

Sonshine

Plop.

“Sir, are you a fool?”

“Fools are but unappreciated geniuses.”

Plop, plop.

“Call it an occupational habit, but you could have gotten a three zone ticket with that, plus a little extra.”

“You’ll never know dear....”

Jacques Motine continues staring in a state of shock as the bizarre, old, and thin bearded man takes out quarter after quarter from a tiny black film canister. One by one he takes the coins and tosses them off the pier, all the while humming an inaudible tune. Taking out one last coin, the old man flicks it up into the air, catches it on the backside of his hand, and then lets it slowly slide into the ocean.

“I call myself Monsieur Maureen Ramace, nice to meet you”, says the old man turning around. With a youthful grin he adds, “You better watch it or you might catch a cold!”

Dumbfounded, Jacques looks down at his four layers of long-sleeved nylon, fleece, vest, and North Face jacket before realizing Maureen’s sarcasm.

“Um...I’m a careful man.”

“Perhaps another occupational habit?” replies Maureen, still with his grin. “I’m a photographer, so my habit is that I divide most everything I see into thirds... which is why I love this country’s flag so much.”

Nodding but not agreeing, Jacques hastily bids farewell and mingles back into the crowds of the pier. He seems to recall hearing the old man singing something about grey skies. Odd...for the sun is shining three fists above the horizon. Fool, if he ever saw one. Roughly estimating, he guesses Monsieur Ramace dumped about 3,50 £ into the ocean.

16:57 o’clock the next day, Jacques arrives on time as usual at the pier side train and bus station. He wipes his golden nametag with his pocket-handkerchief as passengers leave the bus, eager to see the ocean. His nametag read: ‘M. Jacques Motine’, with the word ‘Owner’ carved clearly in black directly beneath it.

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Turning his head quickly, Jacques sees Maureen slowly lowering his camera from his face. Maureen is wearing a backpack with a badge of the French flag proudly sewn upon each of the shoulder straps. On the backpack itself, is an array of pins from all over the world. Jerusalem, Lima, Athens, Minsk, Kyoto, Phuket, and New York are just a few of the more prominent ones. Behind him, the sounds of the hustle and bustle of a beach pour into his now attentive ears.

“3,50 £ for a three zone ticket you say?”

“Um...sure”

"Thank you. Thank you for the picture as well, the moment was perfect."

After dropping the coins into the box, Maureen finds a spot to sit down. The lazy afternoon rays of sun are seeping through the thinly tinted bus windows and onto the dull-shaded blue cushioned seats. A hazy, musty aura, peppered with an entropy of nearly translucent dust particles, swirls from the current of air created by Maureen's movements.

"You do know this route is a loop right? That we'll just end up right back here again?" Jacques informs his solitary traveler.

"I'll return to the same spot, yes, but I'll return a different man."

Right. That's what we all like to hope is it not? Jacques thinks to himself as he yanks the lever towards him, closing the bus doors, shutting out the sounds of the beach as well. A sense of satisfaction passes through Jacques as he shifts into drive, a sense of control over his direction and surroundings. He has lost count of how many times in his life he has traveled this same route, how many years of his life spent sticking to the main roads, following road signs, and never deviating from the norm. Then again, it is not his fault that wife had left him 4 years ago, leaving behind two children. No more getting on his Harley and just riding without direction. By the time the younger child is a teenager and no longer requiring his constant attention, the older needs to go off to college, and after the younger reaches college time, he will have to retire on what little money he has saved.

As soon as Jacques turns out from the train station, Maureen pushes the button to get off.

"Monsieur Ramace, your three zone ticket ensures you an entire round trip... are you sure you want to get off at the first stop?"

"Don't you see that young alto-saxophone player over there? He's playing *Song for my Father*, I can hear it all the way from here", responds an excited Maureen.

Glancing over, Jacques momentarily catches the glimmer of golden brass reflect into his eyes, and the silhouetted figure of a short boy yearning the bell of his saxophone towards the cloudless sky.

"Do you want to come with me?"

"Pardon me, but can't you see I'm driving?" Jacques blurts out.

"Pardon me, but I can see you are the owner of this tourist bus, thus you can do whatever you want. Come on, just for once, go somewhere your heart wants to lead you. There are no other passengers, and it is getting late, so it is unlikely there will be any more", Maureen explains. In seeing the dilemma in Jacques' eyes, he adds with a smile, "I did pay a little extra for this ride, didn't I?"

At that, Jacques found no alternative but to make a turn into the east end parking lot of the beach, where the young man still stood, playing his heart out.

"Five minutes..." Jacques quietly mumbles as he opens the doors. Maureen quickly strides off the bus and towards the jazz musician, while he himself stays behind to close all the windows, to make sure there are no graffiti, and that the emergency exit stickers and advertisements have not been picked at by bored passengers. *Occupational habit*, he thinks to himself.

Finally assured that he can temporarily leave the bus, he walks up to where Maureen is crouching, taking a picture of the saxophone player with his saxophone mouthpiece just barely blocking the sun, so as to produce a perfect silhouette effect in the area where his mouth meets the reed.

"Listen to the jumping rhythms," says Maureen with his eyes closed and camera lowered, "Horace Silver balances them with such sophisticated complex harmonies don't you think?"

"May I ask why you like this song so much?"

"Reminds me of my son."

"And where is your son right now?"

"He's traveling the world."

It is then that Jacques senses a brief change in Maureen's ambiance, from the quick-witted man to a sentimental being. Opening his eyes, Maureen takes out his film canister, dumps 14 quarters into the young man's saxophone case, and silently, he strides back to the bus, with Jacques following him.

All the way back to the train station, Maureen does not say another word, merely staring out at the ocean, and again singing softly to himself something about grey skies. This time though, Jacques does not think of him as a fool, and pressing his lips together, he exhales a slight breath before starting up the engine to the bus, and pulling back onto the main road.

The next morning bore a dense fog that immersed the pier, making it look like a path that slowly dissipates as it grows into the distance. Being slightly earlier than usual, Jacques stops in by the tiny coffee shop by the head of the pier.

"Good morning Monsieur Motine!" says the cheery plump man behind the counter.

"Good morning to you too Etienne. I must be your first customer for today am I not?" asks Jacques as he grabs his coffee, ready to head out the door.

"Not today Monsieur, another soul beat you in here this grey-skied morning. An old photographer by the looks of it... seemed like an amiable person."

Stopping in his tracks, Jacques turns around and asks, "Monsieur Ramace?"

"Well I never caught his name," replies Etienne, "but he bought some black and white film, two rolls actually, and a pin to add to his, I must say, amazing collection. I asked him where he was headed, and he said he was going to the cemetery since today is the anniversary of his son's death. Funny how on such a day, he still passed off as amiable, wouldn't you say?"

Back behind the wheel, the lights in front of his bus makes two misty circles on a canvass of grey fog. As he drives along his usual route, he sees Maureen walking along the side of the road, with his usual backpack and camera. He stops slightly ahead of him, and waits for him to catch up.

"Need a lift somewhere?"

"I thought you had a set route."

"No one rides this early. Hop on. You don't need to pay."

"Why thank you, and to think I took you for a careful man, one of rules and schedules", says Maureen while taking a seat.

"The man at the coffee shop said your son was dead," Jacques says, ignoring the old man's previous assertions. "You told me he was traveling the world."

"He *is* traveling the world. I will show him to you... will you please drive me to the cemetery?" asks Maureen.

Never believing in ghosts, Jacques doesn't think Maureen will introduce him to a spirit who has been floating around the globe, yet his curiosity pursues him forth. When they arrive and Jacques turns off the engine, he again becomes aware of the dense fog, settling itself around the bus and its surroundings. Maureen motions him to follow, and together they walk briskly down a soft dirt path and into a clearing, where row upon row of white tombstones and crosses stood waiting at attention. Stopping at one that read 'Aumur Ramace' Maureen takes off his backpack, and sets it down beside the grave. He sits down on the grass and reaches into his backpack and takes out a thick photo album, with the title across it that read 'Sonshine'.

"You see, my son does travel the world, since to me, he is everywhere I look, he is every sound I hear, and every breath that I take. To me, he *is* the world."

Jacques slowly takes the photo album from Maureen like he would a tender sleeping kitten, and setting himself beside Maureen, begins to flip through the pages. Starting from the first page, Jacques sees images of bright golden suns, reflected upon railway tracks in Minsk. There is Mount Fuji at sunset, with the sun reflected in one of the five surrounding lakes. There is a golden retriever, running along the street in front of the Coliseum. There is a blond haired girl, playing the violin on Ellis Island. Photo after photo of golden images from all over the world are all contained in this one hardbound album. Suddenly realizing something, Jacques takes a closer glance at the pictures. The pictures are all in black and white.

"*You make me happy, when skies are grey*", Maureen sings with a smile on his face.

"I will never forget when we used to take a walk every evening, then head to a small café for two of the best drinks in the house at 1,75 £ each. Sure, it cost much, but was it ever worth it..." says Maureen as he takes out his film canister and places it on the tombstone. "You know, I was once much like you Jacques, traveled the same routes day in and day out, keeping to the same routine with the belief that it cannot work any other way. My son always spoke of traveling the world, and seeing different cultures, but I never encouraged him to step off course. He could have been an amazing musician you know, and I made myself believe there was only one way to achieve that."

Jacques listens with his mouth open, yet with no intent to speak. The fact that this global traveler could have once been a rigid person, whose life was regulated not by his own hands, but by the hands on his watch, just hits him as a shock.

"Just before he died I promised him I'd take the adventures that we never went on, that I'd go see the things that he only saw in his dreams. Though the world be a duller shade now that he is gone, things that remind me of him brighten up the world again, makes gold of grey, sunshine of even a foggy day as today", Maureen explains as he points to the black and white photos. Suddenly remembering that he has a bus to drive, Jacques gets up to leave. After saying his farewell, he turns to leave only to hear Maureen call out his name.

"Remember Jacques, take the paths that your heart point towards, for it is the compass of your soul. Be not afraid to take adventures, and don't let apparent obstacles get in the way. Just think: Would you wait until all the lights turn green before you head out and do your route? The same goes for life. Just take it as it comes...though it's probably not good to think so much about driving. It might become an occupational habit after awhile..."

Smiling, Jacques nods in agreement and heads back towards his bus. Along that same path that he came in, he now walks back a different man. Off in the distance, he hears Maureen singing:

"You are my sunshine,

*My only sunshine,
You make me happy, when skies are grey...
You'll never know dear,
How much I love you,
So please don't take, my sunshine away."*

Back at the train station, after the days work, Jacques takes a stroll on the pier. From his pockets he takes out the change he had from the coffee he bought that morning and looks at its shiny luster, sitting soundly in his hand.

Could I travel the world again? Ride without direction? Or couldn't I? Jacques contemplates tossing a coin up to decide, as he has seen Maureen do that first day he met him here. Heads, I go travel, tails I keep the life style I have now.

As the coin sails up into the air, and back down onto the back of his hand, Jacques just smiles, and slowly, he too lets it slip into the water without looking at it. For it is not the flipping of the coin that decides, it is the fact that the instant the coin was in the air, he knew exactly what he wanted the decision to be.

"Genius", he says aloud, as he strolls back home.