

Three Stories

Walter Agnew Moore

21 August 2002, Amiens, France

François and I are having a rare beer in the Pub Geronimo. Rare for him, but then, he just lost his court case and a load of money. Maybe that's why he is a sudden stickler for accuracy.

“Walter, I just read that story you wrote, the one that had Liovain in it.”

“The ‘Soup and Waffles’ one? Did you like it?”

“It was OK. But you got it all wrong, the part about Liovain’s family.”

“What’d I get wrong?”

“The part about his father. You said his father was rich.”

“I thought you said he was rich.”

“No. I mean, it’s an interesting story the way you tell it, it’s just, you got lots of things wrong.”

“What things?” I say, “I just wrote down what you told me, about that time they pulled him out in the street—”

“Yes, but Walter, ‘nine men?’ Where did you come up with ‘nine men?’ Is that a symbolic number or something?”

“It’s what you *said*...”

“I think I would remember it if I said it. Here, you want another, or do we go?”

We pay our tab at the bar. When I open my wallet to pull out my Credit Agricole bankcard, I see Leigh’s old photo, still there. I’ve kept it with me all this time. She was smiling, a laughing smile.

The sun is still up as we walk out the door onto the street. It’s warm now. Not long ago I thought it would never get warm. I think back to the story, the one bugging François. He acts like I was making stuff up on purpose.

Soup and Waffles on a Cold Cold Night: 11 December 2001, Amiens, France

So François is back in town for the weekend as usual, and he calls me for lunch. Well, I'm skipping lunch to do some rank laundry, but we agree to get together for supper at his parents' house.

You know François. Underground Journalist, writes for *Fakir*, available here in Amiens at all the finer newsstands. Recently taken to court by an incompetent, wasteful city official for exposing that city official as wasteful and incompetent. That François. If he interviews you, get him to pay you the court costs up front. Less paperwork for all concerned.

It's cold when we get together later. Iced-up windshield. I say, jeez, I was thinking of hiking in this weather. He laughs as he scrapes the frost. No, Walter, there are better things to do than hike in this weather.

He keeps asking me if everything is alright, and I don't know why.

We go pick up Liovain. Liovain is a black guy who lives on the north side of town in the HLM, a project. Nicer than a US project, but still. A few weeks back some kids kidnapped a driver here so the police would come into the projects, then they ambushed the police using shotguns. Very well planned-out, but everything is more organized in France.

We're driving back towards the south side where François's parents live, taking the big boulevards to avoid the tiny streets through the middle. I talk to Liovain some. He doesn't write for *Fakir*, no. He is in school at the University, knows the American Economics professor I met the other day. He answers François that he still hasn't found work, and they talk about other leads.

We park and walk to the house. Liovain has that old-style African politeness, very much in the "after you, no, please, I insist" mode of a gentleman from a bygone age.

There is a fat warm cat on the sofa in the house, another on the stuffed chair, and another darts off into hiding. Maman greets us and takes our coats and scarves. She gives us snacks and *apéritifs*—nut wine, whisky. We chat in the den waiting for Papa, all around the low table munching crunchy things. My fat sofa cat stretches.

Papa is amused that I referred to this area, Picardy, as "the

Tennessee of France.” I don’t know why I say the things I do, but he likes the idea. We are at the dinner table. The *potage* is warm and rich, with what I think is the taste of mushrooms, but Maman says no, it’s some French vegetable whose name escapes me now. Still, it is tasty and filling. I have two bowls. So does Liovain. We take bread and sop up the soup from the brown ceramic bowls.

Papa is joking with me about Texas. Does everybody really ride a horse? He’s messing with me for fun, so I tell a joke or two back, and we laugh. François and Papa are discussing the new airport down the road that’s causing so much controversy.

Liovain pours us all some cider, and Maman is making *gaufres*. She has the waffle iron on the table. First she brushes on butter, then pours the batter in, first to the left, then to the right. Then she closes it, turns it over, and heats it for about a minute. Next she opens it, and she pulls out two connected *gaufres* each time. Papa and François split theirs, and Liovain and I split ours. Maman is obviously of the “food equals love” school, because we don’t lack for *gaufres*. I burn my fingertips as I pass the other side of the *gaufres* to Liovain to pull apart.

There is butter for the *gaufres*, and powdered sugar, and strawberry jam.

We talk about weapons in the US. I go on a tirade about how pistols are mostly good for committing suicide, or for letting your kids find to accidentally shoot somebody. I say, if you really need to fight, you’re better off with a good-old pump shotgun. Best to talk things out first, but if that doesn’t work, don’t use a pistol, use a shotgun! Everyone gets big-eyed and laughs at the American maniac. Maman gives me more *gaufres* to split.

Liovain’s talking to Maman and Papa. He hasn’t found work, but he may have a lead on something in Switzerland over Christmas holidays. No, his grades in school are miserable.

Papa and François go off to work on something in the house. Maman brings out a pair of pants that she mended for Liovain. He inspects the repairs, smiling, looking relieved, and praises her work. She says, “I broke lots of needles on that denim!” Liovain thanks her.

It’s late. We all three get back in François’ car, full bellies, groggy. We drop Liovain off first. Pulling out of the parking lot, François says, it can’t be easy, being a refugee in a strange country. I ask, “Who is a refugee?”

“Liovain. He had to leave Rwanda. They’re killing people left

and right.”

Turns out that Liovain’s father had already been killed in a terrorist attack. His mother, murdered on a different occasion. One day, Liovain is in Kigali, in a cafe, watching a football match on television. It’s the same day that the President’s plane is shot down. Soldiers break into the cafe, and pull everybody out into the street. They line nine men up in a file, one behind the other. They announce, we are going to fire one shot into you nine; whoever dies, dies. Whoever lives, you better get out of here fast.

They pull the trigger. The first man in the line, of course, is hit. By some fluke, the bullet misses the number-two man. Man number three is hit, and the bullet goes through him into the next man. The men farther back are all spared.

François says, “So number one, three, and four are dead right there on the spot.”

“And Liovain saw that?”

“Liovain was at the end of the line. He was the ninth man.”

“Jesus. And there I was telling that stupid story about pistols and shotguns.”

“You couldn’t have known. That’s life. I don’t think you offended him. In any case, you had everybody laughing for an hour.”

“How does he go to school after that? If I saw something like that, I would be destroyed inside.”

“I think Liovain is half-destroyed inside. At least his father was some kind of important person when he was alive.”

“How do you know that?”

“If he wasn’t, Liovain would still be stuck in Rwanda.”

Nine men in a row. Sometimes I find that a walk helps to sort out disturbing thoughts. The next day I start walking. The day after that, I stumble into Beauvais, 40 miles south of here.

21 August 2003, Amiens, France

Pub Geronimo is a good ways behind me down the hill as I walk home, up Route de Rouen. They say this narrow street was the main highway to Rouen in the old days. The sun just hangs there low, warming my right shoulder.

The Waffle Story. I don’t really want to rewrite the piece. I swear I heard him tell it like that.

But thinking about it now, I see where I got it wrong. It wasn't in the tiny details, whether they were right or not. It was more basic. That long hike to Beauvais didn't have anything to do with Liovain at all. His loss was just one thing too many to take, when you're broken inside and trying to hold it all in. François had just seen through the stage-props of my "objective reporting" and called me on it.

He's always been a stickler for evidence.

Can't be helped, it's too late now. Goodnight, sleep tight, my little Laughing Girl.