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WELL-ARMED

A FEW MONTHS BEFORE I MOVED IN, Serge was sitting in his house cleaning an AK-47 when it went off in his lap. Looking down, he found his hands were still intact, and he decided then and there to stop selling weapons. On the French mainland, he'd gone to school for aitiopathy, a form of physical therapy that seeks to provide treatment without pain. Down the line, he still looked forward to opening a private practice; gun running wasn't worth the risk of losing any fingers. Eventually, Serge's friends would tell me about his arsenal, though I never saw it myself. Each of them had seen a weapon at his house, and they realized, comparing notes, that the individual guns they'd seen were all different. In fact, Serge seemed to have a very large collection.

But I knew none of this when we lived together. For a season, in 2007, while I was growing lettuce in the yard and jumping rope in the driveway, Serge kept his guns well hidden. I never figured out why someone exiting the arms trade would want a roommate in the first place, but Serge, as I met him, was not an arms dealer. He was twenty-eight and unemployed by choice, a pothead, an animal lover, the younger son of one of Saint-André's most prominent families. Our connection was a friend of a friend who had worked with him in concert promotion. For years, Serge had been the exclusive chauffeur of visiting reggae stars in Réunion: The Congos, Burning Spear, Israel Vibration, and Sean Paul had all toured the island in a rented limousine with Serge at the helm. The gigs came once or twice a year. Otherwise, Serge subsisted on the rent he collected from the house next door, and he made bongos from glass soda bottles, which he sold on consignment at a craft fair in Saint-Pierre. From time to time, friends and acquaintances hired Serge to fix their computers or build new ones from scratch. Serge had no email account, but he did have a BA in computer science from a university in Quebec.

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I went to Réunion Island¹ to teach primary-school English through a program run by the French Embassy in the U.S. Réunion, I'd read, was France's Hawaii,

1. The name "Réunion" is an artifact of colonialism and revolt. In the seventeenth century, the monarchy named the island Île Bourbon, after the King's own family; during the French Revolution, it was renamed Réunion to commemorate the historic "meeting" of two armies which led to the overthrow of Bourbon rule. Neither name has anything to do with the place itself.

the “extreme island,” a volcanic speck of rock in the Indian Ocean. Before I got there, I had trouble explaining just where I was going—an island that’s part of France, I’d say, about 450 miles east of Madagascar. Madagascar, of course, is a bit more than two hundred miles east of Africa, so people often ended up telling me simply to “have fun in Africa.” Barely thirty miles across, Réunion rises sharply out of the ocean towards a ten-thousand-foot dormant volcano at its center. The terrain is steep enough that most development has been confined to the island’s coastline. Box stores, traffic circles, and high-rise housing have sprung up in the years since Réunion became a French state, or *département*, in 1960, but there is a cluster of villages in the mountains where the mailman takes a week to complete his route, traveling only on foot. All in all, it is a stunningly beautiful place, with sugarcane fields and towering waterfalls dotting the humid highlands in the east, and postcard-worthy beaches in the south and west. Most visitors to Réunion spend time in the capital, Saint-Denis, in the north; at the western beaches and nightclubs of Saint-Gilles; or at the lava flow in Saint-Philippe, near the island’s one remaining active volcano. My posting was in Saint-André, a largely Indian town on the east coast, where Serge was born and raised, and where any tourists you see are probably lost.

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Rooms to rent in Saint-André were not forthcoming. My colleagues shrugged. People get married young here, they said. They live with their extended families. Serge was my only contact outside of work, so I called him from a pay phone outside the local bakery and showed up at his house with a pineapple tart and a loaf of bread. He answered the door wearing a *Simpsons* T-shirt and jeans, as taut and upright as though he’d been strung on the neck of a guitar. Slight but broad-shouldered, like a welterweight, he was wiry and unshaven, with bright, coppery skin. He had piercing eyes and a carefully trimmed, jet-black mullet that fell on his shoulders. With a withering, ambivalent handshake, he said “*Bonsoir*” and invited me in.

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I was meant to spend only one night at Serge’s house. It passed in fitful conversation against the high-pitched buzz of the television in the front room. Serge, as always, sat in a swivel chair at the desk by the television, his friend Mélissa on the couch, and I in a shabby armchair nearest the front door.



SALT MINES FACING THE INDIAN OCEAN AT THE POINTE AU SEL, SAINT-LEU

An oversized orange tabby lounged regally on Serge's lap, a massive forepaw dangling towards the floor. While we watched *Simpsons* episodes subtitled in French, Serge scratched automatically at the nape of the cat's neck, making the gesture seem equally comforting to both of them. He offered me a bell pepper and a tomato to go with my dinner of bread and butter, and gave a look of relief when I said I didn't mind if he smoked pot. From another room, Serge promptly produced three bongos made from glass soda bottles. We turned in early. "You can sleep in Naruto's room," he said, referring to the cat.

The next day, Serge said that I could stay longer, as long as I promised to "disappear" whenever his girlfriend came for the weekend. His parents and her parents were former best friends, now in an interminable feud; if someone were to see his girlfriend or learn her name, he thought, they ran the risk of letting it slip in conversation with his mother. As it was, they had been together for ten years. He couldn't take the risk. Serge's precautions struck me as overwrought, but then again, I had a hard time imagining how I might conceal a romantic relationship from my mother for a decade, particularly if we both lived in the same town. Eager for a place to stay, I promised to disappear.

"I've been suffering from a lack of activity these days," Serge said. "It might help to have someone around."

I promised to grow vegetables in the garden and help him build an outdoor kitchen, and Serge gave me a break on the rent.

That weekend, Serge and Mélissa took me to watch the sunset at the Pointe au Sel, in Saint-Leu, where sea salt collected in tidal pools carved into a jagged outcropping of volcanic rock. Serge drove well, but incredibly, terrifyingly fast, so that a trip that might have taken me two hours was complete inside of an hour and a half.

Serge had a friend named Gaspar, a photographer he'd gotten to know at reggae shows over the years, who lived nearby in a tiny stucco house with no bathroom. The yard was overrun with a vine that had erupted in tiny pink flowers. Mangoes fell on the roof and cluttered the ground beneath a hammock hung in front.

There were leaks everywhere, Gaspar explained, and the whole place flooded each time it rained. "It's not bad, as long as you stay in the camping mindset," Gaspar said.

Luckily for him, Saint-Leu is one of the driest towns on the island—the mountains shelter the west coast from most of the bad weather coming off the Indian Ocean, which drenches the east almost daily for most of the year. Ask someone from the west about living in Saint-André, for example, and you can predict with near certainty that the first thing they’ll say is “*Il pleut*”—“It rains.”

Gaspar shared the place with a roommate, Thomas, whom he called an asshole and a drunk, and Thomas’ ex-girlfriend, Sandrine. There was a cloth partition down the center of the living room and a small bedroom in the back. Thomas slept in the bedroom, Sandrine on the far end of the living room, and Gaspar on the couch. In fact, Gaspar slept very little; he smoked cigarettes and drank tea constantly. He said he suffered from both insomnia and narcolepsy, a condition that made him stay up for days on end and drift off in the middle of work or conversation. This was Serge’s world.

On the following Monday, I began my teaching job, a gig spread over three public elementary schools around Saint-André. Each week, I spent one day at Georges-Marie Soba, one day at Lacaussade, and one day at Raphaël Vidot. All were more or less the same to me, indistinct concrete buildings united in my mind by their lack of hallways. The classrooms gave directly onto large expanses of blacktop and, on the second story, onto wraparound balconies overlooking the school courtyards. In classroom after classroom, I was greeted by third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders with an identical set of American names printed on folded pieces of paper at the front of each desk: Stevie, Lisa, Suzanna, Johnny, Mike, Nancy, Christina, Bobby. These were the names they’d chosen specifically for English class, all drawn, I imagined, from a common list distributed by France’s department of education.

Though the job was part-time—twelve hours a week in the classroom—I taught nearly three hundred students lumped into groups of twenty or twenty-five, an arrangement that nearly guaranteed they wouldn’t learn much English. By the end of the first week, my head was clouded with the faces from fifteen classes all bearing a single set of names, and I asked my students to turn their nameplates around and write their real names on the other side. A few Johnnies and Kevins remained. One of my colleagues called these kids “the soap opera generation,” named for American television characters beamed into Réunion in the 1990s. The other names were less familiar: Yanice, Djana-touni, Marie-André, Léanzize, Jean-Frédéric, Kamaldine, Nadège, Ankhidati.

They were the descendants of the East African and Malagasy slaves that first worked Réunion's sugar plantations in the 1700s and of the French colonists who had brought them there; of the Indian indentured servants the British sent to French colonies following France's abolition of slavery in 1848; of the Pakistani, Malay, and Chinese traders that came in the first part of the twentieth century; of yuppie transplants from the French mainland; and of undocumented immigrants from the Comoros Islands who have flocked to Réunion since the colony became a state in 1960. People in Réunion look like they could be from just about anywhere.

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Serge's house was a spacious concrete bungalow with a large side yard overhung with mulberries. The house sat in a quiet neighborhood called La Cressonnière ("the watercress patch"), built on the dry bed of a river that now flows to the ocean a half mile to the south, its course altered by silt and debris flowing down from the mountains. Behind the house was an overgrown boulder field covered with vines and dotted with papaya trees, bordered by a tall concrete wall. Serge's pet goat, Kabri ("Goat" in Réunion Creole), had the run of the boulder field but didn't come close to keeping the plants at bay. There was also a German shepherd called Tamarind, and Ineta—another cat named for an anime hero—who lived outside. Naruto came and went between the house and grounds. He spent an inordinate amount of time on Serge's lap and, while I was out, on my bed. As I'd learn later, Naruto never got over having to give up his bedroom.

Most days, Serge woke up early, around 7:00, as I was getting ready to go to work. He had taken the living room as his bedroom, so that I had to pass through a corner of it in order to get to the kitchen. It was a large room with a separate entrance leading out into the side yard but no doorway to close it off from the rest of the house. Depending on which way you turned, you could pass directly from the corner of Serge's bedroom into the kitchen, the bathroom, or the small workshop where he fixed computers and made bongos. When Serge closed his "bedroom door," it cut off access to everything but the front room.

The floor was covered in navy-blue carpet, and there was a king-size bed at the room's exact center. This, Serge said, made him feel safer. Sitting in bed,

he had a line of sight to the entrances on three sides of the house. At the foot of Serge's bed was a large flat-screen computer monitor, which, along with the fluorescent lights overhead, kept a bright, electronic vigil over him as he slept. In the mornings, Serge would sit up halfway, refocus his attention on the screen, and reach to his side for his favorite bong and smoking kit.

Serge had pot, which he called "*jwen*," (from the French word for "joint") eleven months out of the year. Microclimates made it possible to get two marijuana harvests a year in Réunion; to get the best price, Serge bought in bulk during each harvest and kept his stash in several dozen large cookie tins, like the ones you see at Christmastime. No matter how large the stockpile, though, Serge always seemed to run out of pot in January. By my count, Serge smoked close to twenty times a day, with peerless focus and a level of organization fit for taking tissue samples. In high school, he said, he'd smoked far more.

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The way Serge smoked was not so ritualistic as it was clinical, imbued with a great sense of deliberation and intent rather than meditation and rhythm. Serge said he had stopped drinking as a teenager, because it made him "too relaxed." "Too relaxed," I thought, meant that alcohol made Serge let his guard down or lose control, a prospect he didn't find relaxing at all. Smoking, on the other hand, didn't relax Serge so much as keep him from boiling over. His smoking kit was a tiered cylinder, six inches high and three in diameter. It was made from four or five round mint tins, the lid of each fastened to the bottom half of the one above it so as to create a series of stacking compartments. The design allowed Serge to organize several kinds of marijuana and a variety of fittings for his bongs at his fingertips. The fittings were custom-made from bits of brass plumbing hardware that Serge had tinkered with to create specific effects. He rotated through a handful of favorites in the course of a day. The top of the cylinder resembled a molded plate like the ones used for TV dinners, divided into three sections by tiny black walls. One side functioned as the ashtray; the other, split in two, held some marijuana in small buds and some snipped into bits, ready for smoking. Each level was wrapped tightly with layers of

magnetic and medical tape, giving the whole the aspect of a worn-out bandage. A lighter, a pair of nail scissors, and a needle with a pearl-sized handle modeled from automotive putty clung to the side magnetically.

I asked Serge about the whole contraption the first time I saw him use it. A look of gentle amusement came over his face as he scraped tiny bits of resin from the sides of a pipe. Serge seemed tickled that his invention would elicit anyone's curiosity. The walls of the cylinder's upper sections, he told me, were made of resin he collected in this way, gradually built up over years of use. Serge carried his smoking kit like it was tied to his wrist. He scarcely stood up without it.

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The kitchen looked utterly anarchic when I first moved in. Serge owned a huge number of plates, cups, and pieces of flatware. He hadn't used the sink in six months. The drain was blocked, and both sides of the sink overflowed with grimy dishes sitting in a dark, oily liquid with bits of food floating in it. This chaos extended to a patch of the counter immediately to the right of the sink, which Serge called "the place for dirty dishes." Cockroaches abounded. The residue of a year's worth of meals covered the rest of the counter with a film of hardened black grease that spread outward from the stove. An electric deep fryer full of congealed oil lay in wait like a trap for small animals. Mouse droppings lined the cabinet shelves. Dark stains made your flip-flops stick to the linoleum floor.

I devoted my first afternoon to unblocking the sink and applying a paint scraper to the counters.

That weekend, we cooked a meal together in the newly cleaned kitchen, and Serge explained how it was that he'd come to let things go before I moved in. He felt he'd reached a "point of no return," as far the kitchen was concerned. I wondered how one got to a point of no return with something as easy to maintain as the kitchen sink. I couldn't relate to Serge's paralysis, exactly, but as we made bean fritters together that Saturday morning, it felt as though I was helping him pull back from the precipice.

Haphazard as it seemed, everything on the property was organized just so, which is to say there were clear philosophical underpinnings to Serge's inaction even at the points of greatest decay. Where pigeons living in the eaves of

the garage covered his tools in a thickening pile of guano, he reasoned that it wouldn't do to pigeon-proof the garage at all until he had time to clean the whole thing out.

So we crusaded against Serge's lack of activity wherever his schema allowed: we fixed a couch, changed lightbulbs, and hung mosquito netting. We freed papaya and banana trees from the grip of creeping plants and pulled down shrubs and vines from the fences. We spent a full day hacking our way through a foot-thick tangle of matted vines and roots that covered the side yard, and piled the detritus by the wheelbarrowful in the boulder field out back, which Serge said belonged to the goat. We cleared and hoed a large rectangle to make way for our incipient vegetable garden. We made trips to buy tools, seeds, and potting soil, and little blue pellets that would ward off the armies of garden snails. We fixed a hole in the fence, which Serge claimed was the reason that Tamarind, at age three, had already borne two litters.

Serge seemed content and competent doing all of this, and I wondered what had driven his previous "lack of activity." It was not a busy man's problem, but still, Serge didn't strike me as a terminal stoner. He woke up too early, was groomed and alert, and, with the arrival of a willing helper, he threw himself into a frenzy of home improvement.

Working in the garden, Serge wore gloves and paid close attention to how he used his hands. He was wary of losing the sensitivity in his palms that aitiopaths rely on, and so he worked more like an archaeologist than a farmer. Yet I was surprised to see that Serge seemed to be an old hand with yard work. He showed me how to use a hoe and warned me to rake through the soil for root fragments of the vines we'd cut out. We scraped the goat's shed clean of manure and mixed it in with the topsoil. Serge was not particular about what I planted. He insisted only that he wanted nothing "artificial" to aid the plants' growth—no twine or wire for the vines to climb, and no wooden stakes to hold the tomato plants upright.

A great many details of Serge's life seemed to be governed by the sort of absolute preference that forbid him to allow wooden stakes in the vegetable garden. In my first few weeks, I learned of a new rule almost daily. Serge would knock on my bedroom door with a bowl of *pêches au sirop* and, seeming to think of it as he turned to leave, say something like, "You know, Rowan, you can go in the back and pick the papayas, but don't give any to the neighbors. I don't want

them getting any ideas.” There was a strict ban on visitors setting foot behind the house. Inside, only a select few were allowed beyond the front room. No one but me was allowed in the kitchen. At the time, it was the furthest thing from my imagination to look on these restrictions as a feature of the criminal mind—to believe that Serge’s concerns for privacy and order suggested anything illicit. His rule-mongering made him seem stranger to me each day, and yet I took it as part of our agreement. In a town without spare rooms, I was grateful for a home that fulfilled my basic criteria: it was cheap, close to school, had good Internet and space to plant a vegetable garden. For that, I was willing to work around everything else.

The kitchen was the most severely regulated room in the house, but I couldn’t discern its code. What made Serge totally unconcerned by a sink filled with refuse, yet maniacally protective of his appliances? Serge was a great collector of the gadgetry of the modern housewife. He had a vegetable steamer, a deep fryer, a sandwich maker, a microwave, a crockpot, two blenders. Perhaps, I thought, this vast accumulation of appliances had acted as a shield against the general decline and rot of the traditional pillars of the kitchen—the sink, the stove, and the counter. As the kitchen inched past the point of no return, the appliances gave Serge a way to work around the problem without having to solve it. When one blender was dirty, Serge would put it in one of his two dishwashers and go on making pineapple juice in the other. The owner of two dishwashers need not wash dishes, and if you’re not washing dishes, who needs a sink?

You might think that someone who let his kitchen deteriorate past cleaning would be the kind of person who lived on Cup Noodles and cold cereal. Not Serge. The one fixed point in Serge’s routine, beyond the constant fog of marijuana, was his weekly outing to the local farmers’ market. Serge and I shared a love of fruit, and when he returned to the house before lunch each Friday, he carried bags of mandarins and tiny Victoria pineapples, bananas, passion fruit, and mangoes. The whole refrigerator, in fact, was a refuge of cleanliness and order, stocked with good produce and fresh eggs. I took this as confirmation that Serge’s view of cooking depended on some internal logic that remained invisible to me. It wasn’t that the refrigerator was miraculously spared from the cesspool that had taken over the rest of the room, but rather that Serge’s idea of a functional kitchen—in which everything essential could be plugged into a socket—was different from my own, which required only a knife, a flame, running water, and clean surfaces.

My most frequent violation in the kitchen was forgetting to close the dish cupboards when I emptied the dishwasher or got out a cup. I also opened the refrigerator door with wet hands, which Serge was sure would break it. I knew better than to mess with the steamer. All Serge's scolds were delivered in the same tone. I came to think of it as something like the "Game Over" tune in Pacman: "Rowan!" Serge would say, in a crackling falsetto, and I'd wince

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in anticipation. There was gouda you were only allowed to use to make tomato salads, and parmesan Serge kept for his girlfriend which you couldn't use at all. At the end of my first week, apologizing for having such strong opinions on the matter, Serge told me that we would have to do *beurre à part*, or keep our butter separate: I didn't observe right angles to cut butter for my bread. But Serge never swept or took up a sponge, and compost went out the back window.

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Unsurprisingly, smoking pot was at the center of Serge's social life. You could tell how much Serge trusted someone by where he chose to entertain them.

The only person I ever saw Serge sit with on his front porch was his mother, a judge, I was told, who stopped by every couple weeks and rarely stayed longer than was required to drop off a few Tupperware containers of Tamil food. We spoke only once, when I came home from school to find her sitting bolt upright in a chair on the front porch, in gold jewelry and a teal blouse, as Serge himself leaned against the railing, arms crossed. Serge introduced me tepidly as "an American teacher friend," and his mother asked where I was teaching—yes, she knew the principal, she said. Feeling chastened by Serge's fears about friends speaking to his mother, I nodded and brought my bicycle inside.

When his friends came over, Serge put on a pair of jeans or pajama pants and played host in the front room, offering each person a glass-bottle bong as he had me on my first night.

Then there was Serge's inner circle—the three people that Serge received on a faded blue armchair by his bed. The most frequent visitor in this group was

Pascal, a brooding father of three who used Serge's house as an escape from the domestic life. I never joined them in the bedroom, but Pascal was often there when I returned home for lunch or while I worked in the garden on my days off. Pascal chewed gum constantly and dressed in Réunion standard-issue: a low-slung Fox Head baseball cap (they make motorcycle gear), iridescent face-hugging sunglasses like those favored in Major League Baseball, mesh shorts, Adidas sandals, and carefully sculpted facial hair. His hat and sunglasses stayed on inside. Like Serge, Pascal was a dedicated practitioner of what people in Réunion call "stalling," or holding in pot smoke as long as you possibly can, making spirant clicking noises as you resist the body's urge to exhale. Pascal regularly drove himself to spectacular fits of coughing in this way. If he had taken his sunglasses off, I'm sure there would have been tears in his eyes. On weekdays, the two of them sat for hours at a time under the loose spell of the Sci-Fi Channel, often without exchanging a word. Sometimes I thought that the basis of their friendship was simply that Pascal was available to come get high earlier than anyone else—he regularly showed up in Serge's bedroom by 10:00 a.m.

When Serge wasn't home and his friends stopped by looking for him, they'd occasionally linger to chat, confiding unsolicited tales from his past. The most informative was an accountant named Benoît whom Serge resented because, he said, "Benoît only comes around looking to get high." Serge was surely right, but as far as I could tell, most of his guests came around looking to get high.

Before marrying and diving headlong into what seemed straitlaced adulthood, Benoît had accompanied Serge on all his delinquent high school adventures. "Man, we used to do crazy shit," he said one day on the front porch. "You know, Serge's mom is a big judge." (I didn't know, yet.) "She's the head of the Tribunal in Sainte-Marie. So, we used to take her law-enforcement ID and use that to buy weapons. We used to go up in the sugarcane fields, too, and Serge would set off chunks of dynamite. Boom! Man, we almost set the whole field on fire. Took a big chunk out of it." Benoît shook his head. Just ten years out of high school, Benoît looked totally incongruous with the story he was telling: khakis and a light-blue button-down, tucked in; a schoolboy part in his hair; delicate gold eyeglasses; a wedding ring conspicuous on his right hand.

Serge's brother Bobby told me that Serge had been the island's biggest pot dealer when he was in high school.

Through Benoît and the other callers in the front room, elements of a criminal past gradually came into focus. There was a man who drove getaway cars, and there was Rafi, known as "l'Alouette," or "the lark," who was Réunion's most accomplished bail bondsman. I thought that Rafi looked exactly as Serge might twenty years later. "He's a good person to know if you ever go to jail," Serge explained one day after Rafi left. He could put up your bail if your family couldn't, or protect you on the inside.

And there were Serge's own reminiscences of the days when you could drive up to Cilaos, one of the island's dormant volcanic craters, and fill the trunk of your car with marijuana for ten euros.

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All of this was in keeping with what I'd been told about the neighborhood. People I met around town were startled to hear I lived in La Cressonnière. "O te! Kartye far West sa!"—"That neighborhood is like the Wild West." I didn't get it. Our street, Rue de Azalées, was a dead end bounded by a wall covered in a thicket of actual azaleas; once every fortnight, our neighbor took four or five hours to mow his tiny lawn, sitting on a footstool with hedge trimmers. Every day, I exchanged silent greetings with a potbellied gentleman in a hat who was a constant fixture in his own garden, planting beans and lettuce, weeding among the stalks of sugarcane. Coming from New York, I thought the place seemed too quaint and outlandish to suffer from anything like ordinary crime, save the petty offenses (profanity, public urination, disorderly conduct) attendant with alcoholism and gambling. Saint-André was poor, especially by standards of the European Union. But dangerous?

One evening early on, while Serge was sitting in bed, I asked, "Serge, why is it that people think La Cressonnière is so sketchy? They keep telling me I should be scared, but all our neighbors are *gramouns*"—old people.

"*Gramouns!*" Serge broke in. "In fact, they are *gramoun* rapists. If you're talking about the one with a little paunch and a hat, don't try and talk to him. He raped a woman when he was younger. And our neighbors to the right, there? Don't chat them up either. They are professional thieves. *Professionals!*" Serge cackled. "But, you know, since all the crooks [live] here in the neighborhood,

they usually rob people in other areas. This is Saint-André's hotspot: they used to call this neighborhood the Quartier Western." Plainly, cowboy movies had made a mark on the island psyche. Serge went on. "That's why I tell you not to bring people from La Cressonnière back home. In general, I wait a year to get to know people before I bring them to my house. I did that with Pascal, with everyone."

"But you didn't do that with me—when I showed up, you didn't know me at all."

"Yes, but you, you were Clément's friend, and it was only for one night! After one night, *faut voir*—you have to wait and see. In any case, my gun is never far! If you tried to pull anything, I could slaughter you very quickly."

"You have a gun in the house?" I asked.

Serge looked down and shifted his hands about on the blankets, chuckling tentatively. "*Oui, je suis très armé* . . . very, very well-armed."

I couldn't think of anything to say.

"You know, if I have a gun, I'm going to use it for something," he mused. "Sometimes, I go to the seaside to shoot: shooting relaxes me. But I'd never shoot a person, never. I just go and shoot for a half hour or something. Before the cops have time to respond."

I was confused. Was this the same Serge who sucked his thumb and ate spaghetti in bed? Was I supposed to feel reassured that he had told me he could slaughter me anytime and, in the same breath, that he'd never shoot a person? The following Friday, while Serge was at the fruit market and I was on my lunch break, I looked everywhere for signs of weapons. I moved the couch, looked under his bed, patted the walls of the bathroom closet looking for secret compartments. I went out to the garage. I rummaged through boxes in Serge's workshop and turned up nothing other than glass Sprite bottles retooled as bongs—close to a hundred of them. And then I gave up. Moving out didn't cross my mind.

Even delivered with such sangfroid, it was hard to take Serge's claims at face value. To me, his whole universe had an air of fiction about it. There were aspects of Serge that I simply could not fathom—habits as ancient and well formed as rock formations by the side of the highway. This, I think, is how I wanted to see his enthusiasm for firearms: I wanted his quirks to be fictional in the sense that fiction is negotiable. Fictional characters are subject to a reader's powers of interpretation, and with a mixture of arrogance and

naiveté, I somehow believed that I could read Serge out of his bizarre convictions. Not that I thought the guns didn't exist at all, but I comforted myself by thinking that the story had been embellished, misrepresented in Serge's unreliable narration. If I could reason with him, probe his character deeply enough, I thought I'd find that Serge was different from the lines he delivered, that his internal plot could be rewritten.

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But I never came close. Almost weekly I pleaded with Serge to allow bamboo supports in the garden, to no avail. Pushed, Serge shielded himself with botanical sophistry about the inherent advantages of allowing a plant to make its own way, and he did not budge. Another example of his impenetrable logic: Serge didn't like papayas at all, and I could scarcely keep up with the bounty his boulder field produced. The birds got most of them. But there was no telling Serge that it would make sense to give the excess papayas to neighbors and friends. It just wouldn't do, he said.

At times, Serge seemed to acknowledge that he was being unreasonable. Once, to my surprise, he said it would be no problem to have a friend from another part of the island stay the night. We ate dinner on the floor of my bedroom and were out of the house by 8:00 the next morning. But later that afternoon, Serge said, “Rowan! No more sleepovers.” It was too much, he confessed, to bear the thought of a stranger using the toilet.

“You know,” I said, “if you're going to have people come over and tell them they can't use the toilet, I'd rather just tell them they can't come over at all.”

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I was on the point of pouring eggs into the pan to scramble one Monday when Serge shuffled into the kitchen carrying his distress voice. “Rowan!”

“What's up?”

“You need to leave.”

“Why?”

“There are people coming here, and I don’t want them to see you.” He gave me fifteen minutes to get on my way and shuffled back out of the kitchen.

For a second, I pondered whether I’d have time to eat my eggs and half-cooked hash browns before I left, before Serge came back around the corner at full clip. “Rowan! What are you waiting for? You have to leave.”

“You said I had fifteen minutes.”

“NOW.”

I left the eggs uncooked in the pan, turned off the stove, and went to get dressed. My shirt on one shoulder, my pants at my ankles, I heard the voice again: “Rowan!” I continued to put on my pants and said as much through the closed door. When I opened it, Serge was waiting for me on the other side, dark eyes ablaze and jaw clenched, holding the other half of my lunch in an un-lidded Tupperware container with a fork in it.

I found Serge particularly cryptic at such moments, capable of uncommon sensitivity and thoughtfulness in the midst of so much neurotic tension. It’s a contradiction that defined him. Once, when his girlfriend showed up unannounced, Serge confined me to my room, and then brought me fresh pineapple juice and a bowl of spaghetti on a tray, “to help you hold up.” Most people would have left me alone and done nothing at all; Serge acted in thrall to his strange impulses, then backpedaled with a sweet gesture.

I left the house out of sorts, my belt half-on, holding my bicycle in one hand and my lunch in the other. Fifty yards beyond our cul-de-sac, Serge whizzed by me in his station wagon, only to return seconds later trailed by two men driving a Peugeot hatchback. I ate my lunch in the meager shade of a flame tree by the post office parking lot and squinted at my book through the heat. When I came back from work that afternoon, I asked Serge what happened.

“Those were old friends from high school. I’m still dealing with their bullshit.”

“But you’re still friends?”

“Yeah, we got through it with knives today.”

No one had been stabbed, Serge said, and no guns had been drawn. “It went pretty well.”

Serge said he’d kicked me out during lunch in order to protect me, and whether I believed him or not, I soon had other reasons to take La Cressonnière more seriously. That week, the police station in Saint-André was burned inside out by a group of sixty vandals who also dispatched two cars and an insurer’s

storefront in the space of a few minutes before midnight. Three policemen came to the scene but quickly fled under a hail of stones and had to limit themselves to directing traffic away from the area. “Everything is on fire in the middle of Saint-André,” a friend told me by phone. The men were retaliating for the arrest of a cohort the night before in Saint-Denis. By the next day, thirty arrests had been made by a total of eighty reinforcements, and the mayor took the opportunity to restate the long-held grievance that Saint-André needed more policemen. Maybe La Cressonnière was the “far West” after all.

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If La Cressonnière was the far West, then people there would certainly have a need for another service Serge was said to offer—removing bullets and sewing up knife wounds. Hearing of this a few weeks after leaving Serge’s house for good, I thought back to the impromptu visit that had interrupted my lunch that day in December. I tried to reconstruct a visual of the men in the Peugeot: Had I seen blood? Was there someone lying in the back seat? I suppose I’ll never know.

But Gaspar was enjoying the telling. It’s not every day you get to tell someone they were living with an arms dealer. “Serge supplied everyone,” he said, before recounting the incident with the AK that had gone off in Serge’s lap but spared his hands. Gaspar and I sat on his couch in Saint-Leu while he smoked an interminable cigarette. He hadn’t slept in days, but he was in high spirits, provoked by the sense of possibility that sometimes comes with shedding one’s possessions. Born in France to parents from Réunion, Gaspar was now thinking of going back to the “*métropole*,” as the islanders call the French mainland, for a shot at more photography work than Réunion had to offer. For weeks, he’d been trading away household objects and years’ worth of concert paraphernalia to one of his neighbors for pot. The last things to go had been a Congos poster and a clock radio.

“If you get shot in the shoulder and you can’t go to the hospital, you go to Serge’s house,” Gaspar continued, nodding with an air of satisfaction. “Serge is a nice guy, but it probably wasn’t good for you to live there. It’s a gangster milieu!” he said cheerfully.

Imagining Serge as a mafia surgeon was much less of a stretch than imagining him selling guns. Serge was a healer. Serge looked over Tamarind’s

coat each day with veterinary attention. He called his pets his best friends, and he meant it without the slightest irony. Serge took in baby birds and tried to nurse them back to health. From time to time, Serge performed aitiopathy on an ankle injury Pascal had sustained on a motorcycle, or on his brother's neck—the only occasions on which I saw him touch another human being somewhere other than the hand. If Serge was a doctor to the underworld, I thought, it might explain why his bathroom remained immaculate even as his kitchen sank into a pool of filth. It could explain why he was so careful to keep his hands protected while we did yardwork and why bail bondsmen came to pay their respects. It could even explain, Gaspar said, why Serge was so adamant that there would be no stakes in the garden: he needed to be able to chase down intruders without any interference. But it did not explain why Serge let me live with him in the first place, or why he ended up kicking me out.

* * *

94 | Serge's decline began six weeks into my stay on Allée des Bougainvilliers. It was the middle of November, around Dipavali, the Hindu festival of lights. Dipavali is Saint-André's annual day in the island's spotlight, but when I went off to town to watch the festivities, Serge stayed home. Though Serge belonged to one of the east coast's prominent Indian families, he generally steered clear of their gatherings. Hindus in Réunion, called Malbars, practice a form of Hinduism in which Kali, the goddess of death, is central. Sacrifices of black roosters and of billy goats are routine. The year I was in Saint-André, the island's Hindu association was jousting with the local government and animal rights groups over their right to sacrifice animals and the methods used to do so. For the biggest event of the year, which begins on February 2, two thousand roosters and several hundred goats are slaughtered over a three-day period at a temple called Terre Rouge, and the Hindu community is fed richly for a week. Serge found all of this barbaric. He was a vegetarian. He had adopted Kabri, the goat, in order to prevent its slaughter at the hands of his father. On Dipavali, the goat got sick.

The main event was a parade of deity-themed floats pulled by tractors driving slowly among the colonial buildings in the center of town. Placid toddlers, stiff with ceremonial clothing, rode cross-legged on top. The high school sent a dance troupe. A group of drummers trailed a wheelbarrow full of hot coals

they used to tune their goatskin drums. I could see why Serge hated it: it was a procession of all the facets of his heritage which Serge had cast off—the pomp, the rituals, the conservatism. There was no place for an atheist vegetarian Nirvana fan at Saint-André's Dipavali.

You could see a related kind of cultural upheaval in many of Saint-André's Malbar youth. In a town that still clung dearly to Hindu traditions like Dipavali and temple sacrifices, there were legions of young Indian men who crowded the courtyards of Saint-André's public housing projects wearing Yankees hats and baggy shorts, whistling at girls in tube tops and hoop earrings. The local high school, Lycée Sarda Garriga, named for the governor who abolished slavery in Réunion, was full of teenage mothers and fathers who listened to dancehall on their cell phones and smoked cigarettes after class. On weekends, they drag-raced souped-up Peugeots on the highway north of town. On Dipavali, they sat, as I did, on the wall of the Catholic cemetery and watched the parade pass by.

When I got back home, Serge was kneeling in the goat's shed with its head across his lap. The goat began to puke, and Serge took off his Nirvana T-shirt to wipe its muzzle clean. He tried to force it to drink water using a plastic bottle. The goat did not make it through the night. In the morning, Serge and his other tenant—a next-door neighbor who worked for the sanitation department, drove its body to the incinerator outside Saint-Pierre. There, in a nondescript industrial park that smelled like dry dog food, Serge's beloved goat was sublimated with the remains of thousands of pigs and chickens from the processing plants nearby.

After Dipavali, I began bathing outside with the rainwater collected in an oil drum under the drainpipe. It didn't really bother me. I only hoped, for Serge's sake, that he would want to shower badly enough to fix the leak in the bathtub or allow me to hire a plumber. He said he was waiting for the concrete hollow beneath the tub to dry completely before attempting to fix anything; if we tried to make a repair before then, it simply wouldn't work.

Serge began to sleep for more than twelve hours at a stretch, television blaring as always. Often, he wouldn't get out of bed all day, except to reheat a bowl of noodles or use the bathroom. He sat, transfixed by sci-fi series, sucking his thumb under a floral blanket. He no longer came out to wield a machete in the garden or even watch from the steps of the house. He no longer went to the farmers' market, previously the point around which his Fridays revolved.

It had been the only time of the week when you could be sure Serge would be out of the house; now he sat in bed watching season four of *The X-Files*. The dishes, once diminished, piled higher and higher.

For nearly a month, I kept up the rain drum shower routine, and Serge went to his parents' house sporadically to bathe. And then he told me I had to move out. I probably should have seen it coming, or made the decision myself, but I hadn't. For all my frustrations, living chez Serge was still convenient and entertaining. My only plausible option at the time was to forsake the local color of La Cressonnière and move in with a group of other foreign teachers across town, and I didn't want to think of moving out and starting over again after less than three months.

The announcement came abruptly one morning in the kitchen: "Rowan. You can't live here anymore."

The idea of changing his mind lasted only a moment. Still, I did negotiate a two-week grace period, and I timidly asked him *why* I had to leave.

Characteristically, his foremost concern was for his pets. "You know, Rowan, Naruto doesn't really like you. The room you are staying in belongs to him. Since you have been here, every morning, I have had to go outside and carry Naruto into the house, even though he is the *indoor* cat." Suddenly, with a convert's newfound insight, I relived months of unconscious conflict with the cat, whom I had often chased from my bed when I got home in the afternoons.

There was also the question of "the old house": Serge wasn't sure it could bear the strain of two humans, as the leak in the bathtub clearly showed.

"But the sink is unblocked now, and the kitchen is clean. We fixed your fence, and your yard is in much better shape."

"Maybe, but if we did all that work just to let the old house degenerate like this, then I don't think it's worth it."

And then came what I suspect was the real reason: "When I told you to stay and live here," Serge told me, "it was because I felt *en forme*"—in shape. "These days, I feel less and less *en forme*." Serge sighed. "I think I'm a bear who needs to live alone."

* * *

Moving out of Serge's place proved to be the best decision I made during my year in Réunion. The prospect of homelessness led me happily to a spare bed at

a lychee farm in the hills above Bras-Panon, a few miles south of Saint-André. It was a trade between the convenience of La Cressonnière and the comfort of belonging. My commute went from a few blocks to six hilly miles, by bike, and during the rainy season, which covers most of the school year, I had to get to work early enough to change out of my muddy clothes unnoticed. There was no Internet at the new place, and my phone had no service there either, but I felt far less isolated than I had chez Serge, where it had been hard to forget, for even a moment, that I was in someone else's home.

My standard line to friends and colleagues after I moved out of Serge's place was that I thought we'd make better friends than roommates. In the end, I saw Serge only once after I gave up my room. On a long Monday lunch break, I stopped by the house to cull what was left of my vegetable garden after two months of neglect and steady rain. Serge was home and willing to let me sort through the weeds to dig up carrots and pick peas, but he seemed entirely uninterested in talking, deflecting my every question with a monosyllabic response. I stayed just long enough to exhaust the usual avenues for small talk and to notice a few encouraging signs of life in the yard around me: a pile of freshly cut branches leaned against the fence; old stepping stones traced a slightly different path to the front door; a freshly cut chandelier of bananas laid to rest on the garage floor. Maybe, I thought, we had fixed Serge's lack of activity after all. But it was hard to say for sure. I was reminded, as I left, of a line from Serge's cousin, delivered to me in confidence one day on his front porch. "You know," he told me, "with Serge, it's like the weather: *un coup de soleil, un coup la pluie.*"