

Chez Garcia

“Do you remember this place? This is where it began.”

“I’ve never been here. How could I remember?” I said.

“You know what I mean. It was on all the TV channels, on the Internet, everywhere. They showed the images of the restaurant garden in a constant loop. The folding metal chairs with people still sitting on them, the tables with half-eaten meals, the customers face-down in their plates, and the ambulance folks with their stretchers carrying them out. They were dead, of course, but we didn’t know that at first.”

Of course, I remembered. It was not the kind of thing you forget. I remembered being shocked that it happened in Paris. In the summer. In a small neighborhood restaurant with an enclosed garden. Exactly the kind of place where I loved to have lunch when the weather was mild.

“There were tablecloths,” I said, “and cushions on the chairs. They’re gone. I wonder who took them.”

“The health services must have carried them away to destroy them. To get rid of germs.”

Bloody useless that turned out to be. Two days later the plague was in New York and New Delhi. A week later it had swept through Africa and the Amazon, and it had probably visited both poles in a hurry. That thing hit so fast that people didn’t have time to make the mess worse. I was old enough to remember all the fuss about the neutron bomb. Well, this bug did the trick. Killed the people without bringing the walls down.

“It’s a funny name, ‘Chez Garcia’. I would expect ‘Chez Loulou’ or ‘Chez Denise’ – something more French,” my companion said.

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“Did you come through the restaurant or straight into the garden from the street?” I asked.

The man frowned, looked at me, at the door leading into the house, at the iron gate separating the garden from the street, and his face had a surprised expression that reminded me of small children about to burst into tears.

“I don’t know how I got here,” I said quickly, to let him know I was confused too.

He coughed, straightened his tie and pulled on his vest. Harmless rituals to regain his composure. He’d been shaken to the core, same as me, and he’d devised tricks to cope. I had some too. I raised the collar of my leather jacket – trying to impersonate Elvis? – and stuck my hands as deep as I could in the pockets of my jeans. When I was really rattled, I muttered nursery rhymes.

“Me neither,” he said. “What’s your name?”

Am I ready to get personal? “Jim,” I said.

“Ah, you’re not local. Unless you’re the cliché ‘American in Paris’,” he chuckled.

I didn’t get the joke but I smiled anyway. He was an affable fellow. Not the type I would have made friends with in a bar, but one couldn’t afford being choosy these days.

“I’m Samuel,” he said. “I used to live in Basel. Banking hub and all that.”

Three-piece suit, good tailoring, shiny patent leather shoes, round in the middle and balding. He could be brushing sixty or he could be older. He had the pink, well-fed, scrubbed-clean look of the middle-class tax accountant. He should be carrying a briefcase. I didn’t look that polished. I had a two-day beard, my sneakers were scuffed and my jeans fraying at the seams. The jacket still looked good but the ‘Cozumel Diving Club’ t-shirt had seen better days. Samuel was right, I was a cliché.

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“Do you know Paris, Sam?”

“First time. Why are we here?”

His coping rituals weren't working as well as mine. He should know not to ask questions.

Poor fellow was unraveling.

“Let's go for a walk,” I said, grabbing him by the shoulder and pushing him toward the garden gate.

A white van was parked on the sidewalk and blocked our view of the street. I squeezed between the garden gate and the vehicle, Sam right behind me.

And I lost it.

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“What are we doing in a hospital?” Sam said.

“I have no answers, so it's no use asking questions. Take it as it comes, my friend.”

I peeked out of the window and caught a glimpse of the inevitable tower. “We're still in Paris. This must be where they brought the restaurant people.”

The hospital looked vaguely familiar. I thought I'd been here before, visiting a friend. Yes. Room 212. What was that friend's name? Mercifully the beds were as empty as the restaurant garden. We might be flipping through space but we were still in our own time; the plague was safely in the past. I didn't look forward to walking miles of resounding linoleum corridors or peering into countless rooms with one, two or four beds, all smelling faintly of disinfectant, all set up with TV screens, washbasin and call buttons that wouldn't summon anybody. Sam wasn't as blasé as I was and felt he had to go through the motions. I followed him, out of some bizarre urge to show support. If you had known me before the plague, you wouldn't have believed I would do this. I was not the most patient guy on the planet.

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“Seen enough?” I said. My patience still had limits.

“It’s interesting,” Sam said. “I spent two days in the hospital in Switzerland for some heart flutters that they wanted to check. It was a new hospital, not like this one. See these gurneys? The paint is flaking.”

“There are plenty of antiques in the Louvre and they look better,” I said.

“These aren’t antiques. This is now.”

“A lot of hospitals are old, Sam. It doesn’t mean they do a lousy job,” I said. “It’s irrelevant anyway. People were dead before they got here. Before they got to your shiny new Swiss hospital too.”

He pondered that for a while. He raised his hands in apology. “I know I shouldn’t ask questions but I don’t think we’re here by accident.”

I had enough of the place and I walked down the stairs. I didn’t care if Sam followed or not, but he followed all right. What other choice did he have? He wouldn’t survive two hours on his own without losing his marbles. I pushed the hospital entrance door and, bingo, there we went again.

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“Nice,” Sam said.

“Place de la Concorde, Sam. The obelisk, Cleopatra’s needle. There’s another one like this in London. See the drawings on the base? That’s how they transported the thing. Marie-Antoinette lost her head nearby.” I blabbered like a tour guide, the kind that only memorized the headlines.

“I didn’t picture you as a history buff.”

“Some places have meaning.” I knew how weird that sounded. Place de la Concorde used to choke with traffic, echo with teeth-grinding horns and suffocate in exhaust fumes, especially on a hot day like this one. To see it close to empty you had to be there at four in the morning on a Sunday. Now it was deserted and it gave me a kick and I talked too much. Sam couldn’t possibly understand.

“Piazza San Marco must look great without tourists,” Sam said.

I was wrong, he understood. Never underestimate a Swiss banker. Sam stood at the foot of the obelisk; he looked at the bridge over the river, at the booksellers’ boxes neatly locked up, at the perfect view of a beautiful city in the fading light of the day.

“If we manage to figure what makes us jump from spot to spot, we could travel the world,” he said.

“Maybe it’s random.”

Sam didn’t like that idea. Balance sheets defined the world he knew. Randomness was an obscenity. I understood how he felt. We were hardwired to search for explanations. When logic failed, we looked up to heaven. I had to work hard to keep my mind from spinning.

“Let’s walk to the river,” I said.

Of course, we didn’t get there. I wasn’t exactly getting the hang of this, but I could get used to it.

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“This thing is like a travel guide that’s got its itineraries mixed up,” I said. “Eight Paris walking tours. Day two. The Luxembourg neighborhood known for its Jardin where nannies push strollers, young parents watch their children launch boats on the pond, and elderly citizens peruse the daily papers in the midday sunlight. I’ve sat here many times reading a book and

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checking out the girls on their lunch break.” I tried not to sound nostalgic but the park radiated melancholy. In the old days, it used to pull at my heart for reasons I never understood. Nothing had changed.

“That’s it,” Sam said, pulling one of the park chairs, wiping the seat for dust and putting his feet up on the rim of the pond. “I’m in an underground bunker. I wear a helmet and goggles, and the game that’s playing is a Paris travel documentary with corrupted files. We’re sharing the same input feed.”

“If it’s a documentary, why is the place empty?”

“Because the recording was made after the plague.”

Or we were dead, or it was just a dream. Blah. Sam was pleased with his half-assed explanation. Good for him. Me, I felt too real to be virtual. I smelled the stagnant water of the pond, the sunbaked grass and the rust coating of Sam’s chair. Since when were video games that good?

“Sam, how much do you remember?”

“Who’s asking questions now?”

“If I were a toaster, I’d say somebody pulled my plug.”

Sam sifted through the gravel and selected a flat stone. He threw it and it skipped four times before sinking to the bottom of the pond. “I remember my whole life,” he said. “My wife, my children, my job, the color of the carpet in the dining room. I remember the dead people in Paris. I went online to find out more about the plague but there were only the images from ‘Chez Garcia’. I don’t remember being sick. A few hours ago, I was in my office looking at my computer, and next thing I’m standing in the garden of the restaurant. Like switching channels.”

I remembered watching CNN, eyes glued to the scrolling news bar at the bottom that listed the cities that fell to the plague, one after the other, one continent after the other, in no particular order.

“The last name I read on the news was Manaus, Brazil,” I said, “then I’m in Paris with you. But it’s not the whole story. I know more than I remember. I wasn’t wearing these clothes when I watched TV, and I was scared to death but I’m not anymore. We should be shocked beyond insanity, Sam, but we’re not. We’ve lost I don’t know how many days that are not recorded in memory; something happened to us during that time.”

Sam stared at his shiny shoes and ran a hand through his sparse hair. “I must have shaved this morning,” he said, “and put on a clean shirt. Doctors sometimes put patients in a coma to help them heal. Maybe they can prevent bad memories to stick.”

He was not pushing his video game theory. I guessed he never believed in it.

“It’s almost evening,” I said. “The City of Light is going to be pretty dark soon.”

“We should see a bunch of stars. I’m not hungry and I’m not sleepy,” Sam said. “Maybe we don’t need food and rest anymore. Where do we go now?”

“I used to stay in a hotel nearby. We can try. Who knows, we might make it this time.”

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“They’re doing well,” the first lab technician said. “Management will be pleased. Big chunks of Paris are popping on the grid. Complete streets. Jim manages to stay in a place long enough for the mapping to stick. Not like that other guy – remember? He was switching so often that we had no idea where he was. Jim knows London too. Maybe we can plug him into the UK team.”

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“Baby steps, Will,” the second technician said. “We’re in charge of Paris and we’re far from done. We have to keep Jim’s mind focused. Let them go to that hotel, then we’ll reset. They’ll rest for an hour and we’ll launch a new day.”

“With Sam again?” Will said.

“They make a good team.”

On a large screen, they watched Jim and Sam leave the Luxembourg garden by the rue de Vaugirard, take a right on the rue Saint Placide, and a left on Cherche Midi. As Jim and Sam progressed, groups of houses appeared on a large three-dimensional digital map, and new pieces were added to the unfinished puzzle that once was Paris.

“Why are we doing this, Buzz? We have so many problems. Rebuilding cities from memories seems ...” Will shrugged with a bitter fatalism that didn’t match his young pimpled face.

“Pointless?” Buzz said. “Management believes that we cannot survive underground knowing that there isn’t anything left topside. Rather a massive epidemic than a global fiery blast. That’s what the shrinks say anyway.”

“Illusions. The plague story is so lame. How long will people buy it?”

“These guys buy it,” Buzz said, pointing at a small monitor hanging from the ceiling. “They see Paris empty.”

The screen showed Jim and Sam side by side on narrow hospital beds. They looked healthy; they could be sleeping.

“I wouldn’t mind taking a stroll in Paris myself,” Buzz said. “I’m tired of looking at concrete walls. And don’t tell me you don’t want to smell grass again, Will.”

“I have allergies.”

