

Fine wine and vivid landscapes garnish these stories of characters so full of life they're bound to run up against society's norms. This is a nimble blend of erotica and humor, full of surprises about love and temptation.

Once Upon A Time At Loch Ness & Other Stories

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ONCE UPON A TIME
AT
LOCH NESS
&
OTHER STORIES

By

William Cates

ONCE UPON A TIME AT LOCH NESS
&
OTHER STORIES

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BEST LOVERS

“**M**arried men make the best lovers,” Jackie Ambler, in a shimmering green cocktail dress with a neckline that plunged below the tabletop, warbled. “They’re sexually needy, well-trained and usually go back to their wives when you’ve finished with them.”

The men seated at the table looked uncertain regarding the observation with married men appearing thoughtful and somewhat pleased, while the single men stared ahead as though puzzling over an algebra word problem. Some turned their eyes to the ceiling for help. For the moment it was a conversation stopper.

Eventually, Ramie Cotton chimed in, “Well they do manage to get married, so I suppose that says something for them.”

“I’m not sure they’re the best but they are the safest,” added Fawn de Hunter. “At least you know where they’ve been and they’ve experienced discipline, but as for imagination, they seem to have used it all up.”

“And how would you know?” Becky Laureat pursued.

“I read all the right magazines,” Fawn smirked, dipping her little finger into the champagne flute then dabbing a drop on her lips as she turned to Becky.

This was not the conversation Babs Alverhume, the hostess, had intended; and they were still on the first course. Knowing Jackie, she had hoped Jackie’s tongue would be content savoring champagne and caviar, but alcohol does tend to bring out elemental fascinations and Jackie’s usually had to do with epidermal contact buttressed by her most recent conquest. As for the others, she had definitely egged them on.

Babs had spent hours in the wine cellar that very morning with her chef, Jason, trying to find just the right champagne to complement

the caviar, and she wanted the conversation to match the culinary experience.

Jason had insisted they taste the champagne in the cellar because the aromas from roasting geese would dominate all other sensations, he told her. And so they did. Jason had gathered a tray of champagne flutes and preceded her down the stairway, descending into the wine cellar where he narrowed their selection to a non-vintage Nicholas Feuillatte Brut or a '96 Dom Perignon.

Ramie Cotton brought Babs back to the moment with the obvious follow-up, "What about divorced men? What kind of lovers do they make?"

"Divorced men," declared Jackie Ambler, "only want to explain to you what went wrong previously, then wallow in guilt. And, of course, single men are the worse being too self-centered to ever want to know what a woman needs."

Babs had hoped for dignity for dinner, but matters were definitely headed in a different direction. She drew a deep breath in preparation for mentioning the upcoming horseshow at the Reagan Center, but before the words could form, Singleton McCleary's resonant voice demanded, "And what about *married women*? Do they make the best lovers as well?"

Oh dear, thought Babs. She cleared her throat and uttered a syllable or two, stopped and tapped her diaphragm as a volume reminder. Then, with a deep breath, she announced over the murmuring of her guests, "In case you didn't know..." She cleared her throat once more and proceeded. "Properly prepared, goose takes three days to reach the dining table, thus it is rarely seen on restaurant menus. This year for our annual Ides of June dinner, I decided to have our chef, Jason, display his considerable culinary talents with bird and oven. Why there is nothing that releases more enticing aromas from the oven than goose. I told Jason that the entire house was saturated with scents that had our digestive juices nearly bolting the starting gate ... which is why we had to sample the champagne in the wine cellar." Babs gave a nod to the champagne flutes on the table before continuing, "And of course, I think preparing goose is worth every minute of the time and

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effort,” she proclaimed. “And, I think Jason, our chef, did his usual splendid job.”

As if on cue, Jason and the servers entered, each bearing a platter proudly displaying a glistening bronzed goose with juices dripping from the legs. Thank heavens, Babs sighed. Jason announced that the goose was stuffed with chestnuts, apples, figs and pomegranates. He said he had even used some of the abundant goose grease to roast the little new potatoes from Oregon. The aromas were so palatable that everyone fell silent in gustatory awe as Jason carved. He served the women first, then the men and announced that their host, Withers, would be serving subsequent portions. Jason disappeared into the kitchen saying, “The artichokes and parsnips are on the way.” Before anyone could comment, the servers were back distributing vegetables and freshly baked rolls.

Looking around the table, Babs was pleased. She liked to see knives and forks so active and hear the soft murmurs of gratification as forks met tongues. For the wine to pair with the goose, Jason had been fortunate enough to find in the cellar six bottles of the highly prized 2002 Tantara “Evelyn” Pinot Noir. Jason had said that goose, being a fowl that is all rich dark meat without any gamy taste, calls for a wine with perfect acidity and gobs of deep red fruit. “I know from its reputation, it’s an iron fist in a velvet glove,” he said. Jason had been so confident of the Pinot Noir pairing with the goose that they had not sampled it as they did the champagne. She smiled, thinking back to the morning in the wine cellar and how Jason had gotten her to close her eyes and imagine she had just taken a bite of Caspian Platinum Sevruga Malossoi. She loved caviar and she loved Malossoi most of all. After she had the image firmly in place, she had opened her eyes to study the champagne bubbles. Then sipped. The Dom Perignon had just the luminosity she wanted. “Elegance itself,” Jason had added.

Several of the men around the table began raising their wine glasses to toast the chef. At that moment, Jason burst in from the kitchen, a glass of wine in hand, to toast the guests. A round of applause greeted him. Jason took a bow and gave them a smile that would have grown wine grapes in Alaska.

“You are all too kind,” he said reaching for one of the pinot bottles on the sideboard and pouring first for the ladies, then more for himself. Swirling his wine glass with the stylish skill of a chateaux owner, he then inhaled the volatile aromas rising from the glass. He sipped with eyes closed, then clucked his tongue, giving the wine every opportunity to show its aromas and flavors. Jason sighed audibly. He then announced, “For desert I’ve prepared a chocolate rum cheesecake blanketed with fresh local raspberries. And, I think you’ll enjoy the desert wine I’ve found to pair with it.” With that he vanished back through the kitchen doorway.

Babs beamed broadly, delighted that everyone was having such a splendid time and pleased that Jason was at the top of his game. But her smiles would not last very long.

Once the geese were devoured and the guests resting their forks, Singleton McCleary, who was not about to let his question go unanswered, began anew. “As I was saying ... what about married women? Do they make the best lovers as do married men?”

The host, Withers Alverhume, took the lead this time, declaring “Women don’t seek the same thing men do. They are quite satisfied with security ... or a good wardrobe.”

The men around the table chuckled and nodded.

“Therefore, a married woman,” Withers continued, “does not make the best lover. Excepting, my wife, of course.” He smiled and nodded to his wife who fought off a blush as she shook her head and rolled her eyes at her husband’s comment.

Another moment of awkwardness was relieved by the reappearance of Jason bearing a tray of deserts. He served the women folk first, giving a bow to each as he placed the chocolate rum cake, dripping with raspberries, before them. Then the men were supplied. While every fork sliced into the raspberries and chocolate, Jason dissolved through the doorway then quickly reappeared to pour a Late Harvest Pinot Blanc from the same boutique winery as before.

Blades McCauly, after an epic bite, licked his fork clean and waved it in the air as though a question had just occurred to him that needed immediate attention, asking, “Are women attracted to strong men or sensitive men?”

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“Go with strong,” offered Jackie, dabbing with her napkin at a piece of chocolate cake making its way down between her bosoms, her actions managing to catch the full attention of all the guests. Jackie continued, “Studies have shown that the Tarzan-Jane approach can work wonders in spite of women saying they prefer sensitive types.”

“Whose studies?” inquired Singleton McCleary. “Yours -- Jane?”

A wave of laughter rolled around the table.

“I hear you laughing,” Jackie called out, “but women may talk up sensitivity, yet in reality they know the sensitive guy is a walkover, not worth the challenge.”

“I quite agree,” added Faye Lanyx, “There are two things a man must express to a woman to gain her attention: athleticism and skills with minor plumbing repairs.”

Another wave of laughter resounded round the table with everyone lifting their wine glasses to their lips or reaching for a bottle.

“By the way, are we generalizing about married women or single women, because there is a huge difference?” Warren Piece inquired, licking his lips.

“Oh really?” said Mrs. Rex Havoc, thumbing her wedding ring. “Do tell.”

“Well,” said Warren, assuming an academic posture, “unmarried women view the married man as an object belonging to another woman. They see him simply as another woman’s property, so whether he’s strong or sensitive makes no difference to them. A married woman, on the other hand, will want a man just the opposite of her husband.”

“Rubbish,” said Jackie Ambler, swabbing chocolate from her neck.

“It isn’t rubbish at all,” Warren countered. “This objectification of the married man is a fact and it is as insensitive as it is socially incorrect. A man must be viewed as being more than a piece of personal property.”

“I meant it was rubbish to state that a married woman wants a man just the opposite of her husband,” Jackie barked. “They want someone just like their husband. Only ... younger.”

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Laughter again, only this time around it faded quickly.

The layers of sweet alcohol from the Late Harvest Tantara Pinot Blanc spawned yet another round of speculation, with Warren Piece proclaiming he seemed to remember reading somewhere, that for some reason, which science has yet to explain, flannel shirts attract women the way honey attracts ants.

“Flannel says physical, outdoorsy, chainsaw. Exactly my point,” Jackie Ambler trumpeted, wiping chocolate from her ear.

“And easy to iron,” chimed in Ramie Cotton.

Near the eleventh hour, all the guests began to stir, rising from their seats and, one by one, thanking Babs and Withers for a dinner that was the highpoint of the season. Babs and Withers saw their guests to the front door, bidding them all a good night.

As soon as the guests departed, Withers retired to the master bedroom on the second floor saying, as he ascended the stairway, that he had perhaps drunk and eaten far too much but had enjoyed the evening immensely. “We’ll do it again next year,” he announced.

“Yes,” Babs replied. She was pleased that the dinner had gone so well in spite of the conversation occasionally wobbling out of control. She watched her husband climb the stairs then went to the kitchen to check on things as she always did.

Jason was waiting for her. He scooped her up in his arms and placed her gently onto the kitchen counter then holding his hands on her shoulders, looked her directly in the eye. “Please tell me everything was perfect,” he said.

“Yes ... it was perfect Jason. Now kiss me.” She closed her eyes.

Jason obeyed, giving her a long kiss while his fingers freed the buttons of her silk blouse.

“Have you ever used a chainsaw?” she sighed, pulling away momentarily for air.

“Never. They’re so loud and smelly.”

“I just couldn’t picture you with a chainsaw.”

“No, No, Never!”

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“I was so tired of hearing that sensitive single men don’t make the best lovers,” Babs breathed as Jason slipped her blouse off her shoulders. His fingers deftly found the catch to her bra. “Did you hear them?” she asked leaning back so he could lift her skirt and get a grip on her panties.

“Elegance,” Jason murmured, his lips covering her tummy.

“Yes,” she replied. “Oh yes.”

BEAUJOLAIS NOUVEAU & THE
ALABAMA WOMEN
Or
BLESS MY DOVER SOUL

It was late November, the Sunday after the Beaujolais Nouveau was released to the eagerly awaiting palates of that certain part of the culinary world that (frankly my dear) gives a damn about a thin, sharp, acidic, slightly candied wine with a wily hint of cherry and strawberry fragrance and a heap of hype, enough to cause the geniuses on Madison Avenue to salivate with so much envy they might even go out and drop a few bucks for the stuff billed as the first taste of the new vintage. Though the reach of this wine is now global, I had somehow missed sampling it while in Paris for a brief culinary romp. But I was not about to escape the experience.

I had just boarded a train heading from Paris' Gare du Nord to Calais for the ferry to England. I settled into the last row of second class seats, dropped my bag at my feet and started rummaging through it for something to read when, from a few rows further down the isle, I heard the ethereal sounds of female voices speaking English with southern accents Vivian Leigh would have hoped for. Two young women were stowing their suitcases overhead and settling into their seats, chattering away like Scarlet and Melanie. It was music to my ears. For a week I had heard nothing but French and here I was heading to England for a visit with friends when those stretched syllables, those warbled vowels rolled all over me like warm bodies on a hayride. I'm from the south myself, Virginia, not the Deep South, but I speak the language. Their language.

Hearing one's own tongue in a foreign country grants you with all the permission you need to open a conversation with the source,

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which I was inclined to do, for they were both attractive -- a petite blond and her companion, a lanky lady with reddish- brown hair down to her waist, both in snug jeans and turtlenecks. We were kinsmen on an unfamiliar train in the presence of those not like us (I was pretty sure of that). Surely they would be receptive to my audacious invasion of their privacy.

Stepping over to help the petite blond who was struggling to get her suitcase up in the overhead bin, I casually inquired, "Now which southern state might you be from? Let me guess."

Those nectar-nourished mouths went slack for a moment upon hearing their native language, and spoken with a southern accent no less. After recovering, they looked at me as though I were their favorite cousin, Billy Bob, just back from a fabulous run at the Daytona 500.

"I'm guessing Deep South," I continued with my dearest Dixie pedigree smile.

"Honey, you're right about that," the tall one replied. Then putting her hand on my arm, she inquired, "I guess you know where Mobile is?"

"I do indeed."

"And where might you be from?" asked the petite blond, peering up at me through bangs that reached to her eyebrows, her jade eyes blinking inquisitively.

"You first."

"Well, why don't you gather up your grips and come join us and we can discuss it right here," said the tall one as she moved across the aisle, leaving me space to take the seat next to her blond friend.

They introduced themselves as Laurie, who was the petite blond, and Winona, the willowy one. They could hardly contain themselves with their joy over having a compatriot, a fellow American and one from below the Mason-Dixon line. As it turned out, neither of them could speak French beyond "oui" and "non" and, "s'il vous plait" (they were, after all, southern ladies). And they had not had the traveling experience in France they hoped for. Before the train had cleared the station yard, they were sharing their disappointments with me while taking good-riddance glances out the windows.

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“We’ve been driving around in a rental car for a week sustaining ourselves on cookies and Perrier water.”

“Cookies? That’s all? Here in France!”

“Well, that’s a bit of an exaggeration but we didn’t know how to order anything in a restaurant,” Laurie said. “Or read a menu. And the waiters were always so rude.”

“Even when they’re hitting on you.” Winona added.

“We didn’t realize these people over here just can’t bring it upon themselves to accommodate you. At all!” Laurie stressed, shaking her bangs.

“They just give you an eyeful of indignation when they hear English, so we just shut up,” Winona explained, pitifully.

And thus, I quickly learned that these belles were desperate for food, drink, and caring companionship within the comfort of the English language (especially spoken with my southern drawl that was getting deeper by the minute). Here they were about to depart from this country of the greatest culinary arts and the finest wines, hardly having sampled the fare.

“You can’t leave France without experiencing their wine and food,” I told them as telephone poles and buildings began to blur past the train window.

Fortunately, with European civilization, people actually want to enjoy traveling, so trains provide food and drink, some of it of good quality. Hardly had the train gathered steady rhythm when a young man pushing a trolley full of snacks and wine and beer came down the aisle. While my two new friends gazed at the trolley with salivating stares, I pointed to a package of Camembert wrapped in paper thin strips of wood and some crackers for all of us, along with a bottle of just released Beaujolais Nouveau. I’m not a fan of Beaujolais, but I thought it might be just the wine for these two since I guessed they would go for something slightly fruity that goes down fine in a paper cup.

When I inquired, in French, about the price of the wine, my friends could have thrown themselves on me so impressed were they with my attempt at this language. The young attendant pulled the cork from the bottle and made change while contemplating my two comely women companions. He then provided us with napkins and three paper

cups for the wine. He smiled at me as though we already shared some manly secret then continued down the isle.

“Wine?” said Laurie, “On a train even. Can you believe that Winnie?”

“It’s hard to find wine in restaurants in Alabama. At least not out where I live,” Winona declared, “Just beer.”

“Winnie, that’s not true,” Laurie chimed in. “I saw that Stacy’s has Merlot and a White Zinfandel from California.”

“I can get you beer if you prefer. I just assumed you’d want wine. I mean, like since you’re here in France. And besides, this is the Beaujolais Nouveau. Just released last Thursday. It’s a big deal everywhere these days,” I explained to them, pouring each a half-cup.

“Not in Alabama,” Laurie said, peering into the cup. Oh, it looks blue. Well, I guess maybe it’s purple.”

“Is it sweet?” Winona wanted to know.

“Not very sweet, but fruity sweet.” I got Laurie to hold my cup while I pulled out my pocketknife and carved the cheese. “Have it along with some cheese. A little protein to help manage the tannins. I promise, you’ll love it.”

And they did. They started slowly but soon picked up speed. When the cart came back through I bought two more bottles of Beaujolais Nouveau and some wedges of herb-coated sheep’s milk cheese along with a bag of salted nuts and some pressed fig cakes. The young man with the cart opened both bottles and gave me a look as though he approved of my progress.

“I just love this wine,” Laurie proclaimed. “How do you know about it?”

“It’s all the rage this time of year.” I told them how taxis wait outside the wineries for it to be released, then they race to Paris to see which restaurants can serve it first. “It’s just recently fermented and bottled. Wine hardly gets any fresher than this. Sort of like beer,”

“Well, I guess that’s why I like it.”

“Brilliant idea. Why age wine when you can sell it right out of the fermentation tank?”

“We don’t want anything with age on it, do we Winnie?” Laurie chuckled, giving her companion a look with more meaning than I could fully grasp.

“Heavens no,” Winona replied.

I looked from one to the other for an explanation.

“Winnie was married to an older man,” Laurie whispered in a voice that was not in any way confidential.

“Too old ... entirely too old,” Winona laughed and they both broke into hysterics.

“You *were* married? To an older man, I take it?”

“I was indeed.” Winona held up an empty ring finger. “Not anymore.”

“He’s a judge,” Laurie added by way of explanation.

So halfway into the third bottle, tongues had loosened enough for them to reveal their private lives. First, they told me they both practiced law in a little town near Mobile. That fact, initially, seemed a little stretched but I let it go. Later, they did exhibit their skills. They also told me they had been traveling, in part, to forget domestic issues back home in Alabama. As it turned out, both were trying to forget their mutual love-life problems: Winona’s messy divorce from the judge and the Laurie’s serious misunderstanding with a live-in lover who wouldn’t move out when told to do so.

Sitting beside Laurie, in my state of growing inebriation, relishing that precious profile, I couldn’t imagine anyone ever having an argument with her. Winona, across the isle – well, maybe. She seemed more forceful. I could see her cracking the whip. Something about her brought to mind a schoolteacher, I once had, who terrorized all the little boys in the third grade (girls could do no wrong).

Winona had pulled out some dark-rimmed glasses to take a close look at the wine labels. The glasses helped her to look professional, like a researcher, or teacher or, yes – a lawyer even. Still, it was hard to believe these two spent time in a courtroom. No wonder Winona had married a judge. Both women were witty and perceptive, but their Alabama drawls, their naiveté and their state of intoxication did a fine good job of concealing their professional education.

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While the train sped along through the flat November-grey countryside toward Calais, they told me about law school at Auburn University and how they had been classmates and stayed close friends over all the years. They had decided to vacation together to put their woes behind them and they had always wanted to go to France.

I told them I had only driven through Alabama and that the George Corley Wallace years had left a bad impression on me; it even affected the way I saw the scenery, green though it was. They both got kind of squirmy and tried to apologize as best they could, telling me of some of the good Wallace had done in bringing industry to the state. They were surprised when I quoted Wallace as he stood on the capital steps in Montgomery sniffing the factory tainted air wafting in from miles away: "That's the smell of progress and she sure smells pretty, don't she?"

"Well, you just keep an eye on Birmingham," Laurie advised. "It's going to grow like kudzu in August. Might even be the capital of the South someday."

"Talk about big cities ... I had no idea Paris spread all over the place like it does," said Winona, pointing to the wine bottle and waving her empty cup.

"We thought it would be this quaint place with the Eiffel Tower in the middle and the Louvre right down the street," Laurie added, holding her cup out for a refill. "Instead, we got stuck on that terrible terrible highway going around the city and we couldn't figure out how to get off to see the Eiffel Tower. And it took forever to go all the way around."

Winona started laughing. "You know what we finally did?"

"No. Tell me."

"We thought of everything that could be worse. That's what we did. We just kept going round and round thinking about all the problems we've had and that road just didn't bother us as much."

"I guess that legal training comes in handy in lots of ways," I offered, admiringly.

"So what were you doing in Paris?" Laurie asked.

"Just sampling the food, the wine, walking around the city to get a feel for its history," I told them. When I mentioned having run

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across historical markers on buildings, such as the one in the 8th Arrondissement saying Marcel Proust lived there, giving the dates even, they looked at me blankly. I tried Victor Hugo and got the same look. What about the cemetery where Edith Piaff is buried? Nothing. Does the Pompidou Center ring a bell?" They looked at one another a moment then shook their heads. Maybe it was just as well that they got stuck on the loop around Paris.

It wasn't that these two charming belles weren't smart. They certainly were. But I suppose they had put so much emphasis on acquiring knowledge of the law and they were so absorbed in the community in which they lived, that details of other cultures just didn't seem to deserve all that much attention. The world they inhabited was Alabama and probably always would be. In some ways, I envied them knowing what their whole lives would be like.

At some point, I should explain that I have observed, over the years, four levels of wine induced intoxication: stage 1 – reaching out to new friends; stage 2 – beginning to grasp the significance of eternal philosophical questions; stage 3 – amalgamating deep and abiding friendships; stage 4 – where did I put my trousers and, why does no one use the word 'trousers' anymore?

By the time the train arrived in Calais, the sun had disappeared for that day and we were shifting from stage two to stage three of wine induced intoxication. We got off the train to head for the ferry to Dover. According to the ferry schedule, we had a short wait and if we missed that ferry there would be more. I still wanted my new friends to try French cuisine. In fact, I insisted. So instead of heading straight for our ferry we followed our noses to a cafeteria located on the grounds of the ferry company or perhaps owned by the French government? Or the Burgers of Calais?

Anyhow, we were all starved and the food was the best cafeteria food I have ever eaten. (Maybe it was there for the English who ferried themselves over for a good feed.) I bought us another bottle of (yes) Beaujolais Nouveau and we dined heartily. They even went back for seconds, then listed each item consumed and rated them on a one to ten scale, most scoring ten.

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“I didn’t know you could do such a marvelous thing with chicken,” Winona remarked. “I guess that was chicken?”

“Best peas ever,” Laurie proclaimed as her fork reached out and stabbed a left-over stray on Winona’s plate.

“No. Couldn’t be better than our black-eyed peas,” I argued, insisting on holding up the banner for southern cooking.

“Well, no, not better than black-eyed peas ... but, they’re the best green peas I ever put in my mouth.” Laurie smacked her precious lips.

“Oh, if only I had been with you two for the past week, you’d be wanting to change residency. Move over here and take up with a chef.”

They looked at one another with peckish consideration and shrugged over that possibility.

Leaving the cafeteria, we somehow took a wrong turn or maybe we simply marched straight into trouble. A short while later we found ourselves wandering around in circles, in the dark, in a huge empty parking lot. Or maybe it was just an enormous space paved over for some secret purpose.

“Could be a launch pad?” I suggested as we stumbled about in the dark. “Or a nuclear waste disposal site?” That was when several spotlights hit us. And a siren squawked.

The security people who picked us up were polite but formal. They took us in a minivan to a cinderblock building (or maybe it was a bunker?) for interrogation by people in uniforms and designer trench coats. The lead interrogator was such a stunning looking woman -- wearing the most fashionable police uniform I’ve ever seen -- I found it difficult to take her seriously, especially since her hem line was at mid thigh. Although, I must say that in my blissful state of inebriation, some things looked better than they normally might have. These gendarmes studied our passports then the woman in charge inquired, in very clear English.

“What were you doing in the restricted area?”

Under the influence of all the wine we had been drinking, I took a bold stand for freedom of expression, “In my country restricted areas have fences around them and warning signs posted,” I proclaimed.

“You were in a fenced area appropriately marked with signs,” came her brisk reply.

“Well, it’s dark out there and I didn’t see any gate and not a sign of any kind.”

“How did you get there?”

“On foot.”

“I mean, how did you gain access?”

“You think we stood on each other’s shoulders? We walked out of the cafeteria exit door and down the stairs and out into the dark. The place ought to be better lit.”

“That exit door was for emergencies only.”

“Oh, then perhaps you’d better talk to my lawyers,” I said, gesturing to the two southern ladies who sat there looking puzzled but as self-assured as possible considering the quantity of wine consumed.

“You are lawyers?” the English speaking uniformed woman wanted to know, giving my two companions, in their jeans and turtlenecks, a look of disbelief.

They nodded and produced Alabama identification that was scrutinized by all present. It was even handed it to me. I studied it thoughtfully while my lawyers behaved with tact and patience. They knew exactly what to say and how to say it to get us out of this mess. But they couldn’t order food! Well, there had been the language barrier until this moment. They seemed so self-assured with the task of the moment, I was pleased to have them representing me.

After our interrogators had done their job and were assured we were not a threat to the security of France, they returned our passports and gave us a ride over to the ferry ramp in their minivan. I thanked them for the service and the three of us made our way up the gangplank onto the next leg of our journey.

Looking over the rail from the top deck, I noticed that the minivan stayed at the gangplank until the ferry cleared the harbor. I gathered my two new friends in my arms and pulled them tightly against me. “They won’t get us now,” I intoned dramatically as I gazed at the lights of Calais beginning to recede into the distance. The two women looked up at me blankly. Jeez, I thought to myself – they don’t

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even get my humor. Or maybe they thought I was serious? Or maybe our situation had been more serious than I realized?

I was getting tired of Nouveau Beaujolais, but we needed a drink after our narrow escape from the French Ferry Guards, and the only wine available onboard was, of course -- Beaujolais Nouveau! I bought a bottle and grabbed three fresh clean paper cups. I was beginning to wonder how many producers could possibly be making Beaujolais Nouveau. And why?

Crossing the Channel, the three of us cuddled against the rail of the ship, sipping our Beaujolais and watching the lights of Calais twinkle, shrink and disappear. Laurie put her arm around inside my jacket, around my waist, and began making promising little soft sighing noises. She could have been seasick, but I took it as chirps of pleasure. When we turned around to watch the lights of Dover growing brighter, she put her head against my chest.

“Hold me, I’m cold,” she said, snuggling tightly against me.

Needing a distraction at that point, I remarked that every time I crossed the Channel, I couldn’t help but think of Florence Chadwick actually swimming across this cold choppy stretch of water -- both ways even! Again, I got the blank looks.

“Didn’t you ever see Florence, in the old newsreels, stepping out of the water, oily skinned and beaming a victorious smile?”

No. They had never seen Florence. Well, it could have been an age difference. I guess I was about ten years or so older than either of them.

Since it was getting quite late, I suggested that we think about staying over the night in Dover because, by the time we got to Waterloo Station, finding a decent room could be difficult. Also, I told them we would miss seeing the beautiful English countryside if we traveled at night. At this point, they seemed to be in agreement with anything I suggested.

When we disembarked at Dover, the town had already shut down. Or maybe it always seems that way. Once we had cleared the port terminal building, there appeared to be little activity. Cars raced away from the ferry and pedestrians scurried to busses or waiting vehicles. We were left alone looking up streets lit by dismal lamps.

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At least there were a few taxis hanging around the exit gate. I hailed one and asked the driver if he could take us to a reasonably priced B&B or a hotel. He dropped us off at a half-timbered building only a few blocks away. It was a quaint looking place, two stories tall and spread about rather haphazardly as though there had been a lot of afterthoughts during construction. A sign out front identified it as The Crusted Admiral (or maybe it was Crested Admiral?).

“Do you want two rooms?” The woman on desk duty asked, then turned to look through the register as though doing a last minute cram for an exam.

I looked around at my compatriots and waited for a suggestion. Laurie had collapsed into a chair and seemed to be dozing. Winona held up one finger.

“My sister says we can all sleep in one room. Do you have a room with a king sized bed?”

The woman behind the desk studied me for an instant, then my new friends who bore no resemblance to one another, nor to me. Her head seemed to dive downwards, back into her registration book. Without looking up she offered, “I have a room with two double beds.”

“That will do fine,” I answered, reaching for the registration card.

Laurie and Winona went up to our room while I headed for the bar. I thought I’d get another bottle of wine and some glasses, just in case. I asked the chap behind the bar what he had in the way of wine.

“Beaujolais Nouveau,” he said, proudly hoisting a bottle from yet another producer.

“How’s the vintage?” I asked, admiring the bottle.

“Best of the decade,” he assured me. “And a steal at six pounds.

“You must have some special connection to get hold of these,” I offered, still appraising the bottle. He gave me a thumbs-up.

“Say, my sisters and I are staying here. Any chance I could borrow a few glasses to go along with the wine?” I pulled a ten-pound note from my wallet.

“No problem, mate.” He grabbed three stubby glasses and slid them across the bar to me.

ONCE UPON A TIME AT LOCH NESS & OTHER STORIES

“Beautiful place you have here,” I said, giving myself a turn as I admired the thick beams and the Tudor-style touches.

“Built in the 14th century from ship timbers,” the bartender proclaimed.

When I told Laurie and Winona the age of the building, they gawked at the timbered walls for a moment.

“Wow, before Christopher Columbus,” Laurie exclaimed, going over to the wall and rubbing her hands along the ancient wood. “I bet it could tell some stories,” she added and pressed her ear against the wall.

Winona was less demonstrative but impressed nonetheless. “Golly, there’s nothing in Alabama that old,” she observed, giving the wall an appreciative pat then turning to more immediate needs.

Our room was clean, pleasant actually, but we discovered it had no bath, only a washstand with a pitcher of water. Something I had failed to inquire about. There was a bathroom at the end of the hall. We all took turns relieving ourselves and we all noted the huge bathtub. The bathroom itself was as large as a bedroom which it probably had been back in the days of chamber pots.

“Since we have to share the bathroom with others, maybe we should all get in the tub together,” I offered as a joke.

To them, it seemed like a brilliant idea. And so we headed for the bathroom with toothbrushes, towels, the bottle of Beaujolais and our three glasses in hand. I was a little hesitant undressing in front of them but they had no problem shedding their clothes. I wondered what had happened to southern modesty (and nether garments). Winona turned on the tap for the tub and adjusted the temperature while Laurie helped me undress.

Somehow the three of us managed to fit into the bathtub with me sandwiched between the two. It was snug but otherwise, sublime. We were all glad we brought the bottle of Beaujolais and the wine glasses along with us so we could sip and soak in comfort. Well, it was perhaps too snug to be really comfortable but we enjoyed every moment of our immersion. I scrubbed their backs and they soaped me up all over.

When we got out of the tub and dried ourselves, we all three stood in front on the mirror dutifully brushing our teeth. The scene was

improbable, but it seemed completely natural. We might as well have been toddler cousins getting ready for bed at Grannie's house. Still, the oddity of brushing my teeth, along with two naked female lawyers from Alabama finally got to me and I burst into laughter. And so did they.

As we made our way back down the hall to our room, carrying our clothes in our arms along with the wine bottle and glasses, some chap popped his head out from behind the door of his own room. "Quite finished in there now, are you?" he asked without giving the women a second look which was surprising since Winona was covered only with a towel draped around her shoulders and Laurie and I both had our towels tucked around our waists.

"All yours mate," I answered cheerily.

He dashed down the hallway and I heard him bolt the bathroom door.

I took the night table and lamp out from between the beds and we shoved the beds together. We crawled under the covers and I hugged and kissed Laurie then rolled over and hugged and kissed Winona. I was trying to decide how best to satisfy them both without appearing to favor one or the other. All that Beaujolais was not helping my decision-making. But it didn't matter for in another moment they were both gone to the world, and with such sweet smiles on their faces. I lay there between those two naked southern belles thinking what promises the morning would hold for me. I kissed Laurie's shoulder and rolled over into Winona's long arms.

The next morning when I awoke, my two friends were gone. I lay wedged between two mattresses wondering if it had all been a dream; and if not, did they have the same headache? Under the circumstance, staring at the ceiling was all my throbbing eyeballs wanted to do. The wooden beams over me looked withered, wobbly. Then I recalled the bartending telling me they were ship timbers, over five hundred year old. On that morning they were still rolling with the energy of the high seas. They probably had stories to tell, Laurie had said, stories of discovery and mutiny and piracy, I guessed. Piracy! Suddenly it occurred to me I'd been taken. Those two women!

In spite of the jackhammers behind my eyeballs, I leaped from the bed and dashed frantically around the room in search of my pants

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(trousers). Panic seized me when I found them hanging neatly in the closet -- obviously not something I would have done. What mocking audacious thievery I thought as I dug in the pockets for my wallet. I am a suspicious type, but I need not have worried. My wallet was there and all the money was still safe. Not only that, they had left me all their change in French francs on the dresser. Beside the francs was a note written on hotel stationary.

*To Our New Found Cousin,
How rewarding to discover we can still depend upon the kindness of strangers. You are without a doubt the best traveling companion and tour guide imaginable. We will be forever grateful for your generous help and we wish you all the best in the future. If that Beaujolais Nouveau wine ever comes to Alabama, we'll raise many a glass in your honor. Please forgive us for our hasty departure and not saying goodbye properly but you seemed so content, we couldn't bring ourselves to disturb you.*

*Love always,
Laurie, Winona*

Cousin, I thought? Well, they are from the south. When I went downstairs to check out, I discovered they had taken care of the bill. I wandered over into the bar that was now set up for an English breakfast. A chap with a pot of coffee popped out from the kitchen, He turned out to be the bartender from the night before.

“Looks like your sisters got an early start this morning. They didn't even stay for breakfast.”

“They had to get back to the farm and feed the livestock,” I offered, shaking my head in appreciation of their diligence. “Dad brought them up right.”

He cocked his head and looked at me for a moment.

“Truly admirable ... their devotion to Ma and Pa ... and all the farm animals.” I continued.

He walked away muttering something about Americans.

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Later, suitcase in hand, I marched out into the bracing morning air of Dover to be greeted by squawking seagulls and humming traffic. I headed off for the train station thinking about my two new friends who I knew I would never see again. They didn't leave me their full names, nor addresses. And I couldn't remember what was on the identification they passed around in Calais. I suppose that was the way they wanted it. Still, I hoped I could catch them. When I got on the train, I wandered through all the cars hoping they might be aboard.

Finally, I took a seat beside a nun. I needed comforting. She smiled at me when I sat down. I didn't say anything to her. I noticed she was reading a book on Teilhard de Chardin. I sat back and let some miles go by. I didn't want to interrupt the nun. At some point she placed the book in her lap and stared ahead in deep thought. I took the opportunity to ask her if she thought mankind might perfect itself by degrees over a long period of time. I nodded toward her book and told her I had been a philosophy major in college. She smiled sweetly and thus it was we discussed the possibility of teleological evolution the rest of the way to London. This was exactly what I needed to do along with watching the beautiful English countryside pass by outside the window.

Since that day and night in Calais and Dover, I have never had another Beaujolais. I never really cared for that wine anyway, finding that it pales in comparison to its neighboring Burgundies further up the road. No wonder the Duke of Burgundy, long ago, forbade the planting of any more grapes for making Beaujolais. But if Laurie and Winona ever find me, I'll buy them all they can drink. Maybe someday I'll get down to Mobile and make some inquiries about legal council. That would be a start. I might even take a few bottles along, just in case I find them.

Fine wine and vivid landscapes garnish these stories of characters so full of life they're bound to run up against society's norms. This is a nimble blend of erotica and humor, full of surprises about love and temptation.

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