A Summer *at* La Rochelle

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A Summer at La Rochelle

The fishing port of La Rochelle, on the Bay of Biscay, should have been a good place to write a novel. Or a screenplay. Or an epic poem. It should have been, but it wasn't.

I remember seeing La Rochelle for the first time, early one misty morning, and thinking to myself that here, hopefully, was a seaside town in which I could lose myself and do some serious writing.

Paris, with its crowds and maniacal traffic, had been hopeless. It had also been smoggy, wet and expensive. After three months in a roach-infested *grenier* on rue La Fayette, across the street from the Gare du Nord, all I had to show for my time was a wine habit and a nagging cough.

And so in early summer I went south by train to Poitiers, where my cousin Freddy Truaxe, a sometime travel writer with *Paris Match,* had lodgings on rue St-Hilaire. Unfortunately, when I arrived at Poitiers, Freddy was truant, and no one could shed light on his whereabouts. The bureau chief of *Paris Match,* a pink, portly man named Brouage, who had sweaty armpits and a row of ballpoint pens in his shirt pocket, said he thought Freddy might have gone to Bordeaux in search of material for his column. "You should have telephoned first," said astute Monsieur Brouage, fingering his various pens.

In disgust, I bought a third-class train ticket for Bordeaux, and left Poitiers at midnight in pouring rain, wishing I were still in Paris, where at least I'd had friends and a roof over my head.

But my troubles were far from over. Either someone had sold me the wrong ticket, or I'd boarded the wrong train, because as dawn broke next morning I found myself travelling west, not south, through the outskirts of La Rochelle, on the Atlantic coast.

To the gruff conductor I said, "Where exactly are we?"

"Exactly, monsieur, we are approaching the ancient fishing town of La Rochelle."

"See here," I said, "I don't wish to go to La Rochelle, I wish to go to Bordeaux!"

"Monsieur," he said, shrugging his shoulders, yawning in my face, "it little matters where you wish to go. You are going to La Rochelle, because that is where this train is going."

As we pulled into an empty, mouldering station, he stood there laughing at me, puffing on a pungent Gauloise, well pleased with himself. Out the window I glimpsed the periphery of a small port, and beyond that, the ocean. There were fishing boats moored alongside a pier, and through the drizzle I could see a couple of stone pillars heroically guarding the harbour entrance.

"Who knows, monsieur?" said the conductor, giving his groin a good scratch. "You may find La Rochelle to your liking. If I may say

so, it's very charming, very picturesque."

HUNGRY, DISGRUNTLED, SLEEP-deprived, I disembarked. Carrying my duffel bag and laptop word-processor, I crossed the street to a dingy waterfront bistro called the *Moulin de Marcouze* and ordered a café-crème.

"With perhaps a small cognac as well, monsieur?" suggested Jules, the jittery waiter, who looked as though he could have used one himself.

"At this hour?" I said.

"In this weather, monsieur."

So I had a cognac with my coffee, followed by a warm croissant, followed by a second cognac, and by then the rain had stopped and the sun was coming out. Not only coming out, but sending brilliant shafts of golden light across the harbour, making the fishing boats sparkle and turning everything a warm bronze. Along the seawall,

children were shouting, dogs barking. Three grizzled fishermen in greasy caps and blue tunics came and stood at the bar, smoking dark cigarettes and sipping their first pastis of the day. Surprisingly, all three nodded in my direction.

"Monsieur is a foreign correspondent?" asked Jules, the trembling waiter, indicating my laptop.

"No," I said. "I write fiction."

"Ah, and monsieur intends to write a fiction about La Rochelle … ?"

"No, I'm looking for my cousin."

"Who lives in La Rochelle … ?"

"No, he lives in Poitiers, on rue St-Hilaire. But I understand he may be in Bordeaux."

"Of course," said Jules, glancing covertly at the fishermen. "Your cousin is a travelling salesman?"

"No, he's a journalist. He has a byline in *Paris Match*."

I saw Jules glance at the fishermen again, and raise his eyebrows,

and I had the feeling he didn't believe me.

Just then there was a commotion out in the street, and I watched a faded magenta tour bus disgorge a dozen elderly passengers, who immediately put up umbrellas, apparently unaware that the rain had stopped and the sun was out.

Moments later, a jaunty young female tour guide, with dark curly hair and shapely legs, took charge and led them down the quay to a red and white ferryboat named *Le Lapin,* whose masts and rigging were festooned with multicoloured pennants.

"They're off to Ile d'Oléron for a day's outing," said Jules, hovering at my elbow. "To eat oysters and look at ruins. They go every Tuesday aboard *Le Lapin.* Their sprightly guide is Josselin Fontvieille, the captain's daughter."

It was then I realized that the three men at the bar, in their greasy caps and blue tunics, now knocking back their second pastis of the day, were not fishermen at all, but the crew of *Le Lapin.* Smacking

their lips and lighting fresh cigarettes, they left in a group, following the elderly tourists toward their waiting vessel.

"I think it would be difficult to write a fiction about La Rochelle," said Jules, shakily mopping up my breakfast crumbs. "We have only ordinary people here, and to write a fiction, one no doubt has need of extraordinary people."

"Yes," I said, "it helps."

Across the street, an impatient locomotive trumpeted.

THE TRAIN TO POITIERS and the tour boat to Ile d'Oléron left La Rochelle within minutes of each other, the one headed east, the other west. I went out and stood on the jetty in the morning sunshine, and felt a strange sort of contentment. It might have been the cognac, or the sun on the water, or the graceful gulls soaring overhead. From the stern deck of *Le Lapin,* as it chugged across the calm harbour, Josselin the sprightly tour guide waved to her friends on shore: an

old brown dog, a woman in a green dress, and several small children. For some inexplicable reason, I waved at her too.

"Monsieur," said Jules, the quaking waiter from the *Moulin de Marcouze,* "don't forget your typewriter and your gunnysack."

"May I leave them with you," I said, "while I go in search of accommodation?"

"Accommodation, monsieur?"

"Yes, I've changed my mind. I think I'll spend some time in La Rochelle after all. I have a notion one could do serious writing here, if one could find a quiet corner."

"I know just the place, monsieur."

"You do?"

"A villa, monsieur. A cottage. A *maison de campagne,* which belongs to my *patron,* the owner of the *Moulin de Marcouze,* who is at this moment in a hospice in Angers, recovering from anemia, amongst other things. His villa at the edge of town, beside the cemetery, is for

rent. There is a grove of trees, a very nice garden … it is an old house, monsieur, but a very nice house, somewhat overrun by salamanders, not suitable for winter habitation, but for this time of year, and for a robust person such as yourself, perfect … and only fifteen-hundred francs per week, monsieur!"

"I think I'll look for a hotel, or a pension."

"Believe me, monsieur, the hotels and pensions are all full. Not only full, but very crowded, very noisy. Unsuitable for serious writing. You would be better off in the seasonal villa of my patron, for, say, eleven-hundred francs per week."

"I could afford six-hundred, maximum."

"Done, monsieur. You have made a wise decision."

THE BEST THING ABOUT spending the summer at La Rochelle, in a drafty, crumbling villa by the sea, was that no one knew where I was. Not even Cousin Freddy. It gave one a sense of freedom, of anonymity.

The second best thing was the villa itself. Though it was, as Jules had said, overrun with salamanders, and had seen better days, it was adequate for my needs. It had an unkempt orchard full of scabrous plum trees, a private little garden protected by trellises, and a spectacular view of the harbour.

On warm days, I took my word-processor outdoors, and sat at a stone table surrounded by hop vines. There would be gulls floating overhead, salamanders sunning themselves, wasps buzzing about in the milkweed. There was also an enclave of voluble cats, keen on pursuing mice among the prickly lettuce. On dull days, of which there were few that summer, I lingered in bed, listening to pleasantly muffled sounds: fishboat engines, rain on the roof, irascible magpies pettifogging in the plum trees. I seldom, if ever, thought of Paris, or of Cousin Freddy.

Every morning I walked down to the *Moulin de Marcouze* for breakfast: warm croissants, café-crême, a glass or two of cognac. And

every morning, when the train to Poitiers blew its horn, Jules would say, "*Eh bien,* monsieur, there is your train departing without you!"

I would talk to the grizzled crew of *Le Lapin:* the captain, the purser and the engineer, who preceded each voyage with a glass of pastis, and from whom I learned that they took busloads of tourists across to Ile d'Oléron seven days a week. "On occasion, monsieur," said Captain Fontvieille, Josselin's father, "I am tempted to throw someone overboard. But so far, in the interest of good-fellowship, I have resisted this temptation."

There were days when I whiled away the entire morning at the *Moulin de Marcouze,* talking to Jules and his cronies. Sometimes we sat outdoors in the sun, watching fishing boats coming in, talking to women in dark dresses on their way to the quayside fish market. When fog blew in off the Bay of Biscay, the tipplers stayed indoors, sipping Campari at rickety tables and playing dominoes, while Jules read aloud the lurid headlines from a week-old Toulouse tabloid.

"Monsieur," he would say to me, "your fiction goes well?"

"Yes, very well."

The truth was, I hadn't written a thing. My wordprocessor was still in its case. Though I might sit all afternoon at my stone table under the plum trees, I did nothing but doze and daydream. Perhaps the setting was too idyllic: the air too spiced, the sky too blue. Perhaps if there had been turmoil, or conflict … but even the voluble cats who frequented my overgrown garden seemed happy with their lot in life.

I ESPECIALLY REMEMBER the warm, aromatic, summer evenings.

At dusk, as fishboats and sailboats were docking, I would walk about the marina and have my supper at one of the smoky, open-air *buvettes,* which served fried fish, salad, and a half litre of Roussillon for twenty francs; and for five francs more, coffee, mustard, and a *baguette.*

There would be adolescents groping each other in the shadows, and a primeval accordionist, with long hair and flowing beard, who sat on

a folding chair and played love songs for money. Swarms of moths maintained orbit around yellow gas lamps. At moonrise, middle-aged couples would stand up and dance slow waltzes to the accordion. Mellow on wine and moonlight, I could see why Ulysses had tarried so long in lotus-land.

It was on just such an evening that I first met Josselin, Captain Fontvieille's dark-haired daughter. She came and sat at my table and allowed me to buy her a glass of vermouth.

"My father tells me you're a writer," she said. "What do you write?"

"At the moment, absolutely nothing."

"But you are a writer? Like Paul Theroux."

"I aspire to be. I pretend to be."

"At school," she said, laughing, tossing her dark curls, "I admired most the decadent poets: Rimbaud, Verlaine, Baudelaire …"

"You must tell me what it's like to be a tour guide."

"Every Wednesday morning, I leave on my bus for Biarritz, and

every Monday evening I return. In between I stop at Margaux, Sauternes and St-Emilion. Every Tuesday, on my father's boat, I escort tourists to Ile d'Oléron to eat oysters, look at castle ruins, and drink some Pineau de Charentes. On the return voyage, I hold their heads for them while they vomit over the side. Soon, I hope to go and live in Paris."

That Tuesday night, a full moon rose out of the sea, and we danced on the cobblestones to the ancient accordionist's slow waltzes. Josselin was pliant, as light as a feather, and her breath smelled of wormwood and crushed grapes. We danced till midnight, then followed the sea-wall to my villa. We climbed to the cemetery and sat in the moonlight, and from there could see beacons flashing on the breakwater, could hear lovers whispering passionately among the graves.

Later, in my garden, we lit candles and sipped Beaujolais under the plum trees, and she told me there had recently been threats against her father; or rather, against his boat, *Le Lapin*. Competitors from

Cherbourg, she said, had threatened to put him out of business, unless he shared his monopoly. Jules, at the *Moulin de Marcouze,* who suffered from palsy, but kept his ears open, had heard rumours.

"If you stay with us long enough," said Josselin, buttoning her blouse against a sudden chill in the air, "we may yet give you something to write about."

As SUMMER DREW to a close and the days shortened, dark clouds lurked on the western horizon and rain squalls swept in off the Bay of Biscay. The wasps and salamanders vacated my garden; the magpies fell silent. Jules, averse to sea breezes, kept the windward doors of the *Moulin de Marcouze* closed. Housewives on their way to market with their dogs and grandchildren wore handknit sweaters.

Early one Thursday morning, I awoke to the sounds of hubbub down in the anchorage. People were shouting, dogs barking. I lay in bed, thinking of Paris, which would soon be filling up with students;

and of Josselin, who had promised me, among other things, a picnic in the cemetery; and of Cousin Freddy, wondering where he was.

What stirred me from my rumination was the sudden bleating of a police siren. Looking out my window, I saw a throng of people gathered on that part of the public pier reserved for Captain Fontvieille's ferryboat, *Le Lapin,* of which there was no sign. Thinking it might have been purloined by pirates from Cherbourg, I dressed and went down to investigate. When I arrived at the quay, I saw what all the fuss was about: Captain Fontvieille's boat had not been stolen, it had been scuttled! All you could see was the top of its mast sticking up out of the water, and one single red pennant. The rest of it was submerged. Down in the murky depths, you could barely discern the roof of its pilothouse. Across the inlet floated a colourful, though ominous, sheen of oil.

Captain Fontvieille, need I say, was beside himself. He strode back and forth in his rubber boots, cursing vehemently, raising his fists

toward heaven, while being physically restrained from jumping into the sea by his fellow crew members. To the police officers, who appeared to be trying to suppress mirth, he ranted and raved like a madman.

Jules, from the *Moulin de Marcouze,* drew me aside and told me what a tragedy this was, not only for Captain Fontvieille and his daughter, but also for the port of La Rochelle. "Have you heard?" he asked, anxious to inform, or at least impart gossip. "Someone has wilfully opened the drain cocks in her bilges. Now, how will tourists make the voyage to Ile d'Oléron, with their tour boat sitting on the bottom in three fathoms of water?"

"It won't be easy," I admitted.

"I see only two practical solutions," said Jules, twitching. "Either raise *Le Lapin,* which is what Captain Fontvieille is advocating, or acquire the services of a second boat."

To properly weigh the pros and cons of these proposals, and give

them the solemnity they deserved, we repaired *en masse* to the *Moulin de Marcouze* for breakfast. All except Captain Fontvieille, who was still stomping up and down the quay in his rubber boots, braying at the police.

NEXT MORNING, BRIGHT and early, on the train from Poitiers, who should arrive in La Rochelle but Cousin Freddy! He came bursting into the *Moulin de Marcouze* while I was enjoying my warm croissant, saw me sitting there, and sat down beside me as though we'd been together as recently as the night before.

"*Amigo*," he said, lighting up a Gauloise and pulling out his reporter's notebook, "tell me what the hell is going on!"

"Fancy meeting you here," I said, finishing my croissant. "I looked for you in Poitiers …"

"In Poitiers? I haven't been in Poitiers since April. I've been in Avignon, watching bullfights, floating up and down the Rhône on a

bateau-mouche casino."

"Your editor, Monsieur Brouage, didn't seem to know where you were."

"Of course he knew where I was. He just didn't want me distracted. Now tell me whose boat blew up."

"Nobody's boat blew up."

"How many people were killed?"

"Nobody was killed."

He closed his notebook, signalled Jules for a cognac, and gave me a long, hard look. "Nobody was killed?"

"Nobody was killed. How could anyone be killed? The boat sank at the dock."

"It didn't blow up?"

"Of course it didn't blow up. Somebody pulled its drain plug."

"We received a phone call yesterday from this very establishment, saying that a ferryboat had blown up halfway between La Rochelle and

Ile d'Oléron, that there had been heavy loss of life, and victims' luggage was being filched from their hotels. The boat's name was *Le Lapin*."

We sat staring at each other, sipping our cognac, hovered over by Jules. Everyone was looking at us, listening to us.

"The captain's name," said Freddy, "was Fontvieille."

"It still is," I said.

"I didn't come all the way from Poitiers on that damned midnight train just to cover a dockside sinking!"

"It appears you did."

There were murmurs of sympathy among the thirsty souls. Cigarettes were lit, drinks ordered. Jules bustled about, shaking like a leaf in a windstorm.

"*Amigo,*" said Freddy, very softly, giving me one of his patented glowers, "did you phone the magazine?"

"Of course not," I said. "Why would I do a thing like that?"

"Because you knew no one would come here for a dockside sinking.

A dockside sinking might merit three lines under a tampon advertisement, whereas an explosion at sea with heavy loss of life would make the front cover. Which is what we assumed …"

"I didn't phone your magazine, Freddy."

"Then who the hell did?"

We sat in silence for some time. It was very quiet in the *Moulin de Marcouze*. From down among the moorings came the clanking of a heavy-duty crane hired by Captain Fontvieille to raise his sunken ferryboat.

"*Amigo,*" said Freddy, "just what the hell are you doing here anyway?"

"Your cousin is busy writing a fiction about La Rochelle," volunteered Jules, serving us cognacs we hadn't asked for. "In spite of our lack of extraordinary people."

"I don't believe it," said Freddy.

"It's true," I said. "I'm renting a derelict villa …"

"Come back to Poitiers with me, for God's sake. I'll show you the sights. We can go down to Bordeaux …"

"I'd like to, Freddy," I said, "but I can't. I've been invited to a picnic in the cemetery. And there's this boat to raise. After that, I may go to Ile d'Oléron for a feed of oysters. And I must soon think of getting back to Paris. In the meantime, as Jules says, I have this fiction to write, a villa to maintain …"

"Then to hell with you!"

"At least come and watch us refloat *Le Lapin*. Talk to Captain Fontvieille about the ferryboat business, about his competitors from Cherbourg. I'll buy you lunch …"

But before I could stop him, Freddy had gathered up his reporter's notebook and his ballpoint pens, and was on his way across the street to the depot.

"If you're lucky," he shouted back over his shoulder, "I'll see you in Paris!"

Clever Cousin Freddy, the travel writer: he had not only memorized the train schedule, he had furnished himself with a return ticket. Which was lucky for him, because no sooner had he disappeared than the locomotive blew its horn, the conductor blew his whistle, and tremulous Jules said to me, "Monsieur, the train for Poitiers is now departing, and once again, it is leaving without you!"

About the Author

Bill MacDonald has been a forester, language teacher, arctic meteorologist and immigration officer. He also spent a year in Paris, purportedly studying French literature at the Sorbonne. Currently, he flogs his scenic photography and works as a salesperson at Fireweed Crafts Inc. in Thunder Bay. His short fiction and poetry have appeared in *Geist Magazine, Prairie Fire, Winners' Circle* and the last four years of *Wordscape Anthologies.* His non-fiction book, *Tyke & Dusty – An Authorized Bioqraphy of Two House Cats,* appeared in 1997. His most recent works of fiction are *Windows on the Street* (Porphry Press, 1998) and *Skull Rock Scandal: Confessions of a Chambermaid* (Porphry Press, 1999). His *Home Before Dark – A Memoir* (seven connected first-person stories) will appear in the new millennium.