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THE NEW BUTCHER BOY

By Yves Cerny

«Anyway,» said my aunt, emphasizing the end of her theatrically-told story with a sweep of the soup ladle and barely missing the hanging lamp, «she's completely mad about him.»

In the silence that followed her statement we could hear once more the sounds from outside. A hen came clucking to the door; the dog lying curled up asleep gave a nearly human sigh; the cooing of pigeons drifted to us again.

«We can sit down now,» said my grandmother, coming in from the kitchen. At her invitation the whole family got up and took their places around the table with the usual talk and laughter.

Twice a year, at Easter and in the middle of September, we used to spend a couple of weeks in Auvergne with my father's mother. Twice a year, as soon as we arrived, my aunt would overwhelm us with six months of local gossip.

When she was a girl, she had wanted to go on the stage. How I wish she had succeeded! Then the theatre would have given her the outlet she had been looking for ever since in her own home.

Yet I must confess that I always enjoyed her half-yearly performance. I looked forward to the bravura bits — an accident at the mine, the latest town scandals, some celebrity's arrival, not to mention the endless wrangles about property lines, the origin of so many lawsuits.

Though she went through her routine, her technique better than ever, my aunt that day, for some reason or other, didn't seem up to her usual standard. I watched her with surprise and even a bit of embarrassment.

She never used to give a thought to her gray hair and was frankly fiftyish, but now she had begun to use dye — a jet-black. One could see only too clearly that she had put on the dye herself, as best she could; it had dried out her hair and was already making her features look harder. She had powdered her face lavishly with too pink a powder, which she had quickly wiped off just before we arrived: it brought out the faded look of her skin, formerly ambercolored. Above all, the artificial high spirits with which she told her story betrayed a hidden fatigue. Only once, in one of those flashes of talent in which she excelled, did she achieve exactly the effect she aimed at.

And yet in the beginning, when she had begun on the chapter devoted to everyone (neighbors, tradesmen, or even friends) with whom she had quarrelled since our last visit, followed by the shorter list of the people with whom she had made up, I thought she was getting off to a good start. But no, it turned out to be a false one. A single subject obsessed her. She had been talking all around it, feeling sure, I guess, that we wouldn't notice.

«By the way, we've gone back to Vital's. Their meat is excellent.»

My father lifted his eyebrows in twofold surprise: first, because Vital's meat had always been first-rate; secondly, because my aunt for a long time hadn't liked fresh meat.

«And I must say,» she added, «their employees are quite decent.»

Mme Vital, a widow, obviously couldn't get along without help. Her business was very active and required the presence of two men and an apprentice.

«Poor Louise,» my aunt continued. «At last she's found the boy she needs. A strong, competent fellow. And good-looking too, which never does any harm.»

After a pause, she repeated:

«Yes, a good-looking boy. And that never does any harm.»

Then she gave a short laugh and with a wave of her hand put things back into place. Of course she had to admit the new butcher boy was good-looking, but she didn't want us to think his good looks meant anything to her.

«The War Memorial monument is finished at last. It wasn't ready for the Fourteenth of July, so they inaugurated it on August fifteenth. The prefect was on vacation and the subprefect took his place. Everyone was there. Our representative, the county councilman, the whole Town Council, and all the school children they could round up.

«Poor Louise was there too, of course. Her name's the last on the list. Beginning with a V, you see. And the new butcher boy, in a dark-blue suit, really very well-dressed! No one had seen him before. Such a crowd in front of the monument! About a thousand people! Of course, all the women wanted a closer look.»

«The women wanted to see the monument close to?» my father absent-mindedly asked. «Why? Couldn't they wait until the ceremony was over?»

«The monument?» exclaimed my aunt. «What monument? They wanted to see the butcher boy!»

«Ah!» said my father, overcome.

«A big dance in the evening, naturally. In the covered market, as usual. The Brioude orchestra came over. I couldn't tell you how many cases of lemonade and beer Chabrillat sold. Oh, he's a smart one. Keeps his eyes open. If he should run in the next election — But that's not the question. The question is that no one knows whom he goes with. I think it's a girl from Sainte-Florine!»

«Why do you think Chabrillat goes with a Sainte-Florine girl?» asked my father. «And, for heaven's sake, why should he be going with anyone at all? His wife's the prettiest girl in town.»

«Who's talking about Chabrillat? Vital's new butcher boy's the one that must be going with a Sainte-Florine girl, because he hasn't any girl-friend here no matter what the bakery woman's daughter wants people to think.

«And I could tell you plenty about her! The probationary teacher, then the station porter, and after him the brother of the woman who runs the tobacco shop. I'll not go on. At least, she used to have some sense. You'd only run across them in out of the way places. But now with this other fellow, the new butcher boy, it's just disgusting the things she does to make everyone think he's her boy-friend. Yes, disgusting. Anyway, she's completely mad about him.»

Next morning was market-day and I went shopping with my grandmother.

«I wrote down my orders. We'll leave them as we go around. First, the butcher.»

My grandmother took the little street by the town hall. I knew that whenever she thought there'd be a lot of customers at the butcher's she'd go in the back way, right into the cutting-room.

Two men were there when we came in, each wearing the traditional butcher's costume: canvas jacket and trousers, with tiny white and blue-gray checks, a big white apron, easy-fitting shoes with leather tops and wooden soles. One of the men went out. From the threshold where I was standing I only had a glimpse of him. The other one, tall, broad-shouldered, with smoothly-brushed black hair and a solid-looking neck, had his back toward us. He effortlessly unhooked a side of beef and slapped it down on the cutting-block.

«Monsieur Armand, I've brought my order for Saturday and Sunday. Make it up when you like. But for today I'd like a nice veal roast. Could I have one? Good. Can we pick it up about ten o'clock? Fine. Then my grandson will come for it.»

The butcher had faced partly toward my grandmother and I saw him in profile: a very pure Latin profile. He listened carefully, only answering her with a nod. But, at the words «my grandson» and her gesture toward me, he turned and I found myself gazing for a moment into his intent, black eyes.

«It will be ready, Madame,» he said.

We went out the same way we had come in and started toward the bakery.

«Well, what do you think?» asked my grandmother.

«About what?»

«Why, about the new butcher boy!»

«Oh, is he the one?»

My grandmother was as surprised as I.

«Didn't you know?»

«I thought Auntie was talking about a young man.»

«A young man! Why, this boy isn't thirty. Hardly twenty-eight. Really!»

So, it was he! If I'd only known, I'd have looked more closely. But I wondered why he hadn't impressed me more.

«He has beautiful black eyes,» I finally said, «but he didn't smile once.»

«That's true. He's an extremely reserved boy. With everybody, I mean. Personally, I like it. I suppose that's just the way he is. So many women are chasing after him I guess he has to act like that.»

My grandmother glanced at me and felt I wasn't particularly interested. I was vaguely afraid I had disappointed her.

«I'll give him a good look later when I go back for the veal,» I dutifully promised.

She laughed.

«If you want to. But you really don't have to.»

She was still chuckling over my answer when we went into the bakery. The proprietress greeted us with her usual friendliness. «Commercial smile,» my aunt always grumbled. I myself thought a never-failing, pleasantly-offered commercial smile was as good as any other.

«Your sponge cakes are ready, Madame Gerlan. The boy asked me if he should make the whole series of moulds. I said yes. But that's up to you. There are five, four of them crown-shaped.»

«That's all right. But there's something more important than sponge cakes. I forgot to ask you to keep a round loaf of whole-wheat bread for me. My son's always asking for one.»

«A round loaf?» repeated the bakery woman thoughtfully. «The whole batch of them's spoken for and may already have been sent out. I'll see if any are left.»

She walked toward the bakeroom stairway. I followed her mechanically.

«Pierre?»

«Yes?»

«Just a minute.»

«Coming!»

A clear, joyful voice had replied. My interest was aroused and I waited expectantly at the top of the stairs. The upper steps were flooded with sunlight, the bottom ones in shadow save when the opening oven door threw out a red glow.

Then I saw the most radiant apparition: a pale-blond young man, slender, naked to the waist, wearing white canvas trousers that fitted tightly around his hips and buttocks. He was leaning forward a little to speak with his employer and his golden hair reflected the light.

They talked together in low voices and agreed to cut in two one of the big round loaves that had been set aside for the Travellers' Hotel.

«Bring it up, will you please?»

In three bounds he was with us, half-naked, smiling, entirely at ease. With a little contraction in my stomach, I kept looking at his greenish-blue eyes, his well-muscled but graceful shoulders, his chest powdered with flour, and the dew of perspiration moistening his forehead. He was quite aware of my interest and, while he was slicing the loaf and weighing each half, he smiled at me pleasantly.

«But — I know you,» said my grandmother suddenly, as if trying to remember.

«Why yes,» put in the bakery woman. «It's Pierrot, the boy who was with us all one winter. When he was eighteen, he enlisted in the navy. Now he's done his three years and has come back to us.»

«I suppose you went all over the world,» said my grandmother, who would have liked nothing better than to travel.

«I don't know where he went, but he surely learned to make good pastry! He cooked for the admiral a year. You should taste his croissants and his brioches. And puff paste is his speciality.»

The puff paste specialist made us a comic little salute and, with hands steadying himself on the staircase walls, plunged in one unbroken movement into the bakeroom.

I kept gazing after him until my grandmother called twice to get me away.

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My aunt had presented a problem. I owed the solution to a storm. To tell the truth I did little more at that time than gather together the elements of the problem; it was only later on, when I was old enough to understand, that I recognized their significance.

In our family weather forecasts the Round always played a leading part. I don't know why that lonely, high plateau, bare as a mesa and reddish, had such a name. Perhaps it was because of the storms that seemed to wheel uncertainly around it before taking their final direction.

At any rate, that very day, after a whole week of fine weather, the leaden sky above the Round warned us all that the first equinoctial storm was getting ready to break. My father gave up the walk he had been planning for the afternoon and on which my mother and I were to have gone along, as we did every day. I decided to send picture post-cards to my school friends.

But the storm remained far away, only a few brief showers falling on the town and its gardens, just enough to fill the air with a warm, sensuous odor of wet earth. Once again the Round had lived up to its name.

After four o'clock, when there was no longer any danger of rain, my father decided to go to the Ribeyres district to see if our orchards had suffered any damage; my mother suggested to my aunt that they do some shopping; I rode off on my bike to the post office.

I was on my way back when I saw the butcher boy just finishing pumping up the tires of his bicycle. He had taken off his apron and canvas jacket and was wearing espadrilles. His shirt sleeves were rolled up high over impressive-looking muscles. Filled with sudden curiosity, I stopped in front of the newspaper vendor's and waited.

He rode away slowly toward the bakery. It happened that the bakery woman's daughter was sitting on a chair that stood on the sidewalk; she was talking, her head raised, her eyes on the windows. I thought at first she was speaking to a neighbor-woman. Then, seeing Pierre, the bakery boy, seated in the doorway, I understood that if she wasn't exactly talking to him, at least he was there as a good excuse for her to ramble on. I liked the proprietress of the bakery, but her daughter irritated me. She so obviously wanted to be the center of the picture.

Armand, the butcher, rode up beside her and stopped with one foot on the sidewalk. Had my aunt been mistaken after all?

I could see only the young man's back, and this broad, motionless back told me nothing. But the girl, coquettish and vain, I suppose, was outdoing herself in alluring wiles, all the time glancing at the nearby windows. I couldn't hear distinctly what she was saying, but one thing I did know for certain: the young man wasn't answering her. His resonant, baritone voice would have reached me.

Could I stay any longer watching them? The moment came when I felt I had to go. I got on my bike and started off. But I meant to take a good look as I went by.

Just as I came even with them, in the midst of the girl's talking, Armand said in a low voice:

«Coming, Pierrot?»

The bakery boy sprang up and perched sideways on the bicycle frame between the butcher's thighs and arms. The girl drew in her breath sharply, then caught herself up, probably thinking of the neighbor-women who might be watching.

«Have a good ride and a good swim,» she called out as the boys glided away. «And bring me back a fish to fry.»

The butcher, legs apart, was pedalling slowly. Beyond the covered market he coasted to the Béal Bridge. I followed a little behind him as though drawn on by a magnet.

Pierre was wearing a white cotton sleeveless upper, very low in the neck, and his white canvas trousers. The thin shoes he wore in the bakeroom were dangling loosely from his toes. When they came onto the Alagnon Bridge road, Armand started pedalling again; the bike swerved sharply; one of Pierre's shoes fell off.

«Don't stop!» I called. «I'll get it.»

But Armand had already put his feet on the ground and was waiting. The baker glanced over his friend's shoulder.

«It's René,» he said, «Madame Gerlan's grandson.»

When I rode up to them, the sight of Pierre nestling in Armand's arms stirred me. There was a striking contrast between the two men. One was blond, slender, and supple; the other, dark, square-shouldered, husky. And then, for the first time, I saw that the butcher boy seemed relaxed, nearly smiling, with an expression of inner joy, of peaceful happiness, quite unlike his grave look of the morning. He gave me a friendly wave and Pierre stretched out his foot for me to slip the shoe on. But, changing his mind («I'd better carry them»), he took off the other one too. Then, calling me by my first name, which he hadn't done at the shop, he asked:

«Going swimming, René?»

«I haven't got my trunks and I don't swim well enough.»

«Better not, then.»

He winked goodbye and Armand pedalled off.

I followed a few yards behind, suddenly filled with sadness. For the first time I understood that I was alone, that neither my parents nor the other boys at school could give me what Pierre and Armand were apparently finding in each other. I had pals; I didn't have a friend. When would the time come for me to have one?

Of the two, Pierre and Armand, it was Pierre who attracted me. But I felt I wasn't the right age and didn't have the build now to take Armand's place, and, worse still, since I was so different from Armand physically, I felt sure Pierre never would find me interesting.

We had left behind the last houses of the avenue and were riding under a vault formed by the foliage of magnificent plane trees. Pierrot's

blond hair was showing above Armand's left shoulder. Suddenly, I saw the charming head lean frankly against Armand's shoulder and Armand lower his cheek. They rode on like this, close together, as far as the narrow side-road, by which carts reach the river, and turned into it without moving apart.

I pedalled on by myself to the Alagnon Bridge, laid down my bike, leaned on the parapet, with my back to the sun, and looked out over the valley.

Below the bridge was the dam that supplied power to the baryta works. The entire left bank was covered with white dust. I remembered how sorry my father had been when this industrial development had replaced an old water mill and, as he said, completely ruined the place. On the right was a gravel beach. Beyond were the meadows and orchards of the Ribeyres plain; farther still, the vine-covered hills along the Limagne; and in the distance the wooded mountains of Auvergne, dark-green shading into blue.

Below me the two young men were calmly undressing, Armand with some discretion, slipping his trunks on under his shirt. Pierre with complete nonchalance. He peeled off his upper, stretched himself in the sun, then unbuttoned his trousers and held them up carelessly with one hand.

«Got my trunks?» he asked.

When he had them on, he tipped up into a hand-stand and Armand caught his feet as they rose and held them in the air with one hand. Then Pierre went into a back-bend to do a wrestler's bridge. Armand gave him support under the small of his back. When Pierre's curve was perfect, the butcher raised up one-handed the limp body that arched, inert, with a kind of plant-like grace.

I stood there admiring the young man's suppleness, his body's tapering lines. I admired the butcher boy's strength. I felt the understanding that linked the two; I envied their close union. They moved together with a sort of feline harmony, yet beyond that I was aware of some attraction between them I didn't understand, some extraordinarily close attachment.

Until then, these two naked men, who were so unlike each other, yet so much one, had appeared to be doing their gymnastics together with a perfectly ordinary and rather unconcerned mastery. But, at that moment, seizing his friend's body with both hands, Armand drew Pierre suddenly against him, and, letting the boy's torso bend backward, leaned forward over Pierre's down-curving head and shoulders with a silent concentration that made my throat go dry. Pierrot gave a moan. His right arm came up; his hand grasped Armand's shoulder, felt for the back of his neck. I saw him pull himself up, hard against the broad chest, and press his forehead into the muscled curve of the neck.

Did it really happen? Already Armand had begun their exercises again and was raising his partner aloft. Holding him high in his arms, he walked toward the river and stepped along the top of the dam. Water flowing over a covering of tiny green algae had polished its surface dangerously smooth. I thought «He'll fall,» a sharp little pain gripping

my heart. I could clearly see his wide brown feet, just covered by the shallow glide of the water, carefully plant themselves one after the other. I cried out when he slipped and dragged his friend down in his fall.

They splashed about in the water, then raised their heads above the surface a short distance apart, Pierre spitting and coughing.

«Bastard!» he shouted, and no insult ever seemed to me to express so much friendship.

For half an hour I watched their play. When they finally came out of the water, the bridge's shadow reached far into the valley. It was still hot, but the late afternoon was soft and peaceful.

Below me the two young men were now lying stretched out on the gravel. Pierre asked for a cigarette; Armand just said: «In my pocket.» Pierre got up, felt around in the trousers, took a cigarette, then another, which he thrust between Armand's lips. He lighted his own, seemed to hesitate, threw away the match, and lay down again beside his friend.

«How about mine?» Armand said.

Pierre smiled slightly. Sliding closer to Armand, he laid his hand on the fine Roman head and turned it toward him. Their cigarettes met end to end.

They remained like that for a minute, leaning toward each other, watching their cigarette smoke mingle. Then they lay back on the ground and for a long time gazed dreamily at the sky. Armand took one of Pierre's hands. The slow-fading, golden, summer-evening light was spreading its final glow over them.

I could barely find the strength to leave. I buried my face in my arms. What a hollow had opened in my life and how much I wanted, I too, to be loved!

Translated from the French by Clarkson Crane

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Between friends there is absolutely no distinction between giving and receiving; they are but twin parts of the same gesture, like a handshake, like a kiss — a gesture which says in one breath, with two voices: «We are fond of each other.» The two hands are outstretched; the direction of anything passing is absolutely immaterial.

St.

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