

The Nail

I dread those times when I must go into the city. The city is like a great, dead whale to me, massive, impenetrable, threatening to rupture and spill its noxious innards at my feet. That particular day, the task at hand seemed to be especially onerous. I skirted the obligation with invented detours and found myself in a part of the city I had not seen in years. I might have called it my old neighborhood, but that I had never felt at home there, never connected to it or its people except for Chantal and Craig, my neighbors a door away. When I left years before, I had made no attempt to stay in contact with them, and in my way I had made certain that no one could contact me.

I looked down the street at the anonymous, identical facades of the three-story apartment buildings that stretched into the distance, their ornate moldings and machicolations, their elaborate cornices, a testament to the great steam-powered machines that could churn out part after identical part in mechanical imitation of high art. They were beautiful for a moment until the fatigue of repetition and the anxiety of dislocation set in. As I traversed this landscape of dis-ease, a woman came out of one of the doors. I felt an adrenalin jolt in my chest. The woman appeared to be Chantal.

Something like this might have happened to Jonah, some bizarre hallucination in the pitch-black belly of the beast. But in an instant I knew this was no hallucination. As she opened the iron gate, Chantal looked up. She must have felt that same etheric rush as she saw me. Her eyes held mine for a moment before she cried, “Phillip, *mon dieu!*” and started toward me.

Her arms went around my neck and she kissed me on both cheeks. Against the gray, necrotic backdrop of the whale she was preternaturally beautiful, almost pathologically vivacious. The pole of my own mood swung irresistibly toward hers.

“Were you coming to see me?”

I smiled. I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

“You left so suddenly. Never said where you were going. Such a naughty boy.”

Still I was speechless.

“But no matter.” She hugged me again, trapping one of my hands between us as I fumbled with the other to return the embrace. “So how are you? *Quoi d’neuf?* What are you doing these days?”

“What are you doing?” I managed to croak in reply.

“I’m on my way to get a powder. I feel one of my headaches is coming. I need something before it overwhelms me.” She hooked her arm in mine. “Can you walk with me?”

We walked the few blocks to the apothecary along streets both familiar and strange. Chantal peppered me with questions and laughed at my vague, evasive answers.

“*Quel têtu!*” she said pulling me closer to her as we walked. Like any true bilingual she moved effortlessly between English and the French of her heritage. She was born in France and came here at an early age. This had been for me part of the charm of our friendship. My own grasp of French was rudimentary, and my belief that I might understand, and even reply to her, was pure

invention. I had acquired a facility with Spanish in my travels as a younger man, and it was there that I often retreated when it was clear that she would have the upper hand in our language games.

As we waited for the apothecary to formulate a palliative for Chantal, I asked, “So how is Craig?” I saw that I had turned the wrong stone.

She looked away from me. The radiance that had suffused her guttered like a spent candle. “We are...” she hesitated as if searching for the right word, “*Presque finis.*”

“He’s gone?” I asked.

“*Oh, non. Pas de tout.* He is there, not there. He works. I work. He does what he wants... *et moi, aussi.*” Seeing her own darkness reflected in my face, she grabbed my hand.

“It’s ok. These things happen. What there was, it’s gone. We’re not angry.” Her face lit up again. “And I’m so happy to see you!”

Outside I steered her away from the way we had come. The late afternoon light was thin, and the gray of the beast had deepened. We walked down a side street and I stopped her in the dusk of a low-branched tree.

“May I kiss you?” I asked.

“But...”

“*Un clavo saca el otro,*” I said.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

I tried my bad French. “*Une clé leve l’autre.*”

“One key raises the other?” Her confusion seemed to reanimate her former mood.

“I was trying to say, one nail knocks out the other... *un clavo saca el otro.* I guess it doesn’t translate well.”

“*Mais, si,* it translates. *Un clou ôte l’autre.* But what does it mean?”

I brought my face close to hers and brushed her lips with mine.

“Let’s do something,” I said.

“Like what?” she asked hugging my left arm.

“Let’s go to the kino.”

She paused as if pondering the idea, then, tilting her face expectantly, said, “Ok, but first give me a proper kiss.”

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I talked her into walking to the theater although she thought it far. We set a leisurely pace, stopping a pair of times to reaffirm our new-found interest in kissing. By the time we arrived it was dusk, and the warm glow of the street lamps had all but banished the whale from my mind.

It was darkness I sought. Inside we took seats beneath an overhanging balcony deep in the rear of the nearly deserted auditorium. I remember little of the show. I was absorbed in the presence of Chantal and marveled each time when, as if by secret prearrangement, our lips came together. My disappointment was sharp when the house lights interrupted our gentle tryst.

Outside the theater I pulled the lever on the call box, and we watched the black stream of carts, wagons and carriages flowing along the boulevard until, within minutes, the varnished scarlet of a cab appeared angling toward the curb. The horses were high-steppers, and the driver struggled to bring them to rein.

“Sorry, Folks. They’re fresh from the stable. Must be something in the air tonight.” He managed a temporary halt, and we ascended to the plush, dark interior of the carriage. The horses bolted into the stream of traffic, and Chantal lurched into my lap with the force of their acceleration. In the cab our passion was abetted by the sometimes violent sway of the rig. As our driver contended for control of his team, Chantal and I gave free rein to our desires, stopping just short of final indiscretion.

The ride was over too quickly, as short as the walk had been long. We found ourselves once again at the iron gate outside Chantal's building. The building was dark, and Chantal pulled me through the gate to the base of the stone steps that led to the door. She stood on the first step, her face level with mine, and we kissed.

"Merci," she said

"Thanks? What did I do?" I asked.

"I think you've helped me with that nail." She laughed.

"I've barely begun that!" I moved to kiss her again, my still-unspent passion pressing me on. As I did, I felt a hand on my shoulder. Not a light touch, I felt its weight and power. It could have pushed me to the ground. I jerked my head around trying to see, and Craig was behind me. In my sudden terror he seemed larger than life, and I still felt his hand though now it hovered inches above my shoulder. His face bore a poignant, melancholy expression that brought my heart to my throat. I looked away waiting for the blow, the reprimand, I knew not what.

"What's the matter?" Chantal asked, a hint of fear in her voice.

I looked over my shoulder again. Was there a receding figure in the dimness? Or was it a trick of shadows? Clearly Chantal had seen nothing, and now I saw only a void that, for a moment, my over-charged imagination had filled with Craig's likeness. The looming darkness remained, but it had lifted its mask to remind me of what, for a few hours, I had forgotten.

"I'd better be going," I said. I made a space between us and held both her hands in mine.

"But..."

I squeezed her hands and she quelled her protest.

"Will you call me?" she asked. "Tomorrow?"

"I'll call you." I kissed her lightly, though I trembled at the anticipation of another hand on my shoulder. It didn't come. I turned and exited the gate, then waited until Chantal had entered the

building. I felt shaken and dazed as if, again like Jonah, I'd just been tossed up on some alien strand. I didn't know what to do, but my legs recalled an old habit and carried me a few blocks to a tavern on the avenue, a place I had frequented in my days in the neighborhood.

Like everything that day, the bar was both familiar and strange. Although I recognized no one, the few patrons might have been the same from years before, old men mostly who worked silently through their drinks or muttered to themselves as they pawed through threadbare change purses. Behind the bar was a young man, a crisp newness about him that belied the timelessness of the setting.

"Good evening, Sir. What can I get you?"

I asked for a whiskey and laid some bills on the bar. As he delivered the drink I asked, "So, is Hollis still working here?"

"Hollis? He sold the place."

"Hollis owned it?" It seemed improbable to me.

"Yep, he owned it and he sold it. To his nephew just a few months ago. Nephew's planning to make it a proper club once he gets the finances in order."

"I haven't been here in quite a few years. This place is something of a landmark. I'm surprised he'd want to change it."

"The whole neighborhood's in for big changes," he said.

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I sipped my drink quietly in imitation of the other men at the bar, ruminating on the day's events. I felt a pang of guilt that my one obligation of the day had gone unattended. The consequences of that, which once would have been worrisome, now seemed trivial. I didn't care, and the scarred and pitted mahogany of the bar exuded a warmth that colluded with my private

declaration. As I sipped a second and then a third whiskey, the whole day became increasingly improbable, a story told by someone else.

"Good luck," the bartender said and parked a fourth whiskey in front of me.

"Some things will never change," I said and raised my glass in salute.

The spell of my reverie broken, I looked around and saw that the bar had filled with people. My comrades were still there, but they were islands of introspection in a sea of sociability. Knots of young people stood, drinks in hand, conversing busily while others leaned against the bar. A trio of musicians had carved a space from a corner of the room and now thumped out a stream of music as others danced or sang along.

A young man came in from the street, his clothes worn and dirty, him dusty and ill-kempt to match. I pegged him for an indigent, but for his self-confident, athletic gait. He was greeted several times as he made his way along the bar to stop at the empty space next to me. The bartender was there with a pint before he had settled in. I was repulsed by his unsavory appearance, yet fascinated by his apparent popularity with the crowd. I watched him raise the glass to his lips and saw that his hands were rough and calloused, the hands of a working man. On impulse I motioned to the bartender.

"That one's on me," I said pushing my motley pile of bills toward him.

My new neighbor turned and raised his glass expectantly. After a moment's hesitation I raised my whiskey in reply.

"Thank you, Sir. To what do I owe the honor?" he asked.

"You look like you need a drink after a hard day's work," I said.

"The name's Peter," he said extending his hand to me. His handshake was strong, but the shape of it was strange. I couldn't help but look as his hand withdrew. He saw me looking, was

probably used to it, and held up his hand. It looked like a blunt spatula, the two middle fingers matching a single line sloping from the index to the little finger.

"Yeah, I've got a couple of short ones. I'm lucky, though. I could have lost my whole arm."

"What happened, if it's not impolite to ask?"

"Are you going to have another drink?" He nodded toward my whiskey.

"This one's my 'good luck' round. Tradition has it you can't leave on a 'good luck,' so I'll be having another I'm sure."

"Well, I'm a woodworker, a cabinetmaker by trade. Most of us lose a little nip of flesh to the machines now and again. That's the short story, and you won't need another whiskey to hear to the end." He sipped his ale. "But there's more to these fingers than that."

He paused and I thought I could see memories tugging at the muscles of his face, emotions re-shaping it.

"Do you live around here?" He asked. "I don't recall seeing you."

I told him that I had lived in, and left, the neighborhood many years before.

"You might remember Lawrence. He was a kind of character around these parts for many years, even before I moved here. He worked mostly at the fruit stand up on the next corner, cleaning, carrying boxes and the like. He helped out at other businesses on the avenue. Anybody that would have him. People called him a half-wit." Peter's face darkened. "He wasn't. He was smart. And he was pure, genuine. There wasn't a speck of bad in that man. People can't understand that, or they can't face it and face themselves, so they ridicule it."

I remembered Lawrence, although I had never known his name: a man always somewhere on the avenue, usually with broom in hand and a broad smile, a harmless fixture in the landscape and one to which I took little notice.

Peter continued. "He helped out at my shop sometimes. I loved his company. He didn't require constant attention. He was content to do what I asked or do nothing if that's what I wanted. His presence had a peaceful, calming effect on me.

"One day some kids were harassing him outside the fruit stand. I chased them off. I was angry. I said to him, 'Lawrence, you should leave this neighborhood. People here treat you like crap.' Lawrence smiled at me. He was always smiling. 'I can't move away, Peter.' 'What do you mean you can't?' I might have shouted at him. Like I said, I was angry. 'You can do anything you want,' I said. He was still smiling. 'Anything? Do you think I could fly?' 'If that's what you really want to do, yes.'" Peter took a long drink from his pint.

"The next day Lawrence came to my shop. I had this pin, the kind of thing you might wear on your lapel. A pair of wings, just wings. I got it from a woman I'd known."

Peter paused, and again I could see in his face the parade of emotions that followed on his parsing of his memories. I could see, too, that this creature that I had first found repulsive was a handsome man of deep feeling, one of those who, without meaning to, will bare his soul to a stranger.

"I gave him the pin. 'Here's your wings, Buddy,' I said. 'Don't be afraid to use them.' He loved it. He wore it every day. He told everybody I had given it to him, that it meant that if he wanted to, he could fly.

"It wasn't long after that, I was working in my shop one morning. I had started early. I had an important commission to finish. I have a state-of-the-art Hyperion dual-armature steam power plant that drives all the machinery in the shop. I don't know if you're familiar with that stuff, but it's a powerful system."

"Not at all," I shook my head. "I'm a slave to the technology that purports to make our lives easier, and I feel unqualified admiration for anyone who understands it."

"No matter," Peter said. "I was doing a difficult cut on the saw when the wood bound in the blade. I had a good grip on it, nursing it through, and I was dragged onto the cutting table. I would have gone right through, but somebody grabbed me from behind and yanked me away as my fingers touched the blade." Peter paused as the bartender set another round in front of us.

"I was on my back looking up at Lawrence. He smiled like always and said, 'Peter, you have to be more careful. If you cut off one of your wings you won't be able to fly.' Then he walked away. I guess I was in shock. I felt no pain, but I was bleeding pretty good. I don't know how long I was on the floor, but I finally got up. I was trying to bandage my fingers when a couple of friends showed up. They seemed upset, from the blood and the mess, I thought, but I told them what had happened, how Lawrence had saved me from going through the saw. They just stared at me. Finally one of them told me that Lawrence couldn't have saved me; that early that morning someone had found him dead in the alley behind the Burton Building."

I watched as Peter fought against the demons these recollections unleashed. Muscles in his neck and arms bunched. His fists clenched and unclenched. He tugged at his shortened fingers and rubbed them against his shirt as if to drive off some phantom pain.

"But, why? What happened to Lawrence?"

With some effort Peter composed himself. "The story came out eventually. A couple of guys from Conner's Bar, used to be just down the street here, closed up now. Anyway a couple of roughnecks got it in their heads they'd get Lawrence to show them how he could fly. They took him to the top of Burton for the demonstration."

"Were they arrested?"

Peter chuckled. The question seemed to relax him. "Their stories were well-coordinated. They claimed it was Lawrence's idea; they were just innocent by-standers."

"So they walked away?" In my state of heightened empathy brought on by the alcohol, the thought seemed unfathomable.

"One was stabbed to death in Conner's, apparently in an argument about gin being better than vodka." Peter drained his glass. "The other fell into the river one night and drowned."

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I lost track of the whiskeys I'd had. Voices and music blurred together, traded meanings. Then it was quiet. Peter was still next to me, his head tilted back, draining a pint. The bar had emptied except for a few old-timers, one slumped snoring against a wall.

"You alright?" Peter asked.

I nodded and he set down his glass. "I enjoyed your story," he said. "You'll have to give me another chapter next time I see you. You left me hanging."

Had I told him a story? Had I told him about Chantal? The melancholy image of Craig's face came to mind. Had I mentioned that piece of my overheated imaginings? I couldn't remember anything.

We made our way outside, and Peter left me after I assured him again that I was fine. My only thought was to leave the city. I would walk until I could find a cab. From there to the terminal where there would surely be a steamer heading up the river. It was enough of a plan, but my body would have none of it. Instead of heading in the direction of the city center where I knew the night life would still thrive, I found myself drifting back up the avenue. The vaulting hulk of the Burton Building, the tallest building on the avenue, loomed ahead, its upper floors invisible beyond the reach of the street's illumination.

A mist rolled through the streets, and the warm glow of the street lamps turned a lurid, greasy white. Animated by the heat of the lamps, the mist billowed like the exhaled breath of some beast. The street became a slick black that seemed to both reflect the light and swallow it, a surface

that was no surface at all, that threatened at each step to become a pit into which I would tumble. The shear walls of the buildings on either side defined a watery passage the depths of which I could not plumb. I leaned against the clammy brick of a building and closed my eyes. Jonah, I knew, had accepted his charge, but what twisted symmetry compelled me back to Chantal that evening?

At her gate I fumbled with the latch realizing only then the extent of my inebriation. Still there was in me a lucid core that observed my struggles with bemused patience. I stumbled on the steps and caught the door handle to right myself. Inside, the vestibule was tiny and claustrophobic, barely the length of a grown man and half that in width. The sepulchral air was enhanced by the jaundiced glow of a single feeble gas lamp high on a wall. Three doors led into the interior, one to the left, one ahead, and the door to Chantal's apartment to the right. I managed to locate among the cords that hung against the wall the one that would ring inside her apartment.

It was as if she had been waiting for such a signal. The door flew open and she came out. Her eyes were blackened circles, her face a mottled red, cheeks wet with tears, her mouth a twisted rictus of anguish, the spectral effect of her appearance heightened by the dimness and angle of the light.

"*Craig est mort*," she screamed. "He's dead, he's dead." She flung herself at me, "*Feu, mon Craig. Feu, mon Craig.*"

I felt as though all the breath had been forced from my body. I got my arms around her sensing that she was about to collapse. My own legs threatened to give out, but I propped myself against the wall, my head tangled among the bell cords, as I tried to move her away from me, to shake her, to catch my breath.

"What happened?"

"*Je n'sais pas...* At work... A scaffold. I couldn't..." She shook her head against my chest. She had given herself into my arms, trembling uncontrollably as I tried to move us toward the

apartment's entrance. It was barely two steps to the side, but my legs buckled and we tumbled through the doorway onto the floor. I lay on my back not moving until Chantal pulled herself on top of me. She pressed her mouth to my ear. "*Embrasse-moi*, Phillip. Make love to me," she whispered as she pressed her lips to mine.

I did not make love to her. To call it that would be an abuse. My rude, drunken fumbblings were ludicrous to me, and my sense of detachment increased even as my desire for control evaporated. Chantal met my ineptitude with desperate passion. She, too, seemed to be moving in some realm other than the physical, her body a mysterious collection of slickly moving parts. My mind flew through time and space jumbling the events of the afternoon, the time in the bar, the distant past. For a moment I became acutely aware of my body, of the feeling of Chantal's weight upon me, her sensuous movements, her hair caressing my face. Then I was at the ceiling looking down at the two of us sprawled in the dim trapezoid of light that was our bed.

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I didn't call Chantal the next day, or the next week. I didn't call her at all. I buried myself in my work. I fielded the sometimes angry, sometimes pleading letters from my agent in the city and obstinately refused to acknowledge them. The gloom that once had dogged my visits to the city had moved north. It now pervaded every moment of self-reflection.

Such a state could not persist, and in time a new lightness overtook my interior landscape. I felt the tiniest pity for my agent, whom I entrusted with all my affairs, and whom I then punished with my lack of cooperation. I resolved that I could, after all, tolerate a visit to the city. I would even stop and see Chantal. I felt sharply the guilt of never having called her, but no, I would not call her now. I would surprise her as I had surprised myself the last time. I felt impetuous, even giddy at the thought, as if I had dressed in some gay new outfit that would shock those who thought they knew me.

I filled the days with imagined details of my visit: Chantal's beauty, the look of surprise on her face when she saw me, and the renewed affection she would show, tinged perhaps with melancholy, but freed of the sordid desperation of our last encounter. I might stop by the bar, run into Peter, and provide him with another chapter of whatever story I had begun that night.

I resolved that I would deal with business first. I would visit the agency offices and free myself of the yoke of that obligation before anything else. Perversely, I did the opposite.

I found myself on the avenue in daylight now instead of darkness, but the edges of my fantastic constructions quickly began to fray. Hollis's bar was closed. A large hand-lettered sign in the window said, "Closed for Renovations." Below it another said, "Opening Soon." It hung forlornly askew, held by one small bit of adhesive. I cupped my hands against the glass and peered inside. The dust and chaos of the interior looked old and abandoned. At the next corner the fruit stand was gone. I remembered how it seemed to spill into the street with its riot of fruits and vegetables, but now the sidewalk was empty. The cavernous first floor of the building, once crowded with bins of foodstuffs, was walled with huge sheets of glass. Inside were arrayed banks of cryptic and bewildering gauges, dials, knobs, and levers, all of gleaming metal, stretching into the dim interior. There appeared to be no entrance from the street and no hint on the exterior of its function.

I had said that I never felt at home in the neighborhood, but now I felt my comfortable refuge of alienation being dismantled. That other place would soon cease to exist, and paradoxically I most wanted to hold on to it now that it was slipping away. I made my way up the avenue to where a construction project blocked the street. Huge machines belched steam, and cables and ropes snaked up the sides of a tall, skeletal structure. The noise was unnerving and I could not pass, so I turned down a side street only to find my way barred again by a chaotic agglomeration of machinery and construction material. My disorientation and agitation increased until, arriving on

Chantal's street by an unfamiliar route, I had to stop for a time, breathing deeply in an attempt to quell my growing anxiety. I passed by her gate, turned and passed it again, unable to bring myself to cross its threshold. I tried to reclaim the pleasure I'd felt in imagining the moment, but it had withered inside me. I finally reached the shadowy confines of the vestibule and pulled the cord for her apartment. She was home, although by then I thought my one chance at salvation would be her absence. Light poured from the room when she opened the door, obscuring any expression I might have read in her face.

"Phillip, I thought I might not see you again."

She didn't throw herself into my arms. Her moment of hesitation, perhaps laden with meaning, was indecipherable to me. She grasped my hands, hers warm against my skin, and pulled me into the apartment. The room was flooded with light coming through the tall windows that looked out on the street. I hadn't noticed the brightness outside. Perhaps the sun had just broken through.

"I thought I'd surprise you," I said.

"Well, you did. You did." She offered me a seat at a small table. "So, how are you?"

"The same," I said. "How about you? How are you doing?"

"*Bien, très bien.* I'm doing well." She sat opposite me. "I've met someone."

I felt a pang, of betrayal perhaps? "*El clavo nuevo?*" She looked puzzled, so without much enthusiasm, I tried my French. "*La clé nue,*" I said.

"The naked key?" She laughed, a sound that could have been delightful. "Oh, I remember now. *Un clou ôte l'autre.*" She had a faraway expression on her face, eyes half-closed, smiling, as if I were no longer in the room, or she transported to some other place. "His name is Raymond."

"For now, perhaps," I said. The irritation I felt may have crept into my voice although she did not seem to notice.

"What do you mean?"

"Raymond. *Rey del mundo*. King of the world."

"Phillip, I think you're jealous."

I did not respond.

She leaned across the table and kissed me lightly on the cheek. "You are so clever. You are always *mon ami*."

The remainder of the visit was a meaningless string of platitudes. Chantal chattered on, her cheerfulness obnoxious now, and I retreated into my customary silence. I didn't stay long, using as an excuse my for-once-truthful assertion that I needed to reach the offices of my agent before dusk. Out on the street the world had turned gray again, and nothing stirred.

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