



12 Bautezar: \$4.41



“Do you know,” I ask Janet, “or can you guess, the substance that was first discovered and mined here, and gives this castle its name?”

“Strangely enough, I don’t.”

“Here’s a hint. It’s pronounced ‘Lay Bow,’ right? But it’s spelled Les B-a-u-x.” I point to it on the receipt for the iced tea we are drinking. How might you pronounce it?”

“Lay Bow.”

“But if you were a stupid American you might say . . .” I notice Janet’s gaze wander out over the balcony, towards the steep gorge below. Tapping the receipt, I say, “Box . . . which

sounds like? What mineral?" She ignores me. "Bauxite! This is the place that bauxite is named for!"

I am in a good mood, and trying to drag Janet along with me. Janet was already up when I rolled out of bed. She was sitting out by the pool, in early morning sunshine, chatting with Paige about health systems and wellness systems. I took my coffee on the upper balcony where I imagined Pleckman on a chaise lounge, Spinoza open on his lap. I asked how *his* research tied to Provence. I imagined him cheerfully saying that it didn't; that his proposal was pure hogwash, and that he was here to do the same things he'd be doing back home. "Plus wine, cheese, et cetera. Complete junket. As alleged."

"Would you have said that last night?"

He laughed. "Hell no. But I wasn't here last night, just like I'm not here now. See, this is where the meta-nonfiction thing loses all credibility. You're just using me."

"But when I admit to fabrication, the narrative reclaims its veracity. As now."

Pleckman bowed to acknowledge my metaphysical superiority.

And then I'd wandered downstairs, found Janet, and swooped her off in the car without saying a word to anyone, just as I'd promised. The highway approached Les Baux across the flat sandy fields, vineyards, and olive groves. The ruins of the castle stood out above the valley, growing out of the chalky rock formation, almost indistinguishable, except that one part of the ridge seems to have square windows. We drove up where the highway slices through the rock, and found a parking place. Les Baux occupies a plateau, perfect for defensive purposes. The castle, or what's left of it, dates as far back as the ninth century. It occupies the highest part, commanding the valley. On the back side of the plateau, overhanging a cypress gorge, the village resembles a haphazard pile of children's blocks, bright painted shutters relieving the gray-white stone. The sun was shining, and the climb from the parking lot to the entrance was surprisingly hot and tiring. The first thing we needed was a cool drink, so we found this place with



its excellent iced tea. Actually, the *first* thing I did was buy a guidebook. I'm giving Janet fun facts on Les Baux over tea.

"Saracen towers! The castle has Saracen towers." I take her hand across the table. "This is the perfect place for both of us. I like castles, and this one is cool, even if it is mostly ruins. And there's this incredible village, with all these shops."

Janet takes her hand from mine. Her fingers slide absently up her glass, collecting condensation. "So," she says. "You go look at your castle. I go look at my village. Fine. What time shall we meet?"

"You know what I meant. We've got all day. You go castle hopping with me, and I'll wander the village with you."

We pay an entrance fee at the castle and are offered little audio machines and ear phones to hear the history of each part of the castle.

In hindsight—and this is me stepping ahead three years, to my lonely corner of Chapet—in hindsight, it is easy to single out this moment, and say, *There. You should have known better.* And I should have. Also, in hindsight I might say, *Hey, Dipstick, you know how, when couples fight about leaving the cap off the toothpaste, it's not really ever about toothpaste?*

Yes, older sadder exile me?

Well, when your wife gets angry about Albigenian persecutions . . .

It's not really about the Albigenians?

You got it.

I honestly thought it was, at the time.

I know, moron. That's why you're—why I'm—stuck in Chapet right now, alone and missing her.

Isn't there any way we can just put this part behind us, and Janet and I—Janet and you—can just be together and be happy?

"Jon?"

"What?"

"Do you want the audio or not?"

"Huh?"

“The *audio* thing. They have it in English. Do you want it?”

“Yeah. Two please.” I hand money to the impassive woman at the desk, and she hands me two units and headphones. Giving one to Janet, I say, “It was like that flash you get, something kicks in and you remember a part of the dream you had last night, and you go, ‘oh yeah!’ and then as soon as you try to bring it into focus it’s gone, totally.”

“Well, try not to do it when someone is asking you something.”

We stay together during the first part of the tour, up through the chapel of St. Vincent. We nod and smile at each other, and press buttons on our machines, get confused, and press other buttons. Then we wander away from each other. There’s a large open area. At one end, the corrugated floor indicates the roof of a huge stone cistern, and there’s this wide area where all the rainwater is caught and channeled into it. Apparently, after some siege or other when everyone died of thirst, it seemed a good idea to build it. Up on a flat area near the edge sits a trebuchet—a giant graceful praying mantis kind of engine that looks like it could hurl a rock half way to Monte Carlo. Trebuchet. I look around for Janet so she can tease me that I like the word “trebuchet” more than I like the siege engine itself. But what if trebuchet were used against the Albigensians? And what is the plural of trebuchet? They probably were used, so I hurry away from there. At times I spot her a long ways across the open rock ruins, and then I don’t see her for a long time. I listen dutifully to the centuries of history, most of it bad and bloody, surrounding Les Baux. In the back of my mind is Pleckman’s taunt that my historical research amounts to reading guidebooks.

At the farther end, I am in that part of the fortress you see while approaching across the valley. Staircases are carved into the stone of the wall, long steep staircases, and, with that European disregard for safety and litigation, anyone is allowed to climb them. So I do, acutely aware that my footfalls are echoing down through history. How many people have climbed



this staircase, in flight, in turmoil, in glee—running to a secret assignation, hurrying to defend a rampart, moving with resignation toward certain death? Some of the stairs are so worn that they form deep concavities. I climb and climb. It gets scary near the top, high and narrow. There are a couple of rooms, and an overlook where I can wave, and people driving up the valley, if they have binoculars, can see me wave. Turning back to the inward side, I overlook the ruined ramparts and walls, trying to find Janet. As I turn to go down the stairs I spot her. In profile, in the distance, *above* me. She is perched on the very top of the fortress, sitting with her feet in front of her, arms loosely around her knees. You can't get there from here—she must have gone up an even steeper staircase somewhere else along these walls. Seeing her there nauseates me with fear. She's sitting too near the edge. I yell to her, but it's too far. I turn back to my stairs, and have to move cautiously because I am dizzy with fear and apprehension. Other tourists are coming up the stairs, and passing each other is delicate. Finally I make it down, and I'm looking up to where she was but I can't see her. I can't even tell where it was I saw her in this giant maze of stone. I stalk up and down along the walls, looking for her, not seeing her, then suddenly she is next to me.

“Hey,” she says, without inflection.

“I saw you way up on top. You were sitting right on the edge. You scared the hell out of me.”

She shrugs.

“Are you crazy? Don't do that anymore! Where's your headset?”

“I took it back a long time ago. Are you ready, or is there more castle you have to listen to?”

“I'm ready.”

We don't say much on the long walk back to turn in my audio unit. I ask her what she saw, what she liked, and she gives short answers. My manner is unctuous. “Now you've done my castle thing,” I say as we approach the village. “I'm ready to check out the shops. Are you hungry?”

“No. Thirsty.”

“Let’s go back and have another iced tea. That place had great iced tea.”

Janet is amenable. So we go back there, and the place is practically filled now, and everyone is having these tall, beautiful ice cream concoctions in tulip-shaped shiny steel serving dishes. We get the menus, which have pictures of them all. We point out our choices and we soon have iced tea and luscious ice cream.

BAUTEZAR II: \$11.76



“I really love that castle,” I say, spooning in the ice cream.

“I thought you would.”

“Did you like it?”

“It was fine.”

“Is everything all right?”

Janet looks down at her ice cream and then up at me. She seems to be making a decision. She takes a deep breath. “Okay, I admit, it was kind of hard for me. When you put on those headphones, it’s like you’ve walked back into history and left me here.”



“I was trying to keep contact. I waved to you.”

“And it felt like you were waving to me from a train window.”

“I don’t think you’re being fair.”

She sighs. “Maybe not. Maybe I’m not making the transition to communal living as smoothly as I’d like. All I know is I’m feeling sad and a little lonely and I need you to just be with me a little more.”

“I’m with you. I’m with you every second almost.”

“I don’t mean just physically being together. I can’t describe it. I just know how it feels to me.”

“Tell me how I can be more there for you.”

“You don’t have to be there *for* me. You have to be there *with* me. I know it sounds like I’m splitting hairs, but there’s a difference.”

“Okay. I’ll try to be more *with* you. I think I know what you mean. When I saw you sitting up on the very top of that rock, it really scared me. It looked like you were going to fall or fly away or something. I felt helpless.”

“I’m not sure that’s the same thing,” she says. “Anyway, thanks.” She shakes her head as if to clear it, and looks around. “Let’s just go check out the village. I saw a place that had essential oils. Maybe I can find something for Nance.”

Janet and I wander through the narrow stone streets and bright shops of Les Baux village, being kind and solicitous towards each other. Perhaps we are trying too hard, because there’s a slight air of artificiality about it. Janet buys a yellow and blue Provençal tablecloth for her sister. Many shops feature the local olive oil, much touted—elaborate bottles nestled in exquisite boxes. The Italian side of Janet cannot quite make the concession to French olive oil. She loves the soaps and oils and lotions and shampoos. She gets lavender-scented lotion for her mother and honey soap for her other sister. Nothing here looks suitable for the boys, however, and that distresses her, although she doesn’t make a big deal of it.

In the interest of maintaining the suspension of your disbelief, I am not supposed to tell you that I have spent days crafting the Iced Tea Dialogues. But you already know that I am reconstructing it three years later in Chapet, and so this confession of inexactitude should actually serve to *enhance* verisimilitude. I remember the feeling of isolation caused by the audio headsets, and I vividly remember the feeling of terror when I spotted Janet sitting casually on the edge of a precipice, but I am having trouble recapturing the way we tried to speak of our vague and dispiriting sense of distance from one another. Certainly the distinction between being there *for* someone and being *with* someone has come up in our conversation in similar circumstances; I'm just not sure if it came up in this one, in this way.

When I get depressed about how far I am from both the real Janet and her literary doppelganger, which is every day, I stop to read *The International Herald-Tribune*. And then I get more depressed because it's all about the war, and there's all this ridiculous talk of "punishing" France for opposing the war. It seems to me that one of the less ignoble reasons for the war is so that Iraqis can criticize their own government—or those of other countries, presumably—without fear of reprisal. Now I read that the Department of Defense is especially keen on punishing France. I haven't been away that long, but already I'm feeling the expatriate's bewilderment over permutations back home. A kind of horrible continental drift is pulling the United States farther from France, and Janet farther from me. I am embarrassed to show my face at Daniel's pub, and yet I do, every day. And the locals shake my hand and call out "*Bonsoir!*" in friendly voices, every day.

Trying to build bridges, I wrote a "Postcard from France" and sent it to the travel editors at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. They wrote back and said my piece wasn't travel writing. Send it to the editorial page instead.

"What then *IS* travel writing?" I demanded of them, rhetorically.



Letters

Don't give in to stereotypes of the French

When I bought toothpaste at a CVS store, I mentioned I was leaving for France later that day. The lady behind the counter guffawed. "He's going to France!" she announced to everyone in the store. "They're going to hate him over there."

I have been in France for more than a week now, and I plan to stay a month. After dozens of encounters with French people, I can report that not a single one has been anything but friendly and polite — and I speak no French.

At the open-air market I bumped a woman and mumbled, "Sorry."
"American?" she asked.

When I said yes, she beamed and said she loves Lansing, Mich., and hopes to go back soon. "Only, you know," she shrugged sadly, "events..."

The bistro in the village was closed for the break between lunch and dinner. The proprietor heard me, came outside, and took me out for Chinese food in the next town. In his car. And he paid for lunch.

My new friend said, "I heard from a travel agent in Paris that all the Americans have cancelled for this summer. They think French people will spit on them or something. It is not true. Politics is politics, but friendship is friendship. Americans should understand that."

It pains me to think that French people who visit the United States might not receive this same kind of hospitality. France is our friend. Let's not give in to small-minded stereotypes and caricatures.

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