

PARIS, IN BLUSH AND CHEAP PUMPS.

By Stephen Sinisi

Marcus is drunk. He drank far too much wine and now he's stumbling through the streets of Paris. One step left. One step forward. Five steps right, right into a young woman texting.

"Par-dome," he says as he burps.

She rolls her eyes and walks to an empty section of the sidewalk.

Two steps forward.

One step left.

It's November and the clouds, swollen with rain, are hanging low in the sky. One of them grazes the tip of the Eiffel Tower and within minutes, the entire city is wet. Marcus' designer suit from Sears is also wet. The pair of Sketchers on his feet make a clacking sound as they smack the cobblestones below. As raindrops slide off his nose, ears and unibrow, an image of Fred Astaire dancing in the rain pops into his head and he sprints towards the nearest lamppost. He leaps, misses his target by half a meter, and lands chest-first on the ground. A man in a blue blazer and an infinity scarf casually steps over him on his way to the garbage can.

"I should have stayed at the café," Marcus mumbles to himself in what he believes to be a French accent.

He really should've stayed at the café. He'd had a nice seat at the table beside the one where Ernest Hemingway wrote chapter three of *The Sun Also Rises*.

"He wrote that here?" Marcus had asked the waiter.

"Yes," the waiter had replied.

"Really?"

"Yes," the waiter hissed. "Do you know Voltaire?"

"Of course!"

"He was conceived behind your chair."

"Cool," Marcus said. "How much for the espresso?"

"Twenty-six Euros."

It was a lovely café, situated right in the heart of the sixth arrondissement. Or was it the fifth? The fourth, perhaps? Though Marcus isn't sure which side of the Seine it was on, he is definitely sure of one thing: it was magnificent. The lighting. The decor. So perfectly Parisian. He could see why so many brilliant minds had frequented it. He'd stared up at the framed picture of Napoleon riding a croissant and tried to imagine what it must have been like to be Ernest Hemingway, just sitting there, writing. He could feel his creative juices start to stir. He'd opened his notebook and started to write down the first words that popped into his head: table, cup, espresso, chair, Napoleon. He'd closed his notebook, thought about ordering another espresso, then decided to treat himself to something really good. A bottle of Merlot that cost two hundred Euros. The good stuff.

Five steps forward.

One step right.

Marcus looks down at his shirt. He's having a hard time figuring out where the wine stains end and the blood stains begin. He wipes his chin with his hand. More blood. He searches his pockets for a tissue and pulls out the embroidered hand towel that he'd stolen from the washroom in the café. He'd thought it would make a nice souvenir. It slips through his fingers and onto the ground. He mutters a word that is not quite English or French and bends over to pick it up. As he does, a scrap of brown paper floats towards his feet. It looks like someone has blown their nose on it. He brushes it away with his foot and reaches over to grab the towel. The paper blows back towards him and lands on his sleeve.

"Shit."

Marcus tries to shake it off but ends up toppling over, falling hard on his shoulder. He rolls onto his back and looks up at the sky. Raindrops bomb his eyes. A group of teenagers is laughing at him. He sits up on his elbows and hastily stuffs the snot paper into his pocket, mistaking it for the towel. He lifts himself up slowly and continues to walk. The embroidered hand towel gets run over by a Peugeot SUV.

Two steps forward.

One step right.

One step forward.

The rain is starting to come down a little harder. Marcus' buzz is starting to wear off. He stops and stares at the buildings. They look beautiful tonight, like they were built with brush-strokes. They remind him of Introduction to Architecture, a class he took as a freshman in college. It was taught by professor Alain Monsignor, the man who inspired him to take Introduction to Business Management instead. He pulls out his notebook and pen from the inside pocket of his suit jacket, flips to a blank page, and decides to give architecture another shot. He stares at the buildings for about a minute, then proceeds to draw three crooked lines and a shape that could be loosely interpreted as a cylinder. He puts his notebook away and starts to walk again.

He can see the Eiffel Tower poking out above the skyline. It makes him think of Adele, his ex-hairdresser. She had a miniature replica on her vanity. It had tiny little lights on it that used to turn on and off at different times, making it look like it was sparkling.

"Did you get that in Paris?" Marcus asked her once.

"No, I got it in Niagara Falls," she replied.

She was a divorcée in her mid-forties who was incredibly skilled at hiding the effects of male-pattern baldness. Sadly, she quit being a hairdresser after her new boyfriend told her to quit being a hairdresser. She was much better than the guy who replaced her. His name was Enzo. He had a personal vendetta against sideburns.

A gust of wind hits Marcus from behind. It goes up his coat and makes his teeth chatter. The street is now empty except for a young couple. They're sitting on a bench, laughing, kissing, French kissing. "Why do they call it French kissing?" Marcus asks himself. The question is loud enough to get the couple's attention. They look up at Marcus. Marcus looks down at them. They go back to French kissing.

"La moor!" he says, toasting their love with an imaginary glass of champagne.

Three steps forward, one step to the right, straight through the door of a small shop. Marcus trips over his feet and lands on his face.

“Merde!” the shopkeeper shouts from behind a counter.

“It’s ok!” Marcus replies as he peels his lips off the carpet. “Jay swiss fine! Jay swiss ok!”

The shopkeeper shakes his head. He has bags under his eyes. He’s been selling souvenirs to tourists for the past ten hours. He’s wearing a novelty bicorne, and he is ready to go home.

“Nice place,” Marcus says, steadying himself on his feet. He looks around. An assortment of authentic Parisian items lines the walls: tri-colored T-shirts, magnets in the shape of little baguettes and keychains that say, “I Love Paris.”

“May I help you?” the shopkeeper asks.

Marcus points to the hat on the shopkeeper’s head.

“Are you Napoleon?” he asks.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, sorry, I mean, tu swiss Napoleon?”

“I speak English.”

“Oops! I mean, tu es Napoleon?”

The shopkeeper shakes his head.

“No, I am not Napoleon,” he replies.

“Well, you sure look like him.”

Marcus points to the bicorne again. It is an exact replica of the one that Napoleon wore in the famous painting by Jacques-Louis David, if you ignore the fact that it is hot pink and made of plastic.

“If you’re not Napoleon,” Marcus continues, “then why are you wearing the same hat as—”

“Yes. I am Napoleon,” the shopkeeper replies.

Marcus rests his forearms against the edge of a glass countertop. His eyeballs are rotating in opposite directions.

“If you’re really Napoleon,” Marcus says, “then where is your croissant?”

“My what?”

“Where is your croissant?”

The shopkeeper considers his question, then responds with a question of his own.

“Where are your sideburns?”

Marcus touches his bald sideburns. He whispers the name Enzo and stares at an empty patch on the wall for several seconds. The shopkeeper looks at Marcus, then at the wall, then back at Marcus, and then back at the wall.

“Two shay, Napoleon,” Marcus says finally. He presses his fingertips against the glass countertop and examines the items beneath it. The shopkeeper sighs. He had just cleaned that five minutes ago.

“Can I see this one?” Marcus asks.

“Which one?” The shopkeeper replies. “The Arc de Triomphe Christmas snow globe?”

“No, this one.”

The shopkeeper reaches beneath the glass countertop and pulls out a pack of extra large, Moulin Rouge-branded condoms.

"Is there spermicidal lubricant on these?" Marcus asks.

"My friend, this box has been sitting here for years. If you want the real ones, you should go to—"

"Nevermind. It's not like I need them anyway."

Marcus sighs. His mouth morphs into the shape of a perfect lowercase "n". There is a buildup of slippery residue at the bottom of his eyes. The shopkeeper sighs.

"Love," he says with a shrug, hoping it will be enough to avoid a potentially long, tedious conversation about love.

"Let me tell you about love," Marcus replies.

Too late.

"I don't know much," he continues. One eye is staring at the shopkeeper. The other eye is staring at a package of curly fake moustaches on the wall. "But I do know this..."

He mumbles a few words to himself and folds his arms across the countertop. He rests his head on his arms, continuing to mumble to himself.

"My friend," the shopkeeper says. "My friend." He taps him on the shoulder. "You cannot sleep here. Please stand up."

Marcus peels his face off his arms. His torso is rotating in a counter-clockwise direction. His eyes are a little bit red. His cheeks are a little bit wet. The shopkeeper sighs again.

"Do not worry, my friend," he says as he claps Marcus on the shoulder. "Paris is the city of love. And where there is love, there is always hope."

It's impossible to tell if Marcus heard him. He's licking his palms and pressing them against his cheeks.

"Even for you," the shopkeeper adds.

Marcus continues to lick his palms.

"I'll tell you what." The shopkeeper says. He lifts the bicorne off his head and places it on the glass countertop. "See this hat? I'll sell it to you. For half price."

"Half price?" Marcus replies. "How much is half price?"

The shopkeeper arches his eyebrow and stares up at the ceiling.

"One-hundred-fifty Euros," he says.

"One-hundred-fifty Euros?" Marcus slaps his cheeks with his spit-stained palms. "For that?"

The shopkeeper nods. Marcus runs his fingertip along the edge of the hat. His fingertip is now pink, just like the hat.

"That's a steal!"

"Yes," the shopkeeper replies, "yes it is."

Marcus hands the shopkeeper two hundred Euros. The shopkeeper hands him ten Euros in change. Marcus puts his new, plastic, hot-pink bicorne on his head and walks out of the shop.

One step left.

One step forward.

Three steps to the right.