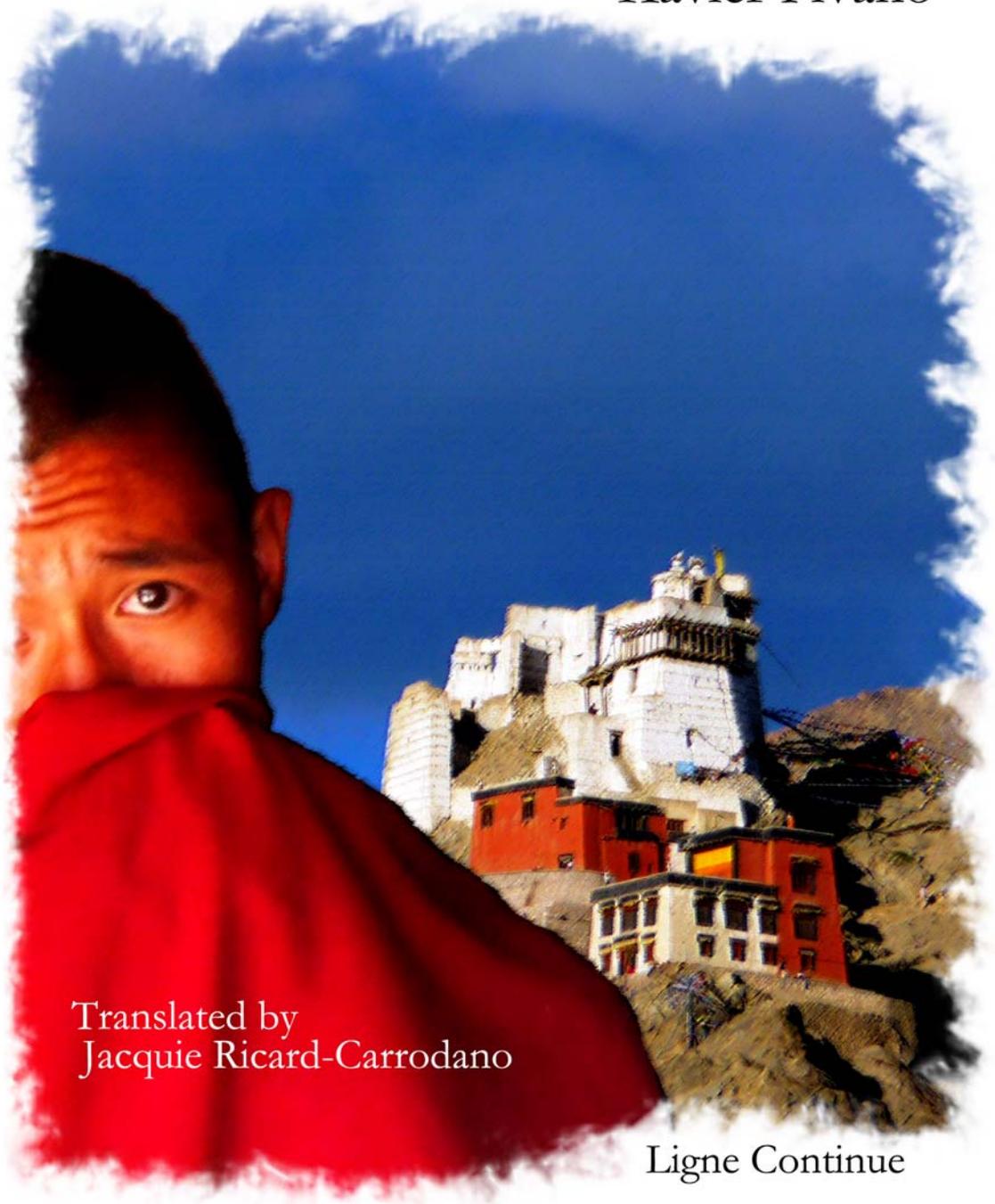


SONS OF THE WIND

Xavier Pivano



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Ligne Continue

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“ Wind does not complain : man only can hear,
moaning of time into,
the moaning of wind. ”

Octavio Paz — *The Literate Monkey*

Arnaud

First of all, a dim glow appeared behind the dark curve of the Earth, then, some fleeting rays lighted up the atmosphere and the sun sprang out of nowhere, as the plane flew down to meet it. A stewardess immediately rushed along the aisle to draw curtains, to prevent the Paris-Delhi business class passengers from being disturbed.

Arnaud stopped her with a smile. He wanted to contemplate this glorious sunrise. He could still be amazed at such a natural daily show, even though he was an experienced manager, right in the prime of life. Not so deep in himself, the child he used to be lay dormant.

That might be the reason why he had planned his tour to visit his Asian customers with the opportunity to stop for a fortnight in India. Two weeks to meet up with his long lost father !

Arnaud sighed, all this suddenly seemed so pathetic. But he hadn't been able to find any more free time in his overbooked schedule and, most of all, he dreaded that the whole story would be nothing but a ridiculous hoax.

The air hostess offered him a cup of coffee that he accepted with pleasure. Arnaud straightened up his seat and unfolded the flap in front of him. Sipping his coffee, he studied the mysterious letter he had received the month before. He read it for the umpteenth time :

“ My Dear Arnaud,

The transformation has been going on for several days now and I don't really know what is going to happen to me. Perhaps I won't be able to write any more, to think anymore, to be the human being I used to be anymore. I don't know. So, I prefer to send you these few words in case I am unable to do so later.

I have sent the same letter to your sister Emily, but I doubt she'll give any credit to it... She is not as adventurous as you are. ”

Arnaud stopped reading, thinking : was he still the bold young man that this man — his father? — pretended to remember? No, he wasn't, definitely not... Bitterly, Arnaud touched his chubby face and pinched the rolls which fattened his belly. All the business meals and a too sedentary life has transformed the sporty figure of the young man he would never be again. Arnaud felt a twinge of sorrow. Was he the man he used to dream of becoming? To avoid answering the question he kept on reading the letter :

“ You were a teenager when your mother and I parted. Emily and you went to live with her and I followed other roads. Shortcuts to be more precise. Ways that don't lead anywhere... or at least where people don't intend to go. That's how I arrived here, where I live now and I am not unhappy. They have let me

experience an outstanding adventure. An adventure from the depths of time that only the Sons of the Wind are lucky enough to experience.

I'm enthusiastic, really enthusiastic, but there may be nothing left of my being in a few days. As long as the transformation hasn't ended, nothing is sure. There have been so many failures and so few elected... ”

Arnaud stopped for a while again. He didn't like this extract, he considered these were the words of a lunatic, a madman who was in a deep mystic crisis. He had wondered if he wasn't caught up in foul scheming organized by the lobby of religious fanatics who were anti-abortionists. His company actually produced various contraceptive products. It regularly underwent attacks by zealous militants who were spurred on by their leaders' inconsequential speeches.

“ My dearest son — for you will always be my dearest son, in spite of the distance and the ups and downs of life — I include what I wrote after we had split up, a few pages which were a sort of psychotherapy. Forgive the style please and some of the extreme expressions that now and then came to my mind when your mother, on her own accord, decided to leave me. I don't bear her a grudge any longer. Luckily, I have got over it. In fact she has allowed me to blossom beyond my wildest dreams... ”

Arnaud remembered, shamefully, how his mother, his sister and he had abandoned his father in a dangerous and depressed state of mind. He now realized, being himself in his forties, how a man became fragile and vulnerable when he went over this fateful age. It was Arnaud's turn to face his own mid-life crisis, this painful turning point when you understand that youth has gone away and time is speeding along.

It was the moment to review the situation : he knew he was at his best. He was at the high point in his career, he had important decision-making powers and more than enough money. The zenith of his life appeared to suit him all right, but he sensed it was nearly the moment when dusk would break in.

Hadn't he read some scientists' new hypothesis that the mid-life crisis could simply be linked to the brain-ageing process ?

A symposium of highly qualified researchers had described this pathology as “*difficulties in concentrating, in getting ideas together and expressing them clearly, in deciding things, a decline in intellectual abilities, an inability to obtain results, difficulties in investing in future projects, a loss of interest in everyday tasks, in socializing, a lack of energy and an extreme tiredness.*” These scientists had noted that such symptoms were very often linked with a lack of some neurotransmitters, especially dopaminergic.

Was he also going to suffer from a lack of dopamine, a substance which has such an important role in so many

cerebral processes ? And in that case, what was going to happen to him ?

Arnaud had been scared ; he had then started to wonder. All that had started with a very tiny crack in the perfect veneer of his life. His mother had started to suffer from Alzheimer's disease and all of a sudden he was standing right at the crossroads of two generations : his kids for one who didn't need him any longer, and his mother whom he had to look after.

Then, one day, what he had buried deep inside for ages sprang out, in the shape of a strange letter from an unknown person who said he was... his own father. The unanswered question repressed in his subconscious had then reappeared with a painful acuteness : what had this father they had so miserably thrown away become ?

At that time, if Arnaud hadn't been so deeply entangled in his teenage worries, he might not have abandoned his father and he might have given him some of his youthful strength or simply his love. But at that time, he had been a selfish bloody idiot, that's all... Arnaud felt tears welling up in his eyes. The attentive stewardess came to him :

“ Do you feel all right ? she asked, worried.

- Yes, I do... thanks so much ”, he answered with a little smile, meaning just the opposite.

He carried on reading, knowing in advance the words his... father... had wanted him to know.

“I know you will doubt this is true. I can hear you tap on your calculator to add up figures and find out my age. Yes, you’ve read right, I’m over seventy ! And I’m still here... and will be for a long time. Because... but I will only tell you, if you come to see me. Whatever condition I am in then ! I’ve left an envelope for you in the monastery, in case I am unable to speak to you...”

At that point that was pure madness. Arnaud blocked on these last words : monastery, inability to speak.

What did it all mean ?

Each time he felt an intense scare. His mother was slowly losing her memory and his father — if the man was really his father — seemed to have a stange degenerative disease.

With such a family mental illness, Arnaud started worrying about his own. “Shouldn’t I try to meet this guy to be able to find out the truth about all this ? ” he wondered once, waking up in a sweat after an awful nightmare.

That was the reason why he had made up his mind to go on this journey.

Or, at least these few days off from his long arranged business trip. Business will always be business and *time is money*.

Arnaud took the brown envelope and intensely scrutinized it. The stamp showed it had been posted in Leh. After some rapid investigation he found out it was the most important city in Ladakh, a province in the

north of India, in the Indus valley at an altitude of eleven thousand two hundred feet.

He took out the faded, battered, stained copybook, then he kept on reading through his father's diary : “ *It was on a gloomy evening...*

“ It was on a gloomy evening,

a bat was flying through the sky like a drunken road hog driving the wrong way down the motorway. Mouth open it swallowed the mosquitoes and I watched it from the only garden seat I had forgotten to throw away.

I was exhausted.

I hadn't had anything to eat since the morning and I hadn't stopped for a second, lugging around worm-eaten boards — the remnants of a bookshelf which had never been erected —, paint pots dried-up through lack of care, old wall paper rolls dating back to the building of the house, bags full of shabby clothes, discoloured magazines with outdated scoops, old dog-eared books stuffed with funny obsolete past subjunctives, all the stuff people pile up day by day without noticing.

Up to the day when you can't move any more, you are overwhelmed by objects, by things.

Where was *real life* among all that ?

A life with adventures, epics, passions. I had always thought that *real life* would begin the next day. As far as I could remember, since my early childhood days, I used to believe that my life at that time was only the prelude to *something* fabulous, extraordinary...

Fabulous, extraordinary but elusive too !

That *something* remained diffuse, just like the thin jet of steam from a pressure-cooker before it boils. I couldn't define it, get a grip on it. I had a blurred image of that

something and yet I knew it existed or, at least, it would exist one day.

“ Tomorrow ! *Real life* will begin tomorrow, for sure ! ”

That was what I used to tell myself each morning, to find the courage to get up from the cosy bed my wife had just left to wake the kids up, to shave in front of the mirror in which a pale copy of myself was staring at me but didn't seem to recognize me, to have a shower where hot and cold water wouldn't mix, to sip a hot cup of coffee of which the caffeine made me so ill that a yellowish foam came out of my mouth as if I was a washing-machine with a badly-closed door, and to get dressed so that I appeared to be a different person, before going back to work to earn enough to pay my taxes and at the same time feed my family.

And I had been waiting for that day, that rebirth, for forty-seven years. Or, in fact my real birth. I had been waiting for that event for so many years... in vain.

But today, I was tired of waiting. It was my birthday. I had been forty-seven on that very morning and on the same evening, I had to accept it, the *something* hadn't happened yet.

Real life hadn't ousted the usual life, the everyday life I knew too well. At that point I decided I wouldn't wait any more.

The previous week, just before my wife took the TV set away, I had watched a commercial for a humanitarian organisation, Africans' life expectancy was : forty-seven. That seemed the right age to die.

My resolve became stronger all that very exciting day long, going backward and forward between the house and the city dump. In fact, the dump guard, seeing me so often, feared that I would fill the container up all by myself.

“Have you got many of these left?” he had asked, potbellied in his blue overalls, stained with black spots which proved he was working too. But what was he working on? On tuning his car engine maybe, waiting for poor guys who got lost between containers for green waste, for large objects or for rubble? And watch out if you make a mistake!

“There go for twenty-four years of family life piled up day by day, I replied with a sigh.

- Yep! And how many cubic feet are there?

- ... , I looked at him, bewildered.

- You know you are only allowed three cubic feet a day?

- No, I didn't. Can't you take more for once? I still have ten years of memories to throw away before closing time.

- What's up with you man? The guard asked with a suspicious look. You do live in this area, don't you?

- Yes, I do, I've been there for fifteen years.

- You're emptying your house, aren't you?

- Yes, I've sold it and I have to leave tomorrow.

- I see.”

But what could this plump man see behind his tinted glasses? this local civil servant proud of his menial responsibilities: a broken man throwing away the last remains of his life into a dump truck, or a dammed nuisance who was going to fill his bloody containers up sooner than expected. He would then have to call the lorry up to take it away and replace it with an empty one instead. The prospect of being disturbed. Though, with a generous smirk he added: “OK, that’ll be all right this time.” As if I was planning to get rid of my life every other day! Once was enough, considering the work it meant.

Since dawn I had loaded the car with the last relics of our life in that large house which had been, for years, noisy and lively. My wife, by common agreement — mostly hers, by the way! — had retrieved the furniture and the kitchen appliances, and moved into a functional flat, more suited to a divorcee living with grown-up kids.

When the divorce was pronounced, I was responsible for clearing up our married life which only amounted to a house and a few shares. So I sold the shares and split the money with my ex-wife. A real estate had easily found a buyer for the house and I had had to negotiate the date of my leaving in order to let us — me, in fact — have time to move the furniture.

My ex-wife and my two children had cleared off when we had had to throw away what four people had been

heaping up for more than fifteen years. She had given the excuse that *she* was working but *I* had all the time I needed for it, as I was on the dole.

On that point, she was right. I had plenty of time. Sometimes too much. All this free time was preying on my mind and dark thoughts were swirling around my head. The emptiness of my whole life only became more obvious and more unbearable. I happened to miss the soothing commuter's routine I had been in for more than twenty years.

As a marketing manager in a huge engineering company, I had rapidly climbed the social ladder and was well paid for it. My responsibilities had increased till nearly forty, when my first nervous breakdown had knocked me out and had been the beginning of my downfall.

One morning, I had woken up and realized, looking in my mirror, that the young man I had kept a mental image of had disappeared, leaving a man with a chubby business-meal face, a beer-loaded belly as thick as a lorry tyre, arms and thighs as soft as Turkish delight and worst of all, breasts as large as my wife's. Which was something !

I took immediate action. I went on a drastic diet so that, from morning to night I was as starving as a wolverine in winter. And then the nervous breakdown began to show itself, through obsessive visions of mouth-watering roast beef and crusty gratins.

I became less efficient at work, at the very moment when the tense international situation made competition greater and markets more difficult to obtain.

After a year's deficit, the chief managers had wanted to tighten up the sails, to lighten up the structure. “A company is like a ship... you should never load it above the water line, or you'll sink”, they had said, announcing a plan for mass redundancies.

I had been sacked on the first round. A letter, a check and cheerio !

For me, as for many of my former colleagues my life became a mess : I had to endure never-ending queues in the dark halls of the local job centre, in order to add my name to the lists of unemployed people ; appointments in those offices where I had to fill out stupid forms, before recounting my difficulties and problems to an indifferent counsellor ; applications, letters for job in which I had to sound enthusiastic which I no longer was and, anyway, I never received any replies...

Time had run out. Too fast. My dole benefits ended before I could find a new job.

The *man-in-charge*, the lonely hunter who leaves the house at dawn to get food for his family had been replaced by the *house husband* who watches his wife go to work, briefcase in hand, to bring good money to pay for mobile rentals and new video games for the kids.

As I had gradually felt deprived of any consistency, I had all the more trusted in the vague concept of *real life*... which would happen soon.

Later on, my wife had wanted to stand aloof. One morning, as she was drying her hair she had told me, all at once : “ ...I need to think, to stand back... ”

I was brushing my teeth so I spat the toothpaste before answering :

“ I can't hear anything because of your dryer. What did you say ?

- I said I needed to stand back, she repeated, switching it off and brushing her hair.

- What from ? I asked far from imagining what was to follow.

- From both of us, of course !

- Both of us ? What do you mean ? I replied with toothpaste running down my hand.

- How stupid you are ! And it's getting worse and worse with years. I need to open up, to find myself again.

- Do you want to go on holidays ? We can go to the island of Oleron if you want to rest.

- You don't mean it, do you ?

- Yes, I do, I don't understand what your problem is.

- The fact is I need to review... about our couple... what it has become... and about my own life too. ”

I was staring at her with round eyes, as bright and witty as a two day fish on the fishmonger's stall.

“ Do you want us to split up ? I asked, breathless, desperately looking for a few atoms of oxygen not to die before her answer

- Don't jump to conclusions ! I didn't say that. It could be a momentary break... to let us have time to see better.

- But I'm not the one who needs it. I can see clearly, I replied, offended by her suggestion.

- You know... it's the moment to think about what our life is like.

- A sort of mid-life checking ?

- That's it. ”

And hers had been strict : she had to sail... alone — another nautical term to stab me. Time had come for her to get rid of what her husband was : a dead weight. She wanted to pep her life up. And she had a good opportunity for that as a thirty-year-old physiotherapist had let her understand she was still pretty and, in his eyes, perfect for a love affair. How could I fight such an enemy then ?

I hadn't been able to. I had surrendered at once. What was the use of it ? You can't keep a woman when she hears the call of the sea. Sailing to new romantic love stories. It's as if you wanted to capture the wind in your hands.

The nervous breakdown had gone worse and I had found some help in various antidepressants and anxiolytics which enlightened my anxiety but brought me very depressing sexual impotence.

On mornings, waking up, I couldn't have an erection as I used to as a teenager. I could watch the most attractive girls down the streets without feeling any turmoil, any sex drive, any desire. Nothing, dead calm. The most pathetic apathy. It was as if I had become a sort of chemical eunuch, a genetically modified mollusc floating in a sexual lack-of-concern sea.

But, of course, it didn't mean any harm as I was as alone as a hermit. All by myself. Without a woman to share sexual intercourse. So, why should I worry? That was true in a way, but can one live this way after losing job, family, illusions and, last but not least, what links you to the brotherhood of men?

For weeks I had the terrifying feeling I wasn't part of human beings any more.

So the day before I had stopped taking medicines. I had left the law-permitted chemical heaven in order to regain the last remains of the humanity I still could find inside me. A one-day weaning couldn't wipe out months of daily doses of course. On the contrary I could feel just the opposite: anguish and depressing impotence. I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear my own self, so a decision had grown up. The Decision. The Only one. The Unique.

Emptying cupboards I had found a shoe box we had forgotten there, since we had moved in, back from Mexico, fifteen years ago. Mexico!

Mexico had been my lucky time. I had just graduated from a high marketing college — I still don't understand how I could have studied there though I used to dream to be an actor — then I had entered an engineering company — the very one which fired me twenty years later — and for a few years I knocked about a lot from Paris throughout South America. I used to like this job. But I sometimes had the feeling I was a super sales representative, but taking planes instead of driving with free samples to give !

That wasn't at all what I had dreamt about as a teenager but there was a thrilling side which wasn't unpleasant : landing in an unknown airport in the middle of the night ; jumping into a taxi driven by an unshaved sleepy man ; settling in a gorgeous palace not more expensive than a two-star Parisian hotel... One could start imaging things !

But there were a few drawbacks as well : walking up and down ministry halls looking for your lethargic correspondent, being daily on the verge of food poisoning, waiting for hours in airport waiting-rooms with no free time for sightseeing.

So after a few years of this hectic life, the company had suggested my taking in charge of their Mexico office. An exceptional opportunity for a young, not very experienced, manager. I hadn't refused of course and we, my wife and my older son, had emigrated in Mexico. The megalopolis. The urban hydra.

We spent three years there. My daughter was born there. My wife had her nervous breakdown there, the day when an unexpected visitor had searched each room, while we were sleeping with open windows to be able to breathe after a steaming hot day. That visitor had stolen some money and some jewellery. Nothing much. But he had to cross both the kids' and our bedrooms. He could have killed all of us. That was the reason why my wife had been hysterical about it. Not to forget that she couldn't speak Spanish at all, which trapped her into an unbearable loneliness ; and that she had two young kids in the worst age for parents — mostly for mothers in fact, because fathers are often out — and she was too far away from her own mama, to be able to complain and be comforted.

The day after the robbery, I had had to whine by the general in charge of the town military security — I was recommended by a minister of Agriculture I was related with for irrigation substructures — to ask for protection. The only protection I got had been a beautiful gun with a licence to use it.

The licence — which was useless in France — was still at the bottom of the shoe box. I had brought it back from Mexico and for ages it had been waiting for the right moment.

It was now lying on my lap. Its metal was shining under the moonlight. Nothing aggressive. A faint friendly glow.

Mexico was so far away now. A sad fado came to my mind : at the twilight of her life, a woman turns back to her youth, the sorrow of not being loved nor loving anymore invades her instead of pleasure of love pain. I can still hear the singer's heartbreaking voice, the accordion melancholy and the guitar sadness : “ *Ter outra vez 20 anos...* ”

I wouldn't even be strong enough to bear the age of twenty once more. I only longed to see what was beyond the mirror. With a slow but steady movement I handed the gun and released the safety lock as the Mexican general — who had spurs on his boots — had shown me.

The bat was now having dinner with another one. They were both sliding in the mid-June warm air, avoiding to bump into each other at the last second, like crazy underground trains. Stars were writing an indecipherable palimpsest on the universe dark material.

I held the gun on my temple.

I wasn't scared.

Just curious.

My forefinger wound round the trigger like and independent facetious snake.

A sharp snap whipped the air near my ear.

My eardrum buzzed.

Was this death ?

I put the gun down on my lap. Looking for an explanation. My hands were shaking now.

I opened the magazine and took a bullet out of it. It seemed all right to me, but the sparse moonlight didn't let me have a minute scrutiny, a thorough scrutiny. I searched my jeans pocket looking for a lighter — I had started smoking again, half grass, half tobacco to forget the ups and downs of my life, and I put the flame near the unwilling bullet.

A thin layer of rust covered the cap proving important damage due to fifteen years' lack of care. The powder must have suffered from dampness.

I was stunned. My last hope to quickly end my life without much pain had vanished. I watched the now useless gun with desperate eyes. What was going to happen to me ?

Panic-stricken, I jumped to my feet and rushed to the swimming-pool. Drowning? I was quite a good swimmer and the water was only five feet deep at its deepest part.

As I am six feet tall, it would have been like drowning in a washing-up basin. Ridiculous. And painful too. How to resist the last moment panic when your lungs burn and long for fresh air ?

One needs a more than sixty feet dive not to be able to emerge before choking. So... with only six feet !

Stars were making a fool of myself from the bottom of water.

I went back into the house, my steps clattering on the terracotta floor. The rooms were lighted up by the

moon through the open shutters. Sad and empty. Only worn out walls, cracked ceilings and shiny tiled floors. The house needed to be brightened up by some paint here, some mastic there.

Our children had been happy in this house. They had spent their whole teenage years in a heavenly setting : separate bedrooms far from the parents' ; three meals a day at any time ; laundry and cleaning services and a jack-of-all-trades — in this case, myself to fix everything. Not to mention the large swimming pool in the genuine Provencal hills and a wide terrace to dance with friends on till sunrise.

I searched the cupboards once more to find an exit. There wasn't anything left, except a little dust and... an empty cylinder of butane gas ! I went out into the garden and walked to the hut I used to keep some tools in. The friendly moon slipped a ray through the torn out material on the roof. There wasn't much left. A forgotten spade, two or three pieces of wood and... a rope. The rope I used to need to tie the goats which willy-nilly cleared the woods. We had bought them with one of our neighbours. Since I had sold the house I had given him the rights on the small flock. He had accepted it with a grin. Not really convinced. I didn't have a choice. Neither did he.

I took the rope and climbed back to the terrace floodlit now by a beaming moon which was

overwhelmed by happiness. It seemed attentive to what I was doing. I didn't want to deceive it again.

I looked for the best place. The balcony guardrail? Not very romantic. I preferred pulling a log under an oak branch tying the rope to this ancient tree. As a young boy I had learnt how to tie slipknots while watching westerns. And I still remembered how to do them. It's like riding a bike, once you can, you never forget it. The harsh rope was crumbling away in places.

I climbed up the log, settled my balance with outstretched arms, then I put the rope around my neck. The inquisitive moon was peeping through branches. I breathed for the last time the burnt soil smell. Lavenders tilted my nostrils to make me change my mind maybe. But nothing could. Suddenly, as I was going to kick the log I realised I was dressed. I had said I was going to die as naked as at birth hadn't I? Then, an awful doubt crept inside my brain. I didn't have had a hard on for weeks but didn't hanging make a reflex erection? I would be very ridiculous, naked, the penis up, hanged to the tree. I decided to remain dressed.

I moved a foot forward, keeping my balance on the second one, I kicked the log and it fell.

I fell too, pulled by irresistible laws of gravity. The rough rope tightened around my neck. I shouted when it scorched my skin. Then, I felt the pressure on my throat. Panic-stricken, I thrashed my legs like a granny in aquaerobics lessons. I resisted the desire to handle the rope and untighten the grip under which I was

suffocating. A black veil slipped in front of my eyes. There was nearly it.

A tearing sound.

Like a sigh.

The rope gave way under my weight and I ended seated in dead leaves.

I had a very sore throat. I was stunned but still alive. Resigned to my fate I widened the ring around my neck and looked at the torn rope. The goats had nipped at it and spring rains had finished the job. I threw the rope away in a rage. Everything was conspiring against me that night. But I wasn't going to accept that...

Once more, I went through the house and the garden hut. Nothing new. There was only the garage left. I would sit behind the driving wheel, close the door of the car — it was the second-hand I had bought after selling my new saloon car when my ex had asked for half the amount of its value — and wait till the exhaust gas made me topple over into a world free of worries. But I had always hated stinks and, what do exhaust gas do ? They stink !

I had another idea about the garage. The year before, visiting a friend in Périgord I had collected some thorn apple seeds, what South-westerner French farmers and cattle-raisers fear. I had picked a jarful of these. Enough to kill the whole neighbourhood. A small handful should be enough. I could find the coffee jar between the sand filter and the swimming-pool pump. I immediately rushed back to the terrace. The moon,

disappointed, had given up. It had glided behind the hill looking at a more interesting sight.

I didn't bear it any grudge. I was getting bored too. I sat down in a decrepit armchair and opened the jar. Instead of the coffee smell, there was the thorn apple seeds sickening odour. Never mind, I had to get over it. I had a secret weapon to help me in front of adversity : a bottle of pure malt whisky bought in a duty free shop, vestige of worldwide trips.

I started with a gulp of alcohol. The peat taste filled my mouth — bluish land on sheer cliffs diving into a grey ocean crested with foam — at that moment I swallowed my first seed. Without chewing it. Swallowing as if they were disgusting capsules to melt in stomach.

I waited for a moment, paying deep attention to my belly reaction. Except for a strong unnatural heat I couldn't feel anything else. Alcohol was running down my veins as fast as a virus on the Web. I seemed to be in a light euphoria. I was on an empty stomach and its staring mucous membrane sponged the liquid up as soon as it came down.

I swallowed another seed with a large mouthful of whisky. Alcohol seemed to evaporate on my gastric wall. Seeds needed longer and longer to dissolve.

As I was sipping my farewell cocktail with its vegetarian snacks, a lamp was turned on at one of the next door windows. Not exactly next door, in fact, it was about a hundred yards away, facing me the other side of the small valley. It was a huge house I could only

see the side of, which was quite impressive. The floor where the lamp had been lit up was the owner's who would stay there only a few weeks a year. The keepers, a couple, permanently lived on the ground floor. The whole first floor was quickly floodlit through wide open windows. The house radiated a merry atmosphere. I watched the lights while swallowing my seeds, one by one, oiling their way down my throat with pure malt mouthfuls. I started feeling dizzy, lights were dancing in front of my eyes on a festive music.

All of a sudden I felt the first heat strokes. Thorn apple seeds had started disturbing my metabolism. My heart went beating faster and faster, next to tachycardia, then it slowed down so that my toes became as cold as ice. In fact that was my feeling. I had a very erratic breath. Breathing in and out wasn't as automatic, as unconscious. I stayed for long moments without any air in, then, the next moment I was puffing like a dog waiting for its mash.

The destructive process had begun. I suddenly crunched a seed by mistake, an unnameable sickening bitterness overflowed my palate and reached my nostrils : really nauseating ! A spasm twisted my oesophagus. At that moment a figure appeared at one of the shining windows. A naked woman — the owner, I supposed — getting out off shower, a towel tied around her head. She stopped at a window, smelling the cool of the night. That was my guess.

Then, as if my eyes could have been independent from my face, springing out to get very near the silhouette, I distinctly saw the clear, soft, tender skin of her breasts, the delicate pink nipples and the image of pale cream cheese topped with raspberry sauce forced its way to my mind.

Miracle ! a long lost heat swarmed to my groin and I felt my prick grow, grow... at last !

Then, another spasm, in the stomach, now bent me double, I threw up and collapsed, unconscious. Thorn apple seeds had got the better of me. A last question flashed into my nebulous brain : was it the creamy mental image or the sight of this nebulous bust that had made me grow hard after so many weeks of impotence ?

I felt at that time I wouldn't be able to know the answer. I was wrong.

Some magpies woke me up at dawn. They were chattering and fighting over my vomit remains. Nothing very fattening. Some stale alcohol, deadly seeds swimming in acid bile. They seemed to enjoy it however, mostly what was left from pure malt.

I stood up with such a stiff neck that I had to keep my head bent on one side. I had the feeling I was a boat sailing up winds with a wobbly list.

The sun was rising over the opposite house. The first floor shutters were closed. Was it a dream ? Thorn apple is a hallucinogenic plant, wild insane images had filled

my mind when I was unconscious. One of these seemed deeply imprinted in my soft cerebral convolutions : a nice white creamy cup topped with one unique red currant in light pink jam.

It made my mouth water and my penis react. What a strange feeling ! A feeling I hadn't experienced for months, maybe years. The feeling of being alive. It was a sheer bliss to back to humankind.

Then an awful deceitful doubt dawned on me. How can one have a hard-on from a cream cheese fantasy ?

That was totally absurd, not to say grotesque.

I would look for this fundamental answer later on. I had more urgent things to do for the time being. I was stinking of whisky and vomit. In less than two hours the new owners were going to arrive to pick up the keys.

Without further thinking I got undressed and dived into the swimming-pool. The last remains of vomit in my three day beard hairs were dissolved in clear water. The trails were vacuumed by the skimmers down the pipes. The chlorine smell quickly masked the bile. There was still one problem left : my stained clothes. I decided to change and I went, naked, to my last and only possession : my car.

From now on it was going to be more than a mere vehicle, it would be my house too as long as I couldn't find a place to put my — not very clean — clothes bag in.

After we had sold the vast saloon car we had bought before I had been fired, I had been keen on a second-hand car. The salesman — I could detect in his accent and his glibness he was an Algerian-born Frenchman — had shown me his whole stock.

“ Look at this one ! Hardly eight thousand miles, that’s a bargain. Sure, a real bargain with a six months guarantee, go on, give it a chance !

- Why not ? ”, I had answered, not really convinced.

I couldn’t imagine being packed in a tiny saloon and I didn’t want to tell him all my troubles either, it would have been a day long. I had then walked to a pick-up with a hard-top.

“ That’s an excellent choice, sir, very trendy. Four wheel drives are fashionable nowadays. It’s in the current trends. And what a look when you drive it !. Not too many miles either, for a diesel I mean.

- Of course — I answered, making a face at the hundred and twenty thousand miles shown on the milometer — you’re right for a diesel it’s not too much ”, I added then because the price fitted my budget perfectly.

Since that day, a bag with the few remnants rescued from both my couple and my professional wrecks stood alone, on the back deck of my pick-up, sheltered by a white hard-top. My only home, sweet home from that day onwards.

After I had put another T-shirt on — not a brand-new one but less stinky — I waited, walking up and down the grounds.

The former months, I had tired myself out cleaning brushwood with the precious help of our goats. I was going to miss them. I used to enjoy it when they circled round me to pick the stale bread I was giving them at the risk of being bitten or gored in the private parts.

The new owners arrived mid-morning. A grey luxury brand car, smart clothes, tanned. The area was being squatted in by wealthy people. Exit the old pensioners with their post-war cottage. As soon as they were called to the other world, their houses were bought by the next town middle-class persons because their heirs couldn't afford the succession rights and the rehabilitation to be done.

I wasn't complaining because I had then pocketed enough money to wait and see for years, in spite of the fact my ex-wife had requisitioned her share. She had immediately bought a nice cosy flat. As for me, being unemployed, I preferred putting that money on my bank account to sparingly dip into it. My only residence was my car and I wasn't going to collapse under taxes. That was a good point !

I left the new owners the keys, in a mixed mood. Happy to end something. But sad to end that way such an important part of my life. My miserable failure to kill myself forced me to think about immediate future. So, I

left the couple planning improvements and I got into my car, sat at the driver's place and... nothing.

I didn't know where to go. I didn't know what to do.

I put my forehead on the steering wheel, closed my eyes, I saw a mental picture, always the same. A soft white mound, crowned by a currant lightly veined with subtle shades of orange and red. Why this picture? Was it an acid flashback?

During my youth I had tried several illicit substances and I still could feel the appalling effects now and then. As a matter of fact, my depression was certainly due to not very judicious practice of LSD when I was a young and unreasonable student in Düsseldorf.

But this cream cheese image was definitely new. An evocation so strong that it would make my blood wake my fifth member up. It was beginning to be worrying. Was I getting mad? Having an erection on some cream cheese!

I tried to readjust the former night souvenirs. The pitiful episodes of my successive failures to commit suicide came little by little to my mind. I could see myself again, swallowing thorn apple seeds, I still could taste peat in my mouth — I hadn't brushed my teeth yet — and... the inward sight of the neighbour's white breasts overwhelmed me once more. As if she had reappeared in front of me, as pale and naked I had seen her the night before. My penis hardened.

I needed to be sure. I started the car which spat some black smoke — I still had to test its pollution — then it

purred like a well-fed cat. I drove down the driveway to the first junction where I turned to the opposite house entrance. A line of pines led me to the steps of an impressive residence. It seemed a fortress more than a Mediterranean villa. A man, only wearing shorts, was picking up pine needles. I stopped the engine to talk to him. I supposed he was the property's keeper.

“ Good morning, I am your neighbour just opposite. More exactly your future ex-neighbour.

- Morning, are you leaving ? he asked, resting on his rake.

- I am... yes... a marital breakdown forced me to sell it.

- I know what you mean. My first wife did the same to me. I was washed out... ”

I stopped him before he started telling me his life in details.

“ Isn't Madame here ? I asked, I think I saw her last night.

- You're right. Mrs Dangor was here yesterday. But she left early this morning.

- Will she come back soon ?

- No, she won't, he answered with an evasive look.

- I see ”, I said very disappointed.

I only knew this woman from neighbour's gossip. She was known to be the only daughter of a rich London businessman who was linked with Afrikaners. Nothing more precise. His daughter in her forties seemed to collect villas around the world.

“ You wanted to talk to her, didn't you ? asked the clear-sighted man.

- Only to pay her my respects before leaving the neighbourhood.

- I may not be able to tell her... her property is on sale...

- You don't say ! Like mine !

- Everything is changing, is evolving, he philosophised, scratching his crotch through his worn out shorts.

- And where is she going to live ?

- She has had no shortage of residences, so far...

- What do you mean ?

- I'm not in the secret, but I understand she has sold all her properties : in London, in South Africa and this one too.

- Where has she gone then ? I asked, bewildered.

- On an island, I think. She still owns a villa there, as far as I know.

- On one of the Caribbean Islands ? In the Pacific ?

- In Indonesia, I guess. Do you know some island names over there ?

- Java, Sumatra, Borneo... Bali more probably.

- Yes, that's it, that's Bali. I remember now. She has talked about her villa in Bali recently, on the phone.

- Bali ? I said aside.

- Yep, not round the corner to pay her a visit, said the housekeeper, laughing.

- And why not ? I said with a half-smile.

- Are you serious ? he looked surprised and very worried. You don't seriously mean to pay her a visit there ? It's a bit far and expensive for a courtesy visit.

- It's more complicated than that. She's the only person who can answer a question I've kept asking myself since last night. A vital one. A matter of life and death. ”

“ Maybe, that's a bit farfetched ” I thought, hastening away.

I got into my car and switched it on firmly. The engine immediately started like a terrified employee rushes to obey his boss' orders.

I was smiling as I drove away. I hadn't smiled for months, even the smallest grin or anything that could have looked like it. Today was definitely D-day.

I saw the keeper get small, down in my rear-view mirror, till he disappeared behind a pine grove. I was delighted by his stunned look. I drove on light-hearted.

I knew where to go : Bali.

To read the rest of the story, visit the website :

www.editionslignecontinue.info

When Arnaud got an odd letter from a stranger who claimed he was his father, he couldn't imagine it would lead him so far away.

Far away from home, of course, but from himself too, from his inherent human nature.

After days of trekking through Himalaya he'll meet his long lost father.

But did he expect to meet such a father ?

It's not that certain !



Xavier Pivano crossed a weird character's path, when he was in Bali first, then on Ganges banks and finally in a remote monastery lost in the Himalayas.



Jacquie Ricard-Carrodano put her heart, skills and enthusiasm into translating this novel in British English, language she has been taught.

