

## Bain de Soleil

By David Vann

Williams College in Massachusetts. 1985. I arrived in ripped jeans from California. I'd been fire-walking, meditating, learning etheric surgery, hoping to become a mystic. One of my roommates had green slacks with ducks on them. I didn't understand these pants. I never could have guessed their existence in the world. He drove a Saab 900 Turbo, had a computer that was black, with no brand name. He owned new skis and shirts in every shade of pink and blue, and he was not alone.

I tried to have friends, of course. I tried Essica Kimberly, for instance, heiress to the Kimberly-Clark fortune you see on every toilet paper roll holder. She was amused but wasn't biting.

I tried befriending Oregonians, but they were better adjusted. I tried the African-American student group, because they were all bitter about being here, but our bitterness wasn't the same. I tried a suicidal girl named Anne, but she was always disappearing and maybe killing herself.

So as the snows hit, I went down into the basement. We had a large heating unit down there, and it had a very nice hum. I closed my eyes and sang along with this hum, harmonized. I did this for hours.

I also went outside and spun in the snow, especially if there was a moon. I turned in circles as fast as I could, staring up at that moon, sometimes for nearly an hour, until I was so dizzy I no longer felt alone. I hadn't had an alcoholic drink yet, or ever tried drugs, so spinning and the heating unit were as good as it got.

But then finally, in the spring, at a campus showing of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, I made a friend, Jamie. He taught me how to ride the unicycle, and we both moved out to the west coast. I transferred to Stanford and he got into grad school at Berkeley. That next year, we bundled up in my father's old army sleeping bag and rolled down hills behind the Stanford campus, bumping and flying and screaming, perhaps the most fun I've ever had. We unicycled all over Berkeley. We had vegan Chinese food with brown rice and laughed at pants with ducks on them.

And then, in the summer, we flew to France, and this was where everything changed.

Jamie's family in Paris had a daughter, just finishing high school. She shrieked one day. Shrieked right in the hallway and collapsed to the floor. I thought someone had died. But it was only her boyfriend breaking up with her. She screamed and howled all night, unending. I do mean that, at least twelve hours non-stop. She was ready to chew off her own leg. The pain she felt was vicious and animal. She banged her forehead against the floor until her mother held her head back.

I didn't know how to respond, and no one was looking for my response anyway. I was becoming a loner again. Jamie was busy with his family, and I had bronchitis, was sleepy all the time, had no energy. I wanted to play my guitar, but it wasn't allowed in the apartment because of thin walls, was illegal on the street without a permit and, when I sat on

the grass in a park, I found out that was illegal too. So I sat in the bedroom alone and just held it. My arms were around something, at least. I felt a bit pathetic.

I had never studied French, and Jamie's family spoke to me in English only to say things like 'You poor American boy, you have never tasted real mayonnaise.' They found me extremely annoying, mostly because I had whistled too much for the first day or two. I had always been a whistler, but most people don't like a whistler. All my years of hunting as a kid, hiking for ten or twelve hours with a gun and a dog, I had whistled, and I could do two tones at the same time, songs in harmony. I had dreams of becoming the first two-tone blues whistler. I had once gotten a third tone to come in, a low liquid, but that had happened only once, and no one ever believes me.

I'm not sure how it happened, but Jamie dumped me. He realized he was gay and left me for a guy named Duncan. I never met Duncan, but apparently he was British and promised a wider world. So I went to Quiberon, in Brittany, because it was far from Paris. I took a ferry out to some island and pitched my tent on a bare headland.

Short wild grasses, turned brown in the sun. Small wildflowers holding their own. It was a beautiful island, but the summer sun was intense, and there was no shade. Not a single tree. I didn't have sunscreen, or a hat. I tried sitting in my tent, but it was an oven.

So I went to town to buy sunscreen. A one-street village. My forehead and nose and neck stung. Even my arms and legs. I was fully lobstered. No signs that I could read, but I found a store finally, a low-roofed affair with no lights inside, very dark after the glare. I needed sunglasses, also. I had left for this trip woefully unprepared.

Wooden shelves, a very small store, and I looked at each item but found nothing that looked like sunscreen. No hat, no sunglasses. Inflatable beach balls, towels, food, wine, bread. I grabbed a jar of cornichons, my fondest memory from Paris. I waited in line, and when I made it to the counter, everyone waited. Une baguette, I asked. And then I trotted out the one sentence I had in French: Je voudrais un pain aux raisins s'il vous plait. I would like some raisin bread, please. I had to repeat it, but then the raisin bread was handed over.

Sunscreen? I asked in English.

Blank looks all around, and some sense of impatience. Sunscreen? I asked again.

Hm, I said. I was desperate. And then I remembered a brand of sunscreen in the US: Bain de Soleil. So I stroked my cheek, leaned in close, and said Bain de Soleil.

The woman behind the counter took a step back. I looked around at the other customers. I stroked my burnt cheek for them, said Bain de Soleil, Bain de Soleil. They looked at the ground.

"Bath of the sun," or "sun bath." That's what I was actually saying. So perhaps it seemed I was recommending this, showing off my burn. Or maybe it seemed I was explaining my mental state. Or even that I wanted someone to give me a sun bath.

I just kept saying it, like a madman. Bain de Soleil, Bain de Soleil. I didn't know what else to do. No one would look at me. I was alone, which was beginning to seem like my natural state, something I'd never be able to run from. I had hoped that Williams College was an anomaly.

I paid for my bread and cornichons and a piece of cheese and walked out. The sun had not softened. I walked up and down that village looking for any other store, but I found none. Dirt street, no cars, access only by ferry. I returned to the store.

Cautious looks as I entered. They may have thought I would try to return the cheese, or a gnawed-on baguette. I was wearing only a T-shirt and shorts, and hadn't showered in several days. Even I felt a little suspicious of me.

I looked around more earnestly for a hat, and what I found was an umbrella. An unlikely item in a place that hadn't seen rain for a thousand years, but I was grateful. It was

expensive, but I bought it and stepped outside, opened my umbrella, and felt the shade. The sting was gone. I was happy for the first time in several days. I felt that my life was turning around.

I walked out of that village back onto the headland, but I had attracted a following. A group of a dozen boys a few years younger than me. They followed about 50 feet behind, and they were laughing. You pretty American boy, they said, and they all pretended to carry umbrellas. They skipped and curtsied. They followed me onto a barren headland where there was only my tent, and I began to feel afraid. There was an edge to these boys. If I said anything, they would attack me, I believed. They were looking for a reason.

And so I went to my tent, zipped myself inside, baked in my oven, and hoped they would leave me alone.

They catcalled for a long time, and they came up and kicked my tent, batted at the top of it with their hands. They pulled out the stakes and let it collapse on me. But they stopped there. They didn't beat me, though they could have easily, with no one else around and the tent a kind of net around me. I sat there afraid and sweating and waited until there was no longer any sound of the boys, their voices and steps faded away into the distance, and then I waited some more. I cried, because I felt tremendously sorry for myself. I cried for Jamie, too, because he had been my best friend and I would not see him again.

I just didn't understand any of it. I thought of that girl in Jamie's family, how she had banged her forehead against the floor, over and over. I had never been in love, and I didn't want to be in love if it meant that. I didn't understand how Jamie could just leave me, and I wondered whether I had been more a romantic interest for him than a friend. There had been nights he had played a game, pulling the blanket and sheets off of me. I had laughed so hard my hands went weak and I couldn't resist. He'd start at one corner and just pull the blanket inch by inch, and when the blanket was gone, he'd pull the top sheet, and when that was gone, the fitted sheet, until I was left alone on my bare mattress, laughing. I had loved that game, and it had never felt sexual to me, but in retrospect it was a game that involved a bed and making me naked in a way. I wanted to talk with Jamie, at least one time, to find out his side of the story. And I didn't understand why we couldn't still be friends. Is there room for only one? If so, then that was the worst part about love.

I found the zipper and emerged from the tent. No sign of any other person. Only a light breeze, the sun a bit lower now. I was soaked in sweat, and dizzy. I drove in the stakes again, took my umbrella, and went for a hike along the headlands.

The jellyfish had come in. They were everywhere, choking the water, making swimming impossible. This promised to last for weeks. I would not be going farther than the beach. They were orange-red warning lights populating every slow rolling wave. The water cool, I was sure, and so much calmer than California. I wanted to swim, but there would be no swimming.

I kept looking over my shoulder. I wondered whether the boys might come back at night. I imagined baseball bats. And so I waited for darkness, and then I walked without a flashlight and moved my tent far away to a small fold between headlands, a place to hide, an outsider, and I hoped that this would not become my life.

**Copyright © 2010, David Vann. All rights reserved.**

*Supported through the Scottish Government's Edinburgh Festivals Expo Fund.*