

# CREATION LAKE

A  
NOVEL



AUTHOR OF  
THE  
FLAMETHROWERS  
& THE  
MARS ROOM

# RACHEL KUSHNER

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# CREATION LAKE

A Novel

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RACHEL  
KUSHNER

SCRIBNER

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*For Jason*

Close, in the name of jesting!

Lie thou there,  
for here comes the trout that must be caught with tickling.

—Maria, from *Twelfth Night*

THE DELIGHTS OF SOLITUDE

NEANDERTHALS WERE PRONE TO DEPRESSION, he said.

He said they were prone to addiction, too, and especially smoking.

Although it was likely, he said, that these noble and mysterious Thals (as he sometimes referred to the Neanderthals) extracted nicotine from the tobacco plant by a cruder method, such as by chewing its leaves, before that critical point of inflection in the history of the world: when the *first* man touched the *first* tobacco leaf to the *first* fire.

Reading this part of Bruno's email, scanning from "man" to "touch" to "leaf" to "fire," I pictured a 1950s greaser in a white T-shirt and a black leather jacket as he touches a lit match to the tip of his Camel cigarette, and inhales. The greaser leans against a wall—because that is what greasers do, they lean and loiter—and then he exhales.

Bruno Lacombe told Pascal, in these emails I was secretly reading, that the Neanderthals had very large brains. Or at least their skulls were very large, and we can safely infer that their skulls were likely filled, Bruno said, with brains.

He talked about the impressive size of a Thal's braincase using modern metaphors, comparing them to motorcycle engines, which were also measured, he noted, for their displacement. Of all the humanlike species who stood up on two feet, who roamed the earth for the last one million years, Bruno said that the Neanderthal's braincase was *way out in front*, at a whopping 1,800 cubic centimeters.

I pictured a king of the road, way out in front.

I saw his leather vest, his big gut, legs extended, engineers' boots resting on roomy and chromed forward-mounted foot pegs. His chopper is fitted with ape hangers that he can barely reach, and which he pretends are not making his arms tired, are not causing terrible shooting pains to his lumbar region.

We know from their skulls, Bruno said, that Neanderthals had enormous faces.

I pictured Joan Crawford, *that* scale of face: dramatic, brutal, compelling.

And thereafter, in the natural history museum in my mind, the one I was creating as I read Bruno's emails, its dioramas populated by figures in loincloths, with yellow teeth and matted hair, all these ancient people Bruno described—the men too—they all had Joan Crawford's face.

They had her fair skin and her flaming red hair. A propensity for red hair, Bruno said, had been identified as a genetic trait of the Thal, as scientific advancements in gene mapping were made. And beyond such work, such proof, Bruno said, we might employ our natural intuition to suppose that like typical redheads, the Neanderthals' emotions were strong and acute, spanning the heights and depths.

A few more things, Bruno wrote to Pascal, that we now know about Neanderthals: They were good at math. They did not enjoy crowds. They had strong stomachs and were not especially prone to ulcers, but their diet of constant barbecue did its damage as it would to anyone's gut. They were extra vulnerable to tooth decay and gum disease. And they had overdeveloped jaws, wonderfully capable of chewing gristle and cartilage but inefficient for softer fare, a jaw that was *overkill*. Bruno described the jaw of the Neanderthal as a feature of pathos for its overdevelopment, the burden of a square jaw. He talked about sunk costs, as if the body were a capital investment, a fixed investment, the parts of the

body like machines bolted to a factory floor, equipment that had been purchased and could not be resold. The Neanderthal jaw was a *sunk cost*.

Still, the Thal's heavy bones and sturdy, heat-conserving build were to be admired, Bruno said. Especially compared to the breadstick limbs of modern man, *Homo sapiens sapiens*. (Bruno did not say "breadstick," but since I was translating, as he was writing these emails in French, I drew from the full breadth of English, a wildly superior language and my native tongue.)

The Thals survived cold very well, he said, if not the eons, or so the story about them goes—a story that we *must complicate*, he said, if we are to know the truth about the ancient past, if we are to glimpse the truth about *this* world, now, and how to live in it, how to occupy the present, and where to go tomorrow.

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My own tomorrow was thoroughly planned out. I would be meeting Pascal Balmy, leader of Le Moulin, to whom these emails from Bruno Lacombe were written. And I didn't need the Neanderthals' help on where to go: Pascal Balmy said to go to the Café de la Route on the main square in the little village of Vantôme at one p.m., and that was where I would be.



BECAUSE BRUNO LACOMBE had been positioned in the briefings I was given as a teacher and mentor to Pascal Balmy and Le Moulin, I was looking for references in his emails to what Pascal and his group had done, and what they were planning.

Six months ago, earth-moving equipment was sabotaged at the site of a massive industrial reservoir being built near the village of Tayssac, not far from Le Moulin. Five huge excavators, costing hundreds of thousands of euros each, were set on fire under cover of night. Pascal and his group were suspected, but so far there was no proof.

Bruno's emails to Pascal covered a lot of ground but I had encountered nothing incriminating beyond Bruno's assertion that water belongs in the water table, and not in industrial holding bays. Bruno lamented that the state had decided it would be a good idea to siphon groundwater from subterranean caverns and lakes and rivers, and to capture this water in huge plastic-lined "megabasins," where it would absorb leached toxins and be evaporated by the sun. This was a tragic idea, he said, with a destructive power that perhaps only someone who had spent considerable time underground might understand. Water, Bruno said, was *already* captured, in nature's own ingenious filtration and storage facilities inside the earth.

I was aware that Bruno Lacombe was against civilization, an "anti-civver," in activist slang. And that the rural, southwestern department Guyenne—and this remote corner of it to which I'd just arrived—was known for caves that held evidence of early humans. But I had assumed Bruno would be guiding Pascal's strategies for stopping the state's industrial projects here. It had not occurred to me that this mentor of Pascal's would have a fanatical belief in a failed species.

We can all agree, Bruno said, that it was the *Homo sapiens* who drove humanity headlong into agriculture, money, and industry. But the mystery of what happened to the Neanderthal and his humbler life is unresolved. Humans and Neanderthals might have overlapped for a good ten thousand years, Bruno wrote, but no one yet understood whether and how these two species had interacted. If, for instance, they knew of each other but kept apart. Or if there were so few people in Europe in the era when they overlapped, that amid rugged and impassable stretches of forest and mountain and river and snow, they weren't aware the other was there. Then again, Bruno said, geneticists have established that they mixed, and had offspring together—a sure indication that they knew the other "was there." Were these unions love? Or were they rape, the spoils of war? We will never know, Bruno said.

At first I wondered if these emails about the Neanderthal were a prank, as if Bruno had planted them for whoever had gained access to his account, to divert them from his actual correspondence with Pascal and the Moulinards. He covered a lot of ground but included nothing about sabotage, and he kept circling back to the Neanderthal—a species who, let's face it, could not hack it, or they'd be here still, and they weren't. They had vanished thousands of years ago, and no one seemed to know why, and no Neanderthal had come forward to explain.

Bruno pushed back against assumptions that *Homo sapiens* were simply cleverer and more adaptable, stronger, more indefatigable than the Neanderthals. In his treatment of these two species as

opponents, I started to see them not in the diorama but in Ultimate Fighting Championship, with *Homo sapiens* a fighter who either gradually or all at once blazed into the ring on a winning streak.

It's tempting to picture the Neanderthal as a weak competitor, Bruno said, who was trounced by *Homo sapiens* (it was like he had access to my mental image of the two species facing off on Fight Night), but this was a cheap solution to the mystery, he said.

If there had been a war between them, it had been a soft war, a competition for resources, slow and relentless. The Neanderthals were skilled hunters, but as Europe warmed, the standards of excellence changed. The ice was gone, and a different body style was needed, lighter and built for endurance, along with new tracking methods, involving large groups in coordination, and different weapons and tools. While the Neanderthal bravely risked his life with a short-range thrusting spear, the *Homo sapiens* opted for a long-range throwing javelin. To kill from a distance was less valiant. It was killing without engaging in an intimate commitment to mortal danger, an embrace of gore, which Thal's weapon required. And yet, Bruno said, the concept of an air-propelled spear, a far more clinical approach to targeting game, was surely a winning method. Another advantage would have been *Homo sapiens's* lighter frame, which required less food. And he—or rather she—was a more frequent propagator. Not by a lot. It was suspected that female *Homo sapiens* produced just ever so slightly higher numbers of offspring than female Thal. But after long stretches, thousands of years, these numbers would compound into huge population differences.

And yet many people carry Neanderthal traces, he said. Two percent, four percent, this measure of ancient life was stunning, given that there have been no living communities of full Neanderthals actively contributing to the gene pool for forty thousand years. It's as if our chromosomes cling to this old share, he said, as if it were a precious keepsake, an heirloom, the remnant of a person deep inside us who knew our world before the fall, before the collapse of humanity into a cruel society of classes and domination.

There are some who might say, "Two percent Thal, four percent Thal, why, that's not much, a rounding error. It leaves a whopping ninety-eight percent *sapiens*."

Indeed, Bruno wrote. Let us have a look at that majority share. Let us not deny that we are *occupied* by the *Homo sapiens*, and that we are, like it or not, ourselves *sapiens*, a figure who, we can all agree, has found himself in crisis. A man whose death drive is *in the driver's seat*.

*H. sapiens* needs help. But he doesn't want help.

We have endured a long twentieth century and its defeats, its failures and counterrevolutions. Now more than a decade into the twenty-first, it is time to reform consciousness, Bruno said. Not through isms. Not with dogma. But by summoning the most mystical secrets we have kept from ourselves: those concerning our past.

A psychoanalyst looks for clues of repression, of what a patient has hidden from others and, more importantly, hidden from himself. The deepest repression of all is the story of those who came first, before we did, long before the written-down. We must unpack what these earlier lives might mean for us, and for our future.

No, I'm not a primitivist, Bruno said, as if in swift answer to an accusation.

I face forward, he said, and any discussion of ancient history is only in regard to what is to come.

Look up, he commanded, in this email to Pascal Balmy and the group.

The roof of the world is open.

Let us count stars and live in their luminous gaze.

Which is to say, these stars' deep past, which is to say, our future, bright as Polaris.

THE ROOF OF THIS PLACE was not open, thank God.

But it leaked in two of the upstairs rooms. All of the roofing, which consisted of flat hand-chiseled tiles of slate, needed to be replaced, and there was a dispute between Lucien Dubois and his aunt Agathe over whether to pump money into the house and restore it, or cut losses and sell it.

The house was three hundred years old. Lucien had inherited it from his father, who inherited it from *his* father. I had asked him when his father's father's family had acquired the place and he'd looked unsure how to answer, as if the question itself betrayed a confusion on my part.

"It was our family house in, uh, the beginning."

Lucien's aunt Agathe was from the other side, his mother's family. Agathe was not a Dubois. She lived not too far from the Dubois place and had been looking after it. When Lucien was making arrangements for me to come here, he and Agathe argued on the phone about the roof and the future of the house.

I didn't care what Lucien decided. I was a temporary resident. The house was a perfect headquarters for my purposes here in the Guyenne Valley, despite the leaking roof. The location was convenient to Le Moulin, the group of people on whom I needed to keep tabs. It was protected, with a long private driveway. Any car turning onto the gravel from the little road far below would announce itself to me through the upstairs windows, which I kept open, alert to sounds. And it had a hilltop vantage. From the room I'd chosen on account of the fact it did not leak on this side of the house, I could see the entire valley. (It helped that I had high-powered binoculars with US-military-grade night vision.)

THE ROAD TO THE HOUSE led through dense forest canopy, discouraging anyone who didn't already know the place was here from investigating the turnoff, which I myself had missed while traveling the tiny and rural D43, upon my initial arrival.

There was no sign, no gate, no mailbox indicating I'd reached Lucien's family estate, just a narrow tunnel into the woods. As I turned up it, a large rust-brown raptor sailed low between trees in the half-lit undercanopy. I sensed it was accustomed to having this place to itself. Get used to me, I thought at it.

At the top of the road, I turned left, following Lucien's instructions. There was a row of tall poplars, tapered into points, like feathers. I like poplars. A straight line of them makes me think of driving, of going fast, into low Western sun, its rays illuminating their rippling leaves. Poplars remind me of Priest Valley, a beautiful non-place that I drove past with that boy who took the rap for Nancy. They are trees that remind me of a time when I felt invincible.

I passed the poplars and continued left, crossing through a walnut orchard, untended and ancient, which stretched out on both sides of the little gravel lane, just as Lucien had described.

I parked beyond the orchard, in front of the Dubois family manor, built of yellow limestone, large blocks of it that radiated daytime heat, although it was evening when I arrived, and cool.

The garden beyond the gates, now weeds, was where Lucien had thrown knives as a boy. Where he'd sifted the dirt for prehistoric tools while the adults drank eau-de-vie, water of life, a clear brandy distilled of this property's summer plums and autumn pears. (Eau-de-vie tastes the same—like gasoline—no matter what fruit it's made from, I didn't point out to Lucien.)

I'd had to hear all about his boyhood memories:

"Our report cards came in five colors: pink excellent; blue good; green satisfactory; yellow unsatisfactory; and red failing."

"My teacher at maternelle had beautiful long brown hair and a soft voice and she wore white sandals with little heels. Her name was Pauline."

"If I got all pinks, we could stay an extra week in the country."

It's the same, whether you're in a relationship with a man or pretending to be in one. They want you to listen when they tell you about their precious youth. And if they are my age, which Lucien is—we are both thirty-four—their younger boyhood, the innocent years, are the 1980s, and their teendom, the goodbye to innocence, is the 1990s, and whether in Europe or the US, it's similar music and more or less the same movies that they want to trot out and reminisce over, from an era I personally consider culturally stagnant.

I prefer to hear about the fixations of the oldest generation of European men, the ones whose youth involved encounters with war and killing and death, traitors and fascists and whores, collaboration and national shame: rites of passage into manhood, a true and real loss of innocence. Everyone has their type. And I'm okay with the generation just under them, the ones now in their sixties, because they at least know compulsory military service, or they know elective, extralegal refuge in the French Foreign Legion.

With Lucien and boys like him—who will forever remain mere boys—there is no war nor suffering nor valor. There is only some bland girl, some banal pop song, a romantic comedy, an August vacation.

August was around the corner, but no family was set to arrive. Lucien was grown, and those trips were long over. The trees from which fruit was made into liquor were still in the yard, gnarled, unpruned, their heavy limbs bending into the chest-high weeds.

Lucien had experienced his first romantic tryst here, with a much older girl, a university student from Toulouse, whose family had a place in the area. She wore a cashmere sweater and a heady Guerlain perfume. She had taken Lucien's virginity, he said, in an empty pig stall of an abandoned farm. I suppressed my laughter, laughed only inwardly, bearing witness to his adolescent memories as if they were not a cliché, and instead, as if they mattered.

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Agathe had left the keys behind a dead geranium in a stone cubby next to the front entrance. I fitted a key into the lock in the heavy iron crossbar on the front door. The crossbar slid to one side. I opened both doors. The air inside was damp and cold like air in a cave.

I walked the broad uneven floor planks, my steps voluble, as if the weight of me was waking the floor from a long dormancy. I peered into rooms filled with furniture covered in sheets. Cobwebs wafted along the hallways, soft and dirty. I went upstairs and inspected bedrooms, opened shutters and windows to get a look at things and to dilute the smell of mold.

The ceiling plaster in half the rooms, under the leaking roof, was puckered and stained. Strips of wallpaper hung down like old movie posters dangling from a tack. On the floor of one of the rooms lay a rattrap bottom-up, a tail peeking from its wooden base. I picked up the trap with the rat strapped to it like it was his backpack and threw it out the window.

Each room was less inviting than the one before. They were crammed full of storage boxes and stacks of old magazines, *Paris Match*, the young faces on its covers water ruined. The largest bedroom featured neither leaks nor clutter but had been vandalized with children's stickers, cartoon babies, "Les Babies" was the logo, pasted onto the furniture and the walls.

I chose my room for its strategic view of the road, its working electricity, a lack of water stains, and a minimum of "Les Babies" stickers. (There was one on the bedside table, but I could cover it.) The sun had set, and from the windows next to the bed I could see a few stars initiating their night watch through the haze of dusk.

Downstairs, the kitchen had an ancient stone sink. The oven appeared to be fired by wood or coal. Next to it was a hot plate from the 1970s, its crooked burners caked white from use. The Dubois family had given up on ancient traditions and embraced this hot plate. Whatever. I was fine with a hot plate.

After surveying rooms, I ate a ham and butter sandwich that I had picked up in Boulière, light on ham and light on butter and mostly bad baguette, the kind that turns to crumbly powder when it goes stale. Realizing I wasn't hungry, I left the rest of the sandwich for the rats.

There were a couple bars of Orange.fr cell service so I texted Lucien that I had made it to the house. I didn't say that his family's beloved ancestral "manoir" looked like a scene from a horror movie. I said

it was lovely here if rustic, and that I was meeting Pascal Balmy tomorrow.

Lucien had arranged this meeting.

He had expressed concern that I didn't have a career. He believed I was a former grad student who had lost her way. (I *was* a former grad student, but I had found my way instead of losing it.)

Lucien's idea of connecting me to Pascal (he believed it was his own idea to connect me to Pascal) was that I could translate into English the book that Pascal and his comrades at Le Moulin had written anonymously, since I had a facility with languages and a lot of free time.

—i mean, i will be meeting pascal if he shows up, I texted.

—He'll show up, Lucien texted back. For you, he'll show. He's curious about you. He's keen to work together. I talked to him about it. But I should warn you... he's charismatic.

Charisma does not originate inside the person called "charismatic." It comes from the need of others to believe that special people exist.

Without having met him, I was certain that Pascal Balmy's charisma, like anyone's—Joan of Arc's, let's say—resided only in the will of other people to believe. Charismatic people understand this will-to-believe best of all. They exploit it. That is their so-called charisma.

—are you jealous? I asked in reply.

Pascal was Lucien's old friend, and I'd be meeting him without Lucien there to mediate.

—It's not that. He gets the upper hand. Look at all these people who followed him down there from Paris. It's pretty weird. But that's how he is. I mean, I have known him forever and I still try to impress him. It's pathetic.

(I was already attuned to what, in Lucien, was pathetic.)

—he won't get the upper hand with me, I texted back, and for once I was being completely and totally honest.

BRUNO LACOMBE RECEIVED EMAILS from only one account, from an address that was used, I knew, by multiple people at Le Moulin, among them Pascal Balmy, certainly the main correspondent, although the queries sent to Bruno were never signed. They were always just a short question, open-ended, which Bruno answered in depth.

Such as the one they sent as a follow-up to Bruno's discussion of Neanderthals' depression and their smoking habits. Their question was about plant origins and tobacco: Was tobacco not a New World plant? they asked.

"Given how stringent we've been with our own farming techniques," they wrote, "and our approach to rewilding what might be native to this part of France, we are confused at the idea that tobacco, which we regard as invasive, could have always been here."

Bruno said, in reply, that without making direct accusations of anyone asking such a question, he could attack that person's conditioning and the external forces that had shaped their attitudes, leading to a profound misunderstanding of migration patterns and an abuse of the concepts "native" and "new."

No, he said, tobacco is *not* a New World plant.

And in any case, people have been in the Americas for tens of thousands of years.

The spread of people over the face of the planet was not a simple three-act play structure, of up and out of Africa (I), into Europe (II), and across a land bridge (III). Bruno said it was far more diffuse and mysterious how people had settled various corners of the earth. The idea that they flowed in a single direction, for instance, had to be false. Do you walk in only one direction? he asked rhetorically. Of course you don't, he answered. Over the parts of a day, a season, a year, a life, people move in many directions, as locus points with their own free will, though he put "free" here into scare quotes.

The more education a person has, the more scare quotes they seem to use, and Bruno was no exception (and neither am I, even as I deplore this habit in others). The less education, the more accidental quotes, whose purpose is the opposite of scaring, and simply to declare that a thing has a name but is being named by someone without a high level of literacy: "Corn Muffins," handwritten by a minimum-wage employee on a sign in a bakery case. "Sale," also handwritten. The not-so-literate and the hyper-literate both love quotation marks, while most people use them only to indicate, in written form, when someone is speaking. In my life before this life, as a graduate student, there were know-it-all women in my department who held their hands up and curved their pointer and middle fingers to frame a word or phrase they were voicing with irony, as a critique. They were fake tough girls who were not tough at all, with their fashion choices veering to chunky shoes and a leather jacket from a department store. They were getting PhDs in rhetoric at Berkeley, as I had planned to, before I abandoned that plan (and spared myself their fate, which was to subject themselves to academic job interviews in DoubleTree hotel rooms at a Modern Language Association conference). Listening to them prattle on and bend their fingers to air quote, a craven substitution of cynicism for knowledge, I sometimes used to imagine a sharp blade cutting across the room at a certain height, lopping off the fingers of these scare-quoting women.



IT HAD BEEN a long and tedious journey from Marseille to the Dubois place. Eight hours. I had made a lot of stops to try to keep things interesting. Then again, the trip might have been eight hours because I was doing that.

I was on toll roads, pulling over to drink regional wines in highway travel centers, franchised and generic, with food steaming under orange heat lamps, each of these travel centers offering local products. Lavender oils, for instance, always made at monasteries, as if the monks worshipped lavender instead of God. Or dried truffles, mustards, and glass jars of jellied meats that look like cat food, and which French people call a “terrines” and eat as if it were not cat food.

It all gets mixed up in your stomach anyhow, I heard no one say as people lined up to buy this stuff.

I sampled these wines from the vantage of plastic seating overlooking fuel pump and highway. I sipped rosé from the Luberon at a clammily air-conditioned Monop’ off the A55, a chaotic place where children screeched and a haggard woman dragged a dirty mop over the floor. The rosé was delicate and fruity, crisp as ironed linen.

I found a Pécharmant from the oldest vintner in Bergerac at the L’Arche Cafeteria on the autoroute A7, a wine that was woody with notes of ambergris and laurel and maybe dried apricot.

I enjoyed a white Bordeaux of Médoc provenance en plein air at a roadside fuel stop where a trucker farted loudly while paying for his diesel at the automatic pump, the loose valves of his truck, like his own loose valves, clattering away. This white Bordeaux was smooth as a silk garment in a virgin’s trousseau. I could have been a little buzzed by this point, five hours into my drive. This cold, dry white wine sent me dreaming about a world where all my clothes were white and I slept on white sheets and would never be traded for a dowry or violated by rough and unworthy men or forced to drink anything less than the finest French wines of the smallest and oldest and most esteemed appellations, and in a way I could say that I was living that life, right here at this gas station. At least in spirit I was.

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I care about fine wine but not about food, and because the terrine is efficient—comes in its own container and can be consumed unheated—I stole two jars of it from one of these travel centers, the weight of the jars giving a new tug to the leather straps of my handbag as I purchased my wine.

It wasn’t that I believed the wine I bought was payment enough for my jars of human cat food. Stealing is a way to stop time. Also, it refocuses the mind, the senses, if they become dulled, for instance by drinking. Stealing puts reality into sharper relief.

You’re in a highway travel center, people in a great flux and flow, coming and going and milling and choosing, the cashiers in a fugue state of next and next and next. And in order to locate the precise moment when you can take unseen, you slow it all down. You make time stop. You insert into reality what composers call a “fermata,” and while time is stopped, you put something in your bag.

In this way, I test my fitness. I test my ability to see. I gauge what other people see, and also, what they fail to see.

TREKKING AND HOBO WANDERING, Bruno continued, in parsing their question of Old World and New, was *not* how human beings had settled the earth. To leave Africa, to leave anyplace, and to go someplace else, in this false three-act structure, gave the impression of people walking arduous and long distances, like refugees or religious pilgrims, looking for a meal and a place to bed down. Taking off their heavy backpack with a “Phew.”

In fact, he said, migration patterns were slow, and formed incrementally: not by trekking. Simply by *living*. People might stay in an area for a length of time, and when the seasons change, or the hunting stock is depleted, or the waters return to a flood plain or bog that had offered bounteous foraging, or when they stumble upon a place whose features seem desirable or track a herd of animals over a season, they might resettle in the new area where they find themselves, and it could be a short walk, a day’s walk, or several weeks’ walk, from their old area. Multiply these movements by tens upon tens of thousands of years, and that is the history of the settlement of the earth.

But how people had gotten from one landmass to another over the last half million years was not yet understood, Bruno said. Polynesians had crossed the ocean long before European navigators ever dreamed of leaving shore. On another occasion he would take up this subject but for now, he implored them to understand that nothing was how they might have thought it to be, and Neanderthals in Europe and Asia—*without question*—smoked tobacco.

They weren’t even the first to do so, he added. That accomplishment goes to Thal’s earlier ancestor *Homo erectus* (Rectus, in Bruno’s parlance), nominally recognized for the rather low achievement of standing—it is in the name, Bruno said, Person Upright, but in fact, the true accomplishment of *Homo erectus* was that he was the first man to play with fire. And we must infer, Bruno told them, that the first man to play with fire was *also the first man to smoke*.

But where did Rectus *get* fire? We have all been taught the myth of Prometheus, Bruno said, in which is birthed this concept that man is an individual who was given, instead of a special trait, the ability to generate heat.

As the story went, Prometheus and his famously dumb brother Epimetheus were assigned the important job of distributing a positive trait to each of the animals in the kingdom on earth. Epimetheus plunged into this work, handing out traits—to bees, the ability to make honey, to deer, a talent for leaping and scampering, to owls, a head that could swivel 270 degrees, and so forth. But by the time Epimetheus got to people, he had run out of qualities in his quality sack.

It was at this point, when the sack was empty and Epimetheus had nothing to bestow, that his brother Prometheus stepped in, stole fire from the gods, and gave that to man as his positive quality.

But here is the catch, Bruno said. The catch is that fire is not always positive. And more crucially, fire is not a quality. It is not a trait that a life-form can possess.

It isn’t night vision or silent wing feathers or a hinged jaw, a spring-loaded capacity to pounce. Man, bland and featureless in this myth, lacking in his own special trait, was condemned, instead, to ingenuity, to being a devious little bastard.

In his ontological featurelessness, different from the rest of the animals in the kingdom, man had to figure out how to work with fire to compensate for lack. Man would come to rely on fire as a crutch. His use of fire would stand in for what man was denied, the possession of a positive trait, as all the other living creatures were given.

This myth of the brothers, one dumb and the other crafty, Bruno told them, and the substitution of technology for traits, was, let's face it, not entirely mythical. In fact, it was accurate, he said, in explaining the miseries and devastations of the world, in accounting for the use of fire to do bad instead of good, to hoard, steal, ravage, pillage, and oppress.

The use of fire for harm instead of good seems to have taken hold, suspiciously, and damningly, just as the Neanderthals began to disappear and *Homo sapiens* rose up, an interglacial bully who shaped the world we're stuck with.

The culprit seems clear, Bruno said, but human history, the story of us, was still a great riddle. Examinations of the past, of dirt and DNA, could show us new ideas of where the entire project on earth *might* have headed. Currently, he said, we are headed toward extinction in a shiny, driverless car, and the question is: How do we exit this car?

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I pictured a driver's helmeted tuck-and-roll from a Top Fuel dragster, his car in flames, his body in a flameproof suit, rolling and rolling in that interminable few seconds before the emergency crew comes running, crimson flags signal TRACK HAZARD, and track workers blast foam-up fire retardant.

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But if it was all of us on planet Earth inside this shiny, driverless car, then what would we be exiting, besides reality? What would we tumble into, if not a void?

I AM A BETTER DRIVER after a few drinks, more focused.

Instead of trying to read my phone or put on lipstick, after several glasses of these regional wines I faced forward and held the wheel with both hands. Drink lulled me into doing only what I was supposed to: drive the car.

Except that I decided toll roads were going to put me to sleep, so I opted for a scenic route on secondary roads. I got lost winding through the Massif Central and its gear-grinding turns.

Sure, I was reckless with the clutch. But it's hard for me to feel that rental cars have value. This one, a small hatchback Škoda, cost eight euros a day. (They had given me a lump sum as travel budget, and so I'd chosen economy.) How did these companies make money? They had brand-new cars. You barely had to pay for them. And they didn't inspect the car before you drove it out of the parking structure.

The Škoda was "clean diesel," an oxymoron that was a metaphor for something, but I didn't know what.

Clean diesel, clean coal. Add the word "clean" and boom—it's clean.

My navigation was off, and the scenic route took me way too scenically over a summit. "Oh, come on," I said out loud as useless vistas, pink-hued Roman ruins and high-walled castles on jagged peaks, reared up left and right.

I passed a tower on a cliff, its top edges eaten away like a sugar cone, at that point when the ice cream is gone, and the child is contractually obliged to take bites of its tasteless container. "God damn it," I said.

These breathtaking vistas were unappealing because they confirmed I was lost. I wanted only an indication by this point that I was headed northwest, toward the city of Boulière, which Lucien had depicted as a cluster of crooked, dirty streets populated by ugly people in crappy cars, and a good place to stop at Carrefour or Leader Price, to stock up before arriving at the Dubois family estate. I saw no signs for Boulière. I was in remote forested highlands. I pulled off at the top of a summit, into an unpaved lot adjacent to a building, some kind of mountain inn, hoping for directions.

The inn was closed. It looked not to have been open in quite a while. Its windows were boarded. There was graffiti along its exterior walls, names and symbols fuzzed out in spray paint, writing that reflected no skill, added no beauty. This kind of graffiti, common enough in Europe, seems like little more than uglification. Certain crimes are natural enough, even serious ones. Murder is understandable when you think about it. It's human to want to annihilate your enemy, or to demonstrate to the world: *this* is how angry I am right now, even if you might later regret killing a person. But to spray-paint an inscrutable sloppy symbol on the outside of a building? Why?

It had just rained up here. The air was damp and warm and close, like human breath. The lot was crisscrossed with patterned ruts from truck tires. The rain had left enormous puddles that were the tint of milk chocolate, their surface silk-screened in sky. There were no trucks. Just ruts. A mist hung in the branches of the low trees beyond the lot, as if a cloud had descended on this mountain and left its ragged parts among the woods.