

APRICOT FEVER

I bought a kilo of golden, pink-blushed apricots, each selected for perfection of form and conformity of size. I made my purchase in a supermarket, one whose corporate office spends a ton of money promising much about quality and price while delivering none. And wouldn't you know it, they had a compressed pulp, odourless, non-taste and if one were blindfolded a real trick to identify from a snurf ball and totally in keeping with today's conglomerate food merchant's marketing philosophy, to wit, 'cosmetic appearances beats quality every time'. They tasted nothing as what I remember as real apricots and it brought back a wistful remembrance when fruit smelled and tasted like the gifts of gods.

Presently, I'm so unhappy with what's left of nearly a kilo of indigestible fruit that it brought to mind the fiasco that catapulted me to a life fraught with danger and, admittedly, with the excitement of getting away with it. A pivotal incident in my life has percolated to the surface and rekindled a yearning for when I was a redoubtable 'Fruit Poacher'. I'm in a brooding state of nervousity and, at this juncture, reckless enough to risk unveiling a dark past when I was

Attila incarnate, the rampaging scourge of my hometown's orchards.

Yes, I admit to a nefarious past as a filcher '*sans-pareil*' of fruits of all shape, size and taste. From about my eighth year. I have pilfered from many a farmer's garden, an orchard or even a neighbour's backyard. In my hometown of Ay-Champagne, I knew where every plum tree stood and could judge within a day when pears would be juicy, peaches tender, cherries sweetest and the grape on the vine just ripe for the plucking. Indeed, I became more adept at spotting a fruit tree ready for plunder than many a careless owner who barely kept one eye on his goods. And what a price I exacted for their indolence! I'd sneak up on their succulent goods stealthy as an Apache; I'd clamber up a protecting stone wall with the ease of a salamander and swing from branch to branch agile as a wistiti; unseen, unheard, I'd sneak under a fence, a lethal, grim-faced commando and voracious as an Amazon piranha.

Indeed, since those early venture into compulsive pilfering, when or where I have roamed, in France, Italy or elsewhere in Europe, in Canada or the United States, during an ambitious trek around the girth of this aching but still beautiful globe, I have subconsciously... no, (I'll remain truthful as long as I have the strength to,) I have 'consciously' through eyes darting, scanning, left-right, up-down, ever alert, stalked the countryside seeking a forbidden fruit in a forbidden garden.

Mea culpa. I confess. Forgive me; I have stolen once, twice... thrice? No, so many times, I've lost count.

I have in my bag, (trophy bag as it were,) plucked guava from the tree and strictly for the pleasure Shanghaied an unripe pineapple in the hills of Hawaii. Ostensibly driving with purpose, perhaps to visit a long lost relative, I've driven into a citrus plantation in Florida. One hundred feet through the gate, I stopped, pulled in a branch through the open window and stripped it clean – result? Three dozen magnificent oranges under a minute. Brazenly, I

magnified the beauty of the coup as I paid the same compliment to a Red River grapefruit tree on the other side – two dozen of the fresh and juicy fruit. (My cover story already at hand, just in case... Oh, so sorry, after all, my cousin doesn't live here? My mistake... yes, good idea, I'll check the telephone directory.) Didn't have to test it out, as I merely backed out; so much for the ten feet wide moats and barbed wire fences they thought would keep me out.

A bright red persimmon, hanging from a bush that gracefully complemented a rock and water garden in a Kyoto restaurant; arrogantly cool, I reached out, snapped it up and languidly strolled away; from a tourist laden flatboat out of Bangkok, cobra-fast, I snapped at a cluster of smallish bananas as we zipped under the broad-leafed tree and copped four or five of the sugary fruit. Impassive, I peeled and ate. Startled passengers eyed me strangely – I fixed their gaze until they'd turned theirs away in confusion. I just can't help myself, *c'est plus fort que moi*. In India, I was skunked and haven't forgotten that amongst other memorable defeats in this most picturesque and frustrating of countries, but I shall return. In Germany, I've made off with apples and pears, in Switzerland too, and walnuts in Corsica; while in Spain, I escaped with at least three kilos of delicious clementines and in Italy stuck my hand through a wire mesh, pushed in hard with my shoulder, gained the metre required and came away with the biggest, longest, largest, heaviest, juiciest golden Muscat grape imaginable and that is saying something for someone who has plundered through the hillsides of Champagne, not to forget the Napa and Sonoma valleys of California. Lest you think me a braggart, I'll pass on successful *razzia*'s in Luxembourg, Belgium, Holland, in 8 out of 10 Canadian provinces.

I longed to have a tattoo imprinted on my long arm – “*Pas vu – Pas Pris!*” ‘Unseen – uncaught’ indeed was my motto, however, by all accounts the procedure is just too painful to be acted upon. Why this lust for forbidden fruit? What snake bit me? No, it was not due to Eve's fateful bite thus inherent to human nature, nor

hereditary and therefore lurking in my genes. By day, I was an average innocent lad, going about the business of being the apple of father's eye and mother's sweetie-pie. I was the earnest schoolboy who earned the plaudits of teachers and envy of classmates as I plucked the '*Prix d'excellence*', the plum prize of the scholastic year. Summer and winter, rain or shine, I daily served Low Mass in St. Brice, our town's thirteenth century Gothic church, rising at 5:30 a.m. and going without breakfast or so much as a cup of hot cocoa.

In pre-Pope John 23rd days and the conclave (high-jacked by fuzzy-brained liberals,) Roman Catholics dared not eat a crumb, nor for that matter drink more than a glass of water before receiving Holy Communion.

My religious devotion was duly noted by the Reverend Monsignor who, with appropriate ceremonial, bestowed the coveted wooden cross with blue medallion inlay of the Virgin Mary (akin to having palms added to a '*Croix de guerre*',) upon a pious boy, who if you didn't know better practically wore a halo. There is a family story (can I trust mother to tell the truth?) a shaft of light filtered through a stained glass window, casting for a passing second a light about my head to a weird halo effect. Swearing to it, Mother is equally certain angels whispered in her ear I was to become a priest or even better, a missionary to darkest Africa, and thus she was to devote her beloved and only son to the cloth. If even for just a tiny instant blessed, I later demonstrated, not without an inner twinge of remorse considering Mother's fervent expectations, my total aversion to heed her sacred calling. Amen sisters and brothers, one more youth dragooned into a calling he had no call for was more than a good call, it was right on with a convincing, "You're out!"

The cross brought great distinction. From then on, as opposed to the red surplice over white cassock worn by lesser lights, I could wear all-white sacerdotal vestments during High Masses and what greater honour could a seven-year-old have than to be placed amongst boys twice his age? Along with prestige, there were other

bonuses; for example, I could show off my mastery of the special swing (one-two, one-two-three... chink-ching, chink-ka-ching... it took a lot of practise to be really proficient,) with the incense burner at the faithful gathered and that meant looking the black and white frocked convent girls straight in the eyes with impunity; that I could serve at baby christenings (thereby earning cash gratuities and cornets of almond pralines distributed by proud God-parents,) and even, I'll confess, to join the older boys and take turns in polishing off remainders of sacramental wine – but note well, not consecrated wine, none of us would have dared, besides the officiating priest never left a single drop.

A touch precocious and a mite too precious, however, by most standards, I was a good lad. When did it all change? Indeed, almost overnight, I became the mysterious fruit-thief whose nefarious depredations began to be murmured about and finally talked about in awed tones during recess. Yet, I was mum as a Sphinx guarding a Pharaoh's tomb; I dared not breathe a word of it, not even to my best pal. My purloining forays were committed at the break of dawn when the dew glistened on the skin, or at dusk when the fruit was still warmed by ripening sunrays. To be safe from being sold out by a jealous snitch, I never shared the plunder. I would squat in comfort on a mossy stone set just under the ever ubiquitous sloe bushes that grew thickly above the town's water supply cistern. It was familiar territory, just a few metres from a youthful love nest the existence I'll soon reveal. At leisure, I'd nibble on whatever I'd not already wolfed down on or under the tree. The great advantage was that from that unencumbered point of view I could look over my town and if anyone had ventured in my direction I'd have had plenty of forewarning and skedaddled to the low tunnels criss-crossing under generations of wild sloe bushes with my ill-begotten loot.

I had begun to tell why or how I'd fallen prey to these fits of pilfering before straying into anecdotal tales of marginal import to the main story. Is it to avoid the telling? Then, here without further

procrastination, I'll make a clean breast of it and reveal as to how and when the savage marauder in me was awoken and not set to rest till this very day.

* * * * *

On a fine Sunday, and after serving the early low mass, I'd set off on one of my weekly jaunts. Since the start of the summer holiday, I'd been steadfastly running long distances, ten or twelve kilometres, so I'd be ready for the daily races through the month of August at the month-long holiday camp I went to each year since I was six. And then, come September, I was sure to win the prestigious long distance race held with competing boys from our town's 'école publique'.

(At this juncture you, dear reader, are wondering when, if ever I'm going to come up with the big deal confession? Trust me, I'm about ready and shall proceed forthwith and forthrightly.)

As mentioned above, I had opted to be a consistent winner and thus decided to run cross-country in order to toughen up for the coming battles. It meant I'd take a much different and tougher circuit, up and down the vineyard covered hillsides stretching from the back of our town, to the edge of the Montage de Reims forest. You might wonder how one talks about the 'back' of a town? Indeed, Ay was built in such a way, a walk along the last row of houses along the Boulevard du Nord where vast cellars concealed millions of bottles of bubbly shows that each building is facing downward, towards the Marne Valley below, with the hills behind. Thus giving the effect of a town with a rear and a front as opposed to a place with houses facing any which way. Alright, I'm getting to the story, but not before I breathe a word of why I normally didn't do this particular run.

On that fateful day, I opted for cross-country as against the Ay to Dizey to Magenta return to Ay triangular course as my usual

partner was not available. His father, a nasty taskmaster had grounded him for not producing a first class report card. Pierrot did all he could but was so painfully aware of his father's unrealistic expectations that it made matters worse and the more desperately he tried to learn, the less anything useful stayed in his head. He came to suffer from a nervous tick with head jerking, shoulders twitching in uncontrolled spasms, and his upper mouth often a raw red with constant licking and blowing from a strangely up-curved lower lip. The more the tyrant screamed, the less my friend Pierrot could produce, the worse it got. What martyrdom and further absolute proof that adults are not all they're cracked up to be!

Although this has absolutely nothing to do with my story, I'm so happy to tell you he overcame the nefarious effects a martinet father had on his youth. Because of above average height, he was mustered into an elite parachutist regiment when his enlistment class was called to military duty. He was almost three years my senior but I was already out of reach of the army's grasp safely tucked away by my parents immigrating to these daunting shores, but that's another story. During the worse of the Algerian conflict, he saw action, was promoted and came out a confident, likeable man. He is married, has children, a good trade as a locksmith and lives in Paris. Bravo! I'm so glad for my pal, Pierrot.

But on that day, when we were still kids, he didn't show and instead of the usual routine itinerary, coming out of St. Brice, I turned up the main perpendicular street that led past the Chateau Ayala, (slowing down and glancing in, hoping one of the two gorgeous, dark and curly haired, violet-eyed daughters of the '*Maitre de Champagne*' was lolling about in the front yard and could admire my form,) skirt the town's water supply cistern, by the grotto with the water fountain, disappeared into the crevassed roadway under the shadow of the wild sloe plums that covered the upper edges. My best pal and namesake Jean and I used to crawl under those bushes where had evolved over the years a Swiss emmental of low, dry tunnels to play 'house' if we succeeded to

entice the youngest sister from the Ayala Chateau. In our version one of us would inevitably heed a call to arms thus being bid a fond farewell by the 'lady of the house'. In the meantime the other remained discreetly out of sight, then the other one gone some way beyond view, he'd step up to comfort the pretty one in keeping with our a little too daring '*ménage à trois*'. Jean and I were truly great chums as we always split the army duty, meaning we each had our moments alone with the delightful little sweetheart and made our initial progress towards finding out in which way females were different and '*vive la différence*'. When she couldn't join us, we'd take our frustrations out on '*vignerons*' or cart drivers on their way to or from the fields with clumps of clay we heaved grenade-style then ducked behind the thick bushes.

Once past that shadowed lane I'd remerged into the sunshine on the upper slopes. Finally, I was lopping at an easy trot, loose and confident – I'd show up Jean who as in all other things, scholastic or sporting was my most serious rival. I already relished the way I'd do it on our very first race. Or perhaps, I'd let him win that first one the better to destroy him. I'd lead him on. I'd just barely stay on his heels. I'd be blowing hard, holding my side, pretending I had a stitch in my side, I'd stagger to the gate and collapse and he'd go on to win as he expected to. But on a dramatic day of my choosing, when the time was ripe and the right audience (female, of course,) then only then would I do him in. I'd play a waiting game – then I'd blast past on the final sprint. I'd beat the proud Jean by ten metres, even more. I'd run the last five backwards. Wow and whoopee!!!

And so I imagined different scenarios, day by day – I'd be untouchable, unbeatable, undeniably the champion of the road and the darling of Jean's cousin, the beautiful Marie-Jane. Thinking about it, bursting with vitality, I'd reel off a fast fifty metres along the sandy path that ran in a straight line between hectares of mostly Pinot Noir and a few acres of white Chardonnay. I'd run until I came to the '*Grand peuplier*', a many centuries old popular, so ancient it was assigned protection as a national monument. At its

base a simple plaque attested to its uniqueness although we locals hardly noticed and there the path forked left, snaking upwards towards higher hills, with strange names such as '*Froid cul*' (it meant what it said, the *vignerons* had to work up a steep incline, backside pointing to the north and when a cold wind blew it was mighty unpleasant, and thus as my father attested, the appropriateness of the name.) As well as *Cotelette*, (from a distance the contours had the shape of a pork shop,) *La Beauve*, *La Crayère* and others with equally colourful names.

To the right meant towards a low-lying, lush hollow, too wet and the soil composition lacking the chalky ingredient required for the famed Champagne grape varieties and thus regretfully given over to a few gardens and two or three small orchards and finally beyond to the edge of a deep green forest. I never knew which way I'd go. I'd simply choose one or the other, probably depending on which foot happened to be leading at the time.

And so, without rhyme or reason, springs up a decisive moment in a boy's life that traces the future course on his adult map. Many a writer has derived reputation and wealth for discovering, exposing and explaining such pivotal events. My life took a sharp turn left as I turned to the right (although left would have been right,) the day I headed 'down' the incline instead of 'up' the slope.

Transpiring from the arduous run and sprint, I'd found a bit of shade under a tree, at the bottom of the dale; panting, I semi-squatted, head down, back propped up by a varicosed wall. I caught my breath and as my heaving ceased I looked up and there, directly above, hanging under a green-hued canopy, my eyes were dazzled by a myriad golden stars in the shape of apricots. Never had I seen such a fruitful tree. An overburdened branch surely would have snapped had it not rested a shoulder upon the wall's roof. Still, several offshoots, hung over, almost, but not quite within my reach. I wasn't even aware that already I was jumping up and down, right hand grasping, reaching, grazing, tantalizingly close then with a

tremendous leap, coming down, falling in a heap... but an apricot delicately held by gentle fingers... and in my mouth... in one seamless move.

And it melted in my mouth; the fragrance invaded my nostrils, a savoury treat never before so much enjoyed. Again and again, I went up and down. Ten times or more, with a tremendous leap, I plucked each apricot until none was left within reach. But now, I wasn't close to being satisfied; never had anything tasted so delicious. There were tons left, on that one branch alone, all I needed was a boost, or a ladder. I skulked about the vicinity, hoping for some kind of inspiration but saw nothing that might be of use – it was discouraging. Muttering against the fates that put a treasure within reach and yet so far beyond my grasp, petulant, I kicked at the wall and just then noticed it had huge cracks and here and there fist-sized holes. Those indentations were perfect in which to insert the tip of a toe, reach for a hand-hold, find another foothold, gingerly gain height, but then I'd lose my grip, my balance and drop back to ground. Three or four times, starting over but each time going a little further up, until I perfected my scaling technique and at last my hand grasped the top of the crumbling wall.

I lifted a leg over and hoisted the rest of my body. I was lucky and blessed by the near-absence of glass shards, a once favourite defence mechanism throughout Europe. Razor sharp broken bottles halves were cemented into the flat top of the wall, jagged ends sure to shred any would-be thief stupid enough to attempt such a way in over the walls that oft protected rural homes or farms. I suppose today they're considered too barbaric and no longer tolerated. As it was, my wall was old and decrepit and only a few weather-beaten, rounded-off shards remained to catch the unwary.

The next few moments are clearly etched in my memory. Straddling the wall, I fed on the branch with purpose, aplomb and precision – pluck an apricot, pop it in the mouth, deftly with the right amount of pressure between teeth and palate split it in two, spit

the stone out, let the juice run down the hatch for a delicious second or two. Swallow and start again, and again, and again. Don't shake your head in disgust; you'd have done the same given half the chance. Those apricots were just *'a point'* caught as a warming sun had just evaporated the last of the dew, the skin was warming, the inside flesh still cool, in other words the way God meant us to eat apricots.

I cleaned out the nearest batch and bumped my bum along, one bump at a time, preoccupied in the foraging as it could hardly be described as normal eating. How many did I engulf? Honestly, I can't recall but it must have been two or three dozen of the golden fruits. Finally, when I couldn't force one more down, astride like a spring-time bullfrog on a lily pad, I ventilated – belly out, in and out, in-out, in-out. I huffed and puffed slowly regaining a semblance of normal breathing. In the meanwhile, the time spent on the summit made me aware of my first act of brigandage and goose pimples rose on my arms, event though I was wearing a warm sweater necessary to ward off the cold and dampness of a 6 o'clock mass inside a stone-cold church. And that gave me an idea. I stuck the sweater's hem into my pants and didn't even need to tighten the belt as my stomach was stupendously bloated. I was aware of nothing, but oh my gosh, how quickly and nimbly did I pluck and stuff as many blessed apricots as I could down the collar and spread them around the waits, moved some to the back and others under my armpits, yet more inside the arms, and filled up the front, every nook and cranny filled from the generous branch. Finally, I couldn't make room for one more but as I held two more in my now sticky-fingers, I cleverly found room to stick one either side of my cheeks, obviously, not one to waste a golden opportunity.

A couple of years earlier, I'd already learned a fateful lesson, namely that *'the meek do not inherit the earth, they merely toil on it'*. (*Remind me some day to tell you the story of the 'Lady in Red'*.) Finally, looking down I made the most graceful leap to ground I could under the circumstances. I landed on the balls of my feet,

flexed my knees, sank to my knees, broke the momentum with my hands and picked myself up. I stuck my landing – a perfect Olympic ten. Not one apricot lost, none squashed, even the duo in my mouth still perfectly intact.

I breathed a sigh of satisfaction but then the most horrific, blood-curdling note hit my brain. The blood literally froze in my veins. I swear, I know exactly what is meant by the expression some might find excessive. From somewhere directly above, a non-voice roared, ‘**Yorrgghh... Yiiirghh hey-hey... toi! Oui-oui, toi, J’te vois! Voleur!!!** Hoo-hoooo... *au voleur!*’ You, yes you! I see you! Thief!

God, it must be God! No, I see him. He’s there on top of the hill, he’s pointing at me... he, he... he’s coming down... no, and he’s running down. Papa? Maman? Help, I got to get me out of here!

At this juncture my memory is not much more than a blur, a vague remembrance of sheer, palpable terror. I do suppose my legs moved and I started to run, don’t know where, straight ahead most likely. As it was, I was stumbling in an oblique direction towards my chaser. I could see him from the corner of my eyes, hoot-hooting... arms flapping like windmill wings in a gale... rolling down like a snowball in an avalanche... down the long rows of Pinot Noir... now and then disappearing down a depression (oh God, let him be swallowed by the earth...) and then a head reappearing, bobbing up and down, and all the while emitting a horrible hoot-hooting something akin to a steam locomotive gone berserk.

I ran or rather stumbled forward; doubly slowed down by my excess on the wall and the excess baggage that I held in by hugging the bouncing contents to my tummy. Meanwhile I knew jail was waiting. Or if I got away, I’d surely been recognized. The Foreign Legion was my only way out. Did they sign-on altar boys?

Or I could hide out in the forest. Live off the land. I'd sneak in at night to see Mommy. Oh Merciful Lord, save me. I'll become a monk... no, better yet, a hermit... I'll eat insects and drink naught but the sweat off my brow. Meanwhile running with my arms hugging myself most definitely impeded real progress. You see what I mean? How could I get away? And I didn't. I could hear the freight train bearing down on me, closing with each stride... thunk-thunk... thunk-thunk... then a hand grasped... no, a claw dug into my shoulder. "Ooo-laaa! Whoa!"

I was done. I was cooked. I sank to my knees and heard the most terrifying words of my life.

"In the name of the law... **I... Me...** game warden for Ay-Champagne arrest you. Get up, you lout. You rascal, I saw you filching tons of apricots. Let me take a look at you."

In a state of shock, I staggered up. He was even more terrifying as a looming figure cut out as a black silhouette against the sun directly behind. I had no time to think but I heard a voice pleading, "Pleeeaaase... pleeeaaase... don't turn me in ... I won't do it again."

"*Zut alors!!!* Who's this? Jeannot? It's you. It's not possible. You, the apple of your father's eye! *La prunelle des yeux de ta mere!* Let me tell you how insidiously nasty that was, in English, he'd have said, the 'iris' of your mother's eye. You, the most devout altar boy of St. Brice parish... the honor student... alas, dishonored for ever."

And on and on! An unbroken litany of my wrongdoings, doomed future, broken-hearted parents, shamed sisters, all of this while expiated my sins on Guyana's notorious Devil's Island. Yet, it dawned on me the voice was familiar and through the haze of semi-lucidity I tried to concentrate – whose? At last as he moved to take my hand and lead me away towards town, my watery eyes

barely making out a somewhat known face, at last I recognized my captor. A sliver of hope in a stygian gloom was after all there to light my way out of hell and brimstone. I stuttered, “Jo... jo... jo... seph.” I bleated, “It’s me-ehh... me-ehh. Please, look.”

“Me-eh... me-eh... you sound like a lost sheep. I know full well who you are and that makes it much worse, certainly not better,” he replied, implacable. “You have brought disgrace to your good family name. Your father will slave all his life to pay for your misdeed. Your sisters will go into a nunnery or worse... your poor mother... your poor mother.”

He left unsaid what would befall my poor mother and my brains were turning into curdled ‘*sauce blanche*’. Meanwhile, I begged for release, “Joooooseph. Jo-jo? Pleeeeaass ooh pleeeass.”

Impossible, as a duly sworn ‘*Garde Champetre*’ he could not break his sacred oath of office, he claimed, even if he could, for the sake of my hitherto irreproachable family, not even if it gained him the favor of Veronique, my beautiful older sister. Not even for a kiss from her very own lips, assured he and that I knew was the final nail. Small as I was, I knew every young swain in town and for ten leagues was pining for my gorgeous, blonde and unattainable sister – father was seeing to that!

Joseph, or Jo-jo, as we called him affectionately had lived with his family in the apartment across from ours. He’d been a good pal in the past. He was the one who has scavenged from the ashes of a burned to the ground bourgeois mansion the greatest gift I’d ever received till then, bar none. He’d presented me with a metal-colored, (the red paint had peeled in the intense heat of the charred home and the few remaining scales had been scrapped off by Dad,) honest-to-goodness automobile. A pedal-driven convertible, large and sturdy enough to accommodate a driver and a passenger - imagine? I was the king of the apartment block and my fame spread well beyond my normal domain. Kids came bearing gifts for the privilege to be

driven around, once or twice, depending on size of donation, around our apartment building's large courtyard. Occasionally, as a very special favor, I might let a very good friend drive, as long as I was sitting besides and giving directions. Left... right... go on straight... back up, (only required to reverse the direction of the pedaling,) or even my sisters were able to make use of the 'family' car' they and their girlfriends would fill the car with dolls and we'd all play house and how innocent and how much fun we had. But all that was in the far away past, at least two years gone and you know that's an eternity for a small boy.

On Sunday afternoons, father would stop any oncoming traffic (not likely as there were but a handful of cars and a few trucks in town as horse drawn and even oxcarts were still prevailing due to short supplies of gasoline years after the war,) none the less he made a show of standing in the middle of Ay's main through road to allow me to grandly pedal my way across to the gravel surfaced esplanade of the '*Grand Boulevard*'. There, I cruised and reigned absolute and all thanks to this benefactor-turned-policeman. The car was so used, by small and big alike that eventually it just collapsed beyond redemption. The seat caved in, rust that had accumulated underneath and done its hidden work finally brought my pride and joy beyond even my father's best technical efforts to mend but what a great couple of years!

And so, inexorably, I was dragged, sobbing, head down, towards my fate. He kept mumbling about dungeons... rats... bad boys... weeping mothers... grieving fathers... shamed sisters... probable excommunication... and meanwhile, I was divesting myself, surreptitiously, on the quiet, of my ill-gotten spoils. Led down the garden path, as it were, the custodian holding tight to my left wrist, I was doing my best to drop the incriminating evidence of my '*razzia*' by the wayside. First, one by one, I'd swallowed the two apricots in my cheeks, yes, stone and all. And even in my semi-conscious state, had the presence of my mind to thank God I'd not come across a peach tree. Next, I shook the apricots from my right

arm loose; tossing them behind, with a sharp little backward snap of the arm, from the elbow down. It worked, they were all gone. Then I reached for the back, where the sweater was tightly held in by the belt and lifted the hem free. I felt the first apricots slide down... and drop... running down my backside and had I been a little ass, passersby might have thought I was dropping golden nuggets down the dusty road.

I managed to shift the front load to the back and as we hit the first houses of the topmost street in town, miraculously there no longer was any evidence remaining. At the very least it might make it difficult to prove how much I'd stolen and perhaps mitigate my sentence. Guilty I was and there was no question in my mind that I'd throw myself at the mercy of the court, still, I might only be convicted of what I'd eaten and how much could that be? As we headed for the town hall, (the police had their two room offices at the side, and reputedly, although none of us kids had ever seen it, a proper jail room, at the back, complete with iron bars,) I realized I still had an armful lodged in my left arm and that was held in a vise. As a last resort, I let myself drop, full weight, to the road. "Please? Jo-jo, my arm is aching."

Jo-jo looked down and changed his grip to hold my right hand. Hourrah! In 30 seconds I'd lost the last of the damning incriminating evidence. Now I was as ready as I'd ever be. Inexorably we progressed, down the central dividing street of our town, that which made one area, east and the other, west. At the bottom, I could see the widening expanse of the main city square, where the cenotaph stood, where town celebrations took place, where Patton's liberating Third Army troops were cheered and where the three women had their heads shaven and hair-strewn shoulders swept clean with the humiliating beating of a bramble broom.

So far the matinal hour had saved me from the ultimate embarrassment of crossing paths with someone familiar. It was

Sunday morning and other than a very few old parishioners who'd already been and returned from six o'clock mass, the one I'd faithfully served the past two years, that very morning included, the town was still asleep. All, except my tormentor, and what was he doing out there? Good question I never thought to ask, seeing the circumstances, and one I belatedly, decades later, is asking myself. What the hell was he doing there? Was he up to no good, as some folks would whisper behind his back? Were the innuendos of small time pilfering justified? There were many small sheds strewn about in the vineyards where the *vigneron* kept tools and useful paraphernalia, easy and tempting targets for quick resale in another village or town. I'll never know but how I'd love to know.

We hit the square and he paused for effect. "There," he pointed left, "is the jail. And there," he pointed right, "is your home."

I waited with bated breath. What did that mean? I soon found out.

He took a conspirational tone and leaned to whisper, "Stop sniveling Jeannot. Turn over half your booty. Quickly and we'll call it quits!"

I didn't hear. I stood there, eyes blinking... a word creeping in... **saved**... you are miraculously saved... quick, give him your apricots... all your apricots! And once again terror, nausea rushing to my lips, my knees buckled and only his grip on my wrist kept me from collapse. "I don't have any... not any... none... *rien du tout*."

Soon enough he discovered the veracity of my words. "Wha-at? Whe-ere? What did you do? You were loaded. I saw you." He was lifting my sweater over my head and patting down my pockets. I told him what I'd done and he burst out cackling. "*Hè-hè-hè!!!* You little fool. I'm your friend... your pal... I gave you that beauty car remember? I wouldn't ever turn you in. It was a joke... a big

joke... I just wanted to scare you a little. Jeez, what an idiot you are. You dumped all those delicious apricots? Chhriippss!” He hunched his shoulders in a fatalistic ‘I give up’ shrug and urged me on my way with a snappy boot to the ass. “Go home and keep your mouth shut you silly donkey.”

As if I was about to tell anyone any of this? Wasn’t the last boot humiliation enough? I was vexed and furious. Immediately forgotten all my prayers, each promise and swore to make good. Henceforth, I would hate all adults (Maman and Papa excepted) and would make them pay. How better than to steal the fruits of their labour? And that is how I have ever since made the world pay for that asinine man’s malicious and gratuitous mental torture of a hitherto sweet and innocent child.

There’s much more to this story than meets the eye. I was tainted from that moment on with a jaundiced appreciation of all authoritative figures. Anyone who’d imagine that mere longevity conveyed a sort of extra wisdom was looked upon askance. Oh, I’m not claiming I was unable to accept direction but only from someone whom I truly felt had earned my respect via a long list of achievements and a measured manner to convey information or even advice. I much preferred to depend on my own initiative, unwavering confidence in my abilities and let the chips fall where they may. In success or failure I could put it all on my own decisions, thus great satisfaction in winning and a determination to learn from a loss. Is this the braggadocio of an insufferable egomaniac? I don’t think so as long as I’ve been true to my personal values and as a result taken the many lumps that came along without whimpering I’d been hard done by.

Ah Joseph, if you could have foreseen the resulting contradiction in the boy you confronted so ferociously with the stupidity of adulthood, surely today, in your dotage, you’d drop your head in shame. Couldn’t we just have shared in the booty? Sit in a shady spot and savour the loveliest of God’s gifts? You could

have talked to me, perhaps mentioned that eating a few apricots wasn't so bad but to load up as I had was a mite too much. I was a sensitive lad, I would have harkened to wise words. But no, you had to use an 'adult' approach; in other words, you were full of shit! And so it is I claim justification for having since revenged myself a hundred fold for the fright of my life.

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It's just about daybreak and I happen to know there's a tree laden with juicy, golden Honey Plums that appeared just about ripe yesterday. There's a conspirational mist swirling about, a hush in the air and but a stone's throw from here – I think I'll go for a little stroll, down memory lane, as it were.

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