

After the War: The Bomb Chateâu

Jason Martin

All we talked about was the War. Various approaches and implications, attack versus steadfast denial, the potential outcomes, the impact on the economy, good & bad, TV ratings, which stations would benefit most. And many slowly went mad knowing that they feared it but realizing ultimately nothing could be done. It would come. It had come. That was the problem. We were already in it. It was just a matter of how bad it would be. How far it would transcend our paltry speculation.

Well, it was horrible.

Possessions: A photo, a screwdriver.

I am a descendent of four ghosts. I assume I am a descendent, why else would I carry this photo around with me everywhere? Everywhere isn't much. I am a resident of the Bomb Chateâu and I rarely leave.

The four—a man, a woman, a boy and a girl, all wear expressions of . . . I can't say.

The date on the back of the photo is "1903." I don't even have to look. But I do. Constantly. To confirm that it is truly so and not another of my convenient fantasies.

I arrived in a glass helicopter, its entrails glowing, a colorful metabolism of blue mercury racing through a single vein.

That cannot be true.

I remember they hastened my exit with sudden and overwhelming force. I watched the helicopter fly away and immediately felt for the photo in my pocket. I dusted myself off and walked into this place. When I look at this place, when I look up from the photo . . . I can't really say.

Their faces are misaligned, which hadn't bothered me until recently. It's as if God or the photographer smeared their faces just slightly during the creation/emulsion process. Or, and this is my greatest fear, someone superimposed their faces over the original

faces at a later date, and if this is the case would my forefathers, my people, be the new faces, or the old bodies? The visible faces or those behind? Those faces are lost now, smeared onto the photographer's or perhaps God's own thumb. The woman is clearly mad. Nothing else is possible. Only a mind at war with demons could wear a face that profoundly opaque.

The Bomb Chateâu, or "The Bomb" or "The Chateâu" as people tend to abbreviate, despite the fact that they are in no hurry and have no place to go anymore, but still feel an instinctive impulse to sound dismissive of the places they frequent, the things that have an irrational hold over them, is a stylish lounge for well-dressed mongrels and displaced fashion junkies. The difference between the two is obvious and I won't go into it. One man, a mongrel, is making like he is fucking a cow in the corner, waving his arms around like propellers, a comical human helicopter tethered to the ground, trying to take off. Perhaps this image is what inspired my earlier helicopter story. In any case, he's overthrusting his pelvis; it's pure vaudeville, funny stuff. The cow looks back periodically, continually forgetting the source of the minor annoyance. I am not disgusted. In fact I am curious. I wonder what it might feel like. All I can imagine is a sort of pink muscle, a moist balloon twisted and stretched, slightly swollen with petroleum jelly. I would never actually do this however. It is a mild, passing fancy and nothing more.

The cow is grazing on the carpet and I would do the same in its place. There is no grass here, of course, and the carpet is a fine thick blend of hearty fabrics. I imagine a strong coffee taste to it.

The best thing about the Chateâu is the pillows. They are immense, covered in green velvet, and they are the only things around here that get washed. The worst thing is the music they pump through the Chateâu twenty-four hours a day. It is a cold and relentless series of vibrations, an endless rumble like a stampede of steel elephants making their way toward us.

Here in the lobby, two naked teenagers are sitting on a radiator facing each other. Their bodies have taken on a fine rose tint. I notice an old-fashioned junkie eyeballing them hungrily. Probably mad for the color. Two androgynous beauties, mirror images of each other, both squatting, thighs and calves pressed together forming an immense labia from profile view, knees cupped inside armpits and one arm dangling down, no two, they are both doing it, two arms dangling, both picking at the carpet absentmindedly. They are little albino monkeys, lazy King David's passing the time on a radiating throne.

Fuck those kids, I think. Even children should have learned the rules by now. The old junkie is in a sort of predatory trance beyond anticipation; a primal tension has besot him like a great cat regarding a small pack of young gazelles. . . .

My photo bears the mark of purgatory. The background is a gray miasma. My only analogy is the atmosphere of a hyper-industrial city, Detroit, or one of those, was that one? No matter, you get the idea. Everyone thought that the coasts would go first, but they started in the middle. We soon figured that their approach was either arbitrary or their strategy was of a complexity utterly beyond our comprehension—and I wonder now, what is the difference between the two? And who are “we”?

It is she that I cannot forget . . . her mineral-silver eyes, the color of smog, her breasts, small but comically buy-out under the blouse, as if she taped two small balloons to her flat chest for the photo. My photo. If that were the case, if she had to purchase the balloons already inflated, or even worse uninflated (not **DE**-flated), can you imagine the slow tedious act of blowing them up with the express purpose of taping balloons to your chest? Pressing little scotch tape **Xes** over your nipples? That was an exercise in preternatural denial or a reflection of a prodigious sense of humor. Was she a reflection of the time? No. I can say no with certainty, and with no evidence to bear. I'm not even sure about the balloon theory.

The children are like miniature adults. They wear the weariness of the world on their faces, their fatigue rooted in an awareness of the futility of existence. But is this

possible? In ones so young? I ascribed them this false quality of precocity early on and they make me pay for it with those expressions.

I thought I might show the photo around, at least to a select few, but I don't trust anyone here. All they ever do is rub their palms along the carpet and whimper, or lick the back of each other's necks absentmindedly. I'm too straight for such shit. And it bores me.

I stare at the photo so often now I can hardly recall the source of the impulse. Is it pure desire, mere habit or calculated performance? I thought the photo might eventually arouse someone's curiosity, but there is none of that here. Only opaque sexual gestures and sudden violence here.

I've been lucky in that regard. I am ignored generally, unseen as a ghost. Like my ancestors. Or perhaps they fear me, but I doubt it. I know nothing of my past, of my ancestry, aside from the photo. Which has been key, I think, to my adaptability, my success thus far. By success I mean my own survival. I'm not yet brave enough, or funny enough to pretend that I don't care about surviving.

I remember I used to surprise others before the War. It was easy to surprise people. A candid statement, a prat-fall, a long silence. I felt equally calculating and cunning, yet utterly honest and clean. I was being true to my script at least. It worked because it appeared to be the best sort of improvisation.

My only other possession, aside from the photo, is a Phillips head screwdriver I carry in my pocket, and I long to use it. To find an old screw, to feel that initial concession as the circular process of fatal disengagement begins.

I will try to remember things now. There is little else to do here.

I have but one memory from my childhood. I recall a Mexican house. A Mexican house is predominantly brown. I don't mean the house itself was of Hispanic origin, nor do I speak of the architecture as being native to Mexico; I simply remember it as a Mexican house because everyone in it was Mexican, save me and my

sister. Brown beans in the frying pan. Brown couch. Brown carpeting. I sit tight next to my sister staring at Roberto's hair as he watches the TV. It grew in wild oceanic cowlicks, Hiroshige waves cascading into bangs. Swirls like Van Gough. His Mexican hair was shiny and fluffy.

Mexican houses have giant televisions that sit on the floor and framed portraits of children surround these televisions like a memorial for a downed school bus. Dozens of frames holding eighteen-year-old Marines and mustached, hair-netted, khaki-legged, tank-topped uncles with large but undefined brown arms littered in Gothic lettering. First communions, white silk pillows bearing rings held by nervous little men in hand-me-down burgundy blazers, their thick wild hair tamed into a single, serrated wave by a black comb and yellow pomade. A young girl in a white dress with long black hair looks back over her shoulder at me. . . .

Everything he said, it seems—the man on the TV I mean—everything he thought, was rooted in tranquility and singleness of purpose, an efficiency. All phenomena, all conversation aboard the boat was informed by his will. He was a little God on the boat. The Calypso, I think it was. He would look out onto the ocean, his brother, his livelihood, and think, or perhaps I thought he thought, *Because of the ocean, I've met everyone I've ever wanted to meet. Except Marcel Duchamp and Milton Berle.* Jacques would laugh quietly and shake his beanie-covered head, *Uncle Miltie* . . . All this he thought in French, in my mind, which does not speak French. He first went to the ocean to test himself. To match his strength against it and define the parameters of his masculinity. Jacques walked past the boxing gyms but never went inside. Or was this again, me?

Roberto looked back at me and shouted, "Boo!"

My sister and I burst into tears and Roberto laughed. In the kitchen, his mother, our babysitter, yelled, "Déjelo en paz. ¿Qué está usted haciendo?"
"Nada. Jacques Cousteau lo hizo llorar."

"Shut up baby." Roberto hissed at me.

As I prayed to God that Roberto would be killed in the

war, he turned and faced me. His face had become very serious and he pointed toward the television. "This man loves water," he said.

There must have been more to my childhood, but it all seems irrelevant now. As if that story was relevant. I don't know why such memories come when they do. I don't know why they come at all. Perhaps I'll try again from the sidewalk.

I do my best remembering on the sidewalk. Not far, the one in front of the Chateâu will usually do. I take to the sidewalk when it is sunny and sit down directly in the path of pedestrians. I am able to ignore their derisive glares once I sit down. Once I sit, the spot is mine and I have blended into the cityscape, so to speak. For it is only in the act of sitting, the transitional period between erect posture and my ass touching the concrete that I feel vulnerable. It is the volitional act, to be witnessed while making my descent, that makes me feel terribly exposed. Once I sit down, I am nothing to myself, a wad of gum, a paper bag, broken glass. . . .

Sig Sauer.

Sig Sauer.

What does it mean? I find myself repeating it on the sidewalk. What does it mean? I must think back.

Sig Sauer. Sig Sour. Lime? Gun. Limegun?

I remember it now, pushed there into its customized space. A silver beauty lying in red felt at a forty-five-degree angle.

"Sig Sauer."

I mumbled its name like a new secret crush, my warm exhalations clouding the glass case that held my new love.

Somewhere between a whisper and a thought I remember now: "Spy-gun. Tuxedo. BANG. . ."

I remember the instructor's shirt was blue. A bright American flag.

9.11.01

"We Will No Forget."

The "t" had faded away with too many washings. The letters were in cursive. His flattop was the yellowish color of a faded desert uniform from a vanquished army. Chunks of hair, like puzzle pieces, were missing.

"I'd like to tell you about myself before I start. I am a special units command volunteer, a fire fighter reservist, and a SWAT team alternate. I'm also assistant manager here at the range."

Behind him, on the wall, are targets. Square posters with drawings of Lichtenstein blondes, guns to their temples, mugged by Hill Street Blues Unabombers. Circular targets, like bull's-eyes, and more variations on the mugger scenario. Osama Bin Laden said "Sold Out."

As the instructor talked, while going through various stances, I looked through the window at the main room. A man was cleaning the glass case that held the Sig Sauer. I looked at his face, and where his mouth should have been was a purple smear, like a tropical plant. He was wearing a shoulder-gun holster. He was covered in guns. Everyone was.

The instructor: "OK. A gun is just a hunk of metal. It's people who are dangerous. Guns are not. OK. Be sure to take a comfortable stance. Men tend to turn their shoulders, and women, their hips. Watch out for that. OK. Lean forward, otherwise you'll sight high. Match your targets, make the W, and pull the trigger on . . ." he breathed out, "The exhale."

He pretended to fire the gun.

"Any questions guys? OK. You try."

He set the gun on the table and pointed it away from me in a very mannered fashion. I got up from my chair, picked up the gun and immediately pointed it at him.

"No, no," he said, assuming an exaggerated karate stance. He pointed to a sign tacked to the wall without looking away from me.

Always Assume the Gun is Loaded

"I am," I laughed crazily. "You're my target today."

He immediately ripped the gun from my hand, moving only his right arm, without disrupting the fragile tension of the karate stance.

"Get out," he snarled, in a tone that sounded rehearsed.

"And take that bitch with you."

It was a crazy and rude thing to say, but I could tell by the wild look in his eyes and mainly the karate stance, that he had been waiting a long time for something like this to happen. I knew that because of the War, he felt entirely justified in saying it.

It seems to me that I was constantly having problems back then. Everything had suddenly become a problem for me. Even urination was a problem. The tickets I received for public urination were not due to any exhibitionistic proclivities but to my timidity in public discourse. I was too shy to enter a place for the express purpose of using its toilet. As a result, my thighs were perpetually spattered, wet and cold with dots of urine from my preemptory impatience to return my penis to my pants, while hiding behind trees or down in sand dunes, frustrated by the whole shameful production, overwhelmed by an overweening desire to get onto other things. Haste makes waste.

It seems to me that, back then, all my most valiant rebukes remained unsaid, merely uttered under breath, and instead of addressing this impotence, I edited my biography in my mind, changed tendencies, added love interests and violent outbursts, elements of danger. . . .

Possessions: A photo, a screwdriver, a card.

I lied again. I have three things in my pocket. Three possessions. I remember now. The doorman at the Chateau, smiling at me like an imbecile, handed me the card that read thus:

The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want.

I held it in my hand, staring at the words. If He is my shepherd than I must be a sheep. Or a lamb is it? I am a mindless bleating puff of wool. It may have been true, but then, where was my Shepherd?

Fucker! I screamed at him for making me think thus, and threw the card down into the gutter filled with dank water. I watched as the white card immediately began curdling, and took on ominous new aesthetic properties.

Once it was sufficiently tainted, I picked it up and put it in my pocket with the screwdriver. And the photo of course. I have three things now. Or, I suppose I always did. I just forgot. How long until I forget again? What wonderful surprises are in store for me!

Don't misunderstand me about this place. I have learned things here. When I first arrived at the Chateau, some here seemed harmless. Now these are the ones I

fear most. I should explain. There are only two classes of people here. Those who are feared and those who fear. Wait, I'm wrong. I'm generalizing. Of course there are the class-less also. Only a few. Like me. Only one other.

He loves to set backgammon pieces on a chessboard. He strategically places each disk into the center of a square, black or white, one or the other, then a great pondering of the board. The arrangement immediately vexes him, he angles his head like a dog, and this perspective seems to soothe him. He vacillates between satisfaction and great anxiety as the pieces sit quietly. I can see where he is going with it, his board is often perfect in a general way, balanced, but upon closer inspection, it is true, there are imperfections, slight misalignments, geometric hiccups caused by slight schizophrenia that I feel all master creators are entitled to.

He hangs a poised claw above the board like a hawk surveying the lake and then he begins moving the pieces again in rapid laser-like diagonals, backgammon pieces remember, all the same as far as I could see, all equal, except in their color, interchanging the piece's various positions on the board at an incredible rate, as if there is some discernable distinction to be made between them, as if each has a proscribed and internal purpose that I can not detect, and then he suddenly loses control, and all is lost. He looks up at me, mumbles something, giggles, shakes his head, smiles, and looks back at the board as he moves the pieces back into their original squares. Now he may begin again. Another chance for perfection. Order.

With him, it is a mixture of aesthetics and mathematics, I think. But that's not what I find interesting. It is the fact that he still seems passionate about something. That things, even backgammon pieces, matter. What a couple we made. Him staring at the board, me writing next to him, about him, while trying not to cry, pretending that I wasn't pretending that I was like the others.

Not much surprises me about this place anymore. Except when I look out onto the street, which isn't often. I look through the window and see the children held like soda cans. Their heads are wrapped in cellophane crowns, varying in number, but most often four to six, connected by an elastic web that converges into

a single centrifugal "palm" from which a curved Kevlar bar (the wrist) absorbs its quarry's weight—namely children, children that bob and spin like plastic animals hanging from a baby-crib mobile. This contraption, which "swept the nation" or so the ads said, is affixed to a rudimentary quad-wheel vehicle with a single bar for steering. The children soon grew accustomed to their elastic confines it was said, apparently satisfied with the vertical possibilities that their inertia provided. Soon enough they forgot about their desire to move forward, to progress, in other words, and the rhythmic disparity in their elevation manifested less of the vertigo sickness than would be expected. The adaptability of children has long been underestimated. I like to watch their blank faces passing by in the window, their bodies bobbing up and then down like inverted accordions straining for the sky only to fail again and again. Or, when feeling more philosophical, I think of the children in my photograph and see them as silent springs performing their function within the much larger machine.