

Lunch with Jason King



Short stories & bedtime tales from the past, present & future of the Digital Age
by Nick Wray

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'The Beach at Narbonne' by Nick Wray

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The Beach at Narbonne

'...and at 620pm on Friday 13th August 2040 the glorious sunny weather continues with cloudless skies for Narbonne Plage and all Southern towns along the Mediterranean coast of France. And there's more sun on the way tomorrow! And now, on Golden Hour, here's a musical blast from the past with 1980s band...'

"20 years ago..." Peter D Carter said to himself in some disbelief, watching some starlings far out at sea. The tiny little birds coalescing into a solid black cloud which, an instant, later evaporated before suddenly reappearing again. A m-mu-murmuration, they called it, didn't they?

A black mass. Twisting, turning one minute; the next, diving, soaring, changing direction, this way then that – then almost vanishing again. Much like...life?

He looked at the sunbathers on the sands and remembered the beautiful young woman who had emerged from the sandy haze that ancient day, all those many years ago. Just as the sun had prepared to quench its insatiable thirst in the darkening sea, just as it had kissed the endless sandy beach at Narbonne. Some seagulls, calling, broke the reverie.

Peter doffed his hat to the birds of the air, adding the glorious French sun to his salute, before bowing theatrically to the very gods themselves. His knees cracked as he stood back up.

"Tempus fugit. Time flies" He said to himself.

'And in foreign news, at midnight tonight European Standard Time, New Albion – the former United Kingdom – will finally re-join the Federal States of Europe after the 20-year absence since Brexit.'

The radio was coming from one of the beach front cafés lining the long, deep sandy beach that seemed to go on forever.

He smiled as two pretty French women, at least 30 years his junior, approached. Perhaps he would come back and live here, in France, one day? He'd always wanted to. Since that day. On the beach. And after midnight, it might just be possible again...?

"Bonjour ladies"! He smiled genuinely, hopefully. Moved just a little, too, perhaps, by their looks. But also yearning for something he'd once seen, but never captured.

The two attractive women were approaching from the opposite direction. Coming towards him along the promenade. But as they passed, they collapsed into each other's arms, giggling hysterically at the very thought of ending up in the arms of an Englishman, *comme ça!* (or so he knew in his heart of hearts...).

"Ah, well but let us say it is merely *au revoir*, rather than a goodbye, then, ladies?" He added hopefully. They disappeared into the haze without a look back.

Frowning, he continued along the promenade and stroked his rounded stomach. This time, he said to himself – once the holiday was over – he really must make a start on the diet. Just cut down a bit on the cheese and wine, he thought (unconsciously licking his lips, savouring the remains of lunchtime's bottle of *Chateau La Clape* on his tannin-blackened lips). His head throbbed from too much sun. Still! In many ways, he felt fortunate.

"And whatever my ex used to say, I've still got my *joie de vivre!*" he said to himself. "And even on a budget I know how to enjoy life. And most importantly, I've still got my health." He coughed heavily and noticed a heavy sweat.

He removed his hat to wipe his face, then noticed fresh seagull droppings on the straw hat's black band. A band already marked and faded by time and the pollution back home. He studied the back of his hands. Rorschach-like liver spots ever spreading across his skin, coding stories of his past.

'Never say die!' He said to himself, after a moment.

If I had a photograph of you

It's something to remind me

I wouldn't spend my life just wishing

The pop song was emerging from the radio of one of the restaurant cafés on the busy beachfront across the road. 'Yes' there was the question of where to eat? And – after all, the sun *had* passed the yardarm – where to drink, tonight, too?

It's not the way you have your hair

It's not that certain style

Who *was* that song by? Oh, his bloody memory these days! Time to cool his thoughts with a drink. Could it really be twenty years since his last visit, to Narbonne? *Twenty years!* Time, indeed, to celebrate in one of the cafés across the road.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" The autonomous car skidded. A shrill electronic banshee wailed, shattering the e-car's normal vows of silence as it slammed to a halt – only just in time, yet still knocking hard against Peter's shins.

"Ouch!" He didn't know whether to be pleased or angry with the technology that had just saved his life.

"Pardon, eh Monsieur and Madame..." he found himself apologising to the scowling French couple whose wine had spilled over themselves as their speeding vehicle had been brought to a halt. Still 'No damage done'. 'All's well that ends well'. 'Live to fight another day', he parroted, as he made it to safety on the other side of the road.

He patted the breast pocket of his smart but fraying linen jacket, just to make sure. Old habits. His Blue British – well *New Albion* - passport, still safe and sound, next to this heart. They could laugh, but at least Brexit had, if little else, given them back that. The Lion and the Unicorn, face to face on its cover. He always liked to think himself as the Lion. Perhaps, tonight, he'd finally find his Unicorn, too? Who knew? Life could change just in the crossing of a road, after all. Yes, perhaps his luck was about to change for the better? After all these years, 2039 might finally mark a turn in his fortunes? Perhaps he'd visit the casino tonight and place one last bet, too? A warm sea breeze answered, whispering encouragingly into his ear.

His memories mixed with a sense of *déjà vu*, once again, as he gazed onto the beach at Narbonne. The beach where he'd last seen *her*. All those years ago. Ochre sunbathers stretched out on the sand

dunes, surrendering their lithe forms to a farewell kiss from the sun. A sun preparing to quench its thirst in the wine dark sea. A smell of roasting hazelnuts in sweet chocolate drifted from one of the concession stands on the seafront. Just as it had, also, when he had first caught a glimpse of the woman of his dreams.

"Whaaa... Sweet Jesus! What now?" A snarling dog, was nipping, biting at the heels of his Penny Loafers, dragging him from his reverie.

"Non! Bonaparte, non! Asseyez vous. Regardez moi!" The delicious honeyed voice came from the outline of a sumptuous woman silhouetted by the sun.

The dog leapt at Peter savagely, its owner only just restraining the animal by violently snatching back on the creature's lead.

"Non! Bonaparte!! C'est suffice! Tu as un chien méchant! Pardon, Monsieur. Je suis très désolé."

"Nil desperandum, I mean... I mean no problem..." His French, like so much else these days, just seemed to melt from his mind when it was needed.

"'...*Pas de problème*', is the mot juste, perhaps, Monsieur? Vous êtes Anglais, non?" He nodded rapidly in response.

"Bonaparte, he likes you, Monsieur!" He could hear a delicious teasing in her voice.

"Comment-vous appelez-vous, Monsieur...?"

'Who am I?' he muttered to himself. "Errr, je m'appelle Carter. Peter Carter." As he spoke, the dog looked at Peter, then back to its owner and barked three times.

"Boney, non! C'est suffice!"

"I'm sure he's just saying 'hello', Madame. Or is that '*bonjour*', if I'm not being impertinent?"

The dog lurched forward, snapping at him again.

"Bonaparte, non! You are a very naughty! Forgive him, Monsieur! He has grown bored talking to the seagulls, I think, Monsieur, Monsieur Carter, you say?"

"Call me Peter, please."

"Enchanté, Peter. And you have met Bonaparte, already." The dog growled dangerously at him.

"A, a, um, beautiful animal, Madame."

"He is getting old now, Monsieur. Like us all, non?"

"Nonsense. Vous êtes une, um, jolie jeune femme et... oh bloody hell... you're a handsome woman on a handsome evening, Madame." A hard, hot, gust from the beach slapped his face then threw scalding sand into his eyes for good measure. He bent over, as though winded, and groped inside his jacket pocket for something to wipe his eyes. Where was it? ...Aspirin, no... the cold wrapper of a single condom – well you never knew – the titillating, tumescent thought reminding him, once again, that one day he really should check its expiry date...

"Ouch! Just a moment, Madame." The sand that had blown in his face was really stinging now. He could even taste some of the brackish particles which must have blown into his mouth, too. His eyes wept as he swallowed to get rid of the taste. He felt around blindly inside his jacket pocket for

something to wipe the particles away; ...Warfarin pills, no, ...his ancient piece of *PhotoMeme*, which for reassurance as ever he ritually patted three times. God, his eyes burned! Oh, where was it? Finally, his sausage fingers found the damp creases of his handkerchief.

Straightening up, he wiped away the sand and sticky tears from his eyes. The worn silk fabric, its sweet and sour smell of sweat, the unravelling monogram, all a premonition of his imminent return to a threadbare home. Assuming Peter's long-suffering landlady hadn't given up on him already and let the tiny flat to some other desperate soul, he wondered?

The promenade, the endless plage, slowly came back into focus. It was silly, but like life's other disappointments and mirages he now half expected the woman not to be there.

"An occupational hazard, Monsieur?"

"Sorry?"

"Les sables – I mean the sands, for us promenaders, non? Can I assist?" She stepped towards him, finally emerging from the cauldron of the sun. A woman so beautiful that, for a moment, she literally took his breath away.

"You are on holiday, Monsieur?"

"Oui. I mean 'yes'. I fly home to England – to New Albion – I mean, tomorrow. I've been touring the Riviera. Or perhaps the Riviera has been touring me. I still can't get used to these bloody autonomous cars doing all the work. I suppose I'm a bit old fashioned, in some ways, Madame...Madame...?"

"I agree! I do not like them either. But *la technologie* can have its advantages? I read *The Wild Ass's Skin* on my last long car journey. Balzac? You know it?"

"Sounds a bit saucy? I enjoy a good yarn. Thriller, crime, you know?"

"Ah, *je pense* it might not be your 'cup of tea'? So, what will you do in Narbonne, tonight, Monsieur?"

"Un petit peu du vin rouge, perhaps? Watch the sunset, have something to eat. Who knows?"

"There are many good places to eat, here, non?"

"You know, I've not had a lot of luck so far with any of the restaurants I've tried in France."

"Non! *C'est impossible!*"

"Perhaps you could recommend somewhere," he swallowed the word 'cheap'. "Somewhere nice?"

"Somewhere nice? Let me think. Have you tried *Tahiti*, Monsieur?"

"Tahiti? We're in Narbonne, not French Polynesia, aren't we?" The woman smiled politely at his attempt at humour, as they stopped outside *Café Tahiti* to study the menu.

Reluctant to reveal his reading glasses he squinted through sandy-sore eyes to try and make out the prices, and do the maths, converting Euros into New Albion Guineas. And all the time resisting the temptation – cued by the café menu – to suggest that they share a 'Sex on the Beach' cocktail.

"Tahiti? Tahiti...Tahiti...? I know, isn't that where you French tested les atom bombs all those years ago?" His attempt to draw a mushroom cloud with his hands somehow morphed into the form of

her hourglass body. A frisson ran down his neck. There was something truly electric about this woman.

"They do say the cocktails at *Tahiti* are nearly as powerful as the New European Army's atom bombs, Monsieur."

"That might make the evening go with a bang?"

"Non, Boney, come back," the dog was pulling away taking Madame with him. "Boney has never liked cocktails." The dog stopped just ahead, outside another café. The Englishman hesitated. But it was now or never. "*Carpe diem*. Seize the day!" He muttered under his breath and strode after them.

"Hello again! Fancy meeting you here!"

"You English and your humour." Had anyone ever smiled so kindly, he thought?

"So, what's this one like, Madame?"

"*L'Arlequin*? This is one of Bonaparte's favourite. But anywhere *sur la promenade* is good. Oh, what is it, Bonaparte, excusez-moi, Monsieur." The dog laid down on the hot pavement in front of the café, panting exaggeratedly. "Bonaparte, he is getting thirsty."

"In which case would you, Madame – and of course, you, Boney," he said, tipping his hat towards the dog, "care to join me for a drink, *ici*? What do you think, Boney? Or should that be '*tu*'?" The dog started to wag its tail excitedly.

"Excellent. *Harlequin* it is, then." Before the woman could speak, he marched onto the café terrace and threw his battered boater onto a coffee table shaded under a large black parasol hanging from above like a Venus Fly Trap. He sat, his body sinking into deep cushions which, like some winded animal, exhaled under his weight.

Ignoring the warning creaks of the double seat sofa – fashioned from yet another kind of new synthetic foreign to Albion's backward shores – he gestured to the empty space beside him. After a moment's thought Madame chose the seat opposite. Despite her womanly curves, she was so lithe, and gently floated down, seeming to merely hover on her chair's edge. Perhaps ready to escape at a moment's notice, Peter wondered?

"Let me get Bonaparte a bowl: waiter, waiter! ...Where is he? Even in a near empty café I seem unable to attract *les garçons* in these places?"

"Perhaps they do not like it if you click your fingers, Monsieur?" The same song came from the radio.

If I had a photograph of you

It's something to remind me

I wouldn't spend my life just wishing

"Gosh, that's funny. Second time I've heard that today. What a coincidence."

"Pardon, Monsieur?"

He was already half-singing, half humming to the tune coming from the café radio:

It's more the way your eyes

Are laughing as they glance

Across the great divide

"Extraordinary! You know, it could be written just for you, Madame!"

"Vous êtes très gentile, Monsieur."

"I know this song. It's from the year I was born. 1982. Nearly sixty years ago. To think it! And it sounds just the same, today, as it did all those years ago when it was first recorded."

"If only real life could be preserved so perfectly, Monsieur?"

"Now what *is* it called? Hell! It's on the tip of my tongue." His head – aching, boiled from the morning's sun – throbbed with the effort of recalling the song's title, still long lost to him.

"Does it matter, so much what it is called? Can you not enjoy it for what it is, Monsieur?"

"*Wishing*?' That's it. I bloody well wish I could remember the name of the group, though?"

"Would that be such a clever use of a wish, Monsieur?" The seagulls above seemed to join in the debate.

"One to discuss over a drink, I think, Madame. What's your poison?"

"Pardon?"

"What can I get you to drink, Madame, Madame...?"

"Ah! A *Kir Royale*, s'il vous plait." Almost the moment she spoke, the waiter appeared.

"Well someone's got the magic touch, Madame..."

The handsome young server smiled genially at Madame, nodded at Boney then looked impassively towards the Englishman.

"Madame, Messieurs? Vous avez choisi?"

"A *Kir Royale* pour la Madame and ...hell! You only live once! Why not just bring us a bottle of Champagne and a couple of spare glasses, whilst you're about it?"

"Vous êtes très gentile, Monsieur, mais..."

"Not another word, Madame. Tonight's on me." What would a few hundred Euros more on credit matter, he mused? Wondering how close his charge card's ever distending, ever ballooning, upper limit was, and when it would finally burst?

The waiter raised his eyebrows as though privy to his secret.

"C'est tout, Monsieur?"

"I think so, for now. Unless, perhaps, we should go for a magnum?" The Englishman was interrupted by barking. "How could we! I nearly forgot Boney!" Bonaparte yapped, gratefully in reply. "And, um, un bol avec du l'eau for le chien, s'il vous plait." He smiled genially at the dog.

"D'accord. *Perrier* ou *Badoit*, Monsieur?"

"Errr, *Perrier* or *Badoit*...?" Peter pondered. Madame snapped at the waiter.

"Un bol a chien, Monsieur. Toute suite!" The young man retreated rapidly to the safety of the bar.

"Ignore him, Peter. The waiter he is joking. They are mineral waters – not for un chien!"

"Show 'em who's boss, eh? Well, this is a lovely way to spend an evening, Madame, Madame...? You know, we've been having such fun, I don't think I caught your name?"

"You know Narbonne well, Monsieur?"

"Not really. It's the first time I've been back here in twenty years."

"Is it because – how do you say in your country – 'the time flies when you are having fun', Monsieur?"

"Not exactly," he said, his frigid smile revealing broken ranks of mustard-coloured teeth.

"Twenty years, you say, since your last visit? It is a long time to wait, Monsieur?"

"Can you believe, it. I was, let's see, I must have been what thirty-seven, back then, when I last visited?"

"And what year was that, Monsieur?"

"2019. 2019's one date I do recall. I was here, on holiday. Just before we, Great Britain, left the European Community. And what a disaster that turned out to be? Not just for Francophiles, Europhiles, 'Remainers', like me. Thirty-seven, thirty-eight...who's counting? Can I ever really have been that young, though? You wouldn't know to look at me now..."

"'What is time, but a mere tyranny...', Monsieur?"

"So, you watched it too?"

"Monsieur?"

"I saw it in my hotel room last night. It's from that film, isn't it?: *A Matter of Life & Death*."

"I have not seen the film, Monsieur. Though of course, at our age, we both know of life and death? I lost friends in the war." A breeze brought the scent of fresh roses to their table.

"I still can't believe it. Britain actually going to war – *war* I ask you – with Spain, with France"

"With all of Europe, Monsieur!"

"Indeed. With your fellow countrymen Madame? For what in the end? For a pointless little rock, an icon of another age, like Gibraltar."

"I suppose Gibraltar – or the idea of it – it represented something to someone, Monsieur. Like your *Brexit*, too, non?"

"Did you fight?"

"Well, I was a pilot." He couldn't help but smile at the thought.

"A pilot!" For the first time Madame sounded surprised.

"Just a drone, of course. Not one of those little ones though." He remembered the toy he had played with on the beach, back then.

"You boys and your electronic toys, Monsieur..."

"No, it was a proper, full-size military one, you know?"

"Yes, I know." Said Madam. Boney whimpered.

"I operated it remotely, of course. From Windsor, in fact. You know, Windsor Castle? The Queen's place? All before AI – Artificial Intelligence, that is – got good enough to do everything on its own."

"At least it did not end in a 'big bang', did it, though, Monsieur? But so many lives lost, so many lives changed, needlessly." Madame looked to Boney who cocked his head mournfully to one side in reply.

"Yet people have become obsessed over less, Monsieur? And the war, thankfully, is long over.

"Still, as Wellington said, 'it was a damn close-run thing', though, wasn't it, Madame?"

"Yes, but – unlike Waterloo – you *lost* this time, non?"

The cry of a solitary seagull finally broke their first silence.

"I am sorry, Monsieur. I did not mean to be rude. Countries, people do what seems right at the time. One cannot have regrets. But tell me; the war only lasted a few years. Why so long to return?"

"I suppose, at first, it was just because everything back home got so difficult. It just got so hard to do anything. Least of all go abroad. There was the devastation to clear up, of course, after all the fighting. The economy collapsing. Then my marriage. No one had any money, least of all to travel abroad. It was dangerous just going out. The riots and unrest. Followed by a whole bloody merry-go-round of elections and new laws and restrictions from the tin-pot despots that took over – and I'm not just talking about my ex for once..."

"Thank goodness for the UN, non, Monsieur? That greater powers prevailed?"

"I suppose so. But I still can't get used to calling home, England, '*New Albion*'."

"The cost of defeat, non? But now we are all friends together, again. And, soon – at midnight – Albion will re-join Greater Europe as the 38th state! Let us drink to our reunion – *Santé*, Monsieur." Their glasses kissed and sang. Yet he winced at the thought of a once proud United Kingdom, a once whole realm – the Lion and the Unicorn – soon to be re-absorbed as nought but a fragment back into amorphous European machine. Yet even now, something about Madame's manner, her cool blue eyes, calmed his mood.

"I sense there is something else, too, Monsieur? Something you wanted to come back for but were afraid to find, to meet?"

"You must be psychic."

"Perhaps I am Monsieur." She smiled, her ivory white teeth immaculate. "So, what is it? What has really kept you away from Narbonne all these years, Monsieur?" Even the birds circling above seemed to be holding their breath for once.

"It will sound silly."

"Try me, is that 'ow you say it, Monsieur?"

He swallowed the lewd comeback he would have tried at any other time, with any other woman.

"I mean, well this will sound ridiculous. I just didn't want to; to *spoil it*."

"Spoil 'it', Monsieur?"

"The memory."

"Monsieur?" He touched the outside of his stretched jacket feeling for the presence of his talisman, the *PhotoMeme*, nestling inside the pocket within.

"Of her."

"Her, Monsieur?"

"The woman on the beach at Narbonne. Even as he spoke his mind had already landed in the soft sands of yesteryear: when – bored by his book, turning lazily under the sun, the beach sticking to his sun-creamed skin – his happy indolence had been rudely interrupted by coquettish laughter which had made him look up to see her...the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen."

"Monsieur? Monsieur?"

He realised his mouth was hanging open indecently.

"This woman. On the beach. You still think about her? Even after all this time?"

"Yes."

"So, what was she like, Monsieur?"

"What was she like, Madame?"

"Oui, Monsieur?"

The setting sun, as though intrigued by the conversation, dropped under the café awning to join them. For a moment he was dazzled, confused. His head hurt, again, as he remembered her. What could he say?

How, all those years ago – his ex-wife lying on the sand beside him but never knowing – that was when he first spied *her*.

How, as the sun set, *she* had emerged from the beach haze, silencing even the sea breeze.

How hiding behind his cheap sunglasses, bored by his ice cream-stained Jeffrey Archer novel, he'd idly flown his cheap toy drone above the beach. A toy which beamed an image to his phone. From where he first spied her. As a part of a group playing volley ball. Then followed her, remotely, as she chased a ball across the sand.

Watching the tiny image relayed to his phone he knew – instantly, even back then – that however far away that this was his perfect human soul. The quintessence of youth and life. His perfect woman. Running along the horizon. Kicking up clouds of sand which kissed and caressed every curve, every swing of her body. He'd longed for her, then. As he longed for the memory of her, now. Her features silhouetted against and the bleach-blue sky – isolated between heaven and earth. But still he knew

then – as he knew now – she was the love of his life. For a moment he froze, brought back to reality by fear. He patted his trouser pocket, but no. It was fine. He could feel the thin folded gossamer sheet of *PhotoMeme* in his trouser pocket, safe as ever.

The *PhotoMeme* which had kept *her* alive since when, back then, just as his phone had threatened to die and lose sight of life itself, he snatched a screen grab, a solitary image of *her* frozen in time, in laughter; the quintessence of the woman on the beach at Narbonne.

Since when, she had never left his thoughts. Every day. First on his phone, then the *PhotoMeme* – he gazed at this picture he had taken, just to be with her, again. Just to re-live that moment and feel so alive again! Day after day. Year after year.

“Was she beautiful, Monsieur...?”

“I think I fell in love that day?”

“So, you spoke to her, then, this woman, non?”

“*Non*. I mean, well ‘no’.”

“Oh Monsieur! So, this woman of twenty years ago, a woman you did not speak to, *une jeune fille* who did not even see you: you say you *love* her? Non! I will not have it. What you saw was but a, a *chimera*. She exists – she existed – only as an illusion!”

“That’s not true!” Madame recoiled in her chair at the anger in his voice.

“She’s always been with me. She’s still with me. Even today. I’ll show you.”

He groped inside his jacket pocket, hurriedly fishing through – though wary of spilling the detritus within – to reveal his slippery leaf of *PhotoMeme*.

“A picture? *C’est suffice*, Monsieur!” Ignoring the woman, he rubbed his eyes before unfolding the clear sheet of polymer on their table. As Madame looked on, three times he stroked the surface of the *PhotoMeme* as he whispered ‘*Narbonne*’: the password, the spell, which conjured up the image of the woman on the beach from all those years ago. His fingers continued to move back and forth, above the plastic screen, gently stroking the air just above the surface of the precious image even after the woman’s form emerged.

“Well? What do you think, Madame?”

“That is, how you say, ‘it’, Monsieur?”

“Stunning, isn’t she?”

“*C’est tout*, Monsieur? It is very, you say ... *granuleux*, grainy non?”

“I’ve never really thought about it. I suppose it is a bit blurry. Remember. Phones were some crude back in 2019! And mine was ancient, even then? An old Nokia. Incredibly poor resolution. Only 640 x 480 pixels or something.”

“Six cent quarante... *pixies*?”

“No, pixels – picture elements. Dots of colour and light?”

“Ah oui, *comme*, Seurat, non?”

“Madame?”

"The artists? Les Pointillists... Post-Impressionists, non? It does not matter. But let me have another look at your *muse*. Twenty years, you say? Have you seen her, since?"

"Almost every day. I suppose, in a way, she never really left me... I *Clouded* it many moons ago, of course, but it's still the original picture. Over the years I've copied the file from one thing to another. Transferred it, enlarged it, enhanced it. But she's still the same, to me." His fingers caressed the *PhotoMeme's* surface this time. "The one constant in my life."

"But, Monsieur, you cannot even see her face – it is too blurred. I can see, perhaps, that once she was *très jolie* – in her bikini. But was that love or lust? You say you did not even talk to her!"

"I had no French..."

"*Plus ça change, Monsieur?*" Bonaparte barked in apparent agreement. "And were you not with someone else, anyway? Your 'ex'?" He seemed oblivious to Madame's inquisition.

"See, that, there, Madame? On her ankle?"

"Oil, a smudge, Monsieur?"

"No. It's a wing!"

"A wing, Monsieur? So, she was a faerie? Or like Mercure, you say Mercury, perhaps some kind of messenger? Or another kind of *fantasme*? The Englishman smiled indulgently.

"No. It was a *butterfly's* wing. See? I remember because every time she jumped into the air to catch the ball – well – it was almost as though she was flying."

"'Wings', Monsieur?" The cawing seagulls above seemed to be mocking the very idea.

Perhaps you mean a *tattoo* of a butterfly's wing, Monsieur?" Madame stretched out in her chair.

"A tattoo, of course. Why do you ask?"

"A pink and green and blue, tattoo?"

"How on earth did you know that. You can hardly see that in the..."

"Have I changed so very much, Monsieur?" With the stiletto of her Champagne flute Madame pointed; first towards the image on the *PhotoMeme*. Then, to her own, elegant ankle. "In truth, you do *not* remember me, Monsieur?"

"Don't be silly she was..."

"*Young?* It was vingt années – twenty years ago, non?"

"But she was a blonde."

"Brunette suits *une femme d'un certain âge* much better, do you not agree?"

He stared as Madame pouted and languorously shook out her hair. And as she did so her locks were gilded in the sun's rays. He squinted, and the last few abrasive grains of sand fell from his eyes. Perhaps, just perhaps, he could see something now. And not just in his mind's eye. The person in front of him becoming one with the image he'd carried with him all these years. Yes, he *could* see it! Madame was once the young woman he'd kept locked-up within his scratched pane of *PhotoMeme* next to his heart. His breathing quickened. The café's radio burst into song.

"Things can only get better

Can only get better, now

I found you..."

"Ah! Now it is my turn, Monsieur. A song I do know. 1993, I think – I am just a little younger than you, non? This one, I think, is by D: Ream?"

"But this is incredible. You've stayed with me, in my memory, every day for twenty years."

"I? Or your picture of a stranger on the beach?"

"Madame! It's like a dream. A dream come true. We've so much to talk about!" How could I not see it? It is you, isn't it! And now I see it, yes, you've, you've barely changed."

"You are very charming, Monsieur, but – in truth – we know that is a lie, non?"

"No, it is true. I should know." He was almost pleading with her, now. "I've looked at you, I've been with you, every day since we first met." Bonaparte yawned.

"Met, Monsieur? Did we ever 'meet'? You simply stole my picture on the beach."

"But we can make up for that now. For all the time that's been lost."

"For all the time that I was, was what? *Wallpaper* on your phone?"

"Yes, no. It was, you were never just that. I mean, there's still time. Time for us to really get to know each other?"

"*Malheureusement*, Monsieur... Time is the one thing we do not have. Indeed, I think we are nearly out of time."

"What do you mean?"

"Pardon, Monsieur. I mean *you* are out of time. Ah oui! It should be 'appening any moment... *now*?" Boney put his head to one side, studying the Englishman with expectant curiosity.

"What on earth...?" Then the pain in his head truly erupted.

"*Finalement*! It has started, non, Monsieur?" At first, he tried to wave away the flashes of light, the agony growing in his head, managing only to knock their Champagne to the floor. The ice bucket landed hard and loud, spilling its guts, sounding a hollow metallic peal. Nobody in the near empty café reacted. Bonaparte started to chase the spilt ice-cubes across the floor, tail wagging happily.

"My head... Someone. Help me, please!" The pain was now growing. Inside his ears, his sinuses, within his skull – within his very brain itself. He grasped the synthetic arms of his chair in agony, barely hearing the woman's words. Nobody in the café reacted as the sky turned red and Peter Carter sank sideways onto the sofa.

"I am so sorry, Monsieur. After all these years that just as we – 'ow you say, we are 'getting to know each other properly' – then, 'poof'?" Madame's delicate long fingers and scarlet nails shaped Peter's mushroom cloud in the heat haze shimmering from the metal table top.

"But it is time for us to leave each other, again."

"Please, please, do something, call someone, now, for Christ's sake!"

"Alas, there is no point. I'm afraid the medical reports show you have been living on, on... you say, 'borrowed time', non? There is nothing that I can do. My hands are tied. It is, how you say, 'over before it has begun'?"

"Call an ambulance, now, for Christ sake."

"Christ? Christ? Christ cannot help you. Not à l'instant, anyway. After, who knows? That is beyond my knowledge. It is anyone's guess. But – for now – you are dying, Monsieur. The Seagulls have just reconfirmed." She looked to the birds above her.

"Seagulls? What the fuck are you talking about, woman?"

"Sentinel Seagulls, non? Maybe outside the Eurozone you do not have them? They are the eyes and ears of the municipality, of the EC, of Greater Europe, non? They tell us *Wraiths* where to go, and what to do." "*Wraiths?*"

"C'est an trop outré, non? La Maire, the Mayor, his nickname for us is *Wraiths*. But it is true.

That is what I am. Remember your 'murmuration' of oiseaux. Your starlings? Yes, do not look so surprised. I can read your mind. You remember the 'sand' that went into your eyes? I call them GoldenSands. They are not sand, but nanobots.

"N-n-nanobots...?" he stuttered, his mouth paralysed on one side.

"Tiny autonomous machines, non? Remember the sand, your eyes? They picked up on your health conditions, your imminent demise. Then the Sands told the Sentinel Seagulls – who told me; and I told Bonaparte, how you say, to 'sniff you out'? *Simple*, non? And find you he did, non? Good boy Boney?" Bonaparte turned his head to one side, as though hopeful of a pat, as he stared at him fondly.

"I, I don't understand?" He could hear his own heartbeat as the torment inside his head grew more intense as he lay sideways on the sofa, unable to move.

"Perhaps, Monsieur, it was the excitement of remembering what you saw all that time ago? Made you – you say, 'blow a gasket'? *C'est actualmente* an artery – in your brain. Of course, I, the Sand would normally try and repair you. To enter you; to fix what is broken. But Bonaparte tells me he has checked your bank account. You have not been a remarkable success in your life, have you, Monsieur? A pity, if you had some credit in your bank account; even if you had some prospects. If only Angleterre had not crashed out of the EU; even if the *concorde* with petit, pardon, *Nouveau Albion* was now in place, we might still have done something for you. But, non, that will not be until midnight. So. It is not to be. '*C'est la vie?*'"

He felt sick and empty. Sweat trickled down his back and sides. As pain grew down the left side of his body a cold dew formed on his forehead.

"You did not think it odd to meet an 'old flame'? That I should come to you in this form, *ce soir*, non?" He tried to move, to get up from the sofa, to run. But his legs – like the dead jellyfish and discarded condoms on the spoiled beaches of Albion – were spent and useless.

"You know what is odd, Monsieur: if only you had come *en vacances* a couple of months ago, then we might have met in the flesh. Then, I was, you say, 'as fit as a... fiddle, flea? I was alive. That is, of course, until last month. A faulty autonomous car! Ran me over. *Très ironique*, non? Were it not for that, who knows what might have happened if we had met again, for 'real' – in the flesh?"

"What are you talking about. You're here? Now. Flesh and blood. In front of me." The woman laughed, but this time he heard something sour in it.

"Non, ma famille has licensed me – well, my *Visage du Personne*, non? – for Narbonne's Hospitality & Transitions Database. I cannot complain. I lived a full life. My estate gets a small pension. A few BitCoin from the Bureau each time I – my Artificial Intelligence, my 'AI', you say, – is allocated to the Sands for sad conversations like this. I am a sort of conductor. Between this world and the next. Though it is nice – I like that word – it is *nice* to do it for once with someone who is not any Tom, Dick or Harry. I hope you are not too uncomfortable, Peter?"

"But I loved you!"

"Oh Peter. Love?" You do not know the meaning of the word! You fell in love with a picture. An image. My bust, who knows – men! I was no more than *idée fixe*. Like your obsession with your Brexit unicorns, non?

Merely something for you to project your emotions – and who knows what else – onto? *You men!* Madame composed herself by looking at herself in a mirror across the bar. But I bear you no malice." She looked back at Boney. "Not anymore, anyhow. How do you feel?"

"Oh Christ. Jesus Christ. What are you talking about? What's happening to me?" Now his bladder emptied.

"It will not be too much longer. A little distraction will help, perhaps, while we wait, *comme ça?*" He watched in horror as first Madame's fingers, then her entire hand began to dissolve into GoldenSands, each with a life of their own. The nanobot particles floated upwards, lazily gathering into a dark cloud where her hand had been. A murmuring vortex from which the elements began to recombine, to re-assemble into the emergent form of an antique hour glass.

"Oh Christ, no!" Now it was his bowels' turn to liquefy.

"Of course, if Albion was already in Europe, there is a *formule* pour La Department to cross charge member states. So much paperwork in the Federation; still, it *could* be done. Perhaps your memories, too could even be copied and transferred as an artificial intelligence, just as mine were à l'hôpital, after my accident.

Just to think, we might even have ended up on the same Arcadia server. Together, on the same Cloud... But non, Monsieur, Albion is not yet reunited, so it cannot be. Your mind must die with your body. But there are certain hygiene standards. I – pour *La Department* – will take care of these, so do not worry.

"I don't understand. What's happening to me." Tears now ran from Peter Carter's eyes.

"Whilst we are waiting, Peter – you said I can call you Peter, non? I must ask: the nanobots that went into your eyes – the neural-interface – they tell me, you lied. You did not vote Remain. You voted for Brexit and to leave Europe, non? Surely it cannot be, with you such a Francophile, such a *lover* of things French Monsieur?"

"I think I'm having a stroke?"

"But I have not even touched, Monsieur. Even after all these years! Oh, pardon! Un *hémorragie cérébrale*? Oui, finalement, vous avez raison! But I hope I have at least made your last moments *confortable*? Bonaparte... quelle heure est-il?" The dog barked.

"Oh, non! We must be going, Monsieur. It's time for Bonaparte's dîner. It is just a little game we play. Boney, I, do not need to eat, of course. We do not even have to speak to communicate, either. Naturally, I can speak any language under the sun. Perfectly. Even English. Like a native." Peter shook his head in disbelief as Madame uttered the last few words in fluent cockney. She resumed her French harmonies.

"But I know you like this accent; and these little rituals Boney and I both enjoy acting out, too, and they add a certain... *joie de vivre*, to life, non?"

So, now it is time to go. Thank you for the drink. It was good to meet you, Monsieur. By the way, that song. The group was called 'A Flock of Seagulls'. Amusant, non? Au revoir, Monsieur.

Bonne journée..."

Slumped to one side in his chair, dribble running from the corner of his mouth, Peter Carter looked on in horror at the floating Hour Glass which – despite not quite having run its course – was starting to dissolve beside him. The nanobots within the hour glass, as though bored by their theatrical temporal chores, now already swarming back to mother, reforming into her hand which she held above her head and waved in the air to him without ever looking back.

Above the tinnitus now filling his head, Peter Carter heard on the café radio the tune that Madame had chosen as his requiem:

*"...If I had a photograph of you
It's something to remind me
I wouldn't spend my life just wishing."*

Boney gave Madame an old-fashioned look as though perhaps he was thinking it all in rather bad taste. Even for the death of an Englishman.

Then Peter Carter slid into limbo...

*

In his mind's eye Peter thought he could see Sentinel Seagulls flocking around a man's body. Their talons grabbing a heavy, comatose, form which the birds lifted into the air flying the body through the cooling Mediterranean sunset. Yet, although he seemed to be watching from afar, he felt like he was floating.

Odder, still, how he could see madame managing her 'Paperwork'; her sensitively composed emails of condolence (though he felt his heart miss a beat as *she* noted how few enough friends Peter had to receive these). But why, now, was she cancelling his travel insurance and return flight?; even his home milk delivery? (*'Milk deliveries; how quaint they still were in New Albion'*, he somehow heard Madame muse). All done in the blink of an eye. Madame's thoughts becoming one with his.

'Even our servers are bureaucratic', he knew Madame was somehow communicating to Boney. But after several time outs, mere nanoseconds– but delays which now seemed an *eternity* to Peter: finally – *Voilà!* Peter Carter's saw his own death certificate formally ratified by the relevant EU servers:

Carnet du Mourir #232319456563:

Peter D. Carter

Died: 20th August 2039 (Narbonne) 20h:21m:05s (EURO Std Time)

– Age 57 (Stroke plus secondary Vascular Dementia/Alzheimer's)

Born: 16th November 1982 Eton, Windsor, UK

[Medicare y/n? = 'N' (Reason: Non-compliant Albion ChkSum)]

Somehow – he knew that – at sad moments like this the Sentinel Seagulls sometimes morphed into Eagles, at least they did for those with healthier bank balances than Peter Carter. '*Eagles... a little vulgar*', he sensed Madame's Artificial Intelligence think.

Now, Peter realised, he was in fact looking up at himself. Sentinel Seagulls (not Eagles he felt oddly reassured to note) carrying his own body, so it seemed, away from the beach at Narbonne and far, far out to sea and the horizon beyond. And he watched as what was now but a pixel-sized dot of himself was released, far above the sea. And then he felt himself fall.

*

"No rest for the wicked, Bonaparte?" There were other *Clients du Mourir* she had to visit that night: two men, a woman. A child, too, had just appeared on her 'to do' list. So sad being human. Perhaps this digital existence, beyond skin and bone, beyond life, wasn't so bad? A happy compromise – a half-way house, between flesh & blood and the eternal?

Tonight, was unusual in that her mind and her body – a body shaped in GoldenSands – had been one, together, joined. Her mind could, of course, occupy any body shape that nanobots could fashion – men, women, birds of the air. Any *Skin* at all.

"Skin. What a vulgar phrase, Boney, non?" Bonaparte yapped as he moved playfully between her legs.

Indeed, there had been nothing stopping her from adopting the exact form of the youthful self she had once been – in the flesh, so to speak – when Peter Carter had spied her on the beach all those years ago. But that might have been too much, too soon for him. It wasn't her job to precipitate death. Just to clear up afterwards. She didn't want to be accused by *La Department* of causing anyone's early demise. She liked her job. She wanted to keep it. And to help Boney, too.

Anyway, she was happy with the skin she was in. And being *une femme d'un certain age* made her feel more than the *objet* Peter Carter had reduced her to, all those years ago. Her middle-aged form was, after all, how she looked when she died. It was indeed, *her*... Even in nanobots.

And by being *herself*, the small extra *Payment du Visage* she got from using her own form meant that one day she might just accrue enough money to pay for Boney's transition. Boney barked excitedly.

Just as she was about to leave the café, Madame looked back and caught sight of the Englishman's *PhotoMeme* still on the table. She zoomed in to study the image it carried of her younger self. The heavily pixelated, false colour picture Peter Carter had 'grabbed' all those years ago.

She, her, the GoldenSands – some of her constituent nanobots – could, of course, have zoomed in, memorised the near naked image, saved it to her own private server. But – despite herself – something inside her made her want to take something physical as a memento for once. Of what, perhaps, she had once been? Of a time when she had had admirers she had not even known about.

Suddenly, Boney leapt at the table, tore the *PhotoMeme* to shreds and swallowed the now transparent remains of the torn plastic. He emitted a low satisfied growl as it disappeared into his stomach.

"Bonaparte!" She could have scolded the animal in any language under the sun. Indeed, they didn't even need to speak, she could simply share her rage across the ether. Everything could connect to almost anything else, nowadays.

"Men... Men! Merde!" Boney whimpered. It was ironic. Her natural 'looks' had gone, forever. And yet, she could emulate these, now, *forever*. And what else could she conjure up to?

For a moment she wondered; might it not be better to leave things with Boney as they were? Was Boney, truly so very different an animal to Peter? Had it just been lust for her décolletage, for him, too, all those years ago? Was Peter, perhaps, a *worthier* suitor, even...? But after a moment Madame dismissed the thought and Boney turned onto his back as she tickled his stomach.

"Cher Boney!" She knelt and kissed the dog. He didn't look too bad, today. He still passed for a real dog. But the little robot was getting old. The early experimental models, like him, were so much less flexible than *Wraiths* like her. And Boney's AI was hard-wired into his body. His firmware soldered into the very being of his little mechanical body. His mind, his AI, stuck – unable to occupy, to move between, to shape GoldenSands nanobots, as her intelligence could.

But if she could just earn enough before his little mechanical parts wore out then, perhaps, she still had enough time to release her lover from his robotic cage before it was too late? The lover who had opted for the early Chiens du Guerre model, rather than oblivion. A young Frenchman wounded whilst fighting for Europe at the Third Battle of Gibraltar. Her lover of the time who had volunteered in hospital for Belgium Dynamics' experimental intelligent robot programme. The choice had been that or face a slow and painful death from his wounds, after all.

Men! Always fighting. Always jealous! Always chasing illusions. But one day – if she could save enough money – his AI might still just be retrieved. Moved onto a Cloud server so that he could be freed. He, like her, become a *Wraith*. Then, once again, they might be as they once were? They would walk, they could fly; no, they would walk; arm-in-arm along the promenade at the beach at Narbonne. Boney yelped, excited by her thoughts.

But the evening had made her think. What would it really be like? To be reunited? What if it all proved to be a great disappointment?

She, Boney... they were quite happy as they were, now. There was a certain simplicity to their relationship; to the shape of things, to the forms and norms they had adopted. A calmness that had certainly never existed when they had been lovers in body and soul. When they'd been alive.

For a moment, she closed the transmission of thoughts which normally flowed freely between them.

To think how jealous Boney had just been of a man she had never even met! A silly Englishman, whose name, already, she could not be bothered to retrieve from the server archives.

Of course, she had never told Boney of her other admirers. The few men – the many, many women she had always preferred. How would Boney react to them – many of them still alive, if he escaped his current form?

Perhaps there was something to be said for maintaining the *status quo*, after all? The smell of moules et frites came from a restaurant. Food for thought, indeed?

It was still light. There was time to promenade. Time to think, before the evening's next *Client du Mourir*. Time to consider the options, time to consider what might happen in the future...

"Come on, Boney, *on y va...!*"

*

Madame's parting words faded from his hearing and Peter D. Carter felt himself falling. Was he sliding from his chair, onto the café floor... or dropping through the air into the sea? He could not tell. He tried to pat his jacket pocket, one last time, to check for his precious sheet of *PhotoMeme*. But his arm barely moved. And as his life slipped away, his last moments were spent wondering what that evening – indeed what throughout his life – he had imagined, and what had been real...?

(approx. 8535 words)

“Wishing – A Flock of Seagulls’

It's not the way you look
It's not the way that you smile
Although there's something to them
It's not the way you have your hair
It's not that certain style
It could be that with you
If I had a photograph of you
It's something to remind me
I wouldn't spend my life just wishing
It's not the make-up
And it's not the way that you dance
It's not the evening sky
It's more the way your eyes
Are laughing as they glance
Across the great divide
If I had a photograph of you
It's something to remind me
I wouldn't spend my life just wishing

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opkzgLH5MA>

Fantasy Casting Thoughts:

MADAME: Gillian Anderson / Cate Blanchett /
PETER D CARTER: Roger Allam / Steve Carell
BONEY: Yorkshire or Highland Terrier

'The Beach at Narbonne' by Nick Wray

<https://www.lunchwithjasonking.com/contents>

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