

**the goat
in the tree**

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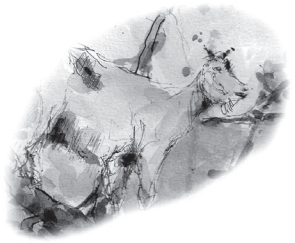
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DIDN'T REALIZE I was hungry till I smelled cooking from across the street. Through the open gate of the ryad I could see a table crowded with brochettes of mutton and baskets of sliced bread. There were also plates of black olives, sliced tomatoes, honey-soaked phyllo pastry for dessert and glasses of white wine to wash everything down. It was as good a place as any to get back into the game.

Inside the courtyard, guests in formal wear stood around a fountain in small groups, but between them and me two men in tuxedos stood outside the gate, one smoking a cigarette, one with his foot on the raised threshold of the door. The gatekeepers.

"Max," I introduced myself. "Sorry I'm late. I was just across town buying a silk scarf for my daughter." There was no scarf, I didn't have a daughter, and my name isn't Max.

"That's fine," said the one with the cigarette.

"So. Where is she?"

"Portia?"

"Who else?" And then to soften that I added: "I must look like a bum." And smiled.

"Not at all," he said, which was promising.

"I was painting," I explained, though I didn't know what this meant yet. I've always found the best way to fill your head with ideas is to surprise yourself.

"What medium are you using?" said his friend.

"Seashells," I said without hesitation.

reconcile anybody. René had his glass filled by the head vintner, raised it to his lips, took the first sip and ... took it away from his lips and looked at it. He was puzzled. He took another small sip. What was wrong? A murmur rose in the crowd. He handed his glass to the head vintner, who took a sip. ‘No,’ he said, and sipped again and frowned, then cast the rest of the wine in the glass onto the ground.”

“Bad?” said Lars.

“It was still only grape juice,” I said. “They called in a viticulturist, who tasted and discussed and advanced a theory. Next came an expert in oenology from the university who took from the back of his car a microscope, smeared some of the wine onto a glass plate and put it under the lens. He looked in, adjusted the focus, invited the priest who looked in and who started back, disbelieving. The Head Vintner was next with the same reaction, and then the owner, who just kept looking, amazed ...”

I paused, dead serious.

“What did they see?” said someone in my audience.

I looked up. “Thousands of yeast cells picketing.” My audience relaxed and smiled. “One yeast-cell, at the head of the yeasts, addressed the crowd of yeasts in front of him. ‘You eat the sugar and excrete alcohol, but what do *you* get out of it?’ the head yeast cell demanded.

“And all the other yeast cells chanted: ‘Nothing!’

“‘And what are we going to do?’

“‘Nothing!’

“‘Louder!’

“‘Nothing!’

“And under the great banner of ‘Nothing’ they went on strike. The yeast refused to eat the sugar, the grape juice never changed into alcohol and the wine was never

made. And so the barrels were emptied, their contents thrown out on the fields where it fertilized for next year the beautiful vineyards of the Vouvray region.”

Partly as a toast, I held my glass so it caught the sun, and downed the rest of the wine. Thank you. I couldn't have done it without you. And from the crowd that had gathered there was a smattering of applause.

They started to break up. Lars tapped his glass on mine. “Chin chin,” he said.

“At least the yeast in this wine never went on strike,” I said and saw that somebody else had come close: Portia, who was entranced.

“Where was that story from?” she asked.

“What story?” I said. “Gospel truth, every word.”

“Did you create it?”

But it does no good to interrogate the Muse, so I had to dodge. “Assembled it,” I said.

“Just now?”

“Well you know, the more you tell something, the better it gets.” I found myself thinking that the wealthy always want to know how to get to the source, so they can own it. But what the hell do I really know about the wealthy? They were nice people here. They couldn't help what they were born into. And the food and drink were excellent. And free, or at least for the cost of a story.

I did have to shake her loose now though. “No,” I said. “I heard it last time I was in France.”

I dropped in status, but I had also slipped through her net. I was not as interesting as she had thought. Good.

We talked of other things. Our group broke up. I mingled. I told some other stories to other people.

I went over into the shade and leant against the wall to watch the shadows rise up the other side of the courtyard. I found myself beside an opening in the outer wall

like a window, screened over with wood lattice through which I could hear on the street one of the caterers from the party, on a break, talking with a friend. "... Bus tour from Marrakech," I overheard his friend say.

"How are they?" said the caterer.

"They're a *bus* tour," said the first with a sigh.

And the caterer said: "Ah," understanding. "Who are you with now?"

"Mogador. Two more hours and we start back. You wouldn't like to take them, would you?"

"No. I have to be here tomorrow."

"You see, there's a gazelle ..." Meaning a girl.

Which was all very interesting. Food is one thing, but travel, in many ways, is more difficult. So I moved along my side of the wall and when I got to the gate I ducked out of the ryad, then took the first alley away from where the two friends were, into the souk. Once in, I took every left, walked along a dogleg street then left again, passed one alley further and found myself back on the main boulevard. I turned toward the gate again and almost bumped into the two friends, still standing there talking.

"Tour guide?" I asked.

"Yes. We'll be leaving in an hour," he said, thinking I was one of his customers.

"Not tonight," I said and then introduced myself. "I'm Eric Martin." He looked at me, waiting. "You're with Mogador Bus Tours, right?"

"Yes. Aziz," he introduced himself.

"Well, you won't be leaving tonight. Motor broke down."

"Motor?"

"That new double flange belt on the differential," I explained. "That bus isn't going anywhere."

“But ... That’s ... too bad ...” meaning that it was excellent. His friend smiled. “They’re putting them up somewhere?” he said, feigning concern for his charges.

“Can’t say. I’m sure they will. Where are they now?”

“It’s their free hour. They’ll be by the tourism board after five o’clock.”

“Well, they’re my worry now. You’re off duty. You have a place for tonight?”

“Yes,” he said, and he smiled again.

“Tomorrow at the tourist board, then. Say eleven?”

“I’ll be there.”

I probably should have gone back to the party and said goodbye to everybody, but I didn’t want to push my luck. I started down the boulevard, past blue doors under the slanting sun. Shops on every corner, and in the alleys and side-streets craft stalls and bad plaster falling in patches off the walls. I walked toward the Place Moulay El Hassan, past those five great thuya trees. Outside the City Gates, a breeze from the ocean was blowing over the walls. Gulls over the port squeaked and squealed. I turned south, towards the Sqala du Port where the small blue boats are moored together, bobbing like blue seeds in an eddy. Essaouira. And now it was time to leave.



THE BUS WAS parked by a restaurant overlooking the beach, near where they build those big wooden boats. Around the bus there was a small crowd, and when I leant through the door I could see two or three passengers already seated.

“Sayeed?” I asked the driver. I had read his name-tag.

“Yes?”

“I’ll be guiding them in this time. Aziz won’t be making it.”

“Really?”

“Yes. They phoned me from Marrakech. This is Mogador Tours, isn’t it?” I leant back and looked at the side of the bus to check. He was about to ask some more questions, I think, or worse, phone in to check up on me, so I kept talking: “Aziz was supposed to meet a girl.”

He nodded knowingly.

“He was waiting out on the street, and a donkey cart ran over his foot.”

“No!”

“Yes. Broke it.”

He looked concerned. “Is he all right?”

“Fine. Just his small toe. But the girl he was waiting for saw the whole thing.”

“No!”

“Yes. He was cursing, limping around on the street. It somewhat damaged the romantic image he was trying to create. She had to take him to the hospital.”

Yes, I thought. We're also responsible for building and maintaining restaurants which conform to the standards of our most discriminating clients, and as an added service we will also make sure that the wind isn't too strong on the beach or that the seagulls don't cry off-key. "Did you register a complaint with the manager of the restaurant?"

"You mean the guy who was cooking? I don't think there *was* a manager."

"And you were, what? Eating and you noticed it gone?"

"Yes."

"But ... I have to be clear about this, sir. You didn't actually *see* any theft?"

"No, but it stands to reason. It was obviously a pick-pocket. Now, what are you planning to do about it?"

"We *could* alert the police ..."

"Yes?"

"... But we have found in the past that complaints of this manner are met with less than satisfactory results. Have *you* alerted the police?"

"No. Since we are tourists in this country and you as tour guide are presumably more in touch with the customs and language of the place, I thought that the least you could do would be accept responsibility to help."

"Happy to do so. You don't actually know that it was a theft, though."

"Are you accusing me of lying?" There it was again.

"Not at all. Simply trying to get straight what happened."

He sighed heavily like I was an incredibly thick-headed student, and this was his hundredth time going through it.

"I'm *telling* you what happened."

“That you were sitting at a tuna restaurant, and found it missing?”

“That we were sitting at a restaurant and that it was stolen.”

“But you didn’t see it stolen.”

“No. Obviously. If I’d seen it, it wouldn’t have *been* stolen then. I would have stopped the thief.”

With a karate chop to the neck, perhaps.

The fact that I was not who I said I was allowed me to be emotionally detached. It’s one of the advantages of doing what I do. One of the reasons, I suppose, *why* I do it. If I’m too close, if there’s too much at stake, I get confused and angry like everybody else.

I pursed my lips and said: “The only thing I can think of doing is to file a report when we get to Marrakech.” Although that, I considered, might create problems. If he took me into the office as soon as we arrived, it could become complicated. I might have to get off at the rest stop before, if there was one, or escape as soon as I got off the bus in Marrakech.

He said: “Oh, sure.” Like this is what he had come to expect. But he led his girl away and took a seat. On a hunch I walked down the aisle. And yes, I saw something under a seat in back. I approached, leant down, picked it up and walked back up the aisle.

“You were in a different seat coming out?” I asked.

“Oh, what?” said the orange-faced man. “We have to stay in the same seats? Is that it? I mean, My God, the bus is *half empty*.”

“No sir, I’m simply asking.”

“Why?” He was making a fuss. The other tourists were starting to raise their eyebrows.

“This was on the floor back there,” I said, and I held the bracelet out.

“Oh! You found it!” said the girl.

I gave it to her. “You must’ve left it behind. Happens all the time.”

“Well. Thank you. You see? I *told* you it wasn’t stolen,” she said.

He didn’t say anything, but he was offended. He had been made a fool of, and would be my enemy for life.

I walked to my seat, sat down and waited as the bus filled up. There would be about thirty of them, past the critical mass where a group of people become an audience. A captive audience, too, tired and open. Someone once told me that the Celtic word for “story” means literally “mile-shortener.” I was just the man for it.

“All right,” I said for my opening, “is everybody here? By which I mean, is there anybody you notice who is missing from when you rode out here this morning?” I waited. They looked around. “Sorry,” I said in an aside to Sayeed. “I should have been given a list.” He leant around and checked himself.

“That’s it,” he said, turned back, and closed the door. He started the bus, pulled out with a hiss, and drove out onto the road that ran along the beach away from Essaouira. I felt that old thrill I always get whenever I start a journey.

I stood up in the aisle holding onto the back of the two front seats, changing my weight with the sway of the bus, like the surfers on the waves we were passing.

“My name is Charles LeCastre, and I’ll be your guide back to Marrakech. We hope you enjoyed your stay in Essaouira, formerly ‘Mogador,’ Phoenician colony, pirate port of the Barbary Coast, then a Portuguese, then a French Protectorate.” They looked at me like: “What is this about?” And if I didn’t come up with something quick I would lose them, which wouldn’t be fatal because

a real tour guide would not be expected to deliver a polished performance. But what else but duty gets you into your workday? Other things might happen after that, but that first step is always yours to take.

“We have just left the new part of town, and will soon be crossing the coastal range of hills, called here the ‘Whaleback’ or possibly ‘Big Fish-Back’ because of the shape.” I looked around to the front, as we passed a milepost with Arabic writing which I didn’t understand, and Arabic numbers which I did. “It is 438 kilometres to Marrakech,” I said, “and will take 3 1/2 hours ...” I looked at Sayeed, who nodded agreement. I turned back and saw one orange face looking back at me narrowly. He had seen the milepost too and suspected that I was improvising. “That’s according to the milepost we just passed,” I said, and his face changed to disappointed that he hadn’t caught me out. This could become a problem. If I was going to have to deal with facts, it was going to cramp my style. Best to get back onto the solid ground of fiction. I took a deep breath:

There’s a story they tell about a lady who lived alone on the shore just south of here, and this was back when all this land, El Maghreb, was flat. She ate oysters she collected in the shallow water and threw a net for fish, and lived just above the tide-line in a hut made of driftwood.

Every year, though, there was a marauding band of brigands who swept in from the east and when she saw them coming she would always hide in the brush until they raided her house and stole everything they could. Then they would kick dirt onto the fire-pit, knock over her hut, and ride away. So she would have to rebuild, every year, and it had started to become tiresome.



T WAS THE best story I had ever told. Like nothing I had ever heard before. They were attentive, indeed they were riveted, but I had told stories before that had done that to an audience. It fell together, each piece contributing to the whole, but although that was rare on the first telling, that had happened before to me as well. This story had something else. Somehow it described what it was like to be alive. They couldn't help but listen, then they nodded, agreeing.

Except the Orange Man. When I started telling it, he adopted an expression on his face like he was trying to bore holes in me with his eyes, but he only succeeded in presenting a model for my character in the story. He crossed his arms and frowned like a child sticking his fingers in his ears. Listening to me and accepting would mean that he would have to admit that the world may be arranged in some other way than he would have it. He was a careerist, in real life and in my story, and the politics of maintaining his position probably interfered with his ability with the work itself. Unless he had twice the energy or efficiency, how could he do both? The work, like everything else in his life, was just another brick on the step to the place where the world behaved as he wanted. That was all in the story, that was what was *feeding* the story, and the goatherd was in it too, and how they connected. It was also about how the meek shall inherit the earth. Not "the earth" in the sense of the

world and everything in it, but in the sense of the soil itself, from which everything grows.

Something new had come into me and I no longer felt I had to engage, which I suppose was what the story was about as well, I realized, as I came to the end. I hoped I could remember it forever and not be distracted from what it said.

When I'd finished the Orange Man said: "Well, that's an old one." Which was untrue. But who am I to criticize? He could of course never have heard it before, but it was easy to believe that it was what he said. A good new story always feels like it's been here forever.

"I've never heard it before," said one of the ladies.

"Check out the Djemma el Fna when we get to back to Marrakech," he said. "Somebody'll be telling that one every night." The Djemma was a large square in the centre of Marrakech. Storytellers gathered there at night, along with sages, animal acts, anything that would draw a crowd. He was saying I'd stolen it.

"How do you know?" she said. He had engaged her.

"I study them," he said. "I am a Professor of Folklore."

Which was well played, I'll say that. But he wouldn't be a very good professor of folklore, I found myself thinking. No real scholar would lie about having heard my story before. This made me happy, sad to say, and I told myself that I should watch out for that as well.

We stopped for ten minutes at a roadside tourist shop with a restaurant. In the hall between the washrooms a fat little boy was stationed at a table, willing to take your money for the non-service he provided. Then there was more rock-strewn desert outside the window and finally we were into the vineyards on the outskirts of Marrakech, vines on rickety pergolas made from poles tied together, and more traffic on the road for the bus to

move through: mopeds, donkey carts and pedestrians. The sun was going down, less obviously when I looked through the tinted windows of the passenger seats, but dusty, lovely and red when I turned and looked ahead through the clear windshield. Right now out of sight in front of us, the walls of the city would be glowing like an ember, but by the time we reached there it would be too dark to witness. Alongside the road now the top-floor windows of the apartment buildings winked gold, with single bulbs dispelling the shadows at street level. Between these buildings stood houses with unfinished top floors. If completed, they would be taxed, and so authority stops progress. All you can probably do is stay low.

Only as low as the ground, of course, but even there you can look for a crack in the mud to sprout through, send the root hairs out to feel for smaller hairline cracks again, thicken into roots, and crack the mud further and turn it into soil. I glimpsed a group of men sitting around a table in the hard light from a single bulb, leaning in and listening to a man near the centre. One of the listeners, somewhat apart from the rest, was leaning back in his chair, smoking and nodding, his waiter's jacket open at the neck. Then we passed, the vision was snatched from me, and the apartment buildings gave way to new palm trees along clean avenues, and we were in the Gueliz.

It was time to wrap it up. And this last story had to have a moral, the hardest kind of stories to make. The best way is just to lay the blocks in a row, then lay blocks on top of them, and if the foundations are strong, you could build something which would take the shape as you built, and needed only the faintest glimmer of inspiration, a sudden view of what that story had been so far, to sum the whole thing up, surprising and inevitable. But when you wanted to make a point, you were

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lorne Elliott is perhaps best known as the host for ten years of CBC Radio's *Madly Off In All Directions* and is a musician, comedian, playwright and novelist. He has written and performed in numerous plays and shows in various media. His latest musical play, *Jamie Rowsell Lives*, won the 2012 Playwrights Guild of Canada Award for Best Musical. He has had a novella, *The Fixer-Upper* and a novel, *Beach Reading*, previously published. Visit his website at www.lorne-elliott.com.

PRAISE FOR HIS PREVIOUS WORK



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