



# **Perfidia**

**By Lewis Shiner**

"That's Glenn Miller," my father said. "But it can't be." He had the back of the hospital bed cranked upright, the lower lid of his left eye creeping up in a warning signal I'd learned to recognize as a child. My older sister Ann had settled deep in the recliner, and she glared at me too, blaming me for winding him up. The jam box sat on the rolling tray table and my father was working the remote as he talked, backing up my newly burned CD and letting it spin forward to play a few seconds of low fidelity trombone solo.

"You know the tune, of course," he said.

"King Porter Stomp." Those childhood years of listening to him play Glenn Miller on the console phonograph were finally paying off.

"He muffed the notes the same way on the Victor version."

"So why can't it be Miller?" I asked.

"He wouldn't have played with a rabble like that." The backup musicians teetered on the edge of chaos, playing with an abandon somewhere between Dixieland and bebop. "They sound drunk." My father had a major emotional investment in Miller. He and my mother had danced to the Miller band at Glen Island Casino on Long Island Sound in the summer of 1942, when they were both sixteen. That signature sound of

clarinet and four saxes was forever tied up for him with first love and the early, idealistic months of the war.

But there was a better reason why it couldn't have been Miller playing that solo. If the date on the original recording was correct, he was supposed to have died three days earlier.

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The date was in India ink on a piece of surgical tape, stuck to the top of a spool of recording wire. The handwritten numerals had the hooks and day-first order of Europe: 18/12/44. I'd won it on eBay the week before as part of a lot that included a wire recorder and a stack of 78s by French pop stars like Charles Trenent and Edith Piaf.

It had taken me two full days to transfer the contents of the spool to my computer, and I'd brought the results to my father to confirm what I didn't quite dare to hope--that I'd made a Big Score, the kind of find that becomes legend in the world of collectors, like the first edition *Huck Finn* at the yard sale, the Rembrandt under the 19th century landscape.

On my Web site I've got everything from an Apollo player piano to a 1930s Philco radio to an original Wurlitzer Model 1015 jukebox, all meticulously restored. During the Internet boom I was shipping my top dollar items to instant Silicon Valley millionaires as fast as I could find them and clean them up, with

three full-time employees doing the refurbishing in a rented warehouse. For the last year I'd been back in my own garage, spending more time behind a browser than trolling the flea markets and thrift stores where the long shots lived, and I wanted to be back on top. It wasn't just the freedom and the financial security, it was the thrill of the chase and the sense of doing something important, rescuing valuable pieces of history.

Or, in this case, rewriting history.

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On the CD, the song broke down. After some shifting of chairs and unintelligible bickering in what sounded like French, the band stumbled into a ragged version of "Perfidia," the great

ballad of faithless love. It had been my mother's favorite song.

My father's eyes showed confusion and the beginnings of anger. "Where did you get this?"

"At an auction. What's wrong?"

"Everything." The stroke had left him with a slurping quality to his speech, and his right hand lay at what should have been an uncomfortable angle on the bedclothes. The world hadn't been making much sense for him for the last eight months, starting with the sudden onset of diabetes at age 76. With increasing helplessness and alarm, he'd watched his body forsake him at every turn: a broken hip, phlebitis, periodontal disease, and now the stroke, as if the

warranty had run out and everything was breaking down at once. Things he'd done for himself for the five years since my mother's death suddenly seemed beyond him--washing dishes, changing the bed, even buying groceries. He could spend hours walking the aisles, reading the ingredients on a can of hominy, comparing the fractions of a pound that separated one package of ground meat from another, overwhelmed by details that had once meant something.

"Who are these people? Why are they playing this way?"

"I don't know," I told him. "But I intend to find out. Listen." On the CD there was a shout from the audience and then something that could have been a

crack from the snare drum or a gunshot. The band trailed off, and that was where it ended, with more shouts, the sound of furniture crashing and glass breaking, and then silence.

"Turn it off," my father said, though it was already over. I took the CD out and moved the boom box back to windowsill. "It's some kind of fake," he finally said, more to himself than me. "They could take his solo off another recording and put a new background to it."

"It came off a wire recorder. I didn't pay enough for it to justify that kind of trouble. Look, I'm going to track this down."

"You do that. I want to know what

kind of psycho would concoct something like this." He waved his left hand vaguely. "I'm tired. You two go home." It was nine at night; I could see the lights of downtown Durham through the window. I'd been so focused on the recording that I'd lost all sense of time.

Ann bent down to kiss him and said, "I'll be right outside if you need me."

"I'll be fine. Go get something to eat. Or go to the motel and sleep, for God's sake." My father had come to North Carolina for the VA hospital at Duke, and Ann had flown in from Connecticut to be with him. I'd offered her my guest room, 25 miles away in Raleigh, but she'd insisted on being walking distance from the hospital.

In the hallway, her rage boiled over. "What was the point of that?" she hissed.

"That's the most involved I've seen him since the stroke. I think it was good for him."

"Well, I don't. And you could at least have consulted me first." Ann's height and big bones had opened her to ridicule in grade school, and for as long as I could remember she'd been contained, slightly hunched, given to whispers instead of shouts.

"Do you really need to control my conversations with him now?"

"Apparently. And don't make this about me. This is about him getting better."

"I want that too."

"But I'm the one who's here with him, day in and day out." It was easy to see where this was headed, back to our mother again. "I've got to go," I said. She accepted my hug stiffly. "You should take his advice and get some rest."

"I'll think about it," she said, but as the elevator doors closed, I could see her in the lounge two doors down from his room, staring at the floor in front of her.

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I had email from the seller waiting at home. Her initial response when I'd written her about the recorder had been wary. I'd labored hard over the next message, offering her ten percent of anything I made off the deal, up to a thousand dollars, at the same time

lowballing the odds of actually selling it, and all the while working on her guilt--with no provenance, the items were virtually worthless to me.

She'd gone for it, admitting picking everything up together at one stall in the Marché Vernaison, part of the vast warren of flea markets at Saint-Ouen, on the northern edge of Paris. She wasn't sure which one, but she remembered an older man with long, graying hair, a worn carpet on a dirt floor, a lot of Mickey Mouse clocks.

I knew the Vernaison because one of my competitors operated a high-end stall there, a woman who called herself Madame B. The description of the old man's place didn't ring any bells for me,

but the mere mention of that district of Paris made my palms sweat.

My business gave me an excuse to read up on music history. I already knew a fair amount about Miller's death, and I'd gone back to my bookshelves the night before. Miller allegedly took off from the Twinwood Farm airfield, north of London, on Friday, December 15, 1944. He was supposed to be en route to Paris to arrange a series of concerts by his Army Air Force Band, but the plane never arrived. Of the half dozen or more legends that dispute the official account, the most persistent has him flying over on the day before, and being fatally injured on the 18th in a brawl in the red light district of Pigalle. Pigalle was a

short taxi ride from the Hotel des Olympiades, where the band had been scheduled to stay, and the Hotel des Olympiades was itself only a short walk from the Marché

Vernaison.

I walked out to the garage and looked at the wire recorder where it sat on a bench, its case removed, its lovely oversized vacuum tubes visible from the side. I'd recognized it in the eBay photos as an Armour Model 50, manufactured by GE for the US Army and Navy, though I'd never seen one firsthand before. The face was smaller than an LP cover, tilted away to almost meet the line of the back. Two reels mounted toward the top each measured about four

inches in diameter and an inch thick, wound with steel wire the thickness of a human hair. More than anything else it reminded me of the Bell & Howell 8mm movie projector that my father had tortured us with as children, showing captive audiences of dinner guests his home movies featuring Ann and me as children and my mother in the radiant beauty of her 30s.

The wire recorder hadn't been working when it arrived, but I'd been lucky. Blowing a half century's worth of dust off the electronics with an air gun, I'd found the broken bit of wire that had fallen into the works and caused a short. That and replacing a burnt-out power tube from my extensive stock of spare

parts was all it had taken--apart from cleaning the wire itself. The trick was to remove the corrosion without affecting the magnetic properties of the metal. I'd spent eight hours running the wire through a folded nylon scrub pad soaked in WD40, letting the machine's bailers wind the wire evenly back on the reel, stopping now and then to confirm there was still something there. Then I'd jury-rigged a bypass from the built-in speaker, through a preamp and into an eighth-inch jack that I could plug into my laptop. With excruciating care, I'd played it into a

.wav file and worked on the results with CoolEdit Pro for another hour, trying to control the trembling in my

hands as I began to realize what I had.

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When I got to the hospital in the morning, my father was reading the newspaper. Ann was still in the same clothes I'd last seen her in; she'd already had circles under her eyes, so it was hard to say if they were deeper. "You're here early," she said, with a smile that failed to cover the implied criticism.

"I'm on a plane to Paris tonight."

"Oh really?"

"You going to find out about that tape?" my father asked.

"That's the idea. My travel agent found me a cheap cancellation."

"How lucky for you," Ann said.

"This is business, Ann." I stifled my

reflex irritation. "That recording could be worth a fortune."

"Of course it could," she said.

"Don't give those French any more of your money than you have to," my father said.

"Oh, Pop," I said. "Don't start."

"We had to bail their sorry country out in World War II, and now--"

"No politics," Ann said. "I absolutely forbid it." I sat on the edge of the bed next to him. "You're not going to die on me, are you, Pop? At least not until I get back?"

"What makes you so special that I should wait for you?"

"Because you want to see how this turns out."

"I already know it's a fake. But there is the pleasure of saying I told you so. You'd think I'd get tired of it after all these years, but it's like fine wine."

I leaned over to hug him and his left arm went around my back with surprising power. He had two days' growth of beard and the starchy smell of hospital soap. "I'm serious," I said. "I want you to take care of yourself."

"Yeah, yeah. If you bag one of those French girls, ask if her mom remembers me."

"I thought you were only in Germany." His unit had liberated Dachau, but he never talked about it, or any other part of the war.

"I got around," he shrugged. His left

arm relaxed and I pulled away. "Don't take any wooden Euros."

Ann followed me out, just as I knew she would. "He'll be dead by the time you get back. Just like--"

"I know, I know. Just like Mom. It's less than a week. He'll be all right."

"No, he won't." She was crying.

"Sleep, Ann. You really need to get some sleep."

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I myself slept fitfully on the way over, too cramped to relax, too tired to read, but my spirits lifted as soon as I was on the RER from DeGaulle to the city. There was no mistaking the drizzly gray October world outside the train for the US, despite billboards featuring Speedy

Gonzales, Marilyn, Disneyland, *Dawson's Creek*. The tiny hybrid cars, the flowerboxes in the windows, even the boxy, Bauhaus-gone-wrong blocks of flats insisted that excess was not the only way to live. It was a lesson that my country was not interested in learning.

I'd been able to get a room at my usual hotel, a small family place in the XVIIth Arrondissement, a short walk from the Metro hub at Place de Clichy and a slightly longer one from Montmartre and Pigalle. I stopped at the market across the street to pick up some fresh fruit and exchanged pleasantries with the clerk, who remembered me from my previous trip. The hotelier remembered me as well, and found me a room that opened

onto the airshaft rather than the noise of the street. The bed nearly filled the tiny room, and it called to me as soon as the door closed. If I stayed awake until 10 or 11 I knew my biological clock would reset itself, so I forced myself to unpack, drink a little juice, and wash my face.

"Hey, ho," I said to the mirror. "Let's go."

The number 4 Metro line ended at Porte de Clingancourt, the closest stop to the markets. I walked up into a gentle rain and a crowd of foot traffic, mostly male, mostly black and/or Middle Eastern, dressed in jeans, sneakers, and leather jackets, all carrying cell phones, talking fast and walking hard.

I headed north on the Avenue de la

Porte de Clingancourt and the vendors started within a couple of blocks. These were temporary stalls, made of canvas and aluminum pipe, selling mostly new merchandise: Indian shawls, African masks, tools, jeans, batteries, shoes. Still, it was like distant music, an invocation of the possibilities ahead.

I passed under the Boulevard Peripherique, the highway that circles the entire city, and the small village of flea markets opened up on my left, surrounded by gridlocked cars and knots of pedestrians. The stalls here were permanent, brick or cinderblock single-story buildings with roll-down metal garage doors instead of front walls, and they were crammed with battered

furniture, clothes, books, and jewelry. Deeper inside, in the high-end markets like the Dauphine and the Serpette, the stalls would have glass doors, oriental rugs, antique desks, and chandeliers. I walked north another block, then turned left into the Rue de Rossiers, the main street of the district. A discreet metal archway halfway down the block marked the entrance to the Marché

Vernaison in white Deco letters against a blue background. Twisting lanes, open to the rain, wove through a couple of hundred stalls, some elaborate showplaces, like my friend Madame B's, some dusty, oversized closets piled with junk. As in any collector's market, the dealers were each other's best

customers; I watched a man in a wide polyester tie and a bad toupee hurry past with a short wooden column in each hand and a look of poorly concealed triumph on his face. Madame B's emporium was in the center of the market, a corner stall with sliding glass door, pale walls, and a thick, sand-colored carpet to show off the filigreed wood cabinets of the Victrolas that were her specialty. She was talking to an official-looking man in a suit and black raincoat, so I stayed outside and admired a beautiful 19th century puppet theater until he was gone.

" *Bonjour*, François," she said, almost singing the words, and I looked up to see her in the doorway. She was somewhere

in her 50s, a little older than me. She kept her black hair trimmed to shoulder length, with severe black bangs that matched her black-framed glasses, long black vintage dresses, and black cigarette holder.

"Problems?" I asked, nodding toward the man in the raincoat. She shook her head and offered her hand, palm down. "What a lovely surprise to see you. You are buying today, or just looking?" She talked to me mostly in English and I answered as best I could in French.

"Looking for a person." I showed her the photos of the wire recorder while we exchanged a few pleasantries. Her business was doing as badly as mine--no one had any money, and thanks to

September 11 and the war in Iraq, American tourists had all but disappeared. Eventually she pointed a long, red fingernail at one of the photos. "And this item," she said, falling into eBay slang like so many in the business, "it is not one of mine."

"They tell me it comes from somewhere in the Vernaison. An older man, perhaps, with long gray hair?"

"It is familiar, I think. When I see it I am interested, but it is maybe a little pricey. I go away for a day hoping the man will come to his senses, *et voila*, the next day it is gone."

"You remember who it was?"

"I think maybe Philippe over in Row 9? Let us look."

She locked up and set a brisk pace through the rain, ignoring it, as most of the locals seemed to do. There were only nine rows in the market, running more or less north and south, but I still had trouble remembering where specific vendors were, and more than once had gotten badly turned around. Row 9 was the slum of the Marché Vernaison, where old and broken things came to their last resting place before the landfill. I had to wonder how some of these vendors paid for their stalls, what pleasure they found in sitting all weekend amid a clutter of useless and ugly objects, their glazed eyes not even registering the few customers who hurried past. At the bend where Row 9 curved east and emptied

into the market's café, a man in his 60s sat with his eyes closed, listening to a scratchy LP on a portable phonograph much like the one I'd had in high school. He had long graying hair, aviator-style glasses, a checked flannel shirt, and an ascot. The booth matched the description the eBay seller had given me, down to the worn carpet and the Mickey Mouse memorabilia. There was some electronic gear as well: a cheap reel-to-reel deck from the early 60s, walkie-talkies, an analog oscilloscope, a pocket transistor radio.

"*Bonjour*, Philippe," Madame B sang again. He gave no indication that he'd heard. "This is my friend François," she said in French, "and he wants to know

about something you might have sold."

"To a woman from the United States," I said, laying the photos out on his nearly empty desk. Philippe seemed to live at a completely different pace from Madame B. He slowly picked up each photo and stared at it, as if searching for something in it that might cheer him up.

"It's a recording device," I said, hoping to hurry him. "It records on a spool of wire." I didn't know the French name for it.

"I must get back to my shop," Madame B said. "Good luck with your quest." I kissed her on both cheeks, and as she rushed out she seemed to take the last of the room's energy with her. Philippe eventually sighed, set the last photo

down, and gave an elaborate shrug.

"So," I said, struggling for patience, "this was perhaps yours?"

"Perhaps." His voice was barely audible over the music.

"I'm not with the authorities," I said, thinking of the man in the black raincoat. "I don't care whether you pay your taxes or how you do your accounts. I just want to know where this came from. I'm a dealer, like you, and it would help me very much to have the provenance. Is that the right word?"

*Provenance?*"

He nodded slowly. "Many things come and go from here. It is difficult to keep track of all of them."

"But this is very unusual, *non?* I think

you have not had many like it." He shrugged again. It felt like we'd come to a stalemate, and I looked around his stall for a couple of minutes, trying on a pair of sunglasses, paging through the postcards, trying to think of a way to reach him.

"You like Jacques Brel, yes?" I pointed to the record player.

"Of course. You know of him?"

"A little. I like that he quit performing when he got tired of it. And that he didn't want to play in the US because of Vietnam."

"You are American, or English?"

The implied compliment was that I hadn't immediately given myself away. "American," I said, "but not proud of it

these days."

He nodded. "You have another Vietnam now, I think." He pointed to the record player. "You know this record?"

I'd recognized the voice, but nothing more, and risked the truth. "No," I said.

"You wouldn't. It was his first, only out in France."

"Do you have the radio broadcasts from 1953?"

"I have them. They are interesting, but they are on CD. The CDs are too cold, I think." I myself didn't understand why having pops and hiss made a recording more desirable, but I also understood that plenty of others disagreed. "They are also on LP, a--what's the word--'bootleg' in English."

"We say 'bootleg' too. You have this record? I have never heard of it."

"I have a friend who does. If you give me your address, it would be my pleasure to send it to you."

"Why?" The question wasn't hostile, but the skepticism surprised me. "Is it because of this information you want?"

"Because it would mean more to you than it does to the person who has it. And this person owes me a favor. It is a small thing."

He was quiet for a moment and then he pointed to the record player and said, "Listen." On the record Brel was suddenly angry, spitting words in a theatrical fury. It didn't touch me, particularly, but I could see Philippe

was moved.

When the song was over, he said, "I have been listening to this record for more than 35 years now. It is still incredible to me to hear a man be so...plain and direct with his emotions."

"Yes," I said. "I know exactly what you mean." He took a yellow wooden pencil from a can on his desk, looked it over, then used a thumb-sized sharpener to put an exact point on it. On a blank index card from a wooden box, he wrote his name and address in an ornate longhand, then tapped the card on its edge as if to get rid of any stray graphite before handing it to me.

"Enchanté," I said, reading it, and offered my hand. "My name is Frank.

Frank Delacorte." He gave me a firm handshake. "Come back on Monday, in the afternoon. I will find out what I can."

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It was already getting dark when I came out of the Metro at Place de Clichy. I called the States on my cell and arranged to have the Jacques Brel bootleg expressed to Philippe. When I was done, a wave of fatigue hit me so hard I nearly passed out. I knew if I went back to the hotel I'd be asleep within minutes, so I walked down the Boulevard des Batignolles to Le Mont Leban, my favorite neighborhood restaurant. I'd never had the heart to tell them how wonderfully inept the English translations in their menu were: "Net of

raw lamb, spied on," "Chicken liver fits in the lemon," and my favorite, "Girl pizza in meat, tomatoes."

They put me at a two-top in the window. I was thinking about a time right after college when I'd been working ridiculous hours at an electronics firm. I'd liked eating alone then, but now that I was pushing fifty, three years on from the breakup of a long marriage, it seemed more of a stigma. I liked my job, especially when I was busy enough to feel like I was reversing entropy in a substantial way. But I also knew I wasn't bringing anything new into the world. No new music, no kids, no world-changing inventions. A life like mine would have been plenty for my

father; he'd been a soldier and then a salesman, paid his debts, and was going to leave the world a better place for who he'd been. And I was generally happy enough. What I missed was a sense of significance, which may have only been another way of saying I wished I had somebody to share it with. I feasted on Foul Moudamas, Moutabal, Falafel, and Moujaddara ("Puree of lens with the rice in the lebanese way") and thought about how much my father would have loved the place. We'd traveled to Europe twice when I was a teenager, and my father had attacked each native cuisine with curiosity and appreciation, while my mother had nibbled Saltines and begged for a plain hamburger.

The memory made me impatient to talk to him, so I paid the bill and went out into the night. The locals were walking their dogs, or hurrying toward the Metro in evening clothes, or headed back to their apartments with a bottle of wine or a paper-wrapped baguette. The subtle differences from home--the melody of the barely audible voices in the background, the tint of the streetlights, the signs in the windows of the shops--were liberating, intoxicating.

I showered and got in bed and called the hospital. My father sounded weak but cheerful, and Ann tried very hard not to sound put upon. I was too tired to react, and I fell asleep within seconds of hanging up.

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It felt odd to have come so far and not be in pursuit of my mission on Sunday. My alarm woke me at seven and I took the number 13 Metro line all the way across town to Porte de Vanves and spent the morning in the flea market there. I didn't find anything for myself, but picked up some wine labels for my father, who had been trying to develop pretensions in that direction ever since he retired. By one PM the antique dealers were packing and the new clothing vendors were setting up. The sun had burned holes through the morning's ragged clouds and I gave in to a sudden urge for the Seine and the Ile de la Cité.

Cynics say it's only a myth that Paris is full of lovers, but I saw them everywhere. A girl on the Metro to Saint-Michel had her arms around her boyfriend's neck and leaned forward to kiss him between every few words. I had to make myself look away, and when I did I saw a woman across from me watching them too. She was about forty, with very short blonde hair and a weathered, pretty face. She smiled at me in embarrassed acknowledgement and then looked down at her lap. The sun was fully out on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, and locals had crammed in next to the tourists at the tiny café tables. I crossed over to the Ile de la Cité and saw more windblown couples holding

hands in the gardens along the south side of Notre Dame, where the leaves were just starting to turn. I wandered out onto the Pont Saint-Louis, which was closed to cars on Sundays, and stopped to hear a clarinetist and pianist who'd rolled a small upright piano out onto the bridge. The view was spectacular: the width of the Seine and the ancient Hotel de Ville to the north, the thrusting spires of Notre Dame behind me, the ancient, winding streets of the Latin Quarter on my right, the elegant 17th century mansions of the Ile Saint-Louis straight ahead.

A crowd of thirty or forty tourists listened from a discreet distance. I saw the blonde woman from the train there, closer to the musicians than the rest.

She'd piled her coat and handbag at her feet; her short dress showed off a slim body and strong legs.

It was her feet that held my attention. She was moving them in an East Coast Swing pattern, rock-step triple-step triple-step, covering just enough ground to make her hips sway. I recognized it as a sort of international distress signal that meant, "Dance with me." I was still deciding whether I should answer when the musicians wrapped up "New York, New York" and started the Benny Goodman classic "Don't Be That Way." It was more than I could stand. I walked up and offered her my left hand. She held up one finger, stashed her purse and coat next to the piano, then came back and

took my hand and smiled, revealing a faint, ragged scar on one cheek. I turned her to face me, put my right hand on her back, and danced her out to the center of the bridge.

She was lively and responsive, picking up my leads but also feeling the music, shifting effortlessly between six-count and eight-count patterns, never losing her smile. It was one of my favorite songs, and the sun sparkled on the river and gulls circled the bridge, crying out in pleasure, and I recognized it as one of those rare moments that you know are perfect even as they're unfolding.

"I'm Frank," I said, when the song ended. "You're a great dancer." Then I

caught myself and asked,

"*Est-ce que tu parle anglais?*"

"Sandy," she said. "And I *am* English."

"Manchester?"

"Originally. London now. Good on you--most Americans can't tell Scots from Welsh. And you're a good dancer, too."

"Thanks." The band laid into "Moonglow." "You want to try again?" After "Moonglow" they played "In the Mood," maybe the Miller band's most enduring hit.

"Why are you laughing?" Sandy asked.

"Glenn Miller," I said. "I'll tell you later." Two other couples were dancing now, and the musicians hammed it up for

us, the clarinetist pointing his instrument straight up at the sky, the pianist kicking away his stool to play standing up. They stretched the song for extra solos, but I still wanted more. When they finished I dipped Sandy low and held her there for a second or two, and then we were all applauding, and I threw a five-Euro note in the clarinet case, and then they rolled the piano away and it was over.

"Wow," Sandy said. "That was fantastic. Do you fancy a coffee or a drink or something?" We crossed over to Ile Saint-Louis and I had to resist an impulse to take her hand. "What are you doing in Paris?" I asked.

"A week's holiday. Ending tomorrow, sad to say. Then it's the train and back to

the Oxford Street Marks and Sparks." She looked over at me. "That's--"

"I know. Marks and Spencer. I've been in that very location."

"You're quite the world traveler, aren't you? Here on business?" I told her about the wire recorder and Glenn Miller while we stood on line for takeaway hot chocolate at a hopelessly crowded café. I was still feeling the intimacy of the dance and saw no harm in talking about it. When I got to the part about the prostitutes and the drunkenness, I could see her expression change.

"But that's perfectly awful," she said. "What do you mean to do with this thing?"

"Auction it off, probably."

"Wouldn't there be a scandal? I mean, the man was a war hero." My romantic fantasies were fishtailing away, and I was angry at myself for losing my head so easily, for assuming that moving well together meant anything more than that. "Our government lied about Glenn Miller, just like they lied about the weapons in Iraq." She shook her head. "I can't abide hearing people talk about their leaders that way. It's so disrespectful."

I felt myself losing my temper. Political arguments always ended up reminding me of my own helplessness. What was my one vote compared to the power of PACs and big money special

interest groups, to corporate campaign contributors and the media? I drank off my hot chocolate and threw the cup away.

"It was great dancing with you," I said, and meant it. "I've got to go." I started to walk away, but she grabbed my arm, her fingers remarkably strong. "Wait." I stood with my hands shoved in my pockets. She ignored my defensive posture and put her arms around my waist and buried her face in my chest. I could smell the sweet scent of her hair. She said, "I've got to go back to my miserable, dull life tomorrow and I don't want this to be over yet. Please? Could we just go to dinner and pretend a little? Maybe go dancing? We don't have to

talk about politics or Glenn Miller or anything important. We could be two different people entirely, just for tonight. Couldn't we?"

Without any conscious decision, my arms went around her. "Yes. Sure. Of course we can." She looked up at me with eager gray eyes and big smile and kissed me quickly, so sweetly and unexpectedly that it vaporized whatever will I might have had left.

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She took me to the pet market at the entrance to the Cité Metro stop, where vendors were selling everything from hamsters and cockatiels to chinchillas and prairie dogs. True to the spirit of our bargain, I ignored any qualms I might

have had about the cages and focused on her delight. From there, we crossed the Seine to the giant toy waterworks of the Pompidou Center where we watched a clown juggle fire on an enormous unicycle, then walked through the tiered gardens of Les Halles, holding hands as the sun set. We ate dinner at an Indian restaurant near my hotel, shying quickly away from topics that threatened to go sour, like our differing tastes in films, and struggling to stay with the ones that seemed harmless, like our distant pasts, or the places I'd been that she'd always wanted to go. The shared effort brought us closer, like a kind of training exercise. When we stepped back into the street, the wind had picked up and the

temperature had dropped. She nestled under my left arm for warmth and I opened my coat to bring her inside it, then turned her face up and kissed her. She tasted of cardamom and wine. Her lips were tense at first, then opened in surrender.

"Do you have someplace we can go?" she whispered.

"My hotel is just up the street."

"And do you have, you know--"

"Condoms? Yes. I didn't think I'd be using them, but--"

"But you never know."

Once in my room the mood turned awkward again. There was nothing there but the full-sized bed, two small end tables, and a half-size refrigerator. The

TV hung from the ceiling and the closet was small and without doors. I went to shut the window to the airshaft and Sandy said, "It's freezing in here."

"I know," I said. "Sorry." I shed my coat and took hers. "Get your shoes off and get into bed. I'll warm you up."

The plastic mattress cover under the sheets made crinkling noises as we got in. I pulled the covers over us and held her for a minute or two, fully clothed, without saying anything. I listened to the rhythm of her breathing, both alien and comforting, and felt the muscles of her back slowly begin to relax. I buried my nose in her neck, inhaling the warmth of her skin, and then I was kissing her neck, her ear, her mouth. We slowly worked

our way out of our clothes and pushed them out onto the floor, and then I had a condom on and was kissing her breasts and their small, clenched nipples, and moving down to taste between her legs. It had been so very long.

"Mmmmm," she said. "That feels wonderful, but if you're trying to make me come, I should warn you it's not going to happen."

"No?"

"Not with a man. Not even with a man present, if that was going to be your next question. I appreciate your thoughtfulness, but you should carry on and enjoy yourself."

"What's in it for you?"

"Don't fret, it feels lovely. Oh, don't

let's talk. Just make love to me, will you?" I had been seesawing between desire and irritation all night, but at that point I suspended all judgment and let my body have its way. As I entered her she said, "Yes. Oh, yes."

•

Later, I asked her about the scar.

When she finally answered, it was in a firm, affectless voice. "I was coming home late from the clubs about four years ago and a man in a balaclava--what is it you call them?"

"Ski mask."

"Yes, one of those. He had a broken bottle and he dragged me into a car park. I was so startled at first I didn't think to scream until it was too late and he had

the glass at my throat and was tearing my tights off. He never said a word, and when he was done he twisted the glass into my cheek, like he was disgusted with me."

"Christ. I'm so sorry."

"I had a mobile, and I called the police even as he was walking away. I was lucky--they caught him, and sent him up, though it was only for two years. That was when I left Manchester. I know the odds of it happening again were no worse there than in London, but I just couldn't feel safe there any more, you know?"

I didn't know what to do or say. We were both still naked and it seemed wrong to hug her, so I took her hand

instead.

"It's easy to go from there to thinking men are just animals and all, but I didn't want to be like that. So I had to box it up and put it someplace, like it happened to somebody else. And in a way it did, you know, I mean, I wasn't part of it. And I know you're anti-authoritarian and that, but I will always be grateful there were authorities that night."

I resented her using her personal horror to score points in our ongoing hit and run political debate. She'd preemptively trumped anything I could say about the authorities having failed to prevent the assault in the first place, or their inability to keep her from living in fear afterwards. I hadn't been there, after

all; I wasn't the one who suffered.

"And I don't blame men in general," she said. "There are nice things about them. Dancing. Sex, when it's sweet, like with you. You just can't trust them, that's all."

"What do you mean?"

"It's the sex thing. I mean, men cheat. It's the way they are."

"I don't," I said.

"Well. Perhaps you're the exception." She kissed my forehead in what seemed a very condescending way and turned her back to me.

I was still trying to find the words to answer her when she began to snore softly. I watched her for a while in the faint light from the airshaft and

eventually I was able to work my way back to my first impression of her, one more lost and lonely traveler, not that different from me. I curled up against her back and felt her squirm slightly against me as she settled in, and then sleep took me too.

•

I woke at seven AM to Sandy sorting out her clothes in the half light. "You're not going?" I asked.

"I must. I have to pack and catch a train."

"Not just yet." I reached for her hand and showed her what I had in mind.

"Oh," she said. "Well..."

Afterwards, it felt as if we had wound the last eighteen hours back onto a reel

and we were suddenly strangers again, with nothing to say to each other. She went to the bathroom, and then immediately began to dress.

"Can I come to the station with you?" I asked.

"I don't want you to even get out of bed." She bent to kiss my cheek and whispered, "Thank you. This was perfect."

"What about your address, or phone number? How can I get hold of you?" She started to say something, then thought better of it. She wrote a phone number on a scrap of lined paper from her purse and handed it to me. "Bye now," she said, and slipped out the door. I felt the way I did after a night of heavy

drinking--back when I did that--minus the hangover. It was like I'd squandered something.

I tried to go back to sleep, but couldn't find a comfortable place for my mind or my body. The rain had returned, cold and steady, but I had warm boots and an umbrella, so I ate the hotel's continental breakfast and headed out to the Porte de Montreuil market, remembering to tuck a mini-cassette recorder in my pocket just in case.

The market was located in a faceless gray commercial neighborhood on the eastern edge of the city. It was mostly new clothing on Mondays, but deeper into the stalls there were always a few interesting antiques and collectables

among the old tools and chipped plates. Nothing for me, though, not that morning.

I was nervous about going back to Vernaison. Philippe had meant well, I was sure, but too many times I'd come back to dealers like him and found only awkwardness and excuses. Once I'd turned around, though, I discovered I could hardly wait. I took the wet walk back to the Metro at nearly a run and hurried through two changes of trains.

When I finally got to Vernaison it was two in the afternoon and Philippe's booth was open, but deserted. I waited five minutes, pacing the narrow alley, and when I was about to give up, I noticed him coming from the front of the complex, head down, a FedEx package

in his hands. My timing, I realized, could not have been better. He saw me, held up the package, and smiled. I followed him into his stall. "You will forgive me," he said, and I waited while he carefully unwrapped the package, took out the record, and admired it. "Still sealed," he said. "Remarkable." He rubbed the edge of the album against the leg of his jeans with a practiced touch, parting the shrink wrap, and stopped to inhale the aroma of vinyl, cardboard, and glue before setting the record on the turntable and carefully cleaning it. I tried to picture him cooking a meal with the same deliberate speed, and imagined that he ate out a good deal.

The vinyl popped and hissed, an announcer made a brief introduction, and

Brel began to sing, accompanying himself on guitar. "*Et voila*," Philippe said softly, then turned to me and said, in English, "I thank you so much for this gift."

"You're very welcome," I said.

He took another index card from his inside jacket pocket and handed it to me. I liked that he'd had it ready before the package came. "This is the man who sold me the recorder," he said in French.

"Along with a lot of other things. He will see you this afternoon if you like."

"Thank you. This is very kind of you. If you don't mind, can you tell me what sort of other things you got from him?"

"They are mostly gone. A radio, a Victrola that our friend Madame B

bought, some silverware. He had also some dishes and ladies' clothes that did not interest me. He is in the real estate business, he tells me. He comes across things from time to time in the houses he buys, and lets me know."

"He didn't say where he got the recorder?"

"I think from some old house. Maybe the owner died."

"Did you see the house?"

"The things were all in boxes, in the trunk of his car. I think maybe he lives in that car." He looked at me over the top of his glasses. "Seriously."

Just then a man in a black raincoat walked by. I didn't think it was the same man I'd seen at Madame B's on Saturday,

but it made me unaccountably nervous. I thanked Philippe again and shook his hand, and as I left he was putting the needle back to the beginning of the album.

•

I called the name on the card, Vlad Dmitriev, from the street in front of the Vernaison. My nerves were still bad, and from the way I was looking around, people probably thought I was making a drug deal. I got a bad mobile connection and it took me a while to convince him that I was an antique collector and not trying to trap him into admitting anything. He finally agreed to meet me at the edge of the markets, where the Avenue Michelet met the access road for the

loop. I was to look for a cream-colored Mercedes.

Half an hour later the car pulled into the swarm of traffic at that corner--pedestrians, bicycles, motorcycles, vans--and parted them like a killer whale. Vlad had his window down, yelling and shaking his fist at a gang of kids that had tried to cross in front of him. He was a bit younger than me, with long hair slicked straight back, a short beard, and a black leather jacket over a dress shirt and new blue jeans. He reached across to open the door for me and beckoned me inside.

"Where you going?" he asked. "I'll drop you." His French was slangy and heavily accented, and I could barely

understand him. As I settled in, I noticed an open shoebox on the back seat that seemed to be full of American passports, and I had to fight off a moment of panic.

"I don't know where I'm going next," I said. "I was hoping you could tell me."

"The stuff from that old house, it's worth a lot, is it?"

"Only to a collector," I said. He didn't seem threatening, but things were getting a little out of control for my comfort.

He nodded, pulled into traffic. "It's okay. I don't do the detail work. I leave that to guys like you and Philippe. I'm strictly wholesale where junk is concerned."

"This place, what was it?"

"Just an old apartment house in

Montmartre. Place was a wreck. Crazy old lady ran the joint, couldn't keep up with it anymore. I'm going to knock all the walls out, put in some offices."

"The old lady, she's still alive?"

"She's alive, but I don't think she'll talk to you. She hates the whole world. Living in some crazy past that never really existed. Doesn't sound like it was so great back then, either."

"Have you talked to her much?"

"Not really. Business, mostly, you know. She says the place used to be a whorehouse during the war, and that she worked there. I think she's making it up."

"You're talking about the Second World War?" Vlad nodded as if it were obvious. "I really need to meet this

woman. I could pay for her time."

"She doesn't give a crap for money. Not like me. You say this is worth a lot?"

"If you've got a card or something, I promise I'll send you some money if I get rich from it." He thought about it, then said, "No, it's okay. I'll take you to see her. Maybe she'll talk. Who knows?"

We were headed south and west, toward the center of the city, winding our way uphill into the artsy Montmartre district, the highest point in Paris. Vlad slowed the car and leaned across me to point out a narrow red brick building sandwiched between two others just like it. "See that? That's one of mine. You're not looking for something like that, are

you?"

"Sorry," I said. "Just visiting."

"Maybe when you sell your whatever-it-is and you're rich, eh?" The steep, narrow streets, the walled-in gardens, the parks and streetlight-lined stairways seemed both welcoming and saturated with history. It was easy to picture myself living there, looking out one of those bay windows as I fixed dinner, Mingus on the stereo. Maybe when Pop finally goes, I told myself.

We turned down a cobbled alley and pulled into a narrow parking space. The building was plaster and wood, in poor condition, and Vlad led me up three flights of stairs to a peeling green door, one of three on the landing. He knocked,

waited, knocked again. After a minute or so I assumed he would give up, but he said, "She's here, she's just making sure we're serious." He kept knocking, and eventually I heard a faint "*je viens, je viens*" on the far side of the door. It opened on a chain, and the voice said, "Oh. Vlad," in vague disappointment. She reopened the door without the chain, and while the door was closed I reached into my jacket pocket and turned on the minicassette recorder.

She wore a pink chenille bathrobe, which she held closed with one hand, and bunny slippers. Her face was striking--deeply lined, and yet with such clear skin that she didn't seem old enough to have been around for World

War II. Her hair was white, with odd strands of gray and black, and came halfway down her back in a loose braid.

We followed her into the kitchen. "My good friend François has been begging me to introduce him to you. François, this is Madame Rochelle."

She took my hand and looked intently into my eyes. "So, you are a good friend of Vlad's? For this I am supposed to welcome you?"

I went with my instincts. "I just met Vlad a few minutes ago. I want to ask you about the wire recorder that he found in your house."

She pressed my hand and nodded. "Okay, Vlad, I will talk to François alone now." Vlad hesitated, as if he

didn't quite believe what he'd heard. Then he shrugged and took a business card from his jacket. "In case you are ever rich," he said. He squeezed the back of my neck in an oddly intimate gesture and let himself out.

"Come in," Madame Rochelle said. "If you insist on something to drink I expect I could find you some tea." Her French, like Madame B's, was musical, but in her case legato and husky. For my part, my own French was still ragged, but practice was bringing it back.

"I'm all right," I said.

She led me into the living room, which smelled damp and got a little second-hand light from the bedroom and a bit of filtered daylight through heavy

orange drapes. She sat at one end of a faux Victorian couch with worn floral upholstery and I sat at the other.

"Talk," she said.

"I am here because Vlad found an old recorder in your house and took it to the flea market at Saint-Ouen, and eventually it ended up with me. There was a spool of wire with the machine that had a date of December 18, 1944. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?"

"No, but I'm fascinated." She clearly wasn't. She lit up a cigarette and looked past me out the window.

"I think the recording contains the sound of someone being beaten to death. I think that person was Glenn Miller, the

American musician."

"Not a very good musician, and he didn't die in my house. The military flew him back to the US, to Ohio, I think, and he died in a hospital there. This anyway is what a doctor friend told me." The blood roared in my ears and I thought I might pass out.

"I forgot that my friend Louis had that machine going," she went on. "He wanted to record the great Glenn Miller playing with the band from the bar down the street. Everyone was much too drunk, especially Miller, and they sounded like a piano falling downstairs."

"Madame Rochelle, may I tape this conversation?"

"Why?"

"It is my only proof of what is on that recording wire. It makes it valuable."

"You are going to sell the recording wire?"

"I don't know yet."

"All right. You may tape."

I switched off the recorder surreptitiously as I took it out of my pocket, then set it on the coffee table and made a show of turning it on again. Madame Rochelle shot me a skeptical glance that told me I wasn't fooling her, but I felt better having it out in the open.

"How did the fight start?" I asked quickly. "Who was it that hit him?"

"That, my dear, is a much longer story. How much do you know about the black market here during the war?"

"Nothing, really."

"Okay. From the beginning, then." She took a deep drag on her cigarette and settled herself on the couch. "When the Germans came in 1940, they set our clocks ahead an hour, so we would be on the same time as Berlin. It brought darkness to our mornings and reminded us every day that we were defeated. That hour was the first thing they stole from us, but it was not the last.

"At first it did not seem so bad. We were already starving from the long siege, and when the first German tanks rolled into the city, the soldiers were tossing chocolate and cigarettes to us. Yes, like the way you Americans want to think of yourselves. We thought then the

Germans would be bring order, but they only brought *papier timbré*--you know, bureaucracy--and long lines. They helped the black market with their own stupidity. They hired local men to provides all their supplies, so of course the local men stole everything they could. That was right where your flea market stands now, at the Port of Saint-Ouen."

"That's amazing."

"What you call coincidence? That is just fingers."

I wasn't sure I'd heard her right. "Excuse me?"

She wiggled her fingers at me. "You see this finger and this finger and you think they are different things, but there

is one hand that moves them both. You understand? Anyway. You know the word *se débrouiller*? It means to get by, to make do. From this we had *le système D*, the way of getting by. Everyone did it. These days, you can't find anybody who was not in the Resistance, but then it was different. We did what we had to do. We stole, we dealt with le milieu, the criminals, we traded our heirlooms, we got drunk or high whenever we could so we didn't notice how hungry we were. Or we were one of the *collabos horizontales*, a whore, like me. We were most of us whores then.

"You Americans came, but there was still no food. Then the American deserters moved in and took over the

black market and it was bigger than ever. American soldiers were selling to them--that's how Louis got that wire recorder, from the American military. And Glenn Miller, he was friends with this Colonel Baessell, who was one of the worst. He would fly over from England with morphine he stole from the Army, hidden in cartons of cigarettes."

I knew the name Baessell, of course. He was the other passenger on the flight on which Miller allegedly disappeared. "Are you saying Miller was involved with smuggling morphine?"

"No. But everyone knew what this Baessell was doing, and Glenn probably knew too. He liked the things that Baessell could put his hands on. Booze

and women. Glenn's appetites were enormous, and he was a very mean drunk. You know why? He was being eaten, from the inside out. Inside he was a great musician, but outside, his body could not play that well. He would have given everything he had if he could have been Jack Teagarden. You can't live like that, wishing you were somebody else."

My father loved Jack Teagarden, and used to lecture us on his awesome technique and control of the trombone. "So what happened on the night of the recording?"

"A man came in looking for Baessell, a boy, really, very young and nervous. He went right up to him at his table and pulled out a pistol and shot him, bang, in

the face. Glenn came off the stage and knocked the gun out of his hand with his trombone, and they began to fight. People were running away now because of the gunshot. They knew the police would come and many of them should not have been there, deserters, black market traders like Louis. Still, someone could have stopped the fight. But there was no love here for Americans. They had not suffered the way we had." I thought of the images I'd seen of the carnage at Omaha Beach and started to say something, but she cut me off.

"A few weeks of combat is not the same as years of hardship," she said. "And many of these men were like Glenn and Baessell, they had never seen

combat. They came and took what they wanted--women, mostly, by force sometimes--and thought we should be grateful."

"What happened to Miller?"

"Like I say, he was a very mean drunk, and he was very drunk. Most fights I have seen have not lasted long, but this one--Glenn was crazy with anger and would not stop, and the boy, in the end, he was beating Glenn's head against the floor. I tried to stop it, finally, and then the Military Police came and took Glenn away. I was sure they would arrest us, but it seems they knew who the boy was who shot Baessell, and he left with them, and they said if we ever talked about it bad things would happen

to us."

"Are you saying the US military was involved with Baessell's death?"

"Do I think it is possible that the US Army wanted to stop Baessell from stealing their morphine and didn't want the publicity of a trial? What do *you* think?"

"Have you ever told anyone else?"

"One time I told an American, after the war, and he was very angry with me and said I was lying. Then a few years ago a woman from England found me. She was doing a book about Miller, but then she went away and I never heard from her again or ever saw the book."

"Do you remember her name?"

"Sorry. I know these things are very

important to all of you, but I don't care. They say life is short, but my life has been very long, and I am tired."

"You never thought of going to the newspapers when you saw the false reports of Miller's death?"

"Why? When your government decides to tell a lie, that is serious business. Like now, your President lies and nothing happens to him, but this man Wilson talks about the lies and the government sets his wife up to be killed."

I tried to find a polite way to ask if she could have been mistaken. "So you knew Miller well? He was a regular customer?"

"When I speak of his appetites, I do it

from personal experience. He was not a bad person. He was not a wonderful trombone player, but he had a true gift as an arranger. He had a sense of humor. He was loyal to his friends, and he was brave enough to take on that boy with the gun. I don't understand your country. Your heroes cannot have appetites? You want to impeach Clinton for having sex, but you let Bush steal your election and carve up the country for his rich friends. All these soldiers who fought Hitler must be these brave idealists fighting the Good War. Well, the soldiers I saw, half of them had wine in their canteens and they wanted to know why they should be dying for stupid French people. But you never hear that now, just like you don't

hear that Glenn Miller died drunk in a whorehouse. Your father, he was in the war?"

"The last part of it. He was very young."

"So many were at the end. Just children."

"He was with the group that found Dachau."

"Ah, yes, the camps. The Americans did many bad things at the camps."

"The *Americans* did?"

"Tortured and killed the guards. Shot German prisoners of war for revenge. Because they could not live with what they saw, and they were only human. Human like Glenn Miller." She looked at her watch. "I think you should go now."

And that was the end. Two minutes later I found myself on the street, dizzy from information overload, oblivious of the rain, clutching my recorder in one hand and my folded umbrella in the other. I sat on the steps of her building and rewound the tape for a few seconds to make sure I had her story. It was there, loud and clear.

"Holy Christ," I said.

I put the recorder back in my pocket and opened my umbrella and started walking. It was getting dark. At the end of the block I found myself on Rue Lamark, and followed it downhill past the stark white domes and towers of Sacré Coeur, then took the long flight of stairs down to Place Saint-Pierre.

It was the find of a lifetime, and now I had to decide what to do with it. My first instinct was to take it slow, send out a few emails to let key collectors know what I had, let word of mouth start the feeding frenzy that would doubtless ensue.

She'd stirred up a lot of different emotions, but most of what I felt was triumph. I'd waited a long time for this, and I was not going to screw it up.

•

My flight wasn't until Wednesday morning. I spent Tuesday at the Rodin Museum and the Gustave Moreau exhibit at the Musée de la Vie Romantique, then I picked up a few presents at the big Printemps department store, including a

necklace with Russian-looking icons of the Virgin for Ann. I felt different, puffed up. No one was looking at me, but it was because they didn't know the secret I was carrying.

Afterwards, as evening fell, I walked around the Pigalle district. This was where Glenn Miller came to drink and let out his inner demons. It had changed, of course, since 1944. The Moulin Rouge now offered Vegas-style dinner-and-a-show, feathered-headdress nudity to busloads of tourists, and the shops were cluttered with sex toys and gag gifts--but there were still prostitutes and live sex shows and lonely men with their collars turned up against the night. I dropped by the hotel around 7 PM to

call and check on my father, and the night clerk stopped me in the lobby. "A man was here looking for you this afternoon, monsieur. He left this message." It was a handwritten note, in English. "Urgent that I speak with you today. Please call me as soon as you get this, no matter how late." There was a local phone number and a name, David Smith. I punched the number into my phone, nervousness edging toward fear. I had to remind myself that my passport was in order, my credit was solid, I'd done nothing wrong. A woman's voice answered, and when I identified myself she switched to English with a colorless American accent. "Mr. Smith has been waiting for your call. Can you hold,

please?" When Smith came on, he too sounded like an American newscaster. "Mr. Delacorte. Thanks for calling back. If you can spare me half an hour tonight, I have some information I think will interest you."

"Are you trying to sell me something?"

"Quite the contrary. Do you know what a Missing AirCrew Report is? For example, if a military plane disappeared during World War II on a flight from a rural English airfield to Paris, there would have to be an MACR filed. Now do I have your attention, Mr. Delacorte?"

"Yes. Yes, I understand."

"I can be at your hotel in twenty

minutes. Is that okay?"

"Yes, I guess so..."

"Great. See you then."

I dropped my packages in my room and washed up. Yes, I wanted to see a Missing AirCrew Report on Glenn Miller, but how would a stranger know that?

I was waiting in the lobby when he arrived, exactly twenty minutes from when I'd hung up the phone. He looked to be in his late thirties. He was wearing an expensively tailored gray suit, but his haircut and bearing both suggested the military. He had a quiet authority that went beyond self-confidence to intimidation.

He shook my hand firmly and said, "Is

there someplace we can talk?"

"My room is a little small," I said. Ridiculous as it seemed, I didn't want to be alone with him. He nodded toward a red vinyl-covered bench at the far end of the lobby. "Here is all right, I suppose. This won't take long."

We sat and he opened the manila envelope he was carrying and took out a single faxed page on plain copy paper. "You may read this here. I can't let you copy it or take any notes. When you're done I'll take it with me."

The form was crude, from a mimeographed original. At the top it said "R E S T R I C T E D" and beneath that "MACR No. 10770." The heading was "WAR

DEPARTMENT/HEADQUARTERS

ARMY

AIR

FORCES/WASHINGTON." I skimmed the report, which listed the command, squadron, departure, and destination points. The date was 15 Dec 44. Paragraph 10 listed the persons aboard the aircraft as John Morgan, the pilot, and passengers Lt. Col. Normal R. Baessell and Major Alton G. Miller.

The most interesting part was paragraph 5, "AIRCRAFT WAS LOST, OR IS BELIEVED TO

HAVE BEEN LOST, AS A RESULT OF." There was an "x" next to "Other Circumstances as follows," and then the words: "Accidentally destroyed when aircraft strayed into Channel Bomb

Jettison Area."

I read the whole thing again. "Are you serious?"

"The Norseman aircraft in which Major Miller was a passenger accidentally overflowed an area in the English channel that was used for the disposal of bombs after aborted missions. Several observers on one of the bombers positively identified the Norseman."

"This is the Fred Shaw story that was in the tabloids in the 80s. There are a dozen holes in it. No one else ever came forward, there was no Mayday call, no wreckage--"

"And no MACR. Not available to the general public, anyway. It would have

been a morale disaster if the truth had come out while our men were still in combat."

"I think this is a fake. For one thing, Baessell's middle initial was not 'R.'"

"No offense, Mr. Delacorte, but I think you're being a bit paranoid. The Army typist hit an 'R'

instead of an 'F'. It's a simple typo."

"If this is the truth, why not admit it now?"

"If it were up to me, I would. But the military is a bit skittish about taking responsibility for past cover-ups at the moment."

Because of the current cover-ups, I thought. I didn't say it aloud because I was afraid of him.

"The important thing," he said, with what should have passed for a sympathetic smile, "is that anything else you may have heard is simply not true. There are rumors, for example, that he was murdered, or any number of other far-fetched scenarios. It was an accident, plain and simple. A piece of really lousy luck."

"You accuse me of being paranoid, but what am I supposed to think, with you showing up like this?"

"Who are you? Who do you work for? How did you know I was investigating Miller's death? Who told you about me?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Delacorte. I've told you all I can." He gently took the MACR from my hands and put it back in the

envelope. "I will tell you that I have a legal background, and that both Major Miller and Colonel Baessell have living relatives. If you knowingly circulate libelous stories about either of them, you could find yourself--and your pertinent possessions--tied up in some very nasty litigation." Smith, or whatever his name was, stood up. "I hope this was helpful to you," he said. "Enjoy the rest of your stay."

•

I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. I sat in my room in the half darkness and replayed everything that had happened since I'd come to Paris. Had I been followed? What about the men in the raincoats at the Marché Vernaison? No

one connected with the wire recorder--not Philippe, Vlad, Madame B, nor Madame Rochelle--knew where I was staying. Was somebody reading my email?

And what was I to believe about Miller? Madame Rochelle had seemed completely convincing, but she had a political agenda and the only evidence to support her was a handwritten label on a spool of recording wire, currently in my safe deposit box in North Carolina. If the recording had been made by anyone other than Miller, or at some earlier time, her story was no more than that. As for

"David Smith," assuming he was military, he also had a motive to lie.

American officers involved in the drug trade, and the Army implicated in a black market coup d'état, was far worse than his friendly fire scenario.

But it was the betrayal that came back to me again and again. Somebody that I'd been with in the last four days was deceiving me.

I had to do something. I called my airline and took a financial beating to change my flight to a Friday departure--from London.

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I arrived at Waterloo Station just after noon on the train from Paris, and used a pay phone to call the number Sandy gave me. I got an elderly woman at a florist's shop who'd never heard of Sandy or

anyone answering her description. "Sorry, love," she said. "You'll find someone else, I'm sure." I wasn't surprised as much as curious to see how far the deception went. I took the tube two stops north to Charing Cross Road and wheeled my suitcase down the crowded sidewalks of Oxford Street and into Marks and Spencer. I found the cosmetics counter and was about to ask a sales clerk for Sandy when I saw her.

She caught my glance and something like panic flashed across her face. I went up to her, saw the name "Margaret" on her nametag, and said, "Which is it, Sandy or Margaret?"

"Keep your voice down, please. Please. It's Margaret."

"What are you so afraid of?"

"Please, could you pretend to be buying something? Everyone here knows me. I don't want them asking questions."

I picked up a lipstick, took the cap off, drew a blood red line on a scrap of paper. "What kind of questions?"

She looked down and whispered, "I've got a fella. They all know him. If word gets back to him that some glamorous older bloke was coming round to see me, I'll be in it for sure." I thought the "glamorous" was a nice touch. "We have to talk."

"Not here. I've got lunch in a quarter hour. I'll meet you just inside the main doors of the HMV  
across the street."

"You're not going to stand me up, are you? "

"I'll be there. Fifteen minutes, I promise. Just go now, okay?" I lurked inside the main doors of the giant record store, checking my watch when I wasn't looking out at Oxford Street. I knew she could easily slip into the crowds and disappear if she had a mind to, and it was with vast relief that I finally saw her hurrying up the sidewalk. I stepped out to meet her and she said, "Let's walk. I don't want anyone to see us here." We headed west toward Tottenham Court Road. "So your boyfriend is the violent type, is he?" She walked on in silence for a long time and then said, "Yes."

"Is he the one that gave you the scar?"

"No, that part was true."

"Were you ever working on a book about Glenn Miller? Interviewing people for it?" She gave me a sidelong glance as if evaluating my sanity. "No." That left the tough one. "Did you talk to anyone about me? In Paris, or here? I mean anybody, a girlfriend, a stranger, a cop?"

"No. It's my secret." She stopped and looked at me defiantly. "Everything I told you is true except my name and the phone number you made me give you."

"You didn't tell me about your 'fella.'"

"You didn't ask. You just assumed." She started walking again. "I needed what you gave me. Maybe it'll eventually give me the guts to change my life. But if

I tell anyone, it won't be mine anymore. I don't want to share it."

The sound of her heels against the concrete was like the ticking of an enormous clock. "It's really arbitrary, isn't it?" I suddenly said. "Who we choose to believe? It's subject to coercion, or habit, or wishful thinking."

"You're saying you don't believe me? Not that I blame you."

"No. I'm saying I do. Believe you."

"I'm really sorry," she said. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again." After a minute I said, "I lied to you, too. When I said I didn't cheat? I did cheat. I had an affair, toward the end of my marriage. I hated the deception, even though I couldn't resist the sex part, for a while

anyway. But I broke it off and swore I wouldn't do it again, and I would either make my marriage work or get out. I ended up getting out."

"It doesn't matter. I mean, in the circumstances, I'd be pretty much of a hypocrite to complain, wouldn't I?" She reached out and ruffled my hair. "Is that why you came all this way? To confess?"

"Something weird happened last night in Paris. It's nothing I want to talk about, but I had to know you weren't involved in it. I had to see you, face to face, to know for sure."

"And now what?"

I hadn't even thought about it until that moment, but once I did it seemed

inevitable. "I want you to do something for me. Can you call in sick tomorrow?"

"I just got back from holiday."

"Tell them you picked something up in Paris."

She laughed, then turned serious again. "Listen. What happened in Paris..."

"It's not like that. I need to go to an abandoned airfield about 50 miles north of here. It's called Twinwood Farm."

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I called my father and told him about my change of schedule, then I spent the rest of the day arranging a hired car, finding the cheapest hotel I could, and reading at the British Library. Margaret met me at my hotel the next morning

wearing jeans and a sweater, and I felt a pang of desire for her that I couldn't seem to shake.

We took the M1 north out of London, then the M6 on to Bedford. My head was too full for me to feel like saying much. Margaret talked easily about her boyfriend, her job, how envious her friends had been of her trip to Paris, and I was happy enough for the distraction. I stopped at the post office in the town of Oakley and asked a man in his sixties if he'd ever heard of Twinwood Farm. "You're joking, son," he said. "Everyone knows of it now, what with the Glenn Miller festival just there in August."

We followed his directions and drove due east, through the tiny village of

Oakley Hill and onto a well-kept tarmac road. We passed a sparse forest, then restored hangars and outbuildings as we pulled up to the control tower itself, a two story brick cube painted in broad vertical tan and olive camouflage stripes. I parked in front and we got out into a cold wind. Margaret went up to the building and looked in the windows. "It's some sort of museum," she called back. She read from a plaque: "...opened on 2nd June 2002... contains a tribute to Major Alton Glenn Miller, who took his final flight from here 15th December 1944."

After a while she came back to where I stood by the car, hugging herself against the cold. "Don't you want to

look?"

"I thought there might be something left of him here," I said. "But I'm too late. The myth has taken over."

"People need myths."

"We need the truth. But all we get is the amusement park version of it. And nobody cares."

"You care," Margaret said. "Isn't that enough?"

•

I dropped Margaret at a tube stop near the car hire agency. We had real phone numbers for each other this time, but I doubted we would ever use them. I slept poorly that night, and not at all on the long, long afternoon flight back to the States.

I went straight to the hospital from the airport and found Ann and my father watching the news. My father switched off the set as soon as he saw me; Ann looked like she was going to protest and then thought better of it. I hugged them both and handed out their presents and we made some small talk about the flight, how my father was feeling, the tepid meal he'd just eaten.

"So," my father finally said. "How was the wild goose chase?" I sat on the edge of the bed and took his hand. "I've got somebody who says it was Miller on the tape. What you heard is the sound of him being murdered--murdered by somebody working for the US Army." Apparently, somewhere over the

Atlantic, I'd made up my mind about who I was going to believe.

"You can't trust the French. They're all Communists." He smiled as if he were joking.

"I want to ask you something, Pop. I want you to tell me about Dachau."

"It was horrible. You've seen the pictures. You don't need to hear it from me."

"I do need to hear it from you. I want you to tell me what you did there." He saw then that I knew, and that I wasn't going to let him escape. "I don't feel like talking about it," he said meekly.

"Francis?" Ann said.

I waved her off. "I learned some things in Paris, and then I read some

more things in the library in London."

My father said, "I don't have to--"

"We have to stop pretending everything's simple, Pop. Black and white, Greatest Generation and Axis of Evil. We have to take responsibility for what we do, and tell the truth about it. We can start right now."

I kept staring until he looked away. "Ann," he said, "could you leave us alone for a minute?" She started to get up and I said, "I'd like her to stay for this." I could feel her glare on the back of my head. "Francis, what do you think you're doing?"

"Sit down," I told her, still looking at my father. "Pop, tell me what you did." He was motionless for so long I was

afraid I'd given him another stroke. Then the tears started to run down his cheeks. "I've never talked to anybody about this," he said. "Not ever."

"Go ahead," I said. "We love you. Nothing you can say is going to change that."

"It might. It very well might."

I waited.

He sighed and said, "It wasn't a death camp, not like Auschwitz. Those were all in Poland. Dachau was a work camp. Not that there was a lot of difference, except they kept the prisoners alive longer. More or less alive. You've seen the pictures, you two have known about it all your lives. We didn't. We were kids, most of us, and we'd grown up in a

sane, reasonable world. Until we went in that camp we didn't know why we were fighting that war in the first place. We thought it was about cleaning up somebody else's mess. We knew the Germans were brutal, inhuman, but nothing prepared us for what we saw.

"We went crazy, all of us. You couldn't look at those starved, brutalized remnants of humanity and feel anything but rage and hatred. Blinding, murderous rage."

"You shot the guards," I said.

"Lined them up and shot them."

"With no trial," I said.

"No trial, no questions, nothing. But that wasn't the worst."

"Tell me the worst, Pop."

"We had to search all the buildings. I was paired up with a Jewish guy from Brooklyn, a big tough kid named Schlomo. We found one of the guards hiding out in a latrine. Schlomo told me to keep him there, and he went out, and he came back...he came back with one of the prisoners. And we stripped the guard naked and..." He faltered.

"Go on," I said, and squeezed his hand.

"And we gave the prisoner a bayonet. I lost my nerve then, but Schlomo stayed and watched." My father took a long breath and closed his eyes. "He told me later what happened. The prisoner...first he castrated the guard. Then he gouged out his eyes, one at a time. And then he

started stabbing him, faster and faster, over and over. It wasn't until then that the guard finally started to scream, and then they were both screaming, and then it was all three of them, and I could hear them from outside."

My father opened his eyes. "I don't care about the guard. There was no torture, no punishment horrible enough for what he did. But I can never forgive myself for letting that poor bastard prisoner become a murderer too. It's like I took the last decent thing away from him." I held my father and let him cry for a while. "Did you ever tell Mom about this?"

"No," he said. "She would have..."

"Say it."

"Some day, years later, when I was least expecting it, she would have used it against me."

"Never," Ann said, a whisper with claws. "She would never have done that." I slowly let go of my father, stroked his forehead a couple of times, and turned back to face Ann.

"Yes, Ann. She would have." Her eyes burned into me, hating me. "For five years I've stood by and let you turn her into a plaster saint. Whenever Mom got scared--like after those huge, screaming fights she and Pop would have--remember?--she would turn cold and vicious and spiteful. You used to know that. Now it's like you're turning into her, and I hate it."

"Get out," Ann whispered. "Just get the hell out of here."

"Not this time. You ran me off from Mom's deathbed and I'm not going to let you do it again."

"You don't know how to take care of people, Francis. You're too spoiled and too selfish. Mother and I made you that way, God help us, by giving you everything you ever wanted."

"I don't have everything I ever wanted," I said slowly. "I never did. Mom and Pop didn't have the perfect marriage. We're not the perfect kids. Neither of us." I watched her anger overwhelm her, to the point that she could no longer speak. She jumped out of her chair and ran from the room.

"She's so angry," my father said. "I've never understood that."

"Mom's death hit her hard."

"Yeah. Me, too." We sat in silence for a while, and then he said, "What are you going to do with that recording?"

"I guess I'm going to play it for people. Starting with the *Washington Post*. If they don't want to write about it, I'll go to the *New York Times* and work my way down. I'll put it on the Internet and hand it out to strangers on the street. If I get sued, so much the better. The story has to get out. It's important."

"Okay," my father said.

It was after midnight in Paris and my body was aching for sleep. "You want the TV back on?" I asked him.

"That would be great."

I fell asleep in the chair almost immediately, and when I woke up the room was dark and silent. I went to the window and watched the stars for a while. My father made a noise and turned over.

"Frank?" he said sleepily.

I sat down next to him and touched his shoulder. "I'm here," I said. "I'm here."

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