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Tarquimpol

(excerpt)

Translated from French by Paloma Vita

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You wrote *Tarquimpol* on the cover of this notebook. It also happens to be the inscription some artist painted at the bottom of the ashtray sitting in front of you on your work table. You have never been to Tarquimpol but you have good reason to believe that Franz Kafka, the author, spent some time there in the summer of 1911 while on his way to Paris with his friend Max Brod.

You are in Soyons, in the Ardèche region of France, in the Rhône valley, less than ten kilometres south of Valence. Tarquimpol is not even a hick-town from around here. It's much farther north. In Lorraine to be exact. You've been told it's a much prized resort destination; someone might have just been pulling your leg because Tarquimpol sits on a small spit of land in the middle of the Lindre Ponds and rural road number 199 stops there. There is no way to go farther. Unless, of course, one feels like a swim.

This is reason enough to see why Kafka may have been drawn to the place, but it's not the only one: a thick fog continuously shrouds the Lindre Ponds and the surrounding area of Tarquimpol. The fog lends to the village a ghostly appearance and imparts to the traveller a wonderful feeling of the surreal. There is no fog, however, in the landscape painted at the bottom of the ashtray sitting in front of you, even though it can be seen on every single postcard of Tarquimpol.

By stirring the few butts cluttering the bottom of the ashtray with your ball-point pen, you can glimpse three yellow houses with red-tiled roofs, and one tower behind them - you think it's the church spire.

There is also a tree on the left-hand side. The artist must have thought a tree ought to be planted on that side to balance the volumes and the artist was right because without this shrivelled little tree, his work would be even uglier.

The sky is lavender blue and not a shred of fog to be seen, but two small turd-shaped white clouds seem to mock this otherwise immaculate sky.

There is a stone wall too. You couldn't see it earlier, hidden as it was by a Marlboro butt. The wall is on the right side and you can make out two crosses: a small one and another, larger one. These must stand for the Tarquimpol cemetery and it confirms your first impression that it must be the church spire and not a simple tower as may have been deducted by the shape of the building, which looks more like a silo than a church spire. The sky is blue, the horizon flat. And the Marlboro butts are, for the moment, the only interesting formations in this boring landscape.

If that is so, then why write Tarquimpol on the cover of this notebook? Because you have good reason to believe Kafka spent some time at the Château d'Alteville, a few kilometres away from the Lindre Ponds, at the very bottom of the ashtray. You have to blow away some of the ashes to see it. The Alteville Château does not look like a castle but rather like a large ivy-covered house. At the end of the 19th century, it belonged to some mysterious character; a certain Stanislas de Guaita, an occultist and author of works with such reassuring and enticing titles as *Le temple de Satan* (The Temple of Satan), *Essais de sciences maudites* (Essays on Accursed Sciences) and *La clef de la magie noire* (The Key to Black Magic). Stanislas de Guaita is a controversial figure: it seems he was one of the main protagonists in the war of the mages that took place in Europe at the end of the 19th century. He is even thought to have flitted in Baudelaire's entourage. What a scandal.

You can't think of what could possibly have compelled Franz Kafka – the German-speaking-Jewish-author-from-Prague – to go to Tarquimpol. In 1911, he was only twenty-eight years old and Stanislas de Guaita had been dead fourteen years. You know for a fact the two men never met.

What then?

For more than twenty years, you have been carefully preserving an entire ream of plain-edged watermarked *Statesman Script* paper. You bound the 57cm x 88cm sheets and folded them in four to fashion two notebooks. You also brought back two vials from America; each contains 50ml of black ink; the first one bears the name Mont Blanc – made in Germany – and the other bears the Waterman brand – made in France. You don't really try to figure it out. As far back as you can remember you've had plans to write in this notebook. Sometimes you shake the ink vials, or you open them up and sniff their contents. You gently run your open palm on the paper. The ink doesn't smell like anything and the paper awaits.

Maybe you're just a little confused. You move your head slowly down the length of your arm resting on the table. You have the sensation of remembering but it's not quite what could be called memory yet. It's something harder, like a peach-stone in your skull. You could perhaps, with some help, remember everything; but you are not that attached to it; so you stay there, your head resting on one of your hands and you listen to the song the mistral makes as it swoops around the roof beams.

(...)

You raise your head; you seem slightly less confused than a while ago. You tell yourself that before going any further, it is imperative to understand why you have come to write Tarquimpol on the cover of this notebook and why you are now in Soyons in the *Ardèche* and thus, quite far from your goal.

One of your best friends always says: "Life is full of surprises!" The way he keeps repeating this at the drop of a hat grates on your nerves, but he is totally right – life is full of surprises no matter your thoughts on the subject.

In your case, surprises first burst on the scene during a reception at the Canadian Embassy in Paris where the Quebec literati had been convened to toast champagne. It is at this moment of your nomadic wonderings that Alya was introduced to you.

You are married now; you and Alya, and you find yourself in the living room of Alya's house, in the Ardèche. If it is appropriate to thus describe the vast room whose ceiling is adorned with a gigantic crater through which you can see the roof beams, and the mistral blows. You write:

I am quite the character. There is a huge crane in my backyard – it's at least twenty metres high; all rusted up; with which I manage on a clear day to produce a certain celestial music that exasperates my neighbours. The pulley, the winch, the counterweight: all these dangle exactly in full sunlight. When the mistral blows, it turns into a gigantic weather-vane that squeals to high heaven. It is my crane. I think it's very useful. There is also a crater in my office, but that is my well-kept secret.

You installed your work desk in this room because you need some space to get up once in a while; walk around the table while smoking Marlboros; and imagine the glorious view that would offer itself to you, had you chosen another room in the house. In which case you would have been able to gaze upon the limestone cliff on top of which regally stands the famous – world renowned, according to the town's Internet site – Leaning Tower of Soyons, built in the 6th century – around the same time than about ten other ones, all identical to this one except that they don't lean – to keep watch over the Rhône Valley and the incursions of potential invaders.

You would even be able to glimpse the mouths of the caves where evidence of continuous human occupation over the last 150 000 years was found. You went for a walk there yesterday afternoon and it was quite the feeling to stand there, at the entrance of one of the caves, and look upon the Vercors Mountains while thinking that Neanderthals, 150 000 years ago or more, did exactly the same thing; well, they couldn't see national road 86, or the train tracks, or the unending parade of warehouses and factories that are glommed on the shores of the Rhône, or the Cruas nuclear plant, far in the distance, belching its massive and completely benign white billows.

Alya is well acquainted with the museum curator who also oversees the protected site of the caves. He's a nice guy. He preserved all he could, as his position dictates; he even arranged three or four - bearded and faux mammoth fur bearing - mannequins at the entrance of the main cave.

It's a rather cheesy display, it must be said, whatever Alya thinks; you don't want to burst her bubble. There is even a prehistoric lion (a Smilodon perhaps?) in a dark corner of the cave. When you first saw him yesterday, you thought you were in a child's room so much this unlikely creature resembles a giant stuffed toy. You told yourself it was a very friendly affair to be in the company of these prop ancestors scratching their butts around a fake electric fire and that we have come quite a long way, with our Internet, cellular phones, and cortisone creams.

Interestingly enough, the mammoth bones on exhibit at the Soyons museum were not discovered in the caves but by a villager who found them while digging up his backyard.

For years, this guy dreamt of having a new garage. And here's what happens! A guy wants a garage, he doesn't want more than that; his ambition is modest. A guy wants a new garage and he finds mammoth bones.

People can always tell the precise moment problems start. This conscientious citizen had even made sure to procure himself all the necessary authorizations, licenses, and permits to build his garage. Then he started to dig. He dug and he dug until his dream was blown to smithereens.

A mammoth.

This is neither the first nor the last mammoth that will ever be found, but what can you do? There aren't that many of them in these latitudes and we are deeply attached to them.

"Hold on, a garage? Are you out of your mind?" said the museum curator, "A garage! What could possibly have given you that idea? It will take us years to dig this mammoth out. And who says this is the only one? We're gonna have to extend the dig to the entire perimeter!"

"The entire perimeter..."

Hearing the curator utter this phrase leaves the villager perplex. He already sees himself wrangling with another mammoth under his kitchen floor and a third one under the kids' room. What luck to have landed on top of a mammoth cemetery; he never should have left Belleville. But this guy is holding on to his Ardèche dreams and he knows that someday he will be rid of mammoths once and for all and that he will get to build his garage. For now, he says he is happy to be contributing to the archaeological heritage. This is how a local newspaper quoted him. It seems he actually said: "I am happy to participate in the national efforts to preserve the archaeological heritage and I am fully collaborating with the authorities."

Kafka is never far away.