

My father had died at the age of fifty-five. A year before I turned fifty-five several things occurred that changed my life somewhat drastically. I started to wonder if I too, at age fifty-five, would die. I also decided that after thirty years I wanted to go back to Paris where I'd been a student in the 60's. The Parisians, especially women, with a few exceptions, had been generally horrible and haughty to me and Americans in general. This had not been the case my junior year at Yale when I took a course in modern French literature. My professor, Annie, a Parisian, had gone to the prestigious Ecole Normale Superieure. She was only two years older than me. She was a wonderful passionate teacher, warm, sparkling, attractive. We had a short delightful affair just before I left for Paris. It was very nice and totally innocuous. In today's world she would have been fired and I probably would be asked to leave school.

My girlfriend Lynn of eight years and I had planned a trip to France. Our relationship had dragged on too long for either of us, and it felt claustrophobic and as if a little of me was dying.

Now thirty years later my fluency in French had disintegrated into my being tongue tied and garbled up with my Italian.

I remembered that my underwater archeologist friend Faith Hentschel had rented her house to a French biology professor at Yale. This was a small house on a spectacular site overlooking a quarry pond. It is one of the spatially nicest houses I have ever done. I called Faith and asked her if she thought the French woman might be someone to rekindle my French over a few meals. She said it probably would work because Agnes had liked the house so much that she wanted to meet me. We met for dinner and more than my French was rekindled as there was an instant attraction.

Agnes was short and smart with a sense of style. Animated, highly opinionated, a life force and a real provocateuse with a wicked sense of humor and a great laugh. From a lower middle class Parisian family she was a real Edith Piaf but with a luscious soft "moileuse" body.

She had been a dentist and then got a PhD in cellular biology. In her early thirties she and her mentor husband were offered jobs at the Yale Medical School. When I met

her she was recently divorced. Within three months I was out of my relationship with Lynn and we were a couple.

Now we were at Tanelle enjoying our first time there together and I had invited Count Vitaliano Visconti and his wife Maria Vittoria, the owners of the 16th century villa Fattoria Solaio for dinner.

I had bought my farmhouse, Le Tanelle, from them. Their grown son, Fillipo, his wife, and their little daughter would also come. My German neighbor, Karl Bonhoeffer (the nephew of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian killed by the Nazis), would come with his wife, Gabriella, his son, daughter-in-law, and their three young lovelies Hanna, Jonah, and Golda (after Golda Meir). They would all be coming for dinner.

I had picked out a nice full leg of lamb from several that Arnolfo, the butcher in Castelnuovo, had shown me.

Returning from the butcher, as I eased the car down the steep and rocky drive toward the ancient stone "fonte" where my water comes from and where the animals come to drink, Hanna ran toward me.

From thirty feet away I could see confusion and fear

on her face. She was short of breath and her voice was anxious. I knew immediately that something really bad had happened.

“Die Hunde haben eine Schafe angegriffen und die ist schwer verletzt.” “The dogs have got one of the sheep and have hurt it.”

I got out of the car and followed her up to where her grandfather was kneeling by a ewe lying on its side in the grass. Dark blood was smeared on the fleece alongside its neck, the hoof of one of its hind legs was diseased and blue-green. Karl had one hand on the animal's head, the other resting on the mass of fleece that rose and fell in spasmodic intervals.

Karl ran a clinic of 275 doctors in Munich. I am a hunter. We understand each other and he knew that I knew what we would have to do here. Even so, I still asked the questions that I knew the answers to.

“Is this one of Amadeo's?”

“Yes.”

“Bardo and Lino went crazy when we got near the fonte and broke loose from Gabriella. They caught this one

because it had the bad leg."

He turned and asked Hanna to go back to the house. I had seen this ewe several days before, hobbling on three legs. She stood out from the flock that wandered freely among our properties. I had made a note to go over to Amadeo's to tell him. Amadeo, the shepherd, was the big, tough Sardinian. When we had first met I'd had to stand face to face with him a few years before, neither one of us backing off, in order to gain his respect. He was ignorant, but "furbo" (clever like a fox), a friend of sorts.

I asked Karl, "Do you think this animal can live?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. If we took the sheep to the vet it might live, but the word would surely get back to Amadeo, and the next time he saw the dogs he would shoot them."

I said, "How do you want to kill the sheep? I can cut its throat. It's relatively painless."

"No, we'll suffocate it."

I didn't like the idea, but it was Karl's call. I got a plastic garbage bag. We put it over the sheep's head.

Karl twisted it tight and put his hands around the sheep's neck. The veins on the back of his hands stood out and the muscles of his forearms tensed as he tightened his fingers, choking the animal. I held the struggling animal, feeling its legs kick. The bag inflated and deflated as the sheep tried to breathe. It struggled against my hold. It took a long time. Karl and I did not talk. We did not look at each other. The ewe's attempts to breathe slowed. Then the animal was quiet.

"Jetzt ist zu ende." "That's all."

We tucked the legs up underneath her in a fetal position.

I took another garbage bag and we slid the bag over the body. The red blood where the dog's incisors had ripped the flesh mixed with the dark purple of the gangrenous hoof. It smelled awful. I had to force it into the bag. I wiped my hand first in the gravel and then back and forth on the grass.

"I will get my car," said Karl.

It was late afternoon. I waited there in the heat, the August sun shining through the clear cerulean sky and

looked out over this meadow where the sheep come to graze, where the hollow melodic sound of their bells wafts up to Le Tanelle and often awakens me in the early morning. I looked out over this beautiful meadow and off into the rolling hills – alternating patches of hay fields, of olive trees, of chestnut and oak groves, and into the distance at the snow covered Apennines on the other side of Florence fifty miles away.

Karl and I lifted the black plastic form into the trunk of his car. It was heavy and awkward. He closed the trunk. Then he turned to me with his arms opened. I opened mine and we embraced.

“Thank you,” he said, “I will bury the sheep.”

I drove back to Castelnuovo with the leg of lamb I had bought from Arnolfo. I returned it to him saying I had misunderstood Agnes, she had wanted an “arrosto di maiale”, a pork roast, not a leg of lamb. He gave me a pork roast.

That night we had the pork roast with garlic and rosemary – one of my favorites. Agnes did a nice job with it. I ate slowly and had very little appetite. My thoughts were elsewhere.

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Leg of Lamb

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