

**PARIS,
I ♥ YOU
BUT YOU'RE
BRINGING
ME ↓**

**PARIS,
I LOVE YOU
BUT YOU'RE
BRINGING
ME DOWN**

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FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX NEW YORK

To my parents

Paris, as much as I love Paris, feels to me as though it's long since been "cooked." Its brand consists of what it is, and that can be embellished but not changed.

—William Gibson

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Acknowledgments

Also by Rosecrans Baldwin

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1

The sun above Paris was a mid-July clementine. I bought copies of *Le Monde* and the *Herald Tribune* at a kiosk and climbed the stairs to my new office on the Champs-Élysées. For three hours, I mugged at a laptop, trying to figure out how the e-mail system worked. My fingers were chattering. I spent long, spacey minutes trying to find the @ key. They'd given me a keyboard mapped for French speakers, with the letters switched around.

For the rest of the day, strangers approached and handed me folders, speaking to me in French while I panicked inside. A sentence would begin slow, with watery syncopation, then accelerate, gurgling until it slammed into an *ennnnnnh*, or an *urrrrrrrrr*, and I'd be expected to respond.

What did they want from me?

Why was every question a confrontation?

First day on the job, my French was not super. I'd sort of misled them about that.

The advertising agency occupied three floors of a building located a few blocks east of the Arc de Triomphe, next to a McDonald's. Our floor might have been a wing from Versailles. Chandeliers everywhere. Gold-flaked moldings. Long rooms walled by spotty mirrors. There were fireplaces like cave mouths, and high ceilings painted with frescoes. A cherub's little white gut mooned my desk.

For a long time I'd thought Paris had the world's best everything. Girls, food, the crumble-down buildings. Even the dust was arousing. Coming out of the Métro that morning, I'd been so full up my throat constricted.

Basically, I'd been anaphylactic about France since I was ten.

So I was trying to seem cool and unruffled.

My new boss, Pierre, was an old friend. We knew each other from New York, where Pierre and his wife had lived before returning to Paris, their hometown. In March, I'd received an e-mail that Pierre had sent around looking for someone to join his agency who could attend meetings in French but write English copy.

We spoke the next day. Pierre said, "You're good in French..."

I said, "How good in French?"

Around lunchtime, Pierre introduced me to André, his co-creative director. They shared an office. André was stocky, long-haired, orthodontic. He grinned like Animal from the Muppets. I liked him right away. Probably ate scissors for lunch.

"André doesn't speak English," Pierre said.

"Fuck that," André said in English, staring at me. He added, smiling, "But no, do not."

A computer monitor attached to André's laptop showed two nude women sixty-nining. André had on a pink Lacoste shirt and a blazer with two lapels, one folded up. It was the first jacket I'd ever seen that included a constantly popped collar, suggesting, *Dude, let your clothes handle the boil, you're busy musing*. At that moment, André's boots were perched on an Italian racing bicycle. People informed me later that he never rode it—it was parked there only to keep beauty in near proximity.

I told André I liked his office. André grinned, then his BlackBerry began to chirrup. André ignored

it and said in English, “So, where you come?”

“Come from,” Pierre corrected him.

“New York,” I said.

The BlackBerry kept ringing. André grabbed it like it was a burning club and screamed down the line while rampaging out of the room.

In a short while, I’d figured out the e-mail system and how to remap my keyboard; as long as I didn’t look too closely at what I was doing, it would perform like a QWERTY layout and I could communicate my intentions. Perhaps this will become a metaphor, I thought. Then my calendar program started making a boingy sound. It said I was late for a *réunion* on the sixth floor.

Getting my *étages* wrong, I wound up in a law firm. The receptionist was prickly: I was due for a meeting where? With whom?

On the proper floor, I asked an IT guy for directions. He said a bunch of things and gestured with his arm. Tried a hallway: dead end. Backtracked, tried another hallway. Oh, you’re dead, I told myself. Around me people were speaking French into headsets, wearing scarves despite the heat. Finally I found a conference room, took an empty chair, and apologized to a horseshoe of elders who were watching a PowerPoint presentation—“*Désolé*,” I said, catching my breath, “*désolé*.”

A woman wearing a white suit and white eyeglasses said in English, “Excuse me, who are you looking for?”

Kind of bold, I thought, matching your pantsuit to your glasses.

Finally, down the hall, in the right conference room, I met Claude, a senior account director, who assured me I was where I belonged.

“Dude, you’re from, like, New York? So cool, man,” Claude said in English. Claude was skinnier and smelled of cigarettes, with arms sunburned to the color of traffic cones. “I love New York,” he said. “Why did you leave? You know, no one goes New York to Paris.”

Claude said he’d recently returned from the beach. “Just the total best, dude, Antibes. You haven’t been? You must go with me sometime.”

Behind me, a breeze suckled the blinds from a large open window. The view spanned Paris, one of those views that came with sunshine and clarinets, from the Eiffel Tower to the Grand Palais, to the fondant of the Sacré Cœur.

I wanted to levitate right out of the room.

Claude asked if I was married and what girls were like in New York. “They’re easy, right, easy pussy? Like you’re just going down the street”—Claude mimed a drum major swinging his arms; I found it hilarious and exciting—“and there’s one! And there!”

Slowly, about a dozen young French people turned up—art directors, copywriters, project managers, programmers—nodding with afternoon fatigue. They helped themselves to Coke and Coors. Light from plastic bottles shaped like petite scuba tanks, and Claude began the meeting. “Okay, she, hey, meet this guy...” Claude paused before saying my name. Truthfully it was a pain in French, all those “R”s. Claude asked in French if I had any introductory remarks. I said, “*Excusez-moi?*” People laughed, and I laughed, too, a survival reflex or whatever. I said, “*Non*.” Claude explained to the group that I was there that afternoon only to listen. “*Mais demain matin, nous aurons un brainstorming session with this dude*.” Claude gestured at me and winked.

An hour later, I had no idea what my assignment was, what I’d be called upon to do, or when I’d be required to do it.

In the beginning of my job, I had a look: toddler struggling with digestion. I saw it reflected back at me in people’s sunglasses, absorbed by my coworkers’ eyes. They weren’t used to an American

coming up so close, being such a worried listener—me pressing in with my nervous smile, my jaw
clamped, my forehead rippling with humps like a Klingon's.

Why couldn't I have found a job in Sydney or Cape Town, where the surf brahs communicated b
vibe?

What had I done?

2

My seventh-grade French teacher, Madame Fleuriot, wore brown nylons, high heels, and yielding sweaters. She had a bouffant hairdo of cotton candy that melted in the rain when she forgot her kerchief. Madame's bosom was substantial: a single body. I remembered it bobbing around the room. Who knows what the other boys thought about Madame, but there was something I found intriguing—her high laugh, her dismissive tone. When we didn't know a French noun's gender, Madame Fleuriot mocked us. Wasn't it obvious, the pen's masculinity? The crockery's curves?

In her class, we learned that most of life in France wasn't intended for children. Madame would sigh, "You are too young to understand."

At the end of the year, Madame Fleuriot threw us a party. She hung *tricolore* ribbons in the windows and taught us how to make crêpes. All the butter seemed to relax Madame's posture. She reclined on her desk and swung her feet. She told us, If ever we were lucky enough to visit Paris ...

Just the word "Paris," she was undone a bit.

Around that time, my mother brought home *Charade*, a murder mystery set in Paris with Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant. First time we watched it, in the den, my mother announced that *Charade* was her favorite movie.

It was the first time I'd heard her say she had a favorite anything.

Mom taught nursery school; Dad sold textiles. We lived in hell: suburban Connecticut. One year when I was fourteen, my parents took me and my little sister, Leslie, for a week's vacation in Paris. Our hotel, near Place Saint-Sulpice, was minuscule. Leslie and I barely got our luggage into the room. That first morning, we were staggering from jet lag. Our mother was already in the dining room; she looked primed. Back at home, she'd said what she wanted most from Paris was the coffee, the morning coffee. She ordered *café au lait, très noir*. When the coffee was ready, the waiter brought it out on a silver tray and served it ceremoniously, pouring espresso from one little pot, milk from another, the two streams melding in the cup.

My mother held the coffee below her nose. Her cheeks flushed.

I'd never seen my mother as a woman before, a woman powerfully contented.

That's when I began drinking coffee. I was hung up on every little thing. I *loved* Paris, and felt straightaway at home. Not to be grandiose, but it seemed like the city had been waiting for me. The air was adhesive, hot, and fragrant, and we walked the city up and down and saw everything. Even my sister got into it: she ate from every crêpe stand we passed. My mother would say afterward, "I don't think she ate a single meal inside a building."

Toward the end of the week, at a men's store that resembled a cottage, my dad told me to choose something for myself, anything. I picked a red-and-white shirt with a button-down collar—the first piece of adult clothing I'd ever wanted to wear.

Too quickly, we were back in Connecticut.

In school, Madame Fleuriot's video days were notorious. Our lessons were based on a program *Voix et Images de France* (Voices and Images of France), that featured a family in Paris called the

Thibaults, who lived at number 10 Place d'Italie. Monsieur Thibault was an engineer—*Monsieur Thibault est ingénieur*. Madame Thibault, a homemaker, took care of the children, Paul and Catherine, who looked miserable. There were two college students in the lessons, Robert and Mireille, who were also boyfriend-girlfriend. Mireille was a hot blonde, maybe nineteen. Every episode, she wore the same red skirt and white blouse—big tits, big hips, long hair, and if Robert was infatuated with Mireille, so were we.

For example, one day, visiting the Tuileries Gardens, Mireille took a table at an outdoor café. Spring in Paris, too good to be true, how lovely! But she was thirsty—well, who wouldn't be?—Mireille ordered a kir royale. However, *ooh la la*, when the waiter returned with her drink, he spilled the whole thing down her front.

“What's so funny?” Madame Fleuriot said, pausing the VCR. She studied the screen, where Mireille's breasts and nipples were plainly showing through her blouse.

“Ah, you boys,” Madame said, “please, grow up.”

Madame laughed and relaxed, one hand perched on the TV cart. Mireille remained pause-pendulous.

“Now, a kir royale,” Madame said. “You know this? It really is delicious. You're too young, of course.” How we disappointed her. “In Paris, children do not drink to get drunk. Excuse me. Now, kir royale.”

“Kir royale,” we said.

“Mostly it's champagne,” Madame said, “but with cassis, just a few drops? It's really wonderful. On a summer afternoon?”

Later in the year, Madame showed us a 1980s French movie called *La Boum*. At one point in the film, some teenagers go to the *cinéma*, and a boy sticks his penis into a popcorn box so the girl sitting next to him will jerk him off. But we weren't shocked. We were turning fourteen, we knew about those sorts of things. Stuff like that happened in Paris. Plus, it wasn't cool to make a big deal about anything.

“French” became an umbrella term for me, describing things I liked before I knew why I liked them. But Paris was different. Paris was an umbrella, a dream I carried around in case the weather turned bad.

3

After college, I moved to New York City and began waking up early to write fiction. So far, I've completed two novels—both were dreck—and set about writing a third, plus started an online magazine with a friend. But none of that paid much, so for the rest of the day I wrote anything that earned money. Pet-grooming articles. Real-estate brochures. At one point, I had a column in a magazine published exclusively for American Express “black card” members. They hired me to write what was characterized as luxury humor. “Oh, you know,” a woman’s voice said over the phone, from high above Sixth Avenue and Forty-third Street, “wine, châteaux, jokes about Greece. Can’t you do that?”

Shortly after I replied to Pierre’s e-mail, the agency flew me to Paris for an interview. It all happened pretty fast. Pierre let me crash on his floor and drove me to the office on his Vespa—at stoplight he shouted, “There are handles under the seat, you do not need to hold me.”

We had a meeting with Pierre’s boss, Bernard. Bernard had long hair and chewed gum. He wore Beatle boots and a slim black suit and spoke perfect English, with a Valley girl’s cadences.

During the interview, to compensate for my lack of credentials in advertising, Pierre said things like, “Luxury humor is the type of fresh thinking we need.” I spoke a little French; Bernard suggested I stop. “You can learn this later.” He wanted to know, Bernard said, how I felt about doing presentations.

“So, look, there’s a lot of global business out there. We need, like, a hundred of you,” he said. “English-speakers, I mean.”

Bernard stared at me for a few seconds, snapping his gum. “Okay, well,” he said, continuing in English, “so how do you feel about Paris, good?”

“*J’adore Paris*,” I said.

“Who doesn’t?” Bernard flipped through some folders for a moment, then looked up, as if he’d forgotten why I was there. “So ... we’ll see how it goes. Pierre, do we have any other business to discuss?”

That was the interview.

Three weeks later, I returned to Paris to find an apartment. The agency provided me with an HR representative and a real-estate agent to show me around. Extremely generous of them, I thought. We saw eleven apartments in nine hours. The agent was serious about her business. She rarely smiled while driving us in her small Peugeot. The HR rep was friendlier, with peachy skin and a high, screwy laugh. All day long, we crisscrossed the city, and I could barely keep track of the neighborhoods, the *arrondissements*.

Back in Brooklyn, I’d spent hours reviewing apartment listings on websites for expats. The descriptions were dreamy and confusing:

Exclusive EXCLUSIVITY: Magnificent studio. Totally renewed, last floor, sight loosened on Paris. Beautiful room to be lived, with U.S.-equipped cooking (oven, patches, refrigerator).

Public prosecutor's department. Very brilliant: several windows. SdE with wc. Close any conveniences. Immediate availability. To seize!

The first apartment was above a farmer's market near the Sorbonne, on the Left Bank. The location was Paris Magnificent. Many cheesemongers nearby, booksellers, and *tabacs*. It was the area known as the home of Sartre and Hemingway, the old boys you saw on postcards for €2.25. We waited for ten minutes to be let into the building, and the agent checked e-mail on her smartphone. A lot, I thought, had happened since the days of Hemingway. Luke Skywalker had happened. Supermarkets happened. Hip-hop happened and Joan Didion happened. E-mail happened. More relevant to Paris, there was 1968 and Les Halles razed, there were Mitterand's *grand projets* and Serge Gainsbourg buried in Montparnasse.

The landlord arrived and we climbed upstairs, where the apartment did not reflect the Left Bank glory. It reflected us. It was a 1970s party pit and the owner had gone in for mirroring. Walls in the bedroom were mirrored. The headboard was mirrored and cabinets were mirrored. The breakfast bar would be good for doing cocaine.

"Do you like it?" the agent asked in French.

"*Ce n'est pas terrible*," I said, focusing on my enunciation.

She said, "What would you prefer to see?"

I glanced at a pair of chairs upholstered in red leopard. I did not want to seize them.

"*S'il vous plaît*," I said slowly, "*moins des chaises des animaux*?"

"*Merci beaucoup*," I added.

The next two apartments were under construction. A fourth apartment, north of the Luxembourg Gardens on a demure, quintessential Parisian street, was all green. Green walls, green drapes, green furniture. Kitchen appliances in avocado. The only thing that wasn't green (the doorknobs were green) was in the bedroom, behind a chair: a large trompe l'oeil painting of women's lingerie hanging off the knobs.

We were in a Folies Bergère dressing room.

"Not bad," said the agent. The HR representative agreed and went close to admire the work. The agent saw my face. "Wait, we're in Paris," she said. "It is creative, the capital of creative. Americans love this."

"*Je suis d'accord*," I said. "... *Peut-être moins créatif*?"

Before we moved on, the HR rep said, "We thought you were creative."

Rue de Harlay. Sauf Accès Parc. Interdit. Honestly, even the street signs were nourishment; I was in a mood to drive around Paris all day long. First we went for lunch on Ile de la Cité, one of the islands on the Seine, where Paris had begun. The agent took us to Place Dauphine, behind Pont Neuf. We occupied a sidewalk table. The sun was so close we could have plucked it.

Just unbelievable, the idea I'd be living there soon.

The women required two minutes to confirm they would order different plates of charcuterie, then came wine selection:

"You think a Sancerre?"

"Oh no, not a Sancerre."

"No. Stupid of me."

"What about rosé?"

"But a good rosé."

"Yes, yes, a good rosé, it would be perfect. From where, though?"

“From Aix?”

“Ah, Aix...”

The next apartment, a loft nearby, was across the street from La Conciergerie, a fortress from the Middle Ages that once had been the “antechamber to the guillotine.” The stairs we climbed were centuries old, tacky with black mold.

“Ah, the charm,” the agent sighed. She paused on a landing for the HR representative to agree. The HR rep nodded, breathless from the climb.

Inside, I shielded my eyes, the loft was so bright. The apartment was wild. Windows overlooking Notre Dame’s gargoyles, showing the Seine flowing east and west. *Sight loosened on Paris.* The bathroom was all marble; it had a bathtub with a view and river breezes. And the rent, the agent said, was nothing.

Unfortunately, the apartment was about the size of the agent’s car.

“Yes, it’s too small,” she said, patrolling the room in about four steps. “You will hit your head. And you are bringing your wife. You will need space.”

The agent stopped dead next to the bathtub. Both of us took in the view of Notre Dame’s spire. The agent tugged up her suede boots and said she had an idea.

“Listen,” she confided, “now suppose you want to have an affair. Men in Paris ... Just remember this place. It would be perfect for that.”

The HR woman said, “The size would be just right.”

She was sitting on the bed, patting the duvet. She smiled at me, blinked behind her glasses, and laughed. She said in English, “Nice bed, hey?”

* * *

My flight home was scheduled for early the next morning. Pierre and his wife, Chloe, said I shouldn’t sleep, instead they’d invite six friends for dinner—it was the Parisian thing to do.

That night, I caught maybe 10 percent of the French spoken. Lots of talk about films and politics. Everyone knew one another from art school. Everyone smoked. Someone brought up the Minitel; I’d never heard of it. “It is a version of the Internet that the French invented,” one guy told me in English. “No one beyond France desired it, for some reason.”

Pierre and Chloe were native Parisians. Chloe was my age, Pierre was a little older. They had two young boys who were asleep upstairs, who were accustomed to their parents throwing noisy dinner parties. Pierre was big and tall, dark-haired, with glasses. Gregarious, upbeat, always laughing. Chloe was very pretty, slender, with short black hair and a tiny beauty mark. Both were Parisian from two hundred feet: careless, chic, self-possessed; bon vivant in dress and manner; cigarettes, turtlenecks, cetera.

Around midnight, we were finishing off the wine when one of Pierre’s friends told a story about his grandmother, who lived in the countryside outside Paris, and how she recently had gone to the market in her village and bought a piece of cheese. When she brought it home, she realized the cheese was bad, and this made her furious, so she threw the cheese out the window and hit a cow.

People laughed. Pierre said to me in English, “Did you follow that?”

“Of course,” I said. “About the cheese?”

“The cheese? What cheese?”

I recounted the whole story in English, which most of them understood: the grandmother, the cow. People exploded, laughing like a section of trombones. Pierre, who was crying he was laughing so hard, persevered to say that the story *actually* had been about his friend’s *mother*. She’d been hiking

and had been trampled by a runaway horse, breaking her leg. Ghastly news. The only funny bit had been something her doctor said to her in the hospital, how she should go back and break the horse's leg for revenge.

People started laughing all over again.

For the rest of the night, until two a.m., I sat next to Pierre and Chloe's stereo and didn't speak, pretending to be too stoned. Songs by the American rapper Young Jeezy were playing. He was "The Realest," and he could laugh about life's ups and downs with his trademark *Ahaaaaa*. Meanwhile, Pierre was counting my drinks, plunging into a long stare.

I thought: *Jeezy, I don't know what it's like to have my phone tapped by the feds, but I hear what you're saying. Literally: I understand every word. And I acknowledge that if we met in real life we have nothing in common. But right now you're all I've got.*

Or maybe I wasn't pretending to be too stoned.

Three-thirty in the morning, after Pierre and Chloe's friends had gone, I went out to the balcony. Paris below me was an empty chapel. No one was out. The big train station, Gare du Nord, was in sight, with tracks and cables like vines on the ground. Each neighboring building had a terrace for a headaddress, and curved blue rooftops like hulls of ships upside down—and they'd stood there how long? Had stood above how many Americans in Paris passing through? I experienced a dizzy spell and clutched the railing. Below me, two girls floated home on bicycles cooing to each other. The sound of a scooter came around a corner, followed by its little dark sentry. No stores were open, the city was shut at that hour, and the air smelled of laundry that hadn't dried.

O Paris dawns ...

That morning, sneaking out of Pierre and Chloe's apartment, hoisting my black travel bag on my shoulder, I knew again that I wanted all of it. No matter how many conversations I misunderstood, I couldn't imagine loving Paris less, only more.

4

The advertising agency paid for me to take three hours of French lessons before we moved, to acquaint myself with contemporary business vocabulary. I found an instructor, Gabrielle, who taught from a room overlooking a Manhattan parking garage. At the beginning of my first lesson, Gabrielle gave me a booklet of business vocabulary: *la souris*, the mouse; *l'ordinateur*, the computer; *le Mac*, the Macintosh computer. Gabrielle said this last term would be helpful, since I'd be working in advertising with *les créatifs*, creative people. Mostly we talked about Gabrielle. She was a frizzy-haired Belgian who wore a vest and a silk scarf in a manner of attempted, botched fashion. Gabrielle said she'd never worked in an office, she herself preferred to be mobile, *mobile*.

"Ah," I said, "*mais est-ce que vous avez une mobile?*"

Gabrielle took this as an affront. "Of course I do," she said, showing me her cell phone. "Do you have one?"

At the end of our first lesson, Gabrielle said in English, "My boyfriend lives in Paris." When I asked what he did, where he lived in Paris, she said, "He is an Internet boyfriend."

During lesson two, Gabrielle told me she was tired of being a French-teaching mercenary. She had been taught in China and Romania. Now she lived with two other Belgians in a walk-up in Queens. Advertising could be a little break, she wondered. After all, she, too, had dreamed of living in Paris since she was little. If I could do it, why not she?

"Do you know," Gabrielle said, "if they are hiring more? Here is my personal e-mail," she said scribbling it on her business card.

To finance the move, Rachel and I sold our bed, mattress, dresser, dining table, and stereo. We packed ten duffel bags, each weighing the maximum amount allowed on the plane, containing clothes, books, a nonstick frying pan, my tennis racquets, and a quarter of Rachel's shoes. At the airport, the check-in clerk said *ohnononononono*. We'd been told wrong, she said, ten huge bags were too many; we'd need to leave at least two behind. After ten minutes and a phone call to her boss, she said *okayfinefinefinefinefine*, as long as we paid a bunch of fees, which were nearly the equivalent of a third ticket.

In Paris, when we landed, our luggage filled three carts. The horizon at five a.m., beyond the lights of Charles de Gaulle Airport, was densely black. Outside baggage claim, a man approached me holding a pair of cell phones. He wore two Bluetooth dongles: a plastic oyster squashed into each ear.

"You need a car to Paris?" He was glancing at some police officers.

"*Avez-vous une grande voiture?*" I said. "*Comme un camion?*"

But already he was pushing 180 pounds of our stuff toward a revolving door.

During the drive into Paris, my nerves were fizzy, so I took the opportunity to practice my French. *Where are you from? Do you own your own business? Would you recommend your cell-phone provider to me? What kind of data plan do they offer?*

"Hey," he said, driving while texting, "*bequeil.*"

Oh, I couldn't place the word, I said.

“*Queil*,” he repeated while typing, “*bequeil*.”

I apologized twice in French, adding, “*Je préfère que mon français est bon, mais je ne sais pas—*”

The driver put down his phone, looked at me, and touched my arm.

“Man, *be cool*,” he said. “Okay?”

Beyond the highway, the outskirts of Paris came into view. Many billboards advertising cell phones and cars. Motels built on top of shuttered stores, and train platforms teeming with commuters carrying shoulder bags. Some sooty buildings from the nineteenth century, though most were from after 1972. We were still miles away from Paris proper, the Pont Neuf’s splendid views; when traffic was bad, the airport could be an hour by car. Still, the deep blue dawn was somehow very French-seeming. On a billboard beside the highway, George Clooney smiled at us and held out an espresso.

When we pulled into the courtyard of our building, I didn’t know how much to tip, so I gave the driver twenty euros. Way too much. He was about to return it, but gave me his business card instead, imprinting it into my palm. He made me promise to call him anytime for anything, day or night.

Rachel said, “We made it. Wow, even our luggage made it.”

In fact, we were early. Our landlord wasn’t scheduled to arrive for thirty minutes to let us in, so we moved our bags inside a ground-floor vestibule, then went out to buy cigarettes. The courtyard door buzzed and clicked, and now I was in Paris, our new home.

Our street, Rue Béranger, was narrow, one-way. Shops on the ground floor, apartments above. Stores were opening. Men and women zigzagged to work. The city smelled terrific, of the river and the *boulangeries*, street-cleaning crews and summer mornings. I set out down the block. The closest *tabac*, around the corner, was full of commuters, coffee drinkers, plus a work crew in blue overalls drinking white wine out of delicate little glasses. I knew the phrase: *Un petit blanc sec*. On one TV screen they were watching a horse race, the news on another.

I wore a gigantic smile and ordered *un café*.

When I returned, Rachel said she’d met someone, a tradesman with a message.

“I memorized it,” Rachel said. “He told me, ‘*Je ne parle pas très bien français*.’”

I said, “Why would he tell you he didn’t speak very good French?”

“What?” Rachel said. “No, he asked me some question in French. I had no idea, so I said what I memorized, *Excusez-moi, je suis désolée, je ne parle pas bon français*. Then he said, ‘*Non, je ne parle pas—*’”

“Right,” I said, lighting a cigarette. “He was correcting you. Baby, I’m sorry, he was just telling you what you should have been saying.”

The cigarette tasted disgusting. I squashed it underfoot and kicked it down a storm drain.

* * *

That night we went across the street to a glass-roofed passageway and took a table in the back of what seemed like a charming little bistro. It turned out to be an Australian bar; they served ostrich fillets in addition to *gigot d’agneau*. The air inside was sweltering. The walls were decorated with X-rated cartoons, with people shaped like sausages having an orgy on the beach. One table over, French office workers were crashing together beer glasses to celebrate someone’s *anniversaire*. Rachel and I got two orders of *steak frites*, and a carafe of red wine to split. The food took forever to arrive and tasted horrible, daubs of gray on greasy plates. But I was too thrilled to notice—Rachel, too, from the look on her face. We couldn’t see straight from all the smoke, but more from delight, because there we were, eating *steak frites* in Paris around the corner from our own apartment, ostrich meat be damned.

I was exhausted. So much was astonishing.

5

Paris's neighborhoods, the *arrondissements*, are organized like a twist. They spiral from the river like toilet water flushing in reverse and erupting out of the bowl—a corkscrew or what have you, flattened pig's tail, a whorling braid notched one to twenty. But if you walk from one neighborhood to the next, there is little to suggest the numbers changing. So it was confusing. Anyway, if you began in the middle of the Seine and snaked around, we lived on the Right Bank in the top of the thirteenth arrondissement, called the *haut* Marais, the upper Marais, on Rue Béranger, a quiet little street curling down from Place de la République.

We'd chosen the apartment so we could be within walking distance of nearly everything. It overlooked its darkness and short ceilings for location's sake: fifteen minutes to Notre Dame; twenty-five to the Louvre.

Earlier generations of Americans wanted to live on the other side of the Seine, in the Latin Quarter, where artists and students rambled, but the Left Bank had long ago priced out the artists and students. Now it was home to the rich of Paris, the wealthy of the retired-expat class, and Russian moguls, while the youthful and creative tended to live on the Right Bank, especially in the higher-cheaper numbers, the nineteenth or the twentieth—if not the Right Bank of Berlin, or Toronto.

But we were very happy about our neighborhood, if not our quarters. Our apartment, located above a costume jewelry shop, was dismal and dark. The apartment above us was being renovated—I hadn't heard the noises during my initial visit. So during our first days—we had a solid week before I was required at work—we tried to get out as much as possible.

Behind our street was a village of elbow streets, sunny walls and filthy corners, and many tucked-away shops. A ten-minute walk south was the proper Marais, the former Jewish quarter that had become a trendy shopping zone, but our northern district was still untrafficked. There were tailors and art galleries. Cafés and butchers. A store that sold athletic trophies and one that sold model trains. A blood-samples lab, a computer-repair agency, a video rental. On a leafy corner was a brightly lit lingerie-and-sex-toy boutique.

And where roads didn't cross was an old covered market, the *Marché du Temple*, blue with a dirty glass roof. Some weekends, men trucked in what appeared to be stolen leather goods, but otherwise the market stood empty—Thursdays, maybe it was Tuesdays, a tennis league strung up nets inside—and the surrounding quadrant would be filled with people dawdling over café tables that they'd occupied for hours, chatting with friends. Then behind the market was Rue Bretagne, a picturesque street that wasn't trendy yet. It would be soon, but not yet. Rue Bretagne had a park with a playground, two bookstores, a boutique that sold vintage radios, a booth that sold found photographs—it was the Left Bank I'd seen in picture books, preserved in time. At the center stood the oldest Paris farmer's market still operating, *Le Marché des Enfants Rouges*, built in the 1600s, now ringed by food stalls that sold Moroccan tagines, huge piles of Turkish desserts, West African stews, even sushi.

It was fantastic.

Rachel and I tramped from dawn to late at night, and collapsed each evening. We also spent a lot

of time having our pictures taken. Every service we signed up for in Paris—cell phones, Internet, electricity—required passport photos, with strict rules about their composure. On two separate occasions, we were asked to resubmit our photos; too much smiling. No visible happiness was allowed in official pictures—*pas de sourire, visage dégaqué*.

To become Parisian was business *très sérieux*.

Anyway, we set up home: bought dishes, stocked the larder, purchased a mop and broom. We ate cheaply so we could afford a few good meals, including an expensive lunch one day inside the Musée d'Orsay, under rows of dazzling chandeliers, where we drank too much wine. Later we got caught in a rainstorm, running for shelter alongside the Seine. That week we must have seen ... we saw a lot. But there were also errands to do.

For example, we visited a bank to open a checking account and apply for a credit card. Well, France didn't have credit cards. Perhaps didn't grasp them, conceptually—it wasn't clear. The bank's representative, who did not speak English, said I shouldn't be bothered, that yes, our account included debit cards.

"No," I said in French, "I apply for a card of credit."

"This is what you have, a debit card," she said.

"No. The debit card, it takes money, when I *have* money," I said, going slowly to find the words. "I want a card that does not have a need for money."

The banker rumbled it for a second. "Well," she said, "we have an option where the card does not remove the money until the end of the month. Is that what you want?"

"No," I said. "Something different." I smiled cheerfully and tried again. "I want the card when I do not have money."

"Maybe I do not understand," she said. "What type of bank has cards like these?"

"American banks," I said. "For example, if I want a computer for two thousand euros, but I do not have two thousand euros? I have a card. The card buys the computer. I give money to the card. Each month, a little money. Then: two thousand euros."

"Ah," the banker said, pleased now, "you would like to arrange a loan!"

"Yes, but no," I said. "I want a card. A card that gives a loan."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand, what kind of card again?" the clerk said.

"Its name is 'credit card,'" I said.

The clerk looked at me closely to make sure this wasn't all one big joke.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I do not think we have this in France."

* * *

Toward the end of our first week, Rachel and I were sneezing, dizzy, exhausted, light-headed, almost fainting, lacking jet fuel, and coughing up sea-green mucus.

"The Paris Flu," expats said. A persistent chest cold caused by French germs. "Everyone gets it," I was told over a drink in Beaubourg, by an editor at the *Herald Tribune*, a friend of a friend. "Trick is," he said, "you gotta eat the local honey. Go to that farmer's market near you, Enfants Rouge. Introduce antibodies to your system from the Paris bees. Make sure you look for the sticker that says the bees are from Paris, that's important."

The next day, after a morning rain, there was a huff of good weather, and Rachel and I went out and purchased the honey of local bees. Then our stove broke. I was eating honey off a Kit Kat when the repairman rang the buzzer.

The repairman looked at our stove and drew squiggles on a ticket. He made to leave, so I handed

the ticket back to him and attempted to explain that I couldn't read his handwriting.

He wrote in block letters, *CRÈME POUR LA PLAQUE*.

So for lack of a creamy topping ...

"The stove has plaque?" Rachel said from the doorway. She sniffled and went back into our living room, a cavern with dark beams.

I said quietly to the repairman, "Where do I find the cream for the plaque?"

But he'd already walked out. He was kind of a bastard.

In the hallway, he stopped in front of our neighbor's door. There were buzz-saw sounds, and sawdust pouring in through an open window from the apartment upstairs. The repairman snatched the paper back from me and scrawled in carpenter pencil, "BHV," then stomped downstairs, just avoiding a pregnant girl and her boyfriend.

"BHV," I announced, closing the door. "What's that?"

"Oh, the hardware store," Rachel said, "near Hôtel de Ville. *Bay-ash-vay*. It's the one with the lingerie section. I heard about it, I'll take you later."

* * *

Several letters arrived that week from the government. One said Rachel and I needed to be weighed, measured, and scanned for tuberculosis, immediately. Also, I'd be asked to pass a language test, since I'd be the one taking a job that could have gone to a French person.

Our appointment was the same day as the repairman's visit. The health clinic was located near Place de la Bastille, not far away. We were in that paunch of Paris summer when the heat ballooned at one p.m., and the weather was lovely in a vehement way, glares everywhere.

At the clinic, Rachel and I were assigned to different waiting areas. After X-rays and measurements, I was directed to a language examiner's office, for my French quiz.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I work in advertising."

"What do you do in advertising?"

"I write."

"What do you write?"

"I write for babies. Milk for babies."

"Where are you from?"

"New York City."

The examiner sat forward and said in English, "Wow, you are?" For five minutes she described to me how she was planning to visit Manhattan soon, it was a long-standing dream. "But isn't it very dangerous?" she asked in English, her consonants sharp as thorns. "Do blacks and whites really get along?"

We stopped for a bite to eat on the way home, in a café on the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. We ordered some white wine and *frites*, which came served with awful ketchup—and here I'd thought Heinz was universal.

"So," Rachel said, "a lot of scientists have now seen me topless."

"Oh, I know the feeling," I said. I was holding my tuberculosis X-ray up to the window.

"Trust me, no, you don't," Rachel said.

She cinched her jacket, a green coat she'd bought especially for our move to France, and explained that things for women in Paris were quite different. "So the doctor is asking me questions. I have no idea what she's saying. I think she tells me to remove my top. I'm pointing—This, my bra, she wants

off? Yes, she wants off. Then I'm instructed to leave. *Now that you're topless, please go out that door.* Only it's a door for a closet with a yellow bulb inside, and at the other end there's another door. I'm to go into the closet and wait for the other door to open."

Rachel drank some wine. "So I'm asking myself, do I cover up, or go out full-frontal? Because I want to do it right. Do it the French way. What would Chloe do? I figured, probably a French woman would just walk out, you know, breasts on parade."

"And?" I said.

"I went out French. The door opened, I checked my posture. It's a big room, like an operating theater, with three male technicians. But they barely notice me. I'm like, You're not even going to look? What does that say? Then I'm instructed to smooch my chest against an upright X-ray machine which was freezing, and they're saying, *Do it again, it's not quite right.* I mean, they're wearing lab coats, but they're also wearing jeans. How was I to know it wasn't some crazy French reality TV show?"

* * *

Friday evening of the weekend before my first day at work, Pierre and Chloe invited us over for dinner. In the same room where I'd slept during my interview weekend, we drank tequila and listened to Charles Trenet and Wu-Tang Clan until about three a.m., when Pierre and Chloe's downstairs neighbor complained about the noise.

Outside, the black sky combined Paris, summer, and the oncoming morning. Noises floated over our heads, but on Pierre and Chloe's street it was quiet enough to hear the traffic signals buzzing. To get home, we rented Vélib's. These were the new bicycles that Paris had installed in a bikes-for-rent program. They'd become the latest badge of chic. Misty mornings, columns of riders pedaled beside the river, and pictures were everywhere of bare-legged women cycling around town in Chanel. Columnists filed reports on Vélib trends, Vélib crime especially—how the city's bright young things rode Vélib's home after partying and crashed them into the Seine.

On the map, one street, the Boulevard de Magenta, appeared to run straight to our apartment. We looked down the hill, and there it was: four empty lanes plunging into blackness, flanked by graceful, decaying Haussmann slabs brambly with iron balconies. Rachel went first, her dress flapping in the wind. There was neon in her hair, then she was eaten up by the dark. I took off after her, twenty feet behind. Fifty feet behind. Soon she was gone. The boulevard flattened out, but for all my pedaling I was slowing down.

Rachel reappeared and found me gliding, kicking with my toes. The chain had come off my bicycle and was grinding on the road. There was no one around.

"We shouldn't have had the tequila," Rachel said, pedaling a circle around me.

"No, no," I said, stopping, "not the tequila."

We stood next to a bus stop and stared around. A Vélib stand was nearby. We parked the bikes and walked home. It was one of those moments when nothing could go wrong.

* * *

The next morning I tried to take out the garbage, but the shed door wouldn't budge. I yanked and banged on it, was about to quit when Asif, the *gardien*, our building manager, whose rooms abutted the shed, rattled his shutters and yelled at me to shut up.

Asif came out, smoking. He wore an unbuttoned paisley shirt and blue jeans with embroidery on

the seat. Asif appraised me and said something in French. I didn't understand and attempted a retreat. That just pissed him off more. He whipped back his hair and snatched my trash, unlocked the sheath, and tossed the bag inside.

His hair had the slow-motion buoyancy of a mermaid's.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But I do not have a key."

"Give me your keys," Asif snapped in French, with a destabilizing Pakistani accent. I could barely understand him. He was tall and lank, posing like a model. He pinched the neck of a four-inch key from my key ring and handed it back to me with two fingers, like a silver snake.

"You're American?"

"From New York," I said. "My wife," I said, pointing at our bedroom window, just above his head.

"I love New York," Asif said. "I'm going soon. You'll tell me where your family lives?"

He pulled me inside his rooms. They smelled of sex. A cute brunette in a bathrobe was sautéing peppers and chicken. She smiled at me. Asif downed some whiskey from a glass on top of a trash can and poured us shots. We did a toast to New York City. He gripped my arms, beaming. When he explained I needed to go run errands (*faire les courses*), Asif went slack. "Fine, then leave!" I shouted, frowning, and disappeared into the bedroom.

Over time, I'd learn that Asif gained and lost euphoria faster than anyone I'd ever met.

That same morning, Rachel and I walked down to BHV, the home-and-hardware store with a lingerie section—it also had a jewelry section, and cabinets of designer handbags, and a lumberyard in the basement, and a kitchen-items section with space for cooking classes—where we bought cream for our stove. Turns out the cream worked. Our coils didn't conduct electricity when they lacked moisturizer; apparently they'd gone dairy-free too long. And the same day, just when we couldn't face one more spoonful of honey, our flu vanished.

We lived in Paris, Paris being not only the city of milk and honey, but also the city where milk and honey were solutions.

No one wonders, because who needs to ask?

That afternoon, we walked halfway across the city and rode a bus home, and collapsed in bed. Lying there on top of the comforter, staring at the dark beams crossing the white plaster ceiling, suddenly I was anxious and out of breath, overpowered by homesickness.

I wanted out of that apartment, out of Paris, as fast as possible.

Rachel said something into her pillow about being hungry. Ice cream, I said, I'll go get ice cream.

I don't even like ice cream that much.

I ran outside, *le monde à mes pieds*, to Place de la République, the large traffic circle behind our apartment. République was a racetrack with four lanes of vehicles whipping around two parks. No square in America looked so majestic, yet in Paris République was considered a retail zone—hardly special except for being where protesters gathered whenever the government threatened to raise the retirement age. In the center was a statue of a robed woman. She was Marianne, symbol of the French Republic, proud and tall, perhaps unaware that her robe was slipping. In several ways, she reminded me of Mireille. I stood on an island in the middle of the Boulevard Saint-Martin, which flowed into République, and waited through several traffic lights, just watching. New, new, new, I was thinking. Our previous life would be reversed within twenty-four hours: me working in an office, in a language I barely spoke, and Rachel at home writing when she wasn't attending French lessons. Was this a good idea? Was it the right thing to do?

It seemed like a colossal mistake.

But would I really prefer to be anywhere else? Hadn't Rachel's breasts passed inspection before?

Parisian experts? As long as no one talked to me about topics other than New York, wouldn't I be fine?

I was scared. Well, so what?

I got the ice cream. We ate it in bed. Through the windows came fragrances from the trees outside and Asif's vegetable garden. We heard only birdsong. I remembered a letter Edith Wharton wrote about Paris in 1907 that I'd seen excerpted in a magazine back in the States: "The tranquil majesty of the architectural lines, the wonderful blurred winter lights, the long lines of lamps garlanding the avenues & the quays—*je l'ai dans mon sang!*" ("I have it in my blood!")

At the time, I'd thought I knew what she meant. But now I knew.

6

At the end of my first day at work, around seven p.m., Pierre introduced me to my new wife, Bruno. Advertising, copywriters and art directors work in pairs. Bruno and I would be overseeing an infant nutrition account together, Pierre said.

Bruno approached me with a chuckling grimace. I tried to kiss him. No doing. For months I'd gotten that wrong. All day, I'd watched coworkers greet each other with a peck, the kissing version of Hello, what's up. But Bruno backed away. Instead we shook hands and grunted hello, *bonjour*, the way French children do when one is new and the other has been asked to show him around school.

Still, Bruno offered me some madeleines he'd just bought from the vending machine.

No matter what happened, Bruno always meant well.

Bruno was a late-thirties Parisian, stocky and morose. Year-round, he was reddishly tan, with a rosy flush that became a glower the more he drank. Bruno was roughly good-looking. His lips were plump, and one ear was scarred from rugby. There was a good deal in Bruno—his sad confidence, his ponderous horniness—for women to get hooked on. Over time, we'd talk a lot about girls. Bruno liked to have a good time. He liked wine, photography, gourmet food, the sea, and the hours he spent on Sunday repairing antique furniture. For Bruno, cigarettes were life itself. Same for his Yamaha scooter.

In the beginning, Bruno's English was even worse than my French. Pierre left the room, and Bruno tried to explain the project we'd be working on together. We didn't get far. Finally he said something like, Drinks? You like a glass? Glass of wine?

Hot summer evening outside, brightly yellow. A very windy Paris twilight, with dust pluming from cars going around the Arc de Triomphe. Bruno led us away from the Champs-Élysées to nearby Boulevard Haussmann, a regal side avenue of shops, restaurants, and white limestone buildings. We took seats at a sidewalk café. Gorgeous people walked by, going home, talking on their *mobiles*. Bruno sat under a machine shaped like a palm tree that sucked up smoke. He lit a cigarette, unclicked a ashtray button nonchalantly, ordered Sancerre, and began talking over my head. After fifteen minutes, I understood that he'd worked on the infant-nutrition project for eleven months, ever since he'd joined the agency. They'd gone through four copywriters in the same amount of time; I was number five.

Bruno said, *Reservoir Dogs*, did I know this film?

"*Bien sûr*," I said, adding, "Mr. Pink?"

"Okay, good," Bruno said in English. "Then, Mr. Pink ... do not be this. Do not be saying in the office, 'Fuck, fuck, fuck.'"

Evidently Bruno had overheard me swearing. He wanted me to know that cursing wasn't cool in Parisian office culture. It seemed to weigh on Bruno, speaking English like that, correcting my behavior. As though envisioning trials to come.

Bruno paid the bill in coins and wiggled out his cigarette.

Back in République, the day's heat was trembling, about to drop. Just like me. After nine hours of French, all I wanted was to snort some Excedrin, eat a meal *gargantuesque*, and sleep for two months.

Rachel and I decided on a café around the corner from our apartment, Café Crème on Rue Dupetit

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