

Capuchin (short story), *Superstition Review* 14 (2014)

I'm walking down a side street in Arles, more or less on the way to the train station, although I am not convinced I will be taking a train. I don't even know if I will go as far as the station. Behind me I hear approaching two garrulous children: a boy and a girl. I turn to look. I guess they are ten or eleven. They are dressed in junky Mediterranean-in-summer clothing: shorts and t-shirts and flip-flops that look like they've been stolen from the last stall at some trash-town weekday *brocante*. Mismatched and eye-scalding, with painfully discordant colors. The boy's shirt is a massacred blood orange with letters scrawled across a front too wrinkled to read; the girl's is a green so extreme that it reminds me not of anything living but of an animal stung by the initial shock of death. Then again, I'm not dressed exactly well myself, and I don't feel well either. There's a suspicious damp place near my waistline that I have not stopped to check on yet. Maybe I will at the station. If I go that far.

The boy has short-clipped bright blond hair, spiked up with gel or sweat or something else in the front. His eyes are blue; his cheeks are jowly, especially when he smiles, which is often. This is a boy who likes to smile while he talks. Or shouts, rather. The girl is not so loud, but she's hardly retiring. She is talking as well; it's just that her voice does not carry as his does. Her long stringy brown hair falls down her back and across her face; it glances off her shoulders and upper arms. It looks like the top of her head has exploded, it or has been stirred a few times by a gardener with a rake and then left to do what it will in the wind.

The boy notices my gaze. He meets my eye. He says something to me in French. Not a taunt. Not quite. I can recognize the sound of a taunt in any language. But neither is it some

politely rendered question either. He's making a statement. With a smile on his face, no doubt, but a statement all the same. The girl, meanwhile, looks at me as if expecting I will want to reply.

I face front, keep walking. The sidewalk is yellowed and gritty and cracked, its best days, or even best centuries, well behind it. Much like the city itself. I have learned that nothing is white in Arles. Everything is tinged and faded; in a state of permanent decline: beyond or perhaps in spite of, reclamation. It feels like this city has been in decline from the second the Romans finished building it, thousands of years ago. From the start there was never a question of going back to glory time but only of surviving. And it has, somehow, even this shit time of 2013. The sidewalk slants downward for several more blocks before it meets the large intersection ahead. I keep walking. The boy speaks to me again, louder. The girl softly chuckles. It is the same thing he said before: word for word. I could continue to ignore him, but I'm not sure he'll let me. Better to cut this off quickly, to use the convenient phrase I know so well and have pulled out in this city on so many occasions. "Je ne comprends pas le Français."

I see the boy's eyes darken with confusion. The girl's face too turns troubled, although she does not seem stymied in the same way he does. They walk on. I walk on. They are young. Even when stymied they walk faster than I do. A few seconds more and they are right behind me. I can see the boy still turning over my response in his mind, how it rolled so easily off my tongue, how the answer and the manner are in complete contradiction. His head dips several important millimeters, and he stares at the sidewalk. Then I see the boy's head come up. He looks at me again. He has another idea. "Vous êtes Anglais?"

I know what he has just asked me, but I decide to stick to my original position. "Je ne comprends pas le Français."

“Allemagne?” the girl tries. “Australien?”

The boy laughs. “Australien!” he says to her. “Oui. Il est Crocodile Dundee!” He says this last bit in a mocking, husky voice.

The girl laughs. “Je déteste Crocodile Dundee.”

Forget about them, I tell myself. I study the sidewalk again. A few more blocks. As much as I don't feel like it, I pick up my pace. I hope to leave them behind. Then I hear an exclamation: sharp and acquisitive. I stop. I turn. The children have stopped. They are leering into a cardboard box stranded beside a trashcan. Not just looking into it but scrutinizing, as if it makes them wary. The boy leans his head toward the girl's and mutters something under his breath. I am about to go back and take a look, when the boy reaches into the box and pulls out a cell phone. It is black, a less than ordinary kind of cell phone, bordering on the chincy. The kind of phone that would have ranked as low-brow five years ago. The boy stares at it, then pushes a button with his index finger. He starts, eyes wide. He jabbars something to the girl. Apparently, the phone is on and working. Who leaves a working cell phone in a cardboard box on the side of the street? I move a step closer. I'm curious about this phone too. The boy holds it in both hands and begins rapid fire dialing with both thumbs. Then, with an expectant, open-mouthed expression he holds the machine to his ear.

His face clouds; his eyes narrow and grow testy. He turns to the girl, emits a short, dissatisfied grunt. She asks him something and he shakes his head. He shows her the screen; then he brings the phone to his ear again. The girl gets his attention. She motions her head my way, says a word to him. The boy's eyes come up. He speaks to me: “Comprenez-vous l'anglais?”

I advance a final step. I hold out my hand. He passes the phone to me. It feels warm, too warm. Dangerously warm for electronic machinery. Probably it has been on this street, and in that oven of a cardboard box, for hours. I hold it to my ear.

“Hello?” I hear. “Are you there?” A man’s voice.

“Hello,” I say.

“Hello? Hello? You’re there?”

“I’m here.”

“Ah, at last.”

“What do you want?” I say.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “but you rang me. What is it that you want?”

I’m picking up an accent. Possibly British, but then again not. Nearly British, but from somewhere else. Somewhere almost British. Somewhere else on those isles—or maybe much farther away.

“I didn’t call you.”

“Who did?”

“A boy.”

“A boy?” As if this were the most outrageous development possible. More unlikely than getting a call from a dragon or a koala bear or Ghengis Khan.

“Qu’a-t-il dit?” the boy asks. The girl too: “Dites-nous, s’il vous plaît.”

Apparently, I will have to utter my standard phrase again. I am about to, but the man on the phone starts talking.

“Is that French? Are you in Paris?”

“No.”

“Somewhere else?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

I hesitate.

“I am quite fond of France,” the man says, “please let me imagine where you are. Please tell me.”

“Normandy,” I say.

“Ah, Normandy,” he breathes. “Normandy in the summer.” Pause. I hear a fantasy picture playing through his mind. Then: “There’s a sweet little village I love in Ornes. It’s called Aubry-en-Exmes.”

I say nothing.

“I have not been there in so long. It was only the one time, years ago. But what a place.”

There is no point in responding to this.

“Have you been, by any chance, to Aubry-en-Exmes?”

“No,” I say.

“Go there at once,” he says, “for my sake. Won’t you? Well, for your sake too, of course. But definitely for my sake. Please.”

“Goodbye,” I say.

“Wait!” he shouts. “I know there is a reason for you calling me out of blue. There must be a reason.”

“They called you.”

“They? I thought you said it was a boy.”

“A boy and a girl.”

“What are their names?”

I glance at them. They are waiting with admirable patience for me to give them a report, to satisfy their need to understand. For the first time, I feel sorry for them.

“I don’t know who they are,” I say.

“Curious,” the man mumbles. “And who are you?”

“I don’t know who you are either.”

“Are you a Capuchin friar? I expect you’re a Capuchin. That’s why you’re calling me, isn’t it?”

I don’t know how to reply to that.

“No?” the man says. He sounds disappointed. “Most of my calls are from Capuchins.”

I say nothing.

“Or perhaps you are left-handed.”

“Why?”

“We get so many left-handers calling about what we’re doing.”

I say nothing.

“And in that case, I expect you’ll want to take the poll.”

I hesitate. “Yes,” I say.

“All right, if you’ll wait just a moment, I’ll pull it up on my screen.”

I wait.

“Right then. Here we go. Question one. Or perhaps, to you, I should say, *question*.” He pronounces the word as a Frenchman would.

I say nothing.

“Question one: Do you consider yourself truly ambidextrous, conventionally ambidextrous favoring left, conventionally ambidextrous favoring right, favoring left, favoring right, exclusively left, or exclusively right?”

I look again at the boy and girl. They are still waiting, but perhaps not so patiently. I give them a thumbs-up signal, and they burst into smiles.

“You’ll have to define those terms,” I say into the phone.

“Really. I wouldn’t think that nowadays they would be regarded as uniquely arcane, especially by a Capuchin. But what have you. *Truly ambidextrous* means that you use both hands equally well and equally often. You can and do perform almost any function just as well with either hand.”

“No,” I say.

“Right. Almost no one is like that.”

“Of course not.”

“Less than one percent. Although for some reason the percentage is higher among Capuchins.”

“Why?”

“Well, that’s one thing we’d like to find out now, wouldn’t we?”

I say nothing.

“*Conventionally ambidextrous* defines countless people. It means that you use both hands in your daily tasks, but that you use different hands for different functions. Almost exclusively, that is. For instance, you almost always manage a fork with your left hand but almost always shave with your right. Or you toss a ball with your right hand but use scissors with your left.

The ‘favoring’ part simply means that when you add up all these different functions you tend to use one hand more than the other. But not by much.”

“Maybe,” I say.

“Is that a yes?”

I hesitate.

“May I count that as a yes?”

“Yes.”

“Yes? *Oui?*”

“Yes.”

“Marvelous,” he says, deeply happy.

“*Exclusively left or right* means just what it says. You’re one of those poor souls for whom one of your two limbs is nothing more than indelicate, uncoordinated baggage, what you haul around with you but don’t ever use.”

“Oh.”

“But that doesn’t define you, right?”

I hesitate. Finally: “I guess not.”

“You guess not?”

“I said, I guess not.”

“I’m sorry but there should be no guessing about this at all. A person should very well know what hand they use. Besides, one can’t be both conventionally ambidextrous *and* exclusively left or right. They are opposites. You are either one or the other.”

I say nothing.

“The Capuchins, as we might expect, have only a small percentage of members who are exclusively left or right. But you probably knew that already.”

I say nothing.

“Wait,” he says, “I can’t remember. Did you actually say you are a Capuchin friar or not?”

“I did not say that.”

“So surprising,” he muses. “Because so many of our callers are Capuchins . . . Although I believe you are the first Frenchman I’ve spoken to for quite a while.”

I say nothing.

“So, to finish off, *favoring left or right* is also exactly what it sounds like. You use one hand for most things, perhaps as much as 75-80% of time. But your secondary hand is not exactly useless either. “

“Right.”

“This defines a great many people,” he says, “including Capuchins. Including Swedes. Including Americans. And, I would assume, Frenchmen. Although our data is not extensive enough on your country to draw any conclusions yet.”

I say nothing.

“Bolivia, you might be interested to know, is nearly hundred percent populated by favoring left or right people. No one knows why. Not yet!”

I glance again at the boy and girl. They are practically seething now, unable to contain their curiosity. The boy is moving up and down on his toes; his hands alight about his head, scratching his face, running over his clipped hair. The girl looks at me beseechingly and squeezes her own hands, as if she must go to the bathroom.

“Do you speak French?” I say into the phone.

“Moi?” the man says and then chuckles. “Why I only studied it for five years in primary school and then for four more in high school. Now, as you can probably tell from my pronunciation, that was quite some time ago! I’m a bit rusty, but yes I’ve been known to *savoir faire* a bit when the moon is full.”

I cover the phone with my hand. I speak to the children. “Cet homme, avec que je m'entretiens parle couramment le Français. Il sera en mesure de répondre à toutes vos questions.”

They smile, astonished, and immediately stand straighter. They stop fidgeting. I hand the phone to the boy, who takes it from me greedily. Then his smile disappears. His eyes have dropped. He is studying my midsection. I look down to see a rusty red tinge of blood against my shirt, just above where my belt secures my pants. I shake my head, a signal to him. But he keeps staring. “L’homme,” I repeat, pointing at the phone. “Il parle Français.” I turn. I won’t give them a second more of my time.

As I walk, I hear the boy behind me, speaking into the phone. “Monsieur, vous parlez Français? C’est vrai? . . . Qu’as-tu dit? . . . Ma main? . . . Droit. *Droit*. . . Capuchin? . . . Qu’est-ce que c’est?”

The sidewalk runs out in front of me, sloping downward. It will not be long before I reach the intersection and a traffic circle. I know that if I travel the circle counterclockwise and then follow a certain spoke leading away from it, I will arrive shortly at the train station. There, in the afternoon, one can catch a northbound TGV train. The kind that reaches Paris in as little as four hours. Will I take the train? Will I get off in Paris? I can decide that right now; I can declare it a plan. I can say what it is that I will do. Except I have learned that too often—no, every single time—any plan will, finally and inevitably, before it can be realized, shock you

with its naïveté. Its damnable and desperate impossibility.