

Learning French

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The American had a heart attack in French class: that's what they wrote on his chart at the hospital in Carcassonne when they rushed him in. His teacher went along because she knew he could barely speak the language, and right then he couldn't speak at all. Perhaps she felt responsible for the attack? They were working on domestic vocabulary, verbs connected to gardening, *bêcher*, first conjugation, to dig, and tools, *une tondeuse*, a lawnmower, or his favorite, *un marteau de forgeron*, a sledgehammer, when she turned to him and asked if he liked tulips. He'd never thought of tulips in terms of like or dislike. Tulips, they just were, they were things Grace used to deal with and he'd not given them an honest thought. They came up or they didn't come up, it had nothing to do with him, as alien as trying to learn French at his age. Colors, he knew there were many colors, he knew they often came from Holland for some reason, and they were pretty in a kind of obvious way, at least until they became blowsy which could happen in a day if the weather got suddenly hot. Did he like tulips? *Philipe, aimez-vous les tulipes?* In French the question seemed more philosophical than practical, implying an entire epistemology he didn't know existed. It sounded challenging, almost demanding, as if he were required to have an opinion on a crucial political question with evidence to back it up. But a lot of French sounded like that.

It was the morning after the Boston Marathon and though he didn't know about the bombing until three days later, still lying in the hospital bed, cared for by sympathetic doctors and nurses – he could see they were sympathetic even if he couldn't understand everything they said – he wondered if the two events could be connected somehow, the destruction of flesh by ball bearings in Boston and the attempted destruction of his heart muscle in French class. He wouldn't have thought of it except for the way he learned, reading it in a leftover regional paper, with speculations about homemade bombs that he really didn't have the vocabulary for, any more than he had for medicine. It interested him because of his past and he decided that if he ever got out of that bed he'd apply himself to the French terminology for wounds and warfare; it seemed like a sign.

The night before the fateful class he'd attended a communal dinner. His little village in the depths of Languedoc was French to the core, but it was close enough to the Spanish border to have a history with Catalonia, and the event had a Catalan theme. The menu was paella and the entertainment was provided by a local club of women dancing the sardana in tight long dresses and tame steps. They relaxed for the next number, a recording with a heavy beat, Zumba, somebody said, or maybe Hip-Hop, he didn't know the difference. The volume was so

loud and the beat so insistent he felt his heart rocking in his chest, lifting out of his ribs and rising to his throat, actually touching his esophagus then dropping down so he felt it in his stomach, as when an elevator drops too quickly and your insides stay where they were, gravity going backwards.

The music changed, still far too loud but an improvement and even a little uplifting – there was a swing to it that reminded him of Duke Ellington, one of his father's records from the late 1940s, "Solitude" or "Where or When." Before he left the States he recorded many of his father's LPs on a reel-to-reel tape machine and still played them occasionally. Not many people here, he thought, would know who the Duke was, this mix of young and middle-aged people scattered with white hairs, as the French call us old folks. He was sitting by himself now. It was already ten o'clock and there was no sign of the paella, and he wondered again what he was doing here. He missed his wife's badgering him to enjoy himself and to try to speak French, though he used to hate her for saying it at the time. He was lazy about learning the language because she spoke it so well. That would have to change.

The young men in the hall were dancing in a group with a few girls, drunk on the endless wine. The wine was good, at least there was that, and he had another cupful. The boys seemed to be aping the hair and tight jeans of the 1950s with pointy shoes, tee-shirts with cigarette packs rolled in the top of the sleeves, Marlon Brando on a mobile phone. They looked at their screens, sending photos to each other, moving too jerkily for his comfort, reminding him of a loss of something, though he wasn't sure what it was.

There was a family of Vietnamese there, the father not more than forty. He must be the son of an Indochine immigrant, or the grandson. The wife seemed Vietnamese also and the children, and they were in the social life of the village, it seemed, talking to everybody and laughing. Maybe they're recent immigrants themselves, nothing to do with French colonialism or the Cold War. He always assumed that Vietnamese here or in the US had been displaced by the long battle, the Thirty Years' War, the thing France and America had in common in the last century. Fading from the world's memory now – he was the one still focused on it. When he moved to France in retirement he thought he'd be done with those memoranda, but how could he be?

He also thought that his wife's death would help him move on. Crazy idea, that because he was now alone he could change his pattern of thought or his moody reflections. His children by his first marriage were thousands of miles away. Move back to the States, Dad, his daughter said on Skype. But could he move back after so many years of exile? First in London, then here with his second wife, Grace, his dead Irish wife. Back to that world he'd abandoned because he was out of place there and not exactly welcome. Oh, they'd let him in at the border, they couldn't prevent that, he still had his American passport, but they'd be watching.

He wondered if the man at the next table spoke Vietnamese; he doubted the children did. The French liked immigrants to integrate; they didn't care what color your skin was so long as you didn't wear the hijab in public. He was tempted to say hello, just in passing, *xin chào*, my name is Philip, *tôi tên là Philip*, do you understand me, *bạn có hiểu tôi*? But if he did they'd be surprised and he'd be quizzed. Or the man would answer in French and he'd be the one who

couldn't understand. Who is this stocky little bald man, why is he wearing a white jacket over a blue shirt and jeans, they'd wonder, and what is he saying?

At last they found a doctor who spoke some English. He explained that the heart attack had been serious but was caught in time. "So, Monsieur Colman," he said, "we give you the bubble. No, not the bubble, the *ballon*, open the *artère atriale* and put a stick there to keep it." Angioplasty with a stent, Philip thought, not so hard to understand. I must have been out of it for a couple of days if I couldn't get that, even with my poor French. They would let him go once they were sure there was no infection or rejection, with instructions about diet and exercise. He'd heard it all before. The cholesterol, the plaque build-up, that was not his fault, it was hereditary. Blame my father, he tried to say in French, but it came out wrong and the doctor looked confused. Still, he'd never had a heart attack before, so something had changed. You're 67, he thought, that's what's changed.

He was having trouble understanding the nurse, saying something about *une fille orientale*. At first he thought she was describing a procedure he'd have to undergo, something to do with a wire, no, that's *fil*. She seemed to be asking a question, seeking his permission. He looked over her shoulder at a movement in the doorway and thought he saw his daughter. He was hallucinating again; she looked wrong, older than she should be, bags under the eyes, her lovely dark skin a bit blotchy. "Hello, Dad," she said, and it felt like another heart attack.

"Thu Trúc," he said, breathless, trying to rise, pointing at the door. The nurse pushed him back, told him to lie still. The girl came forward and took his hand. It seemed she was there after all. "What are . . . ?"

"My number was in your wallet, I came as soon as I could get a flight." She was a part-time school teacher in New Haven, staying on after art history at Yale. She made gallery installations about war and conflict, whatever war was going; lately she'd been busy. She had a boyfriend who was lazy; Philip didn't like him and was glad they had no children. She was now, what? thirty?

"You look tired," he said.

"You don't look so good yourself."

"It's fixed now. I told them not to bother you."

"Would you have told me at all?"

He wondered if he would have. He was used to isolation and this didn't seem very different from when his wife died, and much less dramatic. He shipped her body back to Ireland, using the services of a mortician in Limoux a neighbor recommended, who turned out to be the neighbor's cousin. The paperwork was horrendous, endless forms, the Irish embassy in Paris no help. He didn't tell his children until she was in the ground in Sligo, her two grown sons from her first marriage standing stony-faced over the grave, glowering accusation. He decided to put her birth name on the granite, Grace McKevitt, not his name or her first husband's name, which of course was the boys' name, and they blamed him for that too. At least there were no tears. He hated tears, he hated sympathy; it always seemed like pity. He didn't want anyone to pity him, least of all his own children, so he pushed sympathy aside.

"How's your French," he asked.

"Still okay." She'd spent her junior year in the museums of Paris.

"See if you can get me out of here, will you? Tell them you're a nurse."

"I'm not a nurse."

“Tell them anyway. Have you been to the house?”

“New York to Paris, Paris to Toulouse, train to Carcassonne, taxi here.”

“There was no need to rush. They have a good health service, though they do it in a foreign language.” He was delighted to see her, he had to admit, even if it was pity that brought her. “How long can you stay?”

“I got someone to cover my teaching. And I can work on my new project here, if it’s all right. I’ll try to find the doctors.”

Philip’s first wife was Vietnamese. Grace, whose ancestors had been in Ireland since before St Patrick, was nothing like her. Aside from him, his wives had only one thing in common: suicide. The second time was not his fault, whatever her sons thought. They’d been married two years when Grace became ill. She loathed indecision, it was one of things he admired most about her. On her last visit to Ireland she’d confirmed there was no chance of survival since the cancer had spread to the liver and spleen. She could do another round of chemo, but everyone, including the French doctors, said she’d gain only a few months. One night last May she got up at two – Philip was a deep sleeper, always had been, even in combat – and walked out the bedroom door straight into the garden with a bottle of vodka and about twenty-five pentobarbital. She must have been stashing them away for a year. He found her in the morning, lying under the cedar on a blanket, wrapped in a winter coat, the sun just breaking the low branches. The damp had seeped through to her flannel nightgown. She had a note clasped in her hand; the gendarme had trouble prying it loose. A few ragged lines, bilingual to cover the bases, a torn apology.

The house in France was hers, bought with her first husband, James Whitman, a London financial wizard who almost never took the time to visit it. But she had come often and grew to love the village, the simplicity. When she met Philip – he was introducing a speaker on the Iraq war at the London School of Economics who was a friend of hers – her marriage was already breaking up. Philip wasn’t the cause, far from it, just a little nudge along the road. James proved generous; it turned out he cared more for his clients’ money than his own. So she got some of it, along with the French house, and a year later was married to Philip by the mayor of the village in a ceremony that bewildered the groom by the length of its speeches. They had a reception in the garden for Grace’s French friends and a few English expats; no family members on either side were present, and Philip didn’t bother to tell his children until Christmas.

In most countries the house would now be his, but French law divided Grace’s property into thirds, equal parts to her sons and Philip. He could choose to sell his part to the sons or to take life use of the house, which would pass to them on his death. He hadn’t decided what to do, the law gave him time, but it didn’t matter since neither of the lads had any spare money. Taking after Grace’s father rather than their own, they operated a fishing boat in Donegal. Selling up was not likely since the property market in France had crashed. The boys didn’t want him in the house but they couldn’t remove him or, to their great vexation, charge him rent.

He was thinking about moving anyway, though he didn’t know where he’d go. He was making a mental list of places, London, Dublin, Vancouver, somewhere English-speaking, when his daughter returned. The doctor in charge said he could leave tomorrow afternoon if the blood tests were good. “They need to check what they called *la warfarine*, whatever that is,” she said.

The blood thinner, to protect against stroke. Philip had been on it earlier when he had trouble with heart rhythm. That was last year, a month after Grace died when his first wife came

rushing back like a tropical storm, uninvited and unwelcome, the South China Sea in tempest. She'd done it before, and each time it caused some bodily upset, vomiting or diarrhea and twice an inflammation of the left eye. The most serious occasion was before he met Grace, when he was still teaching at LSE. He had recounted the story of his own involvement in Vietnam in a series of lectures. A number of guests were in attendance for the final one, including the Vietnamese ambassador. Philip finished the lecture at four o'clock on Thursday. Walking off the speaker's platform, surrounded by students asking intrusive questions, he saw his dead wife taking notes in the corner of the room. As she looked up at him with an admonishing gesture, her pen in the air like a talisman, he fainted, fell, and hit his head on the edge of the low platform. He came to quickly, looking up from the floor at the exaggerated faces of concerned people. They seemed to be in black and white, like a film noir shot with a fisheye lens. He was embarrassed, of course, though it went into local lore: a dramatic gesture from a man whose life had been drama.

Had been, that was the word. He stayed on at LSE for another few years, though he always suspected he'd been given the job for his history rather than his critical ability. He was an adequate teacher – what he had to say was interesting in itself and didn't require much pedagogical skill. His occasional articles for the left-leaning papers and journals, and his one book decrying American foreign policy after the Cold War, these were always received respectfully, like the memoirs of an elder statesman. But he was an anti-statesman, critical of the War on Terror and the continuation of Cheney's Wars. And the cowardice of Obama in not ending them or closing down Gitmo. Despite that, he never felt at home among the old lefties at LSE. He saw them as warmed-over British socialists; they hadn't quite freed themselves from fear of another Hitler or embarrassment over Stalin. In fact he wasn't really a lefty, he was an American liberal who believed the US could be a force for good in the world if it weren't for the CIA and the politicians who let anxiety and alarmist electioneering run the country.

They were having lunch at the big pine table in the big kitchen. Philip wasn't hungry after his days in the hospital and pushed some green and brown things around his plate. This bothered Thu Trúc, a vegetarian who knew she wasn't a good enough cook to spark his appetite, and Philip wasn't ready for a restaurant outing. He wanted to do something, though, and was told he could take light exercise, but it had been raining for two days, lightly but steadily, and working in the garden was not possible. "It's strange you never learned to cook Vietnamese dishes," he said.

"When I was little Mom thought I was hopeless and chased me out of the kitchen. Then she died."

"Fortunately you have more valuable talents."

"Are they more valuable? We'll have to work something out about food, because I'm going to stay a while and take care of you."

"It's not necessary."

"I'm worried about you. Anybody would be."

"What about Quan? Is he worried?"

"I haven't told him yet."

"Keep it that way." He took a sip of wine; the doctor said it was all right, maybe even good for him. But this wine, though he bought it himself and knew it was good, tasted sour. He made a face and set the glass aside.

“You should try harder with him, Dad.”

“You may remember that he walked away from me.”

“But still, after this, you might make another effort.”

He could feel the old ire building in his chest, blocking his veins. His son, Quan De, was a doctor himself somewhere in the Midwest, Wisconsin maybe, he’d lost track. He used his mother’s family name, Tian, rejecting him entirely. Just like Grace’s boys, Quan blamed Philip for his mother’s death. Which wasn’t the whole story, not by a long shot. Quan had a firm grasp on the wrong end of the stick, as usual, and wouldn’t let go. Philip pushed the anger down, away from his delicate heart, but it went into his stomach where it soured with the wine. He got up to clear his place.

“I’ll do that, Dad. You have a rest.”

“I’m not tired. I’ll take a walk, just to the other side of the village.”

“It’s still raining.”

“I have an umbrella.” A big yellow one emblazoned with the word OBI, the local home improvement center. *Bricolage*, they call it; he wasn’t much good at it, though the house needed repairs. The streets were muddy and there was no one about. He stopped in the village shop for bread, and answered the owner’s concerns about his health with the universal “ça va, ça va.” His shoes were wet when he got home and he started to sneeze. He heard Thu Trúc doing something upstairs in what had been Grace’s little studio in the attic, still cluttered with her easels and sunny landscapes. He planned to sort them out but found he hadn’t the heart for it. He sat in the living room with a book.

He was back in Vietnam after the American pullout but before the end of the war. Fighting was heavy in the suburbs of Saigon. He seemed to be a Red Cross observer, which was absurd, and also looking for someone’s lost child, even more absurd. A mortar shell exploded near him and knocked him off his feet into a crowd of fleeing women. They set him on the hard ground and began to pick burning flesh off his face. His shoes were on fire. The women became one woman, his wife, who held his head on her lap on a blue sofa in the middle of the jungle. He could hear the wings of a large bird above the trees. “Kim Lien,” he said, “you’re back.” She applied a balm to his face, gently rubbing it into the skin. “Rest,” she said, *hãy yên*, “it will be all right.”

The book had dropped to the floor and his mouth was dry. How long had he been asleep? It seemed darker outside, though the rain had stopped. He drank a small glass of water in the kitchen and put on his gardening shoes, went outside and looked at the top of the cedar, which had grown higher since Grace died. Kim Lien was standing under the tree, dressed in a white áo dài, partly obscured by the low branches. “Kim Lien,” he said, and she looked at the house. He turned and through the window saw himself in the chair looking out. This is how she prefers to conduct our relationship, he thought.

They met in 1972 when he was in Paris for the peace talks. By then he was out of the navy, working in San Francisco as a representative of the UN Vietnam mission, travelling to Saigon and occasionally Hanoi while Nixon dithered about how to treat the country he’d been bombing the piss out of. War reparations were on the table, but the North Vietnamese were stubborn and Philip saw that the stumbling block to US withdrawal was going to be American POWs. Philip was treated with suspicion by the US command, and openly despised by the South Vietnam military.

Tian Kim Lien was a mid-ranking staff member of the Hanoi delegation. She was the same age as Philip but theirs was a unlikely relationship, and he later admitted that his hatred for the war was part of the attraction. She was strong willed and very beautiful. She came from a wealthy family, had been educated in Paris and London and returned to Hanoi in 1964. Soon she was drawn into the revolutionary struggle; when her parents were killed in an early bombing raid while on holiday near Haiphong, she dedicated herself to the American war. Despite her bourgeois origin, she rose quickly through the Communist cadre and proved useful at the negotiating table, partly because she and the Viet Cong negotiator were the only females present.

She and Philip had an affair in Paris. Though he had neutral standing, Kim was criticized in Hanoi because of his past in South Vietnam. She barely avoided the indignity of self-criticism and was sidelined in the final phase of the fighting. When the war ended in 1975, Philip convinced her she'd blotted her copybook indelibly at home. It was his fault, he said; he should have known better, should have anticipated how sensitive her position was. But it was done, they were in love, so she might as well make the best of it and come the States. That was awkward to achieve since she had been an official enemy of the US. In the end she was forced to claim that she feared persecution in the reunified Vietnam. This pained her greatly, since her loyalty to the cause remained intact; despite a happy married life, the birth of two healthy children, and a satisfying career working with immigrants in San Francisco, she never recovered. One day, without warning, when Philip was away on a trip to Hanoi to discuss economic renewal, she bought a .22 caliber target pistol on the street in Oakland, returned to their house in the Sunset district, and shot herself in the head. Quan De, then twelve years old, found her lying on her back in her bed, fully clothed, one leg tucked under the other, the pillows red. There was no note.

The note came in her subsequent appearances. First she said she was sorry for the children but she needed to go home. Next time, that she was pregnant with a monster. Now, standing under a branch of a cedar tree in the south of France, she said nothing but pointed a forefinger at Philip's heart and cocked her thumb, smiling all the while.

He was back in the chair holding the book when Thu Trúc came downstairs asking for wood glue. He was startled, not sure if he was awake, his mouth woolly, his eyes stinging. He looked out the window at the tree, then took her to the garage and found a plastic bottle of carpenter's glue at the back of a shelf. "I raided some scrap wood while you were out," she said, "I hope you don't mind." She was making a model of a new art installation on the topic of drones. Wanting to see it, Philip panted climbing the stairs and had to sit down to catch his breath. The model was on an old pine table Grace had used for mixing paints. Thu Trúc had spread a sheet on it and had assembled a maquette from plywood and leftover strip molding. From the ceiling she hung a block of wood representing a drone. Viewers would enter a large gallery room with a brightly lit white floor that contained odd objects of interest at waist level. In the shadows above their heads working models of drones would appear at irregular intervals, highly theatrical moments suggesting the terror of death from the sky.

Philip thought it was a bit obvious and wondered how much of him she had put into the idea, purposely flattering him, since he had spoken out against drones early in their deployment in Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan. His article for *The Guardian*, reprinted in a number of US newspapers, compared drones to other targeted-killing operations by the CIA,

noting that they have two irredeemable flaws: no judicial oversight and no recourse for mistaken identity. He pointed especially to the Phoenix program in Vietnam.

Lieutenant Philip Colman was stationed in Saigon in 1967. Ostensibly he was the naval attaché to Body Count Bill, as Philip always called him. Not to his face, of course; to his face he called him General Westmoreland and saluted smartly. Clueless about how to counter guerilla activity, Westmoreland convinced Washington that the number of dead commies lying on the ground provided the only objective gauge of success. Philip once asked him how they could count bodies when they'd been blown apart by bombing; in his nicest South Carolina accent the general told him to shut the fuck up. The CIA had established a parallel black ops called Phoenix. The point was to abduct civilians suspected of supporting the revolutionary front and interrogate them, in an enhanced South Carolina manner, until they revealed what they knew. Many knew nothing, of course, since arrests depended on uncertain intelligence and chance, though that didn't stop the CIA from interrogating more than 80,000 people. About a third were killed, either through excessive torture or by tossing out of a Chinook helicopter in the expectation that the other detainee, who thought he was along for the ride, would now talk. The catchphrase of Phoenix was KKK: kapture, konvert or kill.

It was the dirtiest work in a dirty war and Philip was part of it, the liaison between the Phoenix and Westmoreland's HQ. He'd been trained for intelligence in the navy, learned Vietnamese at the Monterey Language Institute, asked for a Saigon posting, believed in the fight against world Communism and thought he was ready for anything. On his first helicopter trip he found he wasn't. They tossed out both of the Phoenix detainees and Philip lost his lunch, a spicy lemongrass noodle soup. "Christ, man," the CIA guy said, wearing a Mets baseball cap and dumping a canteen or water on the vomit, "it's just a couple of gooks."

He lasted until Nixon kicked Body Count Bill upstairs in June 1968, but by then reports of Phoenix and civilian massacres were uncontrollable. Necessary interdictions were suddenly called war crimes and Philip had enough. He asked to be relieved, resigned his commission, and wrote an article for the *Washington Post* which claimed that the US had mistaken a struggle for independence as a communist revolution. He condemned the corrupt politicians of South Vietnam and said the war was unwinnable. He then offered his expertise to a neutral UN agency. Considered a traitor by the US military establishment, he was widely attacked in the press, but the country caught up with him and Nixon bowed to the inevitable.

What had it been for? So his half-Vietnamese daughter could dream up an art work about the continuation of that old policy? No wonder he had a heart attack. But he knew that wasn't true; the heart is a time bomb.

His son was on the phone. "Where are you, Quan," Philip asked, still a little out of breath.

"I'm in Grand Rapids, it's where I live."

"Is that in Michigan? Dutch people, I seem to remember."

"And Mexican and Puerto Rican, not to mention Vietnamese."

"But mostly Dutch."

"How're you feeling, Dad?"

"Modern medicine is a miracle."

"Yes, I know, I'm a cardiologist."

"Are you? I didn't know that."

“I spoke to your cardiologist in Carcassonne, right after Thu Trúc called me.” Philip looked up sharply at his daughter, but she was busy with glue. “He thinks you’ll recover completely. Do you want me to come to France?”

Philip paused. He didn’t know if he was ready for that. Being angry at his son had become a habit, and he might not want to give it up; it gave him something to live for. This was just more pity. In the end he said, “I won’t stop you, Quan De, but there’s no need and you must be busy with work and children. How many do you have now?”

“A son who’s eight and two daughters, six and three. You should see them, growing fast.”

His heart was pounding; that can’t be good for me, he thought. He slowed his breathing, the way the nurse showed him. Count, she said, one-in, two-hold, three-out; his French was good enough for *un-deux-trois*. Had his son forgiven him? Remarkable, this near-death experience. “Would you really want me to visit?”

“Dad, I know we’ve had our problems, but I care about you.”

“You’ve been very quiet about it.”

“Thu Trúc keeps me informed.”

Does she, Philip wondered. “We’re looking at her new project.” He started to explain it then stopped himself, remembering Quan’s anti-political rants. He thought politics had destroyed his mother; he even refused to vote. He hated communist Vietnam for what it had done to her, would never go there, and married the daughter of an exiled South Vietnamese colonel. The colonel, now dead, lived long enough to refuse to shake Philip’s hand at the wedding. One-in, two-hold, three-out.

He’d gone pale. Thu Trúc took the phone but Philip didn’t hear her; he was back at the wedding. That’s when my family divided, he thought. Our seventeenth parallel and our own American War. He felt his life was a contrivance of atonement. As if his crossover marriage, his half-breed children, his political repentance could compensate for the miseries of history. If his estrangement from his son was the price he paid, then the heart attack was the interest on his debt to Kim Lien.

He worried that he was losing sight of her face. He knew she was lovely and delicate, small hands and black hair, but the details were fading despite her frequent apparition. What did she look like when she moved, when she talked? He was no longer sure. He had pictures, of course, snapshots and portraits in an album, but when he looked at them her face seemed distant, as if the photographic images were fading like his memory, Ektachrome bleeding color, growing false. Perhaps he should hang a picture of her now that Grace was gone. There were few photos of Grace; she hated the eye of the camera. Would she begin to fade like Kim Lien?

He slept that evening; with a break for brushing his teeth and undressing, he slept through the night. He dreamed of war reparations. Kim Lien appeared at a dark hour dressed in the black pajamas of the Vietnam People’s Army, climbed into the bed, and held him close until morning. When he woke the pillow was wet, sweat or tears, no way to tell.

The sun was shining and by ten o’clock the grass dry enough to cut. He told Thu Trúc he’d try out his strength just a little, making only a few passes with the gas mower. When he got near the cedar he stopped, his hand still on the dead-man’s switch, and thought he saw a white silk scarf under the tree. Since Grace’s death he didn’t like to stand under the branches but looked anyway and saw only a bright shaft of sunlight on a few scattered leaves. He felt well

enough to continue. He was lost in thought and didn't notice that the mower had started to smoke. Suddenly it stopped with a bang. He'd checked the fuel tank before he started but not the oil and this was the first mowing of the season. The cap was hot to the touch. He opened it with a rag and saw that the oil pan was completely empty. He'd burned out the motor.

Together they took it to Obi to ask about repairs. Thu Trúc didn't know the word for lawnmower and wanted to return to the house to look it up, but Philip remembered his heart attack class: *une tondeuse*. Not worth your while, the man said; I've got the same model on sale for less than it would cost you to repair it. Together they bemoaned a world where machines like this were thrown away, but that's what they did, they bought a new one and left the old one at the recycling center. Philip also bought motor oil, but by then he was too tired to mow.

Monday was some sort of holiday so there was no French class. Instead they went to an open market nearby where one of the regular stalls was run by a Thai woman who stocked ingredients for Southeast Asian cooking. Philip bought lemongrass, lime leaves, ginger, and a bottle of fish sauce. That evening he cooked three complementary dishes: rice noodle soup, dumplings with scallions and ginger, and a spicy beef stew; in deference to his daughter he substituted black eggplant for the meat. Working with the aromatic spices and chilies helped restore his appetite and even the wine tasted better to him. After dinner they listened to Duke Ellington on the reel-to-reel. His father had once danced with him as a boy; he blundered around now with Thu Trúc to "Night and Day," both of them laughing at his steps, so clumsy for a man with small feet.

He had a check-up: all was well. He mowed the lawn, and accidentally ran over a late tulip, a yellow one. No, I don't like tulips, he decided, they're too showy and self-centered. The mowing made him tired enough to sleep without a visitor. He spoke to Thu Trúc about her work on a long walk, suggested she might rethink her latest idea. Perhaps just the sound of a drone, he said, though he thought even that too melodramatic. What can inspire dread in the safety of a museum? That's the problem with films and novels about Cheney's Wars, he thought; they transfer terror into thrill. He wondered if art was ever adequate for devastation and loss. The nearly silent descent of a Hellfire missile, nobody can imagine that, you're there and then you're not there, you're in the Chinook and then you're not.

"How's your boyfriend," Philip asked. They were at a restaurant in the countryside, an evening in April warm enough to sit outside. They had dressed up a bit, Philip in his white linen jacket, his daughter in an elegant blue jacket with a silk scarf. The dining terrace looked down on a meadow with a group of five or six horses grazing in the late sun.

"I'll tell you," Thu Trúc said, "if you can remember his name."

"Billy," he said. "No, it's Charley or Buddy."

"I know you're trying to make a point. But you get no news."

"All right, it's Karl something. Karl Marx."

"No, he's your boyfriend. Mine is Carlos Rivera."

"Rivera, like the Mexican painter?"

"Yes, and he's not my boyfriend any longer."

"What happened? Did you cut his allowance?"

"He left me for a blonde twenty-year-old, one of his little students in life drawing."

"Have you replaced him?"

"I'm not that flexible."

“No, I suppose you’re not.” He watched the horses move to catch the last of the sun. Suddenly a small colt took off across the field, running for the joy of it. His mother looked up and whinnied, then went after him. We’d call her a filly, Philip thought, from the French for daughter or girl, but the French say *la pouliche*. How do I know that, he wondered, and not know the words for heart attack? “What’s the French for heart attack,” he asked.

“I think it’s *crise cardiaque*.”

Almost the same as *cri de cœur*, though he didn’t say it out loud.

“Will you visit Quan?” Thu Trúc had turned in her chair to follow the horses, as if her question were too personal, intrusive, her face half-hidden by her long black hair. Her mother’s hair. My daughter is beautiful, Philip thought, especially here with the sun on her face, her white scarf setting off her dark skin, but she can’t judge men well, including me. He hoped she’d let the question drop but she asked again.

“I don’t know. I might in a few months. To be honest, I don’t know what I’m going to do with my life, Autumn Wish. The rest of it, I mean.”

“You haven’t called me that for a long time.” Autumn Wish, a translation of the Vietnamese name her mother chose. It always sounded more euphonious to Philip than its original.

“Tell me something,” he said, “if I were to live near you, would you mind?”

“Permanently, you mean? Somewhere like New York?”

“I’m not sure I could take New York after this,” he said, “but somewhere nearby. Not New Haven, it’s an ugly place.”

“Only in parts. Of course I wouldn’t mind, I’d be delighted. I thought you were happy here.”

Happy?

The main course arrived.

He was back in French class on Monday, two weeks after the heart attack. Thu Trúc was at the house packing, flying out that afternoon. She didn’t want to leave but Philip convinced her she needed to go home to work out her new project. The truth was he needed to work out his own project and, much as he liked her being there, found she was distracting his thought. He’d spent the evening before on French homework of his devising, fulfilling his promise in the hospital, looking up words for *flesh wound*, *penetrating injury*, *shrapnel*, and *amputation* (easy, that one, the same in French). Grace’s English-French dictionary was too old to include *jihadist* but Philip figured that would be the same too. He started a fresh notebook, readying himself for a renewed assault on the language of Racine and Marshal Foch. What was he preparing for? He wasn’t sure.

He thanked his teacher, Madame Duclos, for coming to the hospital with the ambulance; she answered with a polite French phrase he didn’t fully understand. The other students, mostly retired couples from the English Midlands escaping lifetimes of bad weather, were delicate in their enquiries about his health. A shock to them, grasping his chest, trying to stand, squawking, drooling with his head on the table. They said he was looking very well. He told an old anecdote about the three ages of man, youth, middle age, and you’re looking very well, but he tried it in French and it fell flat. He realized that some of them knew less French than he did, and that cheered him.

They were working on the future tense. Philip thought he'd at last understood the various forms of the past tense but the future still eluded him, especially with irregular verbs. He asked how to form the future of *aller*, as in "I will go home." Madame Duclos told him, and he repeated it. "What about 'I will stay here,' what would that be?" She told him, and he repeated that as well. He wrote both sentences in his new notebook, then drove his daughter to the Toulouse airport. She had tears in her eyes, so he said he'd come to visit when he felt stronger. He wasn't sure he meant it.

He smiled on the drive back. Happy? He was trying to decide.