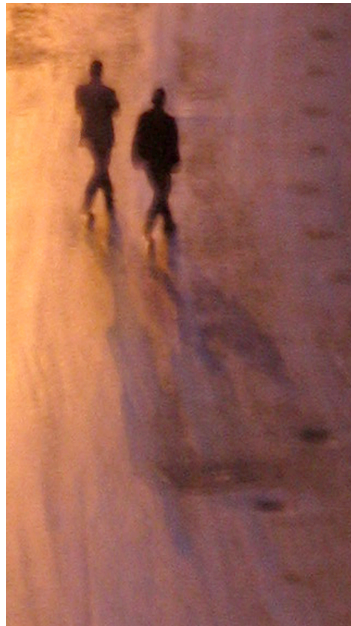


## Like a gentle earthquake (excerpt)



by

Doyle Avant

A semi-autobiographical meditation on family members who have died in air crashes, a journey to Algeria, and Albert Camus' final hours.

*Like a gentle earthquake* was first presented at Jump-Start Performance Company in 2008, performed by the author. Portions of it were subsequently expanded into a full-length work – *The Last Thing You'll Ever See* – which premiered in June 2011.

*Like a gentle earthquake* was presented as part of a trilogy of solos at Mansion in Beirut, May 2013. It can be viewed on Youtube.

*A video comes up of a man looking through prison bars.*



*Lights up on a MAN onstage standing in the video projection facing the same direction as the man onscreen.*

*As the Call to Prayer fades, the MAN onstage turns to us and quotes a passage from...)*

There are so many things I have to tell you, Marie. And so little time.  
You see, my mother died today. Or perhaps it was yesterday.

Videos fades in and out like memory throughout the entire piece.



I got a telegram from the old folks home.

“Mama est morte. Burial tomorrow. Sentiments distingue's.”



*(The Mans smiles at the lines he's just quoted.)*

I was 19 years and 333 days old when I first read those words, the opening lines of Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. At the time, of course, I was fascinated by the main character – Meursault – because he is without a doubt the most deadpan guy in the history of deadpan guys.



Look up blasé in the dictionary and he doesn't even bother to show up. *That's* how blasé he is. And me... well, I was looking for a role model.





In chapter two – on the morning after he has buried his mother without feeling a thing – Meursault strolls down to the beach, takes a dip in the ocean and picks up a beautiful woman named... Marie.



Takes Marie to the movies...

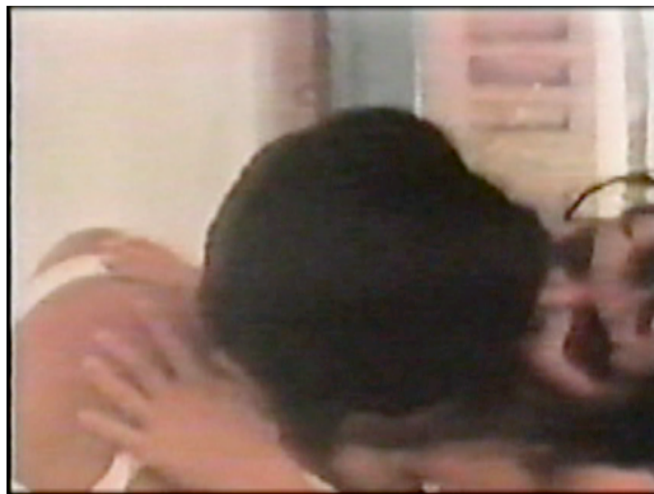


takes her to dinner, takes her home...





et voila.



The next morning he wakes up to find that Marie has gone –  
but that the scent of her hair is still there on the pillow.



He makes some coffee, lights up a cigarette goes out onto his balcony, and spends the entire day just sitting there watching the world go by.







And when night falls, he realizes that another Sunday has come and gone, maman is dead.... and *really* nothing has changed.



\* \* \*

When I was 19 years and 333 days old, I couldn't imagine anyone cooler.  
And now.... well let's just say that I got *older* and Meursault *stayed the same age*. You see *that's* why I betrayed him with time and didn't lift a finger when they condemned him to death.





And *that's* why twenty years later I have no choice but to go back to chapter one and try to make things right again.

And so on October 1, 2004, my un-crashable Air France flight lifts me up out of Paris and then gently sets me down again right on the precipice of North Africa – in Algiers.



To picture Algiers, imagine a beautiful French seaside town... but for some reason all the French have mysteriously vanished. It is...*a miracle*.

I check into the Hotel Touring – an exquisite time capsule of melancholy just like the city around it. I step out onto my balcony – right across the street from the very apartment where Camus first started writing *The Stranger* some sixty years ago...



and where Meursault has sat ever since, smoking his cigarette and watching the years drift slowly by.



And when I see his face behind the bars, I know that I'm going to betray him again...  
Know that I haven't come to Algiers to find Meursault at all.  
I've come back *for you, Marie*.



And so I search for you in all the places you can't possibly be.

In the Place de Martyrs with its never ending flow of nameless faces, in the forgotten back alleys of Bab el Oued,



and in the timeless labyrinth of the Casbah



where every winding passageway lures me to the end of the world.





I look in every hidden corner of this city where you and your people once lived like kings –  
a million pied noirs surrounded by ten million invisible Algerians.







Until one day when they suddenly became...





Visible.





And then in July of 1962 – when you finally lost the war with time – quickly packed a suitcase and joined the forsaken exodus – desperately making its way to the port of Algiers.



Praying for a ship to carry you away from paradise.



Terrified that these very *visible* Algerians – drunk on history – would sweep down from the Casbah and slit your lovely white well-fed throats.



And over seven savage years of war, you had given them a million reasons to do *just that*. So I know that the chances of finding you here now, Marie, are *almost zero*.



But I look for you all the same for the simple reason that I don't believe in the law of averages. In fact, I don't even *believe in numbers*, because in my experience – the numbers *always lie*.

Here, I'll show you.



.  
This is the number of times my mother was married.



.  
This is the number of times she *should* have been married.



And this is the number of marriages it took *to completely shatter her*.

Her first husband was a navy fighter pilot.



Their first date was blind. He called her up sight unseen and asked her to the movies.

He had read about her in a little black book given to him by another navy pilot who was shipping out to Key West. The black book had names, phone numbers, and stars. My mother's name had *three stars* next to it.

Some of the names had *four stars* – but it took only a few quick phone calls to establish that all of the “four star girls” were away at college. My mother's first date with the pilot was in early 1958 and they were married that summer.

Then just a few months later – on Thanksgiving Day to be exact – her husband slammed his F4 fighter jet into the side of an aircraft carrier.







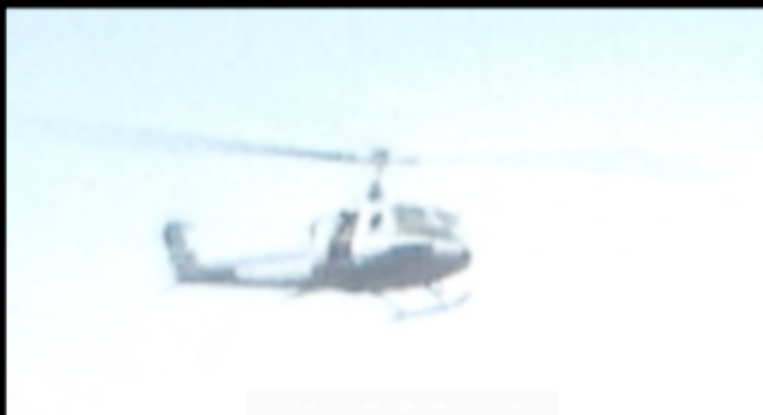
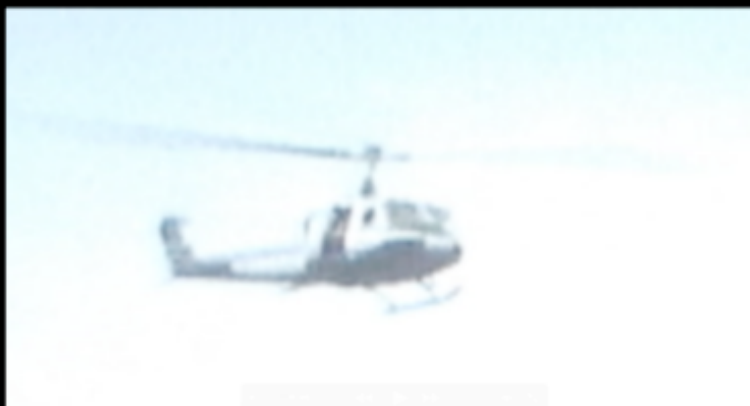
At the time, my mother was three months pregnant with my sister.  
*Hamdulilah.*



Then in 1962 – just as the French were desperately fleeing their beloved Alger Blanche...  
my mother married *my father*



and just a few years later – the helicopter that he was flying let go of its propeller.





When that happens, you inevitably fall back to earth – too fast to walk away...  
but slow enough to see very clearly what the future holds for you.







Then a few years after that, my mother married for a *third and final time*. Married a man who traveled a lot on business and used to fly constantly and unfortunately



*his plane* never crashed.

You see, Marie, *he* was the one who *should* have fallen to earth, but never did.

*Ya Rabi s'mahili*

So perhaps you can understand how after all this – someone like my older sister might feel a bit apprehensive when boarding an airplane.

Not me. I'll fly *anything*. Any *time*. Anywhere. I would have flown on the afternoon of September 11<sup>th</sup> if there'd been somewhere I felt like going that day.

I mean do the math. Two people in my immediate family have been killed in air crashes, which I figure makes the chances of *me* dying in one *absolutely zero*.

\* \* \*

End of excerpt.