

Jack's Jitney: Paris, France

A Travel Story by Jack Simon

Everywhere I looked in Paris I saw my type. Women five foot ten minimum, with strong faces, all of whom looking like they did not have time for me. Making eye contact conjured up a reverse Medusa effect. After meeting somebody so striking, you might as well turn to stone for what is the point in continuing any further? The only correct response would be to stand on the nearest elevated surface, denounce capitalism, swear off singing the Star Spangled Banner, and dedicate myself to the Revolution. Whichever one they got going these days. Viva la France, Viva la Resistance, Viva la Guillotine.

It was romance that had brought me here, my second trip to the city of many cobblestone streets. First time was with my mom, her friend and her kids and the only thing I remember is ordering a bunch of croissants from room service. I talked a lot about returning one day, so when I got an enticing invite from an Ex-girlfriend who had gotten a gig as a cabaret dancer out there I jumped at it.

Vacation is for pretending, traveling is for discovery. Both are dandy, it's like the conversation between art and entertainment. Traveling is what I did in Japan, what I do when I'm in my Jeep canvassing the States. Nights on floors, sleeping in hammocks and bunk beds, meals out of boxes, itineraries filled with adrenaline-inducing engagements. It's scratching itches in spots you didn't know were there.

I was trying out vacation, pretending I could afford hotels. I was living in such a way I would never or could never if I resided on location full time, nor could I survive at this pace back home. Some would say that this conjures up a false image of your location, but I'd volley back that this is only true if you shelter yourself behind a resort's gates. Paris, I gather, is a lot tougher than it

has gotten credit for. People call them snobby but if they spoke with Midwestern accents they would be called gruff. It's not elitism, it's indifference.

French culture seems relatively simple; eat outside, preferably underneath an awning for as often and for as long as possible: smoke; drink; sip; smoke; eat; then follow up all that up with a long walk despite what's now rolling around your stomach, liver, and lungs. Find a new cafe, have some more drinks paired, and smoke the rest of your pack while stuffing your face with another rich snack. I'm pretty sure nobody here works. People who wander the stores to kill time between meals are deputized as employees upon entry so they can earn some cash before their next gallivant.

My first night I unwound with a couple of foreign bartenders who crafted and served me the single best cocktail that has ever touched my lips. Their foreign didn't match my foreign though: the bartender who played more the host role was Italian and very explicitly hated the espresso in France, and the second was a husky Australian who made the majority of the drinks. The latter had gotten robbed his first week in the city but long ago he had shrugged it off. Chalked it up to sometimes bad things happening to good people. Unrest is an anticipated affair, civil displeasure is treated as an almost reassuring occurrence. People who are upset let the larger population know about it loudly. Crime is a parasitic act wherever it happens, but here it is not catastrophized into proof of civilization's downfall. Nobody went out thumping their chest with terrible "Paris Strong" slogans while boarding up their storefronts and distrusting their neighbors. People continue to live their lives happily letting anybody who wants to air grievances do so. Plus you can smoke inside most places, so you tell me who really is the land of the free.

That same first night, I made the pilgrimage to one of the world's great attractions. A testament to architecture and grandeur, I can't imagine pretending to be so cool that I lose the ability to gaze up at the Eiffel Tower, with its 350 light bulbs wired to the thousand-foot freestanding iron, all of it glittering so brightly, and not gasp at what humans are capable of

doing. Anybody who makes fun of touristy stuff is a lame-ass-try-hard. If that burns you, if you go somewhere with someone who wants to hit the stuff that's in their little travel booklet and you refuse, it says more about you than it does about them. Sure, some are traps that are desperately tacky, and yeah, a few are designed to take your money and underwhelm you, but all provide a valuable service. A place that provides a crucial breath away from the world. Somewhere a family can go, stare, and be together.

I walked everywhere, as it is free. An expensive meal was coming down the pike, with a reservation a family friend had helped get for my Ex and me. We had met back in college on the set of a film my friend was directing, she was an actress and I was helping out in the art department. I spent too much time flirting with her and my director friend got pissed at me for distracting the talent. Despite dating for only a few months, we stayed in touch long after and always had an amiable enough relationship. Dancing had her moving to Japan to cruise ships to Ireland to Paris while skiing had me jumping from New York to Colorado to Oregon and back again. We would message each other happy birthday when the dates came around every year and send Snapchats back and forth of the pretty places that we would end up at. Or just when we were bored. It's easy to talk to exes from unserious relationships. It's comfortable.

We had always joked about visiting one another, but if I can get a reason to go somewhere I go. It was evident she was getting cold feet as we drew closer to the trip. Our time together was cut from a two-night stay at her place to none, and a promise to cook for us had seemingly been forgotten. A date on her day off to the Palace of Versailles had been canceled too, she said she's up all night for the shows. On her one rest day, she wanted to sleep in. When I looked up at the ceiling mirror that hung above my hotel room bed all I could think was, "What a waste."

So I ate alone a lot. Gave me time to think about a lot of nonsense which is often the most constructive thing to think about. Scarfing down a meal inside some gorgeous hotel, I became

curious about who was the genius who first took the snail off the sidewalk, from underneath the rock in their garden, perhaps plucked it off the bottom of their bare foot; took it to the kitchen, smothered it in butter and garlic and served it with some toasted bread. I would like to meet this fearless creature who saw deliciousness in sliminess and give them a deep wet kiss. What is brilliance if not seeing what nobody else can?

What I could not see was how to use this new utensil that sat beside my little snail plate. I texted my parents, I texted my pro wrestling group chat, and I texted friends who were more well-traveled and cultured than I to ask what this thing was. This mini-fork attached to mini-spoons stacked atop one another connecting in what looks like a musical instrument triangle. Shockingly, it was my dad who texted me back first with an answer. Telling me to squeeze the outside of the triangle and work the mini spoons as pliers to work into the snail's shell, then use the fork to extract all the gooey good stuff inside. He made it all sound so simple.

I felt so out of place: stranger in a strange land and all that. I was glad for the French laissez-faire service style, as it was unlikely the waitress would see me struggling and I could avoid embarrassment. It's an old stereotype about slow European waiters, but I think that's the point. They're not slow, they're teaching you. Their service is part of the culture, by trying to hail down a waiter your American is showing as nakedly as a bald eagle tattoo across your neck. Parisians treat good food like a divine right: you're supposed to take a long time to eat. Where have you got to be anyway? Sit, think if you're alone, lose yourself in conversation if you're lucky enough to be with company.

For my day's excursion outside the city, I opted to check out the Palace of Versailles's gardens. The line to access the exterior was shorter, and the ticket was cheaper. *Buying* the ticket had been my plan, but as I went to join that short line a gaggle of kids were taking tickets one at a time from the fat stack a woman was holding in her outstretched hand. It had to have been a middle school field trip. As the last kid came through there were still tickets remaining in her palm,

so I leaned over the barricade that was between us and with a toothy smirk asked "Excuse me, hi. You think you can give away one of those extra tickets?" And she looked at me and she looked at the tickets and finally back to me and laughed with a large smile remaining. She let me take a ticket.

Filled with manicured hedges and cascading fountains, it is fascinating what gifts greed can give. I found a cracked door that took me underneath the main grounds and shimmied my way through. Inside this separated hallway were ceilings so high a God could not touch them. I sat on my skateboard beneath a sculpture hugging my knees to my chest, gawking up at a warrior atop his horse. Both had luscious manes that had been chipped and carved from a blank slab of marble that the artist foresaw what could be. I opened a Red Bull. The hiss and the crack of the can echoed in the cavernous surroundings. Standing to wander once more, I took a deep chug. Where the two hallways met a room emerged atop some narrow steps, it was small but still contained two more sculptures and a shallow pool in its middle. I slipped my shoe off to delicately dip my toes in and let the royalty wash over my foot. I imagine myself a prince preparing to bathe before lunch is served to me on a long candlelit table. Afterward, as I digested, I would spectate a polo game held on the grounds. The water was too cold to pretend for very long.

Walking the entirety of the grounds took four hours, stopping to lie down in a knee-high length grass field that had dandelions sprouting up. I could have hung around for another hour studying sculptures, figuring out how it was possible to give the impression of skin being squeezed from stone. The strong gender juxtaposition, the men get defined musculature and the women are made smooth as a display of femininity, is one that can be contemplated for hours. I wanted to stay, but I had a show to catch.

I packed my favorite fancy outfit for this occasion, a blue smoking jacket over a black turtleneck paired with black jeans dotted with butterflies. Black velvet loafers on my feet. It was my Ex's show, she had gotten me a ticket that came with a glass of champagne. While those day-

long getaways had gotten canceled, and texts and FaceTime were kept curt and cordial, it was still this night that could be looked forward to. The bubbling excitement had boiled over though. It was understandable, a reunion after six years might make anybody feel uneasy. Maybe she had remembered that I broke up with her after she had told me she loved me. I knew it was at least slightly irrational to feel sad, as if real romance was slipping through my fingers, but still

The show was around the corner from Moulin Rouge and had a gorgeous venue in its own right. A stubby bald security guard who looked Russian but was French and hated how fast I spoke English checked my name off the guest ticket list and ushered me to the front. The interior was modestly sized, with cozy theater seats on the ground floor and a dinner table set up on the balcony above. The sold-out crowd of Australians on break and American Southerners running away from the summer heat filed in. I got sat in the back corner in a single red leather booth where I made myself comfortable. When my Ex hit the stage I grinned and grinned and grinned. I grinned so hard I got convinced she would be able to see my teeth shine from the darkness, I grinned so hard I think my mouth connected to my ears, I grinned so hard my face grew heavy. It was my first time seeing her since before I was of legal drinking age, and she looked magnificent.

There were singing and circus performances, and the dancers all hit the Can-Can for one segment. Volunteers were taken for a dance contest where the prize was marriage to my Ex wearing a topless wedding dress. Hers weren't the only titties in the show, it was cabaret after all. But they were the best tits in Paris.

I told her as much when we met up in a nearby bar afterward. "That's the goal," was her reply. She introduced me to her friends who were in the show and I screwed up when one went full French on me and tried to give me the double-cheek kiss greeting. I recovered and we pulled it back together a second time for a successful attempt. Pointing out which of the performers were her roommates, one was the star and the show's de facto hostess. It was her whom I spoke to the longest. My ex got busy doing her social butterfly thing which had always been one of my favorite

things about her. The bar was fun and comfortable as the performers were regulars there. Drink rounds came swiftly and went down smoothly. Eventually, Ex came back around and we sat beside one another in the booth discussing the show and how lively the crowd was. She explained that whenever she hears Australian accents she knows the crowd is going to be riotous. We walked out together, turning left lost in conversation when her roommates started calling out their goodbyes from behind us. Ex hadn't realized her home was in the opposite direction. I thought maybe she'd keep going down the sidewalk, briefly fooling myself that I had read it wrong. But instead, she quickly made our plans for the next evening. Meet up for a drink at a rooftop spot before the dinner reservation.

"Romantic."

"Yeah." Then she scampered away towards her friends.

Despite plans to wake up every morning to get pastries at one of those notorious Parisian bakeries, I kept sleeping late to eleven due to the partying and the jetlag. At that point I'd still be too mucked to move so it'd be another hour in bed and by then I feel it's really too late for all that. Not getting outside until the afternoon was embracing the European spirit anyway. I took a bath, also very European, dabbed on some cologne, used the same toilet that Leonardo Dicaprio once had. I knew that because there was a gold plaque above it that read "Leonardo Dicaprio Pissed Here". It also had a heated seat and bidet built in. Explains the five stars.

The place had enough allure that somebody was having their wedding in the courtyard that afternoon. I ran into them on my way out the front door; the Bride was having a tough time walking the cobblestone in her high heels. "Congratulations!" Shouted I and they shouted back a jubilant "Thank you!" in unison. The event would take place right below my room so it became my day's lynchpin.

I knew it was time when I heard the strumming of a harp floating through my open window. Sitting myself on the sill I leaned out to watch, holding onto the bottle of champagne that

had come with my room. My plan was to spray it around when they came back down the aisle a newly minted married couple. The Groom was already at the altar, the guests all seated.

I dropped a picture from my bird's eye view into the pro wrestling group chat. They were all older and wiser and had families and maligned my dating life constantly. One replied I should do a Coffin Drop dive onto the crowd like one of our favorite wrestlers Darby Allin, a second said I should cash in my Money in the Bank briefcase that guarantees me a World Championship Wedding Match, one said that the Universe was mocking me.

The Bride came down the aisle, her dress was long and flowing and busty with her bosom flowing and busting out. The officiant was a family member. I knew that because as the ceremony started with the two of them up there he said "When you asked me to officiate the wedding... I assumed it was because I'm the oldest living member in the family." Delivery and timing were impeccable.

Quickly I was crying, bawling really. Right before Old Man Ordained could get to the part about presenting the rings, the Bride cut him off. "Wait! I need to do this part! Everybody look under your chairs... Check underneath cushion, maybe taped to it..." An anxious minute passed. "Everybody looking? Did everybody look?" A woman finally shouted "I got it! I have them!" She held up a blue suede box about the size of a sunglass case. "Suprise! You're the ring bearer!" Exclaimed the Bride. I tried to stop myself from full-on sobbing. The woman who found it stood excitedly and tried her best to impersonate the slow rhythmic walk down the aisle. After receiving the rings that I could see sparkling all the way from my position, both said "I do" and kissed before trotting down the aisle too excited to walk. I looked at the champagne bottle in my hand and opted not to pop it. Now the idea felt selfish.

The only reason I had time to sit through all this was because Ex had canceled those pre-dinner plans. Our time together continued to dwindle, now it would be but a meal. The restaurant's dress code was "casual-chic", whatever that means. Never one to repeat an outfit, I threw on my

new three-button suit that had a one-of-one custom paint job on the back from a Ukranian designer who sold directly to the Parisian thrift shop I had found it in earlier that day. Beneath was a silky black shirt whose collar I pulled out, then a grey stetson fedora up top and plaid pants. The hostess didn't turn away my interpretation.

I was there first but that was normal. I was always early and Ex had always been a late person. We ate our way through multiple courses that were bitterly disappointing. Not just because it was the most costly spot I'd eaten at during the trip, but because the food was flavorless. We talked about mutual friends and what they were up to now, where our lives had taken us since we moved away from New York, what our parents were doing. Ignored the food's mediocrity. I did my best to talk about myself but I didn't really care to hear it. We shared how we were tired of packing and unpacking that one massive duffle containing our extensive wardrobes. I tried to make her laugh. I thought it'd help, she was clearly on edge. A band began to play downstairs; they sang "Sweet Home Alabama" in French accents. That's so disarming it'd put anybody at ease. We shared a dessert: one plate two forks dissecting a pecan-crust ed cheesecake. Although in writing the scene may sound romantic it wasn't, we were just two friends with a sweet tooth. Nothing Was Going To Happen.

Ex excused herself to the ladies' room and while she was there I paid the bill because that's how my momma raised me. When she returned she stuck her credit card out to help. I told her it was too late. She blushed and thanked me then said "Well, I should go meet up with my friends..." We hugged goodbye. Later on Instagram, I would see her post a story with her roommate with the Eiffel Tower in the background.

I walked home to the hotel doing my best to shake off any silly sullenness. With that bottle of champagne still unopened and armed with a glass flute, I sat on the steps outside and ripped off the cork. The dull thud echoed through the gated side street. The security guard working the entrance to the hotel mean-mugged me so I asked him if this was alright and he said sure as long

as I stayed quiet. He held a finger to his lips. It was well past midnight by now, the wedding party was beginning to wind down.

My thoughts turned to my friend who said the cosmos were mocking me by placing the wedding right below my window. From his perspective, I understood why he had said it. He worries about me. But when I had cried earlier it was not sorrow that was the tears' catalyst.

Guests leaked out on their way back to their respective hotels, first the oldest ones like the officiant, then the youngest ones being carried out by their teetering parents. A handful around my age emerged at the top of the wee hour to see the Eiffel Tower light up. But it was oddly dark. I talked to the guard and asked him what was happening.

"I thought it was supposed to go off at the beginning of every hour during the night."

"They're only doing two a night to save money. Spent too much on the Olympics... Economy."

"Economy," I repeated.

"Bad economy."

"Yes, bad economy."

"Yes, bad." It was the best we could do with the language barrier.

The wedding guests vanished off somewhere. I hung out and smoked joints with the waitstaff while they were on breaks from the final big cleanup. The guard left promptly when his shift ended at two AM making us promise to be quiet.

Seeing Ex was good for the heart. Hearing how she had achieved everything she dreamed about once upon a time when we were still intimate is a gift, the type that carves a hearth inside you that you return to when you need warmth. Seven years on from our relationship, with our early 20s disappearing behind us like a ship on the horizon, our adoration for one another was now in retrospect. While I may never have loved her, I love now what she has become. I love what we have become. People look for somebody to grow old together, but perhaps we do not cherish enough those we were once able to be young with.