

Karaoke Showdown

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It was October in Saint Marie-de-la-Mere, a tiny town on the Mediterranean coast. We'd been on the road for two days—fifteen students and a professor on a bus trip through southern France. We'd hiked medieval fortresses at Perigueux and taken the heretic's tour of Carcassonne, and hopped the fence to crawl across the aqueduct at the Pont du Gare. We were beat, and looking to unwind.

The bowling alley for some reason closed at six, and the restaurant ushered us out around ten; soon, the only place open was a seedy karaoke bar with an unlit facade. Professor Morgan bought a bottle of *pastis* and a carafe of water and we mixed them four fingers high in blue plastic cups. Across the bar, in a huddle around a constellation of empty Budweisers, were four men, who muttered to each other and peered over their shoulders in our direction. We learned later that they -were paratroopers from a nearby Armee de Terre base: aggressive, highly trained, and patrons of a century of military tradition unblemished by victory. To them, we were symbols of French failure: a touristic army of occupation. And we -were getting drunker, louder, and more American by the minute.

Erin was a voice major and the only one in our group ■with the ability to carry a tune and the confidence to sing sober. The paratroopers put down their bottles and sat ramrod straight facing the stage when she picked up the mic and cued the bartender to hit the play button. She did Peggy Lee's "Big Spender," some Streisand number, then "Be our Guest" from the *Beauty and the Beast* soundtrack, and we -were on our second bottle of *pastis* by the time she took her bow. The Frenchmen clapped politely, and the tallest of their group took the stage, and with a long deliberate look in our direction, performed "Soyez notre invite" from the French soundtrack to Disney's *La Belle et la Bete*. Now we understood: it was a showdown.

The Brown twins were good and drunk and ready to rumble. Their timing was all off on Young MC's "Bust a Move," but their attitude was right on. The paratroopers flared their nostrils and demanded another round, then sent a man to the stage to reclaim rap for France. He hit us with Sir Mix A Lot's "Baby Got Back," in an outrageous accent, and I sprayed two fingers of *pastis* out of my nose.

We were on our third bottle and getting goofy; even Erin was tipsy, and trying to assemble a quartet for an ABBA showcase. The paratroopers downed bottle after bottle of Bud and looked a little meaner with each round. I ■was feeling drunk and sentimental, and offered an olive branch, wheezing Elton John's "Can You Feel the Love Tonight," as I gesticulated sloppily with my cup and spilled blue-green highlights on the paratroopers' table. They either didn't understand the lyrics or took offense at the stains; there was to be no love felt tonight. The paratroopers took the stage in an understrength squad, and countered ■with a French classic, "Comme d'habitude."

I grabbed Dr. Morgan by the sleeve and asked if he recognized the tune.

Sure enough, it was "My Way." The paratroopers had 'walked into a trap. I dragged Dr. Morgan to the stage "with the remains of our fourth bottle, and pointed a finger at the bartender, who stood ready over the CD player. And we did our best Sinatra, loving that microphone, taking swigs of *pastis* in turn, and fumbling all but the first verse. It was messy, but it was enough. The paratroopers stood, tossed a wad of francs on the table, and filed out with their standard furred and their tails between their legs. The last paratrooper to leave paused in the doorway, and as Dr. Morgan and I held that final long note, saluted and turned away.