. I had time to notice that it was full of people. The singer couldn’t take a passenger either. Tools and spare parts pile up on his back seat, a large backpack and a sleeping bag occupy the front seat.

The bus always leaves at six in the morning, I say this for people who want to travel in Turkey. Oh, it’s going so fast that I almost feel dizzy— at least fifty kilometers an hour. It’s because the road is paved again. It couldn’t last... After a hundred kilometers,

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the beautiful black ribbon turns left and we continue to the right on a good old yellow dirt track. A passenger on the bus speaks English. I ask him where the paved road goes.

“The American road. If we can take, go to Yerevan, in Armenia, and Baku, in Azerbaijan.”

“We can’t?”

“They have military bases and missiles. Forbidden.”

Signs say *No Trespassing, Strictly Forbidden, Military Zone, Minefields, Shoot on Sight.*

I could get off the bus... Wait for the night, follow the road on tiptoe, taking care to avoid the minefields. See the atomic missiles pointed at Moscow!

The bus slows down. This morning’s sprint has exhausted it. The mountain scares it. It stops for two hours in Diyadin to regain its spirits. The man who speaks English invites me to lunch.

“Good kebab they have. Our Turkish specialty.”

“Ah yes, I love it.”

In truth, I’m starting to get tired of lamb with rice. I hope the Iranians have other specialties.

We leave again. The road climbs higher and higher. The bus is panting, trembling, struggling. In the middle of the afternoon, it heaves a sigh of relief as it arrives in Dogubayazit, its final stop.

And now? Sixty kilometers to the border. There is always a little traffic on the roads early in the morning when vans or even carts deliver vegetables to the villages. Sleep here, get up at dawn...

I question the brave police officers who play dominoes in front of their station.

“Hotel? The white house over there.”

“*Teşekkür ederim.*”

Two small tables in front of the hotel. Sit at one of these tables, order a delicious sweet tea... Or, it’s free, take a little walk on the road. You never know. Sister Anne, do you see anything coming?¹

The road is deserted. The majestic conical silhouette of Mount Ararat, topped with an elegant snow hat, seems to dance on the steppe like a giant dervish.

I sit on a stone and take my notebook out of my bag. I write down the names of the cities I have crossed, the schedules, the distances, and the amounts of money spent every evening. Two thousand kilometers since Istanbul. I left on the morning of July 15th, and it is now the 18th. I start a letter to my parents. “Dear friends, I am at the foot of Mount Ararat. I can clearly see, near the summit, the wreckage of a large boat. I wonder how they managed to hoist it up there...”

¹ A quote from the 17th century French version of *Bluebeard*, by Charles Perrault.

Hitchhiking

Suddenly, I am overwhelmed by a sudden rush of happiness. It's the mountain air that intoxicates me. It's not thick and sticky like the air of the plains, but light, caressing, fluid, fragrant. The depth of the silence has something voluptuous about it. What am I talking about? I hear a coffee grinder noise, I see a red dot growing on the road... The Austrian in his flea!

He stops at my height.

"Hello, Frenchman!"

"Hi. My name is Jean-Jacques."

"Christian. Did you come this far by bus?"

"Yes, but after that there are no more. Until the border, I have to manage on my own."

"I'll give you a ride if you want."

"Do I sit on the roof?"

"On the seat. My backpack on your lap."

"I'll try. I need to take out your bag first to sit in its place... Uh, it won't fit anymore. I need to find a way to compress it, and myself too. I know: you just have to get out and come to this side, then you'll push the bag and close the door."

Wow! The driver and the car are dancing some kind of Viennese waltz. Leftward, rightward, then downward into a rut. Hey, watch where you're going! He can't help but look at Mount Ararat, blushing coyly in the setting sun.

The barbed wires marking the border are interrupted to make way for a large fenced enclosure in which two small houses and two cars are locked up. The Turkish flag and the Iranian flag fly above the small houses. I recognize one of the cars: it's the English Vauxhall I saw yesterday. The other car, a gray Land Rover, has license plates that don't mean anything to me. I look for a country indication at the back. Ah, there it is: *Aus*.

Aus? It's not Austria—the singer's flea has the letter A. *Aus*... Wait, can it be... I rush into the Turkish police station. Two tall, nonchalant fellows are waiting on a bench while the police examine their papers closely.

"Are you Australian?"

"Yes, mate!"

"You drove from Australia?"

"With our amphibious car."

"We took the boat to Singapore, then from Penang in Malaysia to Madras in India. Then by car!"

Hitchhiking

“India, then Western Pakistan¹, Afghanistan, Iran... I hope Turkish beer is better than Iranian.”

I’m speechless. If they came from Australia, me, going in the opposite direction... No, what would I be doing in Australia? But India! I try to remember my geography lessons. I thought the Persian Gulf or the Himalayas separated Iran from India. So, at the end of this road... By golly, of course! I just have to follow in the footsteps of Alexander the Great. Passed through here, went all the way to India. On foot. Or maybe him on horseback, his horse on foot. How many kilometers? Let’s say six thousand... If from Istanbul to Tehran three thousand, to return from Tehran to Istanbul or continue to India, same thing. I unfold my journey, as I did to transform my Paris-Lisbon round trip into a Paris-Istanbul. Once there, I’ll find a plane or a boat to take me back to France.

I leave the Turkish police station. In the courtyard, while customs officers examine the contents of his little car, Christian chats with the passengers of the Vauxhall. A family of five. The father, a giant Pakistani, has such thick and black hair and beard that I think I see the pirate Blackbeard, with his sword unsheathed under a skull and bones flag. The mother doesn’t even reach his shoulder. A delicate Englishwoman with milky skin and carrot-colored hair. Blackbeard and Blanchette have three little gray children.

“They’re tired, they have dysentery,” says the mother in a pale voice.

“It’s already better since we arrived in the mountains,” adds the father. “In Tabriz, we’ll find a pharmacy.”

I enter the Iranian police station to have my passport stamped. Hey, another hitchhiker! He has long hair and is growing a beard, but it’s less thick than the big Pakistani’s. He is English.

“Andrew.”

“Jean-Jacques. Have you been here long?”

“I arrived this morning. A truck drove me to the last village, then I continued on foot. Six miles.”

“Has anyone passed by since this morning?”

“Just the Vauxhall and you guys. I played dominoes with the Iranian police. They will take me when they leave work tonight.”

These police officers probably live in Maku, the first small town after the border. I bet they invited Andrew to their place to continue the domino game. In any case, no one apart us is having dinner at the only hotel in Maku. We drink Pepsi-Cola, a drink unknown in eastern Turkey. I feel like I’m back in a civilized country. There’s a sink

¹ Pakistan was split in two parts, on both sides of India. Eastern Pakistan seceded in 1971 and became an independent country, Bangladesh.

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in my room, and even an electrical outlet. I can wash my two shirts and shave. My beard is still young—I shave twice a week.

Civilization isn't all good. The Iranian road thinks it's superior to the Turkish tracks: it's covered in gravel and almost flat. They just forgot to use the steamroller to smooth out the wrinkles. A roadological mystery: if you drive ten thousand trucks on a gravel surface, it starts to look like corrugated iron. Our little car grumbles. Yesterday, it waltzed between the ruts. Today it vibrates like a worker handling a jackhammer: Rak rak rak rak... I'm also shaking with it. We're not making any progress. From time to time, a truck overtakes us, showering us with gravel. We stop in a small meadow by a stream. I'm glad to slip out of my shell and relax my cramped muscles. Christian takes out a set of cooking pots from the trunk and prepares our breakfast: oat flakes and tea. He gives me some advice.

"You should only eat boiled food, otherwise you risk having bellyache."

"And the schnitzel last night?"

"Meat is fine, they serve well cooked. You should avoid vegetables and fruit. Above all, drink no water, but only Pepsi-Cola or tea."

"It's an alcohol stove? I remember my father had one when we went camping."

"Butane gas stove would be more convenient, but I don't know if I can find gas everywhere. Whereas alcohol..."

"I thought Muslims didn't drink alcohol."

"You kidding! Anyway, it's not whiskey stove. It's denatured alcohol. People put in their lighters."

Rak rak rak rak... It's not enough for him to crawl at the speed of a turtle, he wants to picnic every five minutes like the hare... Breakfast, lunch, tea. Too bad his car doesn't have a radiator. It would be more convenient than the stove to get boiling water.

The city of Tabriz looks like the villages we have passed through, except that it sprawls for miles. The houses take up a lot of space because they only have one floor, like in Los Angeles.

Christian knew he was coming to the region, so he read books to prepare for his trip.

"Second largest city in Iran. In the Middle Ages, was even the capital of the entire Mongol empire."

"It would look more like a city if they built multi-story houses."

"Many earthquakes. Houses more than two floors collapse like house of cards. Middle Ages monuments have long since disappeared. The Shah wants to modernize the country, so they are starting build earthquake-resistant buildings."

"I hope they wait until we leave before triggering the next earthquake."

Hitchhiking

We find a pleasant hotel surrounded by a flower-filled garden. We eat a boiled broth of meat and vegetables.

Christian told me that Mount Ararat was higher than Mont Blanc. So I thought a mountain range separated Turkey from Iran, like France from Italy, and then the road descended to Tehran. Well, no. New mountains rise in our path. The flea is full of goodwill, but a little tired. So am I. We stop even more often than yesterday. First, there's the oatmeal flakes under the fir trees. Then, a flat tire. Christian puts on the spare wheel and studies the map.

"Can't repair the tire in just any village. Go to the city of Mianeh."

We pass a mountain lake in which Genghis Khan must have bathed in the past. Judging by the green color of the water, I guess it's very cold. What a tough guy, that Genghis!

"Look, Christian, over there on the beach, the Vauxhall!"

"We might as well stop for lunch."

The mother washes her children's clothes. Underpants and shirts are already drying on tree branches. Blackbeard heats the pot on a wood fire. The children sit near the fire. My parents would have liked these kids: as good as gold. My brothers and I couldn't be taken on vacation because we fought all the time. One brother at a time is fine: my parents plan to spend August with Olivier in an apartment they just bought on the French Riviera.

"How are they?" Christian asks.

"Not very well," the mother answers. "They have diarrhea. I spend my time washing their clothes."

"You didn't find pharmacy in Tabriz?"

"They sold us a herb tea that isn't very effective."

"Wait, I have something..."

He rummages through his luggage and pulls out a first aid kit.

"Try these pills. Two per day outside meals. Above all, eat boiled food. Beautiful fruits in the villages, but not eat them raw. Make compotes. Only drink Pepsi-Cola or tea."

"Thank you. I didn't think to bring medicine. It's Laura who's the worst off. She's always been fragile."

"Her fate is in God's hands," the pirate adds.

We leave before them, as they wait for the laundry to dry. About twelve kilometers further on, we get another flat tire. This time, we have no spare wheel.

"I have what fix it."

"Patches and all that?"

Hitchhiking

“No choice!”

He lifts the car with the jack, removes the wheel, and takes the tire off the rim with a crowbar.

“Hard part is finding where hole is. You see basin on back seat? Bring it, and also container I filled with water from lake.”

“Do I pour the water into the basin?”

“Yes. The pump is in trunk...”

It’s a kind of large bicycle pump. We pump the air by stepping on a pedal. He inflates the inner tube and submerges a section of it into the basin. He turns it slowly.

“See the bubbles! The hole there. Now, dry the rubber well and scrape a bit so patch sticks well. Bring me tire that burst earlier. We fix that too. That way, we have a spare wheel again.

“Why are you pressing the valve? You’re going to deflate the inner tube.”

“On purpose. I want put it back inside the tire without forcing. We inflate afterward.”

He wedges the tire back into the rim using the crowbar, then he attaches the wheel to the hub, lowers the car, and tightens the bolts.

“Now your turn to work. While I fix other one, you inflate this one.”

“We should have done this before lowering the car. Inflating the tire now is like lifting the car. It’s much harder.”

“No, it’s same. Whether car is up or down, you just add air to inner tube, that’s all.”

“It’s elementary physics. If I succeed in inflating the tire, the car will rise several centimeters. So, I’ll be doing the job of lifting five hundred kilos by several centimeters.”

“It will do you lot of good.”

“Yeah, I’d like to see you try.”

“I’m willing to do it if you fix other tire in meantime.”

“I can’t guarantee that I’ll be able to apply the patch properly.”

“You can’t do anything. While I’m struggling to fix, you’re watching like you’re at theater. When I ask for help, you refuse with stupid excuse. Thanks a lot!”

He adds a few words in German, among which I recognize an expression meaning “French bastard.” His singer’s training allows him to raise his voice and awaken the mountain’s echo, which has been asleep since the Mongols screamed to terrify their enemies.

I don’t try to answer. I’m not even sure I’m right about the pump. I can solve physics problems for the Polytechnique competition, but no one has ever explained to me how the laws of physics apply to everyday objects. I take my bag and leave without saying anything. A little walk will calm me down. Not just the tire story. His obsession with boiling everything. The slowest alcohol stove in the galaxy. A candle would be faster.

Hitchhiking

I want to eat in the villages, meet Iranians, never mind the germs. I should have asked him what his father did during the war.

After about fifteen minutes, I see coming... No, not a red flea, but a white Opel. Two Iranian students going from Tabriz to Tehran. Get in! What country are you from? France? Ah, you're the first Frenchman I've met in my life!

It's an understatement to say that I come out ahead. I stretch out on the back seat of a fast car that will take me all the way to Tehran, barely shaking. My good fortune shows that Heaven approves of my refusal to lift a car with a foot pump. Don't take me for a circus strongman!

Finally, I meet some Iranians.

"In France, General de Gaulle?"

"Yes, that's right."

"He is dictator?"

"Not really. He was elected. He has a lot of power, but he might lose the next election."

"You have heard about our Shah?"

"Of course."

"Shah Muhammad Reza. He's dictator."

"Tyrant."

"I thought he was modernizing the country."

"Modernizing for rich."

"Fake Shah. His father, Reza, Minister of War of true Shah, take power in 1925 by military coup. English depose him 1941 because he too much likes Germans. They put crown prince, Muhammad Reza, in his place.

"The people never loved him. Ten years ago, good prime minister, Dr. Mossadegh. Americans chase him to strengthen Shah's power. Their ally against Russians."

In any case, the Shah or whoever did a good job modernizing the hotel in Zenjan where we spend the night. I haven't had such a comfortable room since the Janissaries' hotel. We leave at four in the morning. At ten o'clock, they drop me off in the center of Tehran. It's Sunday, July 21st. I left Istanbul six days ago.

Cucumbers in yogurt

I walk along Shah Reza Avenue, which I am tempted to call Tehran's *avenue des Champs-Élysées* when I discover that they even have a tourist office there. It's a brand new institution that smells of fresh paint. They opened the office, now they're waiting for tourists. I am the first one!

"May I help you, sir?" a brand new employee asks.

"I'm looking for a student hotel, not too expensive."

Hitchhiking

“What country you from, sir?”

“France.”

“Oh oh... France... Général de Gaulle! Madame Bovary! Paris!”

“Yes. Maybe a hotel with a dormitory, I don’t know if that exists.”

“If you’re a student, why you don’t go to University City? Take bus 40 at end of avenue. It goes there, is last stop.”

I find a post office on the way to the end of Shah Reza Avenue. I send my parents the letter written near Mount Ararat.

The University City looks like the housing complexes that are popping up like mushrooms around Paris. The concierge stares blankly while smoking a cigarette, just like at home. The only difference is that he asks me where I’m going in Farsi¹. I try English.

“I would like to rent a room... A bed in a dormitory is okay too.”

He looks at me with round eyes. He wonders if those bloody students are playing a prank on him again. A young man who speaks English comes to my rescue.

“I am student. My name Hajy. I live here with little brother and cousin. I am very honored if you accept live with us, sir.”

“Merci.”

Iranians, or maybe only those who belong to high society, say *merci* to mean thank you. They have an expression that resembles the Turkish *Teşekkür ederim*, but they prefer to use the French word.

Hajy takes me to the room he shares with his brother and cousin. As it happens to be lunchtime, they offer me their house specialty: cucumbers in yogurt, accompanied by flatbreads and tea.

“If you want, we can visit Tehran. You will find very ordinary compared to Paris.”

“Not at all. I find Paris ordinary since I’m used to it. Here, on the contrary, everything is new.”

Not so new: we take bus 40 and return to Shah Reza Avenue, which hasn’t changed much since earlier. The few cars float between the sidewalks as if they wore oversized clothing. I see the Vauxhall go by. One, two, three. The children still alive... They didn’t see me. At least, I hope not. It’s just that Hajy and his cousin hold my hand, Iranian-style. They let me stay with them, they offered me cucumbers in yogurt, so I don’t want to offend them by pulling my hand away. I must accept the strange customs of foreign countries, otherwise I should have spent my vacation on the French Riviera with my parents.

We return to University City. Hundreds of students want to meet me. The room is too small. We spill out onto the terrace and lawn. Cucumbers in yogurt are the main

¹ The language the Persians speak. The word *Persian* is derived from *farsi*.

Hitchhiking

course for dinner, but guests also bring melons, watermelons, almond ice cream, and honey cakes. I feel like the same people keep passing by me, like in a movie where an army is simulated with fifteen extras. An army of dark-haired, mustachioed men.

“I introduce you my cousin... My cousin’s cousin... Ali who was in my class last year... Fahri who wants to become electrical engineer...”

Hey, let me eat my ice cream before it melts!

They all ask me the same questions. If I had a loudspeaker, I could answer once and for all.

“Eighteen years old. Two brothers. My father a doctor. Paris. By plane to Istanbul, then by road. Mathematics and physics. Yeah, just this little bag...”

The next day, we start the day by swimming in University City’s pool. My swimsuit finally comes in handy. The problem is, I can’t take it off to dry because I have nothing else to wear.

Hajy’s little brother didn’t come for a walk with us yesterday afternoon. He was in high school.

“I talked about you. The teachers are asking if you accept to visit us.”

“Oh yes, I’d love to see an Iranian high school.”

“This morning, music class.”

“Great. Let’s go!”

The teacher puts Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony on the record player. The black hair of the students stands on end.

“This is not music!”

“It hurts the ears.”

“They really like this music in your country, sir?”

“Yes. My brother is a pianist. He plays Beethoven’s music.”

Then, we listen to Chopin’s mazurkas. Ah, that’s better... With half-closed eyes, they nod their heads, smiling. Chopin’s modulations probably have an oriental flavor that suits them.

“Iran will become a great modern country like France and Germany,” the teacher explains. “Therefore, we must study and understand Western music.”

The students demand Iranian music. They want to know what I think. Well, hmm, the wind instruments squeak like cars taking a turn too fast. The singer reminds me of Mr. Seguin’s goat¹. If she could sing like that, the wolf would run away instead of eating her. I have to be polite, of course, so I lie like a tooth puller (Chinese)².

¹ In a famous story by Alphonse Daudet. The goat is *la chèvre*, so I say she and her.

² *Mentir comme un arracheur de dents*. A 17th century French expression alluding to the fact that the dentist told you it wouldn’t hurt.

Hitchhiking

“Ah, it’s beautiful. Very moving. Is it a love song?”

“Yes, you guessed it! You are very sensitive, a musician like your brother...”

I spend the afternoon with Hajy and his cousin in Tehran’s large covered bazaar, which reminds me of the one in Istanbul. The merchants want to sell me carpets. Say, do you take me for an American?

Even the bazaar is modernizing: I find a photobooth there.

“Wait, I’m going to take some pictures. I need them for visas. I have to go to the Afghan and Pakistani consulates.”

My companions rush to the photos as soon as they come out of the slot. Okay, one each!

“Oh, thank you. We will keep carefully.”

“I look like a convict in those photos. It’s always like that with these machines.”

“You only have two left. Enough for visas?”

“I’m going to take four more.”

I change ten dollars. As in Istanbul, the rate is much better than in banks.

After the cucumber yogurt in the evening, I play chess with Hajy.

“Do you play chess in Paris?”

“Sometimes.”

“It’s Iranian game! The word *chess* comes from *shah*. Do people talk about our Shah in France?”

“France is a republic, but some French people love kings and queens. The newspapers made a big story when the Shah divorced Princess Soraya because she could not have a child, then married Farah Diba.”

“He needs heir. Modernizing country is long-term job. Do you know about White Revolution?”

“Ah no. I know very little.”

“Take the lands of large landowners to give poor peasants. Everyone loves and admires our Shah.”

“Except for the large landowners, maybe.”

I’m happy to live with real Iranians, I appreciate their hospitality, I’m willing to give them photos, but I can’t let Hajy win at chess. It’s against my nature. I capture his pieces one after another with the utmost savagery before assassinating his poor shah. Mate!!

My friends would gladly escort me every day. I put a stop to it.

“I’m going to spend my day waiting in line at embassies. It’s better if you attend your classes at the university.”

¹ Dead (in Arabic).

Hitchhiking

“We learn more in your company than during our classes.”

“You can enjoy my company at dinner time.”

I start with the Pakistani embassy. I give two photos, fill out forms, and wait for an hour or so. I didn't prepare my trip well: the book I brought to fill the dead time bores me. It's *The Plumed Serpent* by D. H. Lawrence. I should have read one or two chapters before leaving Paris. I take it out of my bag from time to time, open it to the dog-eared page, and catch a conversation I don't understand. Who are these people? What are they doing in Mexico, again? I go back to the beginning of the chapter to try to pick up the thread. Ah, that's not enough, I have to reread the previous chapter...

With my Pakistani visa in my pocket, I go to the other side of the city, looking for the Afghan embassy. A small yellow house in a quiet neighborhood. I give two photos, fill out the forms...

“They will examine your application,” the consular employee tells me. “Come back in two hours.”

“I'll have my visa in two hours?”

“Come back in two hours.”

Two tall American men and an even taller American woman find the scene very amusing.

“And us, in two hours too?”

“We gave our forms ten days ago!”

“Has the consul seen them, yes or no?”

“They left to eat. Come back in two hours.”

The Americans take me to lunch at an international school restaurant.

“They have really good yogurt with cucumbers.”

“Oh yeah? I'll try the eggplant salad instead. And then, a kebab. It will remind me of Turkey.”

“My name is Tom.”

“Dick.”

“Pat.”

“Jean-Jacques.”

“What are you doing around here, Djinn-Djak?”

“Hitchhiking.”

“Did you come from France by hitchhiking?”

“From Istanbul.”

“That's not bad already. So, you want to go to Afghanistan next?”

“I'd like to go all the way to India and maybe return by boat. And you? Do you work at this school?”

Hitchhiking

“We received training there when we arrived in Iran a little over a year ago. Now we work in villages.”

“We’re part of the Peace Corps.”

“The Peace Corps? Is that the army?”

“No, it’s an idea from President Kennedy. We volunteered to help people in poor countries.”

“We were supposed to teach math, electricity, a little English, but the villagers have other needs. It’s pointless to teach English to children if they get sick and die.”

“We give hygiene and physical education classes. They don’t boil the babies’ milk. They don’t wash their hands before preparing vegetables or fruits.”

“We show them how to brush their teeth.”

“They make children work too early in the fields or workshops. They carry loads that deform their spine and stunt their growth.”

“For the girls, there’s sewing and housekeeping too.”

“The kids are fragile. I had one who broke his leg last month. They put on a splint carelessly and send him back to work right away. His friends already call him *the cripple*. He’ll limp for the rest of his life.”

“There are I don’t know how many who are called the cripple or the hunchback. I have to ask: Which cripple? The little one? The big one? The one who lives near the river?”

“I take care of the girls. They think they shouldn’t learn to read and write. They marry them before they turn ten.”

“Hey, it’s true, I haven’t seen any girls. Neither at the University City nor at the high school. Do you think the Shah will succeed in modernizing Iran?”

“That, I’d like to see.”

“Modernization is not close to reaching the villages.”

We return to the embassy. So, my visa? The employee is sorry.

“They left because tomorrow is holiday.”

“Is it the king’s birthday?”

“King’s birthday is in January. Tomorrow, July 24th, national holiday. They will make visas on Thursday. Closed on Friday. Come pick up on Saturday.”

Tom, Dick, and Pat snicker.

“What did we say! You know, Djinn-Djak, it’s easier to go through the south. You’ll see Isfahan, which is the most beautiful city in the country. Then, you’ll enter Pakistan directly. From Zahedan, there’s a train that goes to the border and then to Quetta every Sunday. Too bad for Afghanistan.”

“And you?”

Hitchhiking

“We have three weeks of vacation. We’ve already gone to Pakistan through the south, so we thought about visiting Afghanistan. We’ll find something.”

I spend one last evening at University City. Hajy doesn’t wash his hands before preparing the cucumbers with yogurt.

The most beautiful city in the world

It’s like Marseille. I take a bus to the end of the line, but I’m still in the middle of the city. I interview passers-by.

“*Salam aleikum.*”

“*Aleikum Salam.*”

“Qom and Isfahan... Here? There?”

“Qom? This way!”

They point to the north.

“Oh oh, not there. Qom and Isfahan to the south, there.”

“That way, that way. *Golpayegen khabr otobus agha jari beyram!*”

Farsi is easy. *Otobus!* He thinks I want to go to the bus station and take the Isfahan bus. I show my legs. I walk the fingers of my right hand on the back of my left hand.

“I want to go on foot! That way?”

“On foot? You want to walk?”

“Decidedly, these foreigners are as crazy as they’re said to be.”

“He’s a pilgrim who has vowed to walk to the holy city of Qom!”

“If that is the case, you just have to continue. You are on the right boulevard!”

I walk for more than an hour. Marseille is very small. The Shah wants Iran to become the Japan of the Middle East. Its capital is already as big as Tokyo.

Little by little, the houses start to look like the ones I saw in the villages. They lose the plaster makeup of city houses. They show the nakedness of their ochre flesh, a rough mixture of straw and dried earth. Goats, donkeys and chickens watch me without being surprised by my light hair and my school bag.

A tanker truck, more curious than donkeys and chickens, stops when seeing me.

“*Maryeb iraj ahga?*”

“Qom!”

“Qom. Get in!”

We cross a huge stony plateau. Not the smallest shrub, not the least blade of grass. I call it a desert, even though they forgot to put sand dunes like in *The Golden Crab*¹. Quite a monotonous landscape, anyway. The driver and his deputy are counting on me to entertain them.

“*Hayezagh deh Qom ahangaran?*”

¹ Tintin.

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“Where I go after Qom? To Isfahan.”

“*Kuh e kukalar?*”

“Where I come from? Well, from Tehran.”

“*Ajji e zarin?*”

“Before? From Turkey. From Istanbul.”

“*Howz i ab shekar? English? Guermann?*”

“Ah, I am French. France!”

“Ferranz? De Gaulle!”

“Yes, shah de Gaulle.”

“Shah de Gaulle, ah ah ah!”

Guessing the meaning of the questions is fun. What is really difficult is to shout louder than the engine. Rak rak rak: the truck vibrates as much as Christian’s red flea. I was hoping that its monstrous mass would allow it to slide like a limousine on the pebble waves of the road... The sun brings its metal frame to white heat. The lowered windows let in a burning wind that dries us instead of cooling us. Hitchhiking is a tough job. Tanker driver, even worse.

A stop in a village. Tea, tea! We eat rice chicken. Some more tea, please.

The truckers are going to Qom. They make me understand that it is the city of the clerics, and that they do not think much of these people.

I wait two hours at the exit of Qom. I stand in the shadow of a house to escape death. If I placed a glass of water in full sun, the water would boil and evaporate in five seconds. The Qomans¹, less stupid than I am, remain cautiously at home at nap time. The intensity of the silence has something frightening. A cataclysm has killed all the inhabitants of this planet except me! I prick up my ears... If someone whispered within ten miles of here, if a cat or an engine were to purr, I’d hear it.

A kind of big jeep is willing to take me from Qom to Isfahan in one fell swoop. I ask the driver if it’s far.

“Qom Isfahan kilometers?”

“Two hundred and seventy,” he says, showing me twice ten fingers and once seven.

“And Tehran Qom?”

“One hundred and fifty.”

Hot air deflects the sun’s rays. We see false reflections, as if a lake stretched all around us. A blurry lake that doesn’t look like the mirage the Dupondt fall into after going in circles. Still, these optical illusions trouble my mind. My thoughts wander like the Dupondt. Why is the city of Isfahan called Ispahan in French? An old name. We say Tehran here, instead of Téhéran. I make lists in my head. Invariable names: Amsterdam, Madrid, Berlin, Glasgow, Boston, New York. Frenchified names:

¹ Qomers ? Qomedians? Qomics ?

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Londres, Rome, Munich, Athènes, Pékin, Varsovie. For Austrians and Germans, Lwów¹ is called Lemberg. We can't say Warszawa, it's too difficult, but no one has Frenchified the names of small towns, so Rzeszow remains Rzeszow and Przemysl remains Przemysl. They only knew one city in the new continent: *Philadelphie*. Otherwise, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego would be called *Saint-François, Les Anges, and Saint-Diègue*. If they had known South America: *Rivière de Janvier, Saint-Paul, Bon Air*. But Paris will always be Paris. Ah no: *Parigi*.

I try to find Baudelaire's *Le Voyage* in my memory.

Pour l'enfant, amoureux de cartes et d'estampes, For the child, lover of maps and pictures,

L'univers est égal à son vaste appétit. The universe is equal to his vast appetite.

Ah ! que le monde est grand à la clarté des lampes ! Ah! how wide the world under the lamplight!

Aux yeux du souvenir que le monde est petit ! To the eyes of memory, how small!

Un matin nous partons, le cerveau plein de flamme, One morning we set out, our brain on fire,

Le cœur gros de rancune et de désirs amers, Our heart heavy with resentment and bitter desires

Et nous allons, suivant le rythme de la lame, And we go, following the rhythm of the wave

Berçant notre infini sur le fini des mers. Rocking our infinite on the finite of the seas:

Le pape est mort. The Pope is dead.

Un nouveau pape est appelé à régner. A new Pope is called to reign.

Araignée ? Quel drôle de nom pour un pape ! Spider? What a strange name for a Pope!

Pourquoi pas libellule ou papillon ? Why not dragonfly or butterfly?

No, it's a mirage. The real sequence escapes me... If I had been less stupid, I would have brought *Les Fleurs du Mal* instead of *The Plumed Serpent*. I would learn the poems by heart to pass the time. Ah, I remember that Baudelaire mentions time:

Amer savoir, celui qu'on tire du voyage ! Bitter knowledge, that one gains from travel!

Le monde, monotone et petit, aujourd'hui, The world, monotonous and small, today

Hier, demain, toujours, nous fait voir notre image : Yesterday, tomorrow, always, shows us our image:

Une oasis d'horreur dans un désert d'ennui ! An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom!

Faut-il partir ? rester ? Si tu peux rester, reste; Should I leave? stay? If you can stay, stay.

Pars, s'il le faut. L'un court, et l'autre se tapit Go if you must. One runs, another crouches

Pour tromper l'ennemi vigilant et funeste, To deceive the vigilant and deadly enemy,

Le temps ! Time!

I could have bought them at the French bookstore in Ankara. Or even in Tehran. I would learn one poem a day, so at the end of my journey I would know the entire collection. Is it possible? The actors of the Comédie Française recite an entire play by Corneille or Racine... Even this man in my cabin on the *Flandres* could do it.

¹ My mother's birthplace. Today, Lviv in Ukraine. See *Malvina*.

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After five hours of crossing the desert, we spot a tiny green spot far ahead of us, at the end of the straight-as-a-rod road. Another mirage? This color reminds me of something. We get closer. Miracle! Trees, meadows... I had forgotten the color of vegetation. An oasis of hope in a desert of boredom!

“Isfahan,” the driver says.

He drops me off on a large avenue lined with plane trees. I find a hotel with bedbugs, where I meet a Dutchman carrying a huge suitcase. He’s not a hitchhiker. We go out to eat chicken and rice.

“From Istanbul to Ankara, I traveled with two Dutch girls.”

“And I talked to a Frenchman in Tabriz.”

“Where are you going?”

To Pakistan. Maybe to India. I’m staying the night in this hotel because it’s close to the bus station. I’ll take a bus to Kerman tomorrow at six o’clock. Another one on Friday, from Kerman to Zahedan. I have to arrive in Zahedan on Friday night to catch the Zahedan-Quetta train.”

“I was told it leaves on Sunday morning.”

“Saturday morning.”

“How many kilometers from here to Zahedan?”

“Thirteen hundred.”

“I’m still going to visit Isfahan, which means I’ll leave day after tomorrow. Thirteen hundred kilometers will take me about four days, so I’ll arrive on Monday night. Too bad about the train: I’ll continue hitchhiking.”

“There’s the great Baluchistan desert between Iran and Pakistan. I don’t know if cars cross it.”

“I’ll leave it to the Allah’s will.”

This Dutchman surely has a travel alarm clock in his suitcase. Another useless thing, since bedbugs wake you up much better, and you don’t even have to wind them up. I get up at five o’clock and have tea with him.

“Where are the monuments, the mosques?”

“At the end of this avenue. You’ll arrive at the Royal Square. Everything is around the square, you’ll see.”

“Thanks. Bon voyage!”

I walk under the plane trees, in the playful breeze of early morning, to the Royal Square. It’s a huge rectangle surrounded by palaces and mosques... *Rogntudju*¹! What’s the point of studying geography for ten years, I ask you: none of my teachers ever told me about Isfahan. This makes the monumental entrances of the mosques even more

¹ A pleasant version of *Nom de Dieu*, a strong curse, from the *Gaston Lagaffe* comics.

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impressive, I must say. Last year, I saw baroque churches in Rome invaded by legions of playful angels. Here, as the Quran forbids showing human beings, the mystical fever of the builders is expressed in fantastic profusions of pure geometry. Cascades of cells cling to the vaults like stalactites. They look like the rays of a beehive whose bees have drunk too much nectar. How do the cells fit into each other? There are convex polygons, concave polygons... I just studied three-dimensional geometry in Maths Sup. All I can say is that the handymen who arranged these puzzles are real champs. Outside, it's even better. The domes... Shimmering poems of blue faience, iridescent garlands of butterfly wings... The artists who created these wonders knew how to combine a thousand shades to create a unique blue. The king didn't believe it.

“Are you sure? Red? Beige?”

“Yes, yes, Majesty. Step back and you'll see.”

I lose myself in this blue as in Agathe's eyes. If I had approached her, I would undoubtedly have seen in her irises glitters of gold and purple. I owe her this moment of ecstasy: I followed her eyes to the Birlik hotel, where I met the two Dutch girls who diverted me from my path. Allah used Agathe as bait. “Look at the pellucid azure of her gaze... Blue, clear, deep, like virginity... Would you believe it? There is an even more sublime blue, which men have created for me! Come, I will show you...”

In the large garden of the king's mosque, a young man dressed in a long robe and wearing a turban draws a curve on a piece of paper. It is the parabola $y = x^2$. I sit down next to him, borrow his pencil, write $y = 1/x$ and draw a hyperbola. We dialogue like this for a few minutes with mathematical formulas. I ask him a riddle:

“Can we write 1963 in the form of a product $a \times b$?”

He scribbles and eventually finds: $1963 = 13 \times 151$. He writes 1342, the year according to the Muslim calendar. It's my turn to scribble: $1342 = 2 \times 11 \times 61$.

Well, we could spend the whole day like this, but I have to visit Isfahan. The royal square measures at least five hundred meters long and over a hundred wide. The king's mosque, the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque, the royal palace... At the end of the square, a dark and majestic gate—the people who rush in and out of it seem too hurried to pray. From the sea-swell sound coming from it, I guess what it is: the bazaar!

The definitive perfection of the mosques reminds me of two verses from Baudelaire's poem entitled *La Beauté*:

I am beautiful, oh mortals, like a dream of stone

I hate the movement that displaces lines

The bazaar is the complete opposite: a constant stream of bearded men and veiled women dancing in the shadows. Their silhouettes tremble like ghosts when they approach the velvety light of the shops. The merchants have special light bulbs that recall the good old days of oil lamps. To further reduce their brightness, they hang

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forests of clothing from the ceiling. They can still see that I am a foreigner. No, I won't buy a carpet!

A young man agrees with me.

"Carpets too expensive."

"And too heavy."

"Here largest bazaar in Iran. You English or American?"

"I speak English, but I am French."

"My name Ali Rostani. You Aryan?"

"Aryan? Er..."

"Me Aryan. Iranians are the true Aryans. We superior race. Have you seen Shah Square? What you say?"

"I say that Isfahan is the most beautiful city in the world, tied with Venice and Paris!"

"Ah ah, yes! Most beautiful city in the world!"

"I haven't seen the forty-column pavilion yet. Is it nearby?"

"Very close. I show you... Shah Abbas traces this grand avenue. Plane trees for shade. In the middle, it used to be canal... Here is forty-column palace."

"Are there really forty columns?"

"Twenty columns and twenty reflections in basin! Each column a single plane tree trunk. Before, covered in mirrors, so roof floats in the sky."

"What era are all these mosques and palaces from?"

"Shah Abbas around year one thousand."

"Ours or yours?"

"Muslim."

"So around 1620. Contemporary of Queen Elizabeth of England and Shakespeare. Do you know Shakespeare?"

"I don't know. There are English people at court of Shah Abbas. They show him how make and fire cannons. With cannons, he retakes Tabriz. Kills one hundred thousand Turks."

"There's nothing to be proud of."

"Shah Abbas very cruel. He thinks everyone wants kill him. So cuts off his first son's head and blinds second and third sons. Then falls in love with Fatima, daughter of second son. So second son poisons Fatima and himself suicide."

"Well, Shakespeare would have loved this story."

Brigitte Bardot

Easier to leave Isfahan than Tehran. The desert at the end of the street.

Hitchhiking

All this empty vastness attracts me: I'd like to walk a little in the purple freshness of dawn... No, I must not leave the shadow of the last house. For now, the sun looks like a good fat red disk that wouldn't harm a fly, but I know what it's capable of.

You can't leave a traveler on the roadside in the desert. The first truck that passes by, around six in the morning, stops when it sees me. It's an old American Mack model. If it could talk, it would tell me about its youth in Iowa: "During Prohibition, I transported smuggled whiskey. See the little hole in the bottom of the door? .38 caliber... A souvenir from the Federal Police!"

We climb bare hills. The way the driver changes gears fascinates me. In addition to the usual gearshift lever, there is a small lever with two positions, high and low. Let's say he's in fourth low. The road goes up, he slows down, the engine coughs. He uses both hands, holding the wheel with his elbow, to shift the large lever into third and the small one into high position. When the road goes up a little less, he accelerates and reverses the process. And when we get to the top of the hill? Well, he turns off the engine. We're not going to burn gasoline, at the price it costs, to go down!

Around eleven, we stop at an underground inn, whose domed roof emerges from the flat surface of the desert like an overturned plate. At home, we would call it a cellar, except that a house usually rises above our cellars. One descends about fifteen steps. One sits cross-legged on a platform of earth covered with a carpet. One drinks tea while eating... I can't see what I'm eating, because the sun doesn't come in and that's just as well. I taste it: chicken with rice.

The driver invites me into another room, where a small basement window allows me to see a large tank filled with gray water. He explains to me by gestures...

"Bath... Very refreshing... Removes the dust from the road."

"No, thanks!"

He undresses and enters the water. From the color and smell of this water, I estimate its age to be ten or eleven months. They change it once a year, and that's in September. If there was a little more light, one could see the germs with the naked eye.

How long does it take for the sun to exhaust its fury? Five hours. The brave Mack, quite perked up after this long nap, sets off to conquer the hills and takes us to the entrance of Yazd. I walk towards the center to find a hotel. I hurry, because night is falling. In a moment I won't see anything. *Les fleurs du mal* and a flashlight.

Suddenly, a flow of light floods the avenue. A magnificent bus, gleaming with all its windows, springs from the twilight as if to bring modernity amidst earth and straw houses. A small illuminated panel, located in a corner of the windshield, announces: Kerman. Hey, that's where I'm going! My arm rises without asking my opinion. The bus stops immediately, like a docile genie. The door opens.

"I'm going to Kerman... That is to say... No money. Hitchhiking!"

Hitchhiking

A young girl sitting in front talks to the driver in a sing-song voice. He grumbles and nods. I climb in and sit behind the girl, who gets up and sits next to me. She walks with two canes. I shiver at the sight of her legs, her too thin arms, her twisted back. Her smile is so warm, her gaze so joyful, that I feel like kissing her.

“My name is Mahwash Taheri,” she says in English. “I’m fifteen years old. I live in Tehran, but I’m going to see my grandmother in the city of Rafsanjan. Do you want some pistachios? It’s the specialty of this region.”

“Thank you. I’m French. I’m going to India. My name is Jean-Jacques.”

“Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau?”

“You’re well-read.”

“I also know Montesquieu, who wrote the *Persian Letters*. But I can’t read them in French.”

“I can’t read Omar Khayyam and Ferdowsi in Farsi either.”

“Their poems are written in old Persian. It’s difficult for me too. I know a poem by Omar Khayyam, I’ll try to translate it into English.

If it were up to my will, I would not have come into the world.

If it were up to my will, how could I leave this world?

The ideal, in such a miserable world

Would be not to have come, not to exist, not to have to leave.”

“It sounds like a Japanese poem. Somewhat Buddhist.”

“It’s true that he wasn’t a good Muslim. In his poems, he celebrates wine, but good Muslims don’t drink alcohol. In Iran, not everyone is Muslim. There are Jews, Bahais¹. Do you know the ancient religion of the Persians, the one of the prophet Zarathustra, whom you also call Zoroaster?”

“I may have studied it at school long ago.”

“You got on the bus in Yazd. It’s the center of this ancient religion². They still have towers of silence. They put the corpses up there, for the Vultures to come and eat them.”

“I would have liked to see that.”

“Me too, but it was already dark when we arrived in Yazd. Besides, the towers are outside the city. I was told that you don’t see the bodies anyway, but only the vultures.”

The Dutchman I met in Isfahan took a bus like this one. A piece of modern Iran rushing into the night. Mahwash is not wearing a veil. Nobody protests because she sits next to me. She wants to know everything about my life in Paris and my trip. Her mother, who is still sitting in front, comes to see us.

¹ A “universal” religion, founded in Iran in the middle of the 19th century, present today in many countries. Its worshippers were persecuted in Iran from the beginning. Their situation worsened under the Shah. Under the current regime, they are not even accepted as Iranian but may be accused of being Zionist spies and so on.

² There are between 20,000 and 40,000 Zoroastrians in Yazd today, out of 500,000 inhabitants.

Hitchhiking

“Leave him alone, Mahwash. Maybe he wants to rest. It’s almost midnight.”

“She’s not bothering me. On the contrary. I’m happy to talk to an Iranian girl. I’ve been in Iran for eight days and I’ve only seen men...”

“He doesn’t know our alphabet, Mom. Bring me my notebook, I’ll teach him the letters!”

Around one o’clock in the morning, we arrive in Rafsanjan. We exchange our addresses. I promise to write back to her if she writes to me. The driver and his mother help her to get off.

As soon as the bus starts again, a young man sitting at the back gets up and takes Mahwash’s place. Am I dreaming? He’s also contorted, but it’s different. While she looked like a fragile flower, he’s hunchbacked like Quasimodo, whose strength is all the greater because it’s compressed. I remember the Americans from the Peace Corps: every other child is nicknamed the Lame or the Hunchback.

“You allow? May I sit down?”

“Please do.”

“My name is Mr. Shariaty, first name Manusher. I live in Kerman, but I study chemistry in Tehran.”

“I study chemistry in Paris!”

I tell my life story again. Still moved by Mahwash’s liveliness and charm, I find Mr. Shariaty a bit of a bore. He gives me the latest news from the capital.

“Our Shah is going to organize a big referendum to find out if the people approve of the White Revolution.”

“I bet the people will approve.”

“Of course. Iran is big country. Soon, big modern country. We have lot natural resources. Today, we sell crude oil. Tomorrow, we transform oil to sell plastic materials.”

“That’s why studying chemistry is interesting! You’re looking to the future.”

“I’m looking to the past. I study ancient and modern dyeing. In the province of Kerman, many workshops make carpets.”

“No flying carpets? That would be convenient for crossing the desert.”

“Flying carpets, ha ha! Soon we build airports. I give you my photo. Do you have a photo?”

“I’ll send you a photo from Paris.”

I would have preferred a photo of Mahwash.

We reach Kerman at three in the morning. It would be stupid to go to a hotel just to get up in an hour. I walk a little, but I can’t see anything. I sit on the ground, leaning against a house, and fall asleep immediately.

Hitchhiking

Awakened by the first light of dawn. My morning walk towards the rising sun. At the edge of the city, the earth houses find it harder and harder to keep their shape. Soon, all I see are vague mounds, vestiges of houses that could not resist the vigilant and deadly enemy: time... And then the flat earth, dotted with stones that seem to be placed there to prevent it from flying away.

Oh, a hitchhiker! His hair falls to his shoulders. His sparse beard reminds me of some sickly bushes that insist on trying to grow in the desert.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

“Are you English? I feel like I’ve seen you somewhere before. Maybe in Tehran, when I went to get my visa at the Pakistani embassy.”

“The English don’t need visas to go to Pakistan and India.”

“Of course. What’s your name?”

“Andrew.”

“It’s coming back to me: the border between Turkey and Iran. You played dominoes with the customs officers.”

“I remember you... In the little red car with the German fellow.”

“Austrian.”

“I saw him again just before Tehran. He broke down. Are you taking the Zahedan-Quetta?”

“It’s difficult if it leaves this morning.”

“This morning? But no—Thursday.”

“A Dutchman told me Saturday. Before that, some Americans told me Sunday.”

“I went to the Kerman city hall last night. They seem well-informed. Thursday.”

We chat by the roadside, but that doesn’t mean we’ve decided to travel together. A truck decides for us. It stops and takes both of us on board. Another Mack, the father or grandfather of yesterday’s. A model that was thought to be extinct! The Smithsonian Museum in Washington would probably pay a good price for it. The driver asks Andrew a lot of questions, pointing at his hair and beard.

“He wants to know whether I’m a man or a woman.”

“He’s taking you for the bearded lady.”

“They all take me for the bearded lady. They would like that.”

He shows his biceps to the driver. “Boy! Boy!” he says in a deep voice. Actually, the driver has other things to worry about: the engine is hiccupping. We should give it a big glass of water or try to scare it. We stop. The driver takes apart the engine, changes a part or two, adds a seal, tightens a bolt. When the truck starts again, it seems ten years younger. A quarter of an hour later, it relapses. The driver takes apart the engine, changes another little gadget, coats a gear with new grease (or maybe it’s a driveshaft—

Hitchhiking

what do I know?). He replaced all the original parts long ago, so the Smithsonian Museum won't want it. If we stop every fifteen minutes to take the engine apart, we'll end up missing our train.

Moreover, the road goes up. We arrive at Zeynalabad village at lunchtime. The innkeeper says we're fifty kilometers from Kerman. It seems to me that we're breaking slowness records.

"Fifty kilometers in five hours!"

"Take it easy, man! We're not in a hurry: the train only leaves next Thursday."

"That's what you say."

"Look, we're lucky we stopped here. Did you think you'd find an inn with a garden and a stream in the middle of the desert?"

I don't know if it's related to the stream, but we're served fish with rice instead of chicken with rice. Is the fish good? I'm too busy spitting out the bones to be able to say.

Since we're stuck for four or five hours, the driver decides to impose his will on the engine. He peels it like an onion, groups the pieces on the ground by family or affinity, washes his cloth in the stream, squats down to think...

The village teacher drinks tea with us.

"You English?"

"I'm English."

"And I'm French."

"You stay here two three days. Stay my house. Come school speak English."

"All right. I accept. You too?"

"No, I can't."

"You'll arrive in Zahedan far too early for the train."

"Never mind. I'll continue by road. I have to be back in Paris at the beginning of September. I'm thinking of going all the way to Bombay. I don't know how long it will take me. Then I'll have to find a boat."

Andrew walks away with the teacher. Smarter than me. I build a mental prison and lock myself in it. He's free: a real hitchhiker.

I don't stay alone for long: an Englishwoman replaces an Englishman. She gets out of her Vauxhall with her three pale-looking kids and her Pakistani pirate.

"Hello Jean-Jacques! How are you?"

"I'm okay. What about the children?"

"They're feeling better, but they're tired."

"It's a long trip for them."

"For me too. I've been driving since London, you know."

"Your husband doesn't drive?"

"Well no. They have chicken with rice?"

Hitchhiking

“Fish with rice and lots of bones. And very sweet melon.”

“Your driver seems quite busy. He’s taken everything apart!”

“He’s not really a driver, but a travelling mechanic. The truck’s owner is in trouble: *My truck is broken down, just before an important delivery.* The travelling mechanic says to him, *I’ll fix it while driving, so I can make the delivery at the same time.* It’s very efficient. He stops every ten minutes. He tries a repair—he can immediately judge whether he’s on the right track. He’s already fixed it twice this morning. He’s now entering the crucial phase of synthesis.”

I improvise this explanation to distract the nice Englishwoman and her three children (the pirate is already devouring a mountain of fish with rice), but it may contain some truth. We race to the city of Bam without stopping once. A crenellated wall the color of the desert surrounds part of the city. Help! The Mongols! The Turks! Everyone to the ramparts!

I find a hotel without rooms. That’s original. One sleeps on the rooftop terrace, covered with a large Kerman rug. At least I escape the bedbugs. The terrace is crowded: all the inhabitants of Bam¹ want to see me while it’s still daylight.”

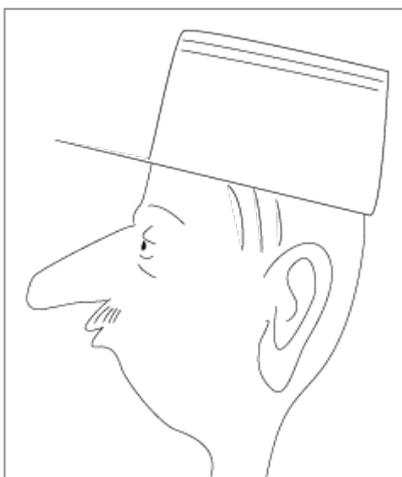
“*Mahirud naomid? Amerika?*”

“France.”

“France? De Gaulle!”

“Yeah, De Gaulle.”

To liven up the evening a bit, I draw Général de Gaulle in my notebook.

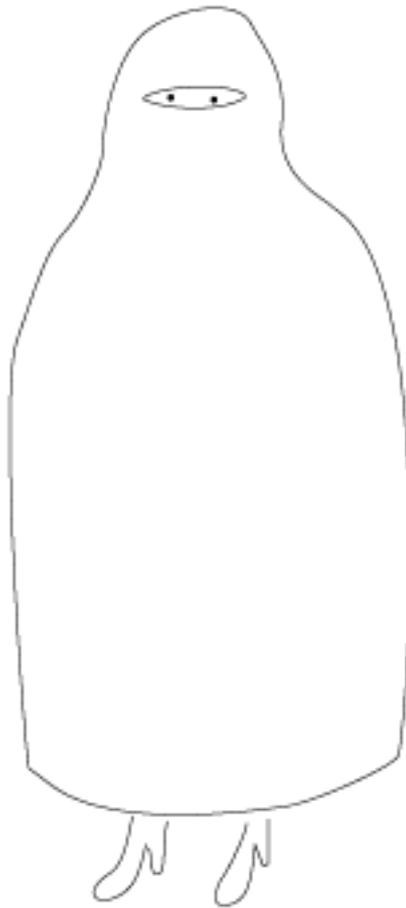


¹ Or rather : half the inhabitants—the mustachioed ones.

Hitchhiking

They exclaim oh! and ah! A clever one shouts, “Brigitte Bardot!” They all repeat in unison, “Brigitte Bardot! Brigitte Bardot!” How could they know BB? In desert villages, there are no more cinemas than there are Olympic swimming pools. Unless they hide an old projector in a school, but then they certainly don’t show films with young ladies in swimsuits.

Since you insist... Give me back my notebook... I draw Brigitte Bardot dressed in the fashion of Bam (thinking of the sheep in *The Little Prince*).



They are very happy. My notebook is passed from hand to hand. I hear bursts of laughter. They ask me questions and I answer them randomly, like with the truck drivers, hoping that the order of the questions is always the same. I raise my hand to the height of my shoulder, then to the height of my belly, to represent my brothers—even though they are both actually taller than me. I write equations on my notebook... I draw the three brothers and their parents, exaggerating my father’s baldness and giving him a stethoscope.

“*Khahak Matematik!*” they say.

Hitchhiking

“*Panah Doktor!*”

It’s all very nice, exchanging gestures and drawings, but it’s a game that can’t be played in the dark. So we end the session as night falls. Too late. How am I going to go to the bathroom in the dark now? I have to climb down to the courtyard via the outside staircase. I know that a dark light falls from the stars¹, but I’m not used to it. Not too fast... One step at a time... Finding the hut is easy: I let myself be guided by the smell. Then... There’s a hole inside the hut, but where?

Phew. Everything’s fine, Madame la Marquise². I go back up...

New trouble: I can’t sleep on the ground. I have this bad habit of sleeping on my stomach. Ouch! My kneecaps protest. I try on my side. I discover that I have ultra-sensitive hips. Did they put nerves in the hip bone? That doesn’t make sense... I’ve never slept on my back before, but what else can I do? At least I can count the stars. I’d better move, otherwise the vultures will take me for a treat exposed on a tower of silence.

Even when I don’t sleep much, I get up when the horizon starts to turn blue. It’s my favorite time of day. Leaving the city in its darkness, I stride towards the desert, where every dawn resembles the creation of the world. *Fiat lux*, as the Italian car sellers say. I sing:

*The road is long, long, long
Walk without ever stopping...³*

Installed at my post at five in the morning, like a good worker, not to miss the first truck of the day.

Four hours later, the first truck has yet to show up. It’s hopeless. They always leave very early. Or maybe it left at five from Kerman and it will show up any minute now... Yesterday, the road saw an old Mack and a Vauxhall. There are days when it sees no one, poor thing. If I continue to practice the noble sport of hitchhiking, I will eventually end up stuck somewhere for twenty-four hours. I pray to Zarathustra that it will happen somewhere other than Bam, where the hotel is so unsuitable for my delicate kneecaps.

Zarathustra be praised and thanked! He sends me a brand new Ford Zodiac, with Indian plates outside and three Indians inside. It’s almost too good to be true...

“Get in. We’re going to Zahedan.”

“And then to India?”

¹ A quotation from the play *Le Cid*, by Pierre Corneille.

² Another quotation, from a well-known song.

³ A summer camp walking song.

Hitchhiking

“We bought carpets in Kerman to sell in Delhi. We plan to have them shipped by train from Zahedan. It will take three or four days to arrange all the paperwork. We’ll go back to Kerman, then return to India in about two weeks.”

“I hope I won’t be in the region in two weeks, but if you see me by the side of the road in the Baluchistan desert, please stop!”

“You can count on us!”

They are even more cautious than truck drivers: to prevent the sun from boiling the water and exploding the radiator, they take shelter in an inn from eleven in the morning to five in the afternoon.

Here, people don’t bury their houses. The inn is a large cabin made of branches. A pipe that descends from the mountain feeds a perforated gutter suspended above the roof. They invented this system during the time of Zarathustra. The flow rate of the water, the spacing of the holes, are adjusted so as to moisten the branches of the roof without flooding them—that is to say, just enough water drips to replace what evaporates in the furnace, but no more. Now, as everyone knows, or should know if they studied their math sup physics program, evaporation absorbs energy.

“It’s almost too cold,” the Indians remark.

“Two years ago, I went to America. They have machines that work on this principle, it’s called air conditioning. It’s very cold in stores and cinemas. You catch a cold in the middle of summer. Do you have refrigerators in India?”

“In luxury restaurants, and among the very rich.”

“It also works like that. A liquid evaporates, then the resulting gas is compressed to liquefy it again.”

“Do you have a refrigerator at home, in France?”

“Of course.”

“What is it used for?”

“To keep food longer.”

“In India, when people have something to eat, they eat. When we’ll have too much food, we’ll wonder how to preserve it.”

A scooter in the desert

We arrive in Zahedan on Sunday, July 28th, around 9 p.m. Say, the train station.

“Can you drop me off, please? I’d like to inquire about the Zahedan-Quetta train. I’ll join you later at the hotel.”

The station looks like those in western movies. A bare room, luggage in one corner, an employee behind a grilled window. A tired lamp illuminates the room; at home, it would be called a night-light.

“Good evening. The Quetta train: which day?”

Hitchhiking

“Tomorrow morning at five o’clock.”

“Really?”

He shows me a freight car, just visible in the uncertain light cast by the night light.

“Is that the famous train? There’s not even a locomotive.”

“Tomorrow morning at five o’clock.”

“Well, I’ll buy a ticket.”

I approach the freight car. From the noise, I can tell that there are already many passengers. I stick my head inside to peer into the darkness. How are they seated? Sitting in small groups here and there... I’d like to lean against a wall. Dilemma: if I go into town to buy food, I might find all the walls taken upon my return, but if I board the car now, I’ll be very hungry. Where I’d really like to be is leaning against the back wall. Already three large silhouettes... There’s still room... Hey, the silhouettes are calling me!

“Djinn-Djak! Djinn-Djak!”

“Pat! Dick! Tom! I didn’t expect to find the train in the station. In Tehran, you told me it left on Sunday. A Dutchman told me Saturday, an Englishman Thursday. In the end, it’s Monday! Did you arrive this morning?”

“No, we took an express bus. It arrives on Sunday evening, just in time.”

“I didn’t see you on the road.”

“We come from the north, from Mashhad. We hoped to get an Afghan visa there. From Quetta, we’ll go to Peshawar, it’s right next to the border, and we’ll try again. If it doesn’t work, we’ll go to Lahore and take a tour of India. Do you want a sandwich?”

“Ah, I won’t say no. Thank you!”

They offer me a chicken sandwich on white bread that seems to come straight from the Automat in New York.

“Do you have Coca-Cola in your bag to go with it?”

“Sorry. It’s too heavy. We drink tea, like everyone else.”

“Can you find this kind of sandwich in Tehran?”

“Homemade. We buy the bread at an American grocery store, but for the chicken, we go to the butcher.”

We chat for ten minutes and then they fall asleep in three seconds like Americans. Even if I hadn’t dozed off on the soft seats of a Ford Zodiac, even if I hadn’t dozed off during the nap hour in the surprising coolness of a wet hut, even if I were lying on a spring mattress instead of sitting on the ground and leaning against a plank wall, I couldn’t sleep. At the other end of the car, an old woman is dying. At least, I think so. I’ve never seen or heard anyone die. She coughs and retches as if she had swallowed a sea urchin. She clears her throat, gasps, chokes, wheezes. At every moment, she tears her corroded lungs a little more. My eyes having grown accustomed to the darkness, I

Hitchhiking

can see that she's wearing a sari. Almost all the passengers are Indian. She breathed wool dust all her life in a carpet factory in Kerman. Not tuberculosis, but woolosis. She's going back home to die.

The train starts moving at five o'clock. Right on time! Perfect... I'm happy to leave soon-to-be-modernized Iran and enter the old empire of India, which the British modernized over a century ago. A railway, a clock on the station facade, a train leaving on time. Soon I'll see asphalt roads, maybe even street lamps.

Was I dreaming? I thought the train was leaving, but I still see the station and its clock. I lean out... Ah, they've hitched a wagon in front and another behind. Up front, a diesel locomotive slowly backs up to take its rightful place. The coughing woman coughs, the Americans wake up, the locomotive whistles, the train starts moving again. This time, it's moving forward. To warm up, it starts with short trips of about a hundred meters. Passengers who find the station poorly located board a little further down. They load bales into the freight car in front of us. A teenager dressed in a stiff pajama appears at the door of our car.

"I come from the kitchen car at the end of the train, ladies and gentlemen. Do you want to order tea? A full breakfast?"

We order tea, just to see. The train leaves Zahedan without hurry. Pat protests.

"They could take the trouble to link the cars with bellows. I'd like to drink my tea right away, but I suppose we have to wait for the next station.

"It's only fifty kilometers away. We'll be there in the early afternoon!"

"Your teas, ladies and gentlemen..."

The boy in pajamas doesn't need a bellows. He steps out of his wagon and catches up with ours by walking faster than the train. Quite a clever idea. Since the tea is excellent, we order full breakfasts.

My train ticket indicates: Zdn-Que, km 732. If we maintain our current speed, we will reach Que in three days.

"The station employee told me when the train was leaving, but I forgot to ask him when it was arriving. Do you know?"

"Tomorrow night."

"In that case, it will have to speed up a bit."

Indeed, it picks up speed, so much so that our breakfast cannot come on foot. As Pat predicted, we have to wait for the first stop, which is called Jozz. Duke Ellington should come to play some music here. He would call it *Jazz at Jozz*. We cross the border around nine o'clock, but the Pakistani police are waiting for us one hundred and fifty kilometers away, in Nok Kundi. It's a good thing: the stop coincides with lunchtime. The boy can bring us our meal without running.

The three Americans have already been here.

Hitchhiking

“They are very picky. They check all the passports and ask lots of questions. We won’t be leaving until tonight.”

The police officers occupy a large room in the station. The police chief is a fat man sitting behind a desk. His mustache and uniform buttons shine with a brilliance that indicates his power. A ten- or eleven-year-old child spends his day waving a long pole to fan this lord with a cloth panel attached to the ceiling¹. The police chief is angry. He scolds a traveler in a mixture of English and Urdu.

“*Musa khel daraban expired! Murgha bumbaz new permit!*”

Hey, I know this traveler. I look to the other side of the police station. Yes, the Vauxhall! The pirate is still massive, but his wife and chauffeur seems thinner and tired. Her face lights up when she sees me.

“Jean-Jacques! What a nice surprise...”

“How are you?”

“Not very well. This pig claims that the car papers are not in order.”

“I suppose it’s difficult to cross all these borders with a car. Each country has its regulations and its highway code.”

“Oh no, it’s not the country. The man is demanding ten dollars, that’s all.”

“Ten dollars?”

“We have no more money because we consulted doctors for the children in Tehran and Isfahan, then bought medicine. Let me ask you something: could you lend us ten dollars for the policeman and ten dollars for gas and food? We would then take you to Quetta and pay you back. My husband has clients there. You’d be doing us a great favor.”

“In your car? There’s no room.”

“The children can squeeze together. You’re thin, it’ll be fine.”

“Well, okay!”

I’m doing a favor for these poor people with their sick children... Hm, the truth is I am mainly doing *myself* a favor: I don’t really feel like spending a second night sitting in the wagon listening to the old Indian woman cough. What annoys me the most is seeing her smoke despite her lung cancer.

I say goodbye to my friends, who are stretching their legs on the platform.

“I’m continuing by car. I’m a hitchhiker, so the train doesn’t suit me too well.”

“This train would make anyone want to become a hitchhiker. We’d like to imitate you, but no car would take three people at once. After Quetta, it will be better. They have fast trains with first-class carriages. Bon voyage!”

¹ This traditional fan is called a *punkah*. The word appears in novels by Kipling or Conrad.

Hitchhiking

Instead of wasting my day at the Nok Kuni train station, I hit the road. Both my butt and my back thank me. All I ask is that the children don't vomit on my nice new pants.

When they left London, they couldn't sit still. Around Amiens, they were already asking, "Is it far to Pakistan? Are we there yet?" Blackbeard handed out slaps left and right to calm them down. Boredom wore them out, and then illness, and medicine to treat the illness. When their father shouted, "We're here! Pakistan, kids!" they half-opened a weary eye. Seeing yet another desert, they sighed in despair and fell asleep again.

We stop in a village for the night. I'm as disappointed as the children. Are you sure we're in Pakistan? People build their houses with raw bricks like in Iran. Women are veiled from head to toe like in Iran. The road is still not paved.

Blackbeard questions a passerby.

"He says the Dak Bungalow is further down. At the edge of the village."

We drive a little further, we approach a large house. A strange sensation overwhelms me, as if someone had just struck a match to ignite my imagination. There, in front of me, the empire of India! The one from Tintin's *Cigars of the Pharaoh*, from Fritz Lang's *The Indian Tomb*... A varnished, perhaps even aromatic, wooden pavilion surrounded by verandas. Servants dressed in long white shirts and tight pants.

"A Dak Bungalow," the pirate explains, "is a relay for travelers. To rest during siesta time or overnight. Funded by the administration. You only pay for meals; you leave a tip for the staff..."

The servants bring us a dish that's so spicy I can barely eat it and I have to drink at least ten liters of water.

"What is this?"

"Well, chicken and rice!"

I find the bed much more comfortable than the roof of the hotel in Bam. It's a high wooden frame that supports a lattice of thin cords. The Indians are spartan: they sleep without mattresses or sheets. And let's not forget the fakirs who sleep on nails. Hey, can bedbugs hide in the cords?

From Istanbul to Zahedan, I drank sweet black tea. Now I'm drinking milk tea like in England.

We drive on the left. A car following us honks as if accusing us of driving on the wrong side, then overtakes us on the right in a big cloud of dust. I barely manage to see that it's a Mercedes with French plates.

"French... They could have stopped. We could have chatted a bit."

"They seem to be in a hurry."

"We may see them at lunchtime."

Hitchhiking

We soon find a Dak Bungalow in a village and decide to eat there. The Mercedes must have rushed by a long time ago. A traveler does sit at our table after removing his helmet. I ask him if it's a motorcycle helmet. He replies in French.

"A motor scooter. You're Jean-Jacques, right? The Englishman told me about you. In a village near Kerman."

"Ah, Andrew... Are you Italian?"

"You recognize my accent, *si*? My name is David Modigliani."

"You came from Italy on a scooter? "

"Why not?"

"I would be afraid of breaking down. "

"I only got two flats. In Tehran, I found a very good garage. They checked everything. Also in Quetta, I think they know Vespa."

"I traveled with an Austrian in a Fiat 500."

"I met him. His name Christian."

"You know everyone. Earlier, a Mercedes passed us..."

"French, from Lille. A man and two young women. A bit strange. How do you say? Bigamist, maybe."

"There is one I lost sight of. A Dutchman I saw in Isfahan. He must have arrived in Zahedan two days too early for the train. I wonder what happened to him."

"Ah, him I don't know."

"It's curious, your watch... the leather cover... I saw such watches last year, they wore them in the kibbutz."

"Yes, it's the kibbutz watch. I was there last year too."

"Are you Jewish?"

"Well, of course... Modigliani!"

"Modigliani, is that a Jewish name? The painter Modigliani was Jewish?"

"You don't know? You are Jewish?"

"Sort of. My father has a blue number on his arm. I never tried to find out more. You're the first Italian Jew I've met."

"Do you know many Italians?"

"I like to go to Italy for skiing. Last year, I met a group of funny students in Courmayeur. They were communist and always arguing. They were from Rome."

"I live in Rome too."

"There was a tall girl named Anna Foa."

"I know her."

"Really?"

"She's Jewish. Her father leads the communist union. I'm not the first Italian Jew you've met!"

Hitchhiking

“Small world.”

“Rome is small city. Jews not many. We know almost all.”

As we are not yet out of the desert, we wait until mid-afternoon to leave. Blackbeard comes to see us. Since leaving London, he has only talked to his wife, and pirates prefer the conversation of men to the babble of women.

“I like Italians. During the war, they were against the English, like us.”

“But you were English, right?”

“The English were the masters, we were the slaves. We hated them. We hoped Hitler would crush them.”

“I’m Italian, but Hitler is not my friend.”

“We had a song:

*Long live Adolf Hitler
For he’s a jolly good feller
The war will soon be over
And he’ll be the winner!*

“Excuse me. I’ll be right back.”

I need to go to the bathroom. Not to vomit, but because my gut wants to get rid of its contents. Ate something bad. Perhaps the spicy chicken last night. Or I drank too much unboiled water to go with it. Already had a bellyache near Trabzon. I hope it will pass.

The pirate has gone to sleep. David frowns.

“If all Pakistanis and Indians love Hitler, I’m going to be unhappy.”

“Are you going to India?”

“I want to travel around the world. I’ll continue the road until Madras. There, I sell the Vespa and take a boat to Penang, in Malaysia. One can’t cross Burma nor China, so got to take the boats and planes all the way to Japan, and then to America. If I can cross with the Vespa, it’s better. There’s still a road from Penang to Singapore. The price would be much better in Singapore. You know, in Pakistan and India, there’s the problem with money. Rupees are worthless.”

“Yes, Americans I was with on the train talked about that. It’s like in Turkey and Iran. I should never change dollars at the bank.”

“The bank, they give you four rupees for a dollar. Change in the street, you can get at least ten rupees.”

“Tell me ... After Quetta, how do you get to India?”

“I go to Lahore. Then, Delhi, Agra to see Taj Mahal, Bombay, Goa, Bangalore, and Madras. I show you on the map.”

Hitchhiking

“Oh, that’s the one I need. I’ll note it for another time: Kümmerli-Frey n°216 Middle East. I note everything I’m missing: a flashlight, a book of poems, a map. You don’t go to Karachi?”

“I think it does not merit. The British built it from nothing. Doesn’t have the character of India.”

“I like to visit the capital of a country.”

“Not the capital anymore for three years. Now is Rawalpindi¹.”

“I’ll go there anyway. According to your map, there are boats that go from Karachi to Bombay. I’ll save time. I have to be back in Paris before the end of August.”

“If you don’t find a boat, you’ll have the problem. Between Karachi and Bombay is Sind, a great desert.”

“Look on your map, there’s a railway and then a road.”

“Maybe only one train a week! Small road. Better to stay on big roads. In India is always mystery and danger: savage tribes, highway robbers, massacres because of sacrilege.”

“In that case, I’ll go to Lahore. I’ll see the capital of India and the Taj Mahal.”

His wonderful map shows the distances from one city to another. I find I’ve traveled two thousand five hundred kilometers—in a week—from Tehran. Then, there are still over eight hundred kilometers from Quetta to Karachi. As the crow flies, the distance from Karachi to Bombay is less than a thousand kilometers. Through Lahore and Delhi: at least three thousand. Oh well, I’ll see... I draw a rough map in my notebook, noting the main cities and distances.

We felt close to each other when the pirate sang his rhyme. We part regretfully.

“If you’re in Rome, come see me.”

“And you in Paris. Ciao, David.”

In the early evening, as we pass through a village, the children finally come out of their torpor.

“Look, Ma, a donkey!”

“Camels!”

“Cows!”

This village no longer looks like an Iranian village. There are as many people (and many more animals) in the main street as on Boulevard Saint-Michel. The car slices through the crowd like an icebreaker pushing blocks of ice away at the North Pole.

“Stop! Stop!” Blackbeard cries.

¹ Karachi was the capital until 1959, when it was decided a new capital called Islamabad would be built near Rawalpindi—which was an “interim capital” from 1959 to 1967.

Hitchhiking

It's a useless order, as we're stopped by a tangle of carts—some pulled by camels, others by human beings. He gets out of the car. His shaggy head floats above the others, disappears under the awnings of the roadside shops, then reappears laboriously. He returns with five yellow balls wrapped in a banana leaf.

"The best thing in the world! Watch how it's done..."

He tears off a small cap and drinks the contents of the ball. We follow suit. It's a thick, sweet, fragrant, succulent liquid. What I thought was a capsule was actually a piece of stem. I have just drunk the flesh of a very ripe, almost rotten fruit.

"Mango! Best fruit in the world!"

Mango? I've seen that name in a book. Does Robinson Crusoe eat mangos? Or maybe, if it's a fruit that only exists in India, I've encountered it in *The Jungle Book*. I think of my grumbling belly and of Christian the singer. Eaten a fruit without boiling it...

Night has already fallen by the time we arrive in Quetta. We find a Dak Bungalow that is as comfortable and pleasant as the previous ones.

"I'll go see my clients first thing in the morning," the pirate tells me. "Don't worry, I'll pay you back."

No Bridge over the Channel

Blackbeard has gone into town. As we eat breakfast, he returns and gives me an envelope.

"Here you are: eighty rupees."

"Eighty rupees? Twenty dollars are worth a lot more."

"That's what they gave me at the border office."

"Of course. It's the official rate. If I had kept the dollars, I would have changed them in the street and gotten at least two hundred rupees."

"I'm reimbursing you for what I spent at the border and on gasoline. They gave me eighty rupees. Isn't that right, Anna?"

She looks embarrassed. She vaguely understands what's going on. This affair weighs heavily on her shoulders. She married a handsome oriental pirate, dreaming of fragrant lotus flowers and moonlit verandas. *Un matin nous partons, le cerveau plein de flammes*. Everything is fine up to Amiens. Then... ten thousand kilometers of roads and trails, sick children, the fate of her daughter in God's hands. *Amer savoir, celui qu'on tire du voyage...* And now the noisy crowds, the animals, the flies, the dirt, the poverty. She knew she was leaving the English meadows behind, but she longs for the cleanliness and purity of the Iranian desert. From tomorrow on, she will live in the city of Multan, which she knows almost nothing about. Worry twists the features of her face.

Hitchhiking

Bah, it's just money. *Roupies de sansonnet*¹... I will never see that dirty Nazi again, while poor Anna is condemned to remain under his thumb.

"I'm sorry, Jean-Jacques," she says. "Can't you make an effort, my dear?"

"All right, I'll give you a hundred rupees."

He gives me the money, then sits down to devour three plates of scrambled eggs with mushrooms. Anna, crouched behind him, closes the bags and suitcases. She calls me discreetly. She pulls out a small red satin purse from one of the suitcases.

"I have a few coins left from our time in France. I kept them as a souvenir. I thought I would spend them the next time we went to your country, but I'm afraid that won't happen anytime soon."

She gives me the purse. Her fingers lightly press against mine. "You're lucky to be going back there," they say. "Bon voyage..."

I dive into the human flow that runs along the streets of Quetta. No, I'm not going to taste the colorful fruits that taunt me on the merchants' stalls. I don't feel good at all. The rebellion in my belly weakens me. I don't have the strength to walk to the city's exit. Hitchhiking is a sport. You have to be strong and well-trained. *Young Jean-Jacques Greif, who was participating in the world hitchhiking championship, fell ill at the roadside, after which he lost all his chances of winning the title.*

Oh, the station... Toilets in there. Rest in the waiting room. It doesn't hurt to inquire while I'm here.

"Karachi? The Mail Express at three in the afternoon. You will arrive tomorrow morning at ten."

"I'll buy a ticket. How much?"

"Which class?"

"The cheapest."

"Third: nineteen rupees and fifteen paisa."

He gives me a cardboard ticket the size of a subway ticket, which reads QUE to KCI, Km 863. My rupees are worth about a franc. So I spent twenty francs for the equivalent of a trip from Paris to Marseille. Okay. If I had changed my dollars on the street, my rupees would only be worth forty cents, and I would go from Paris to Marseille for eight francs. Better.

Started with three hundred and fifty dollars, spent sixty. I hope I'll have enough left to buy a boat ticket in Bombay.

I board the train. They have invented intermediate classes with more or less comfortable sleeping arrangements. My third without beds is actually a fifth. Apart

¹ Starling rupees. A medieval French expression meaning a trifle, almost nothing. The word *roupie* then meant snot. So the exact translation of the expression is *a starling's snot*.

Hitchhiking

from a few privileged passengers who occupy the benches and luggage racks, everyone is sitting on the floor.

Pakistanis do not know the cotton handkerchief, let alone the paper handkerchief of Americans. They simply press one nostril with their index finger and blow with the other. The noise always surprises me. Moreover, they chew betel¹, a red stuff that forces them to spit constantly. Yeah, well, I'm very tired. Night falls. I imitate my neighbors: I lie down on the floor, my head resting on my backpack.

"Hey, what?"

"You English?"

A young man wakes me up by pushing his foot into my ribs. He wants to chat, just so he can say to his friends, "I talked to a foreigner!"

"No, I'm French."

"French? De Gaulle!"

It starts out like a conversation with an Iranian truck driver. I guess it will go further, because several passengers speak English. Gentlemen sitting on a luggage rack squeeze together to make a little room for me. I climb up there. It's cleaner than in the middle of the red spitting, but not more expensive.

By the pirate's beard! I accepted a poisoned gift. Do you want me to sit cross-legged for twelve hours? All that's missing are the nails. I look down... If I let my legs hang, they will hit the noses of the passengers sitting on the bench. They consider feet to be an impure and contemptible part of the body, so they don't like getting kicked in the nose. If I had known, I would have taken yoga classes.

"In France, have you been free from the English for a long time?"

"Free? But we were not... Well, maybe in the Middle Ages, the Hundred Years' War, Joan of Arc. Five centuries ago!"

"We, fifteen years."

"Sir, your country is right next to England, isn't it? There's just a channel between the two... One crosses it on a bridge, right?"

"But no. The English Channel is too wide. At least twenty-five miles!"

"Say, sir, you Christian?"

"No."

"Then you Muslim?"

They all turn their head and prick up their ears.

"No again."

"You neither Christian nor Muslim? What is your religion?"

"Well, I haven't got one."

¹ A stimulating mixture of betel leaves, tobacco, lime and areca nut.

Hitchhiking

“You’re making fun of us. You don’t have a religion, but you have a God. What’s His name?”

“No God either.”

“That’s not possible, sir.”

There is a great silence. Then they all speak at once.

“I heard that in Russia...”

“No God...”

“Communists...”

“China...”

“Eternal damnation!”

“Sir, sir! You don’t pray God because you don’t know him, but you don’t claim that he not exist, do you?”

“Well, I don’t know if he exists...”

In any case, the news of my own existence spreads throughout the train. In the first-class sleeping cars, travelers dream of approaching me and converting me. This feat would earn them a place of honor in paradise. Let’s enjoy the rivers of honey and the seventy-two virgins! For now, those within earshot are trying their luck.

“Sir, if God doesn’t exist... Look outside: do you see all the little lamps shining in the sky? Can you tell us who hung them?”

“And the big lamp of the moon!”

I should have said I was Catholic.

Thursday, August 1st. Three weeks since I left Istanbul. How shall I get my suitcase back?

Karachi looks like Paris. I mean, London. The English have laid out wide boulevards and erected proud buildings during the reign of Queen Victoria. In fact, the main avenue is called Victoria Road. Between carts pulled by camels, Austin and Morris cars roll by, perfectly recognizable even though they try to deceive the world by calling themselves Ambassador or Prince.

I go to the Indian consulate and fill out visa application forms. Tomorrow is Friday, the Muslim Sunday. Saturday is the festival of the god Ganesh. Sunday is Sunday for the Indians. So I have to come back to get my visa on Monday.

They recommend the McKenzie Packet navigation company. Ah, the beautiful offices! Polished parquet floors, wood paneling, leather armchairs. It would be the perfect place to shoot a film based on a Dickens novel, like *Dombey and Son*, for example. Wood paneling all the way to the toilet. I stay there for a long time. Much better than the Indian consulate.

Hitchhiking

“Yes, we have a ship going to Bombay. Departure on Monday at eight in the morning, arrival on Tuesday at four in the afternoon.”

“That won’t work. I have to pick up my Indian visa on Monday at nine o’clock. Is that the only one this week?”

“You can try the Scindia company. They have a ship on Saturday.”

“Won’t do either.”

I’m back in the street after a final visit to the toilet. Not unhappy, after all. Never believed in that boat crossing. Want to see Lahore, Delhi and the Taj Mahal.

What shall I do until Monday? Heal, perhaps. I search the facades for a green cross¹. It looks like they haven’t invented the green cross. I examine the shops... Not a single pharmacy. I arrive on a large tree-lined boulevard. A pharmacist is sitting at the foot of a tree. For a display, he has his prayer rug; for packaging, banana leaves; for remedies, small piles of colored powder. Under the next tree, a fortune teller has laid out a sign on his rug showing the lines of the hand. What is the profession of the man waiting under the next tree? Large pliers soak in a glass full of water; red-stained teeth pile up in a chipped bowl. And so on, as far as the eye can see, under every tree on the boulevard: a pharmacist, a fortune teller, a dentist, a pharmacist, a fortune teller, a dentist.

I wouldn’t go sit under one of these trees if I had a toothache. So I’m not going to ask the pharmacist for advice either. I hesitate, to be honest. My ailment is probably widespread in this country, so I can assume he sells a powder that can cure it.

I find a hotel room for three rupees. After a good night’s sleep, I’ll figure it out.

Between two visits to the bathroom at the end of the hall, I try to sleep. A huge fan rotates above my bed. The rod that supports it also turns, as if it wanted to accompany it in its languorous rounds. This thing is going to fall, as sure as two plus two equals four, and chop me up. It makes me dizzy. Stop looking at it... But how do I stop hearing its pathetic groans?

Sand dunes

As soon as daylight breaks, I flee. I just have to settle on the beach. No need for a fan. At the end of the city. I’m burning up with fever. My legs are like cotton. A tram...

“Are you going to the sea?”

“Next to the sea, one hundred meters.”

Two classes: at the front, seated; at the back, hanging on. I go up front, I sit down...

“No, no, you not allowed: women’s compartment!”

“Would you make an exception for a poor sick person?”

“Women!”

¹ Sign of a pharmacy in France.

Hitchhiking

Hanging outside? Impossible, too weak to hold on... *A French tourist falls under the wheels of a tram: cut in two!* My head rolls on the asphalt. My body bounces around like a chicken's. I bend down, I grope for my head...

I walk to the sea, very slowly. Pretentious gardens separate the city from the beach. Too-green lawns, marble stairs, it feels like Eastbourne or Plymouth.

I bathe in the Indian Ocean. I'm not going to set any speed records, but I manage to float. What's difficult is swimming without taking my bag out of my sight. Oh well... No one on the beach, except for a few camel herders running their beasts far away. The Karachilers don't say, "It's Friday, let's go picnic on the beach." They are unaware of the existence of beach-umbrellas and beach-volley. They don't want to tan, that's for sure.

Ah, yes, a passerby. He approaches me as I'm drying off.

"What country you from?"

"France."

"De Gaulle!"

"Yup, De Gaulle."

"Are you Christian?"

"Christian? Of course."

You bet I am. Me good Christian¹. As my classmates used to say: Our father who art in heaven stay there. Hail Mary full of grease.²

"Me too Christian."

"Great!"

"Like you."

"That's right."

"We Christians better than Muslims."

"That, I don't know."

"Muslims barbaric. All refined people Christian. You went swim in the ocean?"

"Yes. I don't feel very well. Belly ache, fever, dizziness. I thought a swim would do me good."

"You very wise. Ocean heals everything. Holy, like Ganges."

It seems that Christianity has absorbed certain Hindu beliefs to add local color. It's like in Mexico, where Aztec gods disguised themselves as saints... If that silly cultural attaché hadn't punished me for my sacrilegious theory, I would have won a round-the-world trip by plane. I wouldn't have eaten chicken and rice in the middle of the desert

¹ A quote from *Tintin in the Congo*.

² *Salut Marie pleine de graisse*. Grease is as close to grace as *graisse* is to *grâce*, but in French *graisse* can mean grease or fat, and fat is the more common meaning.

Hitchhiking

in a cave, heard about Hitler in a Dak Bungalow, and all the rest. Thank you, Mr. Cultural Attaché.

My new companion invites me to his home.

“You will do great honor. My parents very proud to meet French Christian.”

“The French Christian is sick. Very tired. I thought I would rest on the sand...”

“Very close. The house restful. Drinking tea perfect good for curing sickness.”

“Okay.”

Too weak to resist his will. I dress and follow him. We cross the lawns and climb the stairs. A long street, another. Not so close. Need to go to toilet again. Where find toilet?

And first of all, this young Christian doesn't seem very Catholic. Strange parishioner¹. Does he really live with his parents? Is he trying to lure me into some hovel where he'll promptly cut my throat? With the three hundred dollars hidden in my bag, he can live the good life for at least ten years (provided he doesn't change them in a bank). My poor parents are waiting for my return. Their hope is slowly fading, like a mud house in the desert. Noël goes looking for me. He finds Anna and the pirate. *We left him in Quetta. He wanted to go to Karachi. He was very generous, he lent us money...* Ah, even better: my visa application to the Indian embassy. Last trace before disappearance. Death without burial, like all those who went up in smoke in the Polish sky.

Hey, *Alliance Française*! A plaque next to a gate. At the end of an alley, a big house and a garden.

“Excuse me, I have to leave you. I don't feel very well. There's a French center here. They can help me. I'm sorry for your parents...”

What attracts me most of all is a bed of cords installed in the middle of the garden. There are probably French people around. Will they have the heart to refuse a sick compatriot the permission to lie down?

A gentleman wearing a turban comes to meet me.

“Yes, sir? The Alliance Française is closed until Monday.”

“I'm French. Could I meet someone from my country?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Delorme are not here. They went to Lahore for a French music concert. Mr. Delorme comes back on Sunday night.”

“I would love to meet him. Do you think I could wait for him by sleeping on this bed in the middle of the garden?”

“If you want, sir.”

¹ In French I wrote *Chrétin* instead of *Chrétien*. *Chrétin* sounds like *crétin*, which means jackass or knucklehead. We say that something is *pas très catholique* (not very Catholic) when it is somewhat fishy. *Un drôle de paroissien* (A Strange Parishioner) is the title of a strongly anticlerical and quite funny movie.

“Thank you.”

What a kind man! I must also thank the young Christian who brought me here without wanting to, and let's not forget Mary full of grease who heard my prayer and arranged this miracle. I mean, I've found the perfect place to rest until Monday morning: just steps away from my bed, on the ground floor of the big house, there is the library of the Alliance Française and, right next to it, a toilet for students. A library and a toilet all to myself!

During the night from Friday to Saturday, I spend more time in the toilet than on my bed. On Saturday, more time in the toilet than in the library. My fever gives a slight blur to reality. I vaguely remember the beach in Karachi. I see sand dunes galloping. A young man claims that my dive baptized me since the ocean is made of holy water. How long have I been sitting on the toilet seat? I examine the bathroom floor tiles. I wonder if, up close, they don't lose some of their beautiful regularity. These three small squares, two centimeters each, are well aligned, but then the worker noticed that he was deviating and he laid the next ones at a slight angle to get back on track. A thin line of cement sometimes appears between two tiles, destroying the harmony of the lines. The closer I look at the floor, the more defects I observe. The largest perfect grid cell: only four tiles. And besides, I would have to observe those four with a magnifying glass to make sure.

Since I no longer eat anything, the filth that was swarming in my digestive tract leaves eventually. It's all empty and clean in there!

During the night from Saturday to Sunday, I sleep much better, but I still have a little fever. I dream that I visit the zoo in Bangkok with Agathe. I am very disappointed because the famous royal white elephant is as gray as all his brothers.

“But no,” she says. “Look under his belly, there are yellow spots.”

I am delighted to spend this Sunday in the library. By the way, this is my first day off since leaving Paris! I take it easy, rereading all the Tintin albums. I weigh *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The binding is quite heavy. I'm not going to tear out the inner pages to steal them. I mean, borrow them. I'd return them to the Alliance Française in Bombay. A traveler going the other way would bring another book to Karachi, following the principle invented by Gretry...

While I'm at it, I quickly browse through some books on India. This *Taj Mahal* that I'll visit in Agra, what is it? Palace, mosque? Neither one nor the other... A tomb that the “great Mughal” Shah Jahan built for his beloved Mumtaz¹ Mahal in 1650. This Shah Jahan was vaguely related to Shah Abbas.

“Hello, cousin. I have built a small blue mosque in Isfahan, you should see it.”

¹ Or Mumtaz Mahal, meaning the Pearl of the Palace. The name of the tomb shortens her first name.

Hitchhiking

“Well, cousin, I am currently building a tomb for my poor wife. Very simple, all white... And how are your charming sons doing?”

“Oh, they were annoying me, so I had their eyes gouged out to teach them a lesson.”

Their common ancestor, Timur Lang or Tamerlane, conquered the whole world in the fourteenth century starting from Samarkand, in Central Asia. His descendants, the Timurids, ruled over Iran and Afghanistan for centuries. When they invaded India, the Indians took them for Mongols—in Hindi, Moghul. In reality, Timur Lang belonged to a Turkish tribe. He defeated the Mongols. An arrow pierced his leg in battle. *Lang*, the lame one.

Fritz Lang doesn't limp, but he's blind in one eye.

I've had enough of history and geography. I'm on vacation, after all. I reread *Around the World in Eighty Days*. “There was a great jostle of people” in the streets of Bombay. Passepartout sees Bunyas with round turbans and Sindes with square hats. According to the Larousse dictionary, the Bunyas belong to a caste of coal sellers... Sindes? The inhabitants of the Sind desert, which prevents me from going from Karachi to Bombay along the coast. Then he sees “Parsees or Guebres with black mitres, direct descendants of Zoroastrian sectarians, who are the most industrious, civilized, and intelligent of the Hindus.” I remembered the Parsee from Kipling's *Just So Stories*, who scattered crumbs of cake into the rhinoceros's skin, but I had forgotten those in *Around the World in Eighty Days*. When Phileas Fogg buys an elephant, he hires “a young Parsee with an intelligent face” as a *mahout* or elephant driver. The beautiful Mrs. Aouda, whom Phileas Fogg rescues just as she was about to be thrown on the funeral pyre of her old husband, is also a Parsee.

Now that I am discovering the vast world, I understand that Parsee means Persian. These “industrious Hindus” are related to the Zoroastrian sectarians who still live around Yazd. According to Mr. Larousse, the word *Guebre*, which designates the Zoroastrians, comes from a Persian word meaning “infidel.”

The director of the Alliance Française, Mr. Delorme, returns on Sunday evening. He invites me to dinner.

“I won't eat much. I'm a little sick.”

“I understand. I was too, at first... I arrived last September. I was a French teacher in Narbonne, but I was bored. Here, the germs are not the same as at home. People have progress to make in hygiene, too. You won't risk anything at my place: my cook washes his hands! Wait, I'll ask Ali to bring you some Enterovioform. I have a small pharmacy...”

“I looked for pharmacies in town but couldn't find any. Just apothecaries selling powders of all colors on the sidewalk.”

“I get my supplies from a hospital pharmacy. Did Ali open the library door for you?”

Hitchhiking

“Yes, thank you. He’s very kind.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, he lives at the back of the garden with his wife and eight children in a small house. The cook has even more children, I believe. The servants cost almost nothing. You get used to clapping your hands to get tea. I don’t know what I’ll do if I ever go back to Narbonne!”

“You’re not sure to go back?”

“At least not in the immediate future. There’s a lot of work here. They know almost nothing about France, but they want to learn.”

“Your wife stayed in Lahore.”

“I had to come back for tomorrow’s classes. She doesn’t teach until Wednesday. She’s lucky. Lahore is a beautiful city, a former capital of the Moghuls. Have you heard of the Shalimar garden?”

“That rings a bell.”

“Your mother may wear *Shalimar* by Guerlain! It’s the name of Shah Jahan’s favorite residence, whose garden is famous for its pools and fountains. Karachi is the only ugly city in this country. All the others existed when Alexander the Great came to stroll in the region. They have a soul. Whereas Karachi...”

“I was told the British built it in the nineteenth century.”

“It’s a city twice new. First, it’s an English colonial city. Then most of its inhabitants, who were Hindus, went away when Pakistan and India separated after independence. Muslims from various regions of India replaced them. This gives a very disparate population. They don’t all speak the same language.”

He is delighted to be able to exercise his vocation as a teacher with a student who understands everything he says. I know lots of things about Indian history, or at least I haven’t had time to forget them yet—the difference between the Mongols and the Moghuls, who Shah Jahan is, and so on. Mr. Delorme may be less bored in Karachi than in Narbonne, but he is very happy to meet a Frenchman from time to time. Ali the steward guessed this, that’s why he accepted so easily to host me in the garden.

After one last night on the rope bed, I have buttered toast with Mr. Delorme.

“Say, do I owe you anything for the medicine?”

“No, of course not! From what you told me, you’re not rich.”

“It’s okay, but I want to keep my money so I can get back from Bombay.”

“Above all, be sure to exchange your dollars in the street.”

“Yes, I know. Ten rupees for a dollar...”

“In India, you can get even more. At least twelve rupees.”

“There are a hundred paisa in a rupee, right?”

“Yes”

Hitchhiking

“Sometimes people talk about *pice* and *anna*. Look, I even have several one-anna coins.”

“Paisa are all new. Before, the rupee was worth sixteen anna, and there were four pice per anna. People confuse paisa and pice a bit, but paisa is worth less. This presents no difficulty for you, since you’re a whiz at math.”

“Math and mental calculation aren’t necessarily the same thing, but this one is simple. Basically, one paisa is worth two-thirds of a pice, and one pice is worth one and a half paisa.”

“So how many paisa do you put in an anna?”

“Well, six!”

“Ah, the unfathomable mystery of numbers... For a literary person like me, it’s fascinating!”

“People who complain about the switch from old francs to new ones should come here!”

The Sacred Cake

As I leave, I run into some students. The women wear a silk tunic, tight pants, and a long scarf. The men dress in Western clothes. They greet me by saying *Bonjour* with a heavy accent.

I arrive at the Indian consulate around nine o’clock. I’m told to come back at eleven. I take a walk around the neighborhood. I feel great. I hope the Enterovioform will prevent my illness from returning. I would still be very happy to find a toilet all of a sudden... My breakfast has made it all the way through without encountering any obstacles and it’s already on its way out. I look left and right. In Paris, I would go into a café... I check out a large cinema. Yes, that hut in the courtyard! I sneak into the courtyard. Come to think of it, I could enter the cinema from the back and watch the movie. Except I wouldn’t understand anything. If I want to see an English-language film, I can pay: a movie ticket costs twenty paisa, which is to say almost nothing.

As I exit the consulate with my visa in my pocket, I notice an orange juice seller. His hand touches the skin of the orange as he grabs it to cut it in half, but not the inside. He lowers a lever to squeeze the fruit... I don’t see any germs. It’s hot, and my illness has dehydrated me. My throat is on fire. I’m dying of thirst. This pulp-filled orange juice could save my life. Saint Enterovioform, protect me!

“How much?”

“Ten paisa.”

“One anna, okay?”

“Okay!”

Hitchhiking

I'm not saying I know Karachi like the back of my hand, but I easily find the McKenzie Packet offices. Just to enjoy their sublime bathrooms one last time!

Three days of fasting have weakened me. My legs fall into languor¹ like those in the fable of *The Members and the Stomach*.

"For hitchhiking, don't count on us," they say.

"All right, but at least take me to the train station..."

A train departs for Lahore tonight at seven. I'll be there tomorrow night. One thousand three hundred and ten kilometers. It's four o'clock. My legs don't want to leave the station. They point to the waiting room: "There, there!"

Useful information for when you go to India: You can no more hope to sit in a waiting room than in a third-class carriage. It only takes three families to occupy the three large benches that circle the room, as a typical family consists of the father, mother, and ten children. I lie down on the ground to rest, my head on my bag.

I don't travel lying down on the wagon's floor, but sitting in a corner on a big bundle tied up with string. Nobody tries to convert me to Islam. Tuesday morning, we cross Multan. I think of Anna and her pirate. I hope she lives in a big house, with servants who bring her tea when she claps her hands.

I like the Lahore train station. Smaller than the one in Karachi, almost intimate. The floor of the waiting room is less stained with betel spit. I've barely fallen asleep when someone shakes me.

"Hey, where are you from?"

"France. And you?"

"Australia. Have you eaten yet? The station buffet looks good to me."

"Ah, I'd love to. I thought I wouldn't eat because I was sick, but I feel my appetite has returned."

"Are you taking anything?"

"Enterovioform."

"Me too. I bought it in Madras. I was as fit as a fiddle in Malaysia. As soon as I set foot in India, I caught a severe case of dysentery. I've been feeling better for a week or so, but I'm still taking the pills."

We eat in the first-class buffet, and my companion recommends the tandoori chicken to me.

"It's the only thing that's not horribly spicy."

"What I really like is Chapati bread."

"You can't live on bread alone."

"You're right. I'll try your chicken."

It's a grilled chicken covered in red powder. Yummy!

¹ *Tombent en langueur*, from a La Fontaine fable inspired by Aesop.

Hitchhiking

“Are you going directly to Iran or passing through Afghanistan?”

“Through Afghanistan. I’m taking the train in two hours to Peshawar, where I’ll arrive tomorrow morning. Then, by bus: Khyber Pass, Kabul, Kandahar, Herat. My first city in Iran will be Mashhad.”

“Me, I went southward. I saw an extraordinary city: Isfahan.”

“I’ll take that route when I return to Australia.”

We exchange our good addresses.

“In Tehran, I recommend the university campus. Very friendly students put me up and fed me.”

“In Bombay, the best place is the YMCA. Well-located, clean, and not too expensive.”

“I spent one night at the YMCA in Istanbul, but then I found a more pleasant and cheaper place: the Birlik Hotel, next to the Blue Mosque.”

My knees grumble all night.

“What does that mean? You promised never to sleep on the ground again!”

“I didn’t promise anything. Stop rolling around in my joint, it hurts.”

“We are kneecaps, so we roll!”

I get up very early to escape their tyranny. I stretch my legs a bit. Apart from the knees, everything seems to be going well. I finally feel strong enough to walk!

The Shalimar garden isn’t open yet. Shall I wait two hours? Oh well, I’ll see it another time. Monsieur Delorme also told me about the imperial mosque, which is the largest in the world, and about the Red Fort. I’m so happy to be back on the road that I forget all that. A truck takes me to the border, about thirty kilometers from Lahore.

In the Indian police station, while an officer checks my visa and stamps my passport, I hear French being spoken. A man and two women.

“Bonjour. You’re from Lille, in a Mercedes...”

“Have we met before?”

“You passed me at full speed when I was a passenger in a Vauxhall. An Italian on a scooter told me about you.”

“My name is Robert. Let me introduce you to my daughters, Sylvie and Caroline.”

“I didn’t see your Mercedes.”

“I parked it behind the building. We’ll continue without it.”

“Is it broken down?”

“No, but they won’t let me drive with my French license.”

“They want ten dollars?”

“On the contrary. I managed to pass all the borders by giving a small tip, but this is the first time it doesn’t work. They’re asking for an international license.”

Hitchhiking

“You make this whole trip without an international license?”

“I didn’t know, when I left... I have custody of my daughters for the holidays, so I suggested we go see Venice and Florence. In Venice, we met a Yugoslavian family. They invited us to their home in Zagreb. Once we were in Yugoslavia, we wanted to visit Belgrade, the capital. There, we saw that we could easily go to Istanbul by crossing Bulgaria. And like that, step by step...”

“The same thing happened to me, starting from Istanbul.”

“We’re going to take the train to visit India. It’s better this way.”

“You’re tired of driving?”

“There are too many people on the roads, even outside the villages. I was lucky, I managed to get across Pakistan without hitting anyone!”

“I came by train from Karachi. You see thousands of peasants in the fields. They don’t have machines, but only those big black cows...”

“Those are called buffaloes!”

“Oh yes, how silly of me... Excuse me, I see that my private driver is ready to go. Bon voyage!”

“Bye.”

The truck driver stops in the first Indian village.

“Breakfast!”

“Okay.”

We enter a small house. There is no sign that says *Restaurant*. The owner does not give us a menu. The people who frequent this establishment cannot read, so it would be useless. Tables, chairs, are also useless. We sit on the floor, on a carpet. The owner brings us chapatis and a bowl containing pieces of meat bathing in a brown sauce. I imitate the truck driver: he tears off a quarter of the flatbread and uses it to pick up a piece of meat from the bowl.

Ouch! I can’t swallow that! The sauce is a concentrate of curry and chili. Even after eating two plain chapatis and drinking a liter of tea, I feel like a swarm of wasps is stinging my mouth and esophagus. The truck driver encourages me to try again. Oh no! One more milligram and I’ll faint... He finds me funny. The owner and he exchange words in their beautiful fluid language.

“He’s a foreigner. He doesn’t like curry.”

“One wonders what they eat in their country”

“They don’t chew betel either.”

“But they do! Americans chew a kind of white betel, which tastes like soap.”

“Is he American?”

“Americans are much taller than that. He comes from a country called Furan. I think it’s an island next to England.”

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“You don’t know anything... I’ve heard of that island, but its name is something like Irulan.”

“Did you notice? He has blue eyes.”

“The English often had blue eyes too. And even red hair.”

Towards the end of the morning, the truck driver drops me off in the middle of a city named Amritsar. I ask for directions from a taxi driver.

“Where is the road to Delhi?”

Here, taxis are not cars, but tricycles called *rickshaws*¹.

“You have visited Gold Temple?” the rickshaw-driver asks me.

“Why, no.”

“You can’t leave Amritsar without seeing. I take you, if you want.”

“Is it far from here? I can walk.”

“I not ask you to pay. Proud to show you sacred temple of our religion.”

“What’s your religion called?”

“I am Sikh. You see beard, turban? All Sikhs have beard and turban.”

I accept. I sit behind him on the bench. I’m embarrassed that someone is going to the trouble of transporting me, but I want to know more about these Sikhs. I thought some Indians chose to wear a beard and a turban in the same way that a Frenchman can wear a beard and a beret. I didn’t know about a religion of bearded and turbaned people.

“Do you never shave?”

“We are enemies of Muslims. Do not shave as long as a single Muslim in India². My name Singh. Means *lion*. All Sikhs called Singh.”

“That’s convenient.”

“Fighting like lions.”

“The purpose of your religion is to fight Muslims?”

“Our religion founded beginning of sixteenth century. India conquered by Mughals. The Indian people too divided, too many castes, to defend themselves. Guru Nanak, the founder of our religion, abolished the castes. All Sikhs equal. Even women equal to men.”

“Yes, but did you defeat the Mughals?”

“Defeated. Sikh warriors invincible. Eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we have great kingdom from Peshawar to Kashmir. The British stronger than us with their

¹ From the Japanese *rikisha*. The driver of a traditional *rikisha* is on foot, not on a bike, as one can see in the Gion neighborhood of Kyoto.

² I guess other Sikhs believe that reason for not shaving, but Wikipedia does not mention it. The Sikhs did fight the Mughals, who executed early Sikh gurus when they refused to convert to Islam. All (male) Sikhs wear a small symbolic knife in their turban.

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artillery. Then, the Sikhs elite troops in British army. We soldiers in the trenches during First World War. Look, here *Harimandir*, our Gold Temple...”

This little trip was not unpleasant at all. One gets used in no time to being served. I clap my hands, my rickshaw comes forward... It reminds me of the time when my brother Noël used to transport me on our scooter, pedaling for two¹.

We leave the rickshaw outside the enclosure and pass under the entrance arch. Wow... By the turban of Guru Nanak! A cube of white marble topped with golden domes rises in the middle of a huge square basin. A long footbridge connects it to the shore. What is moving is not so much the building, which looks like a big meringue floating on a lake of cream, but the fervor of the priests and the faithful. Turbans of all colors come and go on the bridge. Inside the temple, noble elders answer the questions whispered by visitors. According to my guide, these elders are not priests, but very wise old men called *babas*. Their beard is as white as their robe. More than white: almost luminous, as if it radiated the sublime clarity of their soul. Diaphanous melodies and incense vapors rise lazily toward the sky. A baba offers me a holy pastry—which looks like the temple, only smaller and without cream. A welcome offer, as it’s lunchtime. Strange taste. Sort of dusty. I don’t want to offend my private rickshaw driver, so I keep my opinion to myself.

“It’s delicious. I have a little stomach ache. A holy cake should do me good.”

“You see, four sides of temple, four doors. Open to all. No matter caste, religion, country. The water is called *amrit-sar*, which means basin of nectar.”

“In what language?”

“Our language: Punjabi. Now, I take you to Delhi road.”

He drops me off at the city’s exit. Since I am satisfied with his services, I give him a rupee after all. To hell with stinginess!

Monsoon

What am I saying, the outskirts of the city? From the last suburb to the first village, there may be twelve meters. The villages follow one another along the main road like the beads of a rosary. An Indian village looks like a French village in which each family would have ten children. The drivers of the cars and trucks that carry me exhaust themselves honking, revving their engines, and shouting insults. The villagers, their children, and their large black buffaloes stand placidly in the middle of the road with their hands in their pockets. “I am on my own turf. Why should I move aside?” they ask. Between two villages, we do not advance much faster: an incessant procession of pedestrians, cyclists, and ox carts clogs the road. Another reason for my slow progress

¹ See *No accent*.

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is the drivers' lack of ambition. Ten kilometers is the end of the world for them. They are not stupid: when they need to go to Delhi, they take the train.

"I am going to Jandiala."

"It is far?"

"Fifth village!"

It has been raining for a while. The meadows we cross between the villages are lush green, sometimes flooded. The road is elevated. The buffaloes wallow in the gray water. We pass a hill that thousands of small waterfalls cascade down like a slide.

"It's raining a lot."

"Monsoon!"

The monsoon... A word I knew, like *Isfahan* or *mango*, without having a clear idea of what it represented. Now I know. It is not a stupid and stubborn rain like the one I encountered on the Black Sea coast, but a grandiose, generous, necessary rain that is part of the landscape. Like the buffaloes, it feels at home. "You're not going to complain, are you?" it says. "If I didn't come back every year, you'd be in trouble!"

A truck driver stops at an inn on the outskirts of a village. The landlady serves us tea. The innkeeper's daughter, a girl of about twelve, looks at me curiously. The truck driver smiles.

"Do you want to marry him? You would go to live abroad. It's so cold in his country that they wear animal skins."

He explains to me, by gestures, that he wants to arrange my marriage with the young lady.

"She's pretty, isn't she? She knows how to cook and do laundry. Will you take her with you?"

"I would rather stay here. I could work in the inn..."

The truck driver and the landlady find the idea very funny. I try to imagine a life of bucolic happiness in the Indian state of Punjab. I could forget calculus and Maxwell's equations. I would learn to speak, uh—Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi? We would have ten children.

While the truck driver tries to convince the landlady to buy one of the kerosene lamps he is carrying in his truck, I write a letter.

Dr. and Mrs. Greif, *Résidence de la Pinède, Fréjus-Plage*

"My dear parents,

"I am pleased to announce that I have just married and now live in Phagwara, Great Trunk Road No. 6. My wife, Savita, is twelve years old. Too young? Here, she is practically considered an old maid. That's because no one wanted her. First, her mother is a widow, which is very frowned upon. Secondly, she does not belong to a good caste. Therefore, I was able to get her at a low price: I offered her mother a buffalo that cost

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me only fifty dollars. Like Phileas Fogg rescuing beautiful Mrs. Aouda, I arrive and save Savita from dishonor, for which she will be eternally grateful.

“My mother-in-law runs a small inn. That’s where I live and work. I’m continuing the family tradition, since Grandpa Greif was an innkeeper in Poland. I intend to produce buffalo milk Camembert that will impress the locals. In any case, it will give me something to eat with my bread, because otherwise the food is a bit too spicy for me.

“I lead a simple life. I do very well without electricity, telephone, television, newspapers, métro, or clocks. Customers, driven by curiosity, come from far away to see me. I’m learning Punjabi, which is the local language, so I can answer their questions. The vocabulary and pronunciation are easy, but the grammar is delicate. What’s annoying is that six villages from here, they already speak another language called Jatki. I also plan to learn the alphabet. My dear Savita and her mother can’t help me because they can’t read.

“*Churu jhunjhunu fatehpur!* (It means: See you soon).”

The truck driver has sold his lamp.

“We go!”

“Okay.”

I regret leaving. I could have stopped for at least a day or two, like Andrew in the village of Zeynalabad. Lycée Louis-le-Grand is calling me... Electricity, television, métro.

I’m afraid of being late for school. The truck driver (not the same one) drops me off around seven o’clock in the city of Ludhiana. Instead of looking for a hotel, I study the schedule of night trains. If I take the "Mail Express" at ten o’clock, I’ll be in Delhi tomorrow morning at six o’clock. LDH to DLI, Km 312, Rs 8.05. I gain at least a day compared to hitchhiking.

In the meantime, a small dinner won’t hurt me. I enter a restaurant called "Kwality." I find the name reassuring. I’ve already seen Kwality restaurants in Karachi. Always very white, they look almost clean. I study the menu. The boy has a beard and a turban. Now I know what that means: he’ll shave as soon as the last Muslim leaves India.

“You don’t you have tandoori chicken?”

“Sorry, Sir.”

I’d rather he said *Sahib*, like in Tintin.

“Excuse me, but is the four-rupee steak a steak?”

“Yes, sir, it’s a steak.”

“Isn’t it spicy?”

“A little, sir.”

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“All right, I’ll take it.”

He brings me a steak that looks great. My mouth waters. I haven’t eaten much since I entered Pakistan ten days ago. I’m hungry!

Aargh... I haven’t been so disappointed since the day Santa Claus came to our house. When he asked if we had been good, I noticed that he spoke with the Polish accent of Dr. Rosen, a friend of my father’s. On closer inspection, I saw that he was wearing a cotton wool beard. Fake beard! Fake steak! A skilled sculptor gave a faux-filet appearance to a minced beef patty. A plain steak would have no taste, of course. They have to put it through a grinder to mix it with chili extract. Fire! Fire! My tongue is burning!

“Excuse me...”

“Yes, Sir? Is the steak not to your liking?”

“Too spicy. I’m giving it back to you.”

“Really? I’m sorry.”

He doesn’t seem sorry at all. He thinks I’m crazy. Strange: Sikhs roll their beards under their chins. How does it stay up?

“Could I have some chapati and a Coca-Cola?”

“We have Kwality Kola, Sir.”

“Okay.”

I fear the worst... Phew! There’s no chili in the Kwality Kola. It vaguely reminds me of Coca-Cola, but much sweeter.

That bite of meat cost me dearly. Quality comes at a price... When I crossed the border, I exchanged the last Quetta rupees for Indian rupees. I have almost none left. The first thing to do tomorrow morning in Delhi is to change money.

Seeing families of ten children on the platform, I imagine another night in a third-class carriage. Last time, between Karachi and Lahore, I was unmoored by dysentery. Ready to accept my fate, to expiate the crimes committed in my previous lives. Since then, I’ve regained my strength. Lie down amidst spit? You’ll see what you’ll see! I look at the Indians crowded around me on the platform. I’m different from them: a foreigner who doesn’t understand anything. I won’t choose first class, so as not to push the envelope too far, but let’s say second class. I’ll be comfy at least until the conductor arrives. Then I’ll look at that dignified official with big empty eyes... I’ll speak French... Passengers will take pity on me and come to my aid. I’ll improvise...

While I’m building castles in Nepal¹, the big black locomotive enters the station and advances along the platform, blowing like a buffalo. I examine the wagons that pass in

¹ A play on *castles in Spain*, which is the way we say *castles in the air* in French.

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front of me. Due to lack of habit, I can't distinguish the classes and subclasses very well. Is this second or second and a half?

Hey, but that green wagon there... No one at the windows. No lights. Empty! I immediately give up my flawed plan. As I no longer understand English, I ignore the sign hanging on its sides: *Military Car—Not For Civilian Passengers*. I must have done lots of good deeds in my past lives. The proof is that Vishnu doesn't send me a simple military wagon, but a sleeping car! I lie down voluptuously on a khaki¹ mattress. If soldiers climb aboard at the next station, I'll utter the magic words: *Je suis français! Général de Gaulle! Brigitte Bardot!*

Are civilians who dare to travel in military wagons shot immediately? Sentenced to twenty years in prison? Since the conductor knows that no one will dare, he doesn't bother to inspect the wagon. Or maybe he enters the compartment on tiptoe and, seeing me peacefully asleep, refrains from waking me out of delicacy.

In Delhi, I take a look at the station square. The crowd is so dense that it would take me at least an hour to cross the forecourt. Since I discovered the first Pakistani village, the bubbling overflowing life of Indian people fascinates and exhausts me. It's a jitterbug in my head. Women in tunics or saris, lines of children, bearded men, cyclists, rickshaw pullers, buffaloes, all run in all directions. I don't feel like accelerating their crazy round by fishing for impressions in the streets of Delhi. I'll soak up the frenzy of a giant city when I wait for the boat in Bombay. And damnit, the rain bothers me.

In any case, the simplest way to get out of a city as big as Delhi is to take the train to a smaller city. Agra, for example. I deliberate, I submit the decision to a vote... Adopted unanimously!

Before going back to the station to buy my ticket, I need to buy some money. "Change in the street," they say. In Istanbul and Tehran, it was done in the bazaar. Here, I'm not too sure. Well, it's very simple: just stand in front of the station entrance for two minutes.

"Exchange money, sir?"

"How much do you give me for ten dollars?"

"Ten? One hundred and thirty rupees."

"Someone offered me one hundred and sixty earlier."

"You should have accepted."

After some tough negotiations, I get one hundred and forty rupees. We're both very happy. Now I have to be careful not to attract another money changer's attention, because he would offer me one hundred and fifty rupees and I would lose my good mood.

¹ I looked in the dictionary : while kaki is a Japanese fruit, khaki is an Indian color,.

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For the modest sum of Rs 4.66, or about one franc, I buy a ticket DLI to AGR, Km 197.

The Ghost of Mumtaz Mahal

This time, I decide to try and see what happens. I get on the eight o'clock Mail Express and sit in second class.

Jiminy Cricket! While the train hasn't even left the station, the conductor is already asking for tickets. He gets angry when he sees mine.

"Third class! Third class!"

"It is a third-class ticket? Are you sure? Where does it say that?"

"Here! Joke not with me."

"Ah, of course, if you write three in the Sanskrit alphabet... I'm sorry... It's a misunderstanding."

"Not misunderstanding. Next station, move third class!"

Just then, we stop already. You can't move from one carriage to another, so I get off on the platform to get on a third-class carriage. I just make it. A little more and I would have been traveling hanging on the outside. I'm standing, compressed by my neighbors like a sardine in the subway. I've already endured these conditions for twenty minutes between Châtelet and Porte de Vincennes, but I think I'm going to beat that record today, and by far.

But no. After just five short minutes, the train stops at a new station and everyone gets off. Passengers can't go all the way to the ends of the carriage, so they get off through the windows. At the same time, newbies enter the same way. During this cross-over, seats become available. Those closest to them immediately take them. Easy does it: I just have to use my subway experience. I move closer to a bench, hoping that someone will get up at the next station...

It works. Seated. Good. Except that I'm wondering about this so-called *Mail Express* that stops every five minutes. I should have studied the display board at the Delhi station. Maybe all trains are called *Mail Express*. It brings mail to villages...

Those who get off rush to the window, those who get on try to push them back. Hey, man, be careful! Slowly! Ah, the brutes... I'm afraid of being crushed, flattened, trampled, crushed, torn apart, dismembered, expelled. They'll talk about me in the newspaper: *Stampede on a train near Delhi. 532 dead.*

I get off at the next important station and I wait for a faster train? Assuming there are important stations and fast trains. For now, I only see villages. Maybe this is not even the main line. I'd better accept my fate and look on the bright side. As the Indian proverb goes: *The wise man is not troubled by what happens today, for he thinks of Eternity.* Well, I'm going to invent some Indian proverbs to pass the time.

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If you don't want to see the confusion of the world, close your eyes.

Instead of complaining about the rudeness of others, the sage strives to be less rude than them.

Look at the monkey: although he has no pockets, he doesn't look unhappy.

I imagine that lots of monkeys, elephants and tigers populate Indian proverbs. In any case, there are monkeys in the villages. I didn't see any on the road because they gather on the train platform. They have contests of grimaces and acrobatics so that passengers on the train throw them treats. The passengers don't throw them coins, since they have no pockets.

Some passengers throw coins to beggars. They have no pockets either, for the simple reason that they are stark naked. My neighbors enlighten me:

"They *naga saddhu*."

"Give up everything."

"No family, no home."

"Worship Vishnu."

"Last year, big fight with naga who worship Shiva."

They seem to me more naked, more hairy and less fun than the monkeys. With their big black beard, they remind me of the Pakistani pirate. They are somewhat frightening. They seem to consider alms as due to them. Don't expect them to thank you with a somersault or two.

The coming and going of passengers gradually calms down. The distance between villages seems to be increasing. I'm not saying that the wagon is empty, but people can at least sit on the ground. I am able to see a mother sitting in front of me, traveling with two of her children. The other ten are in the fields. For luggage, she carries a paper bag filled with candy of all colors no bigger than pinheads. She gives them to her children to keep them quiet and to the monkeys to entertain her children. As for me, I'm not going to beg for candy like a monkey. I have to try to think of something else. *The wise man prefers the effluvia of the hereafter to earthly nourishment*. Too late... she saw my hungry look and hands me the bag. Thank you, ma'am!

A thousand million thundering typhoons! They give their children sugar-coated chili peppers! I should have known: to fireproof their palates, they must start the work from their earliest childhood. What's horrible is that I can't soothe the burn with chapati and Kwality Kola.

We arrive in Agra around eight in the evening. If you want to brave the downpour and darkness in search of a hotel and restaurant, go ahead. As for me, I dine in the station buffet and sleep in the waiting room. Once bitten, twice shy: I discuss at length with the boy before ordering a half portion of the least spicy dish on the menu and three

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chapatis. My kneecaps, resigned to their sad fate, stop complaining. I dream that the train controller gives me a big package of candy, but a monkey comes and steals them from me.

Hallelujah! When I stick my nose out at daybreak, I discover that it's not raining. The monsoon has glitches. Maybe it's taking a little break to go pee. I hurry to the Taj Mahal. I avoid looking at the heavy clouds that threaten to fall on my head, but I can't help seeing their leaden reflection in the puddles.

This is the Taj Mahal? It looks like the Sacré-Cœur!¹ All that's missing is the Montmartre funicular and urchins. I don't like tombs anyway.

Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan sleep together under the great dome. Shah Jahan has a heavy sleep, but Mumtaz Mahal's ghost enjoys talking to solitary walkers. I find her looking a little down.

"Getting bored in there?"

"During the monsoon, what would you expect, the place is pretty empty. At seven in the morning, besides... You should come back in spring or fall. Few ghosts see as many people as I do!"

She's very kind, but still a little too dead. I find her house sinister. If I have to marvel at a marble pastry, I prefer the Golden Temple of Amritsar—less impressive but more lively, with its ballet of bearded babas.

The cycle-rickshaw drivers chewing betel at the entrance of the garden are surprised to see a tourist.

"You American?"

"The Americans are not that stupid. I'm a poor idiot wandering around India during the monsoon."

"Better come in spring or fall."

"Many American tourists March and November."

"They lend camera to us to photograph them in front Taj Mahal!"

"Sir, you like Taj Mahal?"

"Of course."

"Mumtaz Mahal died when give birth to fourteenth child. Shah Jahan so sad that his hair turns white in single night."

While I'm at it, I ask them to show me the way to Bombay.

"You go Bombay?"

"Yes, but not by train. I don't want the station. I want to walk there."

"Very far... First, go Gwalior."

"Okay. So the road to Gwalior."

¹ The ugliest church in Paris, built to atone for the sins of the 1871 *Commune* revolutionaries on top of the highest hill, where everybody can see it.

Hitchhiking

“Behind post office.”

“And the post office, where is it?”

“After Oberoi hotel.”

“Here is Red Fort. Built by Shah Akbar, grandfather of Shah Jahan.”

“I find it rather brown, don’t you?”

I saw the red fort of Delhi yesterday from the train. It was redder. I should have brought some colored pencils and drawn all this. This trip is really poorly planned.

The wallet on the road

Another hitchhiker. Already the second since Istanbul.

“Are you English?”

“French. Jean-Jacques. And you?”

“German. Erich. Terrible weather...”

“The rain did stop for a while earlier.”

“The rain in three months will stop. With such shower, amazing people manage to stay so dirty.”

He looks like the Germans who win all the medals at the Olympic games: tall, blond, muscular. He speaks English with athletic stiffness. I guess I’ll find his conversation heavy and his jokes indigestible after thirty-seven and a half seconds. Well, nice meeting you, goodbye and see you soon.

I’m going to walk and sing in the rain, it will remind me of the Mimizan summer camp.

The pretty morning, all full of light,

The pretty morning gets us going.

Whether it rains or blows,

We always sing...

What’s annoying is that he doesn’t let me go. Too happy to have found someone to talk to.

“I see you are real sage. Your bag... The right size. Above all, you don’t wear a watch.”

“I never wear a watch, even in Paris.”

“The Indians always your arm they grab: *What brand your watch?* Grab, pull towards them to see better, never ask you first. They think honor you by admiring your watch. If you meet one who don’t touch your arm, it’s not he just more polite, it’s you disgust them. A Brahmin. Can’t touch us. We’re impure. Outcast.”

“Untouchable...”

“Can’t even drink same water as us.”

“It’s your fault, too. You have too beautiful a watch. By the way, what time is it?”

Hitchhiking

“Eight twenty. Next person who grabs my wrist and asks, *What brand your watch?* I knock them out. Bought it in Singapore. Still very happy to travel when I am there. In America, perfect. In Australia too. India, first country I can’t stand.”

“Are you traveling around the world?”

“In Bombay, I take plane and go back Frankfurt. They disgust me with their red spitting. Are too many of them.”

“Yesterday, I traveled by train. There were so many people that they were coming in and out through the windows. One thing that surprised me was the naked beggars in the stations. Have you seen them?”

“*Naga sadhus?* Of course. I’m in India three months. They take vow of poverty and chastity like monks. I don’t know if they observe vows better than our monks. They have bad reputation.”

“I heard that they fight among themselves, the worshippers of Vishnu and Shiva.”

“Yes, despite vow of non-violence. Move around in groups. Gather for big religious festivals. Fight over who will bathe first in Ganges, that kind of thing. They go into trance and don’t know what they doing. Maybe they drank bad alcohol. Also the Jain religion ascetics naked. They just have feather duster to sweep ground in front of them, to avoid stepping on ants by mistake. Never wash: afraid of drowning their lice. This country is big madhouse. I can’t wait to be on the plane!”

A brand new Ambassador, driven by a chauffeur, stops next to us. The man sitting in the back seat lowers the window and sticks his head out. He’s wearing the type of small-collar jacket made fashionable by Nehru.

“Where do you want to go, gentlemen?”

“To Bombay.”

“To start with, Gwalior.”

“I can take you to Dholpur, forty miles from here. You’ll be halfway to Gwalior.”

“That’s fine with us.”

“Thank you very much!”

Confirming the impression I had on the train, the villages are further apart than in the Delhi area. Nevertheless, we are moving very slowly. The road is as narrow and humped as the back of a python. Passing a poor buffalo cart is a big deal. When a truck comes in the opposite direction, it holds the middle of the road while honking arrogantly: “Fat ones get right of way, fat ones get right of way!” We have to park on the side of the road, hoping we won’t slip into the rice paddies. From time to time, we see the rusted corpse of a truck, victim of a duel between the fat ones that went wrong. The man in the Nehru jacket winces.

Hitchhiking

“We’re not even capable of renovating the road and railway networks the British left us. How do you expect our country to modernize? I lose a lot of merchandise in truck accidents.”

“What kind of merchandise?”

“I run a factory... Look at the sign on the house.”

“Mangola?”

“Mangola by Singh. Mangola is a mango drink. Singh, that’s me.”

“Singh, isn’t it the name of the Sikhs?”

“It means lion. Anyone can be called Lion. In your country, there are people called Lion who are not Sikhs.”

“My father! His name is Léon.”

We cross the town of Dholpur around noon. Mr. Singh invites us to his house.

“Just after Dholpur, we turn off the road to go to my village. It’s not far. I can show you my factory, if you’re interested, and then we’ll have lunch at my house.”

Between the time he says “Here’s my village, Bandikui” and the time we enter the courtyard of the factory, there’s a good twenty minutes.

“It’s a big village.”

“My village is of medium size. Two hundred thousand inhabitants.”

“At least you have electricity in the factory.”

“It’s necessary to operate the big automatic bottling machine. And also this machine, which washes dirty bottles.”

“Are the bottles refundable?”

“Of course. Five paisa. Here, the mango juice barrels... The carbon dioxide cylinders... The caps...”

In Mimizan, we used to visit a similar factory. I found it even more boring than the visit to the potter’s. The only good moment was at the end, when they offered us a bottle of soda.

Mr. Singh pulls a bottle opener out of his pocket.

“I always carry a bottle opener with me! You’ll taste Mangola...”

“Very good!”

“Excellent. One can taste the mango flavor.”

“We sell it all over Uttar Pradesh. Did you stay at the Oberoi Hotel in Agra?”

“Uh... In any case, I saw it this morning.”

“They serve Mangola at the Oberoi Hotel bar... Now, my driver will take you to my house. I have to take care of one or two things, then I’ll join you. You may want to take a shower while waiting for lunch. See you later.”

Hitchhiking

His house is kind of half-way between a Dak Bungalow and the Taj Mahal. The manner he said *my village* and *my factory*, I could have guessed that Mr. Singh was as rich as the Marquis de Carrabas¹. The driver hands us over to the palace steward.

“Welcome, gentlemen. The master called me to announce your arrival. I have prepared two rooms so that you can rest.”

A room with a bathroom each... This is what I call living like a Maharajah! It’s time for me to take a shower, actually. The last time was on Monday morning at the Alliance Française in Karachi. It’s Friday. I slept twice on the train and twice in a train station waiting room. Wow! I find a rose-scented soap in my bathroom. The soap that has been traveling in my bag since Istanbul is only a shadow of itself. By washing my shirts, the poor thing has become even thinner than me. The house has electricity, like the factory, so I can also shave.

We occupy only a small corner of a huge table in a cavernous dining room. I imagine a family reunion: Mr. Singh’s twelve children, his eleven brothers and sisters accompanied by their spouses and their twelve children...

Three servants, one for each person, bring us a vegetarian meal: rice with vegetables and almonds. I was afraid I would have to drink Mangola. We are served a kind of salty fermented milk that I find much more refreshing. The vegetables look friendly, but I remember a science fiction movie in which vegetables eat people. I taste cautiously... The sauce is mildly spicy and fragrant rather than really spicy. It’s good.

I savor every moment of my stay in India. I will remember my lunch at Mr. Singh’s house for the rest of my life, as well as everything else. To engrave the impressions in my memory, I concentrate my attention and keep my senses alert. Is it due to excessive exaltation? It seems to me that I am discovering the taste of rice. That is, for the first time in my life, I am eating rice that has flavor.

“This rice is delicious.”

“We call it basmati, which means *fragrant*². It’s the most expensive rice, the kind that the Rajahs and Emperors ate. To enhance its flavor, it must be stored for a year or two before eating.”

“Like wine!”

“There are many varieties. The Indus Valley in Pakistan and the Punjab produce the finest rice.”

“The Indus is your Bordeaux, the Punjab your Burgundy!”

The driver drops us off on the road to Gwalior. Erich has trouble digesting his basmati rice.

¹ The name that Charles Perrault’s *Puss in boots* invents for his master.

² Today, you can find Basmati rice in any supermarket. Not so in 1963. There were no supermarkets, actually.

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“I had heard of this rice, but never eaten. Dirty pig lives like prince in the midst of villagers who have nothing. They don’t earn enough money in entire life to buy a kilogram of this rice.”

“In Paris, there are posters in the street. *Great conference at Salle Pleyel with a film screening in color: India, land of contrasts*. The following week it’s *Brazil, land of contrasts*.”

“It doesn’t bother him to be served by servants. Eating until stomach bursts, while others dying of hunger.”

“You can’t blame him for that. We don’t care either. We eat whatever we want in Europe without worrying about people living in poverty in Africa or Asia. There are even people who are hungry in our countries.”

“He despises them. Lower castes. They all hate each other. Village is divided into caste neighborhoods, like ghettos. His Mangolola not better than donkey piss.”

“Don’t exaggerate. It does have a mango flavor.”

A Mercedes truck takes us to Gwalior. When it reaches the city, the road follows a hundred-meter-high cliff, at the top of which kilometers of red fortifications can be seen. The wall looks sturdy, worthy of Vauban¹, yet its shape is not rigid. Ornate turrets give it a sort of oriental and tropical sensuality.

“Old city,” the driver says. “Biggest fortress in India. Capital of Maratha empire.”

“Maratha?”

“They great warriors. Defeated the Moghuls.”

Make up your mind. Who defeated the Moghuls? The Sikhs or the Marathas? Looking at their stronghold, one can say these Marathas were no weaklings, so they could beat the Moghuls². But then the English got the last word.

Towards the end of the afternoon, we hit the jackpot: a Leyland truck going to Bombay, more than six hundred and fifty miles away. Indians believe that buying a truck is pointless if it remains in its original state. They entrust it to artists belonging to the ancient caste of coachbuilders. These people, after decorating palanquins³ and caparisoning elephants for centuries, switched to trucks. They add carved and scalloped wooden structures to the cabin, as garish as Hindu temples, sheltering grinning Vishnus and Krishnas. They embed small mirrors and fake pearls in the doors to make them shine brightly. They hide Ganesh gods in the corners for luck. Someone should compare

¹ A great late 17th century French builder. His fortifications can be seen around many French cities, for example Besançon in the Jura mountains.

² They did, around 1750. Their leader was a woman at the time.

³ A Hindi word: *palaki*.

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accident statistics to determine once and for all who gives better protection: Ganesh or Saint-Christopher.

Our Leyland's cabin has been completely reshaped. It's almost as big as Mr. Singh's dining room. It has two benches, like an American car, except that the space between them is about three feet wide. At the very back, there's still room for an alcove containing a bunk. Three people are sitting on the first bench: the main driver, a backup driver, a Sikh mechanic. I'm sitting with Erich on the second bench, but I hope to try the bunk later on.

For now, we stop at an inn for dinner. I'll just take plain chapati, thank you. No, no dipping, doctor's orders.

The best thing I discovered during this trip, after the blue mosques of Isfahan, is chapati. I can't get enough of them. These flatbreads are even more delicious when the innkeepers prepare them on-site rather than ordering them from some unknown industrial bakery. I could survive in India, eventually, by eating tandoori chicken, basmati rice, chapati, and mangoes.

The innkeeper brings the truck drivers a bottle without a label containing a colorless liquid. They drink from the bottle, wince, exhale as if they were going to spit flames, snicker. They offer us the bottle: "Taste this little tonic, you guys!" I refuse politely. Not only do I never drink alcohol, but I also think of the moonshine that drives people insane. Nonviolent ascetics become bloodthirsty demons and kill each other with bare hands! I'm not afraid of offending anyone. Just assume I'm a Muslim.

Erich drinks without hesitation.

"It's not bad. Tastes like Schnapps."

"If you like it, I give you my share."

We set off into the night.

"Say, gentlemen, the bunk... I see that nobody... Do you think I could..."

"Okay, okay, you can!"

No need to tell me twice. I spread out on the bunk like a chapati on a pan. Aah... More comfortable than the floor of the waiting room where I slept last night. This truck goes all the way to Bombay. The train station waiting rooms, nevermore (quoth the raven)! I don't sleep for long. Anna wakes me up by caressing my cheek. She gives me a huge red wallet. "I have dollars, but you have to change them on the street. The dentists sitting under the plane trees exchange them for teeth." Hey, it's Blackbeard driving, yet he said he didn't have his license. Suddenly, he starts screaming: "You're not allowed to kiss my wife! You're not Aryan! Stop! Stop!" The truck stops with a loud screech...

Huh? Where? Who shouted "Stop?" I hear grunts. I see silhouettes in the darkness... Erich is fighting with the Sikh mechanic!

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I guess what happened: the Sikh took his arm to look at the brand of his watch. Erich did say he would knock out the next person. But no, that doesn't make sense. In the dark.

"Know nothing," the Sikh says.

"You know damn well!" Erich yells. "Open door! Open door!"

He gets off on the road. He illuminates the road with a flashlight. He's better equipped than me. I should have bought one in the bazaar in Isfahan. Then the batteries run out just when you need them... I see the little light moving away in the night.

He comes back. He brandishes something. Oh, a wallet. He saw a wallet on the road and made the truck stop. That's what I call having a sharp eye.

"You see, I found it!"

"So?"

"You made me drink on purpose!"

"No one forced you drink. Your friend not drink. You not hold alcohol..."

"You made me drink to steal my wallet. When see I wake up, you throw out the window."

"Didn't throw. You throw!"

"I throw it? And why?"

"To make trouble. You drunk. Accuse us. Say we thieves."

"Well, yes, I'm saying it. You're thieves!"

"Not possible. Me Sikh. Sikh not possible be thief."

"Tell that to the police. I wonder if they find the argument convincing. You're dishonoring the Sikh people."

I find this affair very strange. My mind is all tangled up. I can't decide who's right. The Indians steal the wallet? Not so stupid. Erich notices before the end of the trip and reports them to the police. Rather borrow it, carried away by their insatiable curiosity, to examine its contents. A wad of twenty ten-dollar bills. One or two bills less, who will notice the difference? Just put the wallet back in Erich's pocket. On the plane, he counts his money. Twenty dollars are missing! Too late...

Or the alcohol that drives one mad. In his delirium, fueled by a rancid surge of repressed resentment, he believes he's being robbed. He feels his jacket... The wallet is there. Ah, they're clever! After emptying it, those vampires slipped it back into his pocket... He takes it out. No need to open it, so obvious! He rushes at the Sikh, who doesn't understand anything and defends himself as best he can. In the scuffle, the wallet flies out the window.

The three Indians make a vehement defense in their language. Either they pity the foreigner because of his madness, or they feel a little guilty despite everything: they decide not to abandon him on a deserted road in the middle of the night.

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“You get off next town.”

Erich grumbles in his beard. I can't make out what he's saying, but it seems to me that the general gist of his speech is like what you'd find in a German translation of Tintin: “Gherkins! Colocynths! Pirates! Squirrel monkeys! Waffle irons! Ectoplasms! Logarithms!”

Me, I refrain from taking sides. I don't yell. Get off and sleep in a waiting room? I prefer my bunk. Yeah, well, sleep is fleeing from me now. Stay alone in the truck? Oh, I don't feel like supporting this dirty Kraut. Should we maybe stick together because we're both Europeans? Because we both belong to the glorious white race? Whereas his parents invented the Aryan race, which was supposed to rule the world, and the Jewish race, which was supposed to disappear. Let him go! Good riddance... I'll have the bunk all to myself. What prevents me from sleeping is a shadow of a suspicion of worry. Three against one. If they want to steal my precious dollars, it'll be easy. Goldilocks and the three bears. A thief, a rapist, and a murderer. They can throw me in the ditch, for instance. No one will know. I hurt myself falling. Attracted by the blood, tigers devour me before dawn. In *Le Figaro's* obituary: *Dr. and Mrs. Greif regret to announce the accidental disappearance of their son Jean-Jacques...* Their friends:

“What exactly did your son die of?”

“Devoured by a tiger!”

No one will believe them, or people will just laugh.

Erich gets off around two in the morning in a town called Guna.

“You stay in truck?”

“Why not? I have nothing to reproach them.”

“So far! The night is not over.”

“Exactly. I'm going back to sleep... *Bon voyage!*”

As soon as he's gone, I sleep on my two ears¹ and on my money. I mean, on my bag, which serves as a pillow. Nobody bothers me. I stunned the truck drivers by parting ways with my companion. If I don't fear them, it's because I know I'm protected by Vishnu, so it would be pointless to attack me.

Shortly after daybreak, things take a turn for the worse. The truck pulls over by the side of the road and the three mahouts go to the toilet in the fields. Say, is there no other way? I'm not used to it... In front of everyone! They crouch down two steps away from the truck to spend as little time as possible in the rain. I go very far, on the contrary. I hide behind the shower curtain. You can leave without me, I don't care. I brought my bag—let's not tempt fate. They wait for me patiently. I amuse them with my Brahmin modesty. I remind them of the strange characters one sees in American movies.

¹ *Je dors sur mes deux oreilles.* I sleep soundly.

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A road sign announces: Tropic of Cancer. Since we're heading south, I could arrive at a place where I won't have any shadow at all at noon, except that I haven't had any shadow for a long time due to the monsoon. We spend most of the day in traffic jams in Indore, a city stupidly installed across our path. Who would want to live in Indore, I ask you. Well, millions of people.

Towards the end of the afternoon, the driver of a sick truck signals to us frantically. His son, a twelve-year-old boy, is by his side. They have unusual faces: skin lighter than that of other Indians, curly hair the color of rust. Their truck is tilted on the side of the road, ready to tip over into the field, the hood open, the entrails partially torn out. Our drivers get out to take a look. The Sikh mechanic examines the patient superficially, then announces his diagnosis to the redhead in a mournful tone.

"When you forget to check the oil level, you end up throwing a rod! What can I tell you..."

"I checked it again this morning. It's the boss's fault. He buys recycled oil."

"At the first garage, we'll ask them to send you a tow truck. It can't be fixed like that. You'll be here for at least three days."

We leave. The three men snicker. They try to enlighten me.

"From Border!"

"What border?"

"Border! Border!"

They vaguely point north. If it's the border with Pakistan, I come from there and I haven't seen any redheads. At the border with Tibet, people look more Chinese, I imagine. I'm searching for other borders in my mind. Nepal? Burma? As David Modigliani used to say: India, there's always a mystery... We drive through the night again. We arrive in Bombay in the middle of the afternoon. Sunday, August 11. I have spent forty-eight hours in this truck.

The ski instructor

Recipe to recreate a street in Bombay. Take *Rue de Rivoli* or Oxford Street. Remove the cars. Entangle tall black bicycles, bike rickshaws, and hand carts. Add a few vans, in the back of which you cram twenty-five people or three hundred bales of cotton. Hang human clusters outside trams and buses. Scatter thousands of pedestrians walking briskly in all directions while barely avoiding collisions. Place vendors of orange juice, pineapple slices, mango, guava, papaya, banana, tea, betel, and single cigarettes on the roadside. Mark off areas on the sidewalk where you station large families, with the eldest members taking turns to hold the spot day and night. Take a hundred thousand children belonging to the beggar caste. Cut off one or two of their hands, blind them, to arouse pity and have them earn their five paisa a day.

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Certain sections of the sidewalk are protected by canopies or arcades (yes, like *Rue de Rivoli*), so that you can stroll under shelter from the rain. I see banks, insurance companies, a post office. A bookstore where I might find a map of India, but I don't need one anymore. A cinema where a long line of people wait in the rain to see a new American film, *James Bond against Dr. No*. Ah, an Air India office. I walk in to inquire.

"Good afternoon, miss."

"Good afternoon, sir."

"I'm French. I hitchhiked here from Istanbul."

"Really? Is that possible?"

"Where there's a will, there's a way. Now, I want to go back to France. I have two hundred eighty dollars. Is that enough?"

"Let me check my book. No, I'm sorry. You need more than four hundred dollars."

"But tell me, with my two hundred eighty dollars, where can I fly to?"

"I'll check. I've never been asked this before..."

"Ankara, for example?"

"Three hundred twenty dollars. Tehran, two hundred sixty. You'll have some money left over."

"Yes, but I'll still be very far from home."

"You can go to Cairo, Egypt. It's closer to France."

"I have an Israeli visa on my passport. If I want to enter an Arab country, they'll turn me away."

"In that case, go to Tel Aviv. It's the same price."

"I'll think about it. I want to ask you something more. Could you give me a paper clip?"

"A paper clip?"

"Yes, look, the hem of my pants is coming undone."

"It won't hold with a paper clip. You need to sew it."

"I didn't prepare well for my trip. Next time, I'll bring a flashlight, a book of poems, a map of India, and a sewing kit."

"If I had thread and a needle, I would lend them to you. I'm sorry..."

"You know what? I found something better than a paper clip. Can I borrow your stapler?"

She laughs. I find her as nice as can be, but I hesitate to court a lady dressed in a sari. The small golden pin in her nostril and the red dot on her forehead intimidate me. She may be a Brahmin, for all I know. How does one recognize them? I can clearly see the difference between the truck drivers who squat in the fields to drop some fertilizer and the bourgeois who speak English. What troubles me is that the bourgeoisie is subdivided into a myriad of castes. The beautiful Bombay girl looks like my friends in

Hitchhiking

the Latin Quarter. Yet, I might commit a terrible crime by wooing her. As soon as Passepartout sets foot in India, he triggers a riot by his ignorance of local customs. It is the same for Capitaine Haddock. The poor girl can barely look at me because I disgust her. As soon as I leave, she will disinfect her stapler with alcohol. She's learned to hide her feelings, otherwise she couldn't get such a job.

"May I abuse your kindness again?"

"Of course."

"You probably have a phonebook. I want to know where the YMCA is."

"No need for a phonebook. I'll show you where it is. See the bus stop across the street? Take bus 29 and get off at Patel Road."

The YMCA reminds me of the Dak Bungalows in Pakistan. A kind of colonial atmosphere: tiles, columns, shutters, fans. There are six beds in the room, but it is much larger than the dormitory at the YMCA in Istanbul. Only one other bed is taken, and actually its tenant enters shortly after me.

"Hi, Djinn-Djak!"

"Tom! Are you alone? Where are Dick and Pat?"

"In Kashmir."

"Is that in India or Pakistan?"

"It's a divided country, but the largest part is in India. They're in Srinagar, the main city."

"You didn't get your Afghan visas?"

"We applied at the embassy in Rawalpindi. We had to wait a week. Dick and Pat wanted to go to Kashmir. I let them go as a couple."

"Oh yeah? I hadn't noticed."

"They may have started to like each other on the train, after you left. I don't remember exactly. In Kashmir, there are large lakes and boats that you can live on. Imagine being in Venice and being able to live on a gondola. It's perfect for two people. I felt like a third wheel, so I came here. I gave up on Afghanistan. I'm flying back to Tehran."

"Two hundred and sixty dollars."

"Are you taking the Air India flight too?"

"No, I just asked about it. I'll try to find a boat going to France."

A third man enters the room. He carries a large bag and a pair of Rossignol skis.

"Good evening, gentlemen."

"Good evening. It's funny to see someone with skis in August in Bombay. It doesn't snow often around here, I bet."

"I come from the Himalayas."

Hitchhiking

“You skied in the Himalayas?”

“A little bit. It’s not easy.”

“They don’t have ski lifts?”

“That’s for sure. Besides, you can’t find snow below four thousand meters, which is already very high. You should hike up from the plain, stop from time to time to adjust to the height. Me, I took a plane. When you land at four thousand five hundred, the shock is tough. You wonder if you’ll be able to breathe, so you don’t really feel like putting on your skis. The slightest effort is painful. You can quickly get altitude sickness.”

“Are you French?”

“Yes. My name is Devouassoux. I am a ski instructor in Courchevel. I went to train instructors in Chile and Australia. Then, since the boat made a stopover in India, I wanted to see the highest mountains in the world.”

We go out to dinner together. That is to say, my two companions order corrosive mixtures, pretending that no, it’s not that spicy, while I content myself with chapati.

The instructor already has his boat ticket.

“On the *Cambodge*, a *Messageries Maritimes* liner going to Marseille. I’m sailing tomorrow night.”

“How much does it cost?”

“I bought the ticket in Singapore. From there, it was two hundred and fifty dollars, so it should be less from Bombay.”

“That’s exactly what I need.”

“I have to go confirm my departure tomorrow morning. Come with me, you can buy your ticket.”

The next day, we hang onto the back of a tram. They should invent a system to shelter outside passengers from the rain. It would suffice to extend the roof of the tram a little... I was already wet when I left, anyway: I washed my shirts last night, but they refused to dry.

The *Messageries Maritimes* employee speaks good French because she was born in Pondicherry. I learned about the five French trading posts in India in school, but I only remember Pondicherry, Chandernagor, and Mahé. Everybody asked his neighbor: “*Tu ponds, dis chéri?*”¹ The history teacher would get angry, which only increased our good humor. I never imagined that I would meet a native of *Tu ponds, dis chéri?* eventually.

“How much is a ticket to Marseille, please?”

“In Tourist class? One hundred and sixty dollars.”

“Ah, perfect. I would like to buy one.”

¹ Are you laying an egg, darling?

Hitchhiking

“For tonight’s departure? I’m afraid there are no more berths. I’ll check... No, nothing in Tourist or Cabin class. There are still berths in First Class, at three hundred and fifty dollars.”

“No, I don’t have that much. Too bad.”

Since we’re in the neighborhood of shipping companies, we stop by Peninsular and Oriental, Lauro, Indian Steamship, and Funebashi. Devouassoux accompanies me everywhere, either because he has nothing else to do or because he wants to hear the story of my hitchhiking adventures to the end. The P & O boat left two days ago; Lauro’s ship stops in Colombo tomorrow, then goes directly to Aden; Indian Steamship only serves Singapore and Manila; the *Sakura* from Funebashi is on its way to Yokohama.

Things are not looking good. I go to Tel Aviv by plane and work in a kibbutz to earn money? It’s uncertain and complicated, whereas it would be so simple to spend ten days resting on a boat.

There’s one last company, Lloyd Triestino.

“Yes, we have a ship, the *Galileo Galilei*, which stops in Bombay on Thursday, in three days. It’s going to Genoa.”

“How much would a ticket in Tourist class cost me?”

“Two hundred and seventy dollars.”

“That’s expensive. On the *Cambodge* from Messageries Maritimes, it was only one hundred and sixty.”

“I know the *Cambodge*. Our Tourist class corresponds to their Cabin class.”

“Well, I have no choice anyway. Here are two hundred and eighty dollars. I only have twenty dollar bills.”

“Ah, but I don’t take dollars. You have to exchange them for rupees at the bank.”

“At the bank?”

“I need a certificate.”

It breaks my heart to exchange money at the bank. They give me the equivalent in rupees of two hundred and seventy dollars for the boat ticket, plus forty rupees for the ten remaining dollars. If I could have changed these ten dollars on the street, I would have had a hundred more rupees.

We go back to Lloyd Triestino. Looking at my ticket, I notice that I can go to Milan or Rome by train at no extra cost. That’s normal: when I came back from New York two years ago, the price of the ticket included the train ride from Le Havre to Paris.

“Can one only go to Milan or Rome?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“To France.”

“I can include a Genoa-to-Nice ticket.”

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“Yes, I’d like that.”

“You must show up at the ship on Thursday at two in the afternoon. The ship leaves at five.”

What can I do with all these rupees? Devouassoux has pockets full of them too. We decide to live like nabobs¹ and take a taxi back to the YMCA. At least we’ll be dry. Later on, we take another taxi to go to the harbor. It’s my turn to accompany him. At the foot of the gangway that leads to the *Cambodge*, people kiss and dab their eyes. Even before approaching them and hearing them, I guess they’re French. I suppose it’s because of their way of dressing, their gestures, a bored smirk that differs from the naive laughter of Americans, who knows. I’m happy to take an Italian boat: I’ll feel like I’m staying abroad until the end of my vacation.

“*Bon voyage!* I’ll come see you in Courchevel.”

“There are several Devouassoux. Ask for the one who goes to Chile. Everyone knows me.”

The birds of Malabar Hill

I go to the post office to send my father a birthday card. Fifty-eight. If I ever reach that advanced age, I will no longer fool around on far-away roads. I guess I’ll prefer to rest on the French Riviera, too.

I have dinner with Tom.

“I saw lots of French people in the harbor. There are surely many Americans in Bombay, but they sit behind their chauffeur in their Ambassador, so we don’t notice them.”

“According to the Bombay guide I bought, wealthy people and diplomats live on Malabar Hill. I plan to go there tomorrow.”

“Do you want to have tea at the United States embassy?”

“No, but the guide says there’s a Parsi *Tower of Silence* there.”

“Ah, I’ll go with you. I passed through Yazd, but it was dark.”

“I don’t know if there really are any Zoroastrians left in Iran. It’s like a kind of myth. Even here, they are not numerous: between one hundred and two hundred thousand, no more. They have a lot of influence because the British liked them.”

“I saw that in Jules Verne. He portrays the *Indous* as primitive natives with horrible customs, but he places the Parsis above them.”

“The Portuguese owned a small marshy piece of land. To get rid of it, they offered it to the British as part of the dowry of a princess who was marrying the King of England: *You’ll see, it’s charming. Ideal for holidays. We’ve named it Bom Bahia*²,

¹ In Hindi or Urdu, a high official in the administration, like a governor.

² Good bay.

Hitchhiking

actually. The English don't like to be cheated. They decided to sanitize the marshes. To attract workers, they announced that they welcomed everyone regardless of race, caste, or religion. As they were outcasts, the Parsis had been languishing at the bottom of the social ladder for centuries in Gujarat, further north. They settled in Bombay and learned commerce and industry from the British."

"Maybe it suited the British to rely on a group that was foreign to the wars between Hindus and Muslims. Say, you who are so learned... I saw some people who were a little red-headed. It seems they come *from the border*. Where is that border?"

"It's the border with Afghanistan."

"In Pakistan?"

"People still have the empire of India before independence in their heads. In this border area, around the Khyber Pass, there are all sorts of tribes. The redheads may descend from Alexander the Great's soldiers. In the nineteenth century, the British were trying to expand the empire in this region and were bumping heads with Russian ambitions, which were pushing south into Central Asia. It was a struggle for influence called the Great Game. Each side sent emissaries to the tribes, spies to the other side. Kipling writes about it in his novels."

The next morning, we take the bus to Malabar Hill.

"In French, *un malabar* is a very tall and strong man, like a furniture mover."

"Here it's a region, the Malabar Coast, south of Goa. Look, the Tower of Silence is somewhere behind this wall."

"In Iran, I was warned that you can't see anything at all, except for the birds."

"With the rain, I can't even look up at the sky. I see a few birds..."

"Do you think they're vultures? I wouldn't bet my head on it. Birdy, birdy, birdy..."

"We should have brought breadcrumbs."

"They would have made fun of us. Wet breadcrumbs! When there are good, juicy corpses to sink their beaks into... I wonder what they do with the skeletons. Vultures eat the flesh but leave the bones, I suppose."

"The skeletons? You're right. My book says they expose the corpses instead of burning or burying them because they don't want to pollute the fire or the soil. They venerate fire and the other elements: earth, air, and water."

"Maybe only the flesh is impure, so the bones can be burned. Or maybe they leave them up there and add some cement. With that, the tower gradually rises. When it's high enough, they start another one."

"Oh no, it's written here: they throw them in the middle. The tower is hollow."

To console ourselves, we go see the main monument in Bombay: an arch of triumph called Gateway of India, built by the sea for a visit by Queen Victoria.

Hitchhiking

Tom has flown away. I have a new roommate: not a tourist, but an Indian named Ruben.

“My family lives in Poona, a hundred miles from here. I’m staying at the YMCA tonight because I’m taking a boat tomorrow morning. Are you American?”

“French.”

“But you speak English.”

“So do you.

“It’s the official language of India.”

“You have a different mother tongue, like me. Do you speak Hindi?”

“People speak Hindi in the north. I speak Marathi. I also know Arabic and I’m learning Hebrew.”

“Hebrew?”

“I’m Jewish.”

“There are Jews in India?”

“Of course. Especially in the Bombay area, which is more tolerant.”

“I’ve heard of that. The English welcomed everyone without distinction of race, caste, or religion.”

“The Jews were there long before the English.”

“Me too, I’m Jewish.”

“Really? There are many Jews in France?”

“Well, er, as many as in India.”

“You have already gone to Israel?”

“Yes, last year.”

“You’re lucky. I dream of going there and meeting my Jewish brothers, but I can’t.”

“It’s too far?”

“I’m a sailor. My ship trades with Arab countries. I’ve gone as far as Aqaba, in Jordan. Right across the way, I saw Eilat, in Israel, but I couldn’t go there.”

“Me, I went to Eilat. I saw Aqaba!”

“You have seen Jerusalem? Every Jew must see Jerusalem.”

“You think so? It’s not like Muslims who must go on pilgrimage to Mecca.”

“We say, *Next year in Jerusalem.*”

“I’ve never said that.”

“Maybe Jews don’t have the same customs in France and India. What are you doing tonight?”

“Nothing special.”

“When I come to Bombay before I embark, I always go to the cinema. They’re showing a new film, *James Bond against Dr. No*. We could go see it together.”

“Oh yeah, I passed by the cinema where they’re showing it. Okay.”

Hitchhiking

At least, I see blue sky on the screen. Dr. No is a presumptuous Asian. James Bond puts him in his place with the arrogance and composure of a true Englishman, but the audience doesn't seem to mind.

My last day in India. I am walking in the streets of Bombay. I feel a kind of relief at the idea of soon escaping the crowd, but at the same time I'm afraid I shall feel very lonely. I have become accustomed to the buffaloes, the rickshaws, the mutilated beggars, the overripe mangoes, the trucks bedecked like old duchesses, the families with twelve children. I feel as if I have been adopted myself into a large family. I understand why people say: *Mother India*.

I eat my last chapatis with two Frenchmen who are exploring India in a Citroen 2CVs.

The Australians

They went to see the coachbuilder Pinin Farina, who designs Ferraris.

"Would you like to design a boat?"

"What kinda boat? Sail? Steam?"

"A liner, the *Galileo Galilei*."

"Hey, why no?"

The result is a sleek all-white floating palace, with a chimney streamlined like a Ferrari wing. Discovering this majestic swan, I rejoice at having missed the ugly duckling named *Cambodge*.

I see a few Italians at the foot of the gangway, fewer than the Frenchmen the other day. Indians embarking and those staying ashore exchange garlands of white flowers. On board, two out of three passengers are Australians, as the *Galileo Galilei* is coming from Sydney.

I take care to devour plenty cannelloni, Milanese cutlets, and semifreddoes. When I look at myself in the mirror, I feel as skinny as the fakir in *The Blue Lotus*¹. Between mouthfuls, I become friends with Australians, Deedee and Stanley. I find Deedee less beautiful, with her blue eyes and straw-colored hair, than some black-eyed and honeyed-skin Indian women. Yet, we become inseparable. We even play the staircase game, which she discovered by herself near Sumatra after ten days at sea.

"I was so bored... A little more, and I would have gone to borrow books from the library."

"I see. You practice for several hours a day. I'm not saying I should beat you, but at least match you. My trip has weakened me."

"Men can't stand it when a woman beats them."

¹ A Tintin adventure.

Hitchhiking

We don't kiss at the foot of the stairs. Firstly, Deedee already kisses Stanley. Secondly, she looks like my mother. What am I saying? I didn't put the reasons in the right order. Firstly, she looks like my mother. After that, there's no need for a second reason.

It's not just the blue eyes and blond hair. Like my mother, she knows exactly what she wants. She orders and everyone obeys.

"Jean-Jacques, give me your pants. I'll wash and sew them. They're really disgusting. They don't smell good. And these staples..."

"You noticed the staples?"

"It's hard not to see them."

"My pants are a little dusty, maybe, but it's dust from the deserts of Iran. I was thinking of bringing it back to France as a souvenir."

"To put it in a museum? Give me your pants, I'll give them back to you tomorrow."

"And in the meantime, I walk around in my bathing suit?"

"I spoke to the boy named Rishi. He's willing to lend you pants."

"The one who sleeps in my cabin?"

"He's a little smaller than you, but it'll do for one evening."

"He'll never be able to wear them again. He's going to study in an English college. He's probably a Brahmin."

"Well, it's a first step to start forgetting his superiority complex. All the little snobs will call him a nigger there."

"He would have been better off studying in Australia."

"Are you kidding? It's the most racist country in the world. They don't let in blacks or yellows¹. They treat the Aborigines like dogs. I won't be going back there anytime soon."

"Are you settling in Europe?"

"In Paris!"

"I must give you my address."

I'm sure they don't even have an orchestra in tourist class on the Cambodia. We have a drummer, a trumpeter and clarinetist, a violinist, a pianist. The host in charge of organizing musical chairs and egg races can imitate Frank Sinatra. He has to sing *Strangers in the Night* every night. It's mandatory on ships.

I invite a beautiful Indian woman to dance. I feel so moved holding her in my arms that I can barely speak to her. What would I even say? I met some very friendly truck drivers... I slept on the ground in trains and train station waiting rooms... I found the Taj Mahal very ugly!

¹ In 1963.

Hitchhiking

Even if I managed to start a conversation, a serious obstacle stands between us: we can't play the staircase game because of her sari. In India, men dress like Beau Brummel, but women are entrapped in miles of silk. When they want to burn one on her husband's pyre, she can't escape.

It's not raining anymore! We're approaching Arabia, where it hasn't rained in a hundred thousand years. I go up to the deck with Deedee to greet the sun.

"Ooh, ooh... My lipstick is going to melt!"

"Imagine you're Indian and they throw you on your husband's pyre."

"Let's go back down quickly. Can you imagine there are people living in this furnace?"

"There aren't."

"Tomorrow, we arrive in Aden. There are inhabitants in Aden."

"I crossed the desert in Iran. They have half-buried houses and they stay inside in the middle of the day."

"I have an appointment with Stanley in the small lounge. We're playing gin rummy with Margaret and Ruth. Are you coming?"

"I'll spend some time in the library instead. It's not because I'm bored. It's because I love it!"

"Do they have detective novels? In English?"

"Of course. They have a small selection of Italian, French and German books, but everything else is in English. They have *Treasure Island*, *Moby Dick*, *Lord Jim*, books to read at sea."

The library contains a 27-volume Encyclopædia Britannica. I'll finally know who really defeated the Mughals: the Sikhs or the Marathas? Both, it seems. United to deliver the decisive blows. Yes, but their opponents were very weakened. The Mughals defeated themselves! That's high philosophy: we have no worse enemy than ourselves.

They had a stupid succession system. In our countries, the king dies and his eldest son or sometimes daughter gets the job. Among the Mughals, it's the same, except the Great Mughal has several eldest sons: the one from his first wife, the one from his favorite wife, the one from the concubine who claims to be his favorite. As soon as he dies, there's civil war. Each one allies with brothers and half-brothers, with neighbors, with eager Afghan warlords, with Sikhs, with Marathas. When a prince prevails, he doesn't kill the other contenders, well not always, but he blinds them. An old custom from Central Asia. Jules Verne knew about this trick. To get rid of Michel Strogoff, the traitor Ivan Ogareff makes him blind. If he had blinded him completely, the story would have been over, so Jules Verne cheated: the executioner burns the hero's eyes with a red-hot iron, but a few tears of filial love prevent the torture from being successful.

Japanese junk

I plan to brag to my brothers that I passed through Aden. Let's call it poetic license. If I see a collection of whitish cubes against a backdrop of arid hills, it's because Stanley lends me his binoculars. Instead of docking, we anchor offshore. A motorboat exchanges passengers who board with those who disembark.

We climb onto the deck. The sun is barely out of its morning bath, so the heat is still bearable. A fleet of feluccas is heading straight towards us.

"Deedee, do you know what they say in French? If you don't go to Aden, Aden will come to you¹."

"It looks like they're racing."

"It's commercial rivalry. They have stuff to sell. Boutiques with sails..."

They line up along our flank. The crew helps them attach rope ladders. For each felucca, a merchant boards the *Galileo Galilei*, a storekeeper stays below. The merchant offers watches, cameras, radios. Stanley finds the same binoculars as his.

"How much are these binoculars?"

"Thirty dollars, sir. Very good quality."

"That's exactly what I paid in Singapore."

"That means prices are lower here," Deedee remarks. "If he says thirty, he's willing to go down to twenty. I wonder if these little radios really work. What's this brand, Sony?"

"Japanese, madam. Very good quality."

Stanley is skeptical.

"All these Japanese gadgets fall apart after three weeks. There are no tubes in this radio?"

"No, sir. Transistors. New invention. Very good quality."

"Show me that camera there. Nikon... Japanese too?"

"Yes, sir. Very good optics."

I'd love to own a nice camera like that. I encourage Stanley.

"I worked in a photo shop in London for a summer. The boss imported cameras from Japan. He said they were just as good as German cameras."

"I doubt it. Well, if this Nikon is half as good as a Leica, I'm ahead because it costs five times less. What do you think, Deedee?"

"Six times less: he's going to lower his price... Let me bargain!"

¹ Based on a famous quote from a swashbuckling novel, *Le Bossu* (The Hunchback), by Paul Féval (1816-1897): *Si tu ne viens pas à Lagardère, Lagardère viendra à toi.*

Hitchhiking

Stanley decides to buy the Nikon. The merchant lowers a basket on a rope. He shouts the references to his accomplice, who places the camera's packaging box and its accessories in the basket.

"I offer film for the young lady! You should buy sunglasses to protect the blue eyes. Look, Ray Ban model, American, very good quality!"

If I had taken the *Cambodge*, I would have stopped in Djibouti instead of Aden. We see this French colony from a distance and enter the Red Sea. We left Bombay on Thursday, August 15th in the evening and arrived in Aden on Monday, August 19th in the morning. We spend three days sailing up the Red Sea to Suez. On Thursday, August 22nd, while the ship is passing through the Suez Canal, which connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, the passengers go take a look at the pyramids.

"Are you coming, Jean-Jacques?" Deedee asks me.

"No, I'm staying on board."

"Is it because it costs six dollars? I've noticed that you never buy drinks. Don't you have any money?"

"I had just enough left in Bombay to buy the ticket."

"I can lend you some. You'll pay me back in Paris."

"Thanks. What bothers me is that I have an Israeli visa on my passport. The Egyptians are at war with Israel. I'm afraid of getting into trouble if they see my visa. They could put me in prison, quarter me, cut off my head, or even worse. I'll see the pyramids some other time.¹"

At least I'm sailing through the Suez Canal. Ferdinand de Lesseps didn't work too hard. He just connected marshy lakes that already existed. When they asked him to dig a real canal in Panama, everybody could see that he was lazy and incompetent.

As it's cooler than near Aden, I go out on deck several times. The landscape is always the same. Water, reeds, not even a crocodile.

On August 24th, we squeeze between Sicily and the tip of Italy's boot. This passage is called the Strait of Messina; in fact, we stop at Messina, in Sicily. We stroll through the deserted streets between teatime and dinner time. There may be a *Sicilian nap* that lasts from two in the afternoon to six in the evening. Or it's just that I'm looking for bicycle rickshaws, mango vendors, sidewalk campers, beggars.

We leave at nightfall. After about an hour, the loudspeakers suggest we look to port. That red glow dancing among the stars is not a will-o'-the-wisp, but a burning belch spewing forth from the bowels of the earth through the mouth of the Stromboli volcano.

The next morning, I recognize another volcano: Mount Vesuvius, sleeping like a good child in the splendid cradle of the Bay of Naples. The passengers going to Rome

¹ Yeah, well, sixty years later, I still haven't seen them.

Hitchhiking

disembark here. Deedee and Stanley get on a bus to visit the city and its surroundings. I give them good advice:

“At lunchtime, ask for *la pizza*.”

“La piazza?”

“Pizza. It’s a Neapolitan specialty: a pie with anchovies.”

“A pie with anchovies? How awful!”

“No, no, I assure you, it’s delicious. In French, we say, *See Naples and die*. You absolutely must eat *la pizza* before you die!”

“Vizza?”

Even if it was free, I wouldn’t get on the bus. I’ve already seen Pompeii and everything else. I feel like strolling along the alleys and my memories. Oh, I remember that Jeff Field, the Canadian, filmed me on this piazza with his Bell and Howell camera. Back in Montreal, he had the film developed. He invited his parents and siblings for a private screening.

“There, that’s a Frenchman I traveled with in Italy and Greece.”

“What’s his name?”

“Uh, I don’t remember. He had one of those French double names, Jean-Paul or Jean-Pierre, something like that.

The red satin purse

Genoa. Monday, August 26, 7A.M.

Australians who come to spend several months in Europe bring huge trunks or herds of suitcases. While they bargain with the porters, I hop down the gangway like a sparrow. I enter a large empty customs office. The customs officers wonder which category to put me in.

“You come from Naples?”

“From Bombay.”

“Without suitcases? With that small bag?”

“*E allora? Perche no?*”

At eight o’clock, I am already sitting on a train that runs northwards along the coast. A little after ten o’clock, I step on French soil at the Nice station. It is without pleasure that I contemplate going on the road. The trucks will not contain any gods with elephant heads. The drivers will not ask me, *France? De Gaulle?* There may be naked people not far from here, but they have not given up their clothes forever.

Hey, wait a minute... I rummage through my bag... The little red satin purse! I count the coins: seven francs and sixty-seven centimes.

“Excuse me, ma’am, how much is a ticket to Saint-Raphaël?”

“Seven francs sixty.”

Hitchhiking

Arriving in Saint-Raphaël, I inquire:

“La Pinède residence?”

“It’s at the end of the beach, over there.”

I take off my shoes to walk along the water’s edge. I recognize my father from afar. He has a way that is all his own of rounding his back to read his newspaper on the beach. My mother, sitting on a kind of canvas chair without legs, is talking to a tall bald man. My brother Olivier is reading a book, lying on a towel.

“Good morning, everyone!”

My mother stands up to kiss me.

“Jean-Jacques! But you’re so skinny...”

“Yet I ate like an ogre on the boat.”

“I saw that in Auschwitz: you lose weight very quickly, but to gain weight back, it’s much more difficult. You took the boat from Bombay to Genoa, as you announced in your letter? You’re coming from Genoa?”

“Yes, by train... Say, Olivier, I have the impression that you’ve grown again.”

“You’re still my big brother!”

“I’m going back to prepare lunch. I’ll buy an extra steak on the way. Did you leave your suitcase in our building?”

“In Istanbul.”

“You went to India with that little bag?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Hey, but that’s my school bag! I didn’t recognize it right away. It’s all beaten up!”

“Don’t exaggerate. A little worn, maybe. It’s seen the world, this little bag. It served as a pillow for me when I slept on the floor.”

The bald man who was talking to my mother is Dr. Wittgenstein, Katia’s father. He bought a studio in the same building as my parents, because he knows that everything my mother does is well done. He examines my bag inside out.

“Really? With that bag?”

“It’s convenient, because I take it everywhere with me. If I meet people on the street who can take me to another city, I’m ready to follow them immediately. No need to go back to the hotel to get my luggage... Is Katia still in Greece?”

“No, she went to my sister’s in Haifa.”

“I almost went to Israel. If I wanted to fly back from Bombay, I had enough money to fly to Tel Aviv, no further. I would have gone to Haifa and asked Niunia, my mother’s friend, to lend me some money. And then I would have met Katia!”

“Or Noël,” Olivier remarks.

“He is in Israel?”

Hitchhiking

“He’s following your footsteps. He went to Greece with his friend Gilles, then they took the boat from Athens to Haifa like you did, and now they’re working on a kibbutz.”

“I’m going for a swim to work up an appetite.”

“It’s funny: you’re wearing your swimsuit under your pants!”

“Yes, *perche no?* This beautiful swimsuit swam in the Indian Ocean in Karachi.”

“Where is Karachi?” Dr. Wittgenstein asks.

“In Pakistan.”

“Pakistan... It’s amazing what you’ve done. Your mother showed me your letters. You crossed deserts! You ran risks, no?”

“Maybe, but I’m cautious.”

“You’re like an explorer, or an adventurer. You must write a book!”

“But no. There’s nothing to write about. I spent hours and hours in trucks...”

“You must have met some characters... Not just truck drivers.”

“In Bombay, I met a Jew. He looked exactly like any other Indian.”

“They say there are Jews in China who look like Chinese people. There’s a joke about it... David Rosenblum goes to Peking for his business. On Friday night, he feels a little lonely. He asks the hotel receptionist if he can be directed to a synagogue. The receptionist calls a taxi and explains where he should go. David Rosenblum enters the synagogue. He sees men praying like in any other synagogue, except that they’re Chinese. He prays with them. When it’s over, he talks to the rabbi. *My name is David Rosenblum. I come from Paris, France.* The rabbi seems quite surprised. *Are you Jewish?* Rosenblum answers yes. Then the rabbi says, *It’s funny... You don’t look Jewish at all!* Olivier doesn’t understand the joke. Dr. Wittgenstein has to explain it to him.

“Anti-Semites think there are Jewish features. Do you know Dr. Rosen?”

“Yes.”

“He looks a bit like the caricature of a Jew. A big nose, a heavy gaze, something Oriental. In Poland, when we said a Jew had *good appearance*, it meant he didn’t have those features. Your mother, for example, she’s blonde, she has blue eyes, a little upturned nose. She could walk around without fear in Catholic neighborhoods.”

“She still emigrated.”

“Good appearance wasn’t enough. Her identity card said *Jew*, so she couldn’t study what she wanted.”

The return of the suitcase

There was a Turk from Istanbul in my class last year. The rascal entered École Polytechnique on his first try. I go see him there.

“I went to Istanbul in July. I left my suitcase in a hotel near the Blue Mosque.”

Hitchhiking

“I was there in July too. You could have come to say hello! I’ll write to my parents. They’ll send someone to get your suitcase. Give me your address. They’ll ship it, it’s no big deal.”

I meet him in a small building that faces Rue Descartes. I can’t enter in civilian clothes inside the school. It’s a military barracks. He is wearing a khaki uniform. He salutes an officer by raising his hand to his beret. Yeah, well, that’s not for me. If all goes well, I won’t waste two years of my life in this ridiculous military prison. I’ll go to École Normale Supérieure and stay free.

1964

Amazing travelers

I remember quite well what I studied last year. I improve and deepen my knowledge. I don't need to rack my brain to find the solution to problems. I think of the Iranian desert and suddenly the solution appears to me like a mirage.

At lunchtime, I play bridge with my classmates Rinaldi, Rosinski, and Portal. We sometimes skip a class that is not important, such as French or English, to go to the cinema.

"They're showing a good movie at Odéon: *James Bond against Dr. No.*"

"Are you sure it's worth it? It's just a spy movie, isn't it?"

"I saw it in Bombay. If it was bad, I wouldn't go see it again."

They come out of the cinema convinced and converted.

"It makes you want to go to Jamaica."

"Now that you've become a globetrotter, Greif, you could go there!"

"Why not?"

I see Deedee again. She comes to my house to look up numbers in the phone book and call real estate agencies. My mother tells her she doesn't have to.

"I know a lady who takes care of apartments. She'll find you something."

Deedee gets into the habit of coming to listen to Olivier.

"Tell me, Olivier, can you play Bach's foogue¹, like the other time?"

"Bach's foogue? Okay."

If he were a few years older, she would fall into his arms right away, especially since tall Stanley has moved to London. Deedee is too blonde for me, but that doesn't stop me from being jealous. Maybe I should study piano again. I won't seduce girls by reciting the coefficients of the binomial theorem.

After a while, Deedee is too busy to come see us.

"I found work at television. You know Jean-Christophe Averty²?"

"He makes strange shows, with lots of characters who move around on the screen."

"He hire me his assistant. You know Père Ooboo?"

"Père Ubu? Of course.

¹ In the French version, she speaks French with an Australian accent. She can't pronounce the French u, which sounds like the German ü, so *fugue* becomes *fougue* (pronounced *foog*, meaning passion or ardor in French) instead of *fügue*.

² Jean-Christophe Averty (1928-2017) was an important personality in French radio and early TV. In the sixties, his crazy experimental video-shows were among the best things you could see on the one and only TV channel. One of his shows was Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*.

Hitchhiking

“He preparing big show about Père Ooboo. *Cornes au coo, vive le père Ooboo!*”

If Jean-Christophe Averty is as messy as his shows, he needs an efficient person like Deedee. Or maybe he just enjoys hearing someone say, *Cornes au coo, vive le père Ooboo!*

I start having dysentery crises like in Pakistan. I talk to my father about it. He tells me he’s a neuropsychiatrist, which I already know, and sends me to his colleague Rosen. The tests reveal that my guts are full of little bugs. At first, when they arrived in France, they found the food a bit bland. Now they’ve gotten used to steak and French fries, so they don’t want to leave.

Rosen prescribes me pills of all colors. The little bugs love them. These good pills that fall every day at the same time are the best thing about this country. They eagerly await them. I should have been careful: a man who dresses up as Santa Claus to deceive poor children!

I go back to see my father.

“The only effect of all these pills is that in addition to dysentery, I have dizziness. The competitions are only a few months away. It’s annoying that I have to leave the classroom every fifteen minutes to go to the toilet.”

“Rosen is a general practitioner, he doesn’t know much about intestinal parasites. I’ll give you the address of a specialist.”

The specialist prescribes me new American pills, which expel the nasty parasites in no time.

I still have other memories: four train tickets, small pieces of text written in Karachi, and a whole miniature Orient installed in a corner of my brain with its landscapes, crowds, sounds, and fragrances. I gradually discover that I don’t need to play the piano for the girls to fascinate them. It is enough for me to reveal a part of these treasures... I know what they expect from me. I’ve read it in Baudelaire:

*Amazing travelers! what noble stories
We read in your sea-deep eyes!
Show us the caskets of your rich memories,
Those marvelous jewels made of stars and ethers.
We want to travel with neither steam nor sail!
Make, to brighten up the boredom of our prisons,
Pass over our spirits, stretched like a canvas,
Your memories within their frames of horizons.
Say, what have you seen?*

¹ Horns on your ass, long live Father Ubu! She says coo, which sounds like *cou* (neck) instead of *cul* (ass).

Hitchhiking

Well... Trabzon and Tabriz, Tehran and Zahedan, Lahore and Indore... An Austrian inflating his tires, an Italian protecting his watch, a German losing his wallet... Blue mosques, red forts, a white mausoleum.

Persian Letters¹

Mawash Taheri, the young girl I met on the bus in Yazd, sends me a greeting card for the New Year. I reply. I then receive the following two letters.

From Mahwash Taheri
Tehran, February 11, 1964

Dear Jean-Jacques,

I received your lovely card a few days ago. You cannot imagine my joy when I found it in the mailbox. I did not hope that you would respond to my greeting card. I find nothing in myself that could encourage you to remember me. All I know is that I behaved with you in a very impolite manner and contrary to all rules of *savoir-vivre*. You certainly noticed that at the time of our meeting, I was not free to behave as I would have liked. Please forgive me. Of course, if we could meet in Tehran, it would be very different, because I have a lot of freedom here, but unfortunately we met in a province where social constraints are much stricter.

I would like to see Paris and learn French. But even my English is mediocre and I can only write this letter with the help of my cousin Pauline.

One of my friends went to Paris last month. Oh, how I would have liked to accompany him to see France and see you again! I hope we will meet again.

Your friend,
Mahwash Taheri

From Pauline Navidi
Tehran, April 26, 1964

Dear Jean-Jacques,

You were undoubtedly surprised to find my name on the envelope. I am Mahwash's cousin. It is a bitter task to write you this awful letter. Our adorable and dear Mahwash is dead. She suffered from a heart disease since childhood. Last month, on March 2, she underwent heart surgery, but her weakened body did not withstand the shock and three days later, on March 5, she died.

She was eagerly waiting for your letter, but it arrived two days after her death. I did not have the courage to write you these terrible news right away, and even now my hand trembles as I recall the disappearance of my dearest friend. Although you only

¹ *Les lettres persanes* is the most famous book by Montesquieu (1689-1755).

Hitchhiking

met her once, you certainly understood that she was a wonderful person. I think you should write a letter to her sister, with whom she was very close, to tell her that you share her grief.

Sincerely,
Pauline Navidi

Around the world in sixty days if I have time

In the spring I wake up at dawn, tormented by a painful desire to see the sun rise in the desert. I went to India. What is the next step? I share my vacation plans with Katia Wittgenstein.

“I think I’ll travel around the world.”

“In eighty days?”

“Rather sixty, if all goes well. I won’t have finished my Normale Sup orals before mid-July. I won’t know the results right away. Let’s say I leave around July 20th. My mother will send me the results somewhere. If I’m accepted, I have to come back in October. I cross the Pacific by plane. The problem is if I’m not accepted at Normale.”

“You will be accepted. You’re first in your class. At Louis-le-Grand!”

“You never know. If I miss Normale, I’ll go to Polytechnique. The studies also start in October, but there is a military period first. I have to be back in Paris in early September, so I have to turn back.”

“How long did it take for your trip to India?”

“Seven weeks. If I go in the same direction, I might get stuck before even reaching India. I’m going to travel in the opposite direction. I’ll be in America. If I have to turn back, I’ll come back through the Caribbean. I will have seen some new places anyway.”

“If you pass through Japan, come and see me.”

“You’re going to Japan?”

“With my mother. I went there already three years ago. She sells her paintings, as well as those of her sister and others, to galleries in America, Brazil, and Japan. Three years ago, we went by way of the south. The same cities as you: Ankara, Tehran, Karachi, and then Calcutta, Bangkok, and Hong Kong. It took three days. We slept twice in airport hotels, without seeing anything. This time, with the new planes, we go over the pole.”

“The North Pole? Say hello to the polar bears for me.”

“There’s a stopover in Anchorage, Alaska. The flight only takes about twenty hours.”

Noël and I are both accepted at Polytechnique. Our parents are even happier than we are.

Hitchhiking

It was a mere formality. The Normale Sup competition is another story. Learned professors design complex and refined problems, which only true math wizards can unravel. I doubt myself. I feel different from true math wizards. If my pride forbids me from finding them more intelligent than me, I guess they have a burning passion for mathematics. What they study in class is not enough for them. They search for rare equations in old grimoires to feed their obsession. They want to marry an unknown woman named x for better or for worse, until death do them part. Like my brother Olivier... He already knows what he'll be doing in ten years, in twenty years, in thirty years: music, more music, always music. While I know nothing.

On Monday, July 27th, Katia accompanies me to the Invalides terminal.

"When will they announce the results for Normale Sup?"

"In three or four days. I don't want to wait in Paris. They can still be delayed. I'll stop by my cousins in Pittsburgh for a while. My mother will send me a telegram."

"She probably wants you to fail, I bet."

"Of course not. Why would she?"

"She's already imagining her two sons at Polytechnique."

"It's rather my father who likes the school."

"She dreams of seeing you both in uniform. You'll be handsome, with a bicorne and a sword!"

"See you soon in Kyoto..."

We see each other once or twice a month. We have tea together, we go to the cinema, we exchange books. We can chat without ever running out of conversation topics. I find her very beautiful and a bit mysterious. I admire the regular oval of her face and the black velvet of her gaze. A spell prevents me from getting closer to her. I find it hard to imagine that she could become my girlfriend, but as I always say: where there's a will, there's a way.

The airport bus is about to leave. We kiss. I place a first kiss in the middle of her right cheek. For the left cheek, I slide a bit so that the corners of our lips touch. I have the feeling of taking a promise of love with me to America.