

Michael Copple

# Vastness of Pace

## Chapter One & Two

a novel  
inspired by  
true events



# VASTNESS of PACE

A Novel Inspired by True Events

by  
Michael Copple

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# Contents

- Chapter 1    SETTING THE PACE
- Chapter 2    FORK IN THE ROAD
- Chapter 3    TRAFFIC CONES
- Chapter 4    GOING WITH THE FLOW
- Chapter 5    CHANGING DRIVERS
- Chapter 6    UPPING THE PACE
- Chapter 7    CHANGING THE ROUTE
- Chapter 8    FURTHER PICKING UP THE PACE
- Chapter 9    CHANGING MOODS
- Chapter 10    FINDING A HOTEL
- Chapter 11    FINDING A CHURCH
- Chapter 12    WHERE'S THE FIRE?
- Chapter 13    HURRY HOME
- Chapter 14    GASSED UP TO GO
- Chapter 15    THE CAR CALLED DUCK

A Note to the Reader  
About the Author  
Books by the Author

**Luke Corbett is reminiscing about an electrifying journey which occurred eighteen years earlier. Before the trip ends, he remembers how he'd sensed that he and Melissa would not be able to reach their destination without a catastrophic disaster. In fact, the thought came to mind that they might either be shipped back in body bags or else were on this path to calamity forever into eternity.**

# CHAPTER 1

## SETTING THE PACE

"Stop. Just listen for a moment."

Seeing that I had stopped, let go of her hand and interrupted our morning walk along the rural road, my wife listened for a few seconds and replied, "I don't hear anything."

"No, listen. Really listen."

"It's so silent; there's no sound to hear," she said.

"Isn't it wonderful!?"

They both listened to and appreciated the silence for a few moments.

"We can't hear a thing! Exactly the reason to stop and listen. There's absolutely nothing like stillness. This is incredible."

We stood smiling at each other as we absorbed the pure calmness of the countryside. I felt like we were sharing a daydream in the peaceful morning ambiance.

Finally, the silence was broken by the sounds of the Provence awakening. The faint sound of a distant rooster crowing welcomed us back to reality. Prompting us to resume our brisk walk, my wife of only three weeks held out her hand to put it back into mine, and we moved on.

Startled a few steps farther by the sudden fluttering of bird wings—and loud chirps filling the air, we saw that our own leisurely motion had surprised a flock of small blackbirds. They landed in a nearby farmer's freshly planted crop field changing their alarming chirps to happy

chattering. They'd hit pay dirt picking the newly sewn seeds from the ground.

It was Friday. The green color of the leaves deepened as the sun grew brighter. The morning atmosphere created an air of serenity.

The wind calm, the sky blue, not a cloud to be seen—an absolutely great way to start the day and a three-day weekend.

Upon returning from the revitalizing exercise, our cardiovascular systems abundantly flowing and wide awake, we were ready to take on the challenge of the day and the ten-hour drive to Cholet, France.

Tomorrow was the long-planned wedding day for my wife's good friend Emmanuelle. Her groom was Pierrick, a fire fighter from Paris. To the best of recollection, the invitation affirmed the ceremony would take place in the Notre Dame in Cholet at eleven on Saturday morning, May 19, 2001.

Cholet—pronounced, “show-lay”—a city near the Atlantic coast in Brittany of the northwest part of France, we anticipated the typical European allure of charming outdoor cafes, restaurants, and history.

Melissa Corbett—and her husband, Luke—that's me—had, for several months, been looking forward to attending the wedding.

Being in my second month of a one-year contract as a service engineer for an American company in Montana, our transportation was a handed-down company car: an olive green, diesel, Ford Mondeo station wagon. I was scheduled to do work in the Netherlands beginning on Monday—a trip that, presently unknown to us, would be postponed after our arrival in Cholet.



We were well prepared and full of energy and both knew this weekend would be as pleasant as could be.

Melissa and I lived only to make each other happy. We enjoyed doing so many things together. We were a fortunate couple. We'd recently learned we were just meant for each other, being as compatible as we were.

We lived only for the here and now. The long-range future couldn't influence enough pressure to make us consider next month, let alone *eternity*.

We planned on departing from our quiet country home near Aix-en-Provence in the southeast of France on this beautiful Friday morning. The journey should comfortably have us there by evening. Upon arriving in Cholet by early evening for a nice supper and restful night, we would again be fully recharged and energized for the long day of events. We wanted to feel sharp and look good while attending and participating in the exciting, traditional French wedding festivities.

Though the company car wasn't a fancy vehicle, it served its purpose well. We affectionately called it the "Grasshopper," because we had big plans for "hopping" from one place to another all over the European continent. Work required me to travel, and taking the car would allow my wife to accompany me.

For this special weekend we were ready to see more of France; the country's center, the people, the varying cultures, and the changing landscapes. In anticipation, the weekend previous to our trip, I had enthusiastically cleaned and waxed our "Grasshopper" in preparation for the journey. I've always believed that a nice clean, good-looking car is gratifying and adds to the pleasure of a long drive.

Following that Sunday car-wash, in the middle of the week, we'd made a trip to France's second largest city, Marseille. Marseille was only fifteen miles south of our quiet, company provided, country home near Calas. What a huge contrast there was between the big city and the small village of Calas. While we'd left the car in a parking lot, someone must have taken a liking to our shiny, silver hubcaps. Walking back to the car, we saw that the two wheels on the passenger side were uncovered. We walked around to the driver side, and, sure enough, all four hubcaps were gone. Our Grasshopper resembled an extremely plain, obviously unmarked, undercover police car that one would expect to see in a movie. "Oh well," I nonchalantly said to Melissa, "hubcaps are only for decoration anyway."

We both had such good outlooks on the upcoming trip and the adventure of the day-long drive in the Grasshopper, we weren't about to let a little thing like missing hubcaps interfere with our laissez-faire mind set. We quickly accepted the fact that our car had a little decorative flaw; otherwise, all was fine. The main thing was that it was clean, safe and mechanically sound. Now, by the week's end, we'd nearly forgotten the incident all together. Our sunrise walk and upcoming day of adventure were not going to be spoiled. It was time to get on with a nice morning meal and a relaxing trip.

For breakfast, Melissa prepared cereal with fresh fruits, quark, breads, cheeses, croissants, egg omelets with mushrooms, and herbal tea with honey and cream.

While she prepared the food, in preparation for our weekend away from home, I watered the trees in the yard. A slight breeze had materialized, but it was still a fine day.

After the superb breakfast, we quickly packed the Grasshopper with our suitcases and lunch basket to depart for the pleasurable drive.

Knowing we would have some idle time, I thought about refreshing my mind with some reading in the Bible. I took it out to the car and laid it in the back seat, then came back inside. Melissa and I, so relaxed and ready, gave each other knowing smiles, opened the door and left.

The air was not as calm as when we had taken our walk. Even the slight breeze had now become more of a strong, steady wind with occasional gusts out of the northeast.

We'd planned for an early start to have ample time to make a pre-planned shopping and haircut stop in nearby Calas. The day was still nice for the most part; it was warm, and the sun was shining brightly, but upon arriving in the village that strong wind that had unexpectedly come up qualified it for the name, "Mistral." The Mistral wind of southern France is well known not only for gusts just short of hurricane force, but also *steady* winds of nearly the same strength as that of the gusts.

While I went to the town barber for my much-needed haircut, Melissa shopped for some bread two doors down from the barbershop.

Being new to the Calas village, and making the first trip ever to this barbershop, I wasn't sure of the shop's customs. I was in great hopes that he could accommodate me since I had not made an appointment. Since the barber was already busy with someone in the chair, just like back at home, I at least knew to sit in a waiting chair.

Passing the time, I looked at my reflection in the large wall mirror. My hair had really taken a beating from the Mistral. It was pointing out every which way. I tried combing it, but the wind had dried it out so much there was no hope.

I'd been wondering how to explain to the barber how I wanted my hair cut. I was happy to see my German born, French speaking wife return from her shopping and come in to sit and wait with me. My ability to speak French was lacking, but she was nearly fluent. The wait for my turn in the barber's chair lasted for about half an hour.

\* \* \*

Melissa told me she'd bought a baguette at the bakery and put it in the car before coming to the barbershop.

A baguette is a long, narrow; "baseball bat" shaped loaf of French bread. It can come in several lengths, but it is quite common to see baguettes in lengths of 2½ feet. To savor its superior quality, it needs to be eaten within about the first two or three hours from the time it comes out of the baker's oven. More frequently than not, a baguette is still warm, or nearly so, at the time of purchase. It's not in a wrapper, because the condensation from its own warmth would spoil the effect of its freshness—its texture. It's not uncommon to see people breaking off a piece of the baguette to eat it on their way out the bakery door. Those first fresh bites are the best.

Sitting side-by-side waiting, my wife told me that after she'd been shopping at the bakery, she learned of more uses than simply *eating* a fresh baguette.

The French lady in front of her had also bought a baguette. Her two small children were with her: a daughter who was about seven, and a son who was about six.

My wife said to me, "The lady left the bakery just before me. When I came out, I saw her walking along the sidewalk, doing some window shopping.

"Her daughter and son were behind her, the three of them in single file. Big sister was in the middle, and the little boy was last. He was given the task of carrying the baguette.

"Enjoying his job, he was entertaining both his sister and himself with the bread. He was swinging it, much like a baseball hitter swings the bat. Only thing was, he was not hitting a baseball with it, he was taking careful aim at the back of his sister's head and clubbing her with it, grinning and suppressing his laughter as he tormented her. There was no injury to her; there was only reaction from her."

My wife told me the little girl cried out to her mother for assistance, telling her that little brother was mauling her with the loaf of bread. The mother appropriately scolded him, leaving him with an astonishing expression, like, "What am I supposed to do for fun around here?"

\* \* \*

This haircut was going to be well worth the wait. After all, at the wedding we'd be dressed in our nice clothes that we had recently purchased especially for attending the ceremony. Melissa in her beautiful, long, green gown, and I in my new suit, tie, and snappy dancing shoes; we'd be going in grand style; sharp, with lots of class.

Melissa had her hair covered with a scarf, since she'd had it done in a stunning, strikingly beautiful way, and now I would also be seen as more prepared for the event with a well-groomed haircut to go with a smart new suit.

My turn came to approach the barber chair.

When the barber held the cape in front of me—the cover to keep the hair off my clothes—I didn't realize I was supposed to lift my arms to put

them into the sleeves. I'd never before seen one of these covers with sleeves. After my confusion, seeing the holes for my hands and arms, he finally received my cooperation.

Upon getting comfortable in the chair, we found the barber himself to be a very friendly and interesting man. He took his time cutting my hair, listening closely to Melissa's instructions, in French, on how I preferred my hair to be cut.

Another man came in and sat down to wait his turn. The barber spoke with him and us, back and forth. He even took the time to learn where we were from, where we lived now, and what we did to earn our living. We learned that the barber's name was Christian.

He'd begun cutting hair in his shop over a quarter of a century ago. He pointed out that he'd planted the vine when he first opened his shop in 1976. It stretched from the rear of the shop to the front window. The vine was now twenty-five feet long—the first ten feet from the large pot being free of any leaves.

Christian was unique; he was still living near the same house in which he'd been born and had never even traveled outside of France. Furthermore, he had no desire to leave.

Furthermore, he had no desire to get into a hurry.

He took his time, seeming to give careful, detailed attention to each and every hair. He had special tools, the like of which I had never seen. Supposing him to be in his early fifties, he wore his half-glasses down on his nose and leaned back, arching his back to achieve the perfect angle and right distance for his aging eyesight. He pursed his lips to hold his mouth just right while he coordinated the length of each strand of hair.

I found myself dozing off while he finished the job. As one would expect, the resultant haircut was perfect, and, best of all, a most peaceful, slow, relaxing pace had been established.

Just as the barber was about to remove the cover he'd placed over my torso and fastened around my neck, he hesitated. He turned his head, looked at his counter, then reached over and picked up a tall spray can. In his deep, rasping voice, a smile in his tone, he asked me in French if I would like for him to spray some onto my hair. I shrugged, and said to him in English, "I don't know." Then in French, I asked him, what is it, "Qu'est-ce-que c'est?" (Pronounced "Kess ka say?")

He turned and looked at his knowing, next French customer, and with a smiling twinkle in his eye, replied loudly, "C'est anti-Mistral!"

It was hair spray to paste my hair down to my skull in the sixty to eighty-mile-per-hour winds! I shrugged and said, "Okay. Why not?" He must have understood this English, because he instantly began spraying me. Oh well, I would have plenty of time to shower and shampoo out the thick grease before tomorrow's wedding.

So, around eleven in the morning, with a cooler of fresh cheeses; and other appetizing snacks and drinks which Melissa had packed, and with a lukewarm baguette and fresh haircut, we were ready to be on our way.

Before we got out of the wind and into the car, Melissa looked me in the eye, we smiled and kissed; both anticipating the journey and the loving companionship.

## CHAPTER 2

### FORK IN THE ROAD



The day before we left, we'd briefly discussed which route would be best for the lengthy drive. The shortest distance would take the longest time, because it would cross the Grand Massive Central Mountains of southern France. To avoid those narrow roads, slow trucks, steep hills, and sharp curves, we talked about taking either a route west to the coast and then go north, or initially head north until we reach a highway to go west to Cholet.

The southern route would require driving westward, north of the Pyrenees and then turning northward up the Atlantic coast through Bordeaux. The northern route would be almost straight north to Lyon then turning west toward the coast. Both of these options would be mostly autoroute toll-roads. Either way would be much faster than traveling across the Grand Central Massive Mountains in the center. We had decided on the northern route by way of Lyon.

Three weeks ago, we'd been at the entrance where the autoroute begins. There were about ten lanes approaching toll ticket booths. From that experience, we learned the autoroute itself went down to three lanes. The far-right lane was really slow, and the far-left lane was extremely fast! As soon as we pulled out of the toll gate with our ticket, it was like all nine of



the other cars came at the same instant and were in a drag car race to see who could reach the point where ten lanes merge into only three. Every driver wanted to be the one to get to those three lanes first! When the competition was over, it turned into a stock car racetrack! We settled for the middle lane and tried our best to maintain the speed limit and stay in our lane.

This would be our second time, so “knowing the ropes”, I, thinking ahead for the Cholet trip, felt like an experienced autoroute driver. I now knew not to hold back when we depart the toll gate. We’d be merging into the already fast paced traffic. I knew it was going to be fast.

As we drove away from the barbershop, me at the wheel, too relaxed to care about the route, Melissa asked me, “Do you know which way to go?”

“No problem. I have the map to the autoroute toll-road pictured right here in my head.”

With that, off we drove, building up to a speed I categorized as something between relaxed *normal driving* pace and nervous *French racing* speed. Well, with things happening a little faster than comfortable, my reaction time for recognition of the French road signs was not quite fast enough to stay on exactly the correct route.

Whoever had put up the sign to the beginning of the autoroute decided it would be best at some of the forks in the road to leave the decision up to the drivers instead of going to all the trouble to install specific, informative markings. Furthermore, it was normal in France for a green sign, versus a blue one, to mark the way to the autoroute. My U.S. driving experiences had me accustomed to blue signs to mark interstate type expressways.

Remaining calm, realizing it was probably just my prior traveling experiences that might have caused some confusion, we continued along the way. We were now following national highway signs, looking for the next green ones.

With the noteworthy wrong turn, we found ourselves slowed down on a main road lined with big trucks, a farmer on his tractor, and finally, a front-end loader with a backhoe. Being behind that construction vehicle our already slow speed was further slowed, lasting for what felt like half an hour, but in reality, was probably more like only three or four minutes.

The route took us by some unexpected industrial type businesses, and we encountered a few traffic lights. The pace was not nearly the same as we would've been experiencing on the autoroute. We were not able to take full advantage of the entire length of the fast-paced toll road from its beginning point, because this slower route did not allow us to enter at the first toll booth station. However, it was only a short distance to the second entrance, so we didn't let it interfere with our calm composure. *Nothing* was going to disturb our peaceful frame of mind.

The first sign for the second entrance to the autoroute, competing with some temporary road construction signs, indicated that it was to Marseille only. That would take us south, but we needed to go north. Surely the next sign would appear shortly.

It did not appear any time soon.

Finally getting the chance, I sped up and passed the back hoe.

Therefore, we didn't see the next green sign. This happened because there was not enough forewarning, or because I was driving too fast for us to notice it in time.

There was no place to turn around.

Then, we came to a big green sign that pointed out the third entrance to the autoroute was only about five more kilometers (three miles). So, I slowed down again, and we found the entrance.

We were finally entering the autoroute at an entrance which would allow us to head north and we were on our way at last.

At what we thought was entry onto the toll-road, we encountered confusing signs giving us a choice to turn toward Marseilles or toward Lyon. We picked up the toll ticket and pressed on. Feeling just a little rushed having never entered at this point, we unfortunately had made the incorrect choice and were headed south instead of north. Upon realizing this, we stopped just past an exit at an “SOS” pullout (parking spot with an emergency phone box) so we could verify with the map. Sure enough, we needed to go back to the second entrance we’d missed. Seeing on the map that it did in fact have access to the northbound autoroute we went for it.

We proceeded three miles south to the exit to accomplish the turn around.

As it turned out, this was for sure, the place we would’ve been about fifteen minutes earlier if we hadn’t missed that entrance. We only needed to turn around again and get ourselves headed in the right direction—north.

We had to pay a small fee to exit the autoroute, but all was okay; we were almost on our way now.

From the tone of our conversation, I do admit we were both feeling a little pressure that one experiences when things haven’t gone exactly as planned.

Fortunately, the signs differentiating northbound from southbound were easier to follow this time. We followed the sign for the way to Lyon with no problem whatsoever.

There was only a short line at the toll entry booth to pick-up our autoroute ticket. When I pulled the ticket from the dispenser machine and had it safely in my grip, the gate raised, and we were swiftly headed north, experiencing the Grasshopper's sluggish acceleration and a wonderful feeling of freedom and no more slow tractors or other delays.

After the few minor hindrances, we settled back into the original ambiance. The peaceful, easy-going tempo would now be tremendously difficult to change. We were picturing what it was going to be like, driving the normal fast pace of the autoroute, and yet feeling so relaxed, wondering if we would even be able to keep up with the flow.

END of Second Chapter

## **Note to the Reader**

Thank you for reading Chapter One and Two of our story.

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## About the Author



Michael Copple's life experience includes twenty-six years active duty in the US Air Force, nine years of which were overseas, including one year in Vietnam, and nine years with the Wings of Blue Parachute Team at the U.S. Air Force Academy. From 1983 to 1986, he was the Superintendent of Parachuting Operations at USAF Academy. He has logged over 2,000 parachute jumps with fifteen hours of freefall, and earned jump wings from six foreign countries. Michael obtained the highest enlisted rank of Chief Master Sergeant.

He survived several near-death events including four parachute malfunctions, a night equipment jump entanglement with another jumper, being hung up to the outside of an aircraft at 3,000 feet above ground level, and he was caught in an 85mph wind shear under canopy—and more. You can read all about his parachute malfunctions and what it feels like in his novel "Calling from the Sky".

Michael realized that his God-given purpose is to devote his time to authoring Christian literature and bringing forth God's Word.

This has now been his goal since 2005.

Michael Copple, a permanent resident of Canada, has resided near Golden, B.C., with his Canadian wife, Elfriede, since 2003. They both believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of God, enjoy reading and studying God's Word, cross country skiing, hiking, and walking every day with their dog "Kansas".

Visit Michael and read more about him on his website/blog at: <https://michaelcopples.com>



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