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about 40,000 words

Napoleon

by

William K Hugel

## Introduction

This is a story about Napoleon. Not Napoleon Bonaparte but Napoleon Edward Lupe.

Napoleon was a man of great ideals, a man of untamable passions, a man who reinvented God. But this was a God so personal that He was of no use to anyone but himself. Napoleon was also useless, not only useless but dangerous; this is because he was a hero.

I would never have invented a hero, no self-respecting writer would, and this is why he invented himself, and in the process has invented me. I could never have written about my life if Napoleon had not made me part of his helter-skelter existence, had not dragged me from one side of the country to the other, had not brought me, like a piece of hand luggage, over the seas until he found his war. If it were not for Napoleon I would not be lying here, the remainder of a bullet freshly taken out of my stomach, sewn back up for a second time, unable to move except to tap restlessly at these keys.

But, as he would say, this is exactly what I wanted. I now have a story to tell, like he promised me. And, odd as it may seem, I am the only one who can tell it, as I alone have been his companion during these eventful years. Eventful! This is certainly an understatement, as

Napoleon was one of those rare individuals who was truly driven, spending his life like a car on a lonely country road, with its lights off and its accelerator stuck to the floor. And I in the passenger seat. I would like to say that I was Napoleon's best friend, but really I was only an out-of-tune accompaniment, a whiny fiddle playing into his great orchestral roar.

The fact is that Napoleon could have, at every turn in the road, gone on alone. And that is why, in spite of myself, I followed him. Perhaps I was afraid he would have been better off without me.

But the hospital has promised to keep me here for ten days only, and this is barely long enough to tell our story. Besides, I'm growing restless; Napoleon has already begun to clamor in my ear, demanding that I sing his song, that I uphold my end of the bargain. And so, to ensure that our hero is not lost, let's proceed.

## Chapter One

### Prehistory

Let's begin with a little prehistory; that is, a brief record of Napoleon's life before he and his parents, or more specifically his mother, bought the property which included the little leased plot of land on which my family's trailer sat. I say prehistory because I did not know Napoleon until he was twelve years old, and so anything I relate here is secondhand if not third.

Not that it should be considered unreliable. Most of what I know of Napoleon's early life came directly from conversations with his mother, a woman defined by a strong penchant for irony, but not dishonesty. Shortly after making Napoleon's acquaintance his mother and I developed an odd sort of intimacy. I insist on calling it an intimacy. She immediately demonstrated, at any rate (let's stay in safe water for now), a particular fondness for chatting with me. I suppose this owed something to the limited social opportunities of our undeveloped area of Northern California- but we will get to our mutual environs later. For now I will try to give you, to the best of my memory, a chronological recollection of Napoleon's prehistory.

Napoleon was born in 1973 to his unwed parents in a work co-op sort of commune located somewhere near the middle of California. Unlike most utopian experiments this one was a financial success; it has since become individually owned, and is now quite famous for the quality of its silverware. Elizabeth, Napoleon's mother, (she has insisted on being called by her first name since the first time we met) was of the opinion that the place was no worse or better than anywhere else to live. She did, however, say that at times it was unbearable, due to the undercurrent of vanity and contrived empathy typical of those in self-imposed exile. "Self-imposed exile"- those were her words.

I got the impression that joining the co-op had been John's (Napoleon's father's) idea, and that Elizabeth had simply gone along out of ambivalence. It was also he who suddenly "absolutely could not live there one more day," and so, when Napoleon was two, they purchased a 1961 International school bus, converted it into a motor home of the most remarkable kind, and set off onto the free roads of America.

Now this converted bus was quite an extraordinary thing, and I would like to offer a detailed description of it. This I am able to do with perfect accuracy, as, until just recently, it had been parked in the back of their house, having served as a home to Napoleon, and therefore also to myself, whenever the former was experiencing a particularly strong whim of independence.

It was our home away from home, probably the most homey creation ever to roll about on wheels, a sort of rustic mobile cottage. This owed much to the Lupe's rather unusual decision to lay down hardwood floors. They also raised the roof about three feet, which added a sense of lofty decadence, and installed in the gap stained glass windows. All the way to the front, just below the stained glass, they built a gorgeous, king-sized loft bed, an enormous skylight over top. Next the floor drops down about a foot- I have no idea how they accomplished this- and here

is a large wood-burning stove. The next "room," after one steps up back out of the study- as I have always called it- is a sort of studio, with lots of open space and a beautiful, collapsible oak table. Along the walls are benches that open for extra storage, and all the way in the back is a small alcove bed.

It is easy to picture this little family, parked out in the middle of the New Mexican desert on a moonlit night, the young couple making love under their skylight while two-year-old Napoleon runs naked among the cacti, strangling rattlesnakes. Not that Napoleon has yet laid claim to the infantile strangling of snakes, but considering his recent obsession with Greek mythology, I have no doubt that that is how he sees himself.

Napoleon has always refused to divulge anything about this early life of his, though it went on in some sort of continuum until he was twelve years old. Whenever I would ask him about his nomadic upbringing he would fall silent and stare off into the distance, his eyes far away, a wistful smile creeping over his face. But this reticence of his is merely a way of retaining the mystique of his childhood, not so much for the purpose of my mystification but his own. This is analogous for the way Napoleon has lived his whole life.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The easiest way to understand the course of this meandering decade is to picture an odd sort of circular migration, a loop encompassing most of Canada, Mexico and the United States. They went north in the summer and south in the winter, traveling always at the same time gradually east or west, due to what Elizabeth called John's "paradoxical hatred of monotony." Every few years John would realize that they had been traveling in circles. He would then turn them all around, retreading with fresh eyes over the roads on which they had just been, until eventually the identical loop was recreated, except clockwise instead of counterclockwise. And so on, and so on.

The young family, as you might imagine, survived on very little, supporting themselves by selling various handmade items out of their vehicle. Almost all of these commodities were produced by Elizabeth. John was, and still is, preoccupied strictly by his art. This is not to say that Elizabeth is not an artist, but simply that she is also a craftsperson. She can create attractive, useful things out of almost anything. She also has an extraordinary talent for realistic oil painting. She paints houses, trees, landscapes, fruit, mountains, people, and just about anything else that catches her eye.

Whenever their poverty, though I use this term lightly, reached a precarious state, there would inevitably be a fight. It would begin with Elizabeth mentioning that- although it did not normally bother her- John should, now that they did not have sufficient money for gas or food, consider contributing something to supporting the three of them. His position both as an artist and a man simultaneously threatened, John would invariably be thrown into a terrible rage. Lumping Elizabeth with the rest of the "mundane world which cannot appreciate art unless they are told to or can put a cigarette out in it," he would lash out against "capitalism, artistic corruption and creatively castrating paradigms," then storm away into the night, or day, depending on the hour.

Then, sometime after Elizabeth and Napoleon were asleep, John would always return, sleep on the floor by the fireplace, and disappear again before dawn. At dinnertime he would reappear, with his first day's pay and his manhood reinstated, announcing that he "would rather dig ditches for minimum wage than sell out his artistic integrity."

I doubt that John ever dug ditches or worked for minimum wage. Judging by the sturdiness and attractiveness of their self-built home, he is clearly a talented builder, and probably in times of economic duress simply joined whatever project was under way in the area, earning a good wage. To his credit- so Elizabeth tells me- when John did work he would enjoy the vigor and

physical challenge of his labors so thoroughly that he would abandon his art entirely, take on two jobs at once, and work eighty hours a week for up to three months straight until they were well out of their financial crises.

But you are probably wondering about these artistic endeavors that to this day so consume the life of Napoleon's father. If you were to ask Napoleon he would say simply that his father is "an immensely talented but misunderstood genius." Napoleon, of course, would not know an artistic genius if he were run over by a busload of them. This conviction is generated by what he considers to be appropriate filial respect, and of course no small amount of vanity.

But is Napoleon's father a genius? I have seen his work, which he kept hidden away in a large, porch-like room in the back of their house, but do not know enough about art to make a qualified judgment. His creations are all a repetition of the same theme. They are striking in a distinctly Gothic style, tortured, malignant, and unpleasant. Everything he creates has definite human aspects, and one can nearly make out the artist himself in most of his work. I suppose he thinks he is capturing the human soul, but I doubt if he has even mastered a reasonably complete depiction of his own.

I should mention that the picture I am presenting of Napoleon's father is probably somewhat unfair, but this is not only because I have always seen him as a rival for Elizabeth's affections. The man barely knew I existed, and was so wrapped up in his "artistic mission" that he seemed hardly aware of his son's existence either. As Elizabeth once put it, he "was an excellent father, but only when in the throes of artistic despair." In other words, only when John was experiencing his periodic abandonment of creative aspirations would he suddenly throw all of his energies into "something more organic, something more truly human"- more specifically, Napoleon.

I will say one more thing about John before moving on: It was he who christened Napoleon. This rather unusual appellation was the product of John's hatred of his own plebeian name, which, along with the rest of his middle-class upbringing, he bore like a dull weight on his otherwise winged shoulders. Several times he set off for city hall with the intention of changing it. Instead, twenty-two years of bitterness went into the christening of his only son.

Our prehistory is nearing its end. After ten years of this Gypsy-like lifestyle a "pale, paunchy, glib man in khaki shorts" approached the family's portable market, glanced cursorily at the wicker baskets and tin sculptures, then leapt into a spiel about a patronal friend of his, a guy who collects unknown art but "doesn't want to spend too much money, because he can't know yet if it'll pay off in the long run, but he'll take a gamble to help out a struggling artist." John and Napoleon were out for a swim. Elizabeth smiled charmingly, invited him in for herbal tea, and listened silently to the man's increasingly dubious ramblings about philanthropic patrons, famous artist acquaintances and unknown painters he has watched gain international renown, all the while playing the naive, beautiful hippie chick concerned with nothing other than mother earth and free love. I was fourteen when she told me this, and the notorious smile that crept over her face forced me to quickly excuse myself from the room.

A month later Elizabeth received a letter forwarded from her mother with an offer from a corporate art dealer to purchase twenty of her paintings. She responded promptly, insisting on three times the amount. After considerable negotiations, and no leeway on her part, she received the requested payment, along with a contract to produce an additional painting each month. It was with this sum that the family bought the rural plot of land, which, as I mentioned, included the rented acre on which my family's mobile home sat. It is at this point in our tale that the twelve-year-old Napoleon, the product of a decade of restlessness and changing landscapes, the

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only son of a would-be artistic genius and an indomitable woman, appeared, as if descended from Olympus, on my doorstep with his first importunate request.

## Chapter Two

### The Proposition

The first thing that irritated me about Napoleon was his precocious manner. I later discovered that he was, in this sense at least, not such an aberration, but rather followed the pattern of only children who spend the majority of their early years surrounded by adults.

I should tell you this much about myself: Two years before meeting Napoleon I had resolved to become a child prodigy. Prior to that fateful moment when he came knocking on our trailer door I had already read Chaucer, Voltaire, Flaubert, Tolstoy and attempted Dostoevsky. I had understood almost none of it, but had acquired such an impressive imitative elocution that one might have been led to believe that I was responsible for these literary classics myself.

The reasons for my unusual autodidactic efforts I understand now quite well. My father died when I was nine, leaving almost nothing to maintain his widow and only child. Out of financial distress my mother had remarried almost immediately, to a simple but solvent local carpenter. If you will allow me some quick family psychology, what followed was as straightforward in theory as it was bizarre and incomprehensible in reality. This new husband of my mother's was

so unlike her first spouse, and I so similar to my real father, that my mother was reduced to a perpetual state of Freudian hysterics. Symptomatically, shortly after her second marriage, she declared that I was "borderline retarded," and tried to have me placed in the special group in our school reserved for those with learning disabilities. I had always done very well at school, and this sudden threat to my self-esteem caused me to triple my efforts. My teacher responded to my mother's request by reassuring her that they would closely monitor my performance. Sometime after this examination period had begun- of which, due to my mother's incessant palavering on the subject I was painfully aware- the anticipated interview took place.

I was summoned one lunchtime to meet with the principal and my fourth grade teacher. Mr. Yelstin, our principal, was a barrel-chested, benign man capable of affecting the most convincing flares of temper, and Mrs. Cummings a saccharine, dull-witted, dowdy middle-aged woman I remember best for the pouting fits which were her main line of defense when the class misbehaved. These two sat facing me as I was shown in by the secretary, their hands folded in their generous laps. They smiled at me kindly and asked me to have a seat. Mrs. Cummings inquired how I was feeling that afternoon, and then informed me, with little ceremony and with what I still interpret as secret malice, of my mother's desire to place me in a group for children with learning disabilities. Mr. Yelstin hastily cut in, reassuring me that my performance academically was, particularly of late, more than satisfactory, and explained that they merely hoped that I could shed some light on the cause of my mother's concerns.

I had been anticipating this question for over a month. I had rehearsed my answer, both silently and out loud, innumerable times. This phrase, which would make me forever victorious over my mother, and dispel these noxious rumors once and for all, I must have picked up watching public television.

I delivered it slowly, and with all the gravity my prepubescent voice was capable of.

"She has gone rather mad, I'm afraid."

My inquisitors, who up until that point had been leaning forward and smiling at me with friendly encouragement, now sprang bolt upright in their seats, a mixture of perplexity and horror spreading over their faces. We seemed to sit that way for several minutes, listening to the baleful ticking of the plain school clock.

Finally the principal, the first to recover from his shock, hastily concluded our session. From then on they both treated me with a special kind of respect and distrust, as have all my teachers since. I suspect they all agreed that it was not only my mother that was mad.

For my stepfather's part, the two of us drove the bewildered man quickly to alcoholism, and the three of us to permanent destitution. To his credit, he never became violent or abusive, but found in his cheap beer, bought by the case, a comfortable distance between himself and his unfathomable new family. This is all I will say on the subject of my unfortunate childhood; this is not out of shame, but simply because this sort of maudlin and dreary tale is hardly an appropriate subject for great literature.

So let's return to where I started this chapter, to the front steps of my trailer, to Napoleon's brisk knock on our metallic door. The rapid, treble call to arms jarred me away from M. Bovary and his spacious, newly-wifeless bed. Putting down the hardcover library book, I listened.

The door opening with a squeak, then: "Good morning Mrs. Brown. Is your son in?" The young, mature-sounding voice was crystal clear through my paper thin, veneer bedroom wall.

No answer from my mother, only her heavy tread towards my door. In the two years since her second marriage my mother had put on fifty pounds. Being married to a diminutive, alcoholic carpenter, I assumed she meant this to evidence her sense of propriety.

Before she reached my door I leapt out of bed, ruffled my dark, curly hair a bit more, untucked my shirt on one side and contrived a serious, contemplative expression. "A very nice, handsome, and INTELLIGENT young man," my mother had reported of Napoleon.

My mother's voice, forever belittling: "Jacob, get out of bed. Napoleon has come to see you. Whatever you do, don't make him wait out there." One would have thought it was the late general himself who had condescended to visit me.

Despite my impatience I managed to wait a few more moments. Then, easing myself out of my room, I shoved my hands into my pockets and shuffled down the hallway, considering how best to dispose of the usurper.

At this point in my life I had become accustomed to generating a certain response, a taking aback, an unease, a sense of discomfort which I nurtured at every opportunity. But as I came face to face with Napoleon I had an immediate presentiment of failure. Napoleon was neither taken aback, uneasy nor discomfited; he met my pensive, disheveled figure with a simple expression of disapproval.

My youthful indignation boiled up red-hot. Slouching against the wall I examined him for a moment, then, without taking my hands from my pockets, said:

"Is there something I can help you with?"

Recovering from his initial disdain, and perhaps resigning himself to fate, Napoleon introduced himself, offering his hand. Still leaning against the wall I eventually took it, beginning to feel somewhat foolish.

"I have a proposition for you," Napoleon began, then hesitated, managing not to look at my mother, who was still occupying most of the doorway, "if you come outside for a minute we can discuss it."

"I'll be out in a moment."

I closed the door and hastily put on my shoes. As much as I would have liked to deny it, I could not help a sense of excitement. Not only was I being "propositioned," but it was something my mother could not be a party to.

I found Napoleon sitting at our little plastic table just outside the door. I sat down opposite him, and folded my hands on the table. It was a light, warm May afternoon, and I allowed the gentle breeze to give me a harried, impatient look. For a time Napoleon said nothing, gazing off toward the small clearing where his converted bus had been parked for the past three weeks. He seemed to have forgotten about me all together.

Tall and slim, his hair blonde and his eyes a gentle blue, he was still young enough and boyish enough to be beautiful. The far-away look he had at that moment, which has changed little over the years, was both infinitely alluring and absolutely maddening.

"I need to get back to my book. Flaubert awaits."

The absent look Napoleon gave me made me wish I had not added the flourish. I flushed wildly, and he seemed for a moment to be looking through me. A moment later he retrieved himself.

"Almost exactly between here and our bus is a spring." He paused to let this sink in. "I've already cleared and dug out the area with a shovel, but to get it deep we have to build some kind of apparatus. Here's the deal: If you help me, we'll share the pond fifty-fifty. No need to ask- you can use it whenever you like. I'm thinking of putting in a diving board also."

The last bit seemed added spontaneously, in order to make the deal all the more unrefusable. Indeed, it was the very unrefusability of the offer that generated my wariness. He expected an

answer immediately, and looked at me with serious anticipation. No need to ask "even though it is my land you will be swimming on," I thought.

"Interesting. And what do you know about pond construction?"

"That's not the point. We'll figure it out."

"Figure it out? It's not that simple. It takes a certain knowledge of mean water levels, and displacement hydraulics," he did not contradict me and I grew braver. "Not to mention the effect on the surrounding fauna and flora, and general ecosystem ramifications. One must be careful when trifling with nature."

"If we dig a hole around a spring, we'll make a pond. I'm sure the plants won't mind."

I affected a laugh. Napoleon looked at me irritably, tensing his mouth into a tight semi-smile and squinting his eyes; he almost seemed to be shaking his head.

"I suppose you admire your own sense of equality," I said quickly. "Entering into an equal relationship with one of your serfs."

The term serf I had at the ready: My stepfather had been hired to help the Lupes build their new house, with the understanding that some of his wages could be put toward rent. He had given my mother and I an honorable speech about respecting them "like they was your parents, as they are now our landlords and benefactors."

I grinned triumphantly at Napoleon's confusion- clearly he did not know what a serf was.

Napoleon took a long time to respond. When he finally did, his expression of irritation and perplexity had not entirely disappeared, but his tone and face adapted, along with a firm and final aspect, something calculating.

"That's why I need you," he began slowly, "to help me with the tricky parts, with the hydraulics and the ecosystem. I need an adviser- someone smart." He stood up as if we had come

to an agreement, all but banging his fist on the table. "If you want, I'll show you what I've thought about so far."

Napoleon began making his way toward the woods between our domiciles, and I began to follow him.

"Wait, Czar Napoleon, I need to get my boots."

But Napoleon did not stop, and neither did I. He was impatient to embark upon our first fateful endeavor, and I did not want him to begin without "his adviser." Clearly, he wanted my company and assistance, but it was just as clear that he would go on alone. And that is why I did not dare let his quickly moving figure out of my sight, not even long enough to get my boots, not even though I was wearing my brand-new high-top sneakers, which were to be all but ruined before the day was over.

### Chapter Three

#### Elizabeth

If there is one word that describes Napoleon it is relentless. When I caught up with him at the work site he had already removed his outer shirt and was digging away. His taut young body and slim appendages moved with marvelous ease. Apparently, he had decided that the pond had to be even bigger, maybe to back up his claim about the diving board.

While he was expanding the periphery I began to inspect the surrounding flora. I soon discovered a nice looking plant, with a white flower in the middle and thick green leaves. Seeming like a good candidate for an endangered species, I dug carefully around it, being sure not to damage the roots. I then transplanted it a safe distance from the expanding pond. Returning to the work site I then decided to determine the mean water depth, and began dipping a stick into various locations of the already large but shallow swimming hole.

"It's not very deep yet," I said. "I'd say about thirteen inches on average. You might want to keep it a bit more even."

Napoleon was digging so fanatically that it was a while before he realized that I had said something. Sweating and filthy, up to his ankles in mud, he finally paused, looking at me with contempt.

"You can start digging the other side if you want."

I looked at him over our broad, superficial pond challengingly, but as I could not think of a sufficiently clever rejoinder, or for that matter any reason why I shouldn't start digging, I gave in and picked up the other shovel. Cautiously, I began removing one shovelful at a time, carrying it twenty feet or so away from the pond and making a nice pile of mud underneath a small tree. Maybe I even had plans to cart it away somehow. But after the tenth trip it all began to seem rather monotonous, and, resting on my shovel, I resolved instead to watch Napoleon.

I decided right away that anyone who digs so maniacally that they don't even notice that they are layering themselves in mud must be insane. I am still of this opinion. Why, I wondered, does one person try to excavate an ocean in their backyard, while another is satisfied to poke around in it leisurely with a stick? Why are some of us content to work nine to five, read the daily paper and spend our weekends in a hammock, while others must storm away into the night to conquer the known world?

What drives a Genghis Khan, an Alexander the Great, a Hitler? What drove Napoleon, as he dug like a maniac, as if he expected to unearth some unearthly treasure? What did he think he would find underneath all that mud?

The only thing I could see doing with a pond was lying on my back on a raft reading Wordsworth, part of a Manet-esque pastoral image entitled "The Young Rural Genius Afloat."

Watching his deranged digging I began to grow queasy. I walked around the edge of the water, stopping a safe distance away from Napoleon and the flying mud. I waited for him to look up. He refused to do so, but I could see his annoyance increasing as I stood idly by.

Finally I yelled over to him: "Hey Samson, I need some paper so I can start designing the digging machine."

Again he took a while to respond. I decided to give him another minute and then I would go home.

"Are you done over there?" He did not miss a beat of his mud hurling, and did not even glance in my direction.

"I'm not going to dig the Baltic Sea with a spade. If we make the apparatus we'll get it done a lot faster."

I think he knew that I was right. I am almost certain of it. But Napoleon has never been able to stop anything once he has begun, not until his body collapses or he crashes headfirst into a brick wall.

"If you want, I'll go home and you can come and get me once you're ready to start the designing."

Napoleon seemed to be thinking this over. But he did not say anything, and so I turned as if heading for my trailer.

"Go to the bus and ask my mom. She'll get some for you."

I stood for a moment looking at the big green bus between the trees. Now here was an opportunity. Not only did I have a chance to see the converted school bus I had heard so much about from my stepfather- "a work of true genius, a work of art in itself"- but I would meet Napoleon's mother, whom I would surely impress with my wit and learning. I took a few deep

breaths, shoved my hands into my pockets, and strolled over through the woods, managing to trip over a stump on the way.

I knocked politely. The entrance was an old-fashioned house door, made mostly of glass that was partitioned by delicate wood that had been painted white. The image I soon beheld forced me to abandon my rehearsed introduction: Surely this was not Napoleon's mother.

"I- Napoleon asked me to come and get some paper. We're designing a digging apparatus."

Elizabeth smiled and my feet went numb.

"I've heard something of the undertaking." She held out her hand. "Elizabeth, Napoleon's mother."

I began to offer her my hand, then pulled it back quickly: there was a small puddle of blood in the middle of my palm. I had not noticed the injury when I had fallen.

"Now that's no good. Come in and we'll get you a Band-Aid."

I followed her inside. Elizabeth was wearing what I came to know as her customary warm weather outfit: a tiny pair of old, paint-spattered, cut-off jean shorts and a white tee shirt. I have still not met another woman with such muscular, lean legs. Her whole body was highly athletic, and I suppose it is she Napoleon has to thank for the strong, hard physique he would begin to develop a few years later. She stopped at the sink and turned her profile to me. I could not take my eyes off her breasts. Exquisitely apparent through the thin fabric, her nipples like stereo knobs, they revealed themselves to me in a way none others had before. It was a long time before I realized that this was because I had never before seen a woman not wearing a bra.

Elizabeth turned on the faucet, and as I approached she unexpectedly took hold of my hand, turning it palm side up. She enveloped my hand entirely, working the soap into my palm with

inspiring circular motions. She then took hold of my wrist, gliding her fingers smoothly up and down my forearm.

At this point I nearly fainted. Fortunately, she soon rinsed me off, and went to the bathroom to get a Band-Aid. As she disappeared I thought madly for a reason to stay longer.

Elizabeth called to me from inside the bathroom, "You might as well have a seat while I find you some paper."

I made my way to the "studio," and found the Band-Aid waiting for me on the oak table. I applied it to my palm as Elizabeth searched through the benches, striking the most awe-inspiring poses for the benefit of our digging machine.

"Here we are."

She deposited some paper in front of me and I shuffled in my seat, wondering if this really meant that I was obliged to leave. "Let me get you a drink and I'll help you with it a bit. If you give Napoleon long enough he'll have the whole thing dug by the time you get back anyway. Just don't wait too long or he'll drown himself trying to conform it to Olympic depth standards."

She came back with two glasses of freshly squeezed juice. This was an indulgence I had never experienced before, and my taste buds joined the rest of my senses in sheer ecstasy. Producing two pencils Elizabeth sat down next to me. To my amazement she quickly drew a superb sketch of an axle.

"There's a rusted out old truck with a snowplow Napoleon found just down that hill." Elizabeth pointed out the window. "He had the idea of using the plow. If we attach it to the axle so that it moves up and down you can pull it along and dredge out the pond as deep as you want."

"I think he wants it wider though."

I watched the little bones on the back of Elizabeth's hands dance up and down as she drummed her fingers on the table thoughtfully.

"We'll weld an extra piece into the middle." She erased the drawing and drew another with the inserted portion, adding the plow on its movable fixture. "What do you think?"

She smiled at me, waiting for an answer. This display of talent, combined with the fact that her bare left arm and leg were nearly touching mine, made me suddenly so hot that I was again afraid I would faint. Burning, I looked down dumbly at the drawing, trying to knit my brow.

Elizabeth stood up. I felt a cool rush of relief, and finally answered her: "It looks perfect. I take it you are an artist."

"We both are, my husband and I."

At the word "husband" I momentarily flamed up again- but this was also a deliverance: I no longer felt pressured to act on my desires. The whole time Elizabeth had been sitting next to me I had been terrified that at any second she might lean over and kiss me. (Let me just insert here that Elizabeth has never graced my lips with her own, not even in our later relationships, not even though it must have been something resembling a romance.) But- to stay in the present- I was glad that the flimsy word "husband" gave me an alibi for my inexperience. I even invented a hypothetical rebuff on the spot.

"My dear," I would say to counter her first demonstration of passionate desire, "we cannot. You are, after all, married."

I managed to cool down, and decided, of my own accord, to put an end to the day's shameless flirtation. I stood up resolutely, taking hold of the piece of paper.

"I'll go and see what Napoleon thinks."

Elizabeth had already brought a painting in progress into the middle of the room, and, sitting Buddha fashion before it, was busy mixing some paints.

"Just don't tell him I helped you. I wouldn't want him to think I am interfering with his project." I turned to go. "And... I'm sorry I've forgotten your name already."

"Jacob."

"Jacob. Don't let that little cherub son of mine push you around. Stand up for yourself." She looked at me seriously, and for a time I stood there, confused. She returned her attention to her paints. "And tell Napoleon to come in and eat before we find a skeleton with a shovel in its hand in the backyard. Tell him his mother said so."

I made my way back through the trees in high spirits. I found Napoleon just as I had left him.

"Your mother says you have to come in and eat now."

Napoleon immediately put down his shovel. He stalked toward me and I handed him the drawing.

"You drew this?"

"Yup."

He drew a filthy hand over his even filthier face, looking at me suspiciously. I turned back toward the bus. Napoleon trudged behind; I suppose he was imagining that he was a coal miner, returning from a twelve-hour shift underground. I felt more like a schoolmaster who was leading away a naughty pupil who had been playing in the mud.

Over our lunch of hot dogs and baked beans (I don't think Elizabeth ever cooked anything other than hot dogs and baked beans) Napoleon made several objections to "my" design of the digging machine. He delivered these challenges in a soft and affectedly deep tone, without

looking up from his rapidly disappearing hot dog. It was obvious that these challenges were not necessarily directed at me.

Elizabeth let him exhaust his capacity for suggested improvements, then calmly pointed out that all of his alterations added complexity of design without any additional function, and made it clear that if she was to help (which was necessary because he was still too young to use a welder or a grinder) she would prefer that they avoided any superfluous labor on her part. To hear her use the word "superfluous" made my heart leap.

After she finished she looked at him for a moment sternly. Napoleon looked back down at his food. His brow was knit and his young muscles tensed as he navigated the last piece of hot dog through his would-be manly mouth.

I froze, unable to continue eating. I was terrified that Napoleon would challenge the design's origin, and hence discover our affair. Napoleon stared silently out the window for a while, then, standing up suddenly, deposited his dishes noisily into the sink. He stopped only once he was in the doorway.

"Is it OK if I do the dishes later so I can get started."

Elizabeth looked at him severely.

She said out loud: "I wouldn't think of asking you to do the dishes while you have a friend sitting here."

But her look said: "If you ever want anyone to care about you, you had better start showing some concern for something other than yourself and your projects."

I believe Napoleon read the look verbatim. His face wilted, and his eyes panicked before his mother's. He returned to the table, sat back down, and awkwardly pulled the drawing toward him.

"It's a good design," he said.

Elizabeth smiled, and the odd warmth of the moment enveloped me. Glowing, I finished my hot dog, using my utensils exquisitely, sure that Elizabeth was noticing.

Meanwhile, Napoleon continued to study the design. In what must be called his heart of hearts, the drawing he was looking at was now mine. And so it became, in my mind also. This was Napoleon's power.