

THE UNFOLDING*

It began almost imperceptibly one misty summer morning, after which my life would never be the same. As I sat in my kitchen drinking a cup of tea, I happened to look out my window in the direction of the lake, and I noticed that there wasn't the usual group of trailers and motor-boats we would normally get at this time of the year in Saint Abitpagus. This struck me as somewhat strange. The lake seemed to just lie there, like stretched aluminum foil, unmoving. This started me thinking that over the last dozen years or so we hadn't been getting the typical gaggle of tourists from Montreal, Quebec City, and even from South of the border. Was this a trend? If so, my business would suffer indeed.

You see, I run a bed-and-breakfast from my home. This structure was built about eighty years ago, and was the home of my parents, both now departed. I also derive some income from my woodcraft—an art that I picked up from my late uncle. I fashion religious images of the saints and the Virgin from the local ash and maple forest, to sell to the pilgrims.

Oh, I forgot to tell you: In the old days there used to be hundreds upon hundreds of pilgrims passing through our town to visit the church of Saint Abitpagus, which was built at the end of the 18th century. This lovely chapel—run by the Order of the Sisters of Final Union—was a legendary attraction for many Catholics from all over the world, especially in the summer when the sisters organized the magnificent processions and the Exposition of the Host, with all the pomp and glitter of a pagan carnival. The Americans in particular were famous for purchasing tons of souvenirs (silver medallions, reliquaries, plaster statuettes, rosaries made from local soapstone, etc.) This was great for the economy of our little town, stuck out of the way, miles from any major highway. Of course, Saint Abitpagus also boasted a local fishery, and some revenues trickled in from the logging and agriculture, but it was really the sanctuary of Saint Abitpagus that kept us alive. Not that I was ever very much of a practicing Catholic, mind you. You rarely saw me in church except for Christmas and Easter.

Anyway, I was looking out my kitchen window and was struck by the stillness. Where had everybody gone? It was truly puzzling. After all, summers in Quebec are very short. Some years we don't even get any summer to speak of. The locals make it a habit of trucking down to the lake, and start sailing or swimming as soon as the black fly season is over. You could hear their kids splashing and laughing all the way across town. Not today, though.

So, as soon as I finished my cup of tea, I decided to take a walk to the town square to visit the Saint Abitpagus "Tourist Office" to talk to Jean-Guy. I knew he opened early; and he was always nice enough to let me place some fliers about my business on the bulletin board. This morning he was out on the front porch trying to catch a tan. I greeted him the usual way:

- "Good day to you, Jean Guy, how's it going this fine day?" – I said,
- "What's so good about it?... 'stie!" –he replied,
- "Well, you're in a mood! What way is that to treat your best customer?"
- "Oh, forget it, my friend, it's just...what's wrong with this town?"
- "Few fish are biting?" –I joked,
- "I haven't seen a tourist coming through these doors for more than a year. Things keep up like this I'm gonna have to close up and send the charter back to Quebec City.

They've been cutting back on my subsidies for years now. Pretty soon they'll send some *'stie de bureaucrat* to check me out, and I'm poutine!"

– Can't you call our local MNA? Maybe he can lobby for your store there."

– "Gaspard" –that's my name, by the way– "Gaspard, under what rock have you been hiding?! We haven't had an MNA representing this town since the last election. Don't you remember? He ran as an independent with nobody from the other parties cared enough to run against him...Monsieur Oubliette...Hah!! That guy left town shortly after the election... he only got 124 votes anyway... and nobody's seen or heard of him since. Our MNA! We might as well have a chicken sitting at the National Assembly!...'stie!"

– "I see... Well, what about the Church? Maybe you could get a concession to sell their souvenirs or guide the pilgrims or..."

– "What damn pilgrims, Gaspard? When was the last time you saw a group of tourists going up the steps of the church? And that Mother Agnès that runs the convent, she's half way to the grave by now. Nobody's seen her since she had her last fit. They say she's in a comma locked up in her room. Naw, no sense in even trying."

– "What about the bishop?" ... Jean Guy hesitated a moment.

– "I could try, I guess...I'm going over to the post office to collect my mail anyway. Maybe I'll try to ring him up from there."

– Your phone here not working?"

– "It's been out of order since last week. Dead as road-kill, 'stie..."

– "Mine too!...Weird... Maybe I'll go with you. I got to see my dear Émilie there anyway."

Émilie was my sweetheart. We had been seeing each other on and off for some time now. She was a young widow with no children, and she worked at the local post office, which also served as our only drugstore and cafeteria. She was not pretty, but she had a lively disposition and could cook up a storm. We had explored the idea of marriage but neither of us was too excited by it, and we had settled into a comfortable arrangement. So Jean-Guy and I headed for the center of town.

The town of Saint Abitpagus was really quite small; and the town centre was just a square with some benches and a small fountain –which had stopped running years ago. The main buildings faced the square: the church itself, the courthouse-cum-police station, the schoolhouse and the post office. Some other small stores were to be found on the side streets from the town square, especially those catering to tourists, on the north side of the church –though most of the trashy souvenirs there were the fake stuff mass-produced in Taiwan and South Korea. The convent was built behind the church –a three-story affair built in the early part of the 20th century to house the nuns –which at that time numbered in the hundreds.

That morning the town was eerily quiet. Jean-Guy and I walked slowly up the hill, and hardly spoke a word. I suppose that we were both a little spooked by the silence and the boarded-up houses along the way.

–"I hadn't noticed how many houses are vacant in town." –I said

–"Economy not too good these days, I guess. Lot of young couples moving out to the cities." –he retorted casually.

Beyond the fringes of the town the mist had lifted somewhat, yet the farthest cottages were kind of... blurred, their earth colours seeming to blend with the grayish-brown of the hillside.

We entered the post office around 10 o'clock, and Jean-Guy headed for the mail counter while I spotted Émilie serving at the cafeteria. There were no other customers beside us. Émilie did not seem too happy to see me, though I assumed she would have found me a welcome sight in such a desolate store. She was wiping the counter with a rag. We spoke briefly and I invited her to my place for later. Émilie appeared non-committal and bored. She said she wasn't feeling "all there" and begged for a rain check. I said sure, and ordered a toast and a coffee.

Afterwards, I sidled over to the mail counter to see what Jean-Guy was up to. He was baffled:

–“They say they are re-routing the mail to the south! The post office is closing down permanently. Can you believe this?...’stie!”–he said, spitting on the dusty floor –“First it was no door-to-door mail delivery, then it was the damn boxes once a week only, and now this!”

–“What the hell are we gonna do for mail?”

–“Call up Ottawa and complain.”– he said. – “Not that it matters anyway. I haven't received any mail in over five years.”

He asked the mail-clerk behind the counter –Robert– if he could use the phone. Robert turned around from sweeping the dusty pigeonholes with a small broom.

– “Phones are down. They're down all over town.”

– “Then how the hell am I gonna call the bishop or Ottawa?”– Jean-Guy cried,

– “I dunno...Maybe go down the road to the highway and flag a ride to the train station.”

– “Tabarnac!, this is ridiculous! Is nothing working in this town?”

– “Sorry. I'm leaving soon myself. Try to find a job in Montreal.”

– “Yeah...Thanks anyway, Robert...”

When we left the post office, Jean-Guy and I decided to split off: he went reluctantly down the old road as Robert suggested, and I headed for the church to see if I could talk to Father Dépéri, the parish priest. He was a thin old skeleton of a man with a sparse comb-over of silvery hair. Usually at that time he would be getting the paraphernalia ready for the noontime mass: the wine, chalice, vestments, etc.

Father Dépéri was surprised to see me. As I said before, I'm not an habitué.

– “Good morning, Father.”

– “Good day to you, my son. What brings you to the house of the Lord?”

– “Father...a lot of strange things have been happening lately, and I was wondering if you could help me...”

– “What kind of strange things, my son?”

– “Well...for one thing, the phones are no longer working anywhere in town, and the post office is closing soon,...and the town seems strangely quiet. Do you know what's going on? Is there an evacuation notice that I'm not aware of?”

– “Not that I know of. I have noticed a dearth of pilgrims lately, though. But you know,

the Lord, as they say, works in mysterious ways... Maybe there is some supernatural agency at work here... some sign from above..."—his eyes became misty.

– “Have you any news about Mother Agnès, father?”

– “Funny you should mention it: it seems she has...vanished.”

– “Vanished!?”

– “Yes...last night one of the nuns went to her room to tend to her needs and...there was nobody there. The nuns say she may have ascended to heaven to be with her beloved Saviour.”

I didn't comment on that, seeing as I thought Jesus might not welcome such an homely addition to His harem. I kept my thoughts to myself, thanked him, and left the church more intrigued than ever.

On the way out, I bumped into a stranger who seemed lost, holding a map in his hand. Feeling like the Good Samaritan, I walked up to him and asked if I could be of some help. He looked at me with a quizzical expression in his eyes and said: –“Where am I?”

–“You're in the town square of Saint Abitpagus. What street are you looking for?”

–“Saint...what?...Your town is not on the map.”—he blurted out.

–“What do you mean?”

–“You're not on the map. I took a wrong turn back there on the highway and ended up here, but I can't find this place on the roadmap.”

–“Let me see...”

He let me see the map of the region. Indeed, it showed the turn-off point from the highway and the old road that climbed up to our little town, but there was no indication of the town itself! I took out my pocket magnifying glass and looked closely at the area where the town should have normally appeared. I had to unfold the map twice to do so, as the place where Saint Abitpagus should have been was apparently printed right on one of the cross-point of the vertical and horizontal folds of the map. And search as I might, I could not find our town. No road. No town. I mentioned this to him, which he took as a valid explanation, thanking me and asking for directions out of town. I asked him if I could see the roadmap one more time. It was a fairly recent edition dating back just a few years. I had never seen this version of the map. I checked the printer's name, address, and phone number for later reference. The map was printed in Michigan by the AAA; and it bore ads for a Japanese car manufacturer.

After the stranger drove away, I walked back to the post office. I was curious. Were all the maps like the one he showed me? Were there any old maps that I could find to compare? No wonder that the tourists weren't coming: they could not find us on the map!

The post-office had some old roadmaps sitting on dusty bookshelves next to my fliers and other town brochures. I picked up one of the maps and checked to see if our town was depicted. And there it was: right on the fold-corner. The paper it was printed on was very cheap and yellowing fast. I checked the date of printing: 1957. The original printer, though, was a Canadian company based in an Ontario town called Limes; and there were ads for Avro—the aircraft manufacturer—and for the Packard automobile. Everything else was where it should be: the highway, the lake, the nearby towns, and Saint Abitpagus. Right on the corner fold.

When I turned around, I noticed that Robert was gone. The post office counter had been boarded up. I looked towards the cafeteria area. It was empty. No food displays. No stools or tables. Nothing. Where was Émilie?

A chill ran down my spine as I started wandering all over town. My intention was to see if I could find any other copies of the original roadmap. I knew that the “Tourist Office” would be closed, as Jean-Guy had headed for the highway, so I didn’t bother going there. I felt tired and hungry. I walked into every store I could find along the side streets. Most were closed and boarded-up as if in preparation for an impending tornado. I kept walking up and down as in a daze. One small grocery store was open but did not have copies of the map. The owner looked at me as if I was insane –he knew I’d lived in town all my life, why would I need a map?

I walked into the town’s only tavern called “Les Souvenirs” and greeted the bartender Joe Leflétri. The place was deserted.

–“Let me have a beer, Joe.”–I whispered

–“You look a mess, Gaspard, what’s the matter?”

–“This town...It’s all...fading...”

–“Yeah, I know...I’m closing up and getting out before it’s too late.”

–“You too!”

–“Look, what the hell, let’s you and I celebrate. I have an old bottle of Metusalén Rum I bought down in Havana back in 1960. I’ve been keeping it all these years for a special occasion. Might as well do it now, before it too disappears, right?”

He uncorked this splendid vintage rum and we spent the next while (was it one, two,...five hours?) drinking this lovely brew until the bottle was all empty. I think I must have dozed off. When I woke up, Joe was gone and the place was dark and empty. I stumbled out onto the street and started on home in a state of foggy weariness.

A grey mist had risen from the lake and settled on the town. I looked back but could no longer see the town square. The church seemed to fade in and out like a mirage. The bells were tolling for the vespers mass, but it sounded hollow, like pounding on a tank full of petrol. I could no longer see the outlying hills for the fog. On the way home, I did not see a soul. It was warm but no one was sitting on his or her porch. The houses seemed to be empty. The sun was slowly sinking behind me. I wondered where the last few hours had flown.

When I got home I felt hot and gritty but not uncomfortable. I made myself a sandwich from the few remaining items in my fridge. Then I climbed up to the attic to look for the roadmap. After a half-hour or so I finally found one behind some boxes. It was the old 1957 version, and it was so yellow and faded one could hardly read the print on it. When I unfolded it to find Saint Abitpagus I finally understood. The folds on the map were all frayed. It was hard to recognize some landmarks because of the frayed paper along the edges. And there it was. Or rather it wasn’t. You could barely read the “Sa”...and the “...gus.” Saint Abitpagus having been printed on the intersection of two folds, vertical and horizontal, had disappeared completely. Anyone trying to find the town over the years would have seen only a cross-like gash. The roadmap was out of print. The new edition must have been copied from an old version, not printed from a master plate. The Michigan-based company probably could not find the original

master. And so, as the old maps had slowly faded, frayed, blurred and yellowed, so did Saint Abitpagus. Fewer and fewer visitors could find it on any map. Tourists picked other spots. Pilgrims went to other towns with better-known saints. And when the new maps were printed, we were erased, annihilated.

Now perhaps the inhabitants of Saint Abitpagus no longer believe they exist either, so they will also fade away.

The fog has crawled right up to my kitchen window...

I sit here looking out the back porch, expecting Jean-Guy or Émilie to walk in any minute...

...but of course, they are probably gone now too...

...like the frayed and yellowing memories of

who I could possibly have ever been in the town of

*Written in Montreal, Canada by © Pascual Delgado on July 23rd 2002; revised on July 26th 2016.