

Lyon story abridged.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

By Bill Kenney

Claude Laurent exploded from the cool of L'epicerie, a café in La Place Bellecour at the foot of Fourvière Hill, into the heat of the late July sun. Two small sailboats tacked back and forth on the Rhône River and the world seemed to be at peace, but Claude was sprinting past the funicular cars that carried the crowd of smiling tourists to the top of the hill where they could visit the cathedral and Roman theaters highlighted in the guidebooks, toward Vieux Lyon, the old part of the city, where he and his mother lived.

He raced through the door of the traboules that connected to the street on which their house stood. His mother, Marie-Élise taught European History at Bernard University and liked to remind him about how les traboules had been used by the resistance fighters in hiding from the Gestapo during the occupation of France in World War II. None of that was important to him now.

He arrived breathless in the kitchen where his mother was chopping beets. She was only three inches shorter than his six feet; her brown hair barely covered her ears, and she wore rimless glasses most of the time. She carried herself with dignity even when chopping beets. She was a full professor at Bernard University, and had published two texts used in several other universities in France. Despite her demanding approach in the classroom, her gentle smile endeared her to her students. Claude admired her intellect and ability to be tough without being nasty.

He shouted, "Gerard Martin is dead."

Marie-Élise laughed. "Did he get another lambasting from the Cardinal for something he published in *La Vérité Nue*, that rag he claims tells the world the naked truth?"

"No, mother. He was murdered!"

"What? Are you serious?" The knife fell from her hand to the floor.

"I just saw the news on television. Three men broke into the magazine's office and shot four people. The TV said it was in retaliation for the latest issue of the magazine.

His mother was silent for a moment and then said, "I guess it was inevitable that something like this would happen. Your father has enraged everybody with the outrageous crap he publishes in *La Vérité Nue*. You remember that it was his ridiculing the Pope that was the last straw in ending our marriage."

"Of course I remember, but this is not words. It's a real murder."

"Yes, Claude, and I'm trying to digest that, but Gerard Martin has not been a part of our lives for almost ten years. That's why I changed our names back to Laurent."

"He has been a part of my life. He calls every once in a while to brag about who he's pissed off lately. That embarrasses me, but we have a connection."

"I know, Claude, and his calls to you make me angry too. Did he call recently?"

"Yes, about three weeks ago. He was bragging that the upcoming issue would shake the Muslim world. I couldn't imagine why he'd want to do that, and I whined to Toufik about it. I

thought I might get some sympathy from him. He's always complaining to me about how his father in Morocco wants to cut his allowance."

"Is Toufik the man who you had some classes with last semester?"

"Yes. His full name is Toufik Moreau. We've kind of kept in touch over the summer."

Claude brushed a wisp of his long blonde hair away from eyes and shifted his sandaled feet.

"What are we going to do?"

"At the very least we'll say a prayer for his soul, but that may be all. Let's see what we can find out from the news."

They had cold beet soup for dinner with some crusty bread from the bakery across the street, and a glass of Macon-Villages red.

The next morning they studied the *Le Monde* report on the massacre in Paris. Three men wearing face masks, carrying AK 15s, and shouting "Allah Akbar" broke into the offices of *La Vérité Nue*, and shot every one they could find. First to go were Gerard Martin, two cartoonists, and an editor. They had been sipping Champagne in celebration of the fact that the complete 50,000 copy print run of the latest issue of the magazine had been sold out in less than 24 hours. The shooters then doffed their masks and guns and melted into the Paris subway.

That particular issue of the magazine had lived up to the hints Claude's father had given him weeks earlier. The Prophet Mohammed had been portrayed in various obscene cartoons such as naked with a huge penis; surrounded by seven naked women waiting their turn to perform

fellatio. The man left in charge at *La Vérité Nue* had ordered a new press run of 500,000 copies, and people waited on line at news kiosks for the delivery truck to arrive.

Claude watched the giant cry of outrage in the media during the following days, about this terror attack on the magazine. Heads of state marched in the streets of Paris in support of the right to free speech. It had been ten years since Claude thought his father was noble, yet there was a certain nobility in his death, as ugly as it was. Claude bounced from shock to acceptance of the inevitability of it; from sadness to relief. There was no emptiness; no sense of loss; just confusion. He did feel his father had finally reached the peak of his own Mt. Everest.

His mother and he decided to go to Paris for the funeral, wearing sunglasses and avoiding cameramen. It was the Christian thing to do. There was a private service conducted by a priest and a trip to a small cemetery in the country. The whole thing was protected by plain clothes security guards. Attendance was limited, mostly employees of *La Vérité Nue*, but there was perhaps a half-dozen others.

As they left the burial site in a grassy cemetery where the graves were marked by both large and small headstones and shaded by many trees, a short man in a black suit with a starched white shirt and light blue tie approached. He was carrying a slim leather brief case and looked like the people you see on television sitting in chairs behind diplomats gathered around a fancy conference table. "I believe that you are Gerard Martin's son," he said.

Claude looked at his mother, took a deep breath and then said, "Well . . . Yes."

"I am Mr. Martin's attorney. I wish to inform you that you are now the sole owner of *La Vérité Nue*."

Claude staggered back a step, as if struck by a blow to the chest. His mother just gasped.

“Mr. Martin had a great deal of respect for you, thought you were very talented, and had the brains to run the magazine if needed. Unfortunately the need has come much sooner than anyone anticipated.”

“I don’t want the damn thing,” Claude stammered.

“It’s worth quite a lot of money, especially after this . . . tragedy.”

Claude’s mother said, “We are not interested in being involved with the magazine.”

“Still, the business side of the situation must be dealt with,” said the lawyer. “It would not be fair to the remaining employees to let the matter linger. The magazine is their livelihood. Can we discuss this tomorrow morning in my office?”

After a moment Claude said, “Provided we can resolve the issue quickly.”

The man gave Claude his card. “I will do my best to make that happen. Is nine o’clock too early?” This card identified him as Marcel Lefèvre in French on one side and in English on the other.

“The sooner the better,” said Claude. He straightened up, took his mother’s arm and left the cemetery. It was just after one in the afternoon.

They stopped when they got to the street. Claude said, “What are we going to do now?”

“Historically, the heirs to kingdoms have prayed for guidance when they inherited the realm, even when they had something to do with the demise of their predecessor. First a bite to eat, and then we'll go to Notre Dame to pray for wisdom.

The next morning they arrived at Lefèvre's office promptly at 9 AM. It was not a luxurious place. There was no window, the furniture was pedestrian, and the wall decorations consisted of a collection of Lefèvre's diplomas. The only thing of notice was the large, high-backed chair in which he sat behind his small oak desk.

There was a tall, red-headed man in the lawyer's office when they arrived. He was dressed casually in the manner of a literary darling living on the Left Bank in Paris. Lefèvre introduced him, “This is Monsieur Charles Roux, the senior editor of *La Vérité Nuc*. He has a proposal in which he hopes you will be interested.”

They shook hands and sat down. Roux remained standing. “All of us at the magazine wish to express our sympathy for your loss.”

Then he got down to business. “I understand that you do not want to assume ownership of the magazine.”

“That's right,” said Claude.

After a quiet moment Roux said, “Would you be interested in a quick sale of the magazine? I and other employees have formed a corporation and can make an offer to buy it from you. Quite frankly we cannot pay the full potential value of the property, but believe the offer to be fair at the moment.”

Without glancing at his mother Claude replied, “What is your offer?”

Roux picked up the only file folder on the desk and handed it to Claude. It contained a single sheet of paper, the bottom line of which read, “Five million Euros.”

Mother and son sat silently looking at each other for a full minute. Lefèvre, at a nod from Roux, interjected, “If that’s not acceptable we might augment it with quarterly payments out of profits for a year.”

Marie-Élise said, “We don’t want any of the future profits from such a magazine. It has not been a part of our life; in fact its editorial approach has been the antithesis of how we live. A clean sale at a fair price makes sense.”

Roux let out his breath and smiled.

Claude’s mother went on, “A lawyer friend from Lyon can be here tomorrow to discuss the details of your offer, and evaluate just how fair it is. You can pay for his costs. If all is well, Claude will sell the magazine, and settle the future of it and those employed there, as misguided as they may be.”

Roux frowned and opened his mouth as if he was about to argue the comment, but Lefèvre silenced him with a glance. The lawyer stood, looked at Claude, and asked “Is that your wish?”

Claude nodded his agreement. Lefèvre then said, “Very well, we are at your service. “We will add the legal terminology for your solicitor to review tomorrow.”

They shook hands and the Laurents started their journey back to Lyon. Enroute, Claude's mother expressed her conviction that God had inspired both them and the leaders at the magazine.

The sale proceeded promptly.

It was December. Lyon was decked out in all its finery: La Fête des Lumières. Its purpose was to thank the Blessed Mother for sparing Lyon from the plague in the early 1600s. The basilica was adorned with a huge lighted sign saying "Merci Marie", and many other lighting arrangements bedecked the rest of the city. Claude didn't care much for the display, even though thousands of tourists invaded his city to admire them.

He waited in the small bar of one of the finest "bouchons" in the city, one of those which justified Lyon's claim to be the gastronomic capital of France. It was all polished dark wood and white table cloths. He was dressed in a fine navy blue wool jacket, gray slacks and Italian shoes; hair neatly trimmed, and his face freshly shaved, but was still nervous in such an unfamiliar place.

He was waiting for Toufik, with whom he still talked occasionally at the university, but who requested this special meeting at this special place. He had no idea why they needed a special meeting in a fancy place. Fantasies filled his mind for a few minutes, but then he shoved that back into that corner of his subconscious where he collected pipe dreams. No, this was just his friend's way of having a nice drink to celebrate the end of the fall semester and the upcoming Christmas vacation. Well, he would know in a moment.

Toufik arrived dressed in a perfectly-fitting gray suit a shade lighter than Claude's slacks. He looked at home in the elegant venue he had chosen for the meeting. Claude rose to greet him. They shook hands and embraced briefly as was the custom at the university.

"Let's try this year's new wine," Toufik suggested and waved at a waiter.

"I thought you didn't drink," Claude said.

Toufik answered, "Well you know. . . when in Rome.

"Well, then you should realize that the time for the new wine has passed. Let's try a Haut Medoc." He gestured to the waiter, who smiled and left.

While they waited Toufik said, "You're looking more like a millionaire these days."

Claude laughed. "Not really. I've upgraded my wardrobe a little, and we've made a couple of improvements to the house. Two of my mother's favorite charities have also benefitted, but I still work at the library on weekends for spending money."

Toufik smiled as the bottle of wine arrived. After the usual opening ceremony with the cork, the waiter poured each of them a glass. Toufik touched his glass to Claude's, and said, "I recognize this meeting is a little strange, but there is a charity I wanted to talk to you about tonight. The friends of mine who helped you get where you are could use some assistance with another project."

"I don't understand?"

“Claude, you complained for months lamenting about your father’s magazine antics, and these friends thought you wouldn’t mind if they used him as the focus of a project they were planning.”

Claude leaped from his chair. “What are you saying?”

Toufik took a sip of the wine, held it up to the light and said, “You’re right. This is better than the new wine.”

Claude grabbed Toufik’s arm. “What are you saying?”

Toufik put the glass down, pushed Claude’s hand away from his jacket and smoothed the fabric. “I’m saying that my friends were able to avenge your father’s terrible insults to the Prophet, thanks to your tipoff about what the magazine was about to publish. Unfortunately, they acted a bit too late to prevent the abuse, but the issue would probably have been published anyway. As it turned out there was a silver, or should I say golden, lining to the whole deal”

Claude collapsed into his chair.

“Yes, Claude, his leaving the magazine to you was the silver lining.”

“You were there. You shot my father?”

“Hell no. I don’t have the courage for that kind of action. I am merely a messenger boy.”

“You used me for murder.”

“No. I just listened to your whining and passed the information on to heroes willing to strike a blow for Allah. It seemed fitting.”

“You mean the cowardly bastards who murdered four people!”

“Not so loud, Claude. This is a fine establishment.”

Claude looked around. Some couples were looking their way. He turned back to Toufik, who said, “My friends would like a tithe from your largesse. They want a half million Euros.”

“So you can murder other innocents? Never.”

Toufik stood, bent over Claude and whispered, “Think on it, friend. It would be a shame to lose both parents in the same year. I’ll be in touch in a day or so.” With that, he left.

Claude’s head dropped to the table and he wept. A waiter came to bring him the check for the wine. Oblivious to the stares of other customers, he sat there with tears running down his cheeks, drank the rest of the bottle of wine, and staggered home.

Marie-Elise returned from teaching her early morning class the next day to find Claude still in bed. She shook him awake. “Claude, are you sick? Didn’t you have a class this morning?”

Claude sat up in bed, but then sank back amid a wave of dizziness.

“Claude, what’s the matter?”

Claude sat up very slowly this time, got his feet on the floor, and held his aching head in both hands. In a croaking whisper he said, “I have not only committed a terrible sin, but also put our lives in danger.”

“Come now, it can’t be that bad.”

“Yes it can,” he shouted, and blurted out the whole story.

When he had finished, his mother sat in stunned silence. After a time, she got up and left the room. Claude was sure she could no longer remain in the presence of such an evil man, but a moment later she returned with a glass of water and some aspirin.

“Take these,” she said. “We need clear heads to think through this situation.”

Claude downed the aspirin, and then said, “If we pay them now, we’ll support more murders and they’ll only be back next year for more.”

“Yes, that seems likely. We need to find a way to end it. It is a time for prayer. Get dressed.”

They hiked up the hill to the cathedral. The exercise helped to clear Claude’s hangover. They sat in silence on the wooden chairs with twine seats scattered in irregular rows in the chilly nave of the magnificent basilica. Light shown through the rose window behind the altar and bathed the central aisle in light, but they sat in the shadows, saying nothing.

The silence was broken by the shuffle of feet and rustle of clothes as a woman dressed in black with a lace shawl over her head approached a stand holding votive candles at the front of the church. Her coin clinked in chest provided in the stand and she lit a candle with a partly used taper. She knelt for a moment on the stone floor, blest herself several times, and left almost briskly, as if this were a daily ritual. Claude wondered whether he should adopt such a ritual in the days and years to come. He watched the flame flicker, the almost invisible smoke rise toward the wood-beamed ceiling ten meters up, but nothing moved his frozen brain to action. He lowered his head to his hands.

After a few moments his mother shook his knee. “Come,” she said, “there is only one thing to do.” Claude was mystified. He waited for his mother to explain, but she said nothing until they got to the bottom of Fourviere Hill.

Grim-faced, his mother said, “There is a man I sometimes consult for first-hand input to my history research projects. He was a leader of the Resistance movement during the occupation by the Nazis. He’s almost ninety years old, but still sharp. Some people called him Le Sauveur. I just call him Papi.

“Grandpa?” asked Claude.

Marie-Elise smiled. “No relative. He claims that he has committed too many sins to merit being called anyone’s Gran pere.”

They slipped through a traboules into a winding, cobble-stoned street in the oldest part of the city. They made their way to a narrow, three story, pastel green house in the middle of a row of five connected buildings painted in different colors. The house looked as if the builder had started at both ends of the row and just squeezed a tiny house in the space left in the middle after he had finished the other four, wider houses.

She pounded the brass ring against the thick wooden door. There was no answer so she stepped back into the street and called up toward an open window on the second floor. “Papi, it’s Marie. I have a problem I’d like to discuss with you.”

A man with a grey crew cut and grizzled face stuck his head out of the window. “Ah Marie,” he said. “Come on in. The door is open.”

As they entered the building a short, lean man made his way down a cast iron circular staircase putting his right foot down first on each step and holding the hand rail with both hands. “These stairs are getting a bit difficult,” he said with a smile. “I’m not as agile as I used to be; may have to move. Come, have some tea.” He led the way into the kitchen.

“Papi, this is my son. Claude. He’s a student at Bernard University.”

Papi shook Claude’s hand. The young man was amazed at the strength of the old man’s grip.

When they were seated at a small round table with steaming cups in their hands, Marie Elise said, “A student at the university is not who he pretends to be. He fed information he got from Claude to the cowardly bastards who killed my ex husband and three others at the magazine in Paris that he published.”

The old man said, “Yes I read about the murders and all the demonstrations afterwards.”

“That was horrible enough, but it’s not over. Now this student is demanding that we finance another mission for members of the gang that committed the murders. Apparently they have found another target whom they think has insulted Mohammed. He has threatened me, and I fear the blackmail will never end.”

”That’s usually the case,” the old man said. “The man’s name is?”

“Toufik Moreau,” answered Claude. “He claims to be just a messenger boy.”

“It seems he’s a messenger boy with initiative,” said Papi. “A catalyst for murder.”

“I thought he was my friend.”

“Of course. That’s how spies operate.”

“Do you have any thoughts about how to deal with this?” asked Marie Elise.

Papi took a deep breath, then he said, “The Nazis killed the Jews, and now radical Muslims kill anyone they don’t like, even fellow Muslims. We of the Resistance did many things during the Great War to save our Jewish friends and promote some freedom for this part of France. A lot of those things were not particularly civilized, but seemed right for the situation. A classic case of the end justifying the means. We lived through it, and nursed our scars. Now you’re asking me to relive a bit of those times.”

“We are just seeking your advice,” answered Marie.

“Advice is cheap, and will do nothing to help. We both know that,” said the veteran fighter.

They all sat in grim silence for more than a minute. Papi drummed his fingers on the table and looked out the window opposite his seat.

Then he asked, “Have you given him the money?”

“Not yet,” Claude answered. “He said he would give me the details in a day or so.”

“Good. Have your mother provide the details of the payoff to me as soon as you get them. Then do exactly what he says. In the meantime my friends and I will see if we have any ideas about how we might break this chain of evil.”

“How might you do that?” asked Claude. His mother said nothing.

“That will take some planning, even though there are only a few options. If I’m successful the answer will be obvious. Now go and live your lives the best way you know how. We’ll see what we can do.”

Claude jerked erect in his chair and said “But what . . .”

His mother cut his words off by grasping his arm. She said, “Thank you, Papi.” She stood to go. “I’ll let you know the details as soon as we get them.”

The next day Toufik cornered Claude in a quiet corner of the campus. It was a cloudy day with a chill wind and the threat of snow, or perhaps the promise of a rare white Christmas.

Toufik came right to the point. “Will you provide the money, or do you need further inspiration?”

“No, we’ll give you the money.”

“Good. I want it in cash, in loose bills no larger than 200 Euros. And I want it before I drive to Paris for winter break the morning after next. Bring it to my apartment at 10.”

“This will be the end, right?”

Toufik smiled. “Of course, Claude. Of course.”

Claude passed on the details to his mother, who passed them on to Papi. Then she went with him to talk to the manager of their bank. The man protested vigorously, but ultimately agreed to provide the cash at nine AM two days hence. Though it was the middle of the week, Marie Elise went to mass.

There was a strained silence between Claude and his mother for the next day and a half, relieved only partially by the need for him to take, and she to grade, the end-of-semester exams. They heard nothing from Papi during that time. Claude's small reservoir of hope faded with each passing hour.

Claude brought a canvas duffle to the bank at 9:05 AM on the appointed day. The cash came in taped bundles holding 10,000 Euros each. He asked the banker to cut the tapes and put the loose notes in the duffle. The 2500 separate notes barely fit. The bag must have weighed almost ten kilos. He walked with the heavy load and shaking hands to Toufik's apartment. On each step of the way he prayed for the people Toufik's vicious friends planned to kill, and that Papi might indeed find a way to end the plot.

When he arrived, he was greeted with a warm smile and an offer of coffee. He refused. Toufik took the duffle, felt its weight, smiled and placed it next to his luggage in the boot of the Citroen parked at the curb. Claude knew that Toufik had no need to check on the bag's contents, because he could always find Claude's mother.

Toufik said, "Allah thanks you, Claude. Enjoy what you call Christmas break, and I'll see you for the spring term."

Claude would not have known what to do if Toufik had offered to shake hands.

The next day the TV news broadcasts screamed of the explosion of a Citroen on the road to Paris just past the village of Villefranche about fifty kilometers north of Lyon. Car explosions were rare enough, but this one merited even more attention. The cloud of 200 Euro notes that erupted from the car darkened the sky for a moment, and then was dispersed by the wind into

fields and streets. Chaos resulted as drivers, pedestrians and even farmers scrambled to recover some of them.

Claude and his mother watched the news in stone-faced silence, not even daring to look at each other as they sat at opposite ends of the couch in the living room. The one meter wide HD TV, which was one of the few household upgrades they allowed themselves with the money from the sale of the magazine, showed the site of the explosion in gory detail, right down to the dismembered arm lying on the hood of the car amid a sea of glass from the shattered windshield. The scene was repeated every few minutes as various CNN reporters talked. Claude's stomach churned, but he could not tear himself away from the screen. He remembered the stories he'd read about how citizens of the United States sat and watched replays of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center for days after that tragedy, and felt he was bound by the same compulsion.

When it was reported that fingerprints from the dismembered arm identified the victim of the explosion as Toufik Moreau, innocuously described as a student at Bernard University, his mother rose from the couch and said, "I have some things to do at the office. I fixed you a sandwich. Perhaps we'll go out for dinner." Claude merely grunted, his eyes never leaving the screen.

During the breaks in news coverage of the explosion, Claude read the book his mother had written about the activities of the Resistance during the German occupation of France. The harsh realities of the time drove him into a morose silence. He never left the couch except to relieve himself and grab a handful of bread from the kitchen. When his eyes glazed as he sat there and he dozed, he dreamed of flaming cars and flying bank notes.

As he read, it became clear that his mother knew what Papi would do, if not how, and that she also knew she could not share that with him beforehand. While he whined, she had faced the problem and took action, just as she had in separating from his father. No wonder that now she just went about her daily activities: some time at her office; some writing at home, and did not press him to lighten up. It was as if they had discovered some secret about each other that could not be discussed, at least not yet.

Claude and his mother went to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. They prayed as a soldier might who had just lived through a bloody battle, offering prayers of praise and thanksgiving, but also a survivor's plea for forgiveness. Claude wondered whether any soldiers ever found the Peace of Christmas after winning a battle. He knew not what the future held for him and his mother, but was pretty sure that there would be little real peace.

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