



Leaving the Institute at the end of the week, Fabien hoped there would be a quorum going for dinner, or at least a drink in one of the licensed hotels. He stood expectantly by the doorway hoping not to appear too desperate, but one by one his colleagues made their excuses. Vaclav, the last to leave his desk, shook his head as he buckled the flap of his laptop bag.

“It is my daughter’s party tomorrow. I must to buy presents. Or else my wife...”
Fabien shrugged. “It is no matter; I will catch up on some reading. There is much I need to do.”

Descending in the lift to the ground floor, he pondered the possibilities and opportunities. He could go for a long bike ride up the wadi that meandered into the mountains. He could practice using his new telephoto lens at the hawking event in the desert. He could go skiing at the indoor slope in the shopping mall. He would Skype Veronique. In fact the vast expanse of the weekend seemed at once so fecund that just a little effort on his part would trigger a blistering fission of activity.

Inside the villa where he lived, he placed his briefcase by the stairs and clopped across the tiles to slide open the door to the garden. After the air-conditioned office, the heat was oppressive even though the sun was sinking behind the wall. Sweat prickled his back, his neck, the inside of his thighs. Why on earth did they choose this place? Why not Germany, or Switzerland? He thought then of skiing holidays; the crisp mountain air, the soft light, pine trees. He recalled time shared with friends, vin chaud, and log fires.

“Mike!” he said aloud, and reached for his Blackberry to text his old friend, tilting the screen so he could read what he had written before pressing send. Forgive the long silence. I am working on rotation at the Institute in Innovation Village. Are you by any chance free this evening or tomorrow?

Fabien knew he would never make the effort to go cycling, or skiing, or hawking, but if he had dinner with a human being the weekend would not feel like an inconvenient and tedious pause in the long voyage of his tenure away from home. He walked to the poolside, hands in pockets, thinking his time would now be purposeful, or at least not wasted.

The flagstones and surrounding grass were covered in a tilth of red sand. It ground under the soles of his shoes. In fact it dusted everything around him: the poolside tiles, the pinnate leaves of the flamboyant tree, even the dangling, odorous seedpods that the Arabs crushed into a bitter paste. It lay on the surface of the pool and slowly sank overnight, turning the water purple.



“Good evening Mr Fabien. You want an omelette for dinner?”

Landa, the Philippino housemaid, was sitting on the swing seat, idly rocking, one foot extended to bathe her toes in the fine spray from the irrigation pipes. It was kind of her to offer as Fabien was alone in the villa, but Thursday was meant to be her evening off.

He said, “It is no need, Landa, thank you. Tonight I am going out, to meet some old friends.”
“Ok, you have fun, Mister Fabien,” she chuckled.

Fabien nodded to her then gazed out across the pool. There was one night - was it Mirabelle, or Saint Sorlin? - when he and Mike were discussing the results from Cerne and finished a whole bottle of wine between them. Mike’s wife, Sara, had been furious when their laughter woke the children. She swept out of the bedroom knotting the belt of a bath robe round her waist and stood over them with folded arms, making clear it was time for bed. They’d slunk off, scolded, giggling like teenagers. In the morning their bravado had been less bold.

Come to think of it, that was the year Mike and Sara finally separated. Mike had found a permanent research post out here and that holiday was the last time they’d seen each other. How life changed. Mike had been his Best Man and Fabien had returned the honour a year later.

Three birds skittered down to drink from the irrigating spray by Landa’s feet. Undoubtedly passerine, they sported a yellow stripe across the eyes looked like sporty sunglasses. The nearest bird cocked its head to stare at him, its beak open and tongue darting backwards and forwards as it disseminated heat. Fabien’s shirt was now sticking to his back.

“I am sorry, my friend. I have nothing to give you,” he said, and turned towards the villa.

Once inside, he took a drink of water from the cooler, then another. He crumpled the plastic cup and dropped it in the bin, then climbed the wide, curving stairway to his room. His footsteps echoed up to the atrium dome. On the landing, he found Landa had kindly taken his shirts out of the washer and hung them on the airing rack where they had baked into a folded state. He had to shake them out before hanging them in the cupboard in his room. There was no reply from Mike, but it had only been a half hour.

Fabien took a long, cool shower, put on some chinos and slip-on shoes, and finally selected a



red polo shirt that would suit the evening. He organised his laptop and notebooks for the return to work on Sunday and lay on the bed with his ankles crossed, taking a couple of glances at his phone when he thought it flashed.

Veronique was three hours behind. She had said she wanted to visit her parents at the weekend. She would be finishing work, getting in the car, driving to Lyon. He had agreed not to Skype until Sunday because it was wrong to burden her with his loneliness. The last time they'd talked, two days previously, she had sounded tired and he didn't want to be a burden on her. But at that moment, he wanted nothing more than to look at a pixelated image of her face and imagine the warmth of her cheek under his fingers.

It was eight. If the minutes would only pass it would soon be an acceptable time for bed. He could read, or watch one of the many television channels, and wait for sleep to come.

Perhaps Mike had changed his phone number? Fabien sent him a Skype message as well, just in case. What else could he do?

In the distance, the distended and sonorous notes of the evening call to prayer floated across the desert like a lament. He enjoyed the sound being distorted by the buildings, complicating and reverberating, then ultimately coalescing into a pure pitch that faded away into nothing. He had learned it off by heart, imitating the sound rather than understanding the language. It would be his party trick one day, when they had guests.

He Skyped Veronique, but she didn't answer. The dial tone rang heavily in his ear, its tunefulness only exacerbating the isolation he felt. He phoned, knowing the call would be expensive, but she didn't answer that either. She must be in the car. Perhaps he should just eat at the row of restaurants next to the mosque? That would take an hour. If Mike didn't ring, well, at least he'd tried.

The automatic light in the corridor was off so Fabien clicked the concave button. The other three rooms were empty, the names on the plates meaningless as he'd never met them: Dr Verasamy; Mr Rosen; Professor Tamarov.

Landa was sweeping the stairs, descending backwards. "They come back soon," she said. "They on home rotation right now."

"Yes, yes I know," Fabien said, looking down at her from the top step. "Is it not your night



off?”

She straightened, pressing on the back of her pelvis, “No problem, Mr Fabien. You want me to call a taxi?”

He thought for a while, hands extending into the deep pockets of his trousers, but shook his head and said he would walk.

“Ok, you have fun Mr Fabien.”

He side-stepped past her and walked out into the radiant darkness.

The villa was set back from the highway by nine hundred metres and accessed by a lane that sat on, rather than cut through, the desert. It had been the first building, the show home, of a development for the expatriate community working between Financial Centre South and Innovation Village. The development company had run out of money during the financial crisis and no other villas had been completed. A lot of people had lost money buying off plan, but the Institute had snapped up the show home to control their hotel bills. Outside, The highway buzzed with traffic and an elevated train shot by towards Plaza One, where all the hotels were clustered and the tourists gathered to film the fountain displays.

Next to the mosque was a building site, a new hotel apparently, that rose floor by floor with every passing day. The workers, Bangladeshis and Balochis, each wore a cloth under their helmets when the plastic got too hot, but never wore a harness. Most nights one was killed by a fall from the bamboo scaffolding. In the morning, when Fabien was being collected, medical teams would be sweeping up the mess while other workers watched from above.

The access road was dark against the desert. Sand had blown across the kerb to settle in scallops along the edge of the tarmac. A warm wind buffeted the back of his arms, bringing the smell of rotting fruit from the dumpster outside the villa gate.

At the parade of shops, Fabien stopped below a streetlight to think about what he would eat. A crowd of men and boys was growing by the mosque, pulling on their sandals and lighting cigarettes. The Pakistani place was a favourite, but tonight it would be busy. It was his Saturday night treat to himself and he didn't want to spoil the routine.

“Mister, you want taxi? Where you go?”

Fabien politely waved the car away, crossed the road and walked along the shops. He didn't feel like Middle Eastern, or pizza, or Thai, or Lebanese, so chose the Chinese at the end



despite the volume of the music. It was almost identical to the others: the tiny cube of a kitchen at the front, a serving window, and a row of two-man, chrome-edged tables along the back wall. He was greeted by a girl with a nice smile who waved him towards a table underneath a tasselled red lampshade. When she eventually brought the menu, he ordered squid followed by noodles.

“You want drink?” she said, slouching on one hip.

“Do you do a lemon and mint cocktail?” he asked, and she nodded slightly, avoiding his eyes, before sloping towards the serving window and shouting through.

“Can you please turn down the music?” he called after her, but she didn’t hear and he didn’t repeat the request.

He wished he had a book to occupy his mind, or at least give him something to pass the time. In the absence of one, he studied the girl while she stood with her back to him, watching the road, arms folded.

Dispatch delivery riders collected takeaways in plastic bags and departed. She took their money and doled out plastic spoons, paper napkins, and menus. An Arab entered, his wife and child remaining on the street.

He spoke to her in Arabic and she responded with a few words and an arm extended towards an empty table. The man looked at Fabien, shook his head, and left.

They were better than him, these other immigrants, he realised. He earned more in a month than they did in a year, but they invested more, working for the country rather than in it. They stayed for years, sending money home. He and his kind were little more than dust on the desert wind.

When the food came, she placed the plate down carefully and straightened the cutlery. The squid was crispy but the noodles too salty. He ordered another fruit cocktail and looked at his watch. He would only have to pay the bill, walk round the block, and enough would have been done. He could go to bed without feeling shame for his transitory and mercenary existence.

The Blackberry lay square to the corner of his table. The light flashed. Someone had rung; a local number he didn’t recognise. He rang it.



"I am returning your call. This is Doctor..."

"Fabien, it's Mike! Listen, where are you?"

"Al Darsha, half way between..."

"I know where it is. Listen, jump in a cab! We're in PTC; the Palm Towers Complex? Come over, we're about to eat. Have you had dinner? It would be great to see you. It's been ages!"

The feeling of being replete blossomed inside his belly. Actually he was a little tired. If Mike hadn't rung he would have happily walked back to the villa. Why had Mike never told him his new number? The idea scalded.

"Actually, I was just going home..."

"Nonsense! Get over here. The restaurant's got some of that cognac you like. Come on; get your dancing shoes on!"

Fabien finished the cocktail, paid for the dinner, and walked out to find a taxi. PTC was a secluded area, almost entirely European, a world apart from the griminess of Al Darsha. Property prices were exorbitant because it was built on land reclaimed from the sea. In the taxi Fabien pulled notes from his wallet and turned them over in the passing streetlights to check what colour they were.

Mike and his young girlfriend, Nastya, were already at the table, a bottle of champagne in a cooler covered by a napkin. They shook hands. He kissed Nastya on both cheeks. They ordered more wine, bought a steak platter, and discussed the Nobel winners. Fabien ate a caprese salad, explaining that was all he needed.

"How are your children?" he inquired when opportunity arose.

Mike shrugged. "It's difficult right now. They come once a year, but they're of that age, you know, when they want to be alone. Petra makes it difficult for Nastya."

It was a shame. Fabien recalled teaching Petra to snowboard; how ungainly she was, like a young doe. He and Veronique had never had children. That was one of the reasons that they had felt he could complete his research paper with the Institute while she remained in Paris. What was she doing now, he wondered?

After the meal they drank some expensive cognac, but not as much as once they would have done. Fabien felt bloated but did admit it. Mike paid for dinner holding up a palm to Fabien's offer to meet half way.



"It's fine, expenses," he said with a dismissive gesture of the hand. Then they were outside overlooking the marina and the long curve of a concrete wall that led the eye towards the distant lights of Plaza One.

"Listen, it was so good to see you," Mike said as they shook hands. Fabien clapped him on the shoulder then released him to kiss Nastya on both cheeks.

"Let's do this again," Mike said, but somehow Fabien knew it would never happen. It took less than a minute to find a cab and he recognised the driver as Nepalese. They spoke of Kathmandu and the Maoist government.

"When do you go home next?" Fabien asked.

"I go home, sir, in two months. For two weeks. To see my wife."

"Do you have children?"

The driver shook his head and broke into a grin. "Oh no, sir. Not yet, sir."

Fabien pointed at the junction that led to the turning to the villa. "This one please. Well I hope you have a good time." The driver laughed, wrinkling the corners of his eyes.

When the villa door slammed, the lock engaged with a harsh metallic clack. Fabien exhaled. What a relief it was to be home. He checked his Blackberry, but Veronique had still not rung. He didn't blame her. She would just be arriving at her parents' place and kissing them hello. But no. It was only Thursday. She would be at her art class and would be going to visit her parents tomorrow. He'd got confused. She would wonder, no doubt, why he had called so many times. Perhaps he would speak to her in the morning. That would be so nice.

It was time for bed. If he spoke to her, he might reward himself with a lie-in, and then a swim.

His shoes clapped noisily on the tiles. The sound was sharp and crisp, perfectly pitched, but at the base of the stairs he also detected something much slower, deeper, and cyclical. It was Landa, snoring in her room. He didn't want to wake her. Carefully, with one hand on the bannister, Fabien removed his shoes and padded up towards his room in his socks.