

Sample Chapter

From "What Remains" by Calvin Shields

Chapter 1

South of France, September 2019

There is something there.

He leans closer to the pixelated image on the screen and presses pause.

The drone footage is blurred and indistinct, even though the light had been good. He frowns, rewinds the recording, and plays it back in slow motion. Something is out of place, or is it just a trick of the light?

Leaning back in his chair, he stares at the computer screen, unaware that night has fallen. The pale glow casts an unhealthy pallor over his face.

Flying his drone gives him a sense of freedom. Its as if he becomes the drone, soaring headlong down valleys, wheeling effortlessly over crests, skyrocketing up to the sky. Sometimes, he makes a little money on the side from photoshoots: weddings, real estate, or the occasional job for tourists.

That afternoon, he filmed a group of pale Scandinavians scrambling up a waterfall in the Gorge du Loup. GPS signals in the gorge are often erratic, but he had flown a high spiral before zooming towards them.

It is a simple process, edit the footage, paste some stills, and add dramatic music to complete the souvenir.

The drone was too high, though. The group is too small at the start of the spiral, and he is about to delete the first fifteen seconds when something catches his eye.

Something moves.

He freezes, watching closely.

What is it?

The computer hums faintly. Outside, the last pale pink of sunset seeps through the grimy window.

"Where is that?" he murmurs.

He often hikes the trails and knows the area well. Opening a drawer, he pulls out a hiking map, switches on the light, and spreads it across his desk. Leaning over, he smooths the creases with his hands.

"It must be there," he mutters, prodding the paper with a stubby finger.

The nearest landmark is the Aqueduct de Foulon, a hundred meters below.

He moves his finger along the map. There is no marked trail, just a steep drop, completely isolated.

"Shit."

He returns to the computer and opens his browser. After five minutes of searching, he finds an old hiking map: Randonner de Trail du Loup, dated 1954. Unfortunately, its small-scale, and when he zooms in on the aqueduct area, it blurs into indistinct smudges.

Tracing the aqueduct northwards, he notices a faint zigzagging dotted line leading away from the aqueduct, climbing west up the cliff.

He glances back at his modern map.

There is nothing there.

He replays the footage, repeatedly, in slow motion.

Behind a large gorse bush, something moves.

The Road to Paradise

Five million years ago, the Mediterranean dried up, and an insignificant brook carved a deep gash in the soft calciferous rock of a plateau in the Alpes-Maritimes of southern France. The Loup River meanders towards the Mediterranean down the gorge, flanked by towering limestone crags on either side of the sinuous stream.

He parks the Deux-Chevaux by the small stone chapel beneath the remnants of the railway viaduct in Pont-du-Loup and switches off the engine. It dies with an asthmatic, agricultural clatter.

It is early morning. A gossamer veil of high clouds shrouds the sun, painting the face of the cliffs at the entrance to the gorge in a wash of pale citrus. The uniformity of the rock face is broken by brown striations of soft sandstone, where vegetation clings precariously to narrow terraces and crevices.

On a rocky promontory 1,800 feet above, the ancient, fortified village of Gourdon peers imperiously down, its grey stone ramparts blending seamlessly with the craggy bluff.

The cool, still air portends yet another hot, humid day.

He pulls on his hiking shoes, lacing them tightly, and opens his backpack. The drone is small and fits perfectly between two water bottles. Clutching his hiking poles, he strides towards the start of the Chemin du Paradis.

The village of Le Pont du Loup straddles the Loup River at the mouth of the gorge. The remains of a railway viaduct tower over the small village which was cynically demolished by retreating Germans in 1944 in an act of Teutonic tantrum,

The congregation of the village had outgrown the little chapel in Pont-du-Loup, forcing them to make the parochial peregrination to the 12th-century church of Saint-Vincent de Gourdon on top of the cliff every Sunday via the Chemin du Paradis.

Just imagine, he ponders, trying to get reluctant teenagers to church these days, let alone cajoling them into climbing 1,800 feet to get there.

The trail is remarkably well preserved. Worn stone steps and pavoirs line the steep track as it snakes through Mediterranean oak, chestnuts, and hornbeams. Fallen leaves cover the track in a soft brown carpet.

After an hour of hard climbing, he reaches the large rusty pipe of the Aqueduct de Foulon, which runs along the 1,600-foot contour.

The town of Grasse had expanded dramatically towards the end of the 19th century, and the existing water supply was insufficient for the increased commercial activity. In 1889, a concrete aqueduct was constructed, connecting a spring at the top of the gorge to satisfy the ever-thirsty tanneries and perfumeries.

The 22 hand-hewn tunnels carved into the cliffs, and the 20-kilometre length stand as a testament to the vital importance of the water supply.

Constantly damaged by rockfalls, the aqueduct was replaced by a metal pipe in 1950, which is still in use today.

He fills his water bottle from a small fountain and turns to follow the three-foot-diameter pipe installed on top of the old concrete conduit. In places, it is in a bad state of repair, the top dented by falling rocks, and frequent leaks which are poorly patched with black bitumen bandages. Patches of moss grow on the condensation clinging to the bottom of the pipe, and drips from the joints form small pools along the path which flow in rivulets into the undergrowth. Sections of the pipe have been replaced with stainless steel which dazzle in the bright sunlight.

The sun burns off the haze, and it is becoming uncomfortably warm. The air is calm and still, filled with the buzz of insects and the occasional trill of a bird. A motorbike rasps in Pont-sur-Loup far below, and in the

distance to the south, an aircraft climbs away from Nice airport.

The first tunnel is tiny, with barely enough room for him to follow the pipe. A draft of cool air greets him as he bends down to enter. The rocks brush his back as he walks sideways into the darkness. Fluttering bats are briefly illuminated by the feeble flashlight of his iPhone, and cobwebs brush his face.

He squints as he emerges into the bright sunlight. The terrain has become more rocky and rugged.

The second tunnel is larger and longer. It is partially filled with water, and he wades through it up to his ankles. The uneven rocks beneath the surface are slippery, and he stumbles past a jet of water pouring from a crack in the pipe. The tunnel exits onto a narrow terrace on the cliff face, where the ground drops away 500 feet vertically to his right.

He passes through a broad flat patch of land filled with pale lilac autumn crocus. He picks one and turns it in his hand, it has no leaves.

Naked ladies. He thinks with a smile.

He rests with his back to the pipe. The village of Courmes, on the far side of the gorge, adds a dab of colour in the shadow of the peaks of Courmettes and Tourettes.

He has only been this far down the path once before.

He turns and walks towards the next tunnel. He catches sight of a streaked, yellowing marble plaque cemented to the rocks. He pauses to read it.

ICI FURENT FUSILLES EN PATRIOTES

PAR LES ALLEMANDS LE 09-06-1944

LES DEUX FRERES

ALBERT ET MARCEL SOLER

DE VENCE

AGES DE 29 ET 20 ANS

He translates it without thinking. On this spot, two patriotic brothers, Albert and Marcel Soler from Vence, aged 20 and 29, were shot by the Germans on June 21st, 1944.

So young. He slowly rereads the text.

He reaches the area he is looking for after two more tunnels. The terrace is now much wider, and the

undergrowth is thick and tangled on the uphill side. He carefully examines the edge of the path and eventually finds what looks like a stone step protruding slightly from underneath a thick thorn bush...

He clambers over the pipe and kicks away the spiky branches with his feet, glad he had worn his hiking trousers. There seems to be a rudimentary path leading through the tangle of thorns and bushes up the front of the cliff. He struggles as he pushes upwards, the thorns tear at his trousers, and it is difficult to forge a way through the gorse bushes. Maddening mosquitos and horseflies attack him in droves.

After half an hour and barely 50 metres, the way is blocked by a landslide of scree 50 metres wide. He gingerly places one foot on the steep, rock-strewn slope and sets off an avalanche of rocks and pebbles which accelerate and cascade over the cliff with a dusty clamour.

There is no way forward. Exasperated, he turns around and descends slowly to the pipe below.

Thermals dance in the afternoon heat, and dark clouds begin to form over the mountains as he gathers his breath in the shade of a stunted oak. There is only one option. He opens the backpack and pulls out the drone and goggles. He unfolds the propeller arms, places the drone as close to the cliff edge as he can and switches it on. It chirps and beeps as it whirrs into life. He pulls on his goggles and adjusts the controls, the picture from the camera in the drone is crystal clear.

The drone hovers, its motors whining softly against the wind which funnels through the gorge. He adjusts the controls, his fingers tense against the slick surface of the controller.

The GPS signal flickers.

"Shit."

He pulls back slightly on the control stick, steadying the drone as it rises two meters into the air, turning towards him. In the goggles, he catches his own reflection, a pale face, tense with concentration. He looks ridiculous.

The battery warning flashes:

Battery level 60%.

Not much time left.

He turns the drone towards the path, following it slowly upwards, past jagged limestone and sparse vegetation. The signal drops out twice, static flickering in his viewfinder. He swings the drone from side to side, adjusting

the camera angle, trying to orient himself.

Then, a flash of movement, its not an animal, or the wind.

He forces the drone higher, pushing towards the flat rock face ahead, half-hidden by thick gorse. He holds his breath, as the image on the controller flickers, revealing something strange, something man-made.

There was a sheet of faded camouflage netting, flapping gently in the breeze.

And beside it, what appears to be a door.

The drone tilts, creeping forwards

The battery warning beeps again:

Battery level 40%.

"Come on, come on..."

He adjusts the controls, bringing the drone in lower and slower.

The door is open.

It isnt just a door, its a large, rusted steel portal embedded in the cliff face, behind which is a cave, or more accurately, a sizeable cavity in the rock. The wind spirals through the opening, stirring dust and brittle leaves across the ground.

"Battery level 30%."

The drone's camera flickers. He swears under his breath, but he carefully nudges the drone forwards into the darkness of the cave.

The sun is low in the west, infusing the cavern with an orange glow.

The drone hovers, the camera adjusting to the low light.

And then he sees them.

At first, he thought they may be a pile of rocks or rubble, but in the gloom, he makes out--

Two skeletons.

They sit slumped against the wall; their bones wrapped in tattered remnants of clothing. The fragile fabric clings to what little remains of leathery flesh, shrunken tight against ribs and joints.

One skull has toppled sideways, its jaw slack in a silent scream.

At its feet lies a pair of scuffed black boots, their laces long disintegrated.

He turns the drone slightly. Leaning against the larger skeleton is a smaller figure with bones protruding from a pair of womens tan hiking shoes. The remains of their fingers are intertwined, a small gold ring lies in the dust.

His stomach turns.

"Battery level 20%."

He should turn back, but something compels him to stay.

His fingers tighten on the controls as he edges the drone closer, tilting the camera downwards.

At the back of the cave, barely visible under the dust, something catches his eye.

There is a large, rusted metal cylinder covered with strange insignia protruding from a pile of rubble.

He holds his breath for a moment.

"Battery level 10%."

The drone wavers as the static worsens. White lines flash across the screen, and in a final garbled burst of light.

The screen goes black.