

Marseille, June 2019.

Zach Levine sees them before they see him. There, in the quiet chaos of the Noailles market, arguably the filthiest, most wretched hive of scum and villainy outside of California, they were, the two of them. Ill-fitting jeans with a wash that could curtly be summarized as “ugly” (hideous being far too beautiful a word to apply to such a sad sartorial creation), T-shirts with words on them, egregiously polarized sunglasses. They spot him, approach him, clearly lost. They’ve decided, probably not incorrectly, that he is the person present least likely to rob or scam them. One of them opens his mouth, his valiant attempt at speaking French serving only to confirm what the hyper-palatable odor of deep-fried freedom and high-fructose corn syrup had made clear- they are American tourists.

“Y’all lost?” asks Zach.

“Oh...” the tourist responds, clearly relieved to find another Anglophone in this cesspool of foreign humanity. “Yeah. We’re looking for the city center.”

“Rookie mistake. Marseille doesn’t have a city center for the simple reason it’s not actually a city, but rather a collection of suburbs surrounding the largest drug smuggling operation on the continent.”

“...oh.”

They aren’t quite the droids he’s looking for, but they’ll have to do. The plot has to advance somehow.

There is no evidence whatsoever linking Zach Levine to legendary Marseillais cannabis empresario and smuggling kingpin Le Hash Vine. None whatsoever. Indeed, one may be tempted to vaguely conceive the notion of entertaining the idea of starting a line of inquiry along the lines of whether such a total lack of evidence connecting the two might actually be a bit suspicious, but to do so would immediately result in an awe-inspiring army of attorneys

informing the aforementioned thinking party of the first part (hereafter referred to as YOU, punk) that even the slightest attempt to continue thinking these thoughts would inexorably lead to the legal equivalent of getting [redacted] so hard your teeth fall out.

“I have some hash”, offers one of the tourists.

“Where’d you get it?”

“Some sketch guy selling contraband Malboros”.

“...”

“...you guys wanna get some potato chips and get high?”

“...potato chips? Listen buddy, it’s a free country, so if ingesting poly-unsaturated fatty acids produced by the ecological catastrophe known as modern industrial agriculture and systematically destroying the biological integrity of your organism is your idea of fun, I won’t stop you, but please, leave me out of it. “

“Alright, fine, no chips, jeez. What else goes well with hash?”

SEMAX, or L-Methionyl-L- α -glutamylhistidyl-L-phenylalanyl-L-prolylglycyl-L-proline, is a divine combination of 37 Carbon atoms, 51 Hydrogen atoms, 9 Nitrogen atoms, 10 Oxygen atoms, and a lone Sulfur atom. Allegedly first synthesized in Russia shortly before the fall of the Soviet Union, it has a chemical structure as complex and intricate as the architecture of Notre Dame de Paris, although regrettably less robust - SEMAX degrades rapidly at high temperatures. Often given to victims of neurodegenerative diseases, it increases both brain-derived neurotrophic factor and Tropomyosin receptor kinase B, as well as working some wondrous magic on the serotonergic and dopaminergic systems of the user. To use the horrifically inaccurate words of one degenerate internaut- “it grows you new neurons!”.

When combined with 100mg of Modafnil and a strong dose of good weed, it can make the experience of working at a fast paced minimum wage retail job whilst having one’s heart ripped

systematically to shreds by a special someone with a nose ring who is as ruthless as she is lovely, well, almost bearable.

The first hit of quality cannabis resin after a long period of sobriety induces sensations similar to those that arise when one reconnects with a long lost lover.

“Oh darling! How I’ve missed you!”

“What did you get up to while I was gone?”

“Oh... I exercised regularly. Watched what I ate with meticulous precision. Went for a walk every night after dinner. Filled my days with activities I valued for their own sake in order to generate flow states. I slept for a minimum of 9 hours per night in order to have the energy and brain power to spend my days working on worthwhile causes with inspirational people and organized my non-scheduled, so called “leisure time” in such a way as to maximize my skills in domains which I deemed would be of great personal, professional, and societal benefit and oh god life is slowly becoming one endless charade could we please just-”

“You wanna....?”

"YEEEESSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS"

A life spent vainly trying to fill a void is now overflowing with ludic bliss. Everything just clicks. You'd swear the colors are brighter and goodness - never noticed that before. Three days can go by, and even if the novelty's worn off a bit, this is still the most fun we've had in ages. A week passes, then another. With the exception of short trips to the shops, the house has not been left. A nagging feeling that there's something out there that needs doing, to be promptly ignored by burying one's attention in the object of gratification. It's a very comfortable place to be. The best traps usually are.

The setting changes slightly, and the three characters find themselves now slightly intoxicated and implicated in some serious stoner talk.

“So that’s it then? A ‘good’ job with a nice salary so you can buy a big house and fill it with shiny objects to entertain your spouse and 2.5 kids and a dog. That’s happiness?”

“Well... I mean if you define happiness to mean feeling like your genes are going to get passed on, yeah.”

“Okay, right, so even ignoring the dubious at best sustainability of such a reproductive strategy-”

“-All I’m hearing is buzzwords-”

“... serious?”

“ヾ(ツ)ノ yaaa.”

“Okay. For every made-in-China-with-toxic-chemicals-and-shipped-halfway-across-the-world-in-a-smog-belching-container-ship-consumer gadget you buy your kids, you put a little more death in your grandkid’s lungs until he dies due to pulmonary failure at like age 8.”

“...I fox wid it.”

“But even if you weren’t going to create a future in which your progeny end up foraging for mercury poisoned fish amongst plastic icebergs- is that really happiness? Quasi-deterministic biological automaton merrily carrying out its preprogrammed routine, feels good when everything seems to be working?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, you have a better idea?”

“Uh, well like uh, what if...”

“What if what?”

“We’re all infinite spirits in a conscious universe?”

“Really? You actually expect people to believe that?”

“Why not? People believe in efficient markets, don’t they?”

“... damn.”

“Yeah man, Alan Greenspan tends to bum me out too.”

“No, it’s not that - we’re out of hash.”

Zach sighed mightily.

“Well, I suppose it's about time I go finish up this narrative. Peace out bros. It's been fiction.”

Somewhere in a relatively nearby part of the space-time continuum there is a girl playing the euphonium on the banks of the river Seine. Her hair is something chaotic, her manner playful, yet regal. She's got a nose ring, baby blue eyes, and an evergreen face. The notes coming from her horn remind all those assembled that, at least in the cradle of revolutions, the flame of liberty burns ever bright.

The Belsunce area of Marseille, located just north of Noailles and east-north-east of the old port, is named after a 16th century cleric. Its inhabitants can be primarily classified into three groups, listed here in order of decreasing trustworthiness - rats, human beings, and government officials. Spirit still a foot off the ground, Zach Levine found himself, somewhere past midnight, ambulating around the area alluded to in the preceding two sentences. And that's how it ended.