

Cinq Jours à Paris

A short stay in the French capital

Michelle Spinelli

Jour un

I could already see the sign for Paris, Bercy when I woke up. I had been sound asleep for the better part of my journey and had gotten more than a good night's sleep. Looking around the bus it seemed like most of my fellow travellers had done the same with some still being covered in blankets and showing no signs of life despite the near arrival. I stretched, as far as my limited space allowed and then reached for my phone. 7:53 am. Should we be on time, we would arrive in just a couple minutes. I gathered the few things I had scattered around my seat and table, zipped up my bag and put on my jacket which I had put in the overhead department when I sat down. This made me feel a lot more comfortable as I was always fearful of leaving something behind when traveling and not being able to recover it. Being overly attached to materialistic things had been a weakness of mine ever since I was a little boy that lost his stuffed animals at the

playground. At that age it really seems like these things are alive and breathing which makes it seem not like you lost a toy but a close relative. I was especially fearful of losing my jacket as it had been my fathers before and I wore it with much pride. It was a heavy leather piece, long cut with a lot of pockets in which I had stuffed my notebooks and harmonicas. Having secured my belongings I now looked outside the window laying my eyes upon the foggy banks of the Seine. The early morning haze hung in the air and gave the famous france Capital an eerie touch. As we drove further into the city, the buildings became taller and more and more people awoke around me. Life returned to the coach and with it the fog lifted. I could now look across the river and saw the universities and the national library which were my first destination on the far sprawling city on the banks of the Seine which they call the city of love. It didn't look much like it out here. The entire district had been marshlands not too long ago until it was urbanised in the early nineties and the buildings sure looked like it. Not ugly by any means but vastly different from the haussmannian style of the inner city with its mansard roofs and broad boulevards. All of a sudden my view of the river was replaced with the stone wall of the Bus station Paris Bercy. It was a big underground hall with dozens of docks for incoming arrivals. Here I first felt the hustle and bustle of the big city. People getting off and onto buses were running around hoping to find their scheduled connection. I became part of this anthill-like organism where from the outside there is no discernable order but every little ant has a purpose and a plan

inside of the apparent mess that is the organism. I stepped outside the bus and was handed my luggage by the dutiful yugoslavia driver who had brought me here safe and sound through half of Europe. Staying awake during the cold autumn night with nothing but the sound of the road by his side and the occasional stop to smoke a cigarette for which I would have joined him weren't I so deep asleep during our journey. I thanked him and wished him well before making my way outside the station. This looked much more like the Paris I knew. The homeless were gathered around the park I had just stepped into and one immediately came up to me.

“T'as pas une clope ?” he asked. My French was bad but since I had just lit a cigarette I figured that he wanted one as well. Having last spoken it in school and not being quite sure though, I asked: “ Tu parles de anglais ?” He looked at me with bewilderment and screamed out: “Non!” before going over to one of the french arrivals and scrounging a fag from them. I inhaled and blew the smoke into the frigid morning air. The smoke lingered for a couple of seconds and then quickly disintegrated when it was caught by a gust of wind. I pulled out my phone and saw that my friend had messaged me. He was going to be late and I should come to the Dupont Cafe at the Francois-Mitterand library. I grabbed my luggage and carried it up the stairs to the bridge which would bring me over the river

and to the library. It was a remarkable building with its four towers looking like opened books and the entire pyramid-like structure of the building rising up on from the riverbank. I only walked for a couple of minutes when the cafe came into sight. I sat down and ordered a flat white as I was still a little sleepy from the ride and needed the caffeine to wake me up. Only later would I find out that this single cup would set me back 7€ which I found to be an enraging price for a cup of mediocre coffee. After smoking another cigarette my friend came up from the Metro. We hugged and briefly exchanged about my journey and his first experience and impression of living in the french capital. It felt good to see him again considering how we would hang out everyday before he moved here. But there wasn't too much time before he had to leave for his lecture and I sat down again in the Cafe and began to write.

After his lecture he picked me up and we walked to the metro while exchanging stories the other one had missed since his move to Paris. He told me about the friends he made. A group of rich Bolivians who had graduated from a French school in Bolivia and moved to the French capital for university. The Metro was packed and for the first time I noticed some of the trains were operating on rubber wheels which I found to be very strange and couldn't unsee ever since. We finally arrived at La Motte - Picquet Grenelle, as the Station closest to his apartment

was under construction for the time being. It was only a short walk from there to his place. He told me he liked the apartment but it being inside of a gated community freaked him out and as we entered the gate I understood why. It felt as if I had stepped onto a movie set. The streets were clean, an uncanny view for anybody familiar with Paris and there were no signs of life. No one walking the streets, no homeless sleeping on the sidewalk and no sounds you would expect when being in a City of this magnitude. A nice place to raise your kids for sure but not one to spend your college years. We walked up the little stairway to the first floor and entered the little flat. 22 square meters, a bathroom, separate toilet and one room with an adjacent kitchen. It was nice. I only left my bags and off we went to grab a coffee as we had done so many times before. Only now we weren't in our little cozy hometown but in the big city. He showed me a place close to the apartment with reasonable prices and we sat down. I very much liked the way cafes in France were set up. Little tables with two chairs each set shoulder to shoulder and awnings above so not even the rain could stop you from enjoying a smoke with your coffee. He ordered and a bald little man with sideburns brought our coffee and an ashtray to the table. The French have this thing about having the perfect place to have a coffee but somehow they seem unable to make a proper one. Much like the brits they always want to put some chocolate on top of the capucciono, which I despise wholeheartedly. As we sat there I noticed how well dressed the parisians seemed to be. Regardless of age and gender they just seemed to have it figured

out. Old men walked by pipe in mouth with peaked caps and young women who easily could have been pictured in a magazine. Not the kind that men would buy to look at them but one that women themselves would enjoy. I listened to the beautiful language the people around us were speaking and for the first time in years I felt a little regret of not having learned it when I had the chance in school. Then the hunger set in and he recommended a banh mi place in Belleville and off we were to the metro again. I learned pretty quickly that no matter where you went in Paris it would take you at least half an hour to get there via public transport. The Metro stations themselves I found very intriguing. They were old and for someone not native to the city they seemed like a maze. Little tunnels going into all directions, splitting up only to merge a couple of meters later. All covered in white tiles and a musician on every corner and next to him a homeless guy who would hassle you for money or cigarettes. Again the train was driving on rubber wheels which still baffled me and to which my friend only remarked he never noticed it. As we left the station in Belleville I noticed that I had once stayed in an apartment on the same street which brought up very fond memories of a summer long gone and after a short walk we arrived at the place and ordered a grand banh mi with beef. Only 5 €. I was impressed. This was an expensive city but my friend told me that you could get ethnic food for very fair prices if you knew the right spots and he did. We walked out and down the street to a little park and started munching down the sandwiches while sitting on a little bench. The food was good

and paired with the price it tasted incredible. I swallowed my last bite and rolled a cigarette to wash it down with when he told me that smoking in public parks had recently been prohibited. Oh how far this once great city had fallen. I thought to myself before noticing that we had sat down right next to a children's playground and suspended my anger for the time being. I looked over at my friend who was typing away on his phone. "Who are you talking to?" I asked. "You know the 290 Bar I told you about?" I knew. It was a little Bar not far from here where one could escape the usually high beer prices in Paris from five to eleven o'clock when the happy hour would make patrons very happy by suspending the price of a pint to 2.90€. "Some friends of mine will be there soon. Let's go there so you can meet them." I was not a big drinker and usually tried to stay away from the bottle if possible but right now grabbing a beer seemed super necessary to me. He had already told me about his new friends and I was more than eager to meet them. "Yeah let's go, who will be there?" "Santi and both of the Vincentes." Santi was short for Santiago, his new best friend whose father used to be a minister for the Bolivian government. The Vincentes I knew nothing about but I figured they must be kind folks as well. So off we went.

The 290 Bar was a rundown establishment on Boulevard de Belleville. From the outside it almost looked like it was closed for construction but my friend assured me this was the place. We

sat down and immediately ordered two pints. You've got to make the most out of the happy hour before the beer doubles again in price. After just a couple of minutes Santi arrived and greeted us in perfect English. He had a big smile on his face and wasted no time getting a beer for himself. We talked a little and I told him he looked a lot like a friend we had back at home. This was a big compliment as the guy I mentioned was good looking and very fun to be around. Santi mentioned that he didn't look like a typical Bolivian and I had to admit that I had no idea what a typical Bolivian looked like and that in my mind he could be the most Bolivian looking person I've ever met. We laughed and I immediately understood why my friend Julius had grown to like him so fast. One of the Vicentes arrived and with him Basil, the only French out of the friendgroup. They told him he had to speak English because the visitor from Germany did not pay attention in school and was unable to converse in his language. "Oh my English is not very good." he said with a heavy french accent. I assured him it couldn't be worse than my French and once again the laughter united us even if we weren't comfortable in each other's language of choice. The beer started flowing and others arrived. The second Vicente, who studied in Lille and only came over for the weekend, Matteo, a quiet but obviously very smart guy and a girl whose name I couldn't remember for the life of me. I bonded with Santi over our taste in music. We both loved the Beatles, especially Magical Mystery Tour and I was impressed by his skill of singing Frank Sinatra. Santi had the most incredible pace while drinking I had seen in a long time

and I told him he should come over to Munich for Oktoberfest sometime as he would fit right in and he in turn offered me to visit his family in Bolivia. I learned that evening that Bolivians are very kind people and that maybe I should visit the county sooner or later. Then the happy hour ended and while our bolivian friends went on to some club, me and Julius decided it was time to go home. I was already quite drunk as I wasn't used to it and had peer pressured myself into keeping up with the pace of the people around me. As we walked away from the Bar I noticed how alive the streets in Belleville were even that late at night. How many people sat out in front of bars or just on the street. How diverse these people were. I have always been of the opinion that the only good that colonialism did was to bring a lot of wonderful people, their culture and cuisine to the European continent. A sentiment that I'm aware of has become a rarity in recent times. The refugee "crisis" of the late 2010s had divided the west. Racial and cultural fears dominated the political discourse instead of the people uniting against their common enemy. The rich men. They had masterfully turned the blame of the perceived receding of western living standard over onto minorities. Those same minorities who themselves had never reached the standard of living whose death the right wing politicians had turned into a self fulfilling prophecy. They were to blame, not the guy selling me a loaded baguette on the way home. They were the ones who told the fairy tale of the death of the white man and they were the ones who beat down any uprising of the working class which could have united the

people, no matter their origin under a common cause. Here in my drunken stupor I recognized once again how artificial this divide was. Paris, a city with a thriving immigrant population showed me how united the people really were. Not on political issues but in life. For me looking in from the outside, a stupid tourist walking the streets, those people were not french, algerian or moroccan. They were Parisians. Just as much a part of the City as Notre Dame and the Eiffel tower.

Jour deux

I awoke the second day to the smell of eggs. Julius had already gone out and bought a baguette, coffee and was now frying the eggs to make as a delicious breakfast. I smoked a cigarette at the kitchen window while sipping my coffee and we talked about our plans for the day. We decided to go to one of the many open air flea markets the city had to offer. His Studio was still empty as he had just moved in two days prior to my arrival. The eggs were grand and filled me up good, ready to have a day filled with activity. We took a bus and arrived at the market. There were countless stands filling the entire street. Each one with beautiful pieces of furniture and other oddities that one could very much desire but never need. We immediately made out a booth which sold many ashtrays and made a good deal for one. As I put it in my bag the vendor asked “Depuis combien de temps fumes-tu déjà des cigarettes ?” and went on about how bad it is for your health and that we should stop doing it. The irony was not lost on us that the man, who had just benefited from our addiction

by selling us the receptacle for the evidence of our ever nearing lung cancer diagnosis would tell us to stop. We however thanked him for the advice and assured him that we would quit soon. A blatant lie. We continued looking for chairs but everytime we asked the price of such an item we quickly snuck away hoping they wouldn't recognize our embarrassing financial situation. We finally accepted that we were too poor for this place and went on strolling through the neighborhood. I liked the storefronts very much. The cafes and other establishments seemed detached from the rest of the building. A unit completely separate from what happened above it. They were colorful, often red or blue and had wooden panels which gave them the illusion of being their one little house. As we walked we noticed another market, one where they only sold books and magazines and we decided that maybe there our purchasing power would be held in higher regard than before. It was adjacent to a park and had a roof but no walls, only a beautiful metal fence which surrounded it and separated it from the street. Not for the last time on that trip I would regret not being able to understand the french language. Never before had I seen so many interesting, almost antique looking books in one place and all of them completely incomprehensible to me. We looked through a pile of magazines and purchased four of them. They were Pilote magazines from the late 70s filled with french and belgium cartoons. Their covers were a work of art, one depicting a colorful science fiction scene and another poking fun at christianity though I didn't understand the joke and only liked the Jesus caricature on the

cover. Julius decided he would put them on the wall of his apartment. We looked around a little more but then sat down in the adjacent park and had another coffee. If we kept up the pace of coffee and cigarettes I would surely die of a heart attack before I could make it back home, I thought. But the coffee was good and the cigarette still satisfied me.

On our way back to the apartment we stopped at an asian supermarket and bought a big bag of rice and some other stuff to cook dinner with. The market was surprisingly cheap and had a decent butchery where we had to buy some deboned chicken wings as they looked delicious. We would surely find some way to incorporate them into our dinner plans. Walking the short way to the apartment we found some chairs out in the street just sitting there waiting for someone to give them a new life and we gave them that opportunity. They were wooden and still in good condition. Whoever put them out on the street must have been an idiot but one man's trash is another man's treasure so we took them with us. They fitted the apartment and Julius was happy to have gathered his first piece of furniture. We smoked another cigarette at the kitchen window and looked out on the empty street. It really was strange to be in such an alive city and not feel any of that in the apartment. Gated communities are a cancer to society. They allow you to, while being geographically located in a living and breathing city to not feel any of that. It's irrelevant if you live in San Francisco, Marrakech or Paris. It will always feel

the same if you don't allow yourself to be confronted with the noise of the city. If you look out the window and there's no trash in the street, no homeless, no youth bringing that joyful sound of mischief. It's just a plain canvas that can never be painted.

Julius told me about a basketball court close to the Eiffel tower and I told him we have to go. I am of the opinion that basketball is by far the best sport to get to know new places and people. You can go to any place on earth, find a basketball court and be immersed in the culture and the people just a few minutes later. You can just join a pick up game and the people there will treat you like one of their own. Most people who play basketball also have an affection for the US which leads to them speaking better english than the average person, at least in my experience. So we suited up and made the short walk to the court. It really was a magical place. The eiffel tower peaking over the backboard and packed with people who could really play. Tall, heavy guys who probably spend most of their free time cooking foreigners, who come to play only for the view and location of the court. We watched for a couple of minutes before calling next together with two locals who asked us to join their squad. Thankfully I've had quite the amount of basketball experience myself being brought up in the Bayern München academy from a young age and was able to hold my own against the local competition. I even adopted the local way of calling screens. "Droit" "Gauche" I yelled and felt like a proper French bloke myself. We played until

my thighs started to cramp up. I didn't bring basketball shoes and so had to play in my Adidas sambas. Not the best shoes for hooping but it did its job. We sat down on the sideline and watched a couple of games. It smelled like hash and I was intrigued. The hash in Paris was supposed to be very good and I now had the opportunity to ask one of the guys where to get it. Then I remembered I don't speak french and so Julius had to make the deal. He asked one of the guys who was smoking and he said he'll get it for us. It took him quite some time and we played a couple of games in between. The locals were super kind and played a fun brand of basketball. I guarded one of the OGs when he all of a sudden started yelling in my face "Was passiert? Du kannst nichts tun! Schau zu!" He had a slight French accent but his German pronunciation was decent. He startled me. Why could he do that? How did I end up being Trashtalked in my own language on the most scenic court in Paris. Live really has some tricks up his sleeve. Fortunately he missed his shot and then after the game told me he had worked in Stuttgart for a couple of years. I had already enjoyed myself immensely and then the guy delivered me the hash to round the evening up perfectly. Turns out we had played against the dealer and that's why it took so long. I could respect that. Selling hash while playing basketball all day sounded like a good life to me and for a moment I considered making that my life. Just hooping in the shadow of the Eiffel tower and smoking hash didn't sound too bad, really.

But now the hunger began to set in and got going. On the walk back I felt the concrete floor of the court in all my joints. I felt like what I would imagine an old man walking on a cane would feel like. My knees hurt, my back gave me trouble and my hip made me walk with a slight limp. Gosh do I love that sport. Every sharp pain, every discomfort in the aftermath was worth the joy I felt while running up and down the court. Should I be crippled by the age of thirty it would be worth it. But the blisters on my feet reminded me that I should at least buy some proper shoes to postpone that until the last possible moment. We walked through the Rue du Laos back to my friend's place. The Eiffel tower, now sparkling in the night sky, peaked above the roofs and reminded me of how blessed I was to be there.

When we got back, Julius immediately started to chop up some vegetables and the chicken legs we bought earlier. A mutual friend of ours who did an Erasmus semester in Reims had called and asked if he could come over for the night since Reims was only an hour away by train and he wanted to spend the Saturday evening in Paris. I hadn't seen him in quite some time, he had moved to Berlin a couple of years prior and we missed him very much ever since. The day, which had been perfect so far, just got even better. Growing up and seeing all your friends become their own persons with their own life completely separate from what had been in your teenage years was a strange but wonderful thing. Of course they had been themselves before but to see them blossom into their own versions of themselves freed from

the shackles of expectations and peer pressure which, dictate your adolescent life to a degree that you will only understand once you rid yourself of them and start to live life not according to the norms and expectations of the people around you but only for your true own self. Of course the process of that isn't linear and in an attempt to find that you will find yourself temporarily adopting the views and lifestyle of certain subcultures and people in no time. But piece by piece you will let them go and that that remains will become you. You'll still be a hodgepodge of thoughts that originated outside of your own mind but at least you'll be your very own hodgepodge. Unafraid of how you conform to the socially acceptable set of rules and norms set by society at that point in time. It never lasts anyway. But those who tolerate, accept or even understand your own accumulated ruleset. Those are the people you got to keep close and those were exactly the people we would gather here today.

For a couple of minutes I watched Julius prepare our dinner before I picked my fatigued body up and made my way to the shower. I always had to blast music when in the bath and while I usually preferred Rock or the Blues I felt obliged to listen to some French tunes at least once while on this trip. While thinking about the french music I knew and it wasn't a lot I remembered this blind couple from Mali whom I at least in my memory had some beautiful tunes. Not being able to pull their name from my mind I looked them up. "Blind couple music" I tipped into searchbar and sure enough they came up. Amadou

and Mariam. Damn, my memory kicked in. I should have known that. The parisian hash had already clouded my senses. I scrolled a little further and discovered that Amadou had died just a couple months ago. Now I really had to listen to their music. In honor of the late great Amadou. “Je pense a toi, mon amour, ma bien-aimée” the speaker blasted through the little bathroom and I disappeared into the warm mist. Showers to me had something emotionally cleansing, an almost religious experience especially once the summer came to an end and the warm water allowed you to escape the cold and harsh reality for a couple minutes. The shower would become my own little sanctuary where, hypnotized by sweet sounds of whomever I felt like listening to, the world became undoubtedly good.

As I left the bathroom, warm and refreshed, the apartment had already adopted the rich smell of japanese curry. I got dressed and then decided on smoking a little more of the hash. As I stood there at the window, trying not to let all the smoke come inside, someone yelled out on the street. Afraid someone had taken offense to the smell of the hash I immediately hid my joint and sneakily peaked out the window. “Mika, Jul” I looked down and saw our friend Felix standing in front of the building looking up. Relief and then joy came over me. Julius opened the door and we embraced each other. Felix had already bought a couple cans of beer and we toasted to being united once again in this unlikely place. They both exchanged about their experiences in France while I finished my smoke. Then dinner was ready.

Due to the lack of a table we had to hold our plates in hand while sitting on the chairs we had gathered not more than a couple hours prior. This unusual dinner arrangement didn't lessen our enjoyment in the slightest as the meal was delicious. We then finished our beer and made our way to a little bar down the road. It was the typical Parisian setup. Little tables cramped together, two chairs each. We had to ask one of the neighboring tables for a third one and we sat quite tightly with barely enough room to lift your arm to drink or smoke. This of course didn't stop us from doing so. The Bar had a happy hour where the pint was only 3,5€ and we made sure to make good use of that. The place was crowded and once again gave me the feeling of being immersed in the local way of living. The air was cold but not freezing and the dim light made it appear to be much later in the evening than it actually was. We drank fast not keeping in mind that the beer they served was stronger than the one at home and so got quite tipsy as the night progressed. We started talking about politics, usually a mistake when drunk but as we all held similar opinions and had at least begun studying politics we just descended into the rabbit hole that is political theory. Not long and I was kind of relieved when I remembered none of the people sitting next to us could understand what we were talking about. Not that speaking the same language as us would have helped in understanding our conversation. Who in their right mind would even want to talk about Carl Schmitt or John Rawls, I thought. The alcohol had gotten the better of us this time. If anybody around us could understand what we were babbling on

about they surely would have sent us into an insane asylum. Three young men, slurring their words trying to explain theorems to each other that they did not understand themselves. Talking about the “Ausnahmestand” and naming as many philosophers as one could regardless of their relation to the topic. We had become fools. But just as the happy hour came to an end our conversation did as well. Unwilling to pay the full price for a beer we decided it was time to go home but not without grabbing a few more beers at Deli along the way.

Already pissed we came back to the apartment, turned on some music then drank and smoked until the sun came up. The neighbors must have hated us that night.

Jour trois

When I woke up the next morning Felix was already gone. He had taken the 9 am train back to Reims and we had slept through his departure. I stretched like a cat after a long nap and slowly came back to life. My head didn't hurt. Good. Unexpected but good. The sun lit up the room. I got up and brushed my teeth. Julius was still asleep so I decided that this morning I would go and get coffee and something to eat. I quickly showered and put on my clothes. It looked warm outside so I left my jacket and wandered out into the already crowded streets. When I left the

gated community the first beam of sunlight hit my face and I felt the warmth of the sunny autumn day wash over me. Paris was always beautiful but today it looked even more lovely than usual. As I made my way down the street I saw that the boulangerie we had frequented the last two days was closed. Closed on a Sunday. How good must business be so you can close on a Sunday ? And where would I now get my desired breakfast. A foolish thought as I remembered I was still in Paris. The next bakery couldn't be far. So I just kept on walking until I came upon a cozy looking one not too far from where I started. Though I wouldn't have minded walking a little longer as the Day really was beautiful. Taking a drag of my cigarette I then remembered I didn't speak French. Panic set in, a revived trauma from my school days. How would I order ? Would I look like an idiot holding up everyone behind me ? Would they judge me for speaking English ? I had to get a grip. I was in Paris. A lot of people spoke English. It wouldn't be a problem for sure. But deep down I wanted to speak French. I wanted to not be one of those stupid tourists unwilling to speak the local language. I had to gather whatever little french remained in my tiny brain and order just as a french person would. I would just smoke one more cigarette while standing outside and listen to people ordering. That was it. I would just copy what they were saying. I lit another fag and very inconspicuously stood outside paying attention to what happened at the counter.

“Bonjur”

“Bonjour”

“Je voudrais deux baguettes tradition, s’il vous plaît.”

“Autre chose ?”

“Non, ce sera tout, merci.”

“Ça fera 4,20 euros, s’il vous plaît.”

“Voilà”

“Merci, bonne journée !”

“Merci, vous aussi, au revoir !”

That didn't sound like too difficult a conversation, I thought. I should be able to manage that. I finished my smoke and then very bravely entered the store. The women at the register smiled at me. “Bonjour” she said. “Bonjour” I mumbled. My confidence already started to crumble. Her Bonjour sounded much more french than mine. Of course. She was French. But I was nervous. Focus! I had to get myself together to not make a fool out of myself right there and then. She looked at me, expectantly. Oh right, I thought. It was my turn to speak. “Je voudrais deux cafés allongés et deux pains au chocolat.” She turned around and said something to the guy operating the coffee machine. She seemed to have understood me. Pride came over me. If only my old French teacher could see me. Ordering coffee and pastries in a

boulangerie like a Paris local. “Autre chose ?” I was ripped out of my day dreams. “Ehm, Eh non. Non, s’il vous plaît.” Well maybe not like a local but good enough for them to understand me. She put the pain au chocolates in a bag and handed them to me. “(unintelligible) euros, s’il vous plaît.” I had no idea what she just said. The french numbers had always confused me. I just held up my card, unable to explain that I wanted to pay with it but she understood. “Par card?” “Ah oui.” She handed me the card reader and I entered my code. “Merci, bonne journée !” “Bonne journée!” I was very proud as I left the bakery. I had just ordered in French. For the more well versed french speaker that interaction might seem like a joke but I was very surprised that it worked out. In school my teachers always told me there was no chance that I could communicate with anybody the way I pronounced the words and seeing them now being proven wrong gave me some proper satisfaction. Exhilarated by my success I strolled home. I now felt like Paris had nothing left for me. I had conquered the city.

When I opened the door to the apartment Julius had just come out of the shower. I told him about my little victory and he affirmed my already inflated ego. We drank our coffee at the window and talked about our plans for the day. Julius, a little more hungover than myself suggested going to Barbes and grabbing something to eat to cure his hangover. He said he knew the best spot for an omelet frite. So off we went.

As we walked down the stairs to the platform a train left the station. At home I would have run, trying to catch it so as to not wait another ten minutes for the next one but here they departed every two minutes. No need to run. As it drove off I again noticed the rubber wheels and wondered why I had never seen them before. Why didn't other cities do this? Maybe they did and I just hadn't caught on yet. After a short wait we boarded the next train. We changed once at Charles de Gaulle-Etoile and then exited at Barbès-Rochechouart.

The street was alive. Many people walking in and out of stores and restaurants. A market was set up underneath the elevated railway tracks. I had a hard time making out what language the people around me were speaking. This was how a big city had to feel like. This slight overload of impressions and the abundance of cultural variety was exactly what I was looking for. Julius walked down the street and I just followed him. He seemed to know where he was going. I looked over to my left side and saw a supermarket front. It was crowded, lots of people going in and out and some standing in front, examining the vegetables laid out there. "Supermarket de la Chapelle" the sign read. "Produits Algériens, Tunisiens, Marocains, Egyptiens, Turcs, Balkaniques"

That checked out. It seemed like this part of town truly was diverse at least in terms of nationalities. We kept on walking for a little bit until my friend stopped abruptly. "I think we should have taken a left a while back." he said. Maybe he didn't know

where he was going. But at least he had walked with such conviction that it seemed like it. So we turned around, still walking with that same confidence and turned right into a smaller street. Here it was much more quiet. We had left behind the stream of people pushing down the Boulevard and escaped into a calmer part of Berbes. The streets were still full of people but the chatter had been left behind. "Here we are!" he pointed into an inconspicuous restaurant on our right. Its interior looked a little bit like the Döner Kebab stores I knew from back home. Simple but not in a way that suggested negligence but more of a focus on the important thing, the food. There's no need for fancy chairs and tables as long as the food checks out. We entered and the owner greeted him like they had known each other all their life. "Ah, salut mon frère! Ça va? Comme d'habitude?" The Display case was filled with all kinds of delicious looking meats and skewers and I became hungry just looking at them. My friend ordered two omelet frites and we each grabbed a drink from the fridge before taking a seat outside. The tables seemed to be gathered from a yard sale. All different makings and styles arranged almost at random on the narrow pavement. Next to us sat a group of young men who talked loud but very joyfully. My drink was strange, not too sweet, a little bitter and somewhat sour. After a couple minutes someone yelled out from inside and Julius got our food. A baguette filled with scrambled eggs, fries and minced meat. A delicious, fatty combination of feel good food. The perfect cure for our lingering hangover. It filled me up good and left me more

than satisfied. Once we had finished Julius suggested another spot not too far to grab some tea. It had been quite a while since I went anywhere for the sole purpose of drinking tea but he assured me that if I were to drink tea anytime soon, this would be the place. So off we went on a short walk through the beautiful neighborhood that was Barbes. We walked uphill and passed a basketball court. There were many people playing, a lively atmosphere all around. A roof covered the place, a rarity back home if not unseen at all. We walked further, through a little park and another court, paired this time with a soccer field as well. Paris, it seemed, was full of those, open to the public sports fields. No wonder they were producing star athletes left and right. Outside the playing area a bunch of younger men and boys were standing around shouting and once again the sweet smell of hash tickled my nostrils. Can you imagine how, if given the opportunity, those young men would contribute to society in a more legal, a more beneficial way. They have all the hunger in the world. Enough to be out in any weather paddling out to the next best passerby. If you gave them a business, say a little corner bodega, don't you think they would attend to it with the same persistence and perseverance they do now. They have the strongest asset possible in a world driven by soulless capitalism without being able to participate in its dirty game. Lots of time and the will to fill that time with work. The hustle to get out of whatever precarious situation had been assigned to them by any means possible. But they are not allowed to play. Only those who have already won can play and those who join without their

predecessor handing them a good hand should lay down the cards immediately.

As we left that little patch of the small man's wallstreet a beautiful gothic church appeared. Not a tourist attraction, just a church for the people. I thought about how, in hindsight, lucky the French were to have not participated longer in the second world war. As a german myself I was well aware of the damage caused not only to the people of the time but also the cityscape by this senseless bloodshed. I myself used to live in a building hit during the war. Next to it stood old, manor-like mansions, built well before the first great war while our building was a mere two stories and had lost all its pre-war charm. The top got blown of during an air raide and there was no money to rebuild it properly. So they just put a roof on what remained as it was the best they could do. Still a place to live but robbed of its former pride. Many German cities had lost their soul that way. Churches, Landmarks old as time, gone forever in a fiery blaze they could blame on no one but themselves. Paris, for the most part remained spared of this destruction from the heavens. Their buildings stood the same as they did in centuries past and their Landmarks still towered over their magnificent city just like the day they appeared. "There it is!" Julius ripped me from my thoughts. A smile on his face he pointed toward a non described door on our left. Only the sign on the side of the building suggested it to be more than just a regular residential

building. “Institut des cultures d’islam” was written on the white sign in small black letters.

Ende

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