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WORDS ARE DEEDS

On entering the restaurant in Corte, Professor Sheldrick saw the woman standing near the bar. He decided then that he would take her away with him, perhaps marry her. When she offered him a menu and he realized she was a waitress he was more certain she would accompany him that very day to the hotel, where he had a reservation, on the coast at Ile-Rousse. Not even the suspicion that it was her husband behind the counter – he had a drooping black mustache and was older than she – deterred him as he planned his moves. The man looked like a brute, in any case; and Sheldrick was prepared to offer that woman everything he had.

His wife had left him in Marseilles. She said she wanted to live her own life. She was almost forty and she explained that if she waited any longer no man would look twice at her. She refused to argue or be drawn; her mind was made up. It was Sheldrick who did all the imploring, but it did no good.

He said, ‘What did I do?’

‘It’s what you said.’

Words are deeds: he knew that was what she meant. And not one but an accumulation of them over a dozen years. The marriage, he knew, had been ruined long before. He was content to live in those ruins and he had believed she needed him. But there in Marseilles she declared she was leaving him. The words she said with such simple directness weakened him; he ached as if in speaking to him that way she had trampled him. He agreed to let her have the house and a certain amount of money every month.

He said, ‘I’ll suffer.’

‘You deserve to suffer.’

Her manner was girlish and hopeful, his almost elderly. She went home; but when it was time for him to return home he could see no point to it, nor any reason to work. He was a professor of French literature at a college in Connecticut: the semester was starting. But from the day his wife left him, Sheldrick answered no letters and made no plans and did not think about the future. What was the point? He did nothing, because nothing mattered. He had set out on this trip feeling lucky, if a bit burdened by his wife. Now the summer was over, his wife had left him, and he began to believe that she had taken the world with her.

He no longer recognized the importance of anything he had ever done before, but his feeling of failure was so complete he felt he did not exist except as a polite and harmless creature who, all his defenses removed, faced extinction. His wife had pushed their boulder aside and left him exposed, like a soft blind worm.

In this mood, one of uselessness, he felt entirely without obligation. The world was illusion – he had invented a marriage and an existence, and it had all vanished. He was a victim twitching in air, with a small voice. What he had mistaken for concreteness was vapor. Only lovers had faith. But he didn't want his wife back; he wanted nothing.

His surprise was that he could enter a strange restaurant in a remote Corsican town and see a woman and want to marry her. He wondered if defeat had made him bold. This island, the first landscape he had seen as a newly single man, had a wild shipwrecked look to it that suited his recklessness. He would ask that woman to leave with him.

He was bewitched by her peculiar beauty, which was the beauty of certain trees he had been admiring all afternoon in the drive from the stinks of Cateraggio. She was slim, like those trees, and unlike any woman he had seen on this island. He knew then that he would not leave Corte without her. She was the embodiment of everything he loved in Corsica. The idea that he would take her with him was definite. There was no doubt in his mind; it was rash and necessary. And while he found a seat and ordered a drink and then chose at random from the menu, he had already decided on his course of action. It only remained for him to begin.

His French was fluent. Indeed, he affected a slight French accent, a stutter in his throat and the trace of a lisp, when he spoke English. But language was the least of it. She had small shoulders and almost no breasts, and slender legs, and her hair was cut short. He spoke to her about the food, but only to detain her, so he could be near her. She smelled of lilies. She brought the wine; his meal; the dessert – fruit; coffee, which her husband – almost certainly her husband – made on the machine. And each time, he said something more, trying to grow intimate, to make her see him. He had no clear plan. He would not leave the town without her. He was due in Ile-Rousse that night. She wore a finely spun sweater. She was not dressed for a restaurant: she was no waitress. Her husband owned the place – he forced her to help him run it. Sheldrick guessed at these things and by degrees he began to understand that though he had only happened upon her, she was waiting for him.

She approached him with the bill folded on a saucer. He invited her to look at it, and when she bent close to him, peering at the bill, he said, 'Please – come with me.'

He feared she might be startled: for seconds he knew he had said something dangerous. But she was looking at the bill. Was this pretense? Was she stalling?

He said, ‘I have a car.’

She was expressionless. She touched the bill with a sharp red claw.

Trying to control his voice, Sheldrick said, ‘I love you and I want you to come with me.’

She faced him, turning her green eyes on him, and he knew she was scrutinizing him, wondering if he were crazy. He smiled helplessly, and her gaze seemed to soften, a pale glitter pricking the green.

His hands trembled as he placed his money on the saucer.

She said, ‘I will bring you your change.’

Then she was gone. Sheldrick forced himself to stare at the tablecloth, so as not to betray his passion to the man he supposed was her husband.

She did not return immediately. Was she telling her husband what he had said? He could hardly blame her. What he had asked her in a pleading whisper was so insane an impulse that he knew he must have frightened her. And yet he did not regret it. He knew he had had to say it or he would not have forgiven himself and would have suffered for the rest of his life. After five minutes he assumed she had gone to the police; he imagined that now many people knew the mad request he had made to this woman.

In the same stately way that she had approached before, she crossed the restaurant with the saucer, and with some formality, bowing slightly as she did so, placed it before him. She went away, back to the bar where he had first seen her.

There was nothing more. She had not replied; she had not said a word. So, without a word, there was no blame; and it had all passed, like a spell of fever. Now it could remain a secret. She had been kind enough to let him go without making a jackass of himself.

He plucked at his change, keenly aware of the charade he was performing in leaving her a tip. But gathering the coins, he saw the folded bill at the bottom of the saucer, and the sentence written on it. The scribbled words made him breathless and stupid, the fresh ink made him flush like an illiterate. He labored to read it, but it was simple. It said: I will be at the statue of Paoli after we close.

He put the bill into his pocket and left her ten francs, and not looking at her again he hurried out of the restaurant. He walked, turning corners, on rising streets that became steps, and climbed a stone staircase on the ramparts that towered over Corte. Alone here, he read the sentence again and was joyful on these ruined battlements and

thrilled by the wind in the flag above him. Beneath him in the rocky valleys and on hillsides were the trees he had come to love.

He gave her an hour. At five, in brilliant twilight, he found his car, which was parked near the restaurant. The steel shutters of the restaurant were across the windows and padlocked. It was Sunday; the cobblestone streets of this hilltop town were deserted, and he could imagine that he was the only person alive in Corte. Not wishing to be conspicuous, he decided that it was better to drive slowly through the Place Paoli than to walk.

He found it easily, an irregular plaza of sloping cobbles, and rounding the statue he saw her, wearing a short jacket, carrying a handbag, her white face fixed on him. He stopped. Before he could speak she was beside him in the car.

‘Quickly,’ she said. ‘Don’t stop.’

Her decisiveness stunned him, his feet and hands were numb, he was slow.

‘Do you hear me?’ she said. ‘Drive – drive!’

He remembered how to drive, and skidded out of the town, making it topple in his rearview mirror. She looked back; she was afraid, then excited, her face shining. She looked at him with curiosity and said, ‘Where are we going?’

‘Ile-Rousse,’ he said. ‘I have a room at the Hotel Bonaparte.’

‘And after that?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe Porto.’

‘Porto is disgusting.’

This disconcerted him: his wife had often spoken of Porto. One of her regrets when she left him, perhaps her only regret – though she had not put it this way – was that they would not be able to visit Porto, as they had planned.

The woman said, ‘It is all Germans and Americans.’

‘I am an American.’

‘But the other kind.’

‘We’re all the same.’

She said, ‘I would like to visit America.’

‘I hope I never see the place again as long as I live,’ he said.

She stared at Sheldrick but said nothing.

‘You are very beautiful.’

‘Thank you. You are kind.’

‘Beautiful,’ he said, ‘like Corsica.’

She said, ‘I hate Corsica. These people are savages.’

‘You’re not a savage.’

‘I am not a Corsican,’ she said. ‘My husband is one.’ She glanced through the rear window. ‘But that is finished now.’

It had all happened quickly, the courtship back in the restaurant, and she had greeted him at the statue like an old busy friend (‘Do you hear me?’). This was something else, another phase; so he dared the question. ‘Why did you come with me?’

She said, ‘I wanted to. I have been planning to leave for a year. But something always goes wrong. You worried me a little. I thought you were a policeman – why do you drive so slow?’

‘I’m not used to these roads.’

‘André – my husband – he drives like a maniac.’

Sheldrick said, ‘I’m a university professor,’ and at once hated himself for saying it.

The road was tortuous. He could not imagine anyone going fast on these curves, but the woman (what was her name? when could he ask her?) repeated that her husband raced his car here. Sheldrick was aware of how the car was toiling in second gear, of his damp palms slipping on the steering wheel. He said, ‘If you’re not Corsican, what are you?’

‘I am French,’ she said. Then, ‘When André sees that I have left him, he will try to kill me. All Corsicans are like that – bloodthirsty. And jealous. He will want to kill you, too.’

Sheldrick said, ‘Funny. I hadn’t thought of that.’

She said, ‘They all have guns. André hunts wild boar in the mountains. Those mountains. He’s a wonderful shot. Those were our only happy times – hunting, in the first years.’

‘I hate guns,’ said Sheldrick.

‘All Americans like guns.’

‘Not this American,’ he said. She sighed in a deliberate, almost actressy way. He was trying, but already he could see she disliked him a little – and with no reason. He had rescued her! On a straight road he would have leaned back and sped to the hotel in silence. But these hills, and the slowness of the car, made him impatient. He could think of nothing to say; and she was no help. She sat silently in her velvet jacket.

Finally, he said, ‘Do you have any children?’

‘What do you take me for?’ she said. Her shriek jarred him. ‘Do you think if I had children I would just abandon them like a slut in the afternoon and go off with a complete stranger? Do you?’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You’re not sorry,’ she said. ‘You did take me for a slut.’

He began again to apologize.

‘Drive,’ she said, interrupting him. She was staring at him again. ‘Your suit,’ she said. ‘Surely, it is rather shabby even for a university professor?’

‘I hadn’t noticed,’ he said coldly.

She said, ‘I hate your tie.’