Art Grillo

We Do Normandy

I finally say "Normandy" and let my bags drop and let the word hang in our space. Val looks at me. We are standing on the main concourse of the Gare St-Lezare. Parisian train stations have a way of sparking all kinds of drama that might so conveniently be resolved elsewhere.

"Normandy?"

"Yes. Let's go there. Instead of Switzerland. Seriously."

She removes her sunglasses so that she might better study me, this odd traveling partner whom she hardly knows. "Who was the one insisting on no more side trips?"

"Okay. We can blow off Southern Italy."

"You don't want to connect with your roots anymore?"

"Not really. I'm only half-Italian."

"What about Montreux? The jazz festival?"

"I'll buy you some records."

This earns me a laugh, a deep, good-natured laugh that promises her eventual surrender to my whim. The two of us met six months ago in Washington, D.C., at the annual shmooze-fest of the Modern Language Association. Let me describe Val: voluptuous, five-foot-three, dark hair cut in what apparently is known as a "Julia Roberts bob," and very dark eyes—orbs, if you will. To me these orbs are windows to a wise, generous, and sexually dominant soul. She is assistant professor of English at a small university in California, an avid golfer, a native of Brooklyn. "The baddest and horniest Foucauldian in town," according to one of her more erotic emails. Mainly we've communicated through cyberspace or on the telephone. It was her idea to "do some damage on the Continent together." We drew up a three-week itinerary, we bought

EuroRail passes. It would be your basic European lark by two relative strangers. Despite all the excitement, I knew the trip would be a test for me—a bachelor without a track record of long relationships. Twenty-one days spent constantly or near-constantly in the company of the same woman would be a personal best.

"The Norman countryside is beautiful," I say. "Quaint stone farmhouses. Cows. Hedgerows. There's even something called the Omaha Beach Golf Club. You'll be able to work on your game." The irony is I never suggested Normandy during our heady days of planning; now I am beckoned irresistibly by the sea and the beaches and the echoes of GI heroism, all chronicled by historian Stephen Ambrose, whose over-the-top tome about D-Day I picked up at the Brentano's on Avenue de la Opera. Being in Normandy will cure the malaise that is traveling with me, a malaise that grew especially uncompanionable last night in our hotel room as Val and I lay in a dead zone of failed intercourse. Normandy will ease my jet lag and my constipation and my performance anxiety. Maybe it even will distract me from this odd tendency of mine to imagine my father burning his tongue on hot soup whenever I am at the climax of lovemaking. I'm not making this up. I'll be having intercourse with Val, and I'll be picturing Dad as he was at the dinner table, raising his spoon, his face already red, his eyebrows arched absurdly high on his forehead, a look of terror in his eyes just before his tongue touches the broth that he has insisted Mom serve piping hot, always hot, hotter, hottest, so he could renew this pointless painful ritual of his.

We gather up our bags.

"It'll be fun," Val says.

"I'll be able to relax," I say.

Bayeux, liberated by the British early in June, 1994, is a town that begs the adjective "charming," if for no other reasons than the natives are friendlier than Parisians and everything is less expensive. Bakeries and delis and sidewalk cafes line the main commercial boulevard, with flags of the world strung between the buildings. A banner reading, "Welcome to Our Liberators" greets you at the cash machine. There is a towering cathedral from the eleventh century and hordes of German tourists. Our hotel is at the edge of the lawn surrounding the Musée Memorial de la Bataille De Normandie. On our first morning in Normandy, as Val finishes her free-room-service coffee and croissant, I

stand at our window and gaze down at a Sherman tank.

She asks, "Your father wasn't at D-Day? Was he?"

"No. He was a bomber mechanic. He was never in combat himself." My words drift down to an imaginary audience of French citizens collected on the lawn. "He never even made it to Europe."

"Was that an issue for him?"

"Not being in Europe?"

"Right. And perhaps not being in combat."

"I don't know. No. He never said it was. He had plenty of other issues to deal with." For instance, alcoholism. Career frustration. Guilt. He went through life with a lot of guilt from defying his mother by marrying a Protestant girl, and from whatever other reasons the sons of overbearing ethnic matriarchs have for feeling guilty.

Val comes up behind me and slips her arms around my ribcage and nuzzles the nape of my neck. Then she tightens her grip and actually lifts me a few inches off the ground.

She leads me over to the bed. Undoes my belt buckle. We kiss. The malaise overtakes me again, that jet-lagged, constipated, burnt-tongue feeling.

"Are you glad we came to Normandy? Are you relaxing?"

"Yes. Let's take a bus trip."

A van trip, to be precise. There are five of us—me, Val, a fortyish couple from Wisconsin, and the driver, a twentysomething Englishwoman named Fiona who says "bloody weather" as drizzle collects on the windshield. Her dialect will rub off on me, an anglophile. Val considers the Brits repressed and passive-aggressive and snotty. I say they were heroes for fighting off the Luftwaffe. When Fiona stops for petrol, we chat with the Wisconsin couple, who happen to be schoolteachers. They are both wearing purple T-shirts with a little smiley-face and the word, "Summerfest"—some kind of annual Milwaukee concert and beer-blowout.

At Pointe-du-Hoc, we go strolling out to a grassy bluff overlooking the English Channel. The barrel of a cannon protrudes from under the ruins of a concrete fortification. Children frolic in the wide craters made by naval guns. Val and I sit together on the roof of a bunker, staring out at the sea. I'm imagining a destroyer emerging from the mist. She's maybe thinking sex, which is maybe what I too should be thinking, I mean, she is a reasonably attractive woman and we are together in France,

and what we're doing traipsing through the battlefields of Normandy is really an extended form of foreplay, as even your typist with his malaise and his Ambrose text realizes.

"Come inside," she says.

"No."

"You're getting wet."

"If the Rangers can scale a cliff in the face of machine gun fire, I can get wet."

"You're nuts, you know that? You're absolutely nuts." She laughs, as if she's still amused. As if she thinks I'm still on the right side of the line separating delightfully eccentric and deeply troubled.

As Val goes inside, I take out Ambrose and peer at a photograph of my exact location. When I look up, a boy of maybe five years is standing before me in a New York Yankees cap.

"Bloody weather, eh son?"

No response. Is he thinking eccentric? Or crazy?

I read to him:

> At dawn the men of the 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions were scattered in small pockets. Few men knew where they were. The groups were usually mixed, containing men from different companies, battalions, regiments, and even divisions, strangers to the leaders who were trying to get them to move on objectives to which they had not been assigned and for which they had not been briefed.
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> Lt. James Coyle was with a battalion that took possession of the quiet little village Ste.-Mere-Eglise. A Frenchman came out of his house to talk. He spoke little or no English and Coyle spoke but a little French, but the lieutenant understood him well enough to sense his concern: He wanted to know if this was a raid or if it was the invasion.
>
> Coyle reassured him. "*Nous restons ici*," Coyle said. "We are staying here."

The boy smiles at me. We are determined to brave the elements. After all, what if we were pinned down in a foxhole and it started to rain? What could we do except get wet? *What if America were at war?* my father would say when I complained about getting wet during my paper route. *What if you were in the Army? What if things were* really *tough?*

Then he would tell one of his stories, and I would act bored and disdainful. Not being in combat was an issue only for *me*. As you know, he had plenty of his own. He was neurotic. "A worry-wort," Mom called him. They seemed not to have the best marriage. It was difficult to imagine their having sex. They would never kiss. I mean really *kiss*.

I raise my hand, and the boy and I give each other a high-five.

"We are staying here!"

The boy's mother arrives.

"Komm her, Franz!" she says.

The rain stops by the time we reach the American cemetery at Omaha Beach, where we wander past rows and rows of white crosses and scattered stars of David and thick wet grass. The stillness seems to conjure up images of battle courtesy of Stephen Ambrose: mortar shells raining down onto exposed Higgins boats, tanks sinking in too-deep water, GIs swimming and wading and staggering ashore like shipwreck victims. Many lost their rifles and helmets in the churning sea, and had to borrow these basics from their dead comrades on the beach.

My eyes moisten. Across the grounds, the schoolteacher husband blows his nose. At the edge of one row, a general is buried next to a private.

"You can't beat America," as Dad would say.

Val and I slip our arms around each other. It occurs to me that I've never visited his grave. Ten years and I've never done that. I don't do graves, except for in places like this. Tourist cemeteries.

"He was never in combat."

Val smiles. There is an ineffable beauty in her smile, a sense of all-knowing, all-powerful femininity that makes me feel like a putz for having rebuffed her advances this morning. "From what you tell me about him, I think he was."

In the darkened cinema at the Musée du Debarquement she cuddles next to me, and later we sit in the van and kiss while Fiona shoots the breeze in French with one of the museum people and the schoolteachers wait in line at the souvenir store. Back in Bayeux, as Val and the schoolteacher wife exchange addresses, the husband asks me how long we are staying in Normandy.

"As long as it takes."

We have sex. Try to have sex. I mean intercourse. As things turn out, I can't get it up. I almost get it up. I get very close.

"It's these bloody condoms that are the problem."

"Oh, please!"

"Condoms were issued by the millions in the days preceding D-Day. The soldiers put them over the muzzles of their rifles to keep out sand and water. They would not have to be removed before firing."

We lie together, spoon-style, with Val behind me.

She says it doesn't matter. "I just like being with you. I like how you touch me." Sure. There is in fact ample evidence that she wants me inside her, that having me inside her will make a qualitative difference in her overall enjoyment of the experience. She has said this during phone sex. On email, too. Her exact words are back home, in my inbox. *I can feel you inside me already, filling me, making me swell, making me hot and wet and whole.* This happens to be the language of someone raised a strict Catholic, someone who is now very lapsed (as my father was), and yet who retains the earthiness of Catholicism, at least as viewed by a Protestant. Where am I going with all this religious stuff? I'm merely telling you that Val's earthy email rap both titillates and scares me. It makes me crave the safe maternal realm of my very Protestant mother, which in terms of sexual performance means I find myself playing the part of the girl. The girl who doesn't want to fuck.

"What if I *had* to do it? What if we were the only two people left on Earth after World War III? What if the human race depended on our making a baby?"

Val sighs. It's not like Val to sigh. Sighing means she is drifting away, thinking about going home, preparing her fall syllabi, applying for Sept. 1 deadline grants. "Then I'm sure you would perform magnificently, dear."

Dawn. The cloud cover has lifted, and a line of trees are casting long shadows over the Sherman tank. Val asks me what we're going to do.

"I know what *I'm* going to do. *I'm* going to take the train to Cherbourg, and then rent a car and drive around the Cotentin Peninsula, retracing the steps of 82nd Airborne and the 101st. That's what I'm going to do."

Her eyes flash daggers. We're way beyond sighing.

"You and your hard-on for war."

I shrug. "What are *you* going to do?"

"Who knows? Play golf! I'll have to try renting a set of lefthanded clubs, for Chrissake!"

"I'm sorry."

My plans are thwarted when I miss the train to Cherbourg. So instead I spend hours in the Musée de la Tapisserie with its celebrated hundred-meter-long hand-woven take on William the Conqueror's own personal D-Day back in 1066. Same concept, except the boats had sails and they traveled in the other direction. After the tapestry, your typist does the cathedral and does a ceramics museum and then walks around munching on a baguette. Dinner is beef bourguignon and cider at a sidewalk place. At the next table sits an elderly American couple. The man is small and grinning, with an oversized bald head, a putty face, thick glasses and a handful of French phrases he uses to flirt with the waitress. His wife reminds me of Margaret Dumont. The man and I get to talking. His name is Al, and—wouldjabelieveit?—he turns out to have been with the 101st.

Showering him with the kind of rapt attention that you-know-who never got, I sit nodding and oh-my-goshing as Al spins a succession of service yarns, including the one about "Cowboy," who was this big tough guy from Texas, the best guy in airborne school until it came time for the first practice jump, whereupon Cowboy panicked right at the head of the line of guys waiting to jump from the plane, he got all stiff and pale, he clutched the sides of the doorway with all his strength, and the jumpmaster tried to coax and threaten and push and kick him from the plane, all to no avail, and Cowboy was washed out of the airborne, disgraced.

"You never know about guys," Al says. "They can start out like world-beaters and then completely choke. Something in them freezes. There's no explanation for who it will happen to or why."

In D-Day, we have what is known as a historical event. Let me explain what happened on D-Day. In the early morning hours of June 6, 1944, after months and months of planning and training, months of arguing about when and where to invade and whether to do it at high or low tide, months of inventing and manufacturing various gadgets of mobility and death, and stockpiling ammo and cigarettes, and months of reconnaissance flights and espionage and code-breaking and fabricating a fake invasion to the north, the Allies launched an armada of some 2,700 ships of varying size and speed toward the same country where the British had been Dunkirked four years previous. These vessels were filled with what are sometimes affectionately referred to as "boys." Most of the American boys had never been in combat. Few had ever fired a

shot in anger or seen a man killed. Yet the historical event in which they were wrapped required them to be warriors, and so upon landing on the foreign shore the American boys sought out German boys and killed the German boys by shooting them, slitting their throats, throwing grenades into their tanks and flames into their pillboxes. The American boys perpetrated the kind of mischief that Tom Sawyer's gang only talked about. Despite some casualties—4,900 Allied troops killed, wounded and missing on this single day that historians and movie producers would call the longest—it all ended happily, and the hated Nazis were destroyed, and the American boys who survived became peaceful again, got themselves college degrees, wives, became husbands and fathers and commuters on the Long Island Railroad, spent their weekends mowing the lawn and playing golf and telling stories.

Maybe I'm oversimplifying, maybe I'm lapsing into jingoism, maybe my critical abilities are going south and my sensibilities are rotting in the sun, but D-Day was just awesome. What's more, it all happened a mere fifty-some years ago. The historical event still hangs in the air. The whole war does. The war lives in people's memories, and in movies and books and old songs, and in the comic books you read as a kid and the television programs you watched. Being a baby boomer means you live in a postwar era, pure and simple. There is the war, and then there is you. There is a big bang, and then there is you. There is a mountain of history, and then there is you, trying to crawl up the mountain face. It doesn't matter that your father wasn't in combat. He served his country well, he was in on a once-in-a-lifetime war, a good war. So what if the rest of his life was anticlimactic? There are some historical events you just can't top.

Okay. You're a baby boomer and you find yourself in Europe, a place where your father (no combat experience) never made it to, and you come upon the Mother of All Historical Events, an Armageddon of sorts, and you feel the weight of the past like never before, you feel its flesh and blood, its bones, its arms and legs and eyes and mouth and genitals. What do you do? Do you drive around, see a few sights, take a few pictures, buy a few souvenirs, eat a baguette and say, "Well, that was nice, now let's go to some other country and see other Historical Events, let's see a few Roman ruins, let's see where Leonardo da Vinci lived, let's see where Michelangelo hung out!"? Is that what you do? Is that really an adequate response to the first country's Historical Event? Course not! What you do—and never mind what the woman wants—is drop

your bags and stay. You walk the streets, you strike up conversations with strangers, you observe, you stay alert, stay awake, you read, taste, feel, improvise, engage, and mainly you *stay*. And after the sun has set and the day is won and the beach is strangely quiet, you drop to your hands and knees and wait there for History to have its way with you. You are naked—the force of History has done that. You are defenseless too, and tense and expectant and hopeful, and you wait and wait until finally History comes up behind you and violates you. You feel History hard and fast, slipping in and out as you cry. Painful as it is, you will learn to like it.

The above, more or less, is what I tell Val in the morning as she packs.

"I appreciate your weight," she says. "I'm still leaving."

I'm waiting with Val for her train and watching our taxi return to town, the driver's head growing smaller and smaller until it and the taxi are lost behind a curve in the road. As a toddler I would watch my father drive off to work in the morning and feel sorry for him because he couldn't be with me and Mom all day, and I would feel sorry for myself because I wasn't with him. It is difficult to imagine him at D-Day. He would have thrown up over the side of the landing craft (but then again, who didn't?). He would have been struck cold with fear as he splashed into the surf—(but who wasn't?). He would rather have been with his Mommy (but who wouldn't have?).

Val is watching me, sensing something. We each take a step forward and embrace. I really ought to be a man about this and follow her through Europe. Why be stuck up like my Protestant mom? And why always be picturing my father burning his tongue?

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. There's nothing to be sorry about."

"It's the weight of history, and all that. It's standing between us. I thought coming up here would be liberating, and in a sense it has been. There's just too much to process, too much to sort out. I'm being stimulated beyond my comfort zone. I'm being overwhelmed, flooded. Raped."

The train comes. We hug and kiss and wish each other safe journeys. She hoists her bags and boards the train.

Maybe he would have been okay in combat.

Art Grillo lives in San Francisco and teaches at Skyline College in San Bruno, California. His fiction appeared recently in *Salt Hill* and in *The Student Body: Short Stories about College Students and Professors* (University of Wisconsin Press). He can be reached at agrillo@email.sjsu.edu.