

FROM THE CURIOSI CASEBOOK

-CHANCE-

Part Two

-9-

We sat at a bar on the other side of the Pont St. Louis. The long wall of windows looked out across the bridge. Behind the band Notre Dame's flying buttresses arched like stone rainbows after a downpour. At the table next to us a man was typing as he looked intently at the screen of his notebook computer. The typing was energetic. Suddenly he stopped, pulled his shoulders up from the hunch position and inhaled deeply from a cigarette, still looking into the screen. Then he placed the cigarette on the lip of the ashtray and began typing again.

"You can see his fingers move but it seems like some sort of prestidigitation. You know, sleight of hand? You can see what is going in and coming out but does anyone really know what the hell's happening inside the thing?" Max said.

"Don't tell me you still use a typewriter?"

Max raised one bushy eyebrow and then looked at his watch. "Time to go and see a man about a painting."

I picked up the glass of Bordeaux from the table and as I finished it off I looked back at the bridge and noticed that the statue had vanished.

We walked down the Rue St. Louis en L'Ile. Max moved quickly against the stream of pedestrians on the narrow sidewalk. I followed in his broad beamed wake, jostled slightly by the turbulence he created. We walked almost half the length of the island, which wasn't very far, before Max turned right onto the Rue Des Deux Ponts. I wondered if he was going to cross the Pont de la Tournelle, taking us in an arc back to the Left Bank, but he stopped in front of the Restaurant Le Yeux Enchantes. He opened a door next to the restaurant and entered. I followed him up a long flight of steps. At the second landing he knocked on a door and after waiting a minute or so a man I took opened it.

"I'm Max Beck."

"Fred Loswell." The man answered. He was tall and thin and the skin on his face was stretched tight over high cheeks. If it wasn't for the sagging skin of his neck he would have passed for someone in his fifties.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet me. I mean us," Max added. "This is Hank Scriviner. He'll be sitting in, maybe take a few notes. Hope you don't mind?"

“Not at all. Although I’m not sure if I have anything that will be worth taking note of,” Fred answered, firmly shaking both of our hands.

We followed him down a short hallway and entered a large room. Taking up most of the left wall, facing the Seine to the south, was a window. Set back from the window was a long worktable. Its top was splattered with colors and there were cans with brushes in them and big tubes of paint. Many of them were partially squeezed so that they looked like half eaten sausages. Paintings of different sizes, some framed but most of them not, were stacked against the wall opposite the window with other paintings hanging on the wall above them. In the center of the room were several wooden easels and a couple of stools.

Fred asked us to take a seat at the end of the room where there was an old easy chair with dried paint stains on one arm, an uncomfortable looking straight back chair with its cane seat slightly unraveled and a couch that sagged dangerously in the middle. The upholstery was faded and worn. Max plopped into the easy chair so I took one end of the couch with a firm grip on the arm to avoid sliding into the depression in the center. Fred, who had left us, returned carrying a tray with a pot of tea and three cups. He poured us each some tea. “Its tea time so I hope you don’t mind? There’s some milk and sugar if you care for any.” He said as he settled into the straight-backed chair. His ramrod posture made me try to sit up a little straighter on the sagging couch.

Max put some milk in his tea followed by a couple of spoons full of sugar. “Quite a spectacular view you got here Fred,” he said as he swirled the tea with a spoon. “How’d you manage to get a place like this?”

“This is my studio but I support now myself primarily by teaching painting. I moved here in 1946. It was right after the war and everything was pretty cheap, as you can imagine, at least for Englishmen – cheaper still for Yanks. I’d had my eye on this area along the Quai d’Orleans. When I was here as a student before the war I stayed on the other side, on the Rue de Poissy. The place where I lived then is now one of those posh little Left Bank hotels that I couldn’t afford to spend one night in. Back then, though, I spent a lot of time looking out the window of my tiny cell of a room thinking that the light would be so much better on this side because it faces south and there’s the river so nothing gets in the way and it would be quieter as well.” He sipped tea as he talked, sometimes chuckling, his shoulders shaking, especially when recounted how he thought that he would be able to work so much better if he only had a studio over here. “Of course, when I finally got this place and put the window in all I did was spend my time looking across the river at the other side. It seemed to me like the Seine might as well be the English Channel. Gradually though I got used to the quiet over here and the light really was so much better. And, then, after I’d painted the view of the Left Bank from here hundreds of times I stopped noticing it so much.” As he looked over toward the easels and the window he told us how his students love the place. “For them, the view isn’t a distraction at all but the chief attraction. It’s probably the one thing they’ll remember

about me – the view from my flat.” He shook his head and sighed. As he held his cup I noticed it trembling slightly. “Would you care for some more tea?”

“No, we can help ourselves,” Max answered. “Mind if I smoke?”

“No, go right ahead. I’ve had to quit but I suppose I’m addicted to second hand smoke. Are you smoking Gauloises?”

“Just a pipe. Is that okay?”

“Certainly. I don’t think there’s too much difference between the two. At least from a second hand perspective.”

Max tapped the tobacco into his pipe and lit it. The old man inhaled deeply as Max exhaled. “You told me on the phone that you’re with the Palimpsest Press? I don’t believe I’ve heard of it. It’s a rather odd name isn’t it since a palimpsest is a piece of paper that’s had the original writing scratched off and something else written over it? Do you print your books on used paper?”

“You’re right about the name. You might say we like to get beneath the surface of a subject.”

“In this case I suppose you might say you want to get under the paint?” Fred answered with one of his gray eyebrows closing in a wink.

“Yeah, I guess you might put it that way. I’m just doing a little background research on the surrealists and I thought you might help fill in a few blanks.”

“Fine but just because I’m an old artist doesn’t qualify me to be an art historian.”

Max and I laughed politely, then Max said. “As I mentioned over the phone, the Palimpsest Press is considering a book on the Surrealists in the nineteen thirties, before the Second World War. Since you were here before the war you were sort of an eyewitness and we were hoping that you knew some of the surrealists and could help us?”

As a matter of fact Fred did know a number of the artists and most of them were surrealists at one time or another, including himself. “However, I would never claim to have been a truly committed surrealist because I never quite got it. Breton was always talking – but then he was a poet and they all seem to talk so much that you wonder when they have time to write – about how surrealism revealed the unconscious and the imagination.”

Max said. “He wrote in the Manifesto of Surrealism that it was the actual functioning of thought but without any aesthetic or moral concerns.”

Fred nodded in agreement. “Breton and some of the others were always writing manifestos. I thought all the manifestos and proclaiming this and that and the other seemed awfully pushy but then it might be that being English I was just more reserved. However, I think that Breton was actually convinced that this unconscious world was more real than the real world and that through surrealism you could make contact with it, or it with you.”

“It’s like a wormhole.” Max said.

“A wormhole?”

“Yeah,” Max flipped through the pad he’d been using to take notes and read. “A wormhole is an opening in the time and space continuum that leads to another universe. Somebody just told me that and I wrote it down because you never know when something that sounds like nonsense might end up making sense when you see how it connects to something else.”

“I have to admit I never would have thought about such a connection, even if I’d known about such things as wormholes. I wonder if they look like Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*?”

“I don’t think you can see them since they’re like black holes, and no light can escape from a black hole, so they’re invisible.”

“Ah, well, painting something that is invisible is what surrealists loved and showing these wormholes as a bunch of gaudy, whirling objects in a black sky would be just about perfect. Some people even claim Van Gogh was a surrealist. He was a bit before their time, of course, but he was considered crazy. Speaking of crazy, as I recall Breton was quite enamored with Freud because of his theories about the subconscious and all of that. It really upset him that the only surrealist Freud actually seemed to admire was Dali, and that was because he met him once.”

“Freud isn’t the only one,” Max pointed out. “Dali is usually the first person a lot of people think of when they think of surrealism, right?”

Fred rolled his eyes. “A lot of us called him Avida Dollars because what really interested him was money. Even Dali began referring to himself by the same name. He was outrageous but cunning. He would do anything to be the center of attention, the star attraction, and he knew exactly what to charge for admission to the show. No one worked harder at looking exactly like what everyone imagined a surrealist would look like, which was actually the antithesis of surrealism – most surrealists looked disgustingly normal. One always got the sense that Dali was trying to make himself the piece of art that everyone else should admire. He would have been happy if he could have hung himself on a wall and, of course, being immortal so he could enjoy everyone looking up at him and he could look down on them for eternity.” Fred paused and sipped his tea. “Perhaps I’m being too harsh. But he did support that Fascist dictator, Franco,

you know? Anyway, I'm sure you didn't come here to listen to me gossip about a dead Dali."

"But you do seem to believe that Dali was someone who took advantage of the true surrealists, the real artists?" Max asked as he hunched over the table reaming out the bowl of his pipe with a Swiss army knife.

"Oh Dali was an artist, don't misinterpret me. He was quite good, at least his early work. It's just that he wasn't really original, in my opinion. He watched what others did and then he added a few flourishes and embellishments and that, together with the contrived eccentricity of his persona, made his work seem daring and different."

"They say the people we often think of as leaders are just people who see which way the crowd is moving and then rush to the front of the line," Max observed, relighting his pipe.

"Shoving aside anyone who gets in their way, I imagine." Fred laughed. "But Dali ended up repeating the same themes over and over. It eventually became clear that the only creativity he exhibited was in the way he disguised the same old thing, just like the way he wore outlandish makeup and clothes. In my opinion he ended up being pathetic rather than prophetic, if you don't mind the pun. He wasn't the only one, of course, just the best at it."

"Being pathetic?"

"No, well yes that to. I meant he was the best at the other part as well."

"Who was second best?" Max asked.

"Oh there may be a tie for that."

"What about Berthold?"

"Henri would have been a contender. He certainly looked and acted the part of the great surrealist, the genius artist, but he managed to get himself killed before he became pathetic."

"It does seem that a primary requirement for being a famous artist is to be dead. The only people who seem to make any money from an artist are the collectors. It's really pretty amazing, isn't it?" Max asked. "I can't think of any other line of work where that occurs, can you? A Marxist might call it the ultimate example of alienation from one's labor."

"So that explains why I'm not famous, it's because I'm not dead," Fred chuckled. "Still, that might explain why so many artists were fond of Marxism. That was until Stalin decreed soviet realism as the only true art. He shared that artistic taste with Hitler, by the

way. For both of them true art had to be some heroic illustration. The super real rather than the surreal.”

“Sort of ironic that both Stalin and Hitler lived in Vienna for awhile at the same time as Freud.”

“Too bad they didn’t get psychoanalyzed. Think of how much human suffering might have been prevented,” Fred answered.

“Who were some of the artists that you feel embodied the true principles of surrealism?”

“Oh, the usual suspects – Max Ernst, Andre Masson, Tanguy, Picabia, Duchamp...the photographer Man Ray...let’s see there was also de Chirico and Magritte and Miro for awhile.”

“But not Berthold?”

“Henri’s great work was Schrodinger’s Cat. At least the only one we can judge him by, since of all his other work was destroyed by the Nazis according to his widow, Penny Geldhart. You know it was his widow Penny who really made him famous? The Cat was what she built her collection on. Considering how much he cheated on her it’s sort of poetic justice that the only thing he left her was a passionate love affair with modern art. But, as I was saying, Henri did look and play the part of a great artist, I suppose that was why so many people were attracted to him, including Penny.”

“Did you know him well?”

“At one time, of course. But then I high tailed it back to England just as the Nazi’s invaded France in May of 40. Of course, when I got to London I immediately found myself much in demand as a private in his Majesty’s army. Just before the Nazi’s entered Paris on June 14th Henri got himself killed in a stupid car wreck. Penny never should have bought him that sports car. She must have known he’d go and smash the damned thing straight away. It wasn’t until later that I found out Penny had managed to smuggle Schrodinger’s Cat out when she returned to the States after burying Henri. Frankly, I was astonished when I finally saw it after the War. What I had seen of his work gave me no idea that he was that bold and original or, even, any good for that matter.”

“So you think it was truly a one of kind?”

“I can only speak about the work I saw and as far as that stuff was concerned if the Nazis hadn’t destroyed it I imagine Penny would have. She certainly wouldn’t have wanted any of it to show up later and ruin the reputation she’d built for Henri. But, as I said, I can only speak for the work I saw and I never saw the work that was to be shown along with Schrodinger’s Cat nor anyone else except Henri and Penny. It was to be part of a show that Penny was bankrolling for Henri called Chance. So maybe it wasn’t one of kind, but we’ll never know now.”

“Was anyone else going to be part of the show?”

“Not that I know of. Of course, the show never took place so who knows?” He paused and knitted his brows. “Now that I think of it, Jacob Sternlieb might have been involved in some way. Jake and Henri were great chums. Unlike Henri, though, Jake looked and acted more like a clerk than an artist. He sort of blended into the background. In fact, I can’t recall what he looked like or much of anything else about him. He did have a mistress. I do remember her because she was quite pretty. She was Canadian, I think, named Harriet something. Harriet Baker, that’s it. How could I forget since Sternlieb joked that the only dough he ever made was with Harriet Baker. He didn’t make many jokes so you remembered things like that. Anyway, he died in a camp and the Nazis destroyed all of his work as well. As far as the Nazis were concerned being both a Jew and a surrealist was the worst possible combination. Unlike Penny, poor Harriet, wasn’t able to save any of his paintings.”

“Sternlieb you say?” Max said, leaning forward. “Do you remember any of his work?”

“I only saw his work once and that was at his studio in a flat he shared with Harriet. It was in the Marais, which is the old Jewish quarter. I thought it was very good - the work of a serious surrealist, if that term exists. He seemed to be someone who was really searching and not just showing off. It’s funny, but I was reminded of his work when I finally got a chance to see the Cat. The fact that he and Berthold were friends and going to do a show together might explain it. I suppose Sternlieb was a positive influence because from what I saw his previous work was much better than Henri’s. As I said, unlike Henri, none of his work survived so we will never know whether he painted something that was as good as the Cat. It reminds me of what Breton said about Picabia’s work. He called it the emotion of the never seen. Well, I can tell you I’m getting a little teary eyed just thinking about Jake Sternlieb and other artists who were pretty damned good but the world will never know it because of the Nazis. Pretty damned sad.”

Max nodded and tapped the embers of his pipe into the ashtray and put it in his jacket pocket. “It’s not just the artists whose work was destroyed by the Nazis, great work has been destroyed by stupid people who were threatened by it since the beginning of history.”

“Yes, you’re right. Somehow, I find that hard to forgive, even though I suppose I should. But I’m a lapsed Anglican and I’m not sure if the Golden Rule applies to the destruction of art.”

“I don’t know either,” Max said getting up. “But I know the Ten Commandments apply to the destruction of people.”

“Did you get what you were looking for from Loswell?” I asked Max as we strolled across the Pont de la Tournelle at a more reflective pace than earlier. It was now late

afternoon and the autumn sun and shadows covered the trees along the quai in an oily light, like vinaigrette on a salad. I wondered if Fred Loswell was watching us from his window, perhaps including us in another of his paintings. We might possibly be famous someday even if totally unrecognizable.

“More than I expected,” Max answered.

“What do we do next?”

“I’m going back to the office and do some thinking. Watching me think isn’t worth you writing about. It’s 5:30 now so why don’t we meet for dinner at 8 at the café next door?”

-10-

There was a cellist playing outside the Cafe, beyond the fringe of the awning that stretched toward the Seine. It was early and the evening was warm so I took a seat. The green canvas above me seemed to inhale and exhale with the breeze. The cellist was playing Eleanor Rigby. I couldn’t see her face but only her long black hair that swayed with the swing of her arm drawing the bow across the strings. There were several other customers sitting outside but they didn’t seem to be paying attention so when she stopped I walked over and tossed a euro into her cello case. She looked at me and smiled. There was something about her that looked familiar. Then I remembered The Dead. “Were you in the string Quartet that played yesterday at St. Julien-le-Pauvre?”

“Yes. You were there? What did you think?”

“Of the music or the bombing?”

“I apologize for that. It was a surprise for us as well. My boyfriend put that whole thing together. I got the others to agree to let him but I didn’t know what he had planned to show on the screen. In fact, I couldn’t see it because the screen was behind us and, anyway, I look down when I play.”

“I noticed.”

“Of course, how could you not? We finally saw it after everyone left and then we understood why so many people in the audience walked out.”

“I mean, I noticed that you look down when you play. If you hadn’t looked up I wouldn’t have recognized you just now.”

She blushed. “I almost wish you hadn’t, I am so embarrassed. My boyfriend shouldn’t have done that. He said he couldn’t tell us because it would have ruined it since it was supposed to be unexpected. I told him he made us look like fools, particularly me, and ruined the musical experience completely. Of course, he’s not a musician or he would have understood. Would you like to hear something? Eleanor Rigby was going to be my

last piece, but I feel like I should play another one for you just to help erase that awful memory.”

“Really, it wasn’t so awful, just a surprise.”

“You don’t think bombs being dropped was awful?”

“I meant the playing. You were quite good, really.”

“It was one of my favorite pieces by Mozart and now I think it’s ruined for me.”

“Why don’t you play it again now, at least try a few bars.”

“Okay. You know, you speak French very well,” she added switching from French to English.

“And your English is very good.”

“It should be since I’m English.”

I sat down. She began to play but stopped and looked up at me, brushing the hair away from her face.

“I forgot the beginning, sorry.” She said, then fingered the strings at the neck as she hummed softly and began again.

Ned Nordley arrived before she finished. He sat down beside me and began to say something but noticed that I was listening to the cellist. When she stopped after four or five minutes, he clapped louder than me. She stood up and bowed. Ned went over and talked to her for several minutes. She seemed upset with him as they talked. I signaled the waiter for another glass of wine. When I turned around she had packed the cello and placed it on a wheeled luggage carrier, securing it with a red striped bungee cord.

“See you later back at the hotel then?” Ned said to her.

She mumbled a reply that I couldn’t make out. Then she gave me a quick look and seemed to blush again although with the shadows it was hard to tell.

“In physics the theory of quantum mechanics says that one thing, at least on a subatomic level, can be in two places at the same time. It only becomes a fixed place in space and

time when it's observed. Einstein had trouble with that. Supposedly, Einstein said if that was true then why weren't there moons all over the heavens?"

"I thought he said God doesn't roll dice?" I answered trying not to sound bored.

Ned looked at me, took a drag on his Gauloises and replied as if I was really interested. "Yes, he supposedly said that as well." He'd was now wearing a black sweatshirt. Stenciled in white letters across its front were the words "Art is a three letter word". The bottle of Kronenbourg next to his right elbow was a third empty and the ashtray beside it a quarter full.

"Do wormholes and black holes have anything to do with these theories? Max mentioned them today."

"Really?" he smiled. He squashed the stub of his cigarette in the ashtray. "I didn't think Max listened to me."

"I don't see what art has to do with physics and this theory you mentioned?"

"You don't know about Schrodinger's Cat?"

"If you mean the piece by Henri Berthold that's in the Pompidou, I've only seen the box that its in."

He sighed. "No the real Schrodinger's Cat, which was the name given to a thought experiment that Erwin Schrodinger, one of the physicists who helped develop Quantum physics, devised in 1935 to illustrate one of the theory's most perplexing aspects. You're sure you haven't heard of it?"

"Never. I was never very good at math...or physics. I don't even know what a thought experiment is. Is that something like I think therefore I am?"

Ned lit another cigarette and leaned toward me across the table. "No that's an hypothesis. But let me explain Schrodinger's experiment. First off a live cat is put in a box. The box is then sealed so nothing can get in or out, and no one can see in or out. In the box there is also a device that holds a small amount of a radioactive element. There is a fifty-fifty chance that the atom will decay and if it does the device will break a container containing poison that will kill the cat. If the atom doesn't decay the cat lives."

"I guess this isn't something that would get a seal of approval from the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals."

Ned laughed, snorted then coughed. "Maybe that's why it's a thought experiment. He didn't want PETA to get pissed. But, seriously, the real point is that according to Quantum Mechanics, which is what they call this type of physics - it doesn't have anything to do with the mechanics who fix your automobile by the way - is that as long

as the cat is in the sealed box both of these outcomes are equally possible, neither outcome can be predicted and, in fact, neither of them has occurred. The cat is suspended in a sort of half dead-half live state. Only when the box is open and the cat is observed do the possibilities end and the cat is, must be, either dead or alive. Of course, Quantum Mechanics deals with the behavior of subatomic particles not cats - how these particles can be in multiple locations and can act as particles or waves at the same time and only become fixed at a single location or in a specific position when they are observed.”

“So you’re telling me that this cat doesn’t have nine lives because it’s neither dead or alive?” I shook my head in amazement.

“It’s only a thought experiment.”

“And Berthold named his painting after Schrodinger’s Cat because of this thought experiment?”

“People think he was being hip, and Berthold was quite hip from what I understand. You know, the surrealists were fascinated with science so it would have been a sort of an in joke. Those who didn’t know anything about the experiment thought it was just a strange looking cat that belonged to someone with a weird name. Remember, it was painted in 1940.”

“So after all these years, why isn’t it just a strange looking cat instead of a famous work of art?”

Ned shrugged. “It is a strange looking cat but it seems that nobody had painted a strange looking cat like that before.”

I snuck a peak at my watch. It was after eight o’clock and beyond the reach of the electric light bulbs strung beneath the awning, Paris was glowing and Max was late. “I couldn’t help notice that you know the girl who was playing the cello?”

“You mean Clare? She’s my girlfriend, although right now she’s quite angry with me.”

I was about to tempt to say that it sounded like a love-hate relationship, but was saved by the chirping of a cricket coming from the small backpack that he had set on the chair between us. He thrust his right hand into the pack and took out several books before he finally pulled out the chirping cell phone. “Bloody mobile, “ He said pressing it to his left ear. He listened, said cheers and flicked it off. “That was Max. He won’t be able to join us after all. Said he was looking for a bakery or something. You wouldn’t think that would be very difficult in Paris, would you? Anyway, he said to meet him here tomorrow morning at 9:00.”