

Marcel Auxere's Last Manuscript

by

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There was a time when my name was fêted. You may even have heard it. Marcel Auxere? Admittedly, you might only recognise it in that dim way which causes people to squint and repeat themselves: "Marcel Auxere... Marcel Auxere...". And even after going through that small ritual you may need further prompting. Something along the lines of "Marcel Auxere - you know, he wrote *Man Shaving*..." Ah yes. *Man Shaving*. That was me. A slim volume of writing published on the Pilgrime imprint 30 years ago. At first, there were only 2,000 copies printed. I attended the print works somewhere in the dismal outskirts of Paris to witness my debut rush off the presses, the pages slipstreaming past my eyes at such speed that the words I had spent so long committing to paper in a small attic room above a dry cleaners in Rue De Rien (which, thanks to years of unattended damp and fractured porcelain, had something of the public toilet about it), turn to fudged grey. Unfortunately, I missed the time allotted for the act of intimacy between the steam-wheezing Victorian machinery and my work. My arrival at the Bete Rouge Litho and Offset Company co-incided with the printing of the latest in a very successful run of puzzle books, this one with a picture of a girl in a bikini on its garish (orange and blue), flimsy (60 grammes per metre square - it reeked of cost cutting) cover which would sell in its millions. *Man Shaving*, I was informed by an ink-smearing machine operator with very few teeth and a Guignol chin, had been printed, the pages guillotined ready for binding. Indeed, the man went on asthmatically, I might find 10 stout cardboard boxes in the warehouse, each containing 200 fresh, fragrant, virginal copies of *Man Shaving*. Ten boxes of 200 slim volumes doesn't look so impressive, especially when placed next to endless bales of *Puzzleworld* in a warehouse blessed with the floor space needed to manoeuvre a large fork-lift truck down its book-walled concrete corridors. But the boxes' contents were dutifully distributed to the bookshops of Paris by Pilgrime's department which deals with that

sort of thing (more men with fingers tipped with sharp crescents of black, missing teeth and cigarette tucked behind ear, I expect).

I allowed myself some shine-eyed parent pride on seeing my little book take its place on the shelves of Tommin's on Rue De Casale,

not true, auxere! tommin's was closed the week your book came out. took them four weeks to put in the new escalators. allowing yourself a little license, eh? wanted everyone to imagine the likes of jean paul parnon and pelgier perusing the shelves like it was the 1940s? pompous sod

me on the street looking nonchalantly through plate glass, my hot breath steaming it slightly in two distinct nose blasts. I don't mind admitting it. I gazed at the delightful young shop assistant (first job, fresh from some cultured conservatoire or other, tight sweater, short skirt smoothed over black nylon-clad legs) placing five copies of *Man Shaving* next to the new ones from Pickard, Kreutz and Jamlene. Pickard, Kreutz, Jamlene, Auxere... All four of them sat together on a waist-high table, under a hand-painted sign: New Titles. Simultaneously, in the reflection of the shop window, a monochrome world eddied behind me - a cold and drained place, the shoppers and workers slipping past one another like ghost images on a poorly tuned television. Inside, the shop yellow-glowed with equal warmth over the works of Pickard, Kreutz, Jamlene and Auxere.

At first, my little book slipped unobtrusively into the sluggish current which washed against the walls of the high and bloody mighty. Modest 200 word reviews appeared here and there in the better newspapers. It was mentioned favourably on television, connected to some piffling controversy or other, and 1,947 copies of *Man Shaving* (43 copies either spoiled in transit, sent to reviewers gratis, 10 for me and mine, eight of which I still have, one lost on the Metro, the other donated to my oleaginous landlord to placate him for late payment of rent) were placed in brown paper bags with a curving receipt and handed over to eager readers in return for 10 francs, two of which were destined for my bank account. A second printing was ordered, a third, a fourth, each larger than the last. By the end of the year, 12,000 copies had been sold and it was translated into English, German and Japanese. Pilgrims were delighted. My editor called me. All the signs are, he yawned with fake nonchalance, of a cult forming. *Man Shaving* was being taken up by the self-help

hippie gurus in San Francisco, smart women in New York were referring to it as some kind of inspirational tract. In London it was considered a crushing satire and was as required for the urban hipster as Necklinger's *Savage Red Gash*, *Blart* magazine and the anthology of poetry from the coterie of loons who hung around with the artist Peter Marx. The last book to show these kinds of signs, whispered the increasingly moist voice of my editor, was *Sky Puddles* by Kurt Beast which, as we all know Marcel, has sold somewhere in the region 4 million units and rising. I would become, he chuckled indulgently, busy. I could hear his slippery smile, feel the temperature of his breath (the heat of his excited viscera) through the telephone's ear-piece.

And so I jet-lagged my way around the world, invited by universities to talk to their students about the themes of my book and by book stores to autograph towers of the sixteenth impression which now featured a photograph of myself on the inside of the dust jacket, such was my status. In New Zealand there was an unfortunate incident which probably limited sales potential, but it had already shifted 8,000 there alone, which in New Zealand is close enough to saturation point anyway.

"probably limited sales potential"? offering the wife of the governor of pitcairn, henderson, ducie and oeno islands a line of cocaine and a "bunk up in the loos" at a reception at the british high commission? you were lucky just to get kicked out of the country. had you been in the philippines (which you were the previous week) you'd still be in prison now

The palaver all died down after 18 months, and I was able to get back home (new house, in the same estate as several pop singers of the day, very nicely appointed, thank you). I could at last settle into writing the follow-up to my very respectable debut. I took the telephone off the hook and hid it in a kitchen cupboard and, at a desk of driftwood carved into shape by a local artist whose work was appearing in the smarter magazines at the time, put 10 solid weeks into the creation of my answer to *Man Shaving*. Those weeks produced 200 pages, double-spaced. It was supposed to be fully sketched out, a sturdy, calcium-rich skeleton awaiting flesh and muscle and skin, but a fully realised creation capable of movement, nonetheless. But on re-reading it I could see that the idea had stalled quite obviously at around page 20.

I put the telephone receiver back in its cradle. Within 15 minutes it rang. It was my editor at Pilgrime again. *Man Shaving* selling very well indeed. Should be proud. We'll be hitting a million before the end of the year. Talk about a film. Next book hotly anticipated, Auxere, hotly anticipated. Any news, by the way? How's it coming along?

"Hold on a minute," I managed to say. "I mean, a million copies? I never meant for that. No, that's not the idea at all..."

"Yes I know, terrible isn't it?" chuckled the voice, now taking on the exaggerated tones of a man who feels he is sharing a joke.

"No, but I don't want that," I replied. "It's too many. Can't you stop it?" He knew why I wanted it stopped. Kurt bloody Beast and that awful book of his, *Sky Puddles*, that's why. Kurt Beast had written some quite dismal modern version of the myth of Sisyphus in 1967, with the central character re-cast as an American seagull with a "can-do" spirit. Fervent tribes of converts started emptying wire trays next to checkouts in supermarkets of copies of *Sky Puddles* like a plague of some hideous sightless insect. They consumed this immensely stupid book with vacant enthusiasm. Kurt Beast had written a pointless book about a ridiculous character unwittingly doomed to repeat the same activities day after day and, eventually, 4 million people took this as some kind of blueprint for their own life. But, like Dr Spangle's *What Was The Weather Like At The Beginning Of The Universe, Daddy?* - a complex and largely unreadable work of interest only to specialists which sold seven million in paperback, very few people actually read it. It was a fashion item, like platform shoes.

"But," soothed my editor,

whose name, auxere, was laurent noir. as if you'd forgotten

voice now drying up, peanut butter sticky as he realised it was turning into a conversation he'd really rather not be having, "You needn't worry. I mean, Beast never wrote another book, did he? That's where he went wrong. Allowed the thing to overwhelm him."

He was right, Kurt Beast didn't have the nerve to write another book.

oh but he did, m. auxere. were you not aware of the discovery of the great lost manuscript,

the adventures of david, discovered by those three american literary historians while visiting the university of essex, england? found it at what those limey troglodytes call a car boot sale. it's all about a permanently erect penis called david. amazing what damage can be wrought by syphilis left untreated

I met him once, after he became famous. A lumbering sack, six feet in every direction, expanded by American hormone burgers, he'd been paralysed by the success of *Sky Puddles*. Those 4 million sales finished him as effectively as a baseball bat to the back of the head. A bone-pulping thwack with each million. He managed a few years of monosyllabic celebrity during which time everyone was more interested in his latest cosmetic surgery disasters and embarrassing chat show appearances than whether he might pen another book. A book, incidentally, which had already been condemned to be nowhere near as good as his first by widely held opinion, because how could he, anyone, top 4 million sales?

Only one way to overturn the curse of Beast, then. Get on with the second book, get it out there as soon as possible. I gave it another three months of solid work. I sat open-mouthed and undressed (except for a red towelling bath robe)

that pungent rag fetched £19,000 at Sotheby's the other day would you believe?

at my typewriter for anything up to 20 hours at a time. I would stalk the room, raving at the thing, warthog bellowing all manner of vulgarities in my freshly plastered house. After a further 400 pages of rejected manuscript, I started to see why, perhaps, I couldn't write anything beyond cliché and strained metaphors. It was the house. This palace of comfort with its waste disposal unit, dimmer lights and central heating. I was at my best, surely, in that reeking old attic with the cracked bog and the drug pushers and prostitutes carving out territory below. I immediately phoned the estate agent and outlined my need for a similar writing garrett. He understood - millionaire eccentric writer needs to spend more money, of course he bloody understood. My old address at Rue De Rien was, unfortunately, no longer available, having been pulled down as part of the redevelopment of that particularly notorious quarter of Parisian pleasure district, but, the estate agent assured me, he would search high and low for the ideal premises. Excited, I naked-footslapped my way around the house which was standing between me and the escape route from

ignominious oblivion á la Karl Beast. I wouldn't attempt a single word or even think about what I would write until I was installed in the correct space. Two days later, I received a call from the estate agent, all apologies for the delay. I harrumphed his apology away, and we arranged to meet at the place he described as perfect.

It seemed to be a building reclaimed by artists who had squatted an old spice warehouse, converted into open plan studio spaces and run as some kind of commune. I was ushered into one of the studios where a crowd of 30 people laughed and drank sparkling wine out of plastic cups. On the whitewashed brick walls were large photographs of model aeroplanes, all Luftwaffe. Some ghastly modern art exhibition by one of the residents, no doubt.

this is, of course, the universally admired paul richard thompson, who had, that very day, completed the photo shoot for "hot weevil fur" by the silverlawn incident. not that it would go down in history or anything, auxere. hahaha deluded nutbag

There were photographers crawling all over, snap bulbing everyone.

"Buying a studio here, M. Auxere?" A journalist. She held a pen over a reporter's pad, she had large breasts, a quizzical look, dark, aquiline features, nose like Cynthia Lennon's.

"I'm looking," I said, "for a place. A place to write. But..."

"Is the Red Fiction Studio your kind of place?" she asked.

red faction studio for the love of christ

No, I thought, it certainly isn't. All these hippies with their half-baked notion of what makes art. Trendy pop star stuff, this. Graphic design at best. Shallow, a surface as slender as the skin of a soap bubble.

or, as you actually said, and i'm quoting here from that youth culture magazine "mary xmas and fuck off" for which you were interviewed on that day: "(it's) a fine environment for artists with new ideas. we have graphic design at its best, music, this art around us now,

all floating like beautiful, fragile bubbles of shivering, naked creativity, gently colliding and multiplying." you pretentious, lying bastard, auxere!

I stomped back to the prissy, dead-aired house I lived in and vowed to not allow such needless prevarication (the right space to write in? I ask you...) to interfere again. I would write *Man Shaving's* sibling here. I would be healthy. For a new birth to be bouncing and full of vigour, its creator needs to be at his peak. I had a mini gym installed, a hostile forest of heavy metal for stubbing of toe and ripping of tendon. I intended to give up smoking and all other damaging vices. Meat was out the window. No more late nights, a daily three mile jog before a breakfast of fruit and a morning session of sparkle-faced creativity.

and how did you fit that in with your cavorting with exotic dancers from that place bonjour! you liked so much? and had you been celebrating a particularly bracing stint of exercise when you were arrested for urinating on a statue of the virgin mary? and the fist fight with newell peedle, the singer of the silverlawn incident? was that part of the health regime, too?

But what to write? What to write? Various dark alleys tempted me in to explore them; Intelligent, charming yet bitter and insane man plans murderous spree which will see off the top 20 most famous celebrities, *modus operandi* involves befriending celebrities and planning bespoke murder, once friendly with star no longer feels the need to murder, moves on to next celebrity etc etc until he is friends with them all. Is murdered in last chapter by man who befriended him in chapter 10; woman is possessed by devil and finds she prefers it to normal life, wreaks awful acts of evil on the world until she settles down to live a quiet life with an older man in a Marseilles suburb; fiercely intellectual, penniless and starving former student murders deeply unpleasant landlady with axe believing it to be justified if he then lives an unblemished life, enters into bizarre psychological cat and mouse game with the investigating police officer, is wracked with guilt and illness while attempting to atone by helping the landlady's daughter financially, inhabits hell on earth for his action, gives himself up.

a.k.a. crime and punishment...

I flirted with the notion of making a sequel to *Man Shaving*. Pick up where it left off, type thing. I considered re-tooling it, making a new version, a kind of cosmic joke on my millions of readers. Trash all the the central ideas of the original, make everyone who'd believed in the thing as some kind religion feel like dupes. Dupees, even. "See?" I could crow throughout, "You thought I meant for this book to improve your life? It was just a trick! Your eyes poked out, I made you believe you were standing on the edge of a great precipice, and when you fell just a few feet, your faith was restored!" That's what *Man Shaving* did. A grotesque joke gone very wrong. Time to redress the balance, pull the blindfold off. Yes, that's it. I'll bloody show you.¹

¹ As far as we have been able to discover, "I'll bloody show you" appear to be the last words Marcel Auxere ever wrote.