the goat
in the tree
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LORNE ELLIOTT

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I didn’t realize I was hungry till I smelled cooking from across the street. Through the open gate of the ryad I could see a table crowded with brochettes of mutton and baskets of sliced bread. There were also plates of black olives, sliced tomatoes, honey-soaked phylo pastry for dessert and glasses of white wine to wash everything down. It was as good a place as any to get back into the game.

Inside the courtyard, guests in formal wear stood around a fountain in small groups, but between them and me two men in tuxedos stood outside the gate, one smoking a cigarette, one with his foot on the raised threshold of the door. The gatekeepers.

“Max,” I introduced myself. “Sorry I’m late. I was just across town buying a silk scarf for my daughter.” There was no scarf, I didn’t have a daughter, and my name isn’t Max.

“That’s fine,” said the one with the cigarette.

“So. Where is she?

“Portia?”

“Who else?” And then to soften that I added: “I must look like a bum.” And smiled.

“Not at all,” he said, which was promising.

“I was painting,” I explained, though I didn’t know what this meant yet. I’ve always found the best way to fill your head with ideas is to surprise yourself.

“What medium are you using?” said his friend.

“Seashells,” I said without hesitation.
“Ah! That blue.”

“Yes. A bit of a cliché now, of course, but the tourists seem to like it.” As long as I remember I could always do this. Accept what they said, see the world they presented, and add to it like I was from that world too.

The other man was less interested in art, and he had looked away. “There’s Portia there,” he said. So I nodded a see-you-later and stepped over the threshold into the courtyard. It was like stepping from one country into another. Outside was Morocco, this was France.

Beside the food table a lady of a certain age stood like a hawk in a tree, surveying her party, temporarily alone.

“Portia!” I said, all breezy familiarity.

Her face turned, beaming a sudden neutral smile. She didn’t have a clue who I was (how could she?) and I saw a moment of panic when she thought that she should know me. “Oh,” she said. “It’s you! Hello!” And I was in.

“I wish I’d brought something,” I said, “but since Dahlia went away ...” And I left it hanging, then snapped out of it. “Anyhow, nice ryad you have here. Absolutely prime.”

“Thank you, and don’t worry. Nobody brought gifts. It’s not that type of party. How is Dahlia?”

I thought of an interesting way to start the story: “Well, I haven’t heard, of course ...” But she didn’t want to hear any more.

“No, of course not. And you probably haven’t been eating properly, am I right?”

“Thank you, Portia. I am a tad peckish.”

“Right over there. Don’t be shy.” So although my story had failed, my desired ends were achieved.

Whoever braised those brochettes really knew what they were doing. It was the marinade. Wine, herbes de Provence, cumin. I was tempted, but it wouldn’t do to just plunge in and stuff them all back at once. What was needed was the delicate touch. Nibble the meat off the first skewer. Heaven. A quick glance around, wolf the rest and get another brochette into my paw. Nibble nibble. Now a cough. Look around as though for something to wet the throat. What’s this? Wine. Just what was called for.

Taste first, don’t swill. A bit young, but the real thing. Vouvray. And with that first taste, I remembered the train out from Gare d’Austerlitz to Amboise, a trip with a friend of my father to fish for gardon just north of there. I remembered the soil the colour of old ivory, and the flint in the fords that hurt your bare feet when you waded across, the maisons troglodytes on the limestone escarpments, the hot uplands, the poplar in the valleys. Independent of everything else going on in my head, a setting for a story started to gather.

A man appeared at my side. “Well, this is nice,” he said, not looking at me.

“Yes. Portia does it up in style, doesn’t she?”

“She certainly does.”

“How did you meet her?” I asked, which presupposed that I was legitimate.

“Nephew. You?”

“She’s a fan.”

“Performer?”

“All the world is a stage, of course, but no. Artist. Seashells.” The wine and food were working. Creativity flourished. “Excellent food, incidentally. These brochettes? Goat?”

“Mutton,” he corrected, which I knew already, but he was watching me eat closely, studying, and what harm would it do if I gave him the opportunity to air this knowledge? “I wish I wasn’t dieting,” he said, which explained
the look he was giving the food. Maybe a drinking problem he was fighting, too. “Try the salad,” he added, to enjoy it vicariously.

“I’d better polish this off first,” I said. “I wouldn’t want to follow the salad with the wine.” And I downed what remained in the glass. As a favour to him, you understand.

“All these rules,” he said. “For instance, why not white wine with meat? Where did that prejudice come from, anyway?”

I said: “Louis the 14th always had white wine with his.” Which may well have been true for all I knew.

“Assuming he knew anything about food,” he said.

“Quite. He certainly had access to a lot, and a lot of different kinds, but that doesn’t necessarily make you an expert. ‘A full larder will only confuse the ... decision making.’” But I had broken the rhythm, scrambled for a word. “It’s better in the original,” I covered, as though I’d been translating. He smiled and I think was about to ask from what language, but I cut him off. “Max.” I introduced myself.

“I know.”

So he’d been talking with people. It was even possible that he’d been sent over to find out more about me. I wiped my fingers on a napkin and held out my hand: “I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure.”

“Lars,” he said. No last name either, until he got mine. The wealthy. Their guard is up all the time. And why not? There are a lot of con men out there.

“The point is,” I continued, “it’s like they told us in high school, all about the ability to make choices. Take my cousin: four degrees from four different universities. Very book-smart.”

“Couldn’t make his mind up?” he asked and I felt a nibble on the line.

“Not for the longest time. Then, when he was fifty years old, he dropped it all and took up welding.”

“What? Sculpture?”

“No, that’s the thing. Shop work. Nine to five, five days a week. And Fridays he goes to the Café de La Gare, takes a table outside with his mates, drinks beer and sings off-key. He’s happy.” A heart-warming tale. Nostalgia for the mud. When the top floors are taken, check out the service rooms.

A gleam glowed in his eye and the plank that kept his shoulders rigid relaxed. He raised his eyebrows in an accepting flash. Happiness, the only currency. Then it was his turn to offer something, but nothing was there, and in that moment of panic I saw the family resemblance to Portia.

“A friend of mine from Aquitaine,” I suggested. “He went to live with the gypsies. His family were very pleased.”

“Tolstoy’s brother,” he said, for his pump had just needed some priming. He was one of those people who needed a springboard into a story, either another book, film, or play, to get his imagination up and running. A vicarious life. But he had a good audience in me. I had to draw him out. The salad really was excellent. Day old tomatoes in olive oil. A sprinkle of parsley. I had not run into this dressing before either. Olive oil, and ... fennel, that was it. Numbed the edges of my tongue slightly. Light, fresh and enhancing.

So I listened intently. He started in academic mode, rocking on his toes, straightening his body into podium stance. “Gregor Tolstoy,” he said. “Lived with a Gypsy girl in the slums of St Petersburg. There is a theory that all Tolstoy’s religious writings, his feelings for the poor, were an attempt to at least attain a sympathy for the people his brother attained just by living like them.”
“More to it than that, of course.” As I know he knew, I implied. “But how interesting. Certainly one of the wellsprings which contributed to the flood.”

“Yes. And you’re right. It’s never as simple as that.”

He was a rich kid who had made himself an expert in something, and now he needed an audience for all the books he’d read and showed he’d weathered. But he had no vocation, poor bastard. (Remember, I told myself. Sympathy is everything. Contempt is death.) Besides, I liked him. And I liked him more as he talked on, came by way of Tolstoy’s brother, through hints and allusions at first, and then more explicitly, to his own life. And finally, he was a friend. Well, you can’t have too many of them.

But some humour was called for. “Then there’s René Montjoie,” I said, smiling.

“Who?”

“You never heard? The Marxist?”

“No.”

“A while ago now ...,” I said, which is one way of saying: ‘Once upon a time’. “He was working with the Left. Became disenchanted with the politics, not leftism, you understand, but office politics. So he went directly to the workers. Hit the farms for the grape harvest. Solidarity with the field hands. Had all the goodwill in the world, but none of the skill. Bought himself a 2CV Camionnette, a heap of junk. The compression was so bad he had to push it up hills. No handle on the door, so when he grabbed the window frame to pull the door shut, the hinged window would fall closed, smacking his knuckles.” I did a quick mime to illustrate while I said it, and was rewarded with a laugh. Heads turned from other conversations around the courtyard, the sound of laughter starting to charge the magnet. “But he didn’t let that stop him. Part of the experience. No problem. Friend of a cousin had a vineyard. He wanted to re-order society so that all people had access to all things, but he still had to use family ties to get to work in a vineyard. An imperfect world. He’d get that changed when the new dawn broke.”

“So, why couldn’t he?” said somebody who’d joined us. It was a foregone conclusion that he couldn’t, my tone of voice suggested: Life is bigger than any individual’s conception of it. But it was not to be a tragedy, not this story. The Mock Grandiose was what was called for here, setting up for a fall.

“It wasn’t so much a ‘cooperative’ as it was an ‘antagonistic’,” I said. “There were the people who picked the grapes and there were the people who took the grapes to the presses. There were the people who pressed the wine and the people who drew the wine into vats, where the yeast started to work. Thanks to René, everybody that year saw where they were on the social ladder of the winemaking operation, and so of course wanted a higher rung. They started to grumble. Held meetings, elected a shop steward. Voted for a strike.”

I was drawing a crowd, so I started to play bigger, casting the net wider. “They were putting it to the owners, and there was nothing the owners could do.”

Danger of politics now, so some fantasy was necessary. I dropped my voice, which had the effect of drawing those who were listening closer.

“The confrontation was at the bernache, the first tasting. With the work slowdowns and disruptions, it hadn’t been a good year. What should have been a celebration was stressful and suspicious. Management were milling uneasily with the workers, and the priest who blessed the harvest was making no headway trying to
reconcile anybody. René had his glass filled by the head vintner, raised it to his lips, took the first sip and ... took it away from his lips and looked at it. He was puzzled. He took another small sip. What was wrong? A murmur rose in the crowd. He handed his glass to the head vintner, who took a sip. ‘No,’ he said, and sipped again and frowned, then cast the rest of the wine in the glass onto the ground.”

“Bad?” said Lars.

“It was still only grape juice,” I said. “They called in a viticulturist, who tasted and discussed and advanced a theory. Next came an expert in oenology from the university who took from the back of his car a microscope, smeared some of the wine onto a glass plate and put it under the lens. He looked in, adjusted the focus, invited the priest who looked in and who started back, disbelieving. The Head Vintner was next with the same reaction, and then the owner, who just kept looking, amazed ...”

I paused, dead serious.

“What did they see?” said someone in my audience.

I looked up. “Thousands of yeast cells picketing.” My audience relaxed and smiled. “One yeast-cell, at the head of the yeasts, addressed the crowd of yeasts in front of him. ‘You eat the sugar and excrete alcohol, but what do you get out of it?’ the head yeast cell demanded.

“And all the other yeast cells chanted: ‘Nothing!’

“And what are we going to do?’

‘Nothing!’

‘Louder!’

‘Nothing!’

‘And under the great banner of ‘Nothing’ they went on strike. The yeast refused to eat the sugar, the grape juice never changed into alcohol and the wine was never made. And so the barrels were emptied, their contents thrown out on the fields where it fertilized for next year the beautiful vineyards of the Vouvray region.”

Partly as a toast, I held my glass so it caught the sun, and downed the rest of the wine. Thank you. I couldn’t have done it without you. And from the crowd that had gathered there was a smattering of applause.

They started to break up. Lars tapped his glass on mine. “Chin chin,” he said.

“At least the yeast in this wine never went on strike,” I said and saw that somebody else had come close: Portia, who was entranced.

“Where was that story from?” she asked.

“What story?” I said. “Gospel truth, every word.”

“Did you create it?”

But it does no good to interrogate the Muse, so I had to dodge. “Assembled it,” I said.

“Just now?”

“Well you know, the more you tell something, the better it gets.” I found myself thinking that the wealthy always want to know how to get to the source, so they can own it. But what the hell do I really know about the wealthy? They were nice people here. They couldn’t help what they were born into. And the food and drink were excellent. And free, or at least for the cost of a story.

I did have to shake her loose now though. “No,” I said. “I heard it last time I was in France.”

I dropped in status, but I had also slipped through her net. I was not as interesting as she had thought. Good.

We talked of other things. Our group broke up. I mingled. I told some other stories to other people.

I went over into the shade and leant against the wall to watch the shadows rise up the other side of the courtyard. I found myself beside an opening in the outer wall
like a window, screened over with wood lattice through which I could hear on the street one of the caterers from the party, on a break, talking with a friend. “... Bus tour from Marrakech,” I overheard his friend say.

“How are they?” said the caterer.

“They’re a bus tour,” said the first with a sigh.

And the caterer said: “Ah,” understanding. “Who are you with now?”

“Mogador. Two more hours and we start back. You wouldn’t like to take them, would you?”

“No. I have to be here tomorrow.”

“You see, there’s a gazelle ...” Meaning a girl.

Which was all very interesting. Food is one thing, but travel, in many ways, is more difficult. So I moved along my side of the wall and when I got to the gate I ducked out of the ryad, then took the first alley away from where the two friends were, into the souk. Once in, I took every left, walked along a dogleg street then left again, passed one alley further and found myself back on the main boulevard. I turned toward the gate again and almost bumped into the two friends, still standing there talking.

“Tour guide?” I asked.

“Yes. We’ll be leaving in an hour,” he said, thinking I was one of his customers.

“Not tonight,” I said and then introduced myself. “I’m Eric Martin.” He looked at me, waiting. “You’re with Mogador Bus Tours, right?”

“Yes. Aziz,” he introduced himself.

“Well, you won’t be leaving tonight. Motor broke down.”

“Motor?”


“But ... That’s ... too bad ...” meaning that it was excellent. His friend smiled. “They’re putting them up somewhere?” he said, feigning concern for his charges.

“Can’t say. I’m sure they will. Where are they now?”

“It’s their free hour. They’ll be by the tourism board after five o’clock.”

“Well, they’re my worry now. You’re off duty. You have a place for tonight?”

“Yes,” he said, and he smiled again.

“Tomorrow at the tourist board, then. Say eleven?”

“I’ll be there.”

I probably should have gone back to the party and said goodbye to everybody, but I didn’t want to push my luck. I started down the boulevard, past blue doors under the slanting sun. Shops on every corner, and in the alleys and side-streets craft stalls and bad plaster falling in patches off the walls. I walked toward the Place Moulay El Hassan, past those five great thuya trees. Outside the City Gates, a breeze from the ocean was blowing over the walls. Gulls over the port squeaked and squealed. I turned south, towards the Sqala du Port where the small blue boats are moored together, bobbing like blue seeds in an eddy. Essaouira. And now it was time to leave.
The bus was parked by a restaurant overlooking the beach, near where they build those big wooden boats. Around the bus there was a small crowd, and when I leant through the door I could see two or three passengers already seated. “Sayeed?” I asked the driver. I had read his name-tag. “Yes?” “I’ll be guiding them in this time. Aziz won’t be making it.” “Really?” “Yes. They phoned me from Marrakech. This is Mogador Tours, isn’t it?” I leant back and looked at the side of the bus to check. He was about to ask some more questions, I think, or worse, phone in to check up on me, so I kept talking: “Aziz was supposed to meet a girl.” He nodded knowingly. “He was waiting out on the street, and a donkey cart ran over his foot.” “No!” “Yes. Broke it.” He looked concerned. “Is he all right?” “Fine. Just his small toe. But the girl he was waiting for saw the whole thing.” “No!” “Yes. He was cursing, limping around on the street. It somewhat damaged the romantic image he was trying to create. She had to take him to the hospital.”
Now he laughed out loud. “Aziz!” he said. He could see it. Everything was all right.


I came on board and sat in the seat right behind him. I looked out the window at the sea and, as the departure time approached, the customers gathered and climbed on board in groups. First was a husband and wife, sixty years old, down from somewhere I wouldn’t know until I heard them speak. Their children had all grown up now, the last one had just left for college. This was the first vacation alone since their honeymoon. They’d always wanted to come to Morocco.

Next came a woman who sat down and tried to figure out a digital camera, clicking a screen, tilting up her glasses, consulting a small manual, clicking again, putting it down in frustration, and leaning her back against the window and looking out, just remembering what she saw rather than trying to record it, as peace settled over her. A schoolteacher.

Then a man with a wife, a business woman who was making a list of figures in a small book, her expenses. A doctor, lawyer or accountant. Choose one, and once you’ve chosen, stick with it. This was all guesswork, of course, but more important than getting the facts was to build up a story around each, making them real, if only for myself. As they came on board and took their seats I was struck by the number of people in the world and the fewness of the types, though possibly that is not the human race’s limitation, but mine.

Then I saw somebody striding angrily across the plaza toward us with a girl behind who was trying to get him to calm down. Trouble. She was dressed in clothes which tried not to be just presentable but sexy for him. He was dressed to do the same for her, but with less success. Both were dishevelled from their exertions. They weren’t married. The girl was younger, and trying to make it work. The guy? Maybe he wasn’t like this all the time, although it’s no good saying that. You had to work with what you have.

I tried to think how this story would play itself out, the better to keep future events in control. I suppose that’s how prophets work. I watched them approach and warned myself not to react to their anger.

He saw me through the window and strode towards the door, climbed onto the bus and addressed me directly.

“I would like to register a complaint,” he said. “Are you who I talk to about that?”

There was something strange about his skin: It was orange. The result, perhaps, of having something go wrong when using instant tanning cream. It was distracting.

“I can certainly bring any issues you may have to the attention of the management of Mogador Tours,” I said. “You don’t deal with them yourself?”

“Well, of course it depends . . .”

“Covering your own ass, then,” he said with a snort.

“What is the complaint exactly, sir?” It was important to use that “sir,” and not sarcastically. I was only here to be of service.

“It’s really all right . . .” said the girl.

“No, it isn’t,” he said testily, dealing here with the important business of keeping the help in line. But I must not get in any sort of fight with him.

“Really,” said the girl. “It was my bracelet.”

“I can handle it.”

She hadn’t said he couldn’t handle it. She said that it was all right. But he had ignored that, better to allow him
to act like the implication had been insulting. *Once upon a
time there was a man who was manipulative, temperamental,
spoiled, and angry.* This had the makings of a decent
Good-and-Evil story, but that view of things can hurt
how you approach problems in the real world. Remember
sympathy, I thought. *But he was all these things for a
reason.* When somebody is trying to humiliate somebody, it is
always because they themselves have been humiliated.

“Her bracelet was stolen,” he said.

“Or I lost it,” she said.

“Stolen. I’ve got this, Hélène.”

She sighed and stood there, looking away, putting up
with it.

“Did you witness the alleged theft?” I said, like I was
taking the proper steps.

“It’s not ‘alleged’. I’m *telling* you.”

“Did you witness the theft?” I said, graciously ac-
cepting his description of the event.

“No.”

So it was alleged, then, wasn’t it? but “Ah,” was all I
said, sympathy for her loss even though there was only
so much I could do.

“Look,” said the orange-faced man. “It was on her
wrist when we were sitting at one of those fish restau-
rants by the seawall.”

“Not while you were actually on the bus then?”

“No, but the tour advertises that all our needs will be
met. I don’t consider whether or not we are on the actual
property of the company to be a criterion for fulfilling
this contract.” He had rehearsed his legal position.

“We are naturally interested in trying to help. Now,
if you could perhaps tell us when you first noticed it mis-
sing.”

“Like I said. At the restaurant. If that’s what you call it.”

Yes, I thought. We’re also responsible for building and
maintaining restaurants which conform to the stan-
dards of our most discriminating clients, and as an added
service we will also make sure that the wind isn’t too
strong on the beach or that the seagulls don’t cry off-key.

“Did you register a complaint with the manager of the
restaurant?”

“You mean the guy who was cooking? I don’t think
there was a manager.”

“And you were, what? Eating and you noticed it
gone?”

“Yes.”

“But ... I have to be clear about this, sir. You didn’t
actually see any theft?”

“No, but it stands to reason. It was obviously a pick-
pocket. Now, what are you planning to do about it?”

“We *could* alert the police ...”

“Yes?”

“... But we have found in the past that complaints of
this manner are met with less than satisfactory results.
Have you alerted the police?”

“No. Since we are tourists in this country and you as
tour guide are presumably more in touch with the cus-
toms and language of the place, I thought that the least
you could do would be accept responsibility to help.”

“Happy to do so. You don’t actually know that it was
a theft, though.”

“Are you accusing me of lying?” There it was again.

“No at all. Simply trying to get straight what hap-
pened.”

He sighed heavily like I was an incredibly thick-head-
ed student, and this was his hundredth time going
through it.

“I’m *telling* you what happened.”
“That you were sitting at a tuna restaurant, and found it missing?”

“That we were sitting at a restaurant and that it was stolen.”

“But you didn’t see it stolen.”

“No. Obviously. If I’d seen it, it wouldn’t have been stolen then. I would have stopped the thief.”

With a karate chop to the neck, perhaps.

The fact that I was not who I said I was allowed me to be emotionally detached. It’s one of the advantages of doing what I do. One of the reasons, I suppose, why I do it. If I’m too close, if there’s too much at stake, I get confused and angry like everybody else.

I pursed my lips and said: “The only thing I can think of doing is to file a report when we get to Marrakech.” Although that, I considered, might create problems. If he took me into the office as soon as we arrived, it could become complicated. I might have to get off at the rest stop before, if there was one, or escape as soon as I got off the bus in Marrakech.

He said: “Oh, sure.” Like this is what he had come to expect. But he led his girl away and took a seat. On a hunch I walked down the aisle. And yes, I saw something under a seat in back. I approached, leant down, picked it up and walked back up the aisle.

“You were in a different seat coming out?” I asked.

“Oh, what?” said the orange-faced man. “We have to stay in the same seats? Is that it? I mean, My God, the bus is half empty.”

“No sir, I’m simply asking.”

“Why?” He was making a fuss. The other tourists were starting to raise their eyebrows.

“This was on the floor back there,” I said, and I held the bracelet out.

“Oh! You found it!” said the girl.

I gave it to her. “You must’ve left it behind. Happens all the time.”

“Well. Thank you. You see? I told you it wasn’t stolen,” she said.

He didn’t say anything, but he was offended. He had been made a fool of, and would be my enemy for life.

I walked to my seat, sat down and waited as the bus filled up. There would be about thirty of them, past the critical mass where a group of people become an audience. A captive audience, too, tired and open. Someone once told me that the Celtic word for “story” means literally “mile-shortener.” I was just the man for it.

“All right,” I said for my opening, “is everybody here? By which I mean, is there anybody you notice who is missing from when you rode out here this morning?” I waited. They looked around. “Sorry,” I said in an aside to Sayeed. “I should have been given a list.” He leant around and checked himself.

“That’s it,” he said, turned back, and closed the door. He started the bus, pulled out with a hiss, and drove out onto the road that ran along the beach away from Essaouira. I felt that old thrill I always get whenever I start a journey.

I stood up in the aisle holding onto the back of the two front seats, changing my weight with the sway of the bus, like the surfers on the waves we were passing.

“My name is Charles LeCastre, and I’ll be your guide back to Marrakech. We hope you enjoyed your stay in Essaouira, formerly ‘Mogador,’ Phoenician colony, pirate port of the Barbary Coast, then a Portuguese, then a French Protectorate.” They looked at me like: “What is this about?” And if I didn’t come up with something quick I would lose them, which wouldn’t be fatal because
Lorne Elliott is perhaps best known as the host for ten years of CBC Radio’s *Madly Off In All Directions* and is a musician, comedian, playwright and novelist. He has written and performed in numerous plays and shows in various media. His latest musical play, *Jamie Rowsell Lives*, won the 2012 Playwrights Guild of Canada Award for Best Musical. He has had a novella, *The Fixer-Upper* and a novel, *Beach Reading*, previously published. Visit his website at www.lorne-elliott.com.
Bill Richardson, writer and broadcaster:

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Terry Fallis, author of The Best Laid Plans and Up and Down:

In Beach Reading, Lorne Elliott masterfully creates a wacky and wonderful world beyond the red sand of Price Edward Island’s travel ads. By turns, hilarious and melancholy, but mostly hilarious, Elliott’s sure hands will keep the pages turning as his memorable rogues and rebels worm their way right into your heart. This is storytelling at its finest.
Patrick Ledwell, writer and comedian:

Elliott is this country’s Mark Twain. *Beach Reading* is schooled in the same storytelling tradition, where a young narrator strings together beautiful incongruities, in a wandering way. But what begins as picaresque ambling soon coalesces into an artful path, and the open-throated laughter makes a straight route to your heart.