

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

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Piaf

During Oregon's winters, Nye Beach is nearly as deserted and shut as the off-season Normandy coast of France. Today, though – in glorious Summer – with the Northwest Trades blustering off the ocean – looking dreamily out the little bakery's street windows, Jurgen just sighs complacently. He knows he really ought to pay more attention to his surroundings, but he's just too old to be interested. He savors a nibble at his lemon and poppy seed muffin. Heaven. But when he lifts his porcelain cup to sip La Maison's marvelous coffee, the press of people inside the bakery bumps his chair from behind, forcing him to rush through the moment. He snatches a sip. He lowers his cup; it clanks his saucer badly. The sip is ruined.

Across the street, through the open front door of the old Sylvia Beach Hotel music wafts, but Jurgen can't hear it over a man guffawing inside the bakery.

Below the bakery's windows, Jurgen can see the fresh Saturday sunshine invites the usual scavenging sparrows – the little brown pias, as he remembers small, non-descript birds are called in French. Amused, he watches the birds hop amongst all the big feet, and peck at stepped-on crumbs on the sidewalk. The expectant, texting tourists queued-up outside the bakery seem to him profane.

When an employee parts the crowd and wheels a large, dolleyed barrel out the front door, Jurgen is jostled again. He knows that if he'd had children of his own, he would be right now sipping amongst his grand children's peers – as rapt, they stare at tiny, hand-held screens of some sort. Rather ruefully, he reflects that he is alive but his era of love ballads like the one coming out the front door of the Sylvia Beach Hotel is gone. Quite unexpectedly, even though he is in possession of perfect coffee and a sublime muffin, a deep sense of loss and torpid moroseness he hasn't felt since he was a teenager washes over him.

That's exactly when, just as in the night he had escaped East Germany, he's jolted by elation. He's shocked! He's - taken – by a frail woman who can't even know he's alive. He watches her limp and wobble and hobble out the front door of the bakery. She's been inside the bakery evidently several minutes. She's lost half of her hair by now, but to Jurgen, there's no question who the diminutive woman is. Her profile is exactly the barb it was. The naked slice of pizza she's carrying on a thin white paper plate is exactly the way she was.

His heart is in his throat! Frozen, still in shock, he watches her peg with her cane toward the street. Gingerly, from the curb, she puts forth a left foot narrow as a popsicle stick. Cautiously, she advances between parked cars.

Once, a long time ago, Jurgen's legs could fly him fast as a Panzerfäust. And he did. Orphaned, in the Christmas snow, he'd escaped fleet-foot from behind the Iron Curtain. He'd dreamed of America. In Paris, among

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the other street waifs, her hands up under his shirt, she whispered to him "C'est toi pour moi, moi pour toi dans la vie." He didn't understand a word, but he knew in his heart then what she meant.

Jurgen stands up abruptly. On his cold, old legs, he wobbles. He shoves his way from his chair into the bakery crowd. He sees her receding. He glimpses her. Ringing her head like a white halo, her hair glows in the sunshine. He is frantic to touch her again.

And just right when he gets to the curb himself, and feebly calls-out her name, just right then, just when his right foot touches between her parked cars, just right then in the far lane of the street, she does it. She drops her slice of pizza.

And according to a Law of Physics, it falls.

And according to the Law of Falling Food, it lands on the pavement – yes – face down.

But according to the international Law of Slim Pickens, she drops her cane and slowly bends at the waist. She is blocking traffic – first, a silver car, then a green garbage truck pulls up behind it. With a kind of groan, she picks up her slice of pizza, re-centers it on her flimsy paper plate. Possibly, a small bit of paving gravel has stuck to the cheese topping of her pizza, because she looks carefully at her food. Casually, she lifts an invisible mote from her plate and flicks it away.

As she begins to disappear on the far side of a line of traffic that stops his advance, as if mocking him, from the front door of the Sylvia Beach Hotel, he hears the powerful voice of a singing woman he had spent a life time trying to forget; her voice filling the whole street she sings, "...Je vois la vie en rose."

Just then, though, an iron curtain of smell and slam and the short air-blast of its parking brake setting, a giant black semi tractor and trailer stop directly in front of him.

Jurgen shuffles to the front of the huge truck. He changes his mind. Running his left hand along the chill metal side, he hurries down toward the truck's rear. Where is she? She was so near! It's futile. He's too old. His panic deepens. So badly, he wants to see her, to just touch her once again. Jurgen's heart is breaking. He stops to gasp. He feels he is dying. He begins to sag to his knees, catches himself.

And then the truck drives away.

The street is empty. Inanely, the bakery crowd texts and chatters. Someone dances alone. A few of the faces turn and look toward the sound as the lonely, resonating voice of the war-time woman proclaims defiantly, "Non! Je ne regrette rien!"

Steel fingers wrap coldly around Jurgen's heart; their grip tightens. They crush.

In Paris, everyone had seen the Americans throwing candy. Everyone dreamed of America where there was candy. Long ago, adopted by a Yankee Doctor, for the hope of cheap candy, Jurgen had abandoned her tender arms. He never saw her ever again. Even though, now, he has just

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glimpsed her after so many years, it is too late.

Completely spent by the episode in the street, Jurgen sags onto the concrete bench in front of the Sylvia Beach Hotel. The bench is old, but the concrete work – the unbroken finish – is artisan-perfect, enduring – with none of the usual re-bar rusting through the surface. Even at its age, the bench is a beautiful thing. People often come to sit on this bench. Jurgen can see this by the worn-away patches in the bit of grass at the foot of the bench – worn away by countless feet – probably of people sitting side-by-side, possibly holding hands. Beside the bench, is a clump of unruly Rosa Ragosa – blooming deep red.

But Jurgen is desolated. Under his breath, bitterly to himself, he remarks, “Arty-farty.”

That’s when the fight starts. It is a fight for life! The combat of tiny, flitting birds brushes his left pant leg. At his feet, three or four of the little brown pias he’d seen across the street are in a struggle over a bit of bread – a faster-than-his-eye-can-follow struggle that carries into the street and back. A single crow flashes in, cuts the squabble short.

At last, through his grief and tears, Jurgen sits numbly, his blurred eyes at first hopelessly following the lively little pias pecking, chirping, gobbling a trail of crumbs someone has just dropped from their pizza crust.