

The Fountain

It's evening in the South of France. Elise flips on the oven light, careful to keep the fan speed low. Sausage is smashed into small pieces with a meat tenderizer. Paz will take a few bites before shooing the food away, but she plates an optimistic portion. The pan is sizzling when there is a knock at the door.

“Bonjour,” Maurice says. “Can we talk?”

Outside is a rickety sign for rue de l'Escalès. There are no houses around except the bastide where Elise and Paz live, pinned to the edge of a cliff overlooking the river. Elise folds the gate back, careful to avoid the hitch that catches when pulled too quickly.

She has not seen Maurice for a year. His cologne is as pungent as ever, petrol-like. Back when they worked at the restaurant, Elise and Paz used to pinch their noses around him. Maurice joked that they should be used to “different” smells, their being chefs. “Elise is not a chef,” Paz would say. He never failed to clarify the point.

They enter the kitchen in silence. The table fits Elise, who is small for a fourteen-year-old, but Maurice is wide, and extends past its perimeter when he sits. He fidgets awkwardly, perspiring from the unseasonable autumn warmth. And yet the collared shirt and tie he wears are spotless. His blazer, immaculate.

The nametag on Maurice's chest is lopsided. He straightens it tenderly, as one might adjust the position of their heart. Then he says, "We need him back."

—

Elise's father was named after his mother, Maria de Paz, who died during childbirth aboard a Bilbao-bound cattle wagon. His father was Santiago Herrera, a farm hand who fled Spain during Franco's rise. Santiago landed in the South of France working a rock quarry until a landslide swept him under the mountain. Paz, barely a teenager, was left on his own.

Nobody was hiring but a small hotel on the outskirts of the Verdon Gorge. The area was famous for its 25-kilometer-long river canyon. Paz was offered a job on the condition he stay out of the hotel's newly built kitchen. Despite the agreement, he snuck in regularly. The manager eventually caught and fired him, though not before trying his Dauphinoise potatoes, which were deemed delicious enough for service. Soon after, Paz was made head chef. He named the restaurant Santi's.

For decades Paz cooked simple food. There were no Michelin stars. No awards or reviews or television specials. Only six tables at a hotel located off the beaten path, far from the rolling vineyards and lavender fields; and an inconvenient distance from the Verdon River itself, too far for tourists and locals alike. The three-tiered fountain out front was the sole object of beauty, a

faithful tributary of recycled water and stone. Each pool sparkled so brightly birds refused to drink from them. Rather, they hovered at a distance, as if anything so alluring had to be a trap.

Six-year-old Elise remembers the route from their house to the hotel. They drove past sleepy hamlets stitched from the vistas, ivy spilling across churches and cafés alike. In Santi's kitchen, she would watch her father slice vegetables and brown butter, singing long, low songs in Spanish, the words foreign but familiar. At night the cicadas would rattle. Then came the stars, fiery red with metallic reflections burned across the sky. The sounds, the smells. It seemed impossible that such a place could ever disappear.

—

“You should see him,” Elise says. The chair rakes across the floor when she pushes it out. “Follow me.”

She brings Maurice down a hall. There's a door left ajar, and beyond that, a bed. Paz sleeps under its covers as he has for months, deeply and without comfort. An arm thrashes. Strange noises escape his lips. He has been bedridden for months. It seems a lifetime ago he was walking around the house, and even longer since he cooked.

Maurice has an expressive face. Every thought is shown before it's spoken, every reaction gestured as if words couldn't do them justice. When he sees Paz, he puts a hand over his mouth, steadying himself on the nearest wall. “I didn't realize it was this bad,” he says. He stands away from the bed, further than Elise, who has grown accustomed to the trappings of death. “I should have come earlier.”

“You're the only one who's come at all,” she says.

Paz has gone bald. The way his skin stretches over his head makes it seem like pressure is building beneath the surface. Elise imagines his skull filled with water. When he dies, the water will burst through his nose. She's seen it before, how dikes fracture over time, leaking, then streaming in torrential quantity.

"The owners want to shut the hotel down," announces Maurice. "To kill it. Like Santi's."

"They should," Elise says.

Maurice looks like an old man who has had his wrinkles ironed out. When he rubs his chin, the stubble darkens. "We need Paz," he repeats, this time with less enthusiasm.

"What do you want me to do?" she asks. "Lift him up like a puppet? Wait here — let me find my marionette strings."

Maurice rests an outsized hand on Paz's forehead as if to check for a temperature. "The owners are coming the day after tomorrow," he explains, "to evaluate." The last word is emphasized. "We're hosting a dinner to remind them how special the hotel can be."

"Paz can't cook anymore."

"Don't you think I can see that?" Maurice says.

"What then? What do you want?"

Their eyes meet and Elise knows what's coming next. She responds immediately — "no no no" — but Maurice is already tensing up, hunched within the borders of the doorframe like a tragic Greek painting. "He taught you all his recipes. You have to help me."

The words echo through the room. It's unusual to see Paz so quiet. Whether he always shouted, or the habit formed from years competing with kitchen noise, Elise isn't sure. No matter the situation, his voice was raised, and when he was asked to lower it, he would simply continue at the same volume, or else get louder. Now he doesn't speak at all.

The stars are out. Elise and Maurice stare through the window at the glittering multitude. They are silent, the only sound coming from the bed, creaking with the old-wood ceremony of the house. When they turn back around, Paz has gone completely still.

—

Elise started school at eight-years-old. She commuted to town every day, biking steep inclines no matter the conditions, the prospect of discussing books instead of recipes giving strength to her bony legs. The restaurant had lost its appeal. There was a world outside of Santi's, she would tell Paz. A world as wide and wild as the Verdon itself. And yet it seemed she never got to see it.

Hoping to connect outside the kitchen, Paz bought a tandem kayak. Elise was reluctant, and for good reason: the river was famous for its rapids, and though it lazed placidly by their house, heavy whitewater ripped downstream. Together they struggled to manage the precise maneuvers needed to navigate hazards, each paddling opposite the other. The kayak capsized too many times to count.

Before, Elise and Paz were in perfect harmony. They would spend days off wading into the shimmering water, limestone cliffs their diving boards and silty shores their beds. But ever since school started, something between them changed. It grated Paz when Elise talked about her lessons or asked if she could visit a classmate's home.

After a few failed excursions, the kayak was packed away.

Not long after, Santi's began to decline. A pay cut was required. Maurice and his staff took one as well; the hotel was barely doing better, its rooms stuffy, ill-lit, and overpriced. Elise's

bike was sold, school no longer a priority. Without explanation, Paz made her replace the laid-off wait staff. She cleared tables, cleaned toilets, and cooked, albeit poorly.

Life back home was just as bad. Paz and Elise's mother fought daily, their shouts shaking spiders from their webs. The police were often called, once, most memorably, when the two drew steak knives on each another. No one was stabbed, but the next morning Elise's mother was gone. She left a note saying Paz would never live as well as he cooked.

After a year of this, the restaurant closed. Then, Paz began to drink.

—

The next day, Elise drags Paz's body down to the river and digs a grave. An old seed potato crate is repurposed as a coffin. It thuds when Elise drops it into the ditch. Inside are things Paz would want to take with him: a bottle of wine, a paring knife, his swim trunks. Animals will dig it up, she realizes, but once the crate is covered there's no going back. The sun has set by the time the dirt is patted down.

Elise returns to the house exhausted. She changes into clean clothes, treats the callouses under her fingers, and rubs Bengay on her arms and legs. At the foot of her bed is a duffel bag. It comes with her to every room as she unplugs appliances. She locks all the windows and turns off the water heater.

She tells herself she won't miss the house. Like everything, it will succumb to time. It feels like only yesterday Elise was in diapers, running around her yard while Paz chased with a spatula in the air waving like a fly swatter. That always used to make her laugh. Those memories are most distant — the happy ones.

Once the house is closed up, she exits to the driveway. To her surprise, Maurice's Peugeot has returned from the previous night. Its dashboard is lined with oranges. In back, the seats are filled with bags: fresh tomatoes and onions; partially melted butter; milk; sugar, and more. An energy crystal hangs from the rearview mirror.

"Did you bury him?" Maurice asks.

She nods.

"Where?"

She points to a pair of stone steps winding down the river. "I pulled him by the legs with a rope. It took all day."

Maurice shifts his weight from one foot to the next. "Can I see the grave?"

Elise averts her eyes. "How many are you starving tomorrow?" She stands to the side as Maurice begins to unload bags. "Sorry — serving."

"Funny," Maurice says. "I'm not sure. Five. Ten, maybe."

"Helpful as always, Pepé Le Pew."

"Don't worry too much about the details," he says. "Just cook a meal like Paz used to make. A meal fit for Santi's!"

She stares at Maurice for a long time. The duffel bag is at her feet. "I told you yesterday I can't help."

Maurice pauses for a moment. He takes a small cloth and dabs his forehead before gesturing at the Peugeot. "Do you know why I keep oranges on the dashboard?"

"To cover your scent?"

"Because they bring good fortune." He puts a hand on her shoulder. "But believe me, a whole orchard wouldn't be enough to make me a decent cook."

The idea that the hotel's fate could be swayed by a meal is ridiculous to Elise. And yet this is how Maurice operates, in grand, exaggerated gestures. Most don't expect this, what with his way of going about things: always neat and organized — and short-tempered when others aren't the same. But in truth he is someone who adheres to the credos of karma and fate. The kind of man who shows up out of the blue, placing his livelihood in the hands of a former's chef's daughter. Paz used to argue with Maurice about mysticism all the time, the two going back and forth on things like leaving milk under beds to protect guests. "All it does is attract ants," Paz would point out angrily. "Do they pay for rooms?"

Together, Elise and Maurice bring everything into the kitchen. Once-stocked pantries are depleted. The freezer and fridge are empty too. Maurice sighs, his brow furrowed into creases shaped like antler tines. "Only a ghost could live here."

"Don't give Paz any ideas."

Maurice doesn't seem to hear her. "Ok, the meal plan is" — he unfolds a slip of paper from his pocket — "ah yes. Yes, of course. Are you ready?"

Elise sits on the counter. "Go ahead."

"It's your father's old Bastille Day menu. We start with a mâche salad and a Creole vinaigrette, followed by ravioli with fennel. Next, Poitou-Charentes petits-gris snail...you remember his cagouille, right?"

"No."

"Of course you do. After will be pomme savonette and a bordelaise sauce alongside filet mignon. And for dessert we'll do an apricot confiture sorbet. Okay?"

Elise blinks. "I can cook sausage."

The next few hours are painstaking. Snails are scratched off the meal plan after being burnt to rubber. The bordelaise sauce is watery, so that too is removed. Worst of all, neither of the desserts come out right. When they are finished, Maurice describes the meal as something Paz would be proud of. But Elise sees the doubt in his eyes.

The Peugeot barks as Maurice drives away.

The wind blows, cliffs dribbling loose rocks into the river. The house has never been so empty. Even when her parents were around, it was too big: seven bedrooms, three floors, each as lonely as the next. There is nothing here for her and yet she has nowhere else to go. She has no money, no friends.

The duffel bag sits by the front door. She ignores it.

Instead, Elise takes the meat tenderizer and goes to the dock. Along the way she passes a garden her mother used to tend to, wild with fragrant shrubs, lavender, rosemary, thyme, flower beds colored as though harvested by Monet. Its rimrocks served as a hiding place over the years. Paz would storm down the stone steps, belligerent, hoarse with rage, all the while Elise crouched out of sight, lifted by the beauty that protected her, and by thoughts of a great flood carrying her away.

—

Ten-year-old Elise was used to running. She would escape down the stone steps behind their house, taking them two at a time as Paz's voice boomed overhead, arguing with the open air, crying, cursing God. She ran until she reached the dock.

Every time she went to the dock, the fountain entered her mind's eye. This happened not by will, but invitation, as though it were a memory capable of being loaned but never owned. Ever

since Santi's closed, she could only picture the fountain dry, its stone cracked with a gray-green patina.

Paz would drink up at the house until the wine rack was exhausted. Then, he filled a sack with empties and walked it down to a shed where he stored the tandem kayak, lining each bottle up neatly like toy soldiers.

Being a chef was the only life Paz knew how to live. Without it, he had nothing. Or at least that's what Elise thought until the coughing started. It turned out Paz had one last thing to offer, and fate was determined to take it too.

The shed sits behind shrubs twisted into finely reticulated patterns. Elise approaches, thorns conducting their ritual sacrifice. Pulling a safety pin from her pocket, she tries to open the padlocked door. The pin isn't the best tool, but she keeps trying, its tinny movements offering some encouragement. Maybe Maurice is right, she thinks. Maybe she *is* haunting the house, searching for what can never be found.

The pin snaps and cuts her. Blood drips from index finger, to middle, to ring. It's been a while since she's forced a lock, and though she was once skilled at doing so, the shackle remains fastened shut. Seeing no other option, she strikes the doorknob with the meat tenderizer until it breaks free.

Across three shelves are bottles of wine. The topmost are cheap and missing labels. Below those sit empties, their slim curves padded by dust. The bottommost shelf is near the floor, where everything is smashed. Shards crunch under her shoes as she kicks over jagged bodies of glass. Propped on a wall is the tandem kayak, its plastic warped from disuse like an atrophied limb.

Elise thinks it's an ugly thing, the shed. Under different circumstances she would have used it to store books, painting the walls and cleaning the single-pane window. It could have been useful. Beautiful, even.

There's a noise nearby. It isn't a normal noise. It rattles in harmony with the shed itself. Elise grabs the meat tenderizer.

The noise grows louder as she walks down the dock. Every step she takes creaks ominously. When the last wooden plank meets the river, she stops, looks down, observing the moonlight on a small patch of black water. The fountain glows below, unmistakable, with its three-tiers and faded gray stone. How it got in the river is beyond Elise.

She reaches out but it's too far. Without hesitation she dives in, clothes and all, piercing whatever surface exists between her and the light. First there is nothing. Then boulders emerge. Elise twists through vacuum-tight spaces, bobbing up and down as the current take control.

She comes into a valley of limestone barely wide enough to fit. Frothy whitewash drags her along, the darkness making it difficult to see. She has never swum this far before, wary of the Verdon's violence. At times she stops by grabbing hold of a grooved rock or the offshoot of a Phoenician juniper, its bark peeled back in mammoth strips, the berries citrusy and evergreen.

She's sure he will come back, Paz. Certain of it. That's why she left him by the river. When a storm blows through and the banks overflow, he'll float to the surface, paunchy stomach, speedo, and all, smiling as if death was always part of the plan.

Elise swims from the gulch to a separate channel. She is uncomfortable, her breaststroke like kneading molasses, every motion a trial working the thick, viscous water. Blue dragonflies land on her nose and mouth, their wings melodized clicks.

Swimming to shore isn't an option. The scrublands are riddled with rocks too slick to grab hold of. Her legs begin to ache, fingers pruned. Finally, she spots a thick branch. It hangs low enough over the water to pull herself out.

Paz was the same age as her when his father died. She wonders how he felt the day it happened. Was he better off? Was she?

Suddenly, the current's pace quickens, and Elise hears the unmistakable roar of a waterfall. The moon banks between mountain peaks, casting a light reminiscent of the fountain itself. There's a calm before she is thrown over the ledge. When she falls, she is further from home than ever before.

—

Elise spent her twelfth birthday learning to pick locks. Guests at the hotel were always losing their keys, and with Maurice short-staffed and Paz ambiguously unwell, her help was required. Unable to pay for duplicates, she walked to the town library and found a book titled *Easy Pickings*. It explained everything. Squeezing lockpicks through a keyhole proved difficult at first, but with enough practice the technique became second nature.

Occasionally, doors were opened without permission. Elise never stole, but rather went through peoples' things. It fascinated her to see what got tucked inside suitcases, the items offering a scaled-down look into the lives of others.

Each foray weakened her resolve to stay in the Verdon Gorge. Guests were no longer passing strangers. They were real, part of a world she could see for herself if not for Paz. If she stayed, she knew his life would become hers, snuffing out what hope flickered on inside her with the bitter wind of resentment.

—

The morning sky is blue, the waterfall immetrically hammering itself into sheets of cold froth. At the far end of the plunge pool is a dirt trail, and further past, a road. The occasional car speeds by.

Elise wakes tasting mud. She has lost things of the replaceable variety: shoes, her sense of orientation. Both float to her in the pool's shallow end. She is lucky to be alive.

After falling last night, she swam to shore and slept under a patch of reeds, wondering not how she managed to survive, but if the afterlife would have brought her to a house on a river with Paz, forever in limbo.

She walks the path to the road. A van goes by with tinted windows. A while later, a sedan with rusted wheels slows down.

An old woman lowers her window. She wears a red scarf around her neck and the moth-eaten remnant of a button down peppered with gray hair. "What happened to you?"

"I fell down a waterfall."

She chews the inside of her cheek for a moment before responding. "It's fine, you don't have to tell me."

"Can you take me home?" Elise asks.

"That depends," says the woman. "Where do you live?"

Elise looks up and down the road. She points in the direction the car is headed.

The woman narrows her eyes. "Do you know where you are?"

Elise says she doesn't.

"Then how do you know you're going the right way?"

“I don’t think you can always know.”

A beat passes before the old woman leans to the passenger side door and pushes it open. Together they drive off. Mud is still in Elise’s mouth as the radio cuts in and out. “For what it’s worth, I agree,” the woman says over the din. The road curves, then straightens. “But give me your address just in case.”

—

On the day Paz was diagnosed, nearly ten months before his death, he brought up the break-ins. It had been years since Santi’s closed, and even longer since Elise had stopped working at the hotel, yet he spoke as if accusing her of murder, his knuckles white mountaintops clenched over the steering wheel as they drove back from the hospital.

“I don’t know why you’re bringing this up *now*,” Elise said to him. “It’s not true, anyway.”

He refused to look at her, saying only, “Don’t lie to a dying man.”

When they got home, Paz said she needed to leave. Elise’s bag was already packed. All she had to do was get it. Something stopped her. She thought it was love at the time but later came to find it was fear. Fear of living with the same regret as her father.

What is life, Elise would ask herself, if not a war against our worst decisions? All the sad memories, the tragedies of embarrassment – they could heal if left alone. But Elise liked to scratch at her missed chances. Opening old wounds reminded her the world was real, or at least real enough to feel. Regret manifested differently person to person, she discovered. Some took it out on others. Some turned it on themselves.

The next morning Paz acted as if nothing happened. The cancer went unmentioned, and so too her banishment. He fried eggs and buttered toast. A mug of tea was offered.

She told him she hoped the cancer killed him quickly. Paz didn't respond. His focus was on a small grease fire, its smoke wrapping the kitchen in a black pall that, for a moment, seemed to come not from the pan, but Paz himself.

—

Maurice is waiting at the house when she arrives. His legs are crossed diplomatically on the stoop. He looks unflustered in the morning sun but for sweat stains emerging through his blazer.

As Elise approaches, his eyes widen. He pokes a finger at her clothes. "What happened?"

"I smelled you and jumped off a cliff."

Maurice insists she clean up. Elise runs the shower, watching the water spill from the ledge where the soap bar sits, to the tub's rim, to its floor, rusted in yellow straw-like patches. She strips and gets in, lying supine no different than her father by the river. It occurs to her that regret doesn't have to mean stagnation. People who obsess over the past miss a fundamental truth about the future: it can be changed.

When Elise gets out of the shower, she goes into Paz's room. It's empty other than a few loose sheets on the floor. When she collects them, a glass of milk under the bed comes into view. A line of ants climb its side.

"Your trick didn't save him," she says when she enters the kitchen, twisting her wet hair into a bun. She places the milk glass on the counter.

"Maybe he didn't put it there for himself."

Elise looks around the kitchen. Metal tongs are charred at the edge, pans congealed by grease. "They're going to close the hotel, Maurice."

It's a strange thing, to see a large man look small. "I know," he says.

They bring everything out to the car. Once it's full, Maurice gets in, but Elise does not. She returns inside, emerging a few minutes later with her duffel bag.

"You're leaving?"

She nods. "After the meal."

"Where will you go?"

Elise extends her hand through the open window. In it is a small key. "The house has a lot of rooms. With a little work you could rent it out. Maybe even run a small hotel of your own." She smiles. "But you have to promise me something."

Maurice holds the key as if it were left over a flame, pinched gingerly between fingers.

"Elise..."

"Don't add a restaurant."

—

The hotel hasn't changed much. Elise unloads the car and makes for the kitchen, navigating back and forth through the empty parking lot. When they are done, she rounds the service entrance and goes to the front yard. The fountain is waiting.

She drops her bag and climbs inside.

Elise thinks some things deserve to be immortal. Not because they are better than their circumstances, but because of life's unfairness, its indifference to what could be in favor of what is.

Moss climbs the fountain's side. There are mushrooms blooming brown and white, caps wet with morning dew. It was once proud, brimming with the confidence of something eager. Staff

attended to it at first. Then, as the years went by, less so. A missed day here. A week forgotten there. The elements left their mark.

The fountain deserves more than a forgotten hotel. Were it up to her, she would clean it. Pick the weeds and scrub the grime. But she can't. It's not Elise's to fix.