

Chapter Two

Eric's little blue house was situated among the terraces rising from the valley, almost equidistant between three small villages. Each of the three, Solliés-Pont, Solliés-Ville, and Solliés-Toucas presented the charm and ambiance of Provence. However, shopping centers were sprouting in the valley and the influence of Toulon, eighteen kilometers away was reaching out. Eric fell in love with Solliés-Ville, the oldest of the three villages and his favorite. Solliés-Ville preserves the old character best, being the most inaccessible atop a small mountain. The little village commanded a breathtaking view up and down the Gapeau Valley, taking in Eric's house also. The location of the village is terribly impractical and was more so before automobiles. But the feeling of grandeur when looking out from that height perfectly justified the arduous climb. The steep ascent up the road which wound up the hill required Eric to pause every fifty yards to regain his breath. Each pause gave time to contemplate the valley, stare at the pattern of Solliés-Pont, and trace the Gapeau River east to Solliés-Toucas. Standing along the precipice Eric felt the urge to fling himself out into space and soar over the valley with the birds. This became the basis of his first poem in his new locale. He soared over the valley in his poem, swooping down on Solliés-Pont, circling the square church tower, then sailing up on a breeze and curving round the valley toward Solliés-Toucas. The birds called and beckoned to him, so he joined them flying higher and higher up the valley.

The isolation of Solliés-Ville appealed to Eric. The old character of the village justified the climb. All the hilly, twisting, turning streets

presented a remarkable composition. Light streaked across a narrow street from a perpendicular alley too narrow to notice. Flower pots of rich colors oozed from the walls of old houses. The colors of the shutters perfectly complimented the fading shades of the plaster walls. A painter could only struggle to match the subtle hues of gray, soft blues, pinks and musty gold of the old houses. The moment of observation is a work of art in itself, requiring patience to simply stand there and soak it all in. Each day the picture is slightly altered by the air and the rain which gives a different sharpness and intensity to the colors. Perhaps a random spotted cat stealthily creeps along the top of a wall animating the whole scene. From unidentifiable windows, the clatter of knives and forks at mid-day added music to the scene. The old residents called out to friends or sat on benches hoarsely chatting away the day. The high pitched squeals and shouting of young children gave the town life and vibrancy, running and playing, or simply sitting alone singing to themselves. Eric's solitary figure wandered by, lost in a dream world like them. Mothers called out to the children to come to dinner, or do their chores, or to find out where they were. But no one called out Eric's name. He was completely free with no ties or obligations. Perhaps this freedom was just a big empty hole. Just once he longed to hear his name called out to come home. No, he was not attached to anyone, like one of society's eunuchs. Was suffering and loneliness part of the territory? He lived in a different world, not in some crummy little house with bills to pay, cranky neighbors and screaming kids. The poet's kingdom is the open air where he sits dreaming up beautiful images while watching huge clouds silently slide overhead like great ocean liners viewed from under the sea.

Eric wrote poems in each of the little parks and plazas around the village. He marked his territory in this way, like a dog lifting his leg. He scented out where other artists had gone before him. The one café in the village plaza made a central headquarters for the writer. Long ago Eric learned the art of lingering over a single cup of coffee. Buying a cup of coffee in France is like renting a seat in the café for the day; a waiter will never disturb you or expect you to order more or move on. Letters

poured from Eric at the café. Life centers around the central plaza and the café in a small village. Eric jammed his letters full of all the little incidents around him. The teenagers hung about the plaza with nothing to do but make their first attempts at seduction. Eric wished he was in on all that cheek pecking with the young girls. Some of the boys sat nonchalantly on their motorbikes, an essential status symbol. The woman pushing the baby carriage across the plaza indicated the chain of events. The older women have to stop her and see how the young fellow looks today, even if they just saw him yesterday. Yes, he certainly does take after his father. Farther along life's path sat the old men on the benches. They read their newspapers or dozed, jostled out of their reveries by one of the young boys revving up his motorbike. This humble life entered the envelopes which were sent across the ocean to entertain Eric's friends. Eric didn't join in himself. His poor French inhibited him and his conversations were limited to asking for coffee or where to find the toilet.

Eric longed to pour his soul out to someone and finally he did to the local writer, Jean Aicard. He found the village celebrity in the little park near the church at the summit of the village. Set into the stone wall of this little park with a magnificent view sat a bust of Jean Aicard who had died sixty years earlier. Eric loved the idea of a park being dedicated to a writer. The French take pride in their artists by naming streets and raising memorials to them, not just politicians and generals like other countries. Eric immediately claimed the park as his place of worship, not the church near at hand. Eric approached the bust with a regard for his new patron saint. Gazing at the benevolent face of the French poet and writer, Eric felt accepted and one with Jean Aicard, even though he had yet to read a word of his works.

"Bonjour monsieur," Eric politely said in a normal speaking voice. "Comment –allez vous?"

Figuring language could be no problem in the netherworld, Eric switched into English.

"Well, you sure picked a pretty little village here for writing. Let's see, your plaque says writer and poet. And you died when you were fifty-

three. Too bad, that's not so old. You must have hated to leave your little corner of the world here. Did you sit here Jean, in this spot, and write poetry? You must have. I'm sure this view has always been stunning and what poet could resist such an inspirational location? Too bad you're not here now; I'd offer you a cigarette and we could sit and talk literature. I wonder what your writing is like? Something good had to come out of such a wonderful village. And somebody must have liked them or you wouldn't be sitting up there right now looking down on me."

Eric looked around a bit self-consciously. There was no one in sight. He felt embarrassed talking aloud to a statue, but it felt good so he continued.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Jean. My name is Eric. I'm a poet too or trying to be one. Oh what the hell; I write therefore I am. N'est-ce pas? Sure, what does publishing have to do with it? I've written poems in the dust on the back of dirty trucks. But you wouldn't know about that. How about writing poems on the greasy table tops of cafes. Ever do that? There must have been a café here in your time too. And you probably drank absinthe too. Don't deny it; it's in your eyes. Damn, I wish they still served that stuff in France. I've got a few brain cells to spare.

Were you ever lonely here, perched atop your rock? Or were you a hen-pecked husband? No, that's not right, is it? Since we're brother poets I'll tell you what's bothering me. I'm lonely as hell. As a matter of fact my guts are being eaten out by the maggots of loneliness. Great line, huh? I used that in a poem. Writing does help externalize the pain, but it doesn't change reality any. When you set down your pen you're still sitting there all alone. An artist is more than a writing machine. In other words, I need to get laid. Really. I'm getting pretty damn desperate for a woman. The old lady at the boulangerie is starting to look good. Don't tell me you're gay; not that it matters. But if we're to be copains, we want to enjoy talking about the same things, and les femmes are the most enjoyable topic of all. Say, you know any good looking women who hang around this park by any chance? Some nice sexy, literary

groupies? C'mon, you can share a little. You're not in any position to do anything about it anyway.

I'm also trying to write a novel right now. I think it's a hell of a lot harder than writing poetry, don't you? A poem just bursts out, but a novel is such a long sustained effort. I'm having a hard time maintaining a constant point of view. It's about a woman I had an affair with and I keep getting re-involved as I write. I mean it's difficult to turn someone into art with a consistent image when you're not even sure how you feel about them in real life. I could use an impartial reader to give me some advice. Would you be willing to put up with some drivel if I bring some pages up to read? I'll make you a deal. I promise to read some of your works in exchange for your patience with me. Writers need contact with each other, even in the countryside. What do you think? Maybe we've got the nest egg of a little artist's colony."

Eric continued to stare at the bust a few moments interpreting a positive response in the impassive stone face. He walked over to the bench nearby and sat down looking out on the valley with his back to the poet. His skin crawled from taking a conversation with the dead so seriously. He looked over his shoulder at the bust and shuddered because he really did feel some sort of contact. "Man, I'm going nuts," he told himself. He straightened around and propped his feet up on the stone ledge. His gaze fixed on the vines crawling along the wall. He noticed the long thorns and an idea occurred to him. It was ridiculous, but once thought of, he couldn't resist executing the notion. He leaned forward, gripped the vine, and jabbed his index finger with a thorn. A little drop of blood came, and he squeezed his finger to increase the flow. He walked back over to the bust.

"Brother poets, and now we're blood brothers, okay?"

He hesitated, not knowing where to make the contact. Fearful someone might arrive to disrupt the scene, he hastily dabbed a blotch on Jean Aicard's lips.

"God, you are a pagan," Eric nervously laughed to himself, seeing the garish red smear on the lips. He tried to tone it down by rubbing the spot with his other hand, but only succeeded in giving the lips an over

all pinkish tone. The bust looked like it was wearing lipstick, a nice bizarre theatrical touch. Eric beat a hasty retreat, but was pleased with the little ritual nonetheless.