

A VANTAGE POINT ON SOFT CRUEL SNOW

I first met Frederic at the Officina Turismo in the little town of Courmayeur in Italy. I had just arrived from Paris after packing a load of winter gear. The day was getting late, and the shadow of Mont Blanc was descending upon the large parking lot that lingered before the terraced villa of Courmayeur. The air was cold, and I was glad to be wearing snow boots.

I entered the officina and shucked off my backpack. Several Italians lounged at the counter, and they filled the room with chatter. I waited, glancing through the brochures that lined the front window display. "COURMAYEUR: The Aosta Valley" read one of the pamphlets. I picked it up.

"Courmayeur, Mont Blanc, a small town for great holidays. A thousand ways of living a fairytale." Scattered throughout the brochure were pictures of mountains and lifts, helicopters flying with skiers carving figure eights in the powder snow below.

"Those who ski at Courmayeur feel special emotions," the pamphlet contended, "emotions that are profoundly different in their nature and intensity, but undeniably unforgettable."

I flipped to the next page. A one-hundred-eighty-degree photo of the surrounding range filled both pages. White-capped monster mountains interlinked themselves to form a wall of earth and snow. The village of Courmayeur looked like a crumb on the bottom of an ice cream sundae.

"You can tackle the spectacular Tula-Pavillion downhill run: from the glaciers of Mont Blanc down to the meadows of Val Ferret. And then there is the famous "Traversatta," which leads from Punta Helbronner, site of the highest border in Europe, to Chamonix, France. It is recognized as the eighth wonder of the world."

"May I help you, sir?"

I turned around. At the counter, a young man, my age, in sport coat and tie, waited in silence for me to reply. He seemed a little overdressed for the mountains.

"My name is Frederic. How are you today?"

"You can actually ski these monsters?"

He laughed. "Yes, you may. But I think it best to find you a room first."

I picked up my pack and carried it to the counter. He produced a list of hotel names with their respective prices. I skimmed down the sheet. Rooms started at one-hundred-thousand lira, which was around eighty dollars.

"Do you have any Pensions?"

He took a deep breath and lowered his eyebrows. "No, I am very sorry, but this is a resort village and you are compelled to pay a high price for accommodations."

"How about a room in a home, something like that."

"A camera?"

"Yes," I replied, "a camera."

"Well..." He said slowly, as if he were breaking the rules. "There is a family up the mountain who will sometimes house students. You are a student are you not?"

"Sure." I lied.

"Excuse me." He went to the phone. Italian sounding a little strange, he cupped his hand over the phone. "She said ten thousand lira, but I think she would lower her rate to six thousand."

After securing a deal for seven thousand--which included dinner--he offered to drive me there.

The roads seemed very narrow as we sped through the village streets in his Alfa Romeo.

"So, Clifford, do you plan to ski during your stay in Courmayeur?"

"Yes," I replied, "that's why I'm here."

He downshifted and threw the car around a hairpin curve, pasting my head against the seatrest.

"Please excuse me for being im...polite, but how do you plan to ski without anything?"

"Well," I replied, "I figured I'd deal with that when it arises."

He laughed again and looked over. "Are all Americans this way? I can hardly believe you just walked onto the train in Paris without planning what you were going to do. What would you do if you did not find a camera."

I thought about it. "Probably get back on the train and head down to Spain."

The remark stumped him. He made no reply.

"So, Frederic, you are not Italian, are you." I said

"No. Very perceptive. I am Swiss."

"So why are you here?"

We flew around another turn.

"I am studying foreign diplomacy, and I wish to practice more of my Italian to gain complete fluency of the language. Then, I shall return to Geneva and work for the United Nations."

"Well." I commented.

He skidded to a halt in a restaurant parking lot.

"We have arrived." He said.

I groped out from the sports car and looked up. "Brasserie Entreves" read the sign that hanged over the doorway. It was actually a chalet nestled within a group of houses built against the snow-covered hillside. We made our way to the restaurant's entranceway. Inside, it was a warm place, smelling of fondue cheese and red wine. The tables were long, surrounded by wood chairs. Several casks were built into the wall, and shelves of mugs and glasses filled the room.

Frederic said something in Italian, and soon a short, frizzy-haired woman appeared. I almost laughed at her elfish-like appearance. She eyed me with a comical scrutiny then led us outside, around the corner to a detached building; we passed a bathroom, and she waved her hand at it, continuing her Italian litany. We entered a room at the hallway's end.

There was a wood burning stove in the corner, two beds, a small dresser and nightstand. I walked over to the window and pulled the curtains back. A blast of warm alpine sunlight came into the room. In the distance, thrusting out from the slate rooftops hung Mont Blanc.

"Well, what do you think?" Fred asked.

"I think it's great," I said.

Frederic translated my response to the woman. She nodded her head and said something back to him. It sounded condescending.

Frederic looked over to me. "She wants a deposit. Fifty-thousand lira."

I pulled out my wallet and handed him the money. He handed it to the woman who stuck it inside her apron, speaking demandingly to Frederic. She turned, said something to me, then left the room.

"Well, " I said, "I didn't think I would get such a fantastic place. This is great." I held out my hand.

He shook it. "I am glad." He said. His manner seemed to melt from the sunlight bursting into the room. There was a brief moment of silence.

"Listen," I said, "I came down here to ski. You ski, right?"

"But of course." He smiled. "We shall ski together."

"You know the slopes?"

"I know them well."

"Okay, look," I took a deep breath, "I brought about three-hundred dollars to spend on skis and boots. I have another couple of hundred to play with, so what do you think?"

Frederic got those squinted eyes again, which made him look like a French cat. "You cannot do much with little money. However, I have a friend who works in the ski shop. We can go there during lunch tomorrow. Three-hundred dollars?"

"Yea."

"That does not buy much in Courmayeur." He said.

"We'll play it by ear."

"Play by ear?"

"We can see tomorrow."

"I believe so." Frederic replied, a little lost.

"I'll meet you at the officina at lunch?"

"Yes, if you wish, you may take the autobus, which arrives every fifteen minutes at the corner, and that will take you down to the village center."

"Hip."

"Hip?"

"Until tomorrow, sir." I said.

We walked out to his car, and looking around, I noticed the sky suddenly turning dark. I realized that he was right; if he had not found this place, I would have been stuck.

"Seriously," I said as he opened the car door, "thanks a lot. I don't know how to thank you. You did me well."

"You are welcome." He replied. "Until tomorrow."

"Get ready to do some damage."

Frederic laughed as he closed the door and started the sports car. He sped down the snow-covered road.

During the night, I could hear the wind blowing, and getting up from bed, I tiptoed along the camera to look through the frosted window. Snow circled around the road below, blowing within the alleyways, lit by old lanterns that stood against the rock-lined buildings.

This was a very old place, worn from the snow and wind, cold to the touch.

Maybe there's nothing after we die, I thought, just the rocks and old things that pass us by. Do we only get one chance at life, and the only shot at paradise is what we have right now. After that, we are broken apart, scattered like the snowflakes against the windowpane. Perhaps paradise does not exist at all even, just the rocks that out survive us.

Yes, I agreed, this is paradise, or the closest thing to it. No. I changed my mind. It is not paradise. It is nature. Paradise exists in my lifetime, this exists for much longer.

I went back to my bed and fell asleep.

Waking, I had expected the gloom and bitter chill cold of a dark cloudy day. Spreading the curtain away from the frosty window, a brilliant stream of sunshine pierced my eyeballs. The sun lingered low on the horizon and the silhouette of Mont Blanc shadowed the rays to form a hard edge of white sky and black mountain. I looked at my watch. It was seven o'clock.

Half an hour later, I was waiting on the corner for the bus. A small Citroen passed by and skidded to a halt, backing up. A bearded man stepped out and spoke to me in Italian, frost emitting from his mouth. I figured that he was offering me a ride.

From what I understood, he was a kind of village handyman, and he liked his car very much since it could hold all his tools and get him through the worst of snows. We were practically rubbing shoulders as we flew along the country road towards Courmayeur in what seemed more like a golf cart than an automobile.

"Grazie." I said as he skidded before the Officina Turismo.

"Prego." He replied.

With daypack slung over my shoulder, I walked into the Officina. Fred was at the counter. Instead of a coat and tie, he wore a ski sweater.

"Buon Giorno!" He exclaimed. He walked around the corner and grabbed my arm, towing me out the door. Once outside he let go.

"Please excuse my behavior, but it was necessary to leave with the impression that you are an important visitor."

We drove up the hill to the entrance of the tramway that led up through the midsection of Mont Blanc.

Across the road, we entered Ulysses Sport, a large shop that looked as though it had a firm grip on the Courmayeur ski equipment industry. Inside, Frederic led me through the aisles of brightly-colored apparel, past the rows of skis and boots, down a narrow stairwell to the fitting room. There, Frederic spoke to the person quietly, and soon I was fitted with the appropriate pair of Italian giant slalom skis, well designed for powder snow. The boots was also Italian, and I knew right away that they were good enough to send back home.

When I offered to buy Frederic a lift ticket, he refused. "I ski for free here, as do any guest of mine. You are not to pay."

We boarded a gondola that whisked us out over the crisp bright ocean of snow. The sun shined brightly through the scratched plastic windows, and I could sense the faintly metallic smell of snow and thin atmosphere as we bounced along the wire, rising steeply along cornices of rock. Frederic was looking down the fall line, studying the terrain.

"Is it not strange," he said, "there is something about going very high in the mountains."

"Yes, I know." I replied.

"I think you will like this very much." He said.

I looked at the array of smoothly covered mountains. All I could say was: "This is insane!"

Frederic looked at me strangely and laughed raucously.

We disembarked the gondola, clipped onto our skis, and pushed off down the slope.

Turning in snow, I immediately recalled motions that were half-remembered. Yea, I thought, it's true, the speed, the steep, the control of force, it flows from within and I remember. I could feel the crisp cold against my face as we dove down into a

cluster of trees. The mist from Frederic's skis blew like a windy mountain fog. I arced right and glided beside him.

"Yee Haw!" I yelled.

The path led down to a groomed slope, and I could sense the dryness of the newly packed surface. A long, flowing turn led to the lift station. We boarded the chair that whisked skyward.

"So what do you think?" Frederic asked.

His face was flushed and little bits of snowflake stuck to his cap. I brushed my forehead with the back of my glove and saw the same. "My God," I said, "we don't get this back home."

"Wait," he replied, "on top, there is the ridge, and that is the highest point without acquiring helicopter."

The ride lasted a good fifteen minutes. The lift bobbed up and down with the steepness of trajectory. I nervously scraped the tops of my skis. On the east side of Mont Blanc, the face was in shadow, and the wind blew with an arctic-like gust, seeping through the layers of apparel.

Frederic tapped my shoulder and pointed upwards where the sun broke over the ridge. The stream of light cut with a crystalline array of spears and splinters. There was a soft mound just to the left of the peak, and it glowed brilliantly white like tropical sea foam against the alpine blue sky.

We disembarked the lift before it swiftly swung around the turnstile and headed unladed downwards.

The wind was blowing hard from the French side, and as we looked to the mass of rock above, we could see clouds swirl around the peak of Mont Blanc, flowing downwards through the crevasses. I clicked at my skis and swung my arms to stay warm.

"Ready?" He said.

"Anytime!" I replied. I could hardly speak over the wind.

"Listen," He said, yelling into my ear, "Stay close. We will be skiing off-piste, and if you become lost, we may never find you! Do you understand?"

"Yes!" I replied.

There was no delay. Several pole pushes, and we were gliding along a wide plateau. I coasted beside Frederic, who smiled through the wind and snow breeze. The

sun was warming, and the dry snow crinkled under my skis. We approached the plateau's ledge and we made several quick turns before hopping over.

The world dropped out from underneath, and I experienced the sudden surge of freefall speed. I engaged a turn, and the soft light snow beneath the skis gripped the cut of the arc, sending me well below waist-deep powder snow. I let off of the turn, and the skis instantly shot me upward to the top, where I planted my pole again for the other turn. I immediately worked to the right of Frederic, who bounced down the mountain, edging, turning, pole planting, edging, turning, and pole planting. A giant fairway of steepness and white down, like whitewater rapids, hurled us both earthwards. It was an endless chamber of snow, and we were suspended above it.

The snow banked to the left and flattened out to what seemed like a ledge at the end. Coasting straight along the white snowscape, Frederic glided right as we both floated over to the tree line along the ledge. Other ski tracks converged into a single well-tracked trail.

"Stay close!" I heard Frederic yell as we followed the path, narrowing by degrees until turning into a goat's trail. I glanced down to see a monumental drop. I quickly looked back up.

The trail opened to a small clearing that was packed by ski marks. Frederic and I skidded to a stop, and we brushed off the caked-on snow. Frederic took off his glasses, wiping them with a handkerchief; he put them back on and looked out to the incredible expanse beyond and below. He lifted his ski pole and waved it like a baton across the mountain ranges.

"This place," he said, "all of it, has been site for many historical events. Two-thousand years before Christ, people lived in this land, and just beyond the foothills of Chamonix, Homo Sapiens-Neanderthalis was discovered." He paused for a moment, leaning against his ski pole, smiling. "Napoleon conquered this place twice." He pointed his pole up the range. "Once from the North in the late seventeen hundreds." He pointed his pole down the range. "And again from the valley in the early eighteen hundreds."

I stood in silence, listening like a schoolboy.

"In World War Two, transients, as well as spies and agents, would use several routes through Courmayeur to make secret passage between nations." He pointed to the East. "Over there lies Switzerland. And there," he swiped his pole to the North, "Lies France. And here," he planted the pole into the snow, "We stand in the middle, where we can see it all."

"A Vantage Point." I said.

"Yes." He replied, smiling.

I looked down the valley, down the crevasses, Courmayeur lingering below with its four-story hotels and an arterial superhighway that leads into France through a tunnel within the belly of Mont Blanc....

"Does this place exist within our minds?" I said. "Have our imaginations kept this place with the stories from the wars fought here?" I looked around. "In the meantime, with bulldozers and cement trucks... dynamite and engineers, we have found ourselves here. We created our own valley. We made the tramcar lines, the bus stops, the restaurants and hotels...."

"Today, if I had the money to do it, I could walk through the streets of Courmayeur and shop at Cartier. I could eat a hamburger, or a fortune cookie, watch the latest Clint Eastwood film before taking a luxury suite in the Hotel Royal, six stories above the crowd."

Frederic laughed. "You are very cynic."

"Cynical is not the right word. I am not that." I said.

"Americans." He said. "You come here to visit, and your attitude always amuses me. In your country, you have no history. If you want history, you come over here to find it, expecting that it is part yours, and when you see it, it is not what you want. You want something perfect." He pointed down the valley. "Think of this: how would you feel if Paris were down there?"

We both looked around.

"You must remember that we have history all around us. We cannot escape it, even if we try. We are like chains to the past."

"Maybe I wish I were European." I replied.

"Maybe you just wish."

"Come along," he said, patting my shoulder. "Today we will be modern men and ski the mountain. Tomorrow, you can ski Val Des Jorasses. There it is as Napoleon left it."

"I would like that."

Frederic turned his skis and skated the path. I followed. I could feel the speed rising, and the lane opened up again. I carved long turns on the smooth slope. Yes, today was a good day. They are all good days. Let's keep them that way.

There are times in our lives when our voices defy our good intentions, and we can't figure whether it is from the suppression of anger or the feeling of great need that the disparity begins. Maybe it's just a common fact to fall off-track into the coldness of disconsolation, to falter, like the vibrations in our voices. And when we dream at night the soft scenes of gentle things are marred by themes of anger and desire, so in the day, the brief moments like those in the greatest dream waver like my skis over soft cruel snow....

Early the next morning, I woke, fixed a bowl of cereal, yogurt, and boxed milk. I stuffed the cameras into my daypack along with some leftover cheese and French bread, beer and chocolate, film and extra parka. Dressed in Nordic outfit, I waited for the bus to pass by Entreves, where I would be taken up the mountain to Plapinceaux. The bus arrived at the cafe', which smelled of pine and strong coffee. I ordered an espresso while the fat gray-haired man melted wax with his iron over the bases of my skis.

I paid and thanked him with a formal "grazie" and made my way to the trail, my leather ski boots crunching in the morning snow. Skiing along the trail, I looked up to the Alps before me. The old man had shown a map, and there he pointed to a trail that leads up through the valley to the giant Grandes Jorasses. Schussing along the pine-covered ridge, I realized that I was alone, quiet, smoothly flowing with the wind, the snow from the trees brushing against my face.

Ahead lied a series of switchbacks. I crossed a bridge, untracked from last night's snowfall. I made even progress up the steep hillside, my breathing quicker, my heart thumping, my body warmer. Time passed by with each tree, boulder, and turn. I stopped at a plateau where the trail straightened to continue along the base of the southern Mont De La Saxe range.

There was a deep rumble that echoed through the valley, deep, like an earthquake. Looking across to the wall of mountains beside me, I saw a cloudy white mass of snow cascade down the rock. Quickly, I took off my backpack and fumbled through the bread and beer bottles. I flung the camera strap over my head and looked through the viewfinder, only to see black from the lens cap. I pulled it away. The avalanche had stopped. All was quiet again.

"Damn!" I said out loud.

Forget it, I thought. No more pictures. I put the camera back into the pack and continued along the path. There was a point along the trail where I had to side step across a field of snow boulders--the washout of snow from another avalanche. Continuing my steps, I heard the low rumbling again, and this time it made my heart pound.

I continued briskly to the end of the boulder field, where the trail continued, slowly rising along the mountainside, meandering with the ridges and rock outcroppings. Most of the morning had been covered by a layer of cloud, which had now thinned to a ghostly frost. The trail descended to an immense flatness, like a meadow or frozen lake.

The sky opened to a deep velvet-blue. Gliding along the white expanse, the mountains towered around me like gods, and they seemed to be watching me pass along the huge valley of snow.

I saw something in the distance--a dark spec on the edge of the arena. It looked like a hut or bivouac of sorts. I changed course slightly to the right and headed in its direction. My pace began to quicken as I settled into a rhythm-like tempo to music.... Da,da... da,da... da,da... da,da... da,da.... Getting hotter, I had become engaged in the action. My glasses misted, and body poured sweat.

This is what it's all about, I thought, to know a place, one must get into beat with it, like a tribal dance. I was not just skiing, I was moving with the landscape, my own breath the instrument of the mountains. I could see the things beside me track by--a clump of snow, a cloud, a mountain, a snowflake, and it all blended together in movement, the fuel in my system driving me, the fluids flowing cleanly from within. The snow beneath was forgiving, and it flexed with each stroke, springing me forward again to the next stride. I was humming, the beer bottles clinking in the backpack, everything moving together in syncopation.

The hut was near, and I could see an approaching sign. "Cirque Des Grandes Jorasses," it read. Coming closer, the hut looked more like a cave than a structure. A mass of boulders was stacked and mortared together. Moss and lichens grew from the slippery-black surface of ice and mud. The roof was covered by a heavy layer of snow, and along the edges, icicles hung low, some reaching all the way to the snowy ground, others broken and laying dead-like on the frosty surface.

I bent down, panting, and unsnapped the ski bindings. I planted one ski next to a low wall protruding from the hovel. With the back of the other, I scraped off the snowy wall to make a sitting place. I shucked off the backpack, placed my parka over the wet stony surface, sat down, and extracted a loaf of bread from the pack, along with a wedge of white cheese, another wedge of blue, a link of sausage, a chocolate bar, an orange, and several bottles of beer. With these items placed around me in the snow like a buffet, I opened my pocketknife and popped the top off of a beer bottle. The liquid was frosted-over, and I could feel the shards of ice pierce my throat as it passed into my stomach.

I looked up at the range of mountains before me. The clouds slowly rolled over the range from the North, arching over the peaks and cascading down to vanish into open air. It is still winter, I thought, and the air is stiff when I don't move. My hands had turned numb. It made me feel closer to that cold heart of the mountains, that center of greatness that exists plainly, as reality, absolute, chilling, firm, awesome.

Placing the beer back into the snow, I tore off a piece of bread. I poked through the dark crust with my thumb and opened the loaf, exposing the soft insides. I scraped a thick layer of blue cheese onto the bread, then cut little slices of sausage and white cheese over the top, closing the bread afterwards before stuffing it into my mouth. I took another gulp of beer, washing it down. I let the taste sit for a moment--the faintly

pungent taste of cheese against the sour bread and spicy sausage, the distinct smell of heavy malt beer, the little bubbles that it left in my mouth....

I looked down and saw the camera at the bottom of the backpack. I took it out, removed the lens cap, and looked through the viewfinder. Fully opening the lens to its widest angle, the mountain scape was too large to capture whole--no way could it all fit. I couldn't convey a fraction of their immensity in a picture. It would be wasteful.

I put the camera back into the pack and left it there for the remainder of the day.

I returned to the restaurant before nightfall, the bus having let me off at the roadside near the brasserie. Walking to the camera's doorstep, one of the restaurant workers was rinsing a mop pail outside of the kitchen's door. He looked up, stared at me for a moment, then continued his work. Before entering the camera, I heard him yell something.

"Americano!"

I looked back around the corner.

"Ti arange." He said.

Ti arange, I thought. I had no idea what that meant. I gave him a shrug of the shoulders. He stood there, cooking apron covered with tomato and blood-red smears. He was not smiling, just standing there.

"Ti," He said, pointing to me. "Arange," He said, pointing to himself with his thumb.

"Arange. Nice-to-meet-you, Arange." I replied

He shook his head and went back to work.

I turned and walked back to the camera door. A cold blast of air blew through the alleyway.

I opened the door and entered the room. The pack felt heavy as I unslung it from my back and laid it on the bed. With sunburned face and soggy feet, wet since leaving the hovel, I tore off my clothes and let them pile onto the floor like rags. With fresh towel, I went to the shower to recharge my batteries.

With a clean pair of Levi's and a new flannel shirt, I hunted through the pack for the last remaining beer left for emergency. Outside, the sun was setting below Mont Blanc, and I could see the outline of trees running along the northern edge of the mountain. The brick patio was still warm from the afternoon sunshine, but I could feel the crisp air blow into my flannel shirt.

I heard the sound of a sports car engine winding its way up the mountain. A pair of headlights lit the roadside as it approached the alleyway alongside the patio. It was Frederic. He halted his car as I stood near the patio door. He left the engine running.

"Bona Sera." He said, standing at the car door.

"Bona Sera." I replied.

"How would you like to visit Chamonix?" He asked.

"Chamonix?" I replied. "Isn't that in France?"

"Yes, it is, and if you wish, I can drive you there for dinner." He said.

I went into the camera and retrieved my parka that had dried sufficiently. I hunted down my passport. No French money. I found a ten thousand-lira note and stuffed it in my pocket.

Frederic sped down the hill leading through Courmayeur. We passed the Officina and turned north on the main highway. Accelerating through consecutive gears, Frederic sped along the highway at incredible speed.

"Ahead we will reach the French border patrol, though the border is actually at the peak of Mont Blanc, and the international line between the two countries is inside the mountain."

"Inside the mountain?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, not taking his eyes off the road. "There is a tunnel that runs underneath the mountain."

"You're serious?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, Indeed. It is one of the seven man-made wonders of the world. Eighteen kilometers of underground tunnel, completely cemented, of course, which leads from one end of the mountain to the other.

"How long did it take to do that?" I asked.

"Perhaps ten years. I am not sure. You will see it soon."

We neared a brightly-lighted area that was obviously a border station. The guard let us pass without stopping.

"That is typical of the Italians. They are very sloppy." He shifted gears. "We will be compelled to stop in France. You have a visa, do you not?"

I assured him that I had.

"Well, at least you prepared yourself for something." He said. He accelerated as we approached the tunnel. Inside, strips of yellow lamps flickered by the window. Frederic looked at his watch. "Let us see how long it shall take. You see, since the tunnel is between two border crossings, there is no speed control. However, careless driving is not tolerated."

We were driving well over a hundred miles-an-hour.

We sat in the Chamonix restaurant, both of us talking, eating, drinking hearty red wine, and looking out to little points of light speckled along the black mountains outside the window.

"As I told you," Frederic said, "the French Border Patrol stops everyone."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"It is not that the French are this way, the Swiss are also very particular about the people who visit. And I think it is because of this that we experience less problems than the Italians."

"The Italians have problems?"

"Not really, but many more than we have. I have said before that they are... slob."

The waiter came by the table with another bottle of wine, which he poured into the glasses, the red liquid glowing through the alpine twilight. I took a deep sip, and I could feel the warmth, the warm feeling it gives, and the spirit that allows you to say and act as you feel by impulse.

"You know," I said, "I think that we only get one shot at life."

"Yes." He replied inquisitively.

"Well, I believe that there may be heaven, maybe there is Jesus, or Buddha, or Mohammed, or whatever else for other people.... But what I know is what I see and taste and feel, just like you and the millions of people on the planet. What happens when we die? It's totally out of our control. We do not know."

I took a sip of wine.

"Go on," he insisted.

"Perhaps heaven is right here and we don't know it."

Frederic gave a very strange face, but I could see a little comical understanding.

"I mean," I continued, "what if every day of your life could be spent skiing the mountain like today?"

"Well," he replied, "I think that I should become quite... mad. After a while, it would become very boring."

"No, I don't mean that you have to do it day after day until you get sick of it! Take another day like today and see the greatest mountain range in Italy. Tomorrow, climb one of them. The day after that, go somewhere else on another venture."

He took a sip of wine, and he studied me. "Yes, you are right." he said. "But only... in your own mind. Only one person can have paradise in this way. And he is compelled to have very much money."

"Oh, bull!" I said. "I spent weeks in Paris, living on next-to-nothing. There is so much just in one city. So much life, so much... potential art."

"What do you mean by 'potential art'?" He asked.

"Art that was never made, but can be made by you. Because a place is so teeming with energy and life, and because you are... special, because you could never have imagined you would find yourself where you are. Everything is so strange, so fresh, that you can't remember all of it even if you were a genius. Do you get the picture?"

A very large pot was placed in the middle of the table, it was roquette, a mountain dish of the French Alps. We squired chunks of steak and broiled them in the large vat of liquid at the table's center, dowsing them afterwards with sharp mustard and crisp pickles.

With his mouth stuffed with bread and garlic cheese, Frederic said, "You are the strangest person that I have met here."

"Right on." I replied, lifting my glass. Frederic reciprocated.

"You know," he said, "I always wonder what it would be like if people from another planet like the earth would come here and visit."

"Go on," I urged.

"There are times when I look to the sky and see Mont Blanc, and the stars do not seem so much farther away than the top of the mountain. I sit and watch, and the sky seems so close, and I think it very possible that other people like us could come and visit from that far away. I do think that."

"I think that too." I replied.

"Yes," He replied, but for now we are here, and we eat the finest food in the world and drink many happy glasses of wine."

"Here's to Heaven." I replied, lifting my glass.

"To Heaven." Frederic toasted.

On the road again, Frederic sped through the tunnel, racing with confidence. I had complete faith in his skill, and I knew that he must have driven it many times under worse circumstances. After passing the Italian guard, he pulled a quick left turn.

"I thought you may find this interesting."

"Where' we going?" I inquired light-headedly.

"Secret."

Several turns and unwarranted stop signs later, we found ourselves on a very large blacktop area, a parking lot of sorts; it was covered entirely with several feet of snow. Frederic reached down to the gearshift and pulled a lever; he then put it in first gear.

"Hold on."

Frederic floored it, pushing the tachometer to the red line; he threw it into second gear, and drove the car straight while the engine screamed a high pitch. He looked over.

"Ready?"

"Yea!" I said, bracing.

He cranked the steering wheel hard, and I immediately plastered myself against the door and window. I looked outside, and all I could see was a caked mass of white snow against the window.

"Jesus Christ! Stop!"

Frederic slammed on the brakes, sending the machine into chaos, spinning several times around, before it came to rest, headlights beaming into geometric tracks of snow.

"You're nuts!" I said.

"Listen," Frederic said, "I have done this many times. It is impossible to hurt the car or ourselves. The snow holds the car to the ground." He paused for a moment. "You try." He said.

"Okay."

Frederic took charge of the tape deck, playing various French disco tunes while I took to writing our names with cursive letters in the square-mile-wide snow canvas.

Back at the camera, we could see light streaming through the color stained windows of the ristorante.

"Dessert?" I asked.

"Yes." He complied.

Voices protruded from within the ristorante, and it sounded completely foreign, though the intonation sounded much like family raucousness. Frederic opened the door, and I immediately found myself escorted into a sitting area that had fallen quiet on our entrance. In the back corner, near the kitchen door, the family sat together at a large bench table. Several decanters sat on the tabletop, the red wine hung low on the bottoms.

"Bona Sera." Frederic announced.

"Bona Sera." The woman replied.

I could not understand what Frederic said, yet the woman acknowledged it, whisking her hand to the various tables about the empty establishment.

The conversation continued in quiet whispers.

We sat at a small table on the other side of the ristorante near a window that looked out to the camera and Mont Blanc. There was a candle at the center of the table, and Frederic reached into his jacket and extracted a phantom book of matches, from which he used to light the candle. He placed the glass cover over the small flame, and I felt a chill through the diffused brightness.

The small woman came to the table and spoke to Frederic.

"What would you like, she has asked." Frederic said.

"I donnow. I haven't had any dinners here yet."

"I suggest Tiramisu."

"Tiramisu?" I repeated.

"Yes, you will like it." Frederic replied. He spoke to the woman, and she quickly withdrew.

"Ti...Rami... Su." I said, slowly separating the syllables.

"Yes," Frederic replied, "it means literally, 'Ti,' or you, in the familiar, 'Rami,' raise, 'Su,' yourself. It is a dish to do just that.

"Ti," I replied, "means you?"

"Yes, just like 'Te' in Spanish or 'Vous' in French."

"What does 'Arange' mean."

There was a brief pause.

"'Arange'... first person, imperative, meaning 'I arrange.'"

"What does 'Ti Arange' mean?" I asked.

"Well," Frederic took a breath, "it means 'I will arrange you.' I think you have the same saying in America 'I will arrange your face?'"

I suddenly felt very strange. I could sense that Frederic knew that there was something wrong, and he fell silent. We both looked out the window into the black night. I felt the darkness of the mountains around me, the chill of the unliving, the lifelessness. I had not even spoken to the cook. He lived several doors down from the camera. We shared the same bathroom. 'Ti Arange,' was the only thing that he had ever said to me.

"Hey." Frederic said. He patted me on the shoulder.

I could feel fluids rising up through my chest into my head and eyes.

The woman arrived with the dessert, and she let them land on the table. Frederic and I became aware of our surroundings.

I picked up a fork and tried it. It was cold, almost like ice cream. It reminded me of the morning in Plapinceaux, when I drank the bitter cocoa flavor, the drug-like poison taste that makes your hair stand on end. What did that old man think of me? Was I the person he thought I was? Did he think I was a stranger. Was I out of arrangement?

The Tiramisu was good, and as I ate it, there was warmth and fire in my belly, and it cleared the cloud that had gotten into my head.

The family from across the ristorante was watching us eat, and one of the little girls came out from the kitchen with a bottle in her hand. The family erupted in uproarious laughter, during which the child spoke to us from across the room. I looked at Frederic who seemed to have changed demeanor. He clenched his teeth. The mother swiped the bottle out of her daughter's hand, trying to disguise it. The rest of the table laughed.

"Do you know what that is?" Frederic said.

I whispered, "No."

"It is ketchup. They are asking if you would like ketchup on your Tiramisu."

I put my fork down and looked out to the black night. I wanted to fly away. I wanted to go back home. I wanted to disappear.

Frederic pushed his chair away from the table. I could hear it land on the floor. He tore away his napkin, picked up his plate, and turned it upside-down, slowly squashing the dish into the tablecloth.

He turned and walked towards the opposite end of the ristorante.

His voice sounded operatic as he approached the family that had fallen silent, and for several minutes, I listened to the music of his voice. Though I could not understand the words, I knew what he was saying. I knew Frederic, and for that brief moment of time, I knew him better than my own brother.

He returned to our table.

"Let's go." He said.

We did.

Outside, he stopped me in my tracks.

"Listen," he said, "how would you like to visit Geneva?"

"Sure." I said, breathing the crisp air.

"Good. That is settled. We shall leave this evening. There is no reason to stay here any longer. There is much to see, and we must not let anything get in your way."

"I agree." I collaborated.

"Good," he replied, "let us work swiftly." Frederic motioned towards the camera.

"Hey." I stopped him before he turned.

"Thanks." I said.

"Thanks." He mimicked, "Such an American word."

"It's the only one I know." I replied.

"Ti Arange." He said, smiling, raising his fists and dancing around.

"C'mon," I replied, mimicking him.

"Comment?" He said.

"Comant?" I replied.

"Oui. Comment allez vous!"

"You comic! I'll arrange your face for that!"

We laughed our way back to the camera and into the cold black night.

Mont Blanc lingered darkly in the distance.