

What the Eyes of Beata Daury Saw

A novel by
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Translation: Claire Hendy

Chapter V

INTUITION

How can a seaside community of not quite 500 people, during autumn, and halfway between Douarnenez and Hendaye, come to grips with the disappearance of one of its inhabitants?

How can a seaside community of not quite 500 inhabitants, during autumn, and halfway between Douarnenez and Hendaye come to grips with the grave suspicions that now cast a shadow over a project that had promised employment for the youth of Nesson during the high season?

The answer was in the collective confidence that was generally felt for the local authorities who were, it seemed, charged with two investigations. Perhaps.

Also, no doubt, in the collective confidence in the capacity of men to withstand adversity and move forward.

And individually, by resorting to that inner refuge of peace and happiness that each person forced himself, according to his character, either to maintain or acquire.

But also: by calling on their intuition.

Now, it seemed to the schoolmaster, Alex Legrand, that the children were, understandably, very distracted.

So, as soon as the weather permitted, he organized an afternoon field trip to the beach.

“Listen to me children, have you all remembered what to bring?

Boots and a wind-breaker, of course.

But also a pencil.

Let’s remember the reason for this field trip: to make a list of all the debris that’s been washed up or blown onto the beach since the recent high winds.

And remember how we’re going to do this: write what you observe at the bottom of the town map you’ve each been given. The map also shows the border of the Maritime Public Domain.”

And in this way, the intuitions of various people, when brought together, managed to uncover the facts below.

The Mayor, Simon Dentraiche, had called an informal meeting with his advisor for urban planning, Remi Lizon.

They were both leaning over the mayor’s desk at the City Hall, studying the layouts of an application for a construction permit that required the Mayor’s approval.

“First of all, Remi, what bothers me – even if it’s not right to make judgements about these things - is that this company – they all have the same name it seems, this one is... Topsun... yes,

that's right... Topsun – is asking for permission to build right on Mrs. Rossignol's property, and just after purchasing that property with a lifetime annuity... it seems very hasty to me...

...But what I really don't understand is this: According to their surveyor's topographic map, the project site is more than 100 meters from the upper limit of the shore... that is to say, in the buildable zone...

But according to the town's map, it's less than 100 meters from the limits of the Public Maritime Domain...and so... not in the buildable zone...

Let me think out loud a moment:

The non-buildable strip is 100 meters wide and is measured from the upper limit of the shore, right?"

"Yes," Remi reassured him, "the law is written using exactly those words..."

At just that moment, Marie, the City Hall's part-time secretary, knocked on the door to say that the schoolmaster had arrived and wished, if possible, to speak with the Mayor immediately.

The school day was over and the mothers had picked up their children. All of them (and the parents were as enthusiastic as the children) said they'd sleep well that night after their trip to the beach!... that the children's cheeks were rosy and their eyes shining, but...

"But," explained Alex Legrand, "... you both know they're like, when they're irritable and nervous..."

It was like letting loose a pack of dogs!... They obviously needed to run around... and that's the reason they were there...

... And you know how children are, as soon as there's sand... they scrape, they dig... you can't stop them...

... And by scraping and digging, do you know what they found?

... Well, little by little (there were twenty-two of them and it took all afternoon) they uncovered different kinds of small wooden fences buried to hold back the sand... you know, exactly the same as the ones used by the Seashore Conservancy to stabilize the dunes and keep the sand from washing out to sea...

You know how they work, ... the sand, when it's brought to the shore by the wind or the current, passes between the posts... And then, once it's behind the fence... it's trapped... Kind of like a crab cage... it can't flow back toward the sea and so the sand stays, grass grows... and the fences are slowly buried... You don't realize it, but in fact... the high-water line is displaced...

And that's what my students discovered this afternoon!"

After the schoolmaster had left, Simon Dentraiche felt like he'd been hit on the head and needed to sit down.

"Remi," said the Mayor, "it wasn't out of the blue that you accepted the Urban Planning position... there have been contractors in your family for generations, isn't that right?"

"...Yes Simon," he answered, "and even if it's completely unbelievable... we'll have to have a surveyor come, of course... and we'll have to work with the Seashore Conservancy... they'll come to the site and send their own surveyor... but it seems to me, there's something..."

... I think your intuition is correct, even if it is unbelievable...”

“And the purpose?” interrupted the Mayor.
“What’s the purpose of all this?”

...What’s the purpose of organizing all these beach games to take place, as if by accident, at times when the wind, the tides or the currents are going to push the sand toward the beach? I always found it a bit strange that the director of Soleilsun asked for permits to hold beach games when the weather would be bad, always a day or two before the equinox or the solstice. And every time he wants to show us those photographs of his great grandmother on our beach (or so he says) with her parasol, hat and gloves ... And the night before the last high winds, he made some excuse for not removing the fences after the games...”

...Hold on, Remi... I’ll just keep thinking out loud and don’t hesitate to stop me if I’m wrong, but...

... the idea is that it’s forbidden to build for a width of 100 meters, and that those 100 meters start at the upper limit of the shore...

... for a parcel of land situated in that 100-meter strip, if the Public Maritime Domain is modified... then consequently the upper limit of the shore is moved... And so the same parcel could find itself in the 100-meter non-buildable zone when it wasn’t before... but... it could also find itself outside of the non-buildable zone when it wasn’t before...”

“Yes,” answered Remi, “... I’m having the same intuition as you ...”

“It seems,” continued the Mayor, that someone wanted to modify the Public Maritime Domain... to extend the land... little by little... by holding back the sand at the top of the shore with

wooden fences and taking from the waterline...
so that the upper limit of the shore is displaced,
with the result that the 100-meter non-
buildable strip is displaced... and that..."

"... and that," finished Remi, "certain non-
buildable lands suddenly become... buildable."