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PERSONAL

BY DON McMICCANN

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Serena unwrapped a syringe, held it by the needle, handed it to Wade the way she would a pair of scissors. He jabbed the needle into the orange: a jet of juice sprayed onto the starched sheet.

"You have got to be shitting me," she said. "It really says to practice that way?"

"I shit you not, mademoiselle." He pulled his passport from his back pocket, took out the brochure folded inside. "Says so right here."

He lay back, moved two oranges over his head in wide arcs. The syringe dangled from one. "Does the sun block the moon? Or is it the other way around? For an eclipse, I mean."

"There are different kinds."

He got up and knelt by the bidet, poked gently into the other orange for the second try.

Serena fell prone onto the mattress. "This is getting out of control," she said to his back. "Maybe it's time we take our losses and fly home. If I take the substitute job for second semester, you can still finish your program back home."

"Studying French in Vermont isn't exactly the same as studying French over here. And this isn't the best time in the world to be traveling American Airlines." The Embassy had issued an advisory to avoid overt American activity after the UN had set the January 15th deadline for Iraq to get out of Kuwait.

"Screw Saddam," she said. "It's the tests I've had enough of. Dipsticks speak the same language here and at home." Since they'd fled Maine after a summer of muted mourning for Hannah, they'd read the same single pink line for NOT pregnant four months in a row.

Wade depressed the syringe with his thumb. "I don't think I've been doing it right. Maybe that's why it's been swelling up on you. You're supposed to hold it like a pencil, but I've been holding it like a dart."

"Let's just get today's done with," she said, dropping her jeans. Indigo bull's-eyes dotted her hips. "You think it's a big deal the vials got all shaken up on the trip?"

“They’re fine. That’s the only train I’ve ever been on where I could walk down the aisle without using my hands to grab the seats.” When they’d made it out of Paris and hit full TGV speed atop the special rails, Serena had asked why they were taking the fast train in the first place since they had the whole week after Christmas to kill before they could get back in their apartment.

She leaned against the door as if she were stretching her calves; her swimmers’ legs tautened. A tall beam of moonlight was cast next to her onto the back of the door, under the emergency instructions. Wade stabbed the needle pencil-like into her buttock. If blood came out, he was supposed to stay calm, withdraw the needle, find a new spot. If they reached a multiple birth situation, they could selectively terminate the extra embryos.

“Fucking shots,” she said.

He rubbed the pinpoint he’d made. She was supposed to be monitored for hyperovulation.

For a few francs, the receptionist lent him a shower key worthy of a treasure chest. The key got stuck in the lock; Wade pulled it out and peeked through the hole.

“Just like picking the one at the chapel,” he said. He used to maneuver a nail file to open the lock on the chapel tower door at St. Matthew’s, where they’d rendezvous for their Saturday nights trysts after sneaking down their dorm fire escapes.

“I can’t believe we didn’t even use anything up there,” Serena said. “And we got away with it.”

They crammed into the closet-like shower stall at the end of the hall, then dried each other off back in their room. When they’d arrived late afternoon, they’d crossed over the narrow causeway on the bus. The premature glow of the late December moon had illuminated Mont-Saint-Michel -- its slate roofs tailored at oblique angles, its façades aborted at steep slants, its cornerstones cut like puzzle pieces. After they’d stepped off the bus -- the abbey ahead rising like a pyramid -- they’d spiraled up the cobblestone path. When they’d reached the steeple at the top, they’d realized the cheapest room was at the base of the island. The dollar had taken a dive since September and they’d drained their “emergency” travellers checks.

Wade pushed aside the towels that had been covering them on the bed. “Do you really mean what you said? Taking our losses? Bailing out? Going back home?”

“Part of me’s just sick of all ...the fertilizer,” she said. “I want to stop pumping all that stuff into my system. It’s not going to make Hannah come back.”

When they’d said her name during the summer, they’d break into a fight until one of them would walk out of the house that Serena called “cursed.” Then they’d agreed not to pronounce her name, period.

“Plus, my ovaries are killing me.”

“Killing how?”

“Like... swollen. Like used up.”

Wade walked across to an épicerie, chose three oranges, bought some cheese and yogurt. While his fruit was on the scale, he let a tu slip out; the brown-skinned merchant corrected him with a vous before closing with an au revoir monsieur,

merci that revealed his own second-language accent.

They made a picnic on top of the single chair in their room, then walked across to a café. A ring of hard-boiled eggs and a peanut dispenser were set on the zinc counter. Wade rested an orange on the bar as if he were bartering fruit for coffee. His fingers could barely touch through the espresso cup handle. Men at the end of the bar, dressed in blue overalls, drank blond beer from tulip-shaped glasses.

“Why are those guys looking at us weird?” Serena whispered in English. Back in college, they used to switch to French in public, but she hadn’t kept hers up.

“Don’t be paranoid. I don’t think it’s the kind of look that says... you’re American and you’re sending your army to the Gulf and tugging the French one along with it. It’s more your basic... ugly American look... New clothes, new sneakers.” The only part he said in English was ugly American look.

“It is kind of nice to be out of the city,” she said in French. A pair of Uzi-armed gendarmes had been stationed near their métro stop after the UN had set its deadline.

Wade pulled out his passport, removed a fresh piece of graph paper he kept folded between its stiff pages. He drew one line all the way across, another as a vertical axis, marked one dot for low tide, a second for high tide.

“I wonder what it does to the tide, these really short days,” Serena said. She took the orange. “This thing is California sized.”

“Leave the rind on. Those other two I had were too small, like tangerines. This time I got the three biggest ones the guy had.”

He unfolded the brochure from inside his passport: Pergonal® -- a natural extract derived from the urine of post-menopausal Italian nuns.

The alarm went off on Wade’s watch. He put his hand over it, then undid the band, stuffed the watch into his pocket. “I have no idea how to turn that off. It’ll just stop after one minute.”

As they got up, he slipped a colorful 20-franc bill under his saucer.

“Didn’t you grab the other orange?” he asked her at the hotel.

“Maybe we should just go find a cantaloupe,” she said. “The outer skin is tougher.”

When they walked back into the café, one of the men in blue overalls rolled the orange along the bar like a pétanque ball. Wade caught it as it dropped over the edge, nodded: “Je vous remercie, monsieur.”

Back in the room, Serena lay down on the bed and pointed at the ceiling. “Just because I’m agreeing to this last month of treatment doesn’t mean I think this juice is going to do anything for us.”

He massaged her hip. She got up, put the chair under the single slit of a window, stepped up. The opening looked out to sand bearing wavy imprints from the last time the strands of the Atlantic had retreated into the English Channel. “It’s weird how tiny these windows are. Remember up at the lake back home when we poked a little dot in a piece of cardboard then watched the eclipse?”

“I just cheated and looked right at the sun.”

She raised her arms so her body blocked the opening.

“They say the tide here comes in faster than you can run,” she said. “This is the first time I’ve really looked at the ocean since I was out there on Halibut Point. I kept turning the high beams on and off so they bounced off the waves.”

“Jesus, I’m sorry.” Once family had flown home and friends had gone back to work, she’d driven out to the Point by herself, swallowed just enough Tylenol to earn an overnight in the same hospital where she’d delivered Hannah twelve months earlier.

She rejoined him on the bed. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

They listened to the tide outside.

“Is it coming in or going out?” she asked.

“Did you ever think how long it took to build this place?” he asked.

“I think it’s coming in,” she said. “When we were in Chartres ten years ago, I thought the same thing about the windows. How long it took to make them. Thousands of panes. All those colors.” They’d lit a candle, dropped their change into the black box, distanced themselves from an Ivy League professor who’d been giving a loud tour in English.

He raised a hand, moved his fingers to make shadows dance on the back of the door. “I remember when we arrived there on the slow train, pre-TGV. How those spires sort of towered over the wheat fields. You could see them from so far away. They don’t even match.”

“I remember.”

“Back in sixth grade, I had this French teacher who had a poster of Chartres. And she had two of Mont-Saint-Michel. One where it’s entirely surrounded by water. In the other, it’s low tide, with maybe a half dozen white horses running around.”

“I’ve seen pictures like that,” she said. “They’re cantering around. And the sand looks like marble cake?”

“But what I don’t get is that it’s supposed to be like quicksand out there.”

“This isn’t the time for a story like that.”

She’d only left the bathroom for a second to pick up the phone – then stayed on too long – since her mother was on the line, interrupting the evening ritual -- dinner, tub, story, rock, crib. Hannah must have tried to right herself -- mobile in new ways on the cusp of her first birthday -- and she must have hit her head on the soap holder -- or maybe the shiny spigot – and her feet must have given way to the slippery surface. Wade had taken out the rubber mat to scrub the tub but then left the mat rolled up behind the door. She’d come to rest face down, the pink bubble bath residue rimming the porcelain casket, the lime green soap ball bobbing like a buoy.

Serena turned on her side so they lay back to back. “I don’t know, Wade. Sometimes I wonder if I’m just kind of going through this whole program on automatic. Shoot me up. Mate me. So it worked once with Hannah. Did you ever

think *that* was my chance?”

Mont-Saint-Michel was supposed to be their stepping stone from Paris to London during the week their landlords reclaimed the maids' chambers apartment. But the second night on the island, Wade drew a graph on the back of a napkin to take stock of their money and project their expenses – when he was selling short back home, his job was to forecast the falls ahead. Looking all the way ahead to his spring trimester, factoring even the most optimistic returns for her tutoring, they decided they had to cut out the ferry ride and stay on the island in their same wedge-shaped room.

The next morning Wade snapped the tip off another ampoule, mixed the powder with bottled water, filled the syringe.

“Which side today?” he asked her. She pointed, then closed her eyes.

He held a cold washcloth to her hip after. “Anyway,” she said. “If we'd taken the ferry, they'd have checked our bags at customs. And I bet they wouldn't think too kindly of hypodermic needles.”

They showered again – he used a corkscrew on the lock -- then walked up towards to the top of the island and sat at a marble table on the terrace of a café to look out over the approaching tide. The weather was as mild as when they'd arrived back in September. A waiter never came by, so they continued up the path, its paving stones fanning out like fountains. They had a cold *pression* beer mid-afternoon, came back to their hotel for a nap, then took a late dinner near the entrance to the abbey. It was the kind of day they'd talked about when they'd sat out on the porch of their log cabin on Aziscohasset Lake, Labor Day weekend, when they'd decided to flee to France, to return to the country where they'd first talked about getting married. Maybe there they could face their tragedy, talk about it face to face in one language or another.

After dessert, and coffee, Wade left a stiff hundred-franc note with the bill. He traded another fifty francs for a bottle of *Chinon*. He asked the bartender to open it, then stuffed the cork back in and tucked the bottle into his backpack. In their room, they positioned themselves towards the single slit in the wall, even though it was too high up to look through.

“I'm going to feel better with my own doctor back home,” Serena said.

The Channel had retreated so far, there was no water to hear.

“Didn't Suzanne Secours say hers is the best in the *seizième*?”

“Still,” she said, “At least I could try to see some American doctor over here.”

“But isn't the American Hospital of Paris an *overt* American activity?”

“So maybe it's just not going to work for me over here.”

He scraped the thin layer of crimson mildew off the cork with his fingernail. “This is just an eighty-eight. I'm surprised it's even bottled, much less for sale.”

“It's been stuck in there long enough.” She tilted her empty glass towards him, one of the two brittle *Kronenbourg* glasses they'd smuggled out of a *brasserie*.

She held up her wine. “Do you ever wonder if all that Tylenol screwed up my liver?”

“You’ll be OK.”

She brought the wine to her mouth. “I kind of wish I’d said no to this month’s shots. But I wanted to go through with it one more month because you seemed so into it.” When they’d first arrived, Serena had tried to *self-administer the serum* until she’d snapped a needle in her hip. “Do you know what a relief it will be to get to the beginning of the month and not have to dread another salvo of those shots?”

Wade leaned toward her: “But we aren’t ruling out giving your body a rest, starting up again with another round beginning of March.”

“Trying another round -- is that a statement, or a question?” *Temporary suspension of treatment* was strongly recommended after three months -- four months maximum.

He took out the graph paper where he’d charted Serena’s morning temperatures since September. She’d told him she didn’t like to look at it since it reminded her of the spikes and lines on the labor monitor in the delivery suite.

“Another round? You make it sound like chemo. And who wants to be traveling with a war about to break out?” They’d read in *The Herald Tribune* that Mitterrand feared Hussein could lob one of his Scuds all the way to Marseilles. “So you find some piss in Italy, it’s not like it’s FDA approved or anything. Who knows exactly what we’d be putting into me.”

Wade’s Plan B involved direct restocking -- buying the drug right in Italy. They’d give her body a little break, undertake another three-month cycle in March. If they were lucky, she’d be pregnant by the summer. Then they could go home.

She took another sip. “Go ahead, just brand USDA on my ass.”

“Well, if you think about it, they take it from the nuns down there then sell it to the company in Boston who funnels it into little vials and slaps a Pergonal label on them. It’s almost better just to get it from the source.” The label read: *Pergonal® stimulates gonadotropic hormonal development*.

“The source? This isn’t like getting... black market Perrier. Or visiting some vineyard and having the owner sell you some unmarked bottle. Fuck the Pergonal nuns.”

He flicked the cork out the window slit.

“Polluting?”

“Cork comes from a tree,” he said. “And Italy is perfectly safe for an American right now.”

“And how happy are Arabs going to be after the ground war starts up?”

“You mean, if we go in.”

“If? We’ve already got thousands on the border? You think they’re visiting Saudi Arabia for the hell of it? Just to wave to the million little Hussein soldiers in the desert?”

She got up on her tiptoes, tried to look out the window slit with one eye as if she were straining to peek through a peephole set too high in an entryway. She

stepped down, stuffed the previous night's cork back into the *Chinon*. She slid under the covers, turned on her side toward the door, and put a pillow between her knees.

Halfway through the night, a storm coming in off the Channel woke them up. Serena reached to the floor, checked her watch, a two-faced one with East Coast time on top, French time below. "Tell the waves to be quiet."

Wade knocked over a glass of wine onto the bedspread. He reached for a hand towel by the bidet, tried to blot it out.

"Spill it all anyway," she said. Sometimes she would say alcohol complicated the treatment by adding another compound to the mixture. She'd taught Chemistry to high school kids, become the advisor all the senior girls wanted.

"I'm sick of this," she said. "My hips kill and my ovaries feel like water balloons. I need more than a month off. I need a sabbatical from sex. And no more shots, period."

"I can go down to Italy by myself on the TGV. Be back the next day."

"And spend money we don't have on some deluxe batch of nun's piss?"

"I can get another loan from my father."

"For some pregnancy potion that doesn't work? I don't want your father knowing all this."

"Didn't the doctor say you could clean out your system for a couple months then start fresh?"

"I'm not a pick-up truck engine that needs to get flushed out then refueled." She got up, threw on her clothes.

"Where are you going? Nothing's open."

"I'm just going to walk around. I'll be fine." She held the door open. "Don't you get it? France isn't going to fix things."

The next morning for the shot she tried sitting in a chair to see if her muscles would relax. She kept her eyes open, breathed through her nose, looked away, up at the window.

All the hotels on the island were booked to celebrate *Réveillon* on New Year's Eve, so they had to pack up and catch a bus back over the causeway. The tiles and castings and buttresses that made the island's mosaic shrunk behind them.

They got off-peak tickets – a regular SNCF train -- saved a little bit on their married couple card discount, would have saved more if they'd taken up the Secours' offer and borrowed their *famille nombreuse* card. They passed back through the same hibernating meadows they'd crossed over before, dormant fields of wheat and rape.

"Peabody will let us just crash on his floor for a couple nights till we can get back in our place," he said.

"I don't want to cram in with your buddy Peabody. This isn't college. Suzanne

told me if we ever got stuck we could always stay with them.”

“What if her daughters peek through and see me shoving a needle into the side of your butt?”

Halfway back to Paris, Wade said: “I really should stay with Peabody. It’s only for three nights. The Secours’ place isn’t really big enough for both of us.”

The train switched tracks through the graffiti-sprayed industrial zone as it approached the Gare Montparnasse.

Serena ducked into the métro towards the *seizième*; Wade took the other line towards the Marais.

They were supposed to meet in the Place des Vosges at seven. Serena didn’t show up on time, so Wade scanned some of wall plaques in the square— *ici mourut pour la Résistance Jean Morot – ici vécut Victor Hugo* -- and window-shopped pricey furniture -- Louis-the-something style. Zeus-like busts watched over lintels; blue porcelain tiles framed white street numbers.

When she arrived she said she was sorry but Suzanne really had to talk to her.

“This is pretty much all fill – like Back Bay in Boston,” he said.

“Then how can this be the oldest part of the city if it’s on top of a filled-in swamp?”

They drifted over to Les Halles. The old marketplace had given way to an underground mall connected by tunnels that shuttled métro riders on changeovers in the cavernous Châtelet station.

“I called Suzanne and she moved up my appointment with her ob-gyn.”

“Is he a fertility guy?”

“Not specifically.”

Above ground, the merchants on the sidewalks had been replaced by *clochards*, the fresh produce from the provinces supplanted by plastic wine bottles. The Normandy cheese stands had given way to gaping porno marts. Butchered *franglais* shouted in neon: FREE SEX A L’INTERIEUR -- VIDEO PEEP -- TOYS POUR TOUS.

“You didn’t tell me it had gotten *that* bad,” he said.

“Listen, it’s hard to explain if you don’t have ovaries yourself.”

They followed a sign marked *Centre Pompidou*. Weaving through tight streets, they passed a ringed red M, stepped on discarded phone cards, Loto stubs, condom foils. On one corner, red wine seeped through cracks in the cobblestones towards drains that dropped into the catacombs and *égouts* below.

When they broke through to an open square, the bold yellows and purples and reds of the *Centre Pompidou* stood out against the muted cement and stone and asphalt of the rest of the *quartier*. A gently sloped concrete bank took up the entire block in front of the museum. Street performers dotted the bank, their acts dwarfed by the building.

“Is it like a swollen appendix?” Wade asked.

“What?”

“The pain you’re feeling.”

“I’ve never had one. But no, it’s not like that.”

Tourists clumped around street performers. A blond woman in a three-piece blue suit ate shish kabobs of fire next to a tall man lying on a bed of nails. Two other men boomeranged the same mechanical birds Wade and Serena had seen African hawkers throwing under the Eiffel Tower. The clack-clack of the tinted wings mixed with accented chatter.

Wade traced the outline of the museum with his finger. Huge white tuba-shaped ventilation pipes opened towards the square. Aquamarine ducts ran from the ground to a red balcony across the top floor.

“It’s upside down,” he said.

“You mean inside out.”

“I have never seen a building before with all the plumbing on the outside.”

They walked towards a basin full of cartoon statues. A pair of swollen ruby lips opened and closed, regurgitating water through a spout on a green tongue. A mustard-yellow curlicue spiraled in the far corner, spurting water out of its peak. Ankle deep in the pool, a worker clad in green jumpsuit and waders scrubbed tiles. Two children threw coins into the basin, one overhand, the other backhand as if tossing a Frisbee.

“Those little kids must be American,” Wade said. “Just the way they throw.”

“Think of those guys who spent Christmas in the desert in Saudi,” she said.

“Think Hussein will pull out?”

“Ask me in two weeks. After the deadline... God, by then I’ll be thirty.”

Above the fountain stood a row of metal cubes displaying bright yellow, right-angled digits: **315.532.829**. At first sight, only the box on the far right changed numbers, counting down.

“Think that’s something to do with President Pompidou?” he said.

“Suzanne really wants you to come over tonight too,” she said. “The girls said they’d share a room so we could have our own bedroom.”

“But I promised Peabody I’d be back tonight.”

They stared at the boxes, followed the countdown.

“I told Suzanne.”

“About Hannah?”

“I had to.”

“You didn’t tell me you were going to.”

“I didn’t know I needed your permission.”

They stared at the numbers. She pointed both her hands towards them. “I finally figured it out.”

“So what’s it for?”

“You’ve always been able to zip around numbers in your head,” she said.

“Think.” She adjusted her twin watch, made the Paris face read ten minutes after ten. “Have you noticed in all the watch ads it’s always ten after ten? So the hands are spread in this perfect little V?”

Another couple came over and sat on a pink plastic bench, stared up at the numbers.

“Think what?”

“Think space odyssey,” she said.

“The thing reminds me too much of the ticker tape back at the office.”

“You mean you’d never go back to that?”

“Never?” he said. “Put it this way -- I’d like not to have to.”

The woman on the pink bench pointed at the boxes; the man counted with his fingers, marking the first and sixth numbers with his thumbs.

“Minutes till 2001?” Wade said suddenly.

“Try seconds till 2000.”

“Three hundred million?”

“Three hundred *fifteen* million, five *hundred thirty two thousand*, seven *hundred and six*.”

The man on the pink bench gestured to the woman like he’d broken a code.

“I wonder where we’re going to be when the year 2000 rolls around,” he said.

“We’re going to be almost forty, that’s where we’re going to be.” During one of their fights after Hannah had drowned, Serena had told him to make one of his goddamn graphs for declining pregnancy rates for women over thirty.

She pointed at a sign on the door of a restaurant on the other side of the square: “What exactly is *Réveillon* anyway?”

“I still haven’t figured that out,” he said. “Something about New Year’s Eve. But those *Réveillon* signs weren’t here when we left the city.”

“It’s weird at the train station how they looked at our bags on the way out of Paris

but then not when we came back in.”

“I guess the checks are just kind of random. You never know who’s going to have some bomb.”

The other couple got up and left.

“I just had to tell someone else about Hannah,” Serena said.

“I know...I don’t know if I can go back to Maine.”

“It’s not Maine’s fault. And it’s not your fault.”

“But I took off the night she drowned.” That night, after he’d fanned the annual reports and earnings charts across the dining room table, he’d dodged bedtime duty by going out to grab a cup of coffee he didn’t really need.

“And you were supposed to know that would happen to her?”

He bent over, put his head between his knees, covered both ears. She rubbed his back and let him cry. When he’d walked back into the house, he’d found Serena on the landing, then dropped his Styrofoam cup so coffee splattered onto his shoes and flowed through the cracks between the linoleum squares.

When he lifted his head back up, he covered his eyes with the heels of his palms. The first wave of relatives had arrived the next morning to set in motion the sequence of scheduled visits and streamlined ceremonies and logistical decisions that seemed to deprive them of their initial grief.

“When I drove out there to Halibut Point,” she told him, “my parents had left, we’d had the funeral, my sub had taken over -- I went through all the scenarios for the millionth time. I blamed my mother. I blamed myself. I blamed you so I didn’t have to blame myself.”

“It was my fault.”

“Is that why you want a new baby so much?” she asked him.

He sunk his head back down. “I really don’t know.”

She leaned forward, held her knees. “It’s like it’s eaten away at me. Hollowed me right out. Like a cancer. And we’ve been over here four months and still haven’t dared to talk about Hannah. *Hannah*.”

When she righted herself, he guided her into a café, ordered two *exprès*. Several tables had been pushed together. The empty champagne bottles and flutes had been arranged like bowling pins.

Wade balanced a stubby ten-franc piece on its edge.

“Remember that penny she found,” he said.

“Of course.”

On the way back from her only Easter service, Hannah had sat on a storm drain, traced the grates with her finger, said *waffle*. Wade had knelt down next to her, pointed down through the squares, told her that his college friend heard a cat stuck in a drain once. So the man got the cat out and brought it back to his room

and took care of it. Then the cat had baby kittens and everyone in the dorm took care of them. When he had finished telling the story, Hannah had lifted a 1961 penny from one of the grates, then kept the coin in her room.

“I still have the penny,” Wade said.

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“It’s in one of the boxes above my parents’ garage.” Their last weekend they’d held a yard sale, then stored what was left with Wade’s parents. They’d driven the boxes from Hannah’s room to a Goodwill container.

They stirred their coffee without drinking it.

“Imagine this place ten years from tonight,” Wade said. “The year 2000 crowds.”

He pointed at the museum. From where they were sitting, the dozens of yellow vertical blinds hanging above the entrance were arranged at just the right angle. They all fell in line to make Georges Pompidou’s profile.

“Thank God that 1990 is ending,” he said. “Then again, there’s something about 1991 that’s freaking me out. I don’t mean about us so much, or what’s going to happen. But about the number itself. How it *looks*.”

“You mean how it reads backwards and forwards? Like *Mom*.”

Another small crowd had congregated below the clock out front; the people dispersed when the last four digits hit an even one thousand.

“Like *Dad*,” she said.

Three 9s shone from the final three boxes. Wade tore his little straw of sugar, let the crystals slide into his coffee: “Or like *Hannah*.”

She laid her forehead against the table. He reached over and stroked her hair.

A few minutes later, he said: “All the end-of-the-year stuff is so much worse this year since it’s also end-of-the-decade stuff. Best of the 90s, all that.”

Serena pointed to a pair of *police nationale* who cut in front of the fountain: “Remember the year we came over as undergrads? All those café bombings? The scares in the métro?”

“I think it’s going to get worse this year,” he said. A week earlier, they’d read their president’s lips on the dubbed newscasts, live from Kennebunkport, in front of the family Christmas tree: *Saddam’s out by the fifteenth, or we’re going in*. The soaring approval ratings had been superimposed on the screen. That same afternoon they’d opened the métro doors and stepped on shreds of burnt American flag and before they could change cars the horn had sounded and the doors had whooshed shut.

“Does the métro run extra late tonight for New Year’s Eve?” she asked.

“Let’s just get a room together tonight instead of going to different places.”

“Can we afford it?”

“It’s just one night.”

Even though they’d stayed up most of their last night on Mont-Saint-Michel, Serena wanted to stay out. Back in September, after the overnight flight, she’d insisted they take a walk to keep from going to bed too early and messing up their internal clocks. The plane and the train were their only all-nighters since the string of white nights right after they lost Hannah, when they kept from going upstairs and walking by her bedroom, when they set up cushions by the hearth instead, as a sort of bivouac.

They cut through the maze of streets towards the Latin Quarter. Merchants wielding shish kabob samples lined the narrowest street. A plate spun out of one of the Greek restaurants like a discus, broke into pieces across the paving stones.

“Means they like the food,” Wade told her.

They came out by the quay next to Notre-Dame, walked across a bridge, past the rose window, and down a set of steep steps to a quieter quay. A couple under a bridge played clarinets in front of empty cardboard refrigerator boxes.

She showed him her watch. “It’s not even midnight back home.”

They washed their hands at a public fountain, the miniature copper ornament covering it greened with age, then walked out to the very tip, the island’s prow.

“So you think the Pergonal is just some fake, magic...elixir?” he said.

The twin currents of the Seine rejoined after sweeping by each side of the island. A row of houseboats rested against the far bank.

“I’m going to take that full-time substitute job back home,” she said. He let the comment pass by. Before it sank in, she went on. “I can’t believe you just took off and blew out to Canada *five days* after your daughter died.” He’d drunk Brodor for two days solid in a hotel room, then called home in tears and hightailed it back across the border.

“That was another major fuck-up,” he said.

They wandered back towards the same hotel where they’d stayed their very first night in the fall. They took breaks on benches, then found a café that was still open. They took beers standing up, asked if they could buy a bottle of red. The woman told them that after all the celebrating she only had a very young *vin de pays* left. The bottle had no label, a chipped neck.

They rang the bell to the *Hôtel Port Royal* until the owner came out. They talked her into letting them in, even though she said only the expensive room was free.

They pulled their chairs to the window, kicked their feet onto the balcony as dawn began to develop over the parapets of chimneys and rooftops. Serena yanked out the cork and filled their plastic cups.

“OK, we probably should see your own doctor, back home,” he told her. “And if I finish on campus in Vermont it’s not like we’ll never come back here.”

By the time the green-clad street cleaners had come out to hose down the sidewalks, they’d moved inside, shut the large windows. Serena reached towards him when he came out of the bathroom, embraced him; he pushed his thumbs through the beltloops in her jeans, withdrew, then burrowed his hands under her

sweater and traced them around her waist till they met behind her back and his fingers intertwined. When she rested her head on his chest, he brushed his hands up to her neck. Her shoulder blades rose up and yielded to his touch as if her bones had softened to cartilage. She let her chin drop and held her hair up to allow him to massage the twin tendons of her neck.

They made love in slow, wavy rhythms. When they were done, she said it reminded her of their first few times, when they'd climb to the top of the spiral staircase inside St. Matthew's chapel, then unroll their sleeping bag at the landing on top. They sank into the sagging double bed in their hotel room the way they used to settle into their hammock when they were first married, well before they'd started trying to have a family, before the pregnancy potions, before the incessant injections, before the wall calendar whose green X marks indicated peak ovulation.

The morning light washed through the blinds and cast bars across the bedspread. As she slept, he combed his fingers through her hair, counting fifty strokes to himself. When he reached *cinquante*, he got up, dug the syringes out of his toilet kit, and threw them out.

Don McMillan's short story "Pergonal" is adapted from his novel-in-progress, *Ice Out*, an early version of which was chosen as a finalist for the James Jones First Novel Fellowship. His award-winning short fiction has appeared most recently in *Confrontation*, *Worcester Magazine* and *Dogwood: A Journal of Poetry and Prose*. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College and an MA in French from Middlebury College. Don chairs the English Department at The Bancroft School in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he also directs The Bancroft Young Writers' Conference each fall. He has written reviews of contemporary literature for *Book and Worcester Magazine*, and is currently completing a collection of short stories about prep schoolers.