



THE RESTAURANT

Jeffrey S. Chapman

After Italy, in the grand Casino de Monte Carlo, in their best skirt and travel pants because they wouldn't have been admitted wearing shorts or jeans, Claire and Eric stand at the craps table. Claire stands just behind Eric's right shoulder, mostly mute, watching. She doesn't really understand craps, she tells him, but it's exciting to watch: the dice flying again and again and chips coming and going. She tells him it's okay, that he doesn't have to explain it to her again, but that it's fine if he just concentrates on his game, on doing whatever he can to win, if there is anything he can do to make a difference, and he assures her there is. There is something he can do. It's just not working quite the way it should. He has a small, good stretch and she suggests, with a light touch at his elbow, that maybe this is the time to go, and he says he's just beginning to win. He's been playing well, and when you're playing well the table is bound to turn eventually. This is the turning point. Not the right time to leave.

But it wasn't the turning point. When Claire finally convinces Eric to leave his jaw is set and tense, with a tic, as if he is doing jaw exercises. Claire grabs his hand.

They meant to spend just one day in Monaco and then continue along the south coast of France, getting as much sun as was humanly possible. But with half their money lost to games played in French, plans were going to have to change. Eric suggests it was not the best idea to play craps without

enough money to weather the swings. He was shaken off his game, Claire agrees, by not having the money to take proper odds. She still doesn't quite understand odds, but that doesn't bother her.

—But don't let's let it ruin our honeymoon, she says. He is draped in a chair in a corner of their hotel room, elbows on his knees and hands covering his head.

He is imagining that it is all over, that the game is up, that they'd have to head home a month early. She tells him that's crazy talk. They can finish up their honeymoon, no problem, as long as they cut down on the fancy spending.

—I'm so sorry, he says.

—Stop. I'm not here to be fancy, she tells him. —Who cares where we sleep? We're asleep.

She's not lying, he knows. She is one of the rare people who don't much care whether their honeymoon is spent in expensive hotels or youth hostels.

—Aren't you angry? he asks.

—Some, she says. —But only a little angry. Not a lot angry.

She walks over to the doors that open onto a terrace and opens them. The long drapes billow inward. She leans over the railing and looks around for a while. She is smiling when she turns around to face him.

—Look, she says, —Losing money is now part of the adventure: contingency we didn't expect, variation in our plans. It's not better or worse, just evolution.

Over the next week they discover that traveling frugally isn't difficult for them; they are not far removed from their hostelling days. They pare down. They wander the thin streets and sit in town squares and cafés, drinking and reading books.

They cook for themselves and eat humbly. Eric still feels guilty about losing their money, but they often talk about how much they enjoy the simplicity of their new frugality. If anything, they enjoy it more than before. —Still, he says one breezy evening while they are out on an after-dinner stroll, —it's unfortunate to be in Europe and never to eat out.

Claire both nods and shrugs. They turn down a cobblestone lane. The air is warm and redolent; for a moment they smell something rank, perhaps garbage, but that passes and when they walk by a restaurant they smell fat, buttery food smells. Eric stops and closes his eyes.

—Look, he says. I never should have lost control at craps. That’s not like me. I love how we’re eating but we shouldn’t leave France without having enjoyed one or two French restaurants. That would be something of a tragedy.

—Barbarian, even, she says.

—I think we should put aside a bit of our money for a special dinner, he says.

—If you tell me we’re going to make an effort to eat delicious food, I’ll never not agree, she says.

They decide they’re going to look for the perfect restaurant: the place they can’t skip; the place where they can relax and forget about money, forget about risk and loss, forget about mistakes; where they can order what they want, as if they were queens and kings with limitless destinies.

Two weeks go by and they travel through many, many towns—Nice and Arles, Aix and Orange—without being tempted. Everything is too touristy or too popular or too expensive. They don’t even talk about the restaurant; they each just keep the search tucked at the back of their minds, something to think about at still moments.

They find it in a small town that isn’t in the travel guides. It is small, inscribed in a circle, and a gorge cut by a crystal-clear river runs along two sides. They can cross the town in five minutes, and beyond this edge, Provençal wilderness. The roads cut through two and three-story houses that press up against each other at haphazard angles. People have built terraces wherever they fit and this is Claire’s favorite part of the town, looking at the terraces and imagining people sitting out there.

Claire and Eric happen upon the restaurant in the twilight hours, down a side street without much traffic. One large window casts warm light like a lighthouse beacon. Glancing in,

they see people eating. There isn't a sign anywhere to be seen, only a menu tacked outside the door. Claire likes that there isn't a sign. There's no need for discussion; neither wants to return to the pension.

They step just inside the door and into the rich border of light and smell. There's a tiny dining room on the main floor and another up a narrow set of stone stairs. An old woman, smiling, shuffles forward to invite them in past the door and show them upstairs to a table.

For a starter, Claire orders mussels and celery cream in persillade of aromatic herbs and Eric gets a terrine of vegetables and soft goat cheese wrapped in green onion. He chooses it because he is enticed by the orderly, slab-like look of terrines.

—Mussels are made and broken, Claire says, —by the sauce they are served with. You can't have a sauce that covers up the taste of the mussels entirely, but mussels alone don't add up to much. That's what I think.

Eric nods. —What do I know? he says.

They buy a bottle of white wine, just the house wine, cheap, but good for their tastes just there and then. Eric proposes a toast to their lives, which are “lived just right.” They are seated in a room upstairs where there are only five tables. The owner assures them that they can take all the time they want because each table is only served once a night. This is Claire's favorite piece of information and she keeps asking Eric to imagine a restaurant back home that doesn't exist on turnover, that doesn't try to get people out the door as fast as they came in, in order to get new people at that same table. Even our slow food is fast food, she says.

For the main course he has a roasted pork chop—from Ventoux, the menu says as if it makes all the difference (Where's Ventoux? he wants to know)—stuffed with blue cheese, served with a handful of vegetable tagliatelle. The pork chop is thick and succulent and impressive. She has a slab of fresh cod *en vapeur douce*—she can't resist something that has been sweetly steamed, even if she has no idea what that means—with a sauce, mashed potatoes and olive oil.

—How is it? Eric asks.

—Very good, she says. But she means more than *very good*. She means she has to close her eyes to concentrate all her senses on the flavors. She means: words are pointless.

By this point in the evening a British family is the only other table left. A couple with their daughter of about sixteen or seventeen, Claire and Eric guess. It's hard to tell exactly because she looks like a late teen but is dressed as if twelve. Her hair is in pigtails and her slightly chunky, quite busty frame is stuffed into a small tee shirt and short shorts. It doesn't, however, seem like the tight tee shirt and short shorts of a young woman who is trying to be sexy, but those of a girl whose parents, grotesquely, don't want her to grow up. When the family's desserts arrive, the girl impatiently tears into her ice cream, to the obvious pleasure of the mother, who says gleefully, —Go to, Veronica.

Claire's dessert is crème brûlée with orange flower water. She is ordering based on the sound of words. Orange flower water. That's what a menu should do, she says. It should seduce you. Eric gets a cheese plate; he likes cheese for dessert. The British family gets up to leave and the mother wets her serviette with spit and cleans off her daughter's face; the girl squeals in protest.

All the next day, Claire is more quiet than usual, as if she has perhaps not woken up entirely. She and Eric have walked to see Roman ruins out in the countryside; Claire is a fan of the Romans. She always has been, since elementary school. But today she's disconnected from what she's seeing. Eric asks her four separate times whether she is okay and four times she smiles at him nicely.

—I'm fine, she says.

She says, —I'm just thoughtful, is all.

They are walking through woods, alongside an aqueduct that for stretches is almost perfect, so they can imagine it 2,000 years earlier, and for stretches has crumbled, toppled, and been covered with flora and adopted into the landscape, so

that if one didn't know better it would seem they were looking at boulders.

—What are you thinking about? he asks. She looks up from a spot on the ground she's been staring at.

—The restaurant last night, she says, smiling. —It was perfect, wasn't it? I want to go again.

He walks ahead down the trail. She runs to catch up with him and link her hand through his arm.

—Isn't it rash, to go out to eat again so soon? he asks.

—Yes, she says. —But still.

They walk on, down switchbacks into a gorge, where there's a park perfect for the picnic they've carried with them. They have a baguette and cheese and thin ham and a dry and respectable rosé that cost less than water, practically, and which they mix with lemon-flavored sparkling water. In the afternoon shimmering heat they sit in the grass by the river, within the umbrella shade of the row of enormous plane trees that line the river, drinking their fresh drinks. They can smell the river and the grass and occasionally, when the breeze picks up, they catch the sweet smell of licorice.

They are sleepy, weighed down with summer. Eric tells Claire that it's only right that she wants to go back to the restaurant. Isn't that precisely the experience we were hoping for, he says. He adds, simply, that he doesn't know if they have enough money to go back. We're getting tight, buddy, he says.

—Yes, she says.

—If you go, I don't think I can go with you, he says.

She nods.

—You'll have to dine alone, he says.

She nods, as if he didn't just repeat himself. He breaks off a piece of bread and eats it with a slice of hard cheese. She cocks her head, listening.

—Those are cicadas, right?, she says. —I wouldn't mind living somewhere with cicadas. They fill up a landscape, don't you think?

—Actually, I wonder whether they might be crickets, Eric says.

—Crickets are good too. Crickets seem happy. You don't think so?

—They're insects, neither happy nor unhappy.

Claire frowns. —That shows a lack of imagination, she says. —They just seem happy.

—I don't see it, is all.

—Don't be grumpy, she says. —It's nothing important.

She lies down on the grass and stretches out on her side, looking at the river. She closes her eyes. Nearby, the river cascades quietly over a short waterfall. He stands up. It's hot, even in the shade. The grass is getting brown. He walks closer to the river.

Claire gets dressed up that night to go to the restaurant alone. He tells her that it's strange that she's going out to eat by herself, and she tells him that he can come, but he says that he really can't. She's so cheerful about the whole proceedings that it's hard to be upset. He realizes that she is approaching her love of the restaurant with the same nonchalance to which she reacted to his losing their money. Not indifference, at all. Just a lack of concern or anxiety. By the time she is ready to leave and putting lipstick on, he is happy again. He'd been sitting on his hands, pressed back against the bed board, silently watching her prep. Now he gets to his feet and stands behind her as she stands at the mirror and encircles her in a hug. She calmly finishes putting on her lipstick then turns around and kisses him on the cheek, bright red lip marks.

—Good, she says. He walks her down to the pension's entrance and then she steps out into the night alone. The air is warm, inviting and redolent.

After Claire leaves, Eric wanders to the town square, where strings of light, crisscrossing from tree to tree in the town square, have been switched on. He sits on the wide rim of the fountain. The square is spacious and many of the chairs that have been set out are empty; a couple strolls across walking their dog. A breeze follows the strollers. Things feel deserted and derelict. A stray and curious dog, tagging behind the dog being walked, peels off and wanders over to Eric. It set-

bles down next to him, and Eric idly scratches behind the dog's ears until it gets bored and trots off with a distinct sense of purpose and destination.

It's beautiful here but Eric feels nervous and unsettled. He is glad they are moving on tomorrow.

He stands up and winds home through small empty streets. The cafés have closed for the night. In bed he leafs through their guidebook, imagining the next few cities they will visit. With a pen he underlines some sights he is sure Claire will be excited to see. He stays awake for a long time but eventually switches off the lights and hands over the room to night.

It's very late when Claire returns; Eric is already asleep but wakes up when the key scrapes in the door. She sits on the edge of the bed to undo her sandals. Why is it so late? he asks.

—I just stayed a while talking to the owners, she says. — They gave me wine.

—How was your dinner?

—As good as before. Better.

—Good.

—They're sweet; when I told Monsieur that I couldn't really afford to eat there, and after I mentioned that I've worked in restaurants, he told me I could come in tomorrow and do some work rather than pay for dinner tonight.

—But we're moving on, Eric says. He rolls over to face her.

—We have to go, Eric says.

Claire takes off her second sandal.

—We have to.

—No. she says, throwing her sandal to the floor with enough violence that he's startled. —No, we don't have to go. We don't *have* to do anything, Eric. That's the great myth of modern society, isn't it: that we always have to be doing things, always.

She scratches the top of her head and closes her eyes.

—We get it wrong, she says finally. —You don't have to do anything.

—That isn't why we came here. That isn't why we travel.

—Isn't it?

She finishes undressing and lies down. It's a warm enough night that he's been sleeping above the sheets; she gets in under them.

In the morning she is still asleep when he wakes up and leaves the room. He goes to a café and gets a café au lait and a croissant. If Claire really doesn't have to pay for her dinners, there shouldn't be any problem buying food and coffee again, and that's a relief. Eric sees the stray dog from the night before and whistles to get its attention. He gives it the end of his croissant, which disappears in one smooth swallow. The dog looks at him gratefully and expectantly. He shrugs.

—That's all, *mon amie*, he says. —It's not real dog food.

The dog is gaunt and long. The thin body is set off by a full, long-haired tail that reminds Eric of a dog his family had when he was young. European strays, Eric has noticed, are often thin but never seem to be malnourished. They know how to make their living and follow their own path. Because there are people like me who give them pastries, he thinks.

—I'm a sucker, he says to the dog.

He stands up and tells the dog to follow him. He goes to a grocery and buys dog food, opens it and pours it out in an out-of-the-way spot where the stray can eat comfortably. You and me, Eric says. We're friends now.

Back at the room, Claire has already gone to work. Eric is there when she comes back briefly to change before going back for dinner. She is sweet to him. She sweeps in and kisses him grandly and her hands smell like sour apples. As she is going out he asks if they are going to leave the next day.

—Honey, she says.

Eric looks at her and she smiles at him. Soporific. She is under a spell, Eric realizes. She is in her own world where he is only on the periphery. He says he can't sit around here all day, that he's getting bored being by himself, in limbo. She smiles and says that the town is only boring to boring people.

He takes a deep breath. She doesn't get what he's saying, he tells her. By boredom he means he doesn't want to be to-

gether with her but not with her. He'd rather be separate apart than separate together. He'd rather be a stray than a mongrel. He says he's moving on the next day, and that he assumes that she will come with, that this has gone on long enough, that they can't stay in one small town for their entire honeymoon.

She moves over to the window and looks out; she says she feels they can. He says he's going to pack his bag.

—Please come, he says.

She doesn't ask if he wants to go to the restaurant that night, though if she had asked he would have said no. She comes home even later that night.

He hoped that a threat of drastic measures would break Claire from her realm of enchantment. But the next morning she sits unspeaking on a corner of the bed as he puts all his things in his rucksack. Having threatened to leave, he finds himself unable not to carry through, although to the last minute he doesn't expect to be leaving alone. He is mistaken. She gives him a kiss as he walks out the door, as if he were off to spend an hour writing postcards at a café, and before the door closes she says with a sweet smile, I'll miss you.

But she doesn't come with him. When he leaves he has no idea where he is going to go. He wants to get away from people most of all. At a magazine shop he buys a minutely detailed map of the region and studies it for some time. He finds a town away to the north that looks isolated and tiny. The tourism office tells him there are two buses a day that run nearby, but that he'd still have to walk almost three miles from the nearest drop spot.

—That's fine, he says. —C'est bon.

The bus ride is not long. Being out in the country clears his head somewhat. He's walking along a small country road lined with plane trees, with fields on either side. It's hot and dusty bright, and the road slopes ever so gradually up, so he's heading into dry toothy highlands. Fields disappear and are replaced by a forest. The woods are open and arid, and white jagged rocks jut up here and there. The mountain ridges in the distance look sharp; layers of sharp, young rock lie reclined

on layers of sharp, young rock. This feels like new and wild country to Eric. Only the occasional car passes him on the road. One stops and a man leans out his window.

—English? the man asks.

—American, Eric says.

The man smiles and talks in solid English. —You want ride to the village? It is, I assume, where you go? The man waves around him, —It is the only place to go on this road, unless you go up into the mountains.

—*Merci*, really, but I want to walk right now, Eric says.

—*Bon*, the man says. He points down the road. —Up ahead, to the left, is a path it will take you through the forest and not on the road. Is nicer.

—Thank you.

—It is late, no? You will need a place to stay tonight?

—Maybe, says Eric, noncommittal.

—If you need a room, ask for Jean-Pierre. *D'accord?*

The man smiles and drives off.

Eric veers where the man has shown him. The path is a dry and dusty white that glares like a desert's exposed bones, but it's covered by a wild tangle of trees: umbrella trees, cypress, poplars, and other trees that Eric can't guess at. It feels, at the same time, utterly wild and utterly tame. People have been here for too long for this to be untouched. Eric imagines the French, sometime in history, cutting down everything and then replanting a forest that would be meticulously wild. Every now and then he comes upon a round stone hut that is falling in on itself and covered in vines, huts that served to offer shade and shelter to shepherds in still-recent times; these huts are the closest Eric comes to seeing another person.

It is a hot day. Eric hadn't thought to bring water. He is alone and thirsty. He is unhappy, despite the dramatic, alien countryside. He is not made to enjoy the world alone. Even if he wanted to return to Claire, there wouldn't be another bus until tomorrow. So he walks forward.

It occurs to him that he will be on his own that night for the first time in two years. Two years ago, Claire had gone

home for Christmas without him. When he left Claire today, he couldn't comprehend why she would leave him. But he was wrong, he realizes: she hadn't left him; he'd left her. Even when he lost half their money, she'd stayed. He wasn't playing the game correctly; by forcing her to choose, he'd already lost.

Once he crests the mountain he catches glimpses of a village in the distance. He bears towards it. Further away, just in front of the horizon, is well-cultivated farmland.

The village is tiny, indeed. A small jumble of red roofs perched on a slope. A small square in front of the church. No hotels. Eric asks one of the old men sitting in the square where he can stay for the night, but the man doesn't understand him at all. Eric says, —Jean-Pierre? Hotel? And the man nods. He points and gives a string of instructions that Eric doesn't catch. The man stands up and plucks at Eric's sleeve to tell him to follow him and leads him down a street. He knocks on a door. Jean-Pierre answers, looks at Eric and smiles. He has close-cut brown hair with a touch of grey. His face is of the type that, by being somewhat round, always looks young.

—You have come for room? he says.

—Oui, Eric says. The old man wanders off, back to the square.

—Good. You stay here with us.

—Cheap?

—Oui, cheap.

He smiles widely and takes Eric around the corner of the house to stairs that lead to a small apartment—one small room with two single beds and a bed stand between them, a bathroom and a small terrace overlooking a small courtyard.

—Perfect, Eric says.

—We feed you also, Jean-Pierre says and then leaves Eric alone.

Eric throws his backpack in a corner and lies down on the bed. He props his head on his arms and looks up at the ceiling until Jean-Pierre calls him to dinner. He walks around the corner where Jean-Pierre and his wife Francine are drinking Pastis

in their dining room. Jean-Pierre pours some over ice and hands it to Eric with a pitcher of water.

—You are traveling alone? Jean-Pierre asks.

—I'm on my honeymoon.

Jean-Pierre nods as if it's common. If he and Francine find the information strange, they don't mention it.

—What do you plan to do here? he asks. —Is a small town, no?

—I just wanted to get away for a day and walk, Eric says.

His host likes this answer. —This is best hiking in France. Not best hiking in world, I admit, which is hard to admit for the French, that there is better place in world to walk. But still, is true. Tibet, for one.

He pauses. —But I would never admit that to my fellow French.

Jean-Pierre starts preparing a salad and Eric sits at the dining room table. Francine places paté and bread on the table. Jean-Pierre brings out an aubergine mousse and they talk about the world and global politics, about which Francine is particularly vehement. Jean-Pierre is curious about the countries where Eric has traveled.

After dinner, they sit outside at a little metal table. Jean-Pierre and Francine drink coffee and Eric drinks beer. The beer tastes light and refreshing in the dusty evening.

—This may be the best beer I've ever had, he says.

—Drink always tastes best when thirsty. Food tastes better when hungry.

—The path you showed me this afternoon was beautiful.

—I used to walk that way many times when I was young. We walk from our town to other towns. And then? We walk back.

—Same day?

—Oui. Sometimes. Or we stay with cousins for one night or two.

Eric drinks from his beer and it is cold and delicious. Jean-Pierre leans forward.

—There is hike I want to make, he says. —Many days

through the Andes, through jungle and also very high mountains, and then one gets to Machu Picchu. That would be good.

—Oui. Eric says. —That would be good.

Jean-Pierre tells him about Chile, why it was one of the great countries of the world. Then he talks about the Amazon. He moves his hands excitedly while talking about the plants.

—It sounds like an amazing place, Eric says.

—You've never been? Jean-Pierre says, surprised. —But you are so close in America.

—Not so close. It's all relative.

Jean-Pierre nods. Eric asks him when he spent time in Chile and Brazil. Jean-Pierre looks at Eric, surprised, and whistles.

—No. I have never been in Chile or Brazil. I was born here and never been more than one hundred kilometers. We are farmers here, not travelers.

—But you know so much about other countries. I assumed you had been to them.

—No, Jean-Pierre says, shaking his head. —I show you.

Jean-Pierre beckons Eric to follow inside. He opens the door to a side room; in one corner is a large bookshelf filled with shelf after shelf of the squared-off yellow spines of National Geographic magazines. Jean-Pierre pulls one out, at random, and gives it to Eric. He opens it to an article on Singapore.

—This is one place I would go, Jean-Pierre says. He shrugs. —But there are many places. There is more in the world than we will ever see. More than we can understand.

He pulls out another magazine and pages through it.

—This is how I learn English, he says. —There is no English classes in my school, but I read these magazines every evening. And American movies. But I have never gone even to Paris, even to Marseille.

He shrugs. They go back to the kitchen.

—There are many ways we have to experience the world, he says.

He leans forward on his elbows. —I have question. Why do you not talk about your wife at all? Where is she?

Eric rubs his lips with his hand. The question makes him uncomfortable. He says, —She's back in another town. I don't mention her because I feel bad; I shouldn't have left her. She is going to the same restaurant every night.

—This happens sometimes here, Jean-Pierre says.

—But we don't have the money.

Jean-Pierre shrugs. He is—to Eric—impassive, tree-like, calm.

—I shouldn't have left, Eric says.

—Are you better alone? Jean-Pierre asks.

—No. Eric doesn't hesitate. He hates being away from Claire.

—There you are then. Jean-Pierre waves the whole thing off and drinks his coffee. —You should return to your wife. Enchantments are no good forever. It is like sports, you are only crazy for while the football match is on. I know.

He pats Eric's shoulder.

—But while they last they are not to be underestimated, no?

The next day Francine and Jean-Pierre drive Eric to the bus stop. Eric shakes their hands and they kiss him on the cheek.

The bus detours through local town after local town. Pretty towns, he thinks. Pretty towns everywhere. He arrives back at the hotel and is surprised to find Claire in the little garden, sitting on the picnic table. She'd been crying. Eric worries that she is crying for him, because she misses him, and he aches for leaving her.

—I'm sorry I left, he says. —I went to another town.

—I knew you'd return, she says. —It's what we do.

She rubs her arms. The night is chilly.

—There was a fire, she says. In the kitchen, a fire, and they're going to be closed for a day. Or five days. I don't know.

He doesn't know what to say, so he sits next to her and puts his arms around her. She shivers slightly. He runs his hand through her hair. She looks him directly in the eye.

—I've never had anything like that, she says.