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PETITE SUITE DES ERREURS MINUSCULES

I. *Un Mot Manquant - Scherzo Ruineux En Do-Mineur pour Violoncelle et Percussion, Sévère et Décisif*

Thomas Szabo stood all by himself in the empty mailroom. He took an envelope from his slot, almost the only item in any of the slots. An actual letter on paper, and an envelope, was about as rare as a cassette tape or a celluloid collar. Szabo held the envelope and, for a moment, his breath. The return address was that of *The Journal of Global Diplomacy*. He unzipped his backpack, slipped the envelope in, and made for his office, four floors up.

The stairway was as crowded and noisy as the mailroom had been empty and silent.

“Hi, Professor,” said Betty Kim, going down as he went up. Betty had earned one of only three A’s he’d given the prior semester.

Szabo nodded at her, remembered to smile a little too late.

Tenure. The grail. The ever-receding, dwindling distinction, once guarantor of academic freedom, now obstacle to management flexibility. Tenure made teachers indifferent and expensive; it made scholars lazy too because, as everybody knows, security kills productivity. Plumbers and hedge-

fund managers didn't have tenure; why should academics? The vox populi and the administration sang the same melody. The financial commitment's prohibitive, complained the Provost. It's an antiquated practice, the President proclaimed, but so long as our peer institutions use it to hold on to their best talent—or to poach ours—we'll have to have tenured faculty. But it's only for the very best. Borrowing an idea from the Vatican, the Provost appointed a devil's advocate to each tenure and promotion committee. The presumption was to be one of inadequacy.

Szabo was about to become such a case, a dossier. But his chairman had been candid. The case was not unimpeachably solid. He was not the very best, at least not demonstrably. His service was more than adequate, and everybody was grateful for it. But no one really cared about committee work, so long as there was some of it. His teaching evaluations were outstanding, but excellent teaching was just a *sine qua non*. For pleasing the customers, you might get your contract renewed; you didn't get tenure for it. Socrates didn't publish? Yes, I've heard that a few times. But Socrates never underwent a tenure review, unless you count his trial, and look how that ended. No, it's scholarship, publications, what the external evaluators write about you. Above all, it's whether they're willing to say that you'd get tenure where they did—that's what matters.

“Your monograph is fine; but it'll be seen as a revised dissertation. The reviews were solid, not spectacular. The three articles will help but the journals that published them aren't at the very top. Your conference papers are good too, but they aren't publications. To have even an outside shot, Tom, you'll need to add at least one more article, a major one in a top-flight journal.”

Szabo had worked it out in daydreams. He'd get tenure and then propose to Caroline. She'd throw her arms around his neck and say yes and then he'd buy a condo, maybe even a house. If he got tenure, he'd have a career, not just a series of gigs. And if he didn't get tenure? *Qua non*.

Szabo closed the office door and sat at his desk. The article was audacious and timely. He'd leapt into the quicksand of the Middle East, armed with a promising and wholly new idea. For weeks, he'd mulled over the mess then it came to him in the shower, and he'd dashed, soaking wet, to write it down. There wasn't much time. He'd rushed the research and the writing too, but got the submission in before the deadline. He had aimed high with *The Journal of Global Diplomacy*, JGD. "The worst they can say is no," Caroline had said airily. "What have you got to lose?" Caroline was not an academic but liked that he was. She was an actuary for a middle-sized insurance company. "The difference between your job and mine," she once told him, "is that when I do good work they give me more money." Caroline could be, by turns, breathtakingly level-headed and squishily sentimental. Szabo found not knowing how she'd react to anything from a Valentine to a head cold stimulating rather than frustrating. And then she was so pretty. Caroline smelled good, even in the summer. Sometimes he imagined they were a pair of vines twining around the trunk of their relationship. He feared the tree could be uprooted, though. If he had to find another job, even if he were lucky enough to find one, it might be a thousand miles away in some small town with too many churches and too few bakeries. Would Caroline move to a place with lots of hymn-singing but no bagels?

Szabo had a French mustard jar on his desk that bristled with pens and pencils. It also held a letter opener one of his students had given him as a present. It was made from some kind of Hawaiian wood. He had never used it before but, for luck, he used it now.

Szabo unfolded the letter, and saw at once that it was too long for an outright rejection. Two pages. It was signed by the editor-in-chief himself. Was he going to be asked to revise and resubmit?

Dear Professor Szabo:

We are pleased to inform you that your article has been accepted for publication. As you will see from the appended reviewers' comments, your submission has been well received. It is also about an urgent matter and likely to prove controversial. That is why I have decided to break with our usual procedure and allow you to jump the queue. Your article will be featured in our next quarterly issue. Further, we intend to invite three distinguished members of our Advisory Board to prepare responses, which will appear after the article. As soon as I receive a positive response from you, I will set all this in motion. Time presses, so please reply at your earliest convenience, and I will send you our standard publication agreement.

On a personal note, it is heartening to see such original thinking from a young scholar. As this will have to be a rush job, let me know if it will be acceptable to dispense with the usual page proofs.

The letter delighted Szabo's chairman. "We can go to the Dean with this," he said, removing his glasses and beaming. "Make me a copy. Thomas. No, make *three*. There are some more people I'd like to see it."

“Good news,” said Caroline. She gave him a disappointingly pedestrian hug, said “Mazeltov,” then suggested they go to a movie. Apparently, there was a new one with Hugh Grant in it.

The new issue came out in just over a month. *JGD* was so well endowed that it still published printed copies. Szabo’s name was featured on the front cover. He turned immediately to the three responses. There were only two. One was from a former Secretary of State, the other from the Whitmarsh Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. Both were brief. The latter began with this sentence: “Professor Szabo must be one of those charming American academics who live each day as if it were their first.” The other was worse.

He was mocked, ridiculed. They seemed to think he had bitten off even more than he had, far more, that he was proposing something absurdly sweeping. Szabo was horrified and baffled.

He turned to his article and read it all. Still perplexed, he turned back to the first page before he saw what had gone wrong. His title had been “How to End the War,” but the one on the page before him read “How to End War.” No *the*.

He phoned the editor-in-chief’s office and was told to try again in two hours. Two bad hours.

The great man had a plummy voice and an accent that suggested some place north of the Midlands. “Sorry. I did have my secretary give it a quick glance. As I said, there was a time constraint. My sincere apologies, Professor Szabo. I didn’t catch it. But who checks *titles*, eh? Look, not to worry. We’ll get a correction into the next issue.”

“But that won’t be out until spring.”

“Ah, summer, actually. We’re doing a double issue, you see. On East Asia.”

Chairman, Dean, Tenure Committee—everybody was informed of the typo. All were encouraged to read the article. It didn't matter. Szabo was already a punch-line, even to Caroline, who found the whole business hilarious.

Szabo had one more year on his contract, which was now terminal.

His next full-time job was two years and eight hundred miles away—one-year, non-tenure-track.

2. Le Grand Cru - Concertino pour Hautbois et Orchestre de Chambre en Sol-Majeur, à la Main Leste et Accidentellement Heureux

Toby Kraftweiner's happy childhood ended abruptly when he was twelve. The racially anxious predicted the decline of the old Germantown section of Philadelphia in which Toby had grown up like a healthy animal unburdened by self-consciousness. His nervous parents decided to move to the suburb of Abercarn. Abercarn had been effectively founded by a post-war developer named Rosenberg who lobbied hard to have it assigned a Welsh name, like exclusive Bryn Mawr and classy Bala Cynwyd. The decision was taken while Toby was off at summer camp. As he was not consulted, Toby behaved accordingly.

His parents enrolled him in Louisa May Alcott Junior High School. Ironically, the famous author of *Little Women* had been born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, not in Concord, Massachusetts. Toby, sulking, would have detested his new school on principle, but principle proved unnecessary. On his first day, Miss Cianci accused him of talking in her English class. "New boy! What's your name?"

What's that? Speak up. Let us all hear you." She then administered a public dressing down, warning him about "getting off on decidedly the wrong foot." The accusation was not only false but absurd, as Toby didn't yet know anybody to talk to; besides, it was the boy sitting behind him who'd told the dirty joke. Toby took the blame without protest, not to spare his new classmate, but out of resentful indifference. It was this same attitude that kept him from speaking up when a clerical error on the schedule he was issued sent him to Mademoiselle Mallin's Introductory French class. He had signed up to take Spanish like nearly everybody else. When Mademoiselle wrote "Français Un" on the board, Toby shrugged, a gesture that was fast becoming typical. So it goes, he thought. Espagnol, Français—what did it matter? If he'd known as much French then as he did later, he'd have said *Je m'en fiche*.

Toby continued taking French all through high school, counting off the days of his captivity. He read the assigned stories in *Contes Modernes*, every tedious page of Pierre Loti's *Pêcheur d'Islande*, and dutifully wrote the *dictées* for which Monsieur Teal used recorded speeches of Charles de Gaulle, the only Frenchman ever to speak slowly.

Toby isolated himself, or, more precisely, did nothing to end his isolation. He consoled himself with Russian novels and German music. He excelled in French but, curiously, couldn't take anything spoken or written in that language seriously. For him the very word *French* connoted frivolity. In translation Camus and Flaubert absorbed and challenged him but, in the original French, they made him laugh.

Toby's parents fretted over their son's adolescent withdrawal; and, when his older sister went off to college, they fretted more. Toby wanted to believe that, deep down, they felt guilty for having moved. He liked that thought.

In the fullness of time, he escaped the leafy corruption of Abercarn for the more congenial life of the University of Pennsylvania. He surprised and pleased his father by registering in the Wharton School of Commerce and Finance; however, he thought it would earn him some distinction among his assiduously networking classmates to minor in French. There were no other management majors who could quote Baudelaire. It was in his French classes that he met all the girls he dated. Yet, when they spoke French, he couldn't take them seriously. *Si ce n'est pas l'amour, alors l'argent*, he told himself sententiously and buckled down to econometric problem sets, supply and demand curves, the *passé simple*.

After graduation, Toby was hired by a rising Boston accounting and consulting firm. He found a decent apartment on Marlborough Street, went to concerts and plays, drank and dated in moderation. The women with whom he was fixed up did not speak French; they'd all taken Spanish. Nevertheless, none of these relationships had much staying power. When his friends asked him about whichever woman they'd seen him with last, he produced a stock reply: "Unfortunately one of us was too neurotic."

The economy boomed, tossing up bubbles like champagne. Business became sexy again. Toby moved up three times; yet with each promotion the work became more boring.

His firm prospered. No more cold calls; new clients were phoning every week. American business methods now had cachet overseas, and the guys with their names on the door decided to go international.

There was a difficult client in Paris, an exporter of pricey cheeses, artisan jams, mustard, and wines. Things weren't going well; profits were flat. At the weekly meeting, Toby's boss asked if

anybody in the room spoke French. Toby raised his hand. “*Oui*,” he said to himself. “*Monsieur le francophone, c’est moi.*”

Toby had traveled through western Ireland with his friend O’Brien during spring break of their senior year. His passport was still current.

“Stay the whole week,” his boss said grandly, handing over the airline tickets and a company Amex card.

In Paris, Toby had to keep himself from chuckling inappropriately. Everybody spoke French and much faster than Charles de Gaulle.

The French clients were irritating, needy, and intractable, though not notably hard-working. Everyone took long lunches, and they all cleared out by four o’clock.

On his third day, Toby was taking on the crowded Métro heading back to his hotel when a thin young man suddenly shouldered people aside, shouted something not in French, and pulled out a pistol. People scattered, screamed, cringed and tried to hide behind each other. The gun was pointed more than aimed. How could he miss? The gun didn’t fire. Toby thought he heard two clicks. Without giving the matter any thought, he launched himself at the skinny fellow, knocked him headfirst to the floor of the car. He grabbed the gun and twisted as hard as he could, like tightening a tourniquet. He could hear the wrist break, a sickening click. The man shrieked and let go of the gun. Toby handed it to another passenger and continued kneeling on the man’s back.

Toby led off the morning news. The American ambassador invited him to lunch where the Marquis de Lafayette and Black Jack Pershing were both mentioned. The President of the Republic

gave him a medal on camera then kissed him on both cheeks—not air-kisses, either. He was interviewed via Skype on *The Today Show* and in person by *Télématin*.

When he finally was able to return to work at the exporters' office, everybody stood and applauded. They also stopped being difficult.

A young woman happened to there that morning, the charming daughter of one of the company's suppliers. "Permit me to present my god-daughter, Mademoiselle Emmanuelle Marais," said the chief of the company. "She teaches English and does translations."

Mlle. Marais thought the hero deserved a home-cooked meal and invited him to her apartment that very evening. The apartment was large and elegant and in the fifth arrondissement, close to the Sorbonne.

They established that they both liked Poulenc and Gide, but not Franck or Proust.

"I love Conrad," she said. "In fact, just now I'm translating *The Rover*. It's one of his last books, set here, in France."

"As was Conrad himself, for a time. He led three lives, each in a different language, didn't he?"

"Ah, vous savez? Mais, exactement."

In short, they were delighted with each other. Not only had Toby never met a woman who cared at all for Conrad but *The Rover* was among his favorite books. He wondered if the French translation would make it seem silly.

Emmanuelle spoke her impeccable English with an accent piquantly halfway between Montparnasse and Oxbridge. Perhaps that's why Toby took her seriously. And maybe she took him

seriously because he could speak French, had been twice kissed by the French president, and had a business degree from the Wharton School.

They didn't want to say good night, though, at three a.m., they did.

On Thursday, Emmanuelle called and invited Toby to meet her parents. On Friday, they took the Very Fast French Train to Châlons, capital of the Champagne region, where her family's small but distinguished vineyard was located. Over dinner, everyone was charmed by Toby's spot-on impression of Charles de Gaulle. Later, Monsieur Marais suggested a walk in the course of which he confided that he had lower-back trouble and was looking forward to cutting back. Emmanuelle was his only child and, while she might not object to leaving Paris to live in the country, she preferred translating novels to running a family business. So, when Toby and Emmanuelle were married a month later, he took over management of the vineyard, which flourished and expanded under his steady hand.

And he never went home.

3. L'Agent Secret - Marche Funèbre pour Flûte et Alto en Do-dièse Mineur, Assez Romantique mais Tout à Fait Brusque

"Look, it's February. Send her a Valentine's card," Charlie suggested before hoisting his brimful glass of Guinness.

"What?" said Owen. "Anonymously?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

“I don’t have her address. I don’t know much of anything about her, actually.”

Charlie chuckled. “Well, you know *one* thing. You know she’s hot. Oops. Excuse me. *Two* things. That she’s hot and you want to know more about her.”

“True.”

Charlie glanced upward, as he always did before pontificating, the skyward look being his version of the raised professorial finger. “Like physics and biology,” he declared, “love begins with curiosity, that urge to see how things work inside, to penetrate. Those toddlers who grow up to be scientists aren’t exactly sociopaths. In fact, they usually love the butterflies whose wings they’re tearing off.”

“You’re feeling philosophical tonight.”

“Oh, that was nothing, pal.” Charlie lifted his half-empty glass. “Get two of these in me and I’ll out-Aristotle everybody in this bar.”

“Okay, Aristotle. You say love begins in curiosity and that curiosity’s a kind of aggression, right? Sorry. That just doesn’t sound right to me.”

“Of course it’s aggression. There’s always a little bit of an assault in love—maybe even a dab of downright cruelty. But, of course, there’s much more beside. If it’s really love.”

Owen smirked.

Charlie laughed. “No, I’m not denying there’s such a thing as love. I’m not that old yet that.”

Owen leaned on his elbows, pensive. “Maybe you’ve got a point, especially about us guys. A lot of women get killed by the men they dump. Rejection vaporizes the tenderness but the aggression sticks.”

“Sure. Then there’s the primitive ownership thing. Some guys need to hold on, just can’t let go. Hot-blooded, full of passion. Strong feelings can flip just like that. When men made the laws and sat on all the juries, they handed out lighter sentences for crimes of passion. Or none.”

“And was there any legal excuse for that, counselor-to-be?”

“A fairly sound one, actually. See, with your *crime passionel* there’s no malice aforethought. By definition it’s a heat of the moment thing. Any competent defense attorney should be able to get a murder-one charge lowered to murder-two. A really good lawyer would get it down to manslaughter.”

Owen took a deep breath, sipped his pale ale, looked around the bar. It was a place for twenty-somethings, young professionals, the city’s not-yet-burnt-out. After a couple of rounds you started to see what they were a year or two ago. Twelve months earlier, Owen and Charlie had both been college seniors themselves. In September Owen had started at Beckley and Stein, Graphic Designers. He was doing well, liked the work he was assigned for the most part, also the pay and living on his own. Charlie had been a philosophy major and was now in his second semester at Columbia Law. He had all the self-confidence Owen didn’t. Charlie could be pompous but Owen respected him. Anyway, he needed to talk to somebody about Claire Dupont.

“Send her a Valentine,” Charlie urged again.

“But I don’t *know* her. I mean we’ve only spoken once. I don’t even know if she’s one of *those* Duponts.”

“So what? You told me she works for some production company—movies, TV. So, she’s artistic. And you know she goes to parties by herself. So, she’s sociable and single.”

“Maybe she doesn’t like Asian guys.”

“And maybe she’s got a thing for them. Come, *on* Owen. You’re not in high school. This is the big bad city.”

“A Valentine card.”

“The *right* kind—nothing lewd or mawkish. Something to make you look sweet and not like a stalker. Or, worse, *needy*.”

Owen sighed. “She’s gorgeous.”

“You’re thinking she’s out of your league?”

“Yeah. Probably. A Dupont.”

Charlie scoffed. “Grow a pair, Owen. What’ve you got to lose?”

Owen was about to say his dignity and his as-yet unbroken heart—but didn’t.

Charlie polished off his Guinness, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Look. Ask the people who threw that party where you saw her. Go online, do a little research. Maybe she just broke up with somebody and she’s vulnerable. Valentine’s Day is, as they say, fraught. For you, it’s an opportunity.”

Owen couldn’t get comfortable with the idea. You sent a Valentine’s card to somebody you were already involved with. But he was lonely and couldn’t get Claire out of his mind. Her hair was long, dark—almost black, like his. She had shown up at the party late, wearing a man’s fedora, tight black jeans, a tight purple pullover. She’d been alone, and Mary, their hostess, took her around.

He’d held out his hand. “I’m Owen Lee.”

“And I’m Claire Dupont,” she said in an alto voice as deep and thrilling as her brown eyes.

“Claire as Claire *de Lune*,” Mary laughed.

Claire smiled. “Mary thinks I’m crazy. But really I’m just a harmless eccentric, a bohemian with lots of affectations.”

Poor people and ugly ones go crazy. Rich pretty ones are eccentric. That was just one of the thoughts Owen had later.

He slept on Charlie’s suggestion of using a Valentine’s card as an opening gambit. He thought it was ludicrous. All the same, the next day he looked up Bill and Mary’s home number and Mary answered. He had to explain that he was the Asian guy that somebody they’d actually invited to their party had dragged along.

“Yes?”

“So, there was woman there. Claire Dupont?”

“Oh, Claire. Sure.”

“Well, I was wondering if you might have her cell number or her address.”

There was a pause. Women didn’t give out their friends’ information to men they didn’t know.

Owen hastily added, “I mean her *work* number, or the address.”

“Oh. You work in film too?”

“Graphic design.”

Owen felt he was teetering on the cusp of a lie, letting Mary think his interest in Claire was professional when it was anything but.

“Sometimes we do titles and credits,” he fibbed.

“I see. Well, Claire works at SoHo-Tribeca Productions. Know it?”

“Sure,” said Owen, swallowing hard, trying to feel aggressive but not managing it.

“Claire’s a talented girl.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Well, good. Look. I’m sorry but I’ve really gotta run.”

It took a bit of hopping from link to link but Owen was able to track down Claire’s home address. He picked what he hoped was the right kind of card, nothing remotely sexual or even romantic, just the sort of generic thing you could send to a child. *Happy Valentine’s Day*. Above his email address, he wrote the briefest note possible: *Lunch? Coffee? Here’s my email. Let me know. Owen Lee.*

He decided not to say that he was the Korean-American graphic designer she’d met at Mary and Bill’s party but to simulate self-assurance by pretending she’d remember his name. It was the sort of thing Charlie would do.

Claire Dupont’s building was a big new one on Montague Street in Brooklyn Heights. One-bedrooms ran \$3000/month. Her apartment number was 1210. Because of the holiday, the postman had an unusually heavy load and was behind his schedule. In his rush, he made an error. Instead of putting Owen’s card into the box marked *C. Dupont, 1210*, he placed it in the one that belonged to *C. Dulac, 1510*. That the “C” in both cases stood for Claire was just a coincidence.

Claire Dulac had become ill during her junior year at Smith. Her roommate moved out. Her parents were called and she had to take the spring semester off. Claire spent two months in an excellent facility before returning to finish her degree. She was fine so long as she took her medications which she did faithfully. Her parents agreed to subsidize her post-graduation life in New York. They found her the apartment on Montague, also, through friends, a job at a trendy restaurant, all kinds of fusion food. Claire spent New Year’s Eve alone, thinking that she didn’t really need the meds anymore, and

she sure didn't need their side-effects. On New Year's Day, she threw her pills away, her resolution. A couple weeks later she was fired. There had been two incidents, the second worse than the first. Claire had accused some customers of spying on her and screamed at the whole table. She threw some rolls and a plate. After that, she hadn't left her apartment except to get coffee, visit the ATM, and pick up the mail. When her parents called, she told them everything was just fine and made sure to ask about the dog. When she remembered to eat, she ordered take-out.

Claire Dulac opened Owen's card and tossed the red envelope in the trash without noticing the wrong surname and apartment number.

What's this, she thought. Had to be some trick, a ploy. This "Owen Lee" was trying to get at her. The whole thing was sinister. *Coffee? Lunch?* She had no doubt this was the same man who had bugged her phone and hidden tiny cameras all over her apartment, even in the bathroom. "Owen" was that man in a pea jacket with the camera who'd been lurking outside Starbucks. He must work for some powerful organization—the CIA, an oil company, a terrorist group, the Chinese.

Claire was scared. She set the card up on the kitchen counter and fixated on it. It was blood red. Burning it wouldn't do any good. Hearts and flowers. *Happy Valentine's Day*. She'd been sleeping all the time but now she couldn't sleep at all.

At three in the morning she took the decision to send an answer to "Owen Lee's" email address. After she clicked on the send button, she recalled something Fitzgerald, her favorite writer, had written in *The Crack-Up*: ". . . in a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day."

"Okay, Owen. Coffee. This Saturday. Starbucks at the corner of Court and Joralemon. Three o'clock."

Owen arrived five minutes early. He didn't recognize the woman who jumped to her feet and rushed up to him as soon as he came through the door. Her hair was wild, her eyes too. She wore a big green parka and her hands were shoved in its pockets. Maybe something had come up at the last minute, he guessed. Claire couldn't make it and had thoughtfully sent a friend to apologize to him in person.

“You Owen?”

He only had time to nod and open his mouth when everything happened all at once—the hands shooting out of the parka's pocket, the knife, the screaming.