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**an excerpt from**

# **No Wolf** **(the waygoing compromise)**

**by**  
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New York

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# Horrid Rice Scar

One Saturday, Jean-Claude woke up early and knocked persistently on my sleeping door. I opened, thinking something was wrong. Our lopsided household had a habit of sleeping in until Saturday afternoons.

He apologized for waking me — looked freshly woken up himself — and asked if I wanted to go to a triathlon with him.

I still thought something was wrong.

He was groggy too — I didn't know what time it was, but it was early.

He excused himself, and said that he was going to start getting ready to go to a triathlon, that he thought it might interest me because I was a runner... and if it didn't interest me as a runner, it might interest me because I was a photographer... and if it didn't interest me as a photographer, it might be nice anyway, just to see the other side of Guadeloupe.

The triathlon, he explained was in a town much smaller than any I'd ever been to. I wondered how he could be sure of that, but agreed, as a photographer and a tourist. I can't watch runners as a runner.

Jean-Claude explained that his brother was participating and wondered if I would take photos of him during the race.

"Having a photographer in the house," he said, "is useful."

I suppose it is. I was more interested in just hanging out but agreed. He knew I didn't have many other options, and there was something generous in his voice. I was happy to do it and got my camera ready.

You may not be surprised to learn that triathlons are boring

things for spectators. Why? As a spectator, you're at a fixed point. There's a lot of waiting. Worse than baseball.

Wait for the athletes to get in the water.  
Wait for the athletes to get out of the water.  
Wait for the athletes to get on their bikes.  
...off their bikes.  
Etc.

During one of these waiting periods, I took a walk to explore. The race was in a tiny tiny village called Aigles des Abymes. Aigles des Abymes was at the point of a small bay. When I say small, I mean it. The entire population of the village must have been less than two or three hundred.

There was a canal by the sea that led to a freshwater swimming pool full of fish. There was a big hill behind it that overlooked the bay, and steep stairs that led to a rustic church at the top. Power lines dangled haphazardly from house to house, and I counted one streetlight. Zero stoplights.

I walked up the precarious steps toward the church, just wandering. The closer I got the better the view below me. I kept turning around.

The church was quite obviously still in use, but was decrepit. The white paint was peeling and falling off, leaving a snow-like dust of white paint chips close to the walls.

Looking in through the open door, I could see an altar and dark wooden pews. Room for about 70 or 80 people, no more. The beams were exposed on the ceiling. The wooden framework — skeleton of the church — was entirely exposed. The floor, too, was nothing but a series of connected boards worn flat from use.

It smelled old.  
It smelled religious.  
It smelled compelling, and I had to take every other step forward.

Behind me, the salty bay and blue sky ignored me. The breeze blew in.

I could see straight through the back door, and in traditional Caribbean fashion, there was a cemetery in the back.

I walked around the white walls to the other side. There were wooden benches along the side that looked like they hadn't been used in years, covered in white paint chips and dust.

I could hear voices off in the distance, blowing in and out with the breeze. I glanced back down at them, knowing they didn't see me.

I could smell the oldness. I could smell the sea and the heat eroding the structure.

There was a large concrete wall, a large eroding concrete wall surrounding the cemetery. The wall, like the building was flaking all over the place. I walked the long way around the wall, trying to find the opening, and finally found it on the far side.

I was a little nervous going in. I was in the middle of nowhere — there was only one way in and one way out, and I wasn't exactly sure whether or not what I was doing was considered trespassing or at best disrespectful. But there was no one around. And I was exploring.

Since being in Guadeloupe, I had opened my heart even more to exploration and the "why not-ness" of things. So why not?

I stepped in and felt the breeze stop. I wondered if it had ominously stopped or if it was just the physics of being behind a wall.

The graves were all ancient looking. Some were rickety crosses with hand-written names, and others were once elaborate (yet still decaying) tombs made out of brick or concrete.

Everything had a still, untouched, tone about it.

No wind.

No sounds.

No footprints.

No life.

Nothing grew.

Even the weeds were gone, which was incredible for Guadeloupe, where everything was green and overgrown.

I imagined the white skeletons beneath me.

Still.

No eyes to close.

The flesh had been eaten away.

Probably bone, too, in most cases.

What was left of these people? Stillness.

I took pictures of the stillness. I adjusted my camera, too. I wanted everything to be still, so I shot quickly, giving nothing the chance to change. And nothing did.

Just as I was getting into it, I heard footsteps, and felt bad for being there. I felt cautious. As I said, I felt like I was intruding, being

disrespectful, but I hoped that whomever the footsteps belonged to didn't agree with me.

I didn't know what to do, really. I've learned — from numerous similar encounters — that often the best thing to do in these situations is to act casual, act like you're not doing anything wrong, and you aren't.

Listen, if reading this far has taught you anything, let it teach you now that that's the way to go:

Act casual.

Act casual.

I even kept taking pictures in hopes that it would add to the casualness of my being there. And it did. A slow-moving groundskeeper walked by, hardly opening his mouth enough to let out a "bonjou." He said it so lazily, all I heard was the "j" in the middle. He was missing most of his teeth, which gave his face a softness that he wouldn't have otherwise had. The rest of him looked hard and old, swollen and leathery.

He was carrying a flowerpot in one hand and a steel bar in the other — probably a tool of some sort, but no tool I'd ever seen before. I looked in his eyes, which were puffy and dark, but honest and gentle. I could tell that he didn't mind at all that I was there. I couldn't have belonged more if I were a tombstone.

The groundskeeper shuffled down the small hill and out of sight, and I was alone again.

The names on the graves intrigued me. I looked around for a few more minutes, and feeling a bit more confident of belonging there, I lit a cigarette.

I looked for a "Richard," just out of curiosity. It was a common enough name — even in Guadeloupe — that there was bound to be one somewhere.

Walking back and forth, I saw names like  
Alexandrine Gappu-Flavie  
Gamma Loyal  
Jacques Auvray  
Auriol Grandai  
Names from a faraway time.  
Names that had a lot to do with the past.

Eventually I found a Richard. It was a small hand-written black cross.

“Ici repose Richard Socrier”<sup>1</sup> was written on the horizontal part in white. I looked for a date, but it was too old and weathered to see. It looked like it said 1927, but it might have been 1997. The handwriting was childish and loose. The first “R” in the last name was capitalized, for example, and the rest were not:

richard socRier

I wondered if it was a childish mistake, or if it meant something. I made anagrams out of it, and “Chair Disc Error” was the best I could come up with, honorable mention going to “Horrid Rice Scar.”

Obviously it didn’t mean anything.  
Nothing ever means anything.

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1 Here lies Richard Socrier.

{spamoscope}

Hermione, seemed to be thinking along these lines, said quickly, off with the plates, leaving them sparkling clean. Tonight she took his hands and was busy pointing to the home position.

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