

A CASE OF CURIOSITIES

A NOVEL BY

ALLEN KURZWEIL



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B C D E

For Nangala

A CASE OF CURIOSITIES

1

THE CASE OF curiosities came into my possession at a Paris auction in the spring of 1983. It is always amusing to hear the impression people outside the salesroom have about people inside. The uninformed presume dinner jackets, numbered wooden paddles, and phone lines from Tokyo and Geneva. They imagine electronic tote boards flashing seven-figure sums in six currencies, the tap of an ivory mallet, and polite applause as some philistine acquires a "priceless" painting he will use as collateral in his next leveraged buyout. The true spirit of the auction house is a lot grittier, and that, frankly, is what I love about it.

At the Salle Drouot you can see pawnbrokers in white loafers and shrewish dowagers in Celine pumps (bought during the crush of the semiannual sales) stomping and kicking for a piece of beauty at a good price. But mostly it's a fight for the denial of someone else's desire. If you look at the display cases of the auction house, you will find that they are scratched to opacity by the diamond rings of greedy women and men.

I happily explore this disreputable environment nearly every week, not to pursue the pleasure of profit—though I must admit I won't turn down a bargain — but to round out my understanding of mechanics, painting, and the more unpredictable incarnations of history. That is how I picked up the trail of the case.

I arrived early in the day, as one must, and leafed through the catalogues chained to the front desk. The salesroom was a terrible jumble. It brought together lots of brown furniture, racks of fur coats, some bronzes, a "nineteenth-century" Dogon mask probably no more than ten years old, walls of unimportant canvas and oil, even a half-dozen electric typewriters. Also in the mess, however, was a terrestrial globe. The catalogue gave no details. I suspected the piece to be Empire. It was supported by black-and-gold caryatids, which in turn had those brass paws so common to the period. It was really quite beautiful.

I left the salesroom and went around the corner to talk to Boudin, a dealer in scientific instruments with whom I had had business over the years. He allowed me to consult his library since my own was too far away. I determined that the globe was indeed Napoleonic. I left the shop in the silent glow of nearby conquest.

That was a mistake. I should never have gone to Boudin before buying the piece. When I returned from a quick lunch, well ahead of the sale, I found the bastard inspecting the day's offerings. It didn't take him long to discover that my casual consultation had served a less than casual purpose. The situation deteriorated. Boudin's appearance sparked the interest of another dealer, and he, in turn, brought along a friend who was a well-known globiste. By the time the auctioneer had sold off the contents of a London barrister's Paris office (the source of the mass of typewriters and, I might add, a rather charming wig) and brought the globe to the block, I was sharing the room with four or five avaricious dealers who knew exactly what was up for sale.

The bidding started with near indifference, a terrible sign. Three thousand francs, three-two, three-three, and then Boudin shouted out six thousand francs. He had shown his hand, and the other competitors chimed in with dizzying speed. I joined the battle briefly, but my limit was quickly passed. By the time it was over, a runt of a man who's not terribly respected in the community triumphed at his own expense. The auctioneer turned to sillier bibelots, and the professionals all left. I was about to follow them when I saw . . . it.

In a corner of the room, behind a rack of furs, rested an object the catalogue had, as might be expected, inadequately described: "Lot 67, Box of Curiosities. 45 cm. X 63 cm. Origins unknown. 19th Cent."

My initial reaction was that the date, though vague, had to be incorrect. The front of the box, with its bubbled glass, suggested something earlier. Because it was sealed, I could not inspect the interior, which was moth-eaten and filled with dust. As for the back of the box, it had markings of the kind used by small provincial museums. These could not be scrutinized discreetly, and given the fiasco of the terrestrial globe, the last thing I wished to do was signal my interest. I could believe the object or the description of the object. The choice was clear.

Competition for the box was minimal. A single tap of the mallet declared the union of object and collector. In less than a minute, I had become the owner of a bizarre little piece of history.

It didn't take very long for me to recognize the importance of my purchase. No sooner had I paid the two thousand plus sixteen percent commission than a short, heavysset gentleman came into the room. Observing what I held in my hands, he cursed with a flourish, invoking the names of at least four saints. The gentleman was Italian.

He waddled over to ask me how much I had paid. Because I felt sorry for him, I replied. No, that's not quite true. I hoped he might reveal something about my purchase. News of the price prompted additional blasphemy. He then asked, implored really, that I sell him the case. Of course, I refused. For the next few minutes, he mentioned sums many times what I had just spent. I explained that I had not made the purchase for profit but would welcome any information as to the nature of his interest. Had he been an auction-house habitue, he would have graciously refused to assist me or tried to strike some deal. Happily, he lectured in art history and proved accommodating.

"Have you ever heard of the memento hominem?" he asked. He dropped his aitches, so that it sounded like "ava you ever eared of dee memento omeenem?"

"Memento hominem?" I said. I had a vague idea or thought I did. "Skulls and watch faces with no hands."

He corrected me. "You are confusing it with the more common memento mori, those records of death uncovered in the painting and cemetery architecture of Europe." He explained that a memento hominem, rather than proclaiming mortality, registers a life. Each object in the case indicates a decisive moment or relationship in the personal history of the compositor. The objects chosen are often commonplace; the reasons for their selection never are. He said it was a conceit popular in parts of Switzerland and France during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Excited in the way that only Italians can be, he revealed that my case of curiosities told a tale, and an extraordinary one at that.

This was a surprise. "You know whose history it registers?" I asked.

The Italian said, "57 e no" He told me how he had come upon an engaging, structurally odd biography written during the French Revolution, Claude Page: Chronicle of an Engineer. The book contained an etching that matched precisely the configuration of the objects in the case I had just purchased. Simply put, my case could be linked to one of the true mechanical geniuses of preindustrial France. "A brilliance," the Italian said, "mixed with martyrdom. A death as tragic as that of Marie Antoinette, and one that was much more bizarre." After he had promised to lend me his copy of the book, I said good-bye and thank you and walked home with Lot 67 under my arm.

I hadn't been inside more than three minutes before I trained two very powerful spotlights on the murky compartments. I turned the case around and around. I resisted removing the glass for a few hours. What was so potent about these protected objects? Was it that my world was kept out? Or that some imaginary world was kept in?

Finally, I decided to open the case front. When I did, two hundred years of dust and history hit my nostrils. It was like some strong brew of my Celtic ancestors. I think that was the instant I became caught in the spell.

I took the objects out of the case very slowly. The first piece I removed was a small wooden manikin, which I've since learned to call a lay figure. It had been sitting cross-legged in the top right compartment. I must have held it in my hands for more than an hour. Next came a simple button, the size of a one-franc coin, made from horn. Then a big shell, a jar, some dried and unidentifiable vegetable matter, and the rest of the objects. I lined them all up and stared at the emptied case, its wood eaten away by insects. It took very little time to see that the objects spoke to one another, and to me.

For the next six years I researched and restored, picking apart the mystery of Claude Page's life. I won't burden you with the path the research took. My investigations had me corresponding with experts at the Wellcome, at the Smithsonian, and, of course, at the French National Library. And yet all those documentary efforts were really quite insignificant compared to the hours I passed simply contemplating the objects in the case. I moved my attentions from compartment to compartment, connecting all I could.

As I bend over the microphone of a tape recorder, note cards at the ready, I am amazed that I spent so much time trying to decipher the relic. Why I did so cannot be adequately explained. I suppose it came down to this: I saw the case and wanted to understand it. That understanding became an obsession, and I must point out that I use the word "obsession" in the classical and satanic sense, meaning the antecedent of possession. Which brings me back to the beginning of this account. I did not take possession of the case; the case took possession of me. To some, these objects might have no meaning. To me, they have many. Why is a button or a shell or a jar worthy of so much attention? For the answer to that, one must have the patience to read on.

2 The Jar

ORIGINS CAN BE difficult to trace. But if we are forced to uncover the origins of Claude Page and his invention, and grant those origins some fine and subtle meaning, we must begin by noting the arrival of the Vengeful Widow on the tenth of September, 1780. Though the Widow can be compared to the eastwinds of Devon and the mistral of southern France, that doesn't quite do justice to her bite. As winds go, she is drier and nastier than her French and English cousins. Patish records indicate that when she hit in 1741, the Widow pulled the steeple off the Toumay church — a steeple that had been mounted and secured just two months earlier—and deposited it in the sty of a heretical farmer. The event provided Father Gamot, the local priest, with a chance for some spirited sermonizing. Ten years later the Widow struck again, this time thrusting the branch of a birch tree through the stomach of Philippe Rochat's piebald pony. Rochat was a devout Catholic, so on that occasion Father Gamot had to keep quiet. But the devastations of '41 and '51 were only preludes to the attack on the tenth of September, when the Widow grabbed the valley's inhabitants mercilessly and by surprise. She stripped tiles from roofs, needles from pines. She slipped through unlatched shutters, searching for exposed bits of flesh. Then she struck: cramping toes, deadening udders, waking dormant nipples.

On that night, the house of Claude Page was singularly secure from the Widow's invasion. Madame Page had noticed slight changes in her nailed-up twig of sapling fir and in the demeanor of the family milch cow. The agitation of the beast and movements in the homemade hygroscope foreshadowed the arrival of the unwelcome wind. Madame Page had ordered the family to prepare.

Claude and his younger sister, Evangeline, shuttered shutters and tied down what needed tying down. They repositioned the roof rocks before closing themselves inside the cottage, where an oak fire counteracted the Vengeful Widow. Fidelite, the eldest of the three Page children, headed a scouting party to cover over cracks in the cottage walls. She toured the periphery of the kitchen, moving her hand up and down. Occasionally she would shout, "A draft!" and dispatch Evangeline to daub the trouble spot with a blend of straw and mud, a recipe of her own mixing. Fidelite ordered her sister to push the gravel-filled snake across the threshold and to stuff a length of old lace in the ornate pump lock, thus conjoining two of the trades that made the valley famous—metal work and lacemaking—in novel fashion.

When the Dragon rug was draped over the window, Madame Page declared, "We're as cozy as a watch in a fat man's vest." She then turned her attention to the pinecones she was roasting for her children. It was a scene that catchpenny printers of the period would have titled, with perhaps a touch of irony, *Domestic Peace*.

Claude stretched out in the attic, peering occasionally through an unplugged knot. In his hands he held a crude copybook, a saint's day gift that was his most regular companion. The intended purpose of the copybook, as indicated by the solid and dotted lines that marched across the page, was the acquisition of proper handwriting. But Claude had adapted it and a pot of ink to his own purposes, namely drawing.

His nose rubbed against the unvarnished oak as he gazed through the knot and lined up the scene below. This peephole perspective was one of Claude's favorites, and he had filled the copybook with many such views, "as if through Father's telescope."

He found his target quickly: Fidelite. Though never terribly kind to his elder sister, Claude tried to maintain a peace of sorts. His unspoken frustrations, however, found

quick and direct release in the copybook sketches. He discovered the reason for Fidelity's tyrannous patching expedition. She had decided to build a house of cards, a project vulnerable to drafts. Claude begrudged the pleasure she took in refusing to let Evangeline do anything but watch, wait, and admire the full scope of her talents.

Talents? Hardly. Claude was always more bold in his constructions, putting the face cards outward in raucous confrontation, at least insofar as the cards could confront each other back to back. Fidelite, on the other hand, lacked inspiration. Her cardhouses, tedious in design, ignored the conjunctions of the kings and knaves who kissed at an apex, or queens flanked by lesser members of the deck. Also, Fidelite cheated by lodging the card edges in the knife cuts of the table before bringing the tops together. This suited Claude's mocking illustration. He had the cardboard nobility emerge from its surface existence to do battle with the hapless architect. He allowed the King of Hearts to slice off one of Fidelite's ears, which looked like jug handles, and had the Queen of Cups spit in her eye. Then he transformed an andiron into a little black dog nibbling at his sister's foot.

"It is to be the mansion house of the Count," Fidelite told her sister.

Claude sniggered. The architecture had taken on pathetically monastic dimensions that suggested none of the mansion house quirks. A courtyard, a cloister, and a steeple figured in the plan. Evangeline pestered Fidelite for cards and consequently received a smack. "Your hands are too muddy." A full-blown, whispered quarrel ensued. Worried by the possibility of parental intervention, Fidelite finally quieted her sister by giving over three cards. The girls returned to their handiwork, and Claude returned to his.

There was a rap at the door, but it was faint. The Vengeful Widow did her best to muffle the sound. Claude's mother, overseeing the pinecones, didn't hear a thing. Fidelite heard — how could she not, with those jug-handle ears? — but ignored the summons. It was Claude who announced the arrival of an unexpected guest. Madame Page ordered the door opened. Fidelite, with much reluctance, slithered away the snake and freed the lock of its costly wadding.

Claude watched intently for the collision of the wicked wind and the object of Fidelite's efforts. The frozen hinges groaned in one way, his sister in another. The outbuildings toppled first, then the cardboard courtyard. Only the steeple remained by the time two heavily booted feet entered.

Amid the ruins of the cardhouse stood Jean-Baptiste-Pierre-Robert Auget, Abbe, Chevalier of the Royal Order of Elephants, Count of Tournay, purchaser of herbal discoveries, naturalist, mechanic, philosopher, watchmaker, patriarch of the valley, and inhabitant of the very building that served as inspiration for Fidelite's uninspired labor. The Abbe, whose many names and exalted titles will be dropped for the sake of narrator and reader alike, apologized for his inopportune arrival.

"I am sorry we could not come before the Widow struck," he said. "I had to secure the lightning pole."

The Abbe had come in the role of grand seigneur and scientist and was as decent (if muddled) an example of both as could be found in the lore of Tournay. He was a man of stout build, whose eyebrows curved toward each other like the rooftop thatching commonly associated with peasant huts of the region. Under these bushy eaves shone two little blue eyes magnified, once he was warm, by a pair of spectacles,

through which he stared admiringly at the floral cuttings that hung from the rafters of the cottage. He had been fascinated by Madame Page's talents and diligence in the botanical arts ever since his arrival in the valley. Even at the end of winter, when most inhabitants longed for little more than the excesses of Carnival, Madame Page dreamed only of her rootings. From spring to fall, while others planted and harvested various grains and tended to livestock, she sought the fungi and flowers that sprouted in the forest and common lands, and the pungent herbs that clung to rocky hills. She dried this valley growth in the rafters of the cottage and dispensed it to all those in need. Her most recent patient had been Philippe Rochat's brown mare, which she treated for vives. (Poor Philippe never had much luck with horses after the disembowelment of his piebald pony.)

The Abbe paid handsomely for the medicines and comestible plants Madame Page picked. These he lovingly transferred to the mansion-house herbarium. Hopeless in systematics and incapable of sustaining the rigors of binomialism, the Abbe renamed the plants to accommodate his version of Linnaeus. He told his hostess that back in his storerooms he had a pot of pagewort "labeled such because both the plant and you, Madame, are tenacious little beauties."

She proved the point, grabbing the Abbe by the arm and pulling him to the fire. She exchanged his boots for aspen sabots and prepared one of her famous tisanes. The Abbe continued his inspection of the plant hangings, noting which were bundled (savory, sage, tattagon) and which were not (beatgape, foxglove, wolfsbane). He was especially impressed by the mushroom strings.

Fidelite had just rebuilt the cloister when her work was interrupted by a second rap at the door, this one executed with much greater assurance than the rap that had introduced the Abbe. A stranger came into the room. His dress, a long, sober cloak of Geneva cut, declared allegiance to the Reform Church. His manner was cold, though the Vengeful Widow breaking through the cottage's defenses added to the chill atmosphere. He did not smile, nor did he speak.

Madame Page ushered the stranger to the fire, where he reacted to what is surely one of life's more enjoyable circumstances—proximity to warmth on a frigid night — with the thankless silence of a stonecrust. He stamped his boots free of snow, causing the steeple and reconstructed cloister to tumble. This put an end, once and for all, to Fidelite's architectural efforts. Only after much hesitation did the stranger accept the use of borrowed clogs. He removed his boots and lined them alongside the smaller ones, neatening up the entire row. Then, with great care and economy of motion, he pulled off two layers of clothing simultaneously, keeping the sleeves of an inner gown in the sleeves of his sober cloak.

The Abbe and the stranger drank Madame Page's special birchwood tea but demurred on the pinecones. The Abbe interrogated his hostess about the stalks overhead, and she pointed out a beargrape diuretic and other efficacious cures. The stony stranger was not one for chitchat, and so he moved without comment to the table, where he heaved a large satchel clangor-ously onto its surface. He swept the cards to the floor with obvious disgust. Evangeline started to retrieve them but was warned away by the stranger's glare.

With a quick clearing of the throat and nod of the head, the stranger called on Madame Page and the Abbe to join him in a quiet corner of the cottage, where they

talked in hushed tones. Fidelite's large ears, it must be said, were characteristic of all three Page children, and Claude, high in his perch, was able to pick up bits of the conversation.

"We must end the boy's discomfort," he heard the stranger say.

"He will object," came his mother's reply.

"It's not his place to object," the stranger said. "He must be rid of the Devil's handiwork."

With that, Claude's mouth went dry. The phrase declared the purpose of the visit. The mother's nodding and her gestures in the general direction of the attic intensified the boy's fears. The stranger returned to the table and started to unpack his satchel. He pulled from it a brace-and-bit, a hacksaw, a hammer, and a large wood file.

Evangeline thought the stranger was a carpenter. She was wrong, as subsequent tools proclaimed. The table was soon crowded with cumbersome bonesetter's gear, a vaginal fumigation pump (with letters patent), blood clamps, sealing wax, and a urethral probe, which looks as terrorizing today as it did back then, perhaps more so. The surgeon—for that was the stranger's profession—inspected a box of lancets and scrapes. Sensing that the Page household did not put much stock in table linen, he unrolled a piece of green baize of the kind used by moneylenders, leaders of the Terror, and enthusiasts of the card game ombre. On it he placed dossils, tents and plasters, compresses, bandages, bands, ligatures, and strings, spacing each with obsessive precision. He pondered the shiny cutlery and then draped a hernia belt with its tentacular strapping over the back of a chair.

Madame Page did not have much to say but did not wish to remain silent. Like many valley folk, she was susceptible to that most gnomic form of folk literature, the aphorism. At last she said, "Take care of the plow blade, and the plow blade will take care of you." This bid for conversation was not accepted by the surgeon. Madame Page looked at her son and soon after asked him to come down. Claude indicated resistance to that idea by launching a wild turnip.

Domestic Peace had ended.

Fidelite retrieved the missile and placed it in her mother's hand, ever the helpful child. She joined her mother in urging Claude to descend. He refused with even greater vehemence and augmented the aerial attacks. The Abbe hobbled forward in his oversized clogs and made various promises to the perch dweller. After the bribe was raised to a travel story and some sweets, Claude wrapped his feet around the uprights of the ladder and slid down, copybook clutched awkwardly under one arm.

He focused his attention on the surgeon, and the surgeon focused his attention on him. The surgeon was granted a more pleasant view. Claude was a long-necked ten-year-old whose most notable feature was a pair of large green eyes his mother likened to basil, a plant to which she declared special allegiance. He was a handsome, unmuscular boy, free of the skin diseases that blemished so many faces in the valley. His ears, as mentioned earlier, were large, though not nearly so large as Fidelity's. He was dressed simply and inattentively, and in normal circumstances exuded a contagious sense of wonder.

Not so Adolphe Staemphli, surgeon and citizen of Geneva. Staemphli was a man of impeccable disposition, but impeccable in the sense of Calvinist doctrine, meaning that he was free of sin. He held himself in the highest regard even if those around him

did not. He was thoroughly convinced that his talents were unparalleled, and that his competence as a surgeon was proclaimed in the precision of his tools. He was a dour man given to excessive use of the imperative. "We must begin," he said.

The two combatants met at the table of tools. Claude attempted to grab a file, but the surgeon ended his curiosity by rapping him over the knuckles with the mahogany handle of the trepan, the instrument Evangeline had mistaken for a commonplace brace-and-bit. Claude started to cry, meekly at first, then more vigorously. Madame Page tried to comfort her son with another saying: "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb." But Claude was taking no chances. He ran to a dark corner of the room.

The surgeon said, "We must not let him bother us with his whimpering." He called for Fidelite to fetch a bucket of snow. The little weasel, who in normal circumstances wouldn't have lifted a ringer, popped out and in again faster than the cuckoo in a Black Forest wall clock. While the surgeon waited, he looked at the cards he had swept to the floor as one might look at some flyblown dung and said, "They come straight from Hell."

Claude, trying to mask terror in defiance, called out, "No, they come from Besanc,on." (Actually, they were printed in a German canton of Switzerland, but such details would do little more than encumber the story.) Claude emerged to pick up a playing card, the Grim Reaper, and thrust it in the surgeon's face. The surgeon was not pleased by the irreverence and knocked the card to the floor. It fell faceup near the table. The surgeon screwed up his features, which were unappealing even in their relaxed state, and turned to the cottage matriarch. His jaws, moving like forceps, announced, "It must be removed today. It must be removed now."

All that remained was to dissipate Claude's resistance. The surgeon put great store in the properties of the distilled juniper berry, a liquor named after his hometown and known today as gin. Madame Page had ideas of her own. She was not about to miss a chance to test her substantial, if provincial, repertoire. The surgeons grudgingly accepted her involvement, saying, "You may apply your remedy, but I must also apply mine."

Madame Page first considered mixing up a linden tisane, an antidote for insomnia. But on observing her son's excited state, she switched to a valerian brew. She pulled down a stalk and began to bruise it in her apron.

The Abbe observed intently. "An infusion?"

"No, this will need a different process to coax out the goodness." Madame Page mixed unidentified pinches, drams, and sprigs of vegetable matter into a gallon of small ale, which she heated very slowly. After much squirming, Claude drank both liquids, but neither the gin nor his mother's decoction diminished the boy's agitation. The Abbe entered a proposal of his own: opium. This provoked an argument. The surgeon wanted nothing to do with the dark-brownish cake the Abbe took from his pocket. Madame Page was less forthright, but also expressed hesitation. She was suspicious of foreign cures. The Abbe cited the Turks, who used the drug to urge the wounded into battle. Suddenly there was an inquiry from the corner.

"Turks from Constantinople?" Claude called out. He was inexplicably comforted. Soon after taking the bitter narcotic, Claude fell into a gin-valerian-ale-poppy-induced daze. Staemphli told the onlookers — sisters, mother, and even the Abbe— to move away. He then used the hernia belt to secure his pliant patient to the baize-covered

table. The operation was at hand.

A bit of medical history. The year Claude went under the knife, the Imperial Court of China added fourteen young eunuchs to the household staff of the Emperor Ch'ien-lung (1711 — 1799). One of the fourteen, a boy named Wang, was taken to an anonymous operator in the ancient trade of eunuch-making. The boy was modified in a room not far from the gates of the Forbidden City. After the excision, the operator applied a paste of peppercorns and covered the wound with paper soaked in cold water. For this service he was paid, if one believes Jamie-son, the equivalent of eight dollars and sixty-four cents. Simultaneously, in Vienna, Herr Doktor Alfred Dreilich, working in his cabinet near the Stock im Eisen, removed the testicles of Heinrich Liitz, a youth who was to become a castrato celebrated for the fioritura in his renditions of Handel's operatic arias. And closer to Tournay, also in that year, a prize goat of the Golay brothers was made a ridgeling with a swift swipe of Matthew Rochat's meat cleaver.

Did Claude suffer similar severance? The answer is an emphatic: No!

The surgeon Staemphli came to remove a very small growth sprouting between the middle and the ring finger of Claude's right hand. It was neither a cyst nor a carbuncle, not a canker or a cancer, though it had been called all these names, and a dozen others besides. What it was was a humble mole. In itself, this would not have attracted Adolphe Staemphli. But when the surgeon learned that the mole bore a resemblance to the face of Louis XVI, that it often turned a royal scarlet (further tribute to the reigning monarch of France), and that it displayed an almost sculptural quality — when Adolphe Staemphli learned all of this, he decided he must investigate.

Claude had grown to appreciate the mole and did not want it removed. It was a source of special interest even in a region that had no shortage of medical oddities, and thus it carried all sorts of privileges. Whenever "the King would visit," Claude was guaranteed a plate of salted peas and a pitcher of licorice water at the Red Dog. He would squeeze his anomaly into a royal likeness and match it to the profile on a proffered coin of the realm. To boost his earnings, he told of the tremendous discomfort he endured coaxing out the King. The deception caught up with him. News of the pain traveled to the kitchens of the mansion house, whose talkative scullion, Catherine Kinderklapper, informed her master of the agony suffered by the Page boy and his royal canker. Because of the Abbe's appreciation of Madame Page's talents, he arranged for the visit from the surgeon who now observed the mole.

Staemphli briefly considered using a raspatory—the tool that resembled a wood file—to remove the corrupted flesh, but this would have proved inelegant. He selected instead a delicate piece of specialized surgical equipment that looked like a miniature hacksaw. He shoved the hand into the snow, checked the leather bit in Claude's mouth, and bowed for momentary prayer. Removing the hand from the bucket, he immediately cut asunder, employing the methods of Sabourin, a fellow surgeon of Geneva. The movements were quick, and the hand was soon returned to the bucket, where it reddened the once-white snow. As the blood drained, the surgeon neatened things up on the table. He again pulled the hand from the bucket and wrapped it in a complicated, almost artful ball of bandaging.

During all of this, Claude's body was motionless, his vision dulled by the brownish cake. His imagination, lively in ordinary circumstances, now raced. He observed the

dried wildflowers and mushroom strings hanging from the rafters. They began to sway and then dance. He soon felt himself running through a multicolored field of borage, flax, and speedwell, of mint and betony, of green nettle and purple sage. He saw himself chased by the fire dogs he had drawn earlier in the evening, only now they were slavering. The last thing Claude observed before falling profoundly into sleep was the surgeon holding the card that had been knocked to the floor: The Grim Reaper had a drop of blood covering his scythe.

As any addict can tell you, the effect of opiates is difficult to gauge even in ideal circumstances. When opiates are bolstered by gin and herbal mixtures, calculating such an effect is next to impossible. Claude slept for a night and a day, and a night again. He awoke in his mother's curtained box bed to the sight of the Abbe, whose kindly disposition provided a pleasant contrast to the surgical nightmare he had carried into sleep. Claude gave his eyes full-fisted rubs with his unbandaged hand, then moaned.

The surgeon ignored his suffering. "Good. He is awake. We must leave now."

The Abbe would have none of it. "What we must do is wait until the boy is out of danger."

"You have been checking him hourly."

"And I will go on doing so." As if on cue, the chime of the Abbe's montre a sonnerie announced that it was time for another inspection. The Abbe brushed the hair out of Claude's eyes and encouraged him to talk. He was still too groggy.

The surgeon said, "It is imperative that I return to Geneva. Obligations."

"Your obligations are here. I might remind you that it was you who wished to perform the operation, despite the weather. You were the one who insisted it be done immediately."

"And it has been done."

"The weather and the boy's mien preclude departure. We will wait." The Abbe spoke with surprising insistence.

The surgeon returned to a stiff rush chair suited to his temperament and feigned reading a medical treatise in quarto. The Abbe gave the patient a wink, as if to say, "Don't pay heed to that spiritless fool. He's an insufferable citizen of the Republic." (Perhaps the wink transmitted slightly less information, but that is the interpretation that should be applied to the conjunction of the upper and lower lid of the Abbe's twinkling eye.) He sensed Claude was cranky and so moved closer to the bed. Raising Claude's bandaged hand, he said, "Fine work. It belongs on the head of some wealthy Oriental merchant." He enhanced this attempt at good humor by providing the sweets he had promised before the operation. From a pocket he pulled a piece of demi-royal and surreptitiously gave it to Claude so that his sisters would not notice.

Using his good hand, Claude fumbled with the violet paper.

"Allow me." The Abbe popped the sugar into the boy's mouth. It was a treat for a child raised on roots and tubers and pinecones.

"I see you can smile," the Abbe said. "A most noteworthy feature." He turned to Madame Page and said, "Your son's smile emanates not from the lips but from the eyes, the source of all truly great smiles."

He looked back at Claude. "Well, that's half the bargain. I suppose I should fulfill the other half by telling you a story. What if I tell you of the sugar you seem so pleased

to consume?"

After a drink of water to slake the thirst brought on by the opiates, Claude settled under the covers, ready for a tale.

It should be mentioned that tales were a lot more brutal then. The brothers Grimm hadn't yet tidied up the fireside accounts of rape, incest, cannibalism, and greed, nor had Per-rault's elevated courtly renderings infected the oral traditions of Tournay. The Sandman, who is now portrayed as a likable fellow, in Claude's day ripped out children's eyes. Happily, the Abbe represented this ancient and violent tradition.

"Do you know where sugar comes from?" the storyteller queried.

Claude shook his head. Beyond the Abbe's pockets and the Carnival stalls, he was ignorant of its origins.

The Abbe, a man who traced the origins of all matter, expounded. "Most mambu juice (that's what it's called in certain parts of the world) is shipped from Hispaniola. It arrives here in two forms: loaves that sit like conical caps in the confectioner's window, and the rougher palm sugar wrapped in leaves that evoke the texture of the tropics. But the finest sugars—the demi-royal that now travels to your gut, and the royal I cannot afford—are furnished by the slavers of the Pompelmoose Atoll." The Abbe traced a map on Claude's stomach, with his nipples serving as Paris and London and the Pompelmoose Atoll rising out of nethermore parts. Claude giggled.

"You will not laugh when I tell you that while wotk in Hispaniola is fatiguing, in the Pompelmoose Atoll it is death. Do you remember the criminal who was caught for bringing down an ax on the aged carter in Vornet?"

Claude nodded.

Madame Page said, "The carter's daughter found his nose in a bandbox under the bed."

"And the poisoner of Passerale?" the Abbe asked.

"Six children orphaned by a wolfsbane potage," she said.

As the docket grew to include infanticide and immolation, Fidelite and Evangeline moved to the side of the box bed, and Staemphli appeared to turn the pages of his medical treatise with diminished frequency, though he would never admit to listening.

"These criminals all ended up" — the Abbe paused to look around the room — "in the penal colony of the Pompelmoose Atoll, where punishment is determined by the class of crime committed. I will explain. Lesser reprobates transported to the Pompelmoose are forced to work the fields, cutting long stalks into short stalks and short stalks into still shorter ones. The days are longer than long. From the cacophonous caw of the cockatoo" — the Abbe mimicked the cry of the tropical bird — "until the sun gives off its last, dusky sparkle on the waves of the surrounding sea, the prisoners are forced to harvest cane. And that, my friends, is considered a light sentence."

"Lighter than your own," the surgeon mumbled. He was suspicious of eloquence.

"Pickpockets and shoplifts are transported — and, actually, you can add your better grade of thief to the list—for periods of ten to fifteen years. But the harshest sentences are given to the meanest criminals, which brings us to poisoners and ax-men. They, along with rapemasters-general and souls insensitive to the beauty of things well made, are banished to the island's sugar mines. There they work their sticky picks, knocking out boulders of crystallized sugar that are hard as diamonds. In caverns where a single candle reflects off a thousand surfaces, the criminals are forced to

satisfy our Continental desires. (Among the residents of your Republic, my dear surgeon, the annual consumption is put at fourteen pounds a head.) Once brought to the surface of the sugar mine, usually by convicted highwaymen, cullies, and conny-catchers, the big crystals are shattered into smaller rock candy, the kind given on feast days to the deserving.

"The chain of penal dulcitude continues indoors. That is where the female criminals are kept." The Abbe looked at Claude's two sisters. "Yes, that is correct. The fair sex is not immune to the punishments of the Pompelmoose Atoll. Women caught pursuing unmentionable but well-imagined acts are given a most appropriate chore: refinement. Only it is refinement not of themselves but of sugar in the baker's drying room, which Ar-buthnot tells us is heated fifty-four degrees beyond that of the human body. The heat is such that it will kill a sparrow in two minutes. Here they must toil to make pastries, their breasts dripping in the syrupy heat. That is why, incidentally, they are called, in England anyway, tarts."

The cottage's occupants were all ears (especially Fidelite) as the Abbe confected his convicts' chronicle, describing callused hands, screams, and cries for salt in a world of bitter sweetness. He beguiled with great seriousness, mixing the terrors of the valley with the mysteries of distant lands, and in so doing offered up a story that satisfied listener and teller alike.

The Abbe wrapped up his tale as neatly as the piece of demi-royal that had inspired it: "So when someone asks you if you want a taste of sugar in whatever form, whether in cane, rock, or refined, remember the source of the sweet that tempts you. It bears the labor of street thief, murderer, whore."

The sugar and the story had served to comfort Claude. Combined, they acted as an analeptic, restoring and renewing the spirits. Now that he no longer had either treat, however, Claude felt a throbbing through the turban on his hand. The Abbe observed stains darkening the gauze. He turned to Staemphli and mentioned the efficacy of alum, noting, "I brought some that I mined myself in Liege. It might be helpful."

"The bandage must stay on for at least a week," the surgeon said.

"But the alum will stanch the trouble spot," the Abbe replied.

"There is no trouble. The discoloration is caused by the digestive medicine."

Claude's mother disagreed, arguing that the ointment of crushed nineshirts, a kind of wild garlic, would not cause such stains. "The flannel could be too tight," she said.

The surgeon was now adamant. "A week, including the Lord's day, must elapse before we remove the bandage." The patient moaned with renewed energy, partly out of fear, partly to challenge the surgeon. The Abbe unraveled the bandage despite Staemphli's protests. It was a lengthy process. The flannel and gauze mounted on a stool beside the box bed. When the dressing was removed, the Abbe looked at the surgeon and said, "I was wrong to trust you. The gauze hides a horror." His tone betrayed rage. Claude caught sight of his hand before the Abbe could reapply the bandages. The mole was gone, but so was something else.

Claude fainted.

Where he had once had five fingers, he now had only four. In the gap: a raw and angry sore. Adolphe Staemphli, surgeon and citizen of Geneva, had cut away the middle finger of Claude's right hand.

The subsequent conflict between the mother, the Abbe, and the surgeon was as

messy and convoluted as the tangle of bandages. A snarl of exclamations, accusations, and curses from the hostess and the Abbe received looks of moral indignation from the surgeon. In his defense, Staemphli tried to offer a succession of excuses involving the fusion of bones in boys and the odd formation of the hand.

"It had to come off," the surgeon said.

"It most certainly did not," the Abbe cried. "And had you thought so, you should have mentioned that necessity to his mother."

Staemphli tried to play down the gravity of the operation. "What does a child's finger do? Pick a nose, poke an ear, ex-plate the seven apertures the body is granted by God. It was only one finger of ten. The child has nine others that function as they need to function. War has scattered limbs and organs more vital than his over the fields of battle, and men have picked themselves up and moved on. The child will as well. You must weigh the loss of a finger against the gains of science." Staemphli revealed the real reason for the enlarged excision. "It was essential that the mole be kept intact. The ringer is a commonplace—the mole, unique. It will find a spot in my collection. It will advance understanding and pay tribute to God's greater glory."

"Collection? God's greater glory?" The Abbe was incredulous.

The surgeon replied calmly. "Yes. You know very well I am gathering specimens for a treatise on the surgical arts. It will contain copperplates that will outdo Cheselden's. The child's anomaly is going to fill a gap in my studies." The surgeon was deaf to his own wordplay. He tried to push the dispute away by wrapping it in obscurity. "You will be amused to know, my dear Abbe, that the ignorant use moles for divination and endow these growths with all sorts of silly meaning. My intention is more rigorous. Maupertuis suggests we look at hexadactyly to understand the ill effects of interbreeding. I am of the opinion that moles also should be considered. Why else do you think I am willing to suffer the vagaries of these valley folk? They harbor blasphemy, heresy, and more specific forms of wickedness so effectively kept in check by the Consistory. Do you know what Bacon says? He says, 'Deformed persons are commonly even with nature, for as nature hath done ill by them, so do they by nature, being . . . void of natural affection; and so they have their revenge of nature.'

The Abbe was furious. "Damn you, damn your study, damn your misreading of Bacon. I hope that this deformed person will have his revenge on you. In fact, I declare right now that he will! I should never have brought you here." The Abbe pounded his fist against the kitchen table. "If I had not borrowed from your library, or from your bankers, and if I knew why you had agreed to come, I would not have called you to the valley. It was never my intention to have you fill your jam jars with the extremities of Tournay."

"As I explained, it was a remarkable sample. And I do not use jam jars. My bottles are made to specification in the Lorraine."

The Abbe tried to console Madame Page, who at this point was highly agitated by the sight of her unconscious son. "You chose the wrong proverb," he said. "God tempered nothing at all, except perhaps the steel that sheared your little lamb."

The mother was reduced to more gnomish incantation: "On the fool's beard the barber learns to shave."

"No, Madame," the Abbe said. "We have been worse than fools. If I held sway

with the authorities . . ."

"... but you do not," the surgeon interjected. "It is / who hold sway. And with that, I think, the subject can be closed."

The Abbe shouted, "Enough of your grim-reapery! Leave!" He moved menacingly toward the surgeon and held up a poker that suggested a surprising capacity for violence.

And so the surgeon left—with Claude's finger, it should be noted.

3

THE vengeful WIDOW entered again as the surgeon hurried from the cottage. She blew through the herbs hanging from the rafters, sprinkling the occupants below with the petals and leaves of the older and less potent plants. She whipped up the cards on the floor, extinguished an unglomed candle, and ruffled open the pages of Claude's copybook. The last assault caught the Abbe's eye. He adjusted his spectacles and took the copybook gingerly in his hands. Opening it, he observed the first page was blank. "The frontispiece of the perfectionist," he said.

The images that followed confirmed the Abbe's expectations. Claude was indeed an exacting draftsman. His reputation had spread to Grand-le-Luc, a village on the other side of the valley. He was known as the Pencil Boy, in the way other children of the region were distinguished by cowlicks, or their unusual predilections, the Boy Bee-eater being perhaps the most noteworthy. Claude had a great deal of time to pursue his talents. Except during the seasonal mushroom explosions, when Madame Page insisted on help, Claude was free to do as he pleased. And when he was not obliged to skirmish with his sisters, what pleased him most was drawing. Hence the nickname.

What did Pencil Boy draw? What was it the Abbe now observed? It was a private register of fascinations, frustrations, and flights of uncontrolled fancy. Claude drew the cemetery yew, and on its branches hung a few dozen water rats affixed by their tails. He drew a soap house overtaken by a colony of spiders spinning webs worthy of the finest watch work. Wild as these designs were, both the tree and the soap house faithfully represented Claude's curious vision. So did the windmills that spun through the high-domed skies, the paddle wheels that slapped the Tournay river dry, and the sparks that rose from the scalp of Christine Rochat, the local pyromaniac. The Abbe found little or no depiction of the conventional. There was one image of Matthew Rochat, the farmer who also served as the local barber. He was sketched behind the Red Dog, performing the surgical procedure on the aforementioned ridgeling. A phrase ran across the bottom of the page: "Shave for a Sou, Bleed for Two. Hogs and Rams Gelded." Next to it, Claude had drawn a picture of a chicken freshly decapitated and hanging from a drying line.

The Abbe leafed back and forth through the disturbing images of the copybook. He came upon a picture of a wedge of cheese, a variant of Gruyere. In the bubbles, Claude had placed the heads of some of the more powerful residents: Sister Constance, a Discalced Carmelite who greatly distressed the Abbe; Gaston, the proprietor of the Red Dog; and, near the rind, a rotund, bespectacled fellow the Abbe rightly took to be

himself. Claude drew a few self-portraits and even a series of Mole Kings, studies of his deformed hand.

While a curiosity to be sure, the mole was not the most serious of physical aberrations visited upon the village of Tournay. Claude's little book documented with tremendous acuity the dreadful results of intermarriage and unacknowledged couplings of a more temporary nature. Once, a company of performers passed through the village, a rare event given the rugged terrain and the scant and miserly population. By the time the players decamped and left the valley, it was hard to establish who had been more surprised, the visited or the visitors. What had the performers made of the Tournay family with toenails like oyster shells, or of Hairless Ruth the lacemaker? When the Abbe observed Claude's drawing of Ruth without her bonnet and scrubbed clean of the burnt cork that normally traced across her fuzzless eyebrows, he thought of an acorn deprived of its cap.

The reason for the limited and intense commingling of families can be reduced to a single word: inheritance. Along with the land and livestock, lace and lock tools, the racks of pewter common and fine, came bequests unrecorded in the heavy elephant folio registers kept by the parish notary. There were harelips, bulbous noses, large ears, high foreheads, and, yes, sometimes even the odd mole. The genealogical trees of the valley often grafted branches back to trunks.

The Abbe came upon portraits of Claude's family. Evangeline found kinder but less frequent representation than Fidelite, whose delineations made the Abbe laugh aloud. And there was Claude's mother, depicted hunching over a large cluster of mushrooms. The Abbe's favorite image was of the three children and Madame Page standing beside the chimney, a hookah and telescope on the mantel and the Dragon rug under their feet.

The Pencil Boy awoke, again indulging in a sleepy, full-fisted rub of his eyes. He became agitated when he observed the Abbe inspecting his copybook. The Abbe silenced the objections with a question: "Where is your father? Why haven't you drawn him?"

"I do not remember what my father looks like." There was an edge to Claude's reply. Indeed, what was missing from his copybook was missing from his life. As if by conspiracy, Michel Page was never mentioned. The only hint of paternal legacy was hidden in the family portrait. "This is all there is," Claude said. He pointed to the telescope, the hookah, and the Dragon rug. These souvenirs told the story of Michel Page, a second-generation watchmaker.

As with an increasing number of the farmers trapped in winter by the windswept snows, Claude's grandfather had cut a window in the wall of the farm, set up a bench and chuck, and crafted timepieces in a land ruled by the sun and stars. He acquired the valley's secrets and transferred them to his son, Claude's father. Michel Page augmented these secrets during a polygonal tour of France. On his way home from apprenticeship, he met a sturdy Lyonnaise girl, a minister's daughter, whom he liked and promptly married. Juliette was uninterested in the devotions of the Church. She chose to dedicate herself instead to plants and children, which suited Michel Page perfectly. Returning from an almost somber wedding celebration overseen by Juliette's father, the young couple shared a coach with an enigmatic vizier. (Is there any other kind?) Michel Page struck a deal to construct a complicated watch reckoned to the

Muslim lunar calendar. Other orders followed, and not long after, he made a six-month trip to Constantinople. He did well satisfying the Turkish love of astronomical watches. Pearls and blue-green enameling practically guaranteed profitable sale in Constantinople, and if not there, in Baghdad. His business expanded. He negotiated lucrative arrangements with Persian caravans that stopped in Smyrna and Aleppo. Silk for watch works. More deals were made. Michel Page befriended the people he needed to befriend, the French consul in Constantinople in particular, and was granted a concession normally unavailable to a man of his humble origins. He returned from the East with a pouch of silver piasters. He also brought back a hookah, a telescope, a carpet of fantastical design—called the Dragon rug by his children though it depicted no recognizable dragons—and stories of distant lands.

Claude loved the stories best. Michel Page mixed Eastern myths and local tales shamelessly. Travel had taught him to burp like a Chinaman, pass gas like a Prussian, and tap his head like a woodpecker pecking at the trunk of a hollow oak. He could even play little tunes on his teeth, until he lost a left incisor, a C-sharp, in a wineshop brawl outside the port of Toulon.

The stories stopped when Claude turned seven. Page pere kissed the forehead of Page fits and left for Geneva. From there, it was on to Besancon and beyond, a trip that would take him to the farthest reaches of the Turkish Empire. He never returned. Two years later, the Abbe brought news of his death. In his vast web of correspondence, he had learned of a devastating plague in Aleppo that had turned every fourth resident into food for worms. According to a trusted spice merchant, an unnamed watchmaker had been snatched up by the horrid malady. The Abbe wrote again, and in less than four months a letter arrived detailing the tragic end of Claude's father. "The tally stick of Michel Page," the merchant wrote in a postscript, "has been marked." No effects were returned except a watch of little value hiding gears of ingenious design. This was an important, if unrecognized, heirloom for the young boy.

Michel Page hadn't been a fool. Before leaving to conduct business with the Muhammedans, he had purchased an annuity for his wife. The receipt, a printed document with manuscript additions, was kept in an iron box near the chimney. He had paid 8,450 livres for an annual income of 650, which made the widow one of the richest residents in the community. Yet even with this wealth, she retreated to the forests, a kind but lonely woman, who, as Claude's drawings made clear, was happiest digging for roots by the light of a waxing moon. She spent substantial sums on the education of her children—they learned to read at an early age—and little on herself.

The Abbe shut the copybook. The feverish and unruly images appealed to his own scattered preoccupations. Many of the drawings reached beyond the borders of the page, as if the paper were not large enough to accommodate Claude's desires, as if his field of focus were at once too narrow and too wide. The Abbe worried that the talent displayed in the copybook had been, in a single stroke of the knife, severed. (Staemphli, with more exactitude, would have said the act necessitated three crosscuts of a surgical saw.)

The Abbe turned to Madame Page. "Before the operation, your boy had a skill that would have made his father proud. It must be retrieved. I wish to see him next session day."

Claude lost a finger that night but acquired something much more valuable: a

patron and a mentor. Amputation had brought about attachment.

The patient did very little during the days that followed. Barricaded in the attic, he directed his attentions to his hand, a scabrous island surrounded by a pink-and-scarlet sea. He spent hours playing with the flap of flesh that was supposed to heal.

He refused to speak and controlled his immediate environment by flinging turnips and dried-up field mice at anyone who attempted to enter his lair. It was soon clear, however, that the hand was festering, and that the healing promised by the surgeon was not taking place.

Madame Page forced her way up the ladder and tended her son's wound despite his protestations. She made him take a wormwood drink, but the bitter taste, worse even than the opium, only provoked more hailstorms of rodentia. She switched to lemon-balm infusions, and still the fever rose. She applied a cabbage leaf bought at great expense from a hothouse near Geneva, hoping that as the leaf withered, the hand would grow strong.

It did not. As a last, desperate act, she employed a risky febrifuge known to produce quick and dramatic results. The fever finally broke, and after a fortnight of suffering, Claude's hand was clearly on the mend. The gauze was soon replaced by dossils, basil-laced clumps of lint. As the wound healed, however, the corruption appeared to move inward; that is, Claude's mood began to fester. He was so mournful that his mother likened him to the pasteboard pietas dispensed by Sister Constance. He refused to draw in the copybook during his convalescence. What imaginative power he retained was employed in thoughts of revenge against his elder sister, against the surgeon, against the world. In fitful dreams, he banished the surgeon to the Pompelmoose Atoll. He contemplated the use of bell-topped stalks of wolfsbane, the plant made famous by the poisoner of Passerale. He finally responded to Fidelity's taunts with the surreptitious application of a powerful laxative, which kept his sister bent-kneed in the bitterly cold outhouse for two days.

A month after the operation, the Abbe returned unexpectedly. He brought three winter pears from his orchards and a snake stone from the quarry that ran between the mansion house and the Page cottage. He gave a piece of fruit to each of the three children and made a special gift of the fossil to Claude. When he learned that Claude had not drawn since the fateful night, he administered a remedy far more efficacious than all those previously applied: praise. Taking hold of the copybook, the Abbe moved his spectacles to and from the sketches. "Excellent. Truly gifted. Your sister's nose hair is treated with great subtlety, though I must say you've been kind. Does your mother really hunch over so much? Perhaps she does. I hadn't noticed until you drew her. Am I so silly in appearance? Maybe I am."

Claude said nothing. He just rubbed his bandaged hand.

"Does it itch? If it does, I suggest you try using a nutmeg grater. Come down here and I'll show you. Then you can draw for me." Claude refused. "Stop all this self-pity and draw," the Abbe said. A piece of demi-royal materialized, and Claude was once again at the side of the rotund seigneur, seduced by his kind voice and tender touch. And, of course, by the sugar. He still refused to pick up a pencil.

"There is a myth, Claude, that hands are destiny. This is nonsense. Take Old Antoine, he's the finest watch-finisher in the valley. Have you seen his miserable extremities? Yet he can patch together the most delicate timepiece. Or take the